Our Run-Ins with Wilhelm Reich

written by Marvin Mandell | August 18, 2009

Both of us had been in Orgone (Reichean) therapy for most of the 1950s, and we still believe it was efficacious. Orgone therapy involves tearing down the muscular armor of the body's defense mechanisms – neck armor, jaw armor, chest armor, eventually pelvic armor, sometimes with the therapist's palpitations of the patient's rigidity. It is an attempt to go beyond Freudian psychoanalysis in that it deals not only with a patient's dreams and free association but also with the physical manifestations of repressed hatred. Reich's theories of therapy and of the connection between sexual repression and economic exploitation can be found in his Character Analysis,The Mass Psychology of Fascism, and The Sexual Revolution, among other books. But we had our difficulties with Reich, and we believe Reich handled them in an authoritarian manner, a contradiction to his anarchistic philosophy of work democracy, self-regulation, and free expression. In 1951, with the United States stalemated in the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur, commander of U.S. forces, wanted to go beyond the Yalu River (viz. into China) to pursue the North Korean enemy. President Harry Truman, not wanting to risk a Third World War, possibly with China and the Soviet Union (then its ally), forbade this, and MacArthur resigned from his post and eventually retired from the army. Soon after this, Reich wrote about his support of MacArthur in the Orgone Energy Bulletin (OEB), a periodical which most of us patients and therapists received. He said that Truman was tying MacArthur's hands. I wrote a letter to the editor of the OEB criticizing Reich's position and pointing out how different it was from Reich's earlier writings. (I cited some left writings of Reich in Leipzig in 1932.) The OEB, under Reich's editorship, did not print the letter or any other one in any way critical. I believe that the OEB never printed any criticism of Reich. But that is not all. Reich wired my therapist and told him to terminate my therapy. I was "too sick to treat," in his view. Fortunately, my doctor ignored Reich's demand. My wife, Betty Reid, had a run-in at around the same time, but hers was not political. She was a co-owner of a summer camp in Rangeley, Maine, near Reich's headquarters, and most of the children who attended either were in Orgone therapy or had parents who were. Reich enrolled his son, Peter, as a full-time camper, and the co-owners hired another counselor. Then Reich said he wanted to change Peter's status to part-time, but the co-owners had already engaged another counselor because of Peter and would not change the fee. Reich's reply was swift: he informed all the therapists that no child attending the camp should be allowed to continue in therapy, nor could his parents. Most of the therapists complied with Reich's demand, and the camp closed. Politically, the once radical Reich was moving rightward, in fact, far rightward, and this was reflected in the authoritarian manner he handled both of our dissensions.