

# DIALOGUE ON REICH

## Reply to Kovel's Introduction

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I am grateful to the editors and especially Joel Kovel for publishing my article on Wilhelm Reich's early writings on work democracy.<sup>2</sup> And who could not help but be flattered when the editor-in-chief of a journal chooses to write a supportive article introducing one's contribution?<sup>3</sup> Still, at the risk of appearing ungrateful, I must take issue with certain aspects of Kovel's article.

But first, let me note that I think the opening of Kovel's piece and the way he differentiates Reich from Freud is brilliant. I am also intrigued by his concluding thought that in some sense Reich is "Marx's true heir," at least to the philosophical Marx of the 1844 *Manuscripts*.<sup>4</sup> However, Reich's positive contribution to solving our eco-crisis is seen by Kovel as basically philosophical—namely as Reich's vision of a socio-political structure where the alienation of humanity from nature has been resolved; where the repression of sexuality has ended; and where meaningful work that meets human needs, embodied love that nurtures and satisfies, and scientific knowledge<sup>5</sup> determine social policy and values rather than multinational corporations, mainstream media, cookie-cutter education, and the so-called free market. But Reich has much more to offer with regards to the planetary crisis *CNS* is committed to addressing. It is these potential contributions that I wish to address in the following paragraphs.

### The Mass Psychology of Fascism

First, especially given that the subtitle to my article was suggested by Kovel, I was surprised that he mentions Reich's 1933 *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* only in passing (see his footnote 17). The subtitle of this book in English is "Concerning the sex-economics of the political reaction and concerning proletarian sex-politics."<sup>6</sup> This book was later published in an expanded version in the United States in 1946 as *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. The German language edition, published in the fall of 1933, was not consumed in flames in the infamous student book burnings in German

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<sup>1</sup> I had assistance from a PhD candidate in biology with some of the scientific remarks made in this piece; alas, because of the prevailing attitudes in academe towards Reich's work with orgone energy, I cannot credit this person by name.

<sup>2</sup> Philip W. Bennett, "Wilhelm Reich's Early Writings on Work Democracy: A Theoretical Basis for Challenging Fascism Then and Now," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 53-73.

<sup>3</sup> Joel Kovel, "Wilhelm Reich: A Harbinger of Ecosocialism? Introduction to Bennett," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 41-52.

<sup>4</sup> Kovel, *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> As Kovel notes, Reich's motto, first used in his English publications beginning in 1942, is, "Love, work and knowledge are the well-springs of our life. They should also govern it." This motto is derived from the last two sentences of the 1939 *Natural Organization of Work in Work Democracy* discussed in my article. In German it reads: "Liebesglück, Wissen und Arbeit sind die Säfte unseres Lebens! Sie sollen es auch regieren!" A good translation might be: "Happiness in love, knowledge, and work are the juices of our life. They should also determine it."

<sup>6</sup> I am here relying on the incredibly thorough bibliography of Reich's work maintained online by Peter Nasselstein of Hamburg, Germany, with whom I share a deep interest and commitment to Reich's work but with whom I profoundly disagree politically. See: <http://www.orgonomie.net/hdobiblio.htm#1933>.

university cities and towns in May and June of 1933, though it was later banned by the Nazis; the 1946 edition was both banned and *burned* by the U.S. government. I feel confident in saying no other author's books share this horrific fate.<sup>7</sup>

So, the first additional contribution that Reich's work brings to the challenges we face is a trenchant analysis of human irrationality and the roots of the fascistic character structure and ideology. Since one of the major stumbling blocks we must address is the irrational politically and economically motivated denial of sound science and the consequent continued destruction of our ecosystem, such an analysis is of paramount importance. As powerful as Reich's therapy can be (Kovel and I disagree about this, though I assume that his characterization of it is true to his experiences with Drs. Tropp and Baker), Reich knew that therapy would have a very limited if not negligible social impact, and he continued to believe that it was only the reordering of social relations that would allow for human flowering. His analysis of the impediments to such a social restructuring as found in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* is crucial to our continued struggle against politically and economically motivated irrationality.

