

Was Reich "mad"? On the credibility of widespread clichés

by Andreas Peglau¹

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A "campaign of character assassination that continues to the present day" (Nitzschke 1997a, p. 91) was and is ongoing against Reich.² Already during his Scandinavian exile (1933-1939), former colleagues of Reich, including his former teaching analysts Paul Federn³ and Sándor Rado, put the claim into the world that Reich had gone mad. Preferably, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia (Cremerius 1997, p. 144).

An example of how even former friends of Reich contributed to representations out of touch with reality is provided by Edith Gyömroi. She reports that she visited Reich in Copenhagen in 1933 together with Otto Fenichel. Reich there told them about the

"main content of the book he was working on. It was the beginning of his orgone theory. Fenichel and I did not dare to look at each other; we shuddered. Then Reich suddenly stopped and said, 'Children, if I were not so sure of my cause, it would strike me as a schizophrenic fantasy.' We said nothing. [...] It was a great loss and a great sorrow for both of us" (quoted in Ludwig-Körner 1999, p. 128).

Apart from the question whether Reich's preoccupation with what he called "orgone" (Sharaf 1996, pp. 313-401) suggests a schizophrenic disorder - I mean: *no* -, the described encounter could not have taken place at all.

The book Reich worked on until late summer 1933 was *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*. This was followed in 1935 by *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf*.⁴

In both writings the term "orgone" does not appear at all, could not appear. Because only in 1936, in Norway, Reich began with those "Bion" experiments, which led in 1938 to the occupation with the phenomenon, which he called "orgone" or "life energy" from 1939 on. Reich probably used a similar expression for the first time in a letter he wrote on March 17, 1939. In it he mentions a "something (we want to call it 'orgonität' for the time being)" (Reich 1997a, p. 292).

¹ Abridged, slightly changed and translated excerpt from "[Unpolitische Wissenschaft? Wilhelm Reich und die Psychoanalyse im Nationalsozialismus.](https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/was-reich-mad-on-the-credibility-of-widespread-cliches/)" 2017, pp. 299-306.

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As to the sources used in this text, please look at its end.

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

² One of the most audacious examples, lacking any scientific respectability, is provided by Hartmann/Zepf 1997 (see Peglau 2017a, pp. 428-432).

³ Sharaf (1996, pp. 104-108) assumes that Federn's aversions against Reich were motivated both by Federn's sexual inhibition and by envy of the successful younger colleague. Both Federn and Reich were politically "left-wing," regarded the subject of sexuality as very significant, and wanted to popularize psychoanalysis. That Reich succeeded in this on a much higher level than Federn is for example shown by a comparison between Federn's 29-page text *Zur Psychologie der Revolution. Die vaterlose Gesellschaft* (1919) und Reich's *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* from 1933.

⁴ Otherwise were published by Reich, *Was ist Klassenbewusstsein?* (What is Class Consciousness?) and *Dialektischer Materialismus und Psychoanalyse* (Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis) as offprints in 1934, then *Der Einbruch der Sexualmoral* (The collapse of sexual morality, first published in 1933) in a second edition in 1935.

At this date Reich had been completely at odds with Fenichel for five years and Edith Gyömroi had already been in Ceylon for a year.⁵

The "evidences" of various psychoanalysts for Reich's alleged mental illness are full of such absurdities.⁶

I will deal with some of them in the following.

The biological experiments

After Reich learned at the Lucerne Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) that he had been clandestinely expelled from analytic institutions, he ventured a new beginning in several respects at the end of October 1934 in Oslo, Norway. In addition to further developing body psychotherapy, now called vegetotherapy by him, he soon devoted himself to biological research.

First, he tried to prove experimentally what Freud also assumed: namely, that the energy of the sexual drive, the "libido," had a physiological basis. Reich wanted to trace this by means of skin potential measurements taken during sexual arousal and other emotional states. By reading contemporary biological research literature,⁷ he had already come to the conclusion that, since the unicellular stage, living beings have either oriented themselves expansively toward the world - which happens in humans, for example, in a state of lust - or retreated contractionally from the world - for example, in the case of fear and threat.

According to him, libido energetic changes corresponded to this, which in turn are reflected in the electrical charge conditions: Pleasure would have to be accompanied by an electrical charge on the surface of the body, discomfort and fear by a decrease of this charge and its shift towards the inside of the body (Sharaf 1996, p. 252ff.). He did not fully succeed in providing experimental evidence for this. Nevertheless, he became increasingly certain of a "functional identity" between physiological and emotional processes in the human being, of an inseparable connection between body and psyche (ibid., p. 255f.).

