

# Think Inside the Box: Wilhelm Reich's Theories on Orgasm and the Orgone

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**Introduction:** As the originator of the term “sexual revolution”, Wilhelm Reich – an Austrian physician, psychoanalyst, political activist and author – was a significant, albeit controversial, contributor to his field. Throughout his career he extensively studied the human orgasm and developed the theory of “orgone energy” as a driving force present in animate and inanimate beings. While Reich’s theories are now largely seen as pseudoscientific, his views on sex and orgasmic energy have had an enduring impact in popular culture and society.

**Sources and Methods:** We analyzed primary material including journal entries and personal accounts obtained from the Wilhelm Reich Museum (Rangeley, Maine). We reviewed published secondary sources on Reich, news articles, and biographies obtained through on-line public resources as cited.

**Results:** Following a tumultuous childhood, Reich attended medical school in Vienna and started his early career under the tutelage of Sigmund Freud. Freud’s influence was instrumental in the development of Reich’s theories on character analysis and orgasmic potency and his ideas were some of the first linking mental and sexual health. Reich also notably combined his interests in politics and sexual health and created “Sex-Pol” clinics, clinics that provided both sexual and Marxist education along with contraceptives, to the working class. Prior to WWII, Reich fled Nazi Germany to the United States, where he studied the relationship between sexual health and cosmic energy, a novel concept he termed “orgone”. To harness this energy, Reich invented “orgone accumulators” which, among other claims, were thought to improve physical and mental health. Ultimately, Reich’s notoriety garnered him attention from the American government, which led to the censorship of his works and ideas and eventual downfall and imprisonment.

**Conclusions:** Although Reich’s theories were largely discredited later in his life, he was a pioneer in advocating for a deeper curiosity of sexual health and its personal and societal consequences, which continue to impact society today.

**Keywords:** Wilhelm Reich, orgone, sexuality, psychology

Theories on the nature and biology of human sexuality are replete with works by Freud, Foucault, and Erickson who are arguably the foremost 20th century authors on the subject. The name of Wilhelm Reich may be less well known yet at one time would eventually have devoted followers on both sides of the Atlantic and revolutionize mainstream thinking about sex. Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) was a Viennese-born psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, political activist, inventor, and prolific author whose works ranged from such broad subjects as the origins of life to the biology of the female orgasm (Figure 1). (1,2) His theories on sexual health in 1920s Europe suggested that functionally productive orgasms were the basis of good individual health and that, in turn, could improve the health of society (3). Reich

called for a ‘sexual revolution’ in Europe, and was part of the sex-reform movement in Vienna and Berlin, which was closely allied with anti-fascist political activism. (4,5) He eventually escaped Nazified Europe in 1939 for New York City and began a remarkable 10-year career advocating his theories of ‘orgone’ and sexual health which became enormously popular, epitomized by his invention of ‘orgone energy accumulator boxes’. When Reich passed away in a Pennsylvania state prison in 1957, however, his theories had been debunked, his name disgraced, his works confiscated or destroyed, and was painted by the FDA as a charlatan and a fraud. (6) During life, however, Reich was a close member of Sigmund Freud’s inner circle, a correspondent of Albert Einstein, and a thinker whose practices had inspired a

sizable following throughout American society from Norman Mailer to Saul Bellow.(7) We wished to explore further the life of this enigmatic individual, the basis of the theories that so influenced his contemporaries, and how the career of a celebrated polymath ultimately ended in a prison cell.

**SOURCES** An initial search on Google was performed to find relevant source material. Select writings by Reich, along with secondary sources including biographies, news articles, journal entries, personal accounts, and information from the Wilhelm Reich Museum (Rangeley, Maine) were subsequently examined in detail.