### **Orgone Energy and its Relevance to the Eco-Crisis**

The standard narratives about Wilhelm Reich typically involve a contrast between an "earlier" brilliant Reich—the Reich of character analysis, or the political radical Reich, or even the body therapy Reich—with a later deluded Reich, obsessed with "the Orgone," as Kovel puts it. These narratives may differ as to when Reich went awry,<sup>8</sup> but Kovel's position that Reich left natural science and his sanity behind to become the leader of some sort of therapeutic cult is standard fare, repeated *ad nauseam* in numerous secondary sources. Here it is worth looking closely at what Kovel says about orgone energy, which by the way Reich never called "the Orgone," with a capital "O"; by doing so, Kovel places Reich's comments into a non-scientific framework of some sort of belief system, akin to a religion, where capitalized nouns reign. This certainly was not what orgone energy was for Reich, and for good reason.

I quote from Kovel:

One of the central problems with the Orgone hypothesis, it seemed to me, was its dependence on immediate perception, which in turn could become a function of one's "health." This, then could be seen as one's "orgastic potency," and in other words, fidelity to Reich. The result tends to induce cultism, which did neither the Reichians nor Reich himself any good, and at the least, made scientific progress difficult.<sup>9</sup>

In the footnote to this passage, Kovel recounts seeing wavelike atmospheric phenomena that his former therapist interpreted as a direct manifestation of orgone energy but which, as Kovel quite

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<sup>7</sup> The text is now available as Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970). Those who found my discussion of Reich's work democracy of interest will want to read at least the last three chapters of this book, which are devoted to Reich's evolving stance on work democracy. But the whole of the text cries out for careful study.

<sup>8</sup> One standard take among psychoanalysts is that by 1933 Reich was already "unbalanced." See Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 224.

<sup>9</sup> Kovel, p. 48.

reasonably suggests, might have been better explained otherwise. If Reich's claims about orgone energy were limited to "immediate perceptions" where one's failure to perceive was attributed to one's lack of health, and alternative explanations were simply dismissed as "resistance," I would certainly agree with Kovel's dismissal. But Reich's claims are not as Kovel describes. Yes, there are certain visual and other sensory phenomena associated with orgone energy, but none is offered as proof. Rather they are *always* seen as the occasion for further inquiry.

Reich himself discusses this under the heading of "Organ Sensation as a Tool of Natural Research," chapter three of his *Ether, God and Devil*.<sup>10</sup> For example, after noticing warmth when he held his hand next to the wall of an orgone energy accumulator, he went on to design experiments to confirm a temperature difference between the inside of an accumulator and a control device, a difference confirmed by Einstein himself when he and Reich met in Princeton for over four hours in January of 1941.<sup>11</sup> The movement from subjective impression to objective study is part of Reich's "orgonomic functionalism," a descendent of his earlier dialectical materialist approach to scientific inquiry. One begins with the energetic contact with the objects of research, but proceeds from this to controlled laboratory experiments.

This is not the occasion nor is *CNS* the proper venue to discuss all Reich's evidence, the best summary of which can be found in his *The Cancer Biopathy*, first published in 1948<sup>12</sup> and destroyed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in the mid 1950s. A careful reading of this text will make clear the abundant evidence Reich had accumulated on behalf of the existence of a unique biological energy; since his death, physicians and scientists in several countries have published careful replications of many of his experiments.<sup>13</sup> That their work is not widely known in itself does not speak to its quality or care. Rather, it speaks to the state of contemporary science and its domination by reductionist and mechanistic methodologies, and the downside of the peer review process. Given this reality, 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.<sup>14</sup> A vital energy has been described in different cultures for thousands of years under a variety of names—chi, prana, animal magnetism, bioenergy, etc; what differentiated Reich's study was its scientific objectivity. The truth of this I leave to others to study and verify or falsify: Reich's orgonomic theory is an empirical one, not a tenet of belief.

### Some Specific Lines of Inquiry and Possible Application

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<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *Ether, God and Devil*, Annals of the Orgone Institute, II, (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1949), now published together with *Cosmic Superimposition* in a single volume (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> The subsequent scandalous treatment of Reich by Einstein is detailed through Reich's letters and journal entries in his *American Odyssey: Letters and Journals 1940-1947* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999). A more complete account, which includes Einstein's communications with Reich as well as all of the letters sent by Reich and his associates to Einstein, can be found in Wilhelm Reich, "The Einstein Affair," Orgone Institute Press, 1953, available as a xerox reproduction from the Wilhelm Reich Museum, online at: <http://www.wilhelmreichmuseum.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Cancer Biopathy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> A detailed bibliography of such experiments can be found at: <http://www.orgonomie.net/hdob345.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Minimally, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and many other editions (first published in 1962).

Assume with me for the next few paragraphs that Reich was onto something real with orgone energy and the science he came to call *orgonomy*; allow that orgone energy really does exist and is not the product of a fervent imagination. Consider the following incredibly important and fruitful lines of investigation, all having immediate bearing on the ecological crisis we are facing.

- The existence of a motor force. Towards the end of his life, beginning in 1947, Reich began developing an orgone energy motor.<sup>15</sup> Since orgone energy exists in the atmosphere, should further research develop his preliminary work on the motor, a major breakthrough could radically reduce our dependence on carbon-based fuel sources.
- Beginning in January 1951, concerned about the possible use of nuclear weapons in the Korean conflict, Reich began exploring the relationship between orgone energy and nuclear radiation, hoping to find that high concentrations of orgone energy could in some way neutralize the deleterious effects of nuclear radiation. Specifically, the plan was to pretreat mice with the orgone energy accumulator<sup>16</sup> and then expose them to nuclear radiation to see if a higher level of orgone energy could protect them from radiation sickness. A preliminary physical experiment involved placing one mg of radium in a powerful orgone energy accumulator; this led to high Geiger counter readings in the vicinity, the sudden death of most of the laboratory mice housed in a nearby building, and serious physical illnesses among most workers at Orgonon, rendering the laboratory virtually uninhabitable for several years. When exposed to the radioactive material, the orgone energy became highly “agitated,” as measured by racing and irregularly high Geiger counter readings in and around the laboratory, personal reactions upon entering the lab, and a blue-purple glow emanating from the building. From this experiment, Reich came to discover that orgone energy could become over-excited and transform into what he called “oranur.” If subsequent experimentation confirms Reich’s discoveries, then there is a further reason to oppose strongly the “nuclear solution” to the energy crisis, reinforcing what I hope will be vigorous resistance to President Obama’s recent proposal to build a new generation of nuclear powered electrical plants. If Reich is right, nuclear energy is even more harmful than is currently believed.<sup>17</sup>
- The over-excited orgone energy, oranur, had as a side effect the formation of DOR, stagnant “deadly orgone radiation.” This was observed in the formation of heavy grey clouds that formed over Orgonon and turned a previously invigorating atmosphere into one that was oppressive. Eventually Reich tried to break up these “DOR clouds” using a series of hollow

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<sup>15</sup>A preliminary report is included in *The Cancer Biopathy*, p. 150. This is discussed further in *The Orgone Energy Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January, 1949, and again in *The Orgone Energy Bulletin*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January, 1950, and in *The Oranur Experiment*, 1951, all destroyed by the U.S. government. Forgive me for belaboring this point, but the destruction of the research journals remains incredibly important to understanding the history of the reception of Reich’s ideas. All of these journals are now available in photocopy form from the Wilhelm Reich Museum in Rangeley, Maine. See: <http://www.wilhelmreichmuseum.org/>.

<sup>16</sup>A simple enclosure whose sides are made up of alternate layers of metallic and non-metallic material, with a non-metallic outermost layer and metallic inner layer. A pamphlet by Reich describing this device, “The Orgone Energy Accumulator: Its Scientific and Medical Use,” originally published in 1951, is available from the Wilhelm Reich Museum.

<sup>17</sup> And if Reich is not right, we still have excellent reasons for opposing the Obama proposal. See, for example, Karen Charman, “Half-truths, Errors and Omissions Propel Current ‘Nuclear Revival,’” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 2010, pp. 20-28.

pipes grounded in water to “draw” off the energy. He was able to eliminate the DOR clouds in this manner and discovered the ability to produce rain or inhibit its falling. Surprising as this may sound, numerous accounts of Reich’s success in this area exist. One such confirmation was reported in the *Bangor Daily News* on July 24, 1953. Here is the reporter’s account, no Reich sycophant he:

Dr. Reich and three assistants set up their “rain-making” device off the shore of Grand Lake, near the Bangor hydro-electric dam ... The device, a set of hollow tubes, suspended over a small cylinder, connected by a cable, conducted a “drawing” operation for about an hour and ten minutes ...

According to a reliable source in Ellsworth the following climactic changes took place in that city on the night of July 6 and the early morning of July 7: “Rain began to fall shortly after ten o'clock Monday evening, first as a drizzle and then by midnight as a gentle, steady rain. Rain continued throughout the night, and a rainfall of 0.24 inches was recorded in Ellsworth the following morning.”

A puzzled witness to the “rain-making” process said: “The queerest looking clouds you ever saw began to form soon after they got the thing rolling.” And later the same witness said the scientists were able to change the course of the wind by manipulation of the device.<sup>18</sup>

An independent collaboration of Reich’s weather work can be found in Charles R. Kelley’s 1961 monograph, *A New Method of Weather Control*, which includes time-lapse sequences of cloud growth and shrinkage.<sup>19</sup> This simple device, properly employed, could be used to end droughts.<sup>20</sup>

Reich’s orgonomy—from the understanding of human irrationality to a non-polluting motor force to a deeper understanding of the perils of nuclear power to possible weather modification—could play an important role in addressing the enormous task of environmental recovery and protection with which humankind must come to grips in the near-term future.

## Assessing Reich’s Work

The concluding chapter to *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, entitled “On Natural Work-Democracy,” was originally published in 1943, two years after the second of the two early work democracy pamphlets I discussed in my article.<sup>21</sup> This chapter incorporates what may seem to be a digression entitled, “Notes on Objective Criticism and Irrational Caviling.” In the context of

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<sup>18</sup>*Bangor Daily News*, July 24, 1953, as quoted in Myron Sharaf, *Fury on Earth: A Biography of Wilhelm Reich* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), pp. 379-380. This book, mentioned by Kovel in his Introduction, describes in detail the oranur experiment and the work on the orgone energy motor, and the rest of Reich’s life and work.

<sup>19</sup>Available at: [http://www.radix.org/Publications\\_files/CharlesKelleyPublications.pdf](http://www.radix.org/Publications_files/CharlesKelleyPublications.pdf). There is also a master’s thesis, again with time lapse photographs: James DeMeo, “Preliminary Analysis of Changes in Kansas Weather Coincidental to Experimental Operations with a Reich Cloudbuster,” master’s thesis, University of Kansas, Geography-Meteorology Department, available from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI, 1979.

<sup>20</sup>Reich spent the winter of 1954 in Tucson, Arizona, attempting weather modification, with, again, startling results. His own account is detailed in his last book, *Contact with Space: Oranur Second Report* (New York: Core Pilot Press, 1957) and examined with care in Conny Huthsteiner, M.D., “Weather Engineering in *Contact with Space*: Global Warming and the Planetary Emergency,” *Annals of the Institute of Orgonomic Science*, Vol. 10, December, 2005, pp. 1-42.

<sup>21</sup>Wilhelm Reich, *Further Problems of Work Democracy*, 1941.

discussing “free speech,” Reich notes the way in which casual unconsciously motivated criticism and interference can inhibit meaningful work. Here he alludes to the reception of his biological work in Oslo on the “bions” discussed in my original piece. Once news of Reich’s biological investigations became public, he was the subject of an extended attack in the Social Democratic daily newspaper, for which there is good evidence of political motivation.<sup>22</sup> In a two-year period, more than a hundred letters and articles appeared denouncing Reich. Ultimately, this attack affected Reich’s research and was part of what motivated him to look elsewhere for a new home.

In the section on criticism, Reich lays out what he sees as a rational approach to a new field of inquiry, in contrast with the irrational caviling of the section’s title:

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.<sup>23</sup>

Had Reich’s work with orgone energy been approached in anything like this fashion, our understanding and appreciation for it might look dramatically different than it does today. 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.

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<sup>22</sup>Reich was seen as a Trotskyite, and the Norwegian Social Democrats were attempting to maintain cordial relations with Stalin’s Soviet Union; recall the expulsion of Trotsky from Norway in 1936.

<sup>23</sup>*The Mass Psychology*, pp. 372-373.