Reich was not the only one who tried to bridge the gap between psychoanalysis and natural science. Several analysts of the time, such as Franz Alexander, tried to find evidence for Freud's drive theory in the field of physics (Sulloway 1979, pp. 555-559).

The most intensive efforts in this regard were made between 1929 and 1935 by Siegfried Bernfeld and his cooperation partner, the engineer Sergei Feitelberg, who wanted to prove by means of "libidometry" - the term they created - that the libido was a special form of energy and that physical laws could therefore also be applied to it (cf. Dahmer 2009a, pp. 225f.). Bernfeld and Feitelberg also built a corresponding "libido measuring device" and used it to investigate skin reactions and temperature differences in the human body (Bacher 1992, pp. 182-196).

While Reich was attacked again and again for his similar attempts, not least by psychoanalysts, Bernfeld received only scanty criticism from his professional colleagues for his "libidometry" (Dudek 2012, p. 495ff.). On the contrary, "libidometry" was given wide space in psychoanalytic publications. In the journal *Imago*, edited by Freud, Bernfeld and Feitelberg were granted five

⁵ Although I already drew attention to this fact in 2013 (Peglau 2013, p. 277), Michael Schröter (2023, p. 413) still uses Gyömroi's story ten years later to make Reich's alleged schizophrenia - or alternatively at least a borderline disorder - credible.

⁶ Also Hartmann/ Zepf 1997 define in the first step Reich's orgone research without further investigation as a psychotic symptom - and then shift the beginning of this research, and thus the beginning of the alleged psychosis to the year 1933 (Peglau 2017a, pp. 428-432).

⁷ For example, by Max Hartmann and Ludwig Rhumbler (Sharaf 1996, p. 248).

articles between 1929 and 1934, totaling about 170 (!) pages (ibid., p. 605), in order to give a broad account of their ideas and experiments. And not only that: in 1930, part of these articles also appeared in book form in the International Psychoanalytic Publishing House: *Energie und Trieb. Psychoanalytische Studien in Psychophysiologie* (ibid.).

The following year Freud even praised Bernfeld's libidometric experiments in a letter of recommendation for Bernfeld addressed to the Berlin University.⁸

In contrast to Reich, Bernfeld had admittedly tried to find a physical basis for Freud's death drive with "libidometry". He explained this in detail in the 1930 *Imago* article *Der Entropiesatz und der Todestrieb* (The entropy theorem and the death drive, Bernfeld/Feitelberg 1930).

But even Reich's approaches in this regard seem to have interested Freud: Reich's 1937 paper *Experimentelle Ergebnisse über die elektrische Funktion von Sexualität und Angst* (Experimental results on the electrical function of sexuality and anxiety, Reich 1937), in which he outlined his investigations, was included by Freud in his personal library (Davies/ Fichtner 2006, para. 2907).

Thus, while Reich had endeavored with the bioelectrical experiments to confirm an early assumption of Freud's in a manner not atypical for psychoanalysts of the time, he more clearly went his own way when he again conducted biological investigations in 1936.

Here, too, he followed a trend in biological research at the time, so he was "not alone either in terms of his epistemological interest or in terms of theoretical premises" (Sawicki 2011, p. 252). Rather, there were "overlaps between Reich's theories and the research of other scientists in this field [...]. In fact, a renewed and extremely lively debate on the origin of life took place in the 1930s," in which, for example, Niels Bohr participated (ibid., p. 249f.). Already in the 1920s, the Soviet biologist Alexander Oparin and the Briton J. B. S. Haldane had put forward theses according to which life could develop spontaneously from molecules at any time (ibid., p. 239) and not, as school biology thought, only once long ago.

Reich was now also observing something that seemed similar to him: From various substances viewed under a light microscope with a magnification of up to 4,000 times, seemingly new, coherent structures developed, not unlike unicellular organisms. Reich called them "bions" (Sharaf 1996, pp. 259-267).⁹

However, the fact that he quickly drew far-reaching conclusions from the thoroughly remarkable results of his biological research (cf. Senf 1996, pp. 41-94), among other things about the causes and possible cures for cancer, made him vulnerable to attack (Sharaf 1996, pp. 268-278). Rumors questioning Reich's sanity became all the more easily entrenched.