## RESULTS

### Early Years and Theory of the Orgasm:

Born in 1897 to an affluent family, Reich experienced a childhood marred by spousal violence, infidelity, and the untimely deaths of his parents.(8) Upon graduating from medical school in Vienna in 1922, Reich began his career working in the psychiatric clinics of Sigmund Freud. From those experiences, Reich formulated his early theories on the function of the human orgasm. Reich believed that sexual repression and impairment which he partially attributed to society's Christian morals and underpinnings, led to "neuroses" – synonymous in those times with mental illness. Failure to achieve

complete orgasm, Reich argued, prevented release of libido and contributed to the development of mental illness. (9,10)

### Orgastic Potency

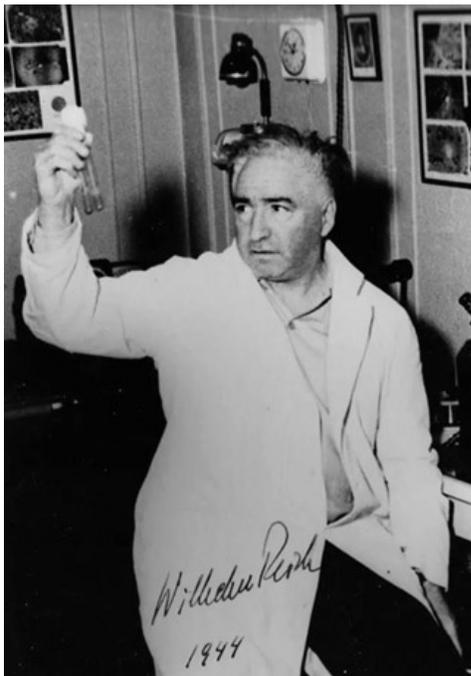
Reich coined the term "orgastic potency" which he defined as "the ability to resolve existing sexual need-tension."(1) In doing so, he supposed that the ability to achieve a satisfactory orgasm was present in healthy individuals while an inability to climax was seen chiefly in those with neuroses (Figure 2).(1) Thus, by addressing an individual's sexual dysfunction, Reich believed that improved orgasms and sexual fulfillment would ultimately improve one's mental state.

### Differences of 'Reichian' and Freudian Thought

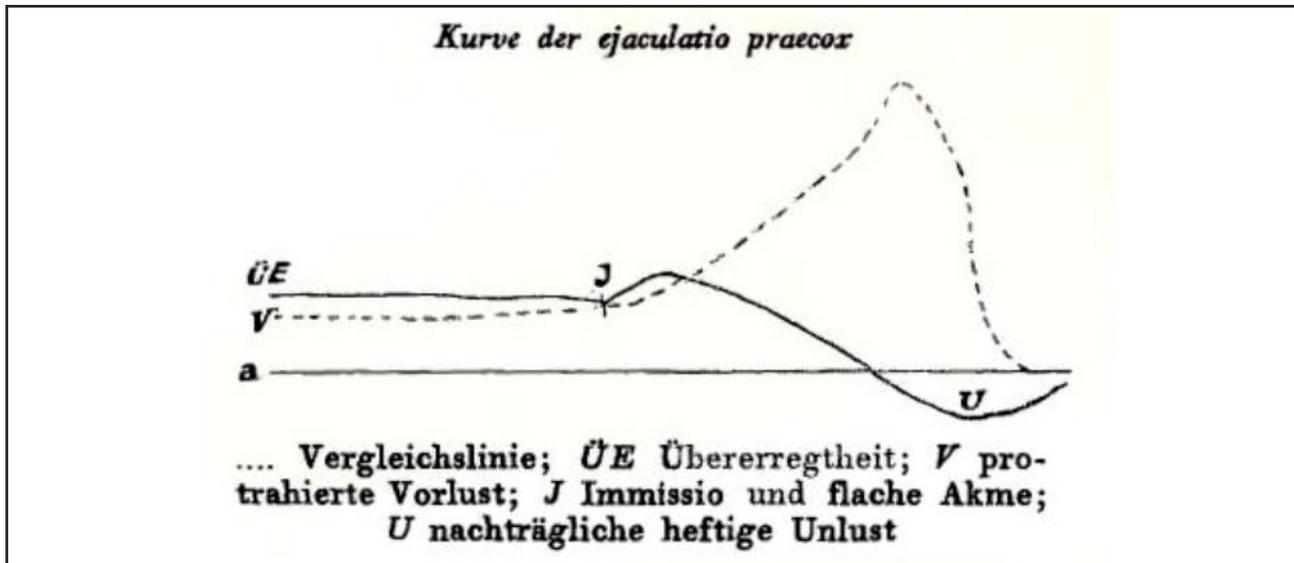
Though Reich's early ideas were influenced by Freud, he ultimately differed from his mentor in several respects. Both believed in a biologic source of sexual energy, but Reich extended the Freudian concept of libido to include a harnessable, quantifiable source of energy which formed the basis of his orgone theory (Figure 3)(11) Furthermore, while both believed mental illness stemmed from conflict between individual sexual instinct and societal norms, Freud believed individual sexual instinct must be subsumed to societal norms while Reich argued that society itself was the main perpetrator of sexual repression and needed to be addressed.(12,13)

