

Reply to Bennett

Joel Kovel

There is much agreement between Phillip Bennett and myself about Reich, but this does not extend to our views on Reich's scientific work concerning orgone energy. Unhappily, to my view, Bennett does not help the cause of authenticating Reich's scientific work by what he has written here.

Let me begin at the end of his article, where he lays down Reich's canons as to critical methodology. Reich wrote:

In the strict objective and scientific sense of the word, only so-called immanent criticism is admissible...

1. He [the would-be critic] himself must have a complete grasp of the field of work that he criticizes.
2. He must know this field at least as well as, if not better than, the one whom he criticizes.
3. He must have an interest in seeing the work succeed—not in seeing it fail. If he is merely intent upon disrupting the work, if he is not motivated by objective interests, then he is a neurotic grumbler, but not a critic.
4. He has to exercise his criticism from the point of view of the field of work under criticism. He cannot criticize from an alien point of view, i.e., from a point of view that has nothing to do with the field of work.¹

Bennett approves greatly of this: “Until his scientific work receives this kind of careful scrutiny, the *a priori* dismissal of it does not move human understanding forward and fosters the continued marginalization of Wilhelm Reich, probably the most profoundly misunderstood natural scientist of our recent past.” But I could not disagree more strongly, for the following reasons:

- Reich privileges the judgment of the figure being evaluated, logically the only one who can tell whether the evaluator knows the field as well as he, or has a complete grasp of it;
- the evaluator is demanded to prioritize the “success” of the work being evaluated;
- there is therefore no category of *truth* except that which the figure being evaluated decides as such—and therefore no category of truth at all: nihilism reigns, each man or woman locked into the prisonhouse of his or her image of the true;
- all of this is expressed in a strikingly binary logic: if you are not motivated by the wish that work succeed, it must be that you want it to fail, and/or to merely disrupt it, as a neurotic grumbler. Thus what is “objective” is that the work should succeed. That's what Reich wrote, and believed—and what Bennett believes as well: note his assertion that the scientific work *either* receives this kind of scrutiny, *or is a priori* dismissed, that is, without any other level of reflection or critical engagement than

¹ The quote is from *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* quoted in Phillip Bennett, “Reply to Kovel's Introduction,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 21, No. 4, December 2010, pp. [[[tk]]]. The *Mass Psychology* was originally published in 1933, then expanded in 1946. I assume this passage is from the later edition, as I do not recall reading it in my original copy, now lost. To me, it shows the marks of the harrowing struggles Reich had gone through in the thirteen years between editions.

hostility to Reich or inability to comprehend his genius. But what a hopeless mess this leads to! Is all work to succeed, then, inasmuch as every person engaged in “science” wants his/her work to succeed? Or only the work of Reich, as a self-certified genius who is to get a special dispensation? It is hard to say which of these alternatives is worse, though each is equivalently foolish.

None of this is to countenance the atrocious treatment received by Reich from so many quarters, most of all, the U.S. government. My explanation for this, and it is only a hypothesis, is first, that Reich’s work was subversive enough as a revolutionary advance in Marx’s vision to bring down upon himself the repression reserved for those who disturb the world’s sleep; and second, because tragic flaws in his character aggravated his trouble and turned this repression into disaster. I do not believe, as do many Reichians, that the vendetta against Reich came as a result of his unlocking the secrets of life, nor does it at all prove that he was a great scientist, or even good one. I continue to insist that a very cold eye be cast upon the abuses of science in our society: its hierarchies and tendency toward bureaucratization, its subsumption into capitalist accumulation and warfare, and the persecutory mechanisms that have been unleashed in its name. But none of this gives the person persecuted the certification of genius, nor does it in itself validate his work. Scientific validity, as the brief methodological excursion, above, implies, can only be determined by patient collective work that sets standards beyond any individual’s whimsy. Yes, this will always be imperfect; but an alternative along the lines proposed by Reich is at best nonsensical.