Diagnosis as a weapon

Undoubtedly, Reich suffered lasting psychological trauma in his early youth (Peglau 2017a, pp. 45-48). He was probably able to compensate for this until 1933 and also to alleviate it through - aborted - (teaching) analyses. However, the simultaneous ostracism by communists and psychoanalysts and Nazi persecution clearly limited his ability to compensate. From now on, there are increasing reports of Reich's choleric, authoritarian and rigid traits as well as

⁸ Freud wrote on February 19, 1931, after an introductory general praise for Bernfeld ("enabled by clear sharp intellect to do scientific work"): "Recently, in the journal *Imago* 1929/30, he tackled one of the most difficult speculative topics of our science under the title Energy and Drive" (Tenorth 1999, p. 310f.).

⁹ In 2015, biologist James Strick has demonstrated in a detailed study published by Harvard University Press that these theses of Reich's, as well as the totality of his biological research, are worthy of attention and continuation (Strick 2015).

pronounced jealousy (Ollendorff 1975, pp. 69ff., 114f.; Sharaf 1996, pp. 301ff., Priese 1999).¹⁰ Several biographers and forensic psychiatrists confirm that he began to show paranoid tendencies in the 1950s, but that they never completely took possession of him (Sharaf 1996, pp. 268-279; Boadella 1988, pp. 291f., 296; Greenfield 1995, pp. 311-317).

The fact that Reich was repeatedly subjected to persecution since 1933 may have contributed significantly to this. I am not aware of any convincing evidence that he suffered from paranoia already in the 1930s. To accuse him of schizophrenia with reference to his life energy research is unserious anyway.

This insinuation ignores, among other things, the importance of the "élan vital" concept of the philosopher, member of the Académie Française and winner of the 1927 Nobel Prize for Literature, Henri Bergson. Reich (1987, p. 28) was not the only one to invoke it on several occasions.

Already in 1911/12, the internationally renowned neurologist, Harvard professor and president of the American Psychoanalytic Association, James Putnam, had called upon the IPA members to take note of the workings of a world spirit or a "self-acting," "self-renewing" "life energy." In doing so, he referred in particular to Bergson, and also to the famous German philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (Putnam 1912, pp. 108f., 117).

In a letter to Putnam of March 10, 1910, Freud agreed with Bergson's view that memories exist "independently of physical laws" (Hale 1971, p. 354). And on July 8, 1915, Freud even conceded: "[I]t is known that each individual represents a piece of life energy" (ibid., p. 376).

Also the libido understanding of C. G. Jung, who held Bergson in high esteem anyway (Freud/Jones 1993, p. 286, Bair 2007, p. 398), showed clear affinities to the "élan vital" (Danzer 2011, p. 219).

Moreover, Reich was no exception, even among psychoanalysts, to the fact that he struggled with mental disorders later in life. Freud classified himself as a "compulsive type" and as plagued by a father complex (Leitner 1998, p. 170). But he also seems never to have consistently worked through the psychological entanglement with his mother. In Jürg Kollbrunner's book *Der kranke Freud* (The ill Freud, Kollbrunner 2001) there are various evidences listed of Freud's persistent psychological and psychosomatic disorders.

That Freud also had blind spots in the interpersonal sphere is demonstrated by Johannes Cremerius precisely by the example of his dealings with important comrades-in-arms such as C. G. Jung, Otto Rank, Sándor Ferenczi or Reich. While Freud initially tended to idealize them, later disappointments often triggered angry reactions in him. If these colleagues evolved too independent views, Freud usually classified them as disloyal deviants and slandered them - even publicly - as psychologically disturbed: attributions that could have lasting damaging effects (Cremerius 1997; Büntig 1982, pp. 254-280; Sharaf 1996, pp. 228f.).¹¹

¹⁰ For a critical but fair assessment of Reich's character, see Neill 1975, pp. 173-179.

¹¹ As late as 1909, Alfred Adler had also assessed Freud as a "theorist, perceptive and original" and a "decent human being" (Freud/Jung 1974, p. 260). As their scientific controversies intensified, Freud increasingly perceived him as paranoid (Leitner 1998, p. 161; Freud/Jung 1974, pp. 446, 473; Gay 2006, p. 254). In 1914, in his paper *Zur Geschichte der psychoanalytischen Bewegung*, Freud subtly imputed "paranoid" traits to Adler, even publicly (Freud/Abraham 2009, vol. 1, pp. 366, 368, fn 3, 369). "This was," writes Freud biographer Peter Gay, "condemnation as diagnosis" (Gay 2006, p. 255).