### "Sexual Politics"

To highlight his belief in society's complicity in sexual repression, Reich put his ideas into practice by becoming the messiah of "sexual politics", or "sex-pol." In 1927, Reich opened several clinics in Vienna which offered what one author claimed was a mixture of "psychoanalysis, Marxist advice, and contraceptives" to working class patients, men, women, teenagers, and the elderly. (14) Inspired by the writings of Karl Marx, Reich later moved to Germany and joined the Communist party where he championed the idea that sexual liberation was the beginning of social and economic reform of the proletariat. Though Reich's political activism was ultimately cut short by the rise of Nazism and his subsequent immigration to the United States, Reich's idea of combining class struggle with psychoanalysis made him one of the forerunners of the modern day sexual revolution.(15)



**Figure 1.** Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), in his laboratory, Orgonon, Maine (Granger Academic®)



**Figure 2.** Reich's theory comparing sexual excitation of a healthy individual (dotted line) with that of an affected individual (solid). From *Die Funktion Des Orgasmus* by W Reich, 1927 (1), p 20. (Gr. *Kurve der ejaculatio praecox*: Curve of Premature Ejaculation; V, *Vergleichslinie*: Comparison lines; ÜE, *Übererregtheit*: overexcitation; V, *protrahierte Vorlust*: prolonged foreplay; J, *Immissio und flache Akme*: intromission and shallow climax; U, *nachträgliche heftige Unlust*: subsequent intense disgust; a, no excitation)(Public Domain)

### Harnessing the 'Orgone'

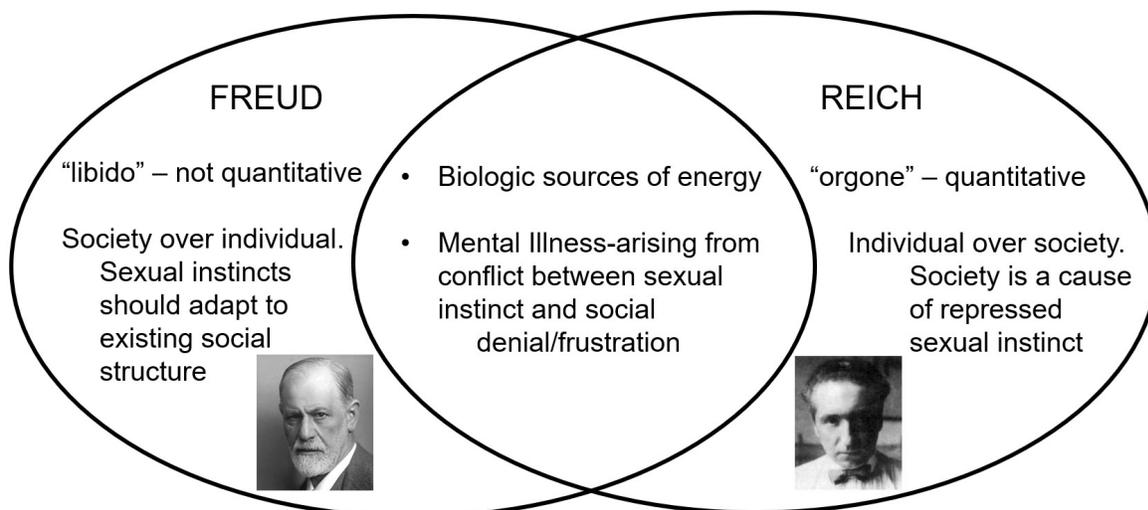
Continuing to build upon his idea of functional causes behind physical ailments, Reich spent his time in the US cultivating experiments to champion his orgone theory. He claimed that the high humidity of New York City dampened his observations.(16) In a 1940 camping trip to Maine, the brilliance of the night sky so convinced Reich of the evidence of atmospheric orgone, he dedicated all his personal energy and cash to the building of an orgone research center in the New England wilderness. In 1942, he purchased a 175-acre property of fields, forests, and hills that bordered tiny Dodge Pond, about 25 miles from the Canadian border, and which had stunning views in all directions. For \$35,000, Reich had a stone complex completed and called the property "Orgonon". A "Students' Laboratory" was completed in 1945 supplemented by an "Orgone Energy Observatory" a few years later (Figure 4). (17)

