

Why is Reich Never Mentioned?*

by R.D. Laing**

It is as though he had never existed. Few medical students, if any, will have heard his name so much as mentioned in medical school, and will never come across him in their textbooks. It is not that his views are less scientific than many of those taught today — which are no more scientific than those clinical dogmas of even 50 years ago that we are now pleased to ridicule or patronize.

Reich's proposals as to the *social* influences on the functions of sympathetic, parasympathetic and central nervous systems, and on our biochemistry, *are* testable, but are never tested, as with much else that is really important — Lemert's work on the conspiratorial nature of the social field of people who think there is a conspiracy going on; Scheff's work on admission procedures to mental hospitals; Jourard's work on bodily contact, for instance. Exciting to "laymen", perhaps noticed by professionals, seldom pursued. If one insists on referring to them, one is becoming tiresome.

Not one person, as far as I know, in any institution in this country is doing a single piece of research even to disconfirm any of the detailed findings or hypothesis of the above gentlemen, including Reich. Professions institutionalize ignorance, and turn ignorance into a claim for status. Reich was arrested by the FBI as a suspected Nazi spy. He was actively persecuted while alive, and is conspiratorially ignored now he is dead. More ought to be done on the sociology of attempts to destroy heretics without a trace. How can we tell when they are successful? Many psychiatric textbooks are largely concerned to screen out information that only advanced students can be trusted to know about, when they, it is hoped, will be so brainwashed theoretically, or hooked to professional practices, that no one can do anything about it (if we had more staff, more money, etc.) The textbook becomes a burial ground. Intellectual ancestor worship. Seldom read after a few years, but there are always new ideas that are dying or can be killed and buried.

Reich has been written off professionally for years. But — somehow or other — patients, perhaps, who must be as daft as him, keep on reading his books. Suddenly it is going to be discovered that we have known all along everything that is worthwhile to know of what he said — the rest can easily be consigned to the convenient dustbins of psychotic ideas. The true dustbins of history are the textbooks. Try reading the

textbooks of 30 to 40 years ago and compare them with Reich's work at that time. Reich is still *alive*. There is no a priori reason to suppose that what survives through history is the truth. More likely we have not much else to go on than the lies that those who win the power game pass on.

The true story of Reich's split with the inner psychoanalytic circle is still a closely kept secret, and will now probably never be known. Why? The dynamics of that group are likely to be as instructive as the theories that emerged from it. More than 50 per cent killed themselves or allegedly went mad, or both. Ernest Jones's official story is less credible than many fairy stories. Reich has penetrating insights into the European patriarchal family but, like Groddeck, he seems to have formed a primitive transference to Freud, without fully appreciating the whole group scenario.

Although Wilhelm Reich's presence still hovers — ridiculous, menacing, pitiful, according to projection — walled off "outside" the orthodoxy of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, there seems to be a quiet reevaluation going on among the younger people of all ages. Even his later work on what he called biophysics cannot be so glibly consigned to cranksville as it was even ten years ago. The more I know at first hand of what Reich was talking about, the more seriously I take him.

Reich began in the twenties as a psychoanalyst, with a particular interest in sexology. He was a distinguished member of Freud's circle in Vienna. Gradually his views took shape out of his own clinical experience. They ran the following course, as recounted by him.

He formed the impression that *all* his patients suffered from a disturbance of genitality. This was not always manifested in obvious frigidity or impotence, but always entailed an incapacity for total orgasm with full gratification. This was not obvious because many people did not (and do not) know what total orgasm is, so they did not know what they were missing. Orgasm, as Reich described it, is a serpentine undulation of the whole body, a giving in, a surrender, reaching an acme followed by complete dissolution of pre-orgasmic tension.

It is generated by a free flow of bioelectric energy, and is resisted by practically everyone to some extent by means of chronic tensions in the skeletal muscles. From head to foot, according to Reich, we are all encased in a sort of muscle armour, that *is* our character. Its main function is to avoid pleasure. It kills gratification and life. We have developed this lethal anti-gratification equipment in childhood, learning to keep a stiff upper lip, holding our head high, chin up, back arched, shoulders rounded, diaphragm rigid, pelvis dead, afraid even to breathe freely, especially to expire.

After some years Reich gave up the techniques of psychoanalysis. He came to regard the exclusive use of talking as

* The following article appeared in *New Society*, March 28, 1968 under the title "Liberation by Orgasm."