Wilhelm Stekel, one of Freud's earliest and closest comrades-in-arms, who partly showed solidarity with Adler, was

Marina Leitner (1998, pp. 162f.) shows by means of several examples that psychoanalysis dissidents were "often psychiatrically diagnosed and pathologized" – not only by Freud but also by other analysts, thus "the same instrument that is supposed to serve enlightenment and healing was used as a weapon to fight opponents."

If analysts who used this "weapon" against Reich can also be assumed to have psychic disorders it is not because this professional group is particularly susceptible to such problems, but because it is hardly avoidable to have psychic disorders from our "normal" childhoods.

This also corresponds to the views of Freud and Reich. In Freud, we learn, among other things, that "we are all a little nervous," that is, neurotic (Freud 1901b, p. 309), or that "normality" is an "ideal fiction": "Every normal person is only averagely normal, his ego approaches that of the psychotic in this or that piece, to a greater or lesser extent" (Freud 1937c, p. 80).¹²

Reich (1986, p. 26) qualified this assumption only insofar as he assumed that this state was tied to patriarchy and would therefore disappear with it.

In my words: Psychologically all-round healthy people would only exist in an all-round healthy society and environment - which the world was far from even in the 20th century.

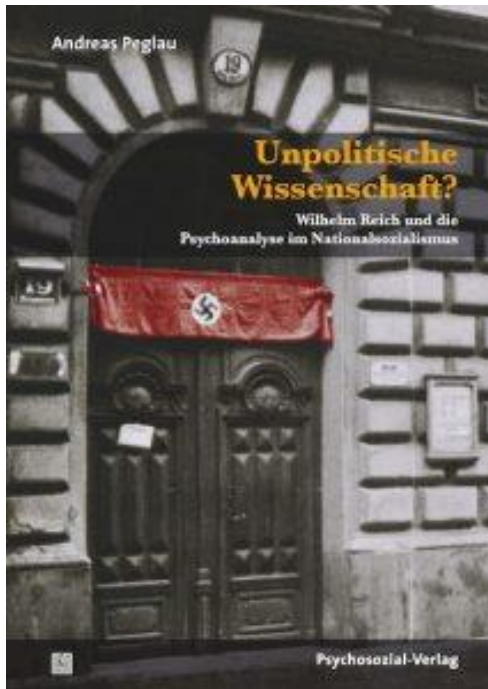
In any case, the presumption that a person - whether Freud, Reich, or anyone else - suffers from psychic disorders should not serve as an alibi for avoiding engagement with that person's views.

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described by Freud in the same paper as the "at the beginning so very meritorious, later completely neglected W. Stekel".

In a telegram to Eitingon of Sept. 2, 1932, Freud assessed the lecture of his former close friend Sándor Ferenczi as "harmlessly stupid" (Freud/ Eitingon 2004, vol. 2, p. 849). The background was: Ferenczi had not let Freud stop him from giving a lecture at the 1932 IPA congress in which he questioned the self-exaggeration of the analyst and attributed far more reality to sexual abuse in childhood than Freud still wanted to admit (Ferenczi 1982b). Since Ferenczi had previously been one of the most important authorities of the IPA, there was - from Freud's point of view - a danger that his thoughts might become school. Again, the defamation and pathologization of Ferenczi served to prevent this. IPA President Ernest Jones excelled in this. Later, in his biography of Freud, he was even to claim that Ferenczi had "last suffered from psychotic states, paranoid ideas, and homicidal ideations" (Jones 1984, vol. 3, p. 214; cf. Cremerius 1997, p. 157; Ferenczi/Freud 2005, vol.3/2, pp. 295f., fn 1; Ferenczi 1988, 2004, pp. 28-39, 54-56. For details on the "Rank case," see Leitner 1998).

¹² Consequently, Freud also used the word "health" or "healthy" extremely rarely, and if he did, then mostly in connection with relativizations - cf. the passages mentioned in the index of the *Collected Works* (Freud 1999) and Lohmann/Pfeiffer (2006, p. 265ff.).



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