It was at Orgonon that Reich developed and ran most of his projects though now largely seen as pseudoscientific. Reich built upon his hypotheses from the 1920s and postulated that orgone was a harnessable, biogenico-cosmic energy present in inanimate matter as well as living things. Reich built a wood and metal box to harness this omnipresent energy field which supposedly functioned like a Faraday cage, allowing an individual to

sit within and accumulate orgone (Figure 6). The device became widely popular when released to the public, especially among the countercultural 'beatniks' such as Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, JD Salinger, and Norman Mailer. (18). Mailer himself built several for his personal use in Connecticut, insulated to also facilitate 'primal scream theory' then popularized by Arthur Janov (1924-2017). " 'They were beautifully finished', remembered Mailer's friend, the theater producer Lewis Allen, 'and there was a big one that opened like an Easter egg. He climbed inside and closed the top . . . ' "(19). Woody Allen, in a nod to the accumulator, included an 'orgasmatron' in his 1973 film "Sleeper" into which the film's protagonist climbs to evade the police. (20)

To many, Reich's box was seen as a celebration of the individual, in which sexual liberation became a form of political activism although the mechanics of the device itself strained credulity. "When I first came across a reference to the accumulator," wrote Christopher Turner in 2011, "I was puzzled and fascinated: why on earth would a generation seek to shed its sexual repressions by climbing into a closet?"(Figure 5)(19)

In 1941, Reich also started using orgone accumulators to treat terminally ill patients. While Reich himself never promised his patients any cure, there



**Figure 3.** Freudian (left) vs Reichian (right) theories underlying sexual function, the individual, and the conflict with society. (Photos: Freud, Library of Congress, Public Use; Reich, AA Brill library, New York)

are many testimonials of patients reporting improved physical and mental wellness which they attributed to using an orgone accumulator. (18, 21) One such account was written by a Norman Shapiro, who was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. He underwent many days of ‘orgonomic therapy’ at the behest of his wife, spending many hours a day inside an orgone accumulator. Shapiro managed to live long beyond his life expectancy and even reported a decreased tumor size on radiography (22).

Reich expanded his research further as his popularity increased and started the self-published *International Journal of Sex-Economy and Organon Research* which distributed his own works and those of collaborators, psycho-social essays, testimonials, and book reviews from 1942-1952. Reich also conducted a series of ‘experiments’ that evaluated cosmic sources of organon, the effect of organon on ‘cloudbusting’ using a special organon ‘gun’, and the effects of organon on bacterial growth. He also conducted the “Oranur” experiments of 1951, in which he placed radioactive radium (somehow procured from the Canadian Radium and Uranium Corporation in New York City) into modified orgone accumulators in the Student Laboratory.(23) His observations, it is said, provided evidence that orgone even had effects on the atomic nucleus. The accumulator appeared to have properties, writes Turner,

that contradicted “all known principles of physics”.(19) Einstein himself spent two weeks analyzing the box: all of Reich’s claims were refuted.(24) Nevertheless, the popularity of the boxes continued and became a central object in the growing sexual pioneer communities of the west coast. Descriptions of the box and Reich’s works were eventually reported in the lay press which caught the attention of the United States and its Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

#### **FDA Injunction and Fall From Grace**

The FDA, citing concerns about patient safety and medical commerce, reviewed and debunked Reich’s work. In 1954 the FDA issued a Complaint of Injunction against Reich, believing his ideas not only to be fraudulent but also dangerous to the public. The injunction declared orgone to be nonexistent, banned Reich’s works, and prevented interstate transport of his orgone accumulators. (25) When one of Reich’s assistants unwittingly violated the injunction, the FDA charged Reich with contempt of court, and, following a 1956 trial, Reich and his assistant were imprisoned. The FDA burned thousands of Reich’s publications in New York City in what was one of the largest federally-mandated book burnings in American history (Figure 6a).(18)



**Figure 4.** Former Student Research Laboratory and Observatory, now the Wilhelm Reich Museum (Wilhelm Reich Museum, Rangeley, Maine)

### Aftermath

On March 8, 1957, a few days before he was taken to a jail, Reich executed his Last Will and Testament before several devotees. In the documents, he established the Wilhelm Reich "Infant Trust" because, he felt, the future of the world was invested in safeguarding the "unarmored life" of infants whom he called "The Children of the Future." (26) He first entered the federal prison in Danbury CT before moving onto Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary in Pennsylvania. There, Reich died on November 3rd 1957 of a myocardial infarction just 8 months into his 2 year prison sentence. His body was brought back to his adopted home state of Maine and put to rest in a dedicated tomb on the Orgonon property. The stone observatory itself had become abandoned but reopened by the Wilhelm Reich estate trustees in 1960. In 1999, the building was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. The Wilhelm Reich cottage, Tamarack, where Reich lived with his family, has waterfront views of Dodge Pond, and is generally available for public use on AirBnB.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Reich died a convicted felon, accused of fraud, and his works banned by the United States. His legacy, however, lives on - in pop culture as well as among a small minority who continue to

advocate for his visionary world (Figure 6b). Reich wrote of many theories about society, politics, and the role of sex in shaping the future. His writings were relevant to many who fought for reproductive rights, for patient autonomy and palliative care, and sexual health, all topics relatable to us as urologists, physicians, and humanists. Reich's work also came to symbolize the conflict between the individual and the state, from his days as an anti-fascist in 1920s Europe to 1950's America where some, including the ACLU, viewed the FDA's actions against him as heavy-handed censorship violating 1st amendment provisions. Reich was, at the very least, an innovative figure, engaged in wide ranging passions from the function of orgasms to methods to treat cancers and end drought. Wilhelm Reich may have indeed demonstrated to his followers that sometimes one may need to sit inside a box in order to think outside of one.

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**Figure 5.** Orgone Energy Accumulation Box showing subject sitting within and supposed rebreathing apparatus to be used when the door has been closed. A cone sized hat was also provided to some subjects to further concentrate 'orgone' levels. The FDA categorized Reich's work as "fraud of the first magnitude." (25) (Photo, public domain, Food and Drug Administration, Washington DC)

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**Figure 6a.** (Left) The FDA-mandated burning of Reich's books was widely reported and generated claims of censorship by the ACLU. (New York Times, 13 July, 1956) **Figure 6b.** (Right) Kurt Cobain (1967-1994) inside an original Reich orgone accumulatory box owned by Reich-devotee, the American writer William Burroughs (1914-1997)(28).

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*« L'économie sexuelle naquit de la tentative d'harmoniser la psychologie des profondeurs, de Freud, avec la théorie économique — et politique — de Marx. »*

**W. Reich.**

**Figure 7.** Wilhem Reich's 1930s concept of 'sexual politics'. that a "sexual economy grew out of an attempt to consolidate Freudian psychology with the economic and political theories of Marx." (From dedication page, *Sexuality and Work*, Boris F and Münzer T, F. Maspero, Paris, 1968 ([gallice.bnf.fr](http://gallice.bnf.fr)))