Comparison with Isaac Newton is useful here. Newton was an extremely peculiar person and in many respects, a repellent one. He was emotionally isolated in the extreme, never had an intimate relation with anyone, was scornful, belligerent and cantankerous, and perhaps to some degree, delusional. Yet however obnoxiously, he remained in touch with a body of ongoing work that was not centered on himself; and he engaged in dialogue with others in that tradition. Further, beyond pondering questions in dynamics and optics, Newton also worked to expand the language of science. He realized that the variegated phenomena of the physical world could not be comprehended in depth by the senses or the language of everyday life. He was, like every true scientist, a kind of Platonist, recognizing that there is more to reality than the shadows on the walls of a cave, and that we need methods connected to but also detached from the senses to comprehend the underlying unity of things. In other words, he sought a meta-language of nature that, for the case of physics, entailed mathematics (in which, to be sure, he made major advances).

There is the scientific establishment. And there is also the community of science, sharing its languages and meta-languages. The former is attuned to power; the latter, to a kind of collective knowing, since “no man is an island,” in science as in life. One can—indeed, should—interrogate these structures, dissect their philosophical foundations and rearrange them, and turn science insofar as we can to the goals of emancipation. There will always be tension in this, but it is capable of moving forward so long as the essentials are preserved. The one thing that reliably destroys these essentials is to turn a scientific endeavor into a cult ruled by a charismatic but jealous and tyrannical “genius.” Then the essential development of collective work and relating it to the larger scientific endeavor of humanity will founder, drift apart, and collapse.

Reich created and then fell into the trap of a personalized science-cult, and his science was irreparably damaged as a result. The tragic story of how this became so is recounted in *Fury on Earth*, the great work of his amanuensis, Myron Sharaf.² It takes very extensive blinders to fail to see that the patterns observed by Sharaf would inevitably have a deleterious effect on the collegiality, objectivity, and self-critical attitude necessary for scientific work. Indeed, Sharaf was often driven to the edge of despair by Reich's foibles, which he recognizes as limits upon the realization of his genius, as when he was overheard saying to himself that "A person like me comes along once every thousand years"; or who would walk about his lab at night with a revolver strapped to his waist, telling Sharaf, "... You will learn about these things after a while." [p. 27.] As Sharaf sums up Reich's relations within the orgonomic movement:

For part of Reich was a bully and he reacted in the same way as he once described the police: Look them in the eye and they leave you alone; hide and they club you. Once one hid, Reich was merciless—in his accusations, his rages, his demands for various acknowledgments that went far beyond actual deeds. However, I like to think that if I had dealt with Reich more openly and courageously, with a deeper awareness of what he was about, he would have taken criticism with much better grace. In my experience, no one did what I have in mind. *Basically, people either went along or they left.* [p. 406, italics added.]

In other words, the strong and independent spirits who might have helped build the movement left; the timid and slavish types stayed.

Bennett's explanation rings hollow, therefore, when, invoking Thomas Kuhn's famous study,³ he claims that "it is not surprising that work growing out of a radically different paradigm should fail to be taken seriously. Indeed, the history of science is the history of such resistance." A problem is that orgonomy doesn't meet Kuhn's definition of a paradigm, one of whose prime properties is that of *consistency*, viewed both internally and externally. A consistent paradigm would be intelligible as a ground of practice to its practitioners, while at the same time capable of being communicated recognizably to the scientific community at large. But orgonomy was a project that lacked the internal social base to provide its workers with a coherent set of practices, as Reich jumped about, intellectually as well as in response to the unbearable tensions of his life, like a mountain goat leaping from one crag to another, leaving the spaces between to be cobbled together with hastily chosen concepts. This could be baffling to the workers in Reich's laboratory. As Sharaf describes it for the "bion" period⁴ of the 1930s:

² Myron Sharaf, *Fury on Earth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983). Bracketed page references in the text are to this work. Bennett and I agree on the necessity of Sharaf for comprehending Reich. Nothing else in print comes close. Not since Boswell on Johnson has a biographer known his subject so well. Sharaf, who died of a heart attack at 70 in 1997 after addressing a centenary celebration on Reich, was disciple, patient, and colleague to Reich. He lived with him for a good part of ten years, in his lab in Maine as well as elsewhere, all the time putting up with Reich's rages, violence and exorbitant jealousy, as well as appreciating his charm and brilliance. Sharaf's wife even entered onto an extended affair with Reich as the marriage went sour. Through all this, Sharaf (whom I knew, though not very well) emerges as a heroic figure of great fortitude, forever torn between conflicting feelings about Reich and striving to be true to all of them.

³ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1962]).

⁴ Bions were vesicular forms observable, for example, in grass infusions under a microscope. They were intermediate according to Reich between non-living and living matter. What he observed within the bions, was a kind of pulsating field; from which the idea of orgone energy was derived.

Most colleagues could not share Reich's awareness of the significance of the bions. They were awed by his earlier studies, but that was not enough for Reich. It was always the latest "child" who was the most beautiful, but who was somewhat alien to his followers since they had been drawn to the Reich of former findings. . . . And more and more, he felt alone and misunderstood by those closest to him. [p. 256.]

The same went for the scientific community at large. From an external standpoint, the orgone energy appears less a paradigm than a series of signposts in a lonely and storm-tossed life, mutually confirming the delusional self-image of being a once-in-a-millennium voyager. How can a coherent paradigm be made out of a concept that wanders from the libido theory, to bioenergetic flows released during orgasm, to blockages within patterns of psychopathology and carcinogenesis, to the generation of life out of non-living matter, to atmospheric phenomena such as weather, to occult interactions with nuclear radiation, and eventually, to cosmology? Bennett would do better to look to the flaws in his hero, and the intellectual price paid for them, than to continually blame a heartless scientific establishment for Reich's frustration.

The Einstein episode is a case in point, in which Bennett alleges "scandalous treatment" by the great physicist for rejecting him after a meeting in Princeton in 1941. I have not read the papers on this in the Wilhelm Reich Museum, but Sharaf did, and he covers the matter in considerable detail on pages 283-288. Sharaf writes nothing that would lead a reader to believe that Einstein acted scandalously. He observes dispassionately that after Einstein expressed some doubt about the reproducibility of the effects Reich was studying and the "inability to exclude subjective impressions," Reich responded with a 25-page response as part of a campaign of "near-desperate efforts to keep Einstein's support." This escalated rapidly ("There was nothing apologetic in his stance toward Einstein. Einstein *should* follow through on his initial enthusiasm . . .") until Einstein, finally provoked, "responded angrily about having his name used for advertising purposes." Sharaf concludes:

To Einstein's credit, he thought seriously for a while and he experimented. But once satisfied with his own explanation, he believed the matter 'completely solved,' and showed no wish to pursue Reich's further experiments.

Not exactly the impression Bennett conveys; but perhaps he feels that Einstein was not qualified to appreciate Reich's genius.

It seems to me, in conclusion, that the whole notion of identifying a discernable Orgone Energy is profoundly misguided, a bad theory that leads to futile practice. Among its many faults—its fatal centering on one very troubled man; its hectic proliferation into domains impossible to conceptually stitch together; its methodological chaos; its lack of internal theoretical unity such as could come with mathematization—can be added that of incongruity with what is known about life itself, including the vast store of discoveries that seem to have passed Reich and the Reichians by. These cannot be recounted here, for reason of limitation of space. There is no doubt to my mind, however, that life is not something capable of mechanical description, and that subtle energy flows perfuse living systems, along with the mystery of consciousness, as has been spoken of for millennia all across the world. Paradoxically, in their eagerness to pass muster with normal science, Reich and the Reichians diverge from these insights even as they speak of parallels with them. Thus they look for a unitary Energy at the core of nature, and fail to look at the physics of energy itself (e.g.,

quantum theory) or the interplay between energy, consciousness, and form. As with certain other proponents of “dialectical materialism,” Reich ultimately fell back into a sterile materialism.

Perhaps Philip Bennett will prove me wrong in this. But I have not seen evidence of it so far.