

Reich Report, 1937

The biological experiments at the Institute for Sex-economic Life Research in Oslo were confronted with very different mindsets in the scientific community long before they were published in their totality.

Two very unscientific types of reception of the first reports concerning biological tasks will be mentioned because they took on a certain practical effect. Specifically, strange rumors concerning the type of experiments were circulated in different venues, for example, it was told that the experiments were totally insane, were implemented fully indiscriminately, that, while the work of the institution in the field of psychotherapy might be good, its work in the area of biology was total nonsense, etc. These rumors originated in part from scientific assistants that viewed the experiments in a highly superficial manner. One cannot usually counteract rumors with rationality, but one can establish facts that are well-suited for eliminating their credibility.

The first assistant in the electrical experiments on the human body was Dr. Löwenbach, who, after being fired by the Department of Physiology at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, accepted a position with Dr. Reich as an assistant in the experiments with electricity. Wilhelm Reich eliminated this assistant position in September, 1935. The final episode, which was preceded by many other episodes, was as follows:

On that occasion, it involved the deciding question whether the potential fluctuations that Reich had observed on human skin during different experimental trials were specific biological phenomenon or whether they could be produced in non-living material. After a period of great initial enthusiasm for this task, Dr. Löwenbach hindered the experiments by denying the existence of indisputable phenomenon that he had observed and verified himself.

The oscillograph, all of the equipment belonging with it, were at that time in the Insane Asylum Dikemark (Head Director Dr. Jessing). A catatonic patient was hooked up to the apparatus, and tickling the palm of his hand with dry, insulated cotton showed the familiar potential fluctuations already known to us ("Tickle Phenomena"). Drs. Löwenbach and Hoffmann, who witnessed the experiment, could not decide whether or not to acknowledge the organic nature of this phenomena and attempted to prove that the sheet upon which the patient was resting was also "alive." The electrode, previously resting on the palm of the hand, was put on the sheet and next to it "tickled" with the cotton wad. To my [Reich's] great horror, this experiment showed exactly the same potential fluctuations as touching the palms of the hands. Dr. Löwenbach and Dr. Hoffmann were triumphant, and Dr. Reich was very surprised because he could not explain the anomaly. It contradicted not only his assumptions but also his previous experiments on inorganic matter. After 24 hours, it occurred to Reich what error was committed by the experimenters and how it had resulted in the anomaly.

- 1) The neutral electrode that lead to the amplifier's cathode was not removed from the patient's leg. His body was, thus, still part of the circuitry.
- 2) The patient's hand rested on the bed sheet, which was moistened with potassium chloride. It was no wonder that one had seen reactions on the bed sheet. With this, a new problem arose: By which biological means could the body's electrical charge be transmitted through the bed sheet.

These are the true facts of the case that were the grounds for Dr. Reich's termination of the team work with Dr. Löwenbach and Dr. Hoffmann. Later Drs. Löwenbach and Hoffmann witnessed the experiment which measured the arousal curve during masturbation. (Experimental results p.VI, fig 21 [p. 152 in 1982 FSG edition]). Neither Dr. Hoffmann nor Dr. Löwenbach saw an increase in the potential and the

uniform intervals of the curves, which proved to be typical formations in later experiments. In a discussion in which Professor Schjelderup, Dr. Hoffmann, and Dr. Nic Hoel and also Dr. Wilhelm Reich were present, Dr. Löwenbach literally declared that the experiments were incorrect because even sexual pleasure must result in negative charge. Only two months prior, Dr. Löwenbach had enthusiastically reported to Dr. Reich that he had measured a strong positive charge on his own person during sexual arousal. These statements are indispensable with respect to the rumors buzzing around at present.