** R.D. Laing was a controversial British psychologist who pioneered the innovative and humane treatment of schizophrenics, and emphasized the social and family origins of the illness.

“ The signs and symptoms of what Reich called the emotional plague are as evident as the signs of the bubonic plague would be... the plague is no respecter of professional boundaries... One of its symptoms is an inability to see that one suffers from it.”

often a collusive way for both analyst and patient to remain trapped in their character armour. He moved to direct efforts to disarm the person by various methods of relaxing the muscles.

In doing this, the imprisoned serpent-power was mobilized — sometimes, as he describes it, in ways that would frighten anyone who did not have real trust in the basic forces of life. Character armour maintains in frozen preservation all through life the original conflicts which occasioned its formation in the first place. When loosened, the first impulses to be released may not look too nice.

The biopathy of this state of affairs leads directly to many physical functional and structural ills, and the latter, especially cancer, gained increasing attention from him towards the end of his life. The culmination for Reich of his life's work was the discovery of a type of biological and cosmic energy, and the investigation of its particular energy field.

The best single introduction to Reich is *The Function of the Orgasm*, now in paperback. *

Whether or not one agrees or disagrees with this or that of Reich's theory and practice, it is inescapable that he was a great clinician, with an unusually wide range. His account of his therapy with schizoid and schizophrenic patients will enlighten in some ways anyone involved in this enterprise. He understood the mess we are all in — hysteric, obsessional, psychosomatic, *homo normalis* — as very few have done. Yet one will look through a hundred journals in the Royal Society of Medicine without coming across one mention of him. Why is he *never* mentioned?

He assaults our narcissism in almost unforgivable ways. Freud was cool. Reich is uncool. He tells us that *homo normalis* is a sort of bladder, often dried up, sometimes overtaken with convulsions, longing and terrified to burst, whether through penetration from outside, or explosion from within: terrified to live freely, which would be to love; with an insane fear of being destroyed and at the same time with a senseless readiness to die, to destroy what he fears; fearful of almost everything, most of all, himself; psychically turned inside out, persecuting righteously his persecutors outside himself, none other than his own projections of evil.

It is easy to dismiss statements of this kind as wild and untestable by the canons of science, which Reich claims for them. I do not think it is justified. The signs and symptoms of what Reich called the endemic emotional plague are as evident as the signs of the bubonic plague would be. The extent to which Reich is ignored cannot be explained rationally, and invites an explanation along his own lines — viz, the plague is no respecter of professional boundaries, and psychiatrists suffer from it as much as anyone else. One of its symptoms is an inability to see that one suffers from it.

Some people do see it, but are still subject to it. They are liable to be diagnosed as schizophrenics. “*There must be a potent reason why the schizophrenic is treated so cruelly and the cruel homo normalis is honored so crazily all over this planet.*” Indeed. “*The neurotic and the perverse are to the*

* Published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, N.Y., 1968. Available from Natural Energy Works, PO Box 864, El Cerrito, CA 94530.

schizophrenic, as far as their feelings of life are concerned, as the miserly shopkeeper is to the big scale safe cracker.” “A few cases of the schizophrenia, well understood instead of ‘shocked’, would, in the long run, save society countless millions of dollars.”

“It seems too much to expect such foresight. It is known that mental institutions are, in reality, jails for psychotics, with little medical care, scarce funds, and in most of them, no research at all.” Written in 1948, true today, as the more enlightened and honest superintendents, staff, and patients of mental hospitals continue to testify. [And still true in 1993! — Editors]

Reich asks us to imagine a parliamentary debate on puberty, to suggest to us how divorced from the facts of life politicians are, who at the same time make it their business to regiment even our biochemistry. He would not have been disappointed in the debates in the Commons and Lords last year on the new dangerous-drug legislation. Political and war correspondents are possibly pretty tough, but they still seem to get frightened when a general or leading politician seems actually to believe his own nonsense. Then watch out. We have got used to the idea that the majority of people will believe what they are told. The danger is that the politician might *stop* being cynical.

Freud felt there was nothing to be done about it. Our civilization was founded on repression, and societal repression was interlocked in alliance with part of the biological constitution of each of us. Reich was more optimistic. He does not explain why man has turned against himself in the first place, but his work contains rich detailed documentation of *how* he has, and he did seem to be able to disarm a number of very heavily armoured characters. He has left us a vivid record of part of his adventure. We would be wise to study it with care. I for one have been instructed. ■



Wilhelm Reich, 1952