

# What would a Wilhelm Reich-oriented psychoanalysis look like?

by *Andreas Peglau*<sup>1</sup>

From a lecture given at the spring conference of the German Psychoanalytic Association (DPG) in Kassel, 6.6.2015.

**„The question of what psychoanalysts can and should do here and now for the preservation of peace - at least where it is still possible to speak of peace at all, i.e. not least in Central Europe - is, in my view, by far the most important reason why a profound discussion of Reich within psychoanalysis should urgently - for the first time - be put on the agenda.“**

\*

... Can we draw the conclusion from all that I have now reported to you that it would be desirable to "rehabilitate" Reich - as was demanded in 1997, on the occasion of his 100th birthday - by readmitting him to the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA)?

For one thing, I don't think Reich would have attached importance to becoming a posthumous IPV member again. His experiences with this organisation were too bad. It would certainly not have suited him to serve as a figurehead for an institution whose interests - as the volume "100 Years of IPA" (Loewenberg/ Thompson 2011) underlines - primarily revolve around therapy and the structure of the association.

Since Reich was demonstrably a psychoanalyst who stood out from the mass of his professional colleagues in a positive sense, the question of whether he is "worthy" of a renewed IPA admission would turn reality upside down anyway.

On the other hand, I think it is necessary to ask whether today's IPA could be a worthy custodian of Reich's psychoanalytic legacy, whether it would be particularly suitable for carrying on his thoughts, which combine the individual and the social in revolutionary conclusions. From all that I know, I have to doubt it.

Reich can therefore, in my opinion, well do without posthumous honorary memberships in the analysis associations. But these analytical associations are cutting themselves down to a considerable extent if they continue to suppress Reich's insights.

But what would happen if they stopped this suppression? What would a psychoanalysis oriented towards Wilhelm Reich look like? Does it fit into a "pluralistic" psychoanalysis, which is the focus of this conference?

---

<sup>1</sup> Please cite as: Peglau, Andreas (2023): What would a Wilhelm Reich-oriented psychoanalysis look like? (<https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/what-would-a-wilhelm-reich-oriented-psychoanalysis-look-like/>)

**Please note:** My English skills are not very good. Therefore, I first translated the text with [DeepL](#) and then corrected it. I expect that there are still translation errors - and ask those who discover such errors to send a message to [info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de](mailto:info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de)

First of all, it would be a psychoanalysis without a pessimistic-individualistic image of man, without the aggression- or even death instinct. And that is by no means "old hat".

In 2012, we learned in a conference report: "The psychoanalyst and affect researcher Rainer Krause [...] spoke about the 'joy of killing' that is inherent in all of us" (Schon 2012). In the *Freud Handbook*, published in 2006, it says: 'The impulse to let the death drive "gain supremacy over Eros" is as a problem "omnipresent today" (Krovoza 2006, S. 428). As early as 1976, Peter Ziese had stated that "the existence of an aggression instinct [is] no longer disputed in analytical literature". And even those who assume an aggression instinct, suggesting that people are biologically predetermined dangerous and thus permanently in need of control, have both quick and false explanatory patterns at hand for war, murder and violence. Ziese said of the death drive theory that it "hardly plays a role in psychoanalytic literature any more" - but on the following pages he then referred to the very analyst who explicitly adhered to this drive: Melanie Klein (Ziese 1982, S. 341-345). Since the "Kleinians" have meanwhile risen to become the most powerful schools of psychoanalysis and the equally influential school of Jacques Lacan continues to focus on the existence of this drive, it must be said: the death drive is more popular among analysts today than it was in Freud's time. The neurobiologist and psychotherapist Joachim Bauer (2011, S. 16) therefore quite rightly formulates it in the present tense: the aggression or death drive *is* "the big flop of psychoanalysis".

But a Reichian psychoanalysis would not only do without the death drive. It would also not contain an allegedly inevitable Oedipus complex, an allegedly fateful compulsion to repeat, a punitive "need", an allegedly innate sadism and masochism. Neither would it propagate a supposedly necessary drive suppression or sublimation, nor a supposedly desirable self-suppression through defence mechanisms or external control through superego implants.

Otto Fenichel had already summed up his therapeutic intentions under the motto: "Where the superego was, I shall become!" (Laska 1991) - which was of course meant as a counter to Freud's: "Where there was It, let I become!"

Following Reich, the aim would even be that no superego should arise in the first place - and that no "it" should disappear either. Since Reich perceived in the "it" the basis for *prosocial* behaviour, he could only wish that we benefit from it throughout our lives.

With Reich, no catalogue of mental disorders would be feasible either, in which people are listed who blush in stressful situations - but not also state leaders who order war and mass murder without any blushing, not also US presidents who set half the world on fire or order new drone executions every week in violation of international law.

Any idea that psychoanalysts could be a "blank canvas" - a notion that Freud already disagreed with - is even more incompatible with Reich: Where analysts necessarily become public critics of social ills, there is no room for this.

So a lot would be lost in a psychoanalysis more oriented towards Reich. What would be added?

Among other things, a rather holistic idea of bodily-mental recovery and actually possible mental health, a focus on psycho-prophylaxis, a stronger inclusion of feelings - especially anger - and the body in treatment,<sup>2</sup> descriptions of complex interactions between the individual and society, as I

---

<sup>2</sup> On the beginnings of this development: Reich 1933a, pp. 100-133 and Reich 1999, pp. 123-159. However, the more Reich concentrated on direct work with the body, energy and the "plasma system" in the 1940s, the more he neglected the therapeutic relationship, life history and psyche of the patients (Reich 1999, pp. 472-476).

have quoted from Reich's *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* - as well as a social utopia underpinned with psychosocial facts. The latter in particular would give psychoanalysis the chance to gain appropriate social relevance and popularity, to become a constructively contentious component of social self-understanding and further development.

But would what I have outlined here still be psychoanalysis at all?

If Reich was right with his theses - then: Yes, of course. If psychoanalysis wants to be a science, "plurality" cannot mean indiscriminately collecting everything that has ever called itself psychoanalysis - no matter how unrealistic it is. But only: to include everything that helps to reflect objective reality more accurately - even if it runs counter to previous views. Psychoanalysis, as Freud (1916-17, S. 403f.) defined it in 1917, "intends and achieves nothing other than the uncovering of the unconscious in the life of the soul".

Reich's insights and questions, in my view, help decisively both in recognising reality and in uncovering the unconscious. And they tie in creatively with Freud - also in their socio-critical aspects.

Freud wrote in 1910 that the "enlightenment of the masses" was the "most thorough prophylaxis of neurotic diseases" and called on the analysts to cooperate in this. He added: "Society must be in resistance to us, for we act critically against it; we prove to it that it itself has a large share in the causation of the neuroses"(Freud 1910, S.111, 115). Several times he made it clear that for him this was connected with the demand for social upheaval.

Thus, in 1927, in *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, Freud (1927c, p. 333) wrote:

"But if a culture has not got beyond the fact that the satisfaction of one number of participants presupposes the oppression of another, perhaps of the majority, and this is the case with all present cultures, then it is understandable that these oppressed develop an intense hostility to the culture which they make possible by their labour, but in whose goods they have too small a share. [...]

It need not be said that a culture which leaves so large a number of participants unsatisfied and drives them to revolt has no prospect of lasting, nor does it deserve to."

The goal, he wrote, must be a culture "that no longer crushes anyone". Thus, consistent psychoanalysis has always been a critique of society - and an effort to change society accordingly.

If such a reality-oriented psychoanalysis, conscious of its social responsibility, could be revived, if it became the core component of a "pluralistic" analysis, it would at the same time be an essential factor to constructively solve the global problems of the 21st century, to avert the impending ecological collapse and to reduce the increasing danger of war.

I believe: without the inclusion of such psychoanalysis, these problems cannot be solved at all.

The question of what psychoanalysts can and should do here and now for the preservation of peace - at least where it is still possible to speak of peace at all, i.e. not least in Central Europe - is, in my view, by far the most important reason why a profound discussion of Reich within psychoanalysis should urgently - for the first time - be put on the agenda.

\*\*\*

## Sources:

Bauer, J. (2011): Schmerzgrenze. Vom Ursprung alltäglicher und globaler Gewalt, München: Blessing.

Freud, S. (1916-17): Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse, in ders.: CW vol. 11, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer

Freud, S. (1927c): Die Zukunft einer Illusion, in Freud: CW Band 14, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, pp. 325-380.

Krovoza, A. (2006): Politische Psychologie, in Lohmann, H.-M./Pfeiffer, J. (ed.): Freud-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung, Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, pp. 423-429.

Laska, B. A. (1991): Die Negation des irrationalen Über-Ichs bei Wilhelm Reich:  
<http://www.lsrprojekt.de/wrnega.html>

Loewenberg, P./Thompson, N. L. (ed.) (2011): 100 Years of the IPA. The Centenary History of the International Psychoanalytic Association 1910–2010. Evolution and Change, London: Karnac.

Schon, L. (2012): Tagungsbericht *Wie nationalsozialistisch waren die Deutschen?* 09.12.2011– 11.12.2011, Tutzing, H-Soz-u-Kult, 25.02.2012, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=4083>

Reich, W. (1933a): Charakteranalyse. Technik und Grundlagen für studierende und praktizierende Analytiker, o.O.: Selbstverlag des Verfassers.

Reich., W. (1999) [1970]: Charakteranalyse, Köln: Kiepenheuer u. Witsch.

Reich, W. (2020): Massenpsychologie des Faschismus. Der Originaltext, Gießen: Psychosozial.

Ziese, P. (1982) [1976]: Die Triebtheorie der Psychoanalyse, in Eicke, D. (ed.): Tiefenpsychologie, vol. 1: Sigmund Freud – Leben und Werk, Weinheim und Basel: Beltz, pp. 337-356.

Translated and abridged excerpt from "Wilhelm Reich's Significance for Psychoanalysis - His Exclusion as a Negative Caesura, His Re-Integration as an Opportunity", lecture given at the Spring Conference of the German Psychoanalytic Association (DPG) in Kassel, 6.6.2015. It was first published in Allert, Gebhard/Rühling, Konrad/ Zwiebel, Ralf (eds.): Pluralität und Singularität in der Psychoanalyse, Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, pp. 450-473.

**The forwarding and distribution of the above article for *non-commercial* purposes is expressly desired.**