In October, 1936, after a satisfactory number of successful experiments to create bions were completed, Wilhelm Reich wanted to seek guidance from Albert Fischer, the Director of the Rockefeller Institute for Biology in Copenhagen, concerning the continuation of his research. On the occasion of a trip to Copenhagen, Reich demonstrated the bion experiment for Albert Fischer and his assistant. During the trial, Fischer asked Reich if he was mixing toothpaste. Reich then asked whether they wished for him to end the demonstration. Fischer apologized, and the demonstration continued. Reich requested a magnification adjustment between 2500-3000X. Albert Fischer's institute, however, only had microscopes without inclined binocular lens tubes and only magnifying from 1500-1700X respectively. Because of this, the demonstration was more complicated; however, the formations, at least to the practiced eye, were clearly observable. One of Albert Fischer's assistants immediately carried out a Giemsa staining, which had positive results. The same assistant made suggestions regarding the measures necessary for performing the demonstration for the scientific community. Also attending this demonstration were Dr. Leunbach and Dr. Philipson from Copenhagen. After a while, Reich received a letter from Leunbach reporting that Fischer had made very derogatory and rude comments. He indicated that it was only his common courtesy that prevented him from immediately throwing Reich out. He had never before encountered such outrageousness. The formations seen in the demonstration were nothing more than simple lecithin formations, and, besides that, it was preposterous to demand such magnifications from him. Reich responded with a letter to Albert Fischer in which he very objectively stated his opinion of this type of control observation. [This letter is published in Reich, *Beyond Psychology*, pp. 91-93. For more on this episode see J. Strick, *Wilhelm Reich, Biologist*, pp. 99-102]. After the first autoclaved and highly sterile bion mixtures succeeded, Professor Thjötta from the Institute for Bacteriology in Oslo was sent some samples to evaluate. Professor Thjötta deemed these as highly irrelevant, dealing merely with simple subtili [i.e., *Bacillus subtilis*, a common air infection bacterium]. Wilhelm Reich then submitted a request to expand the experiments to also include animal trials. It was a matter of fact that the cultures he obtained must be tested for virulence. The request went to Oslo's Medical Director, Heitmann.* Professor Thjötta was supposed to provide the expert opinion. Thjötta told Professor H. Schjelderup, through whom the request was processed, that the experimenters would be better off stopping their work because everything had already been researched in that area. Permission to conduct animal trials was later rejected by the medical director.

These encounters, just a few examples from many similar ones, should not only show how "scientifically" one approached an, after all, not unfamiliar work, but also point out that there is another way, a correct way of approaching the issue scientifically. Professor Roger DuTeil from the University of Nice was the first representative of this approach.

When Professor DuTeil received the first report about the sterilized bion mixture, he thoroughly examined the preparation together with a bacteriologist, verified the experimental design, and immediately sent a report to the French Academy. He wrote the following to Wilhelm Reich: The experiments were correct and interesting, however, such experiments had already been carried out earlier, though not in this manner, and, most importantly, were cultures from sterilized structures. At this time, the first cultures had already succeeded. Consequently, he immediately called together a commission following his presentation at the Natural Philosophical Society in Nice on March 7, 1937, composed of pharmacologists, bacteriologists, and hygienists under his leadership. This commission was tasked to perform control experiments parallel to those at the Sex-economic Institute in Oslo and, after their

completion, to report back to the French Academy. The first statements made by local bacteriologists are contained in Roger DuTeil's Nice presentation. Further inoculations using the forwarded cultures showed positive results, likewise the verification that the cultures were pure. The experimental design was also deemed correct. However, the work of creating bions and cultivating them, a job that was already difficult due to their nature, bogged down. In the summer of 1937, DuTeil made the decision to travel to Oslo in order to spend 14 days directly on the spot where he could verify for himself the working procedures, their results, and the possibility of completing control experiments in France. He spared neither money nor time in order to achieve the possibility of complete control. For ten days, DuTeil worked in the laboratory at the Oslo Institute together with all scientific personnel completing a trial test, which was completely successful including the cultures from sterilized bions. In the meantime, a commission of French scientific specialists, among them a leading professor of surgery [Monod], were waiting for DuTeil in Paris, who was supposed to bring with him the bions and the cultures produced in his presence in addition to a film showing the work process. DuTeil left on August 7, 1937, following very prolific work, with about 600 m of film and a collection of preparations, which had been produced in his presence.

This is the productive, correct yet discerning and friendly sort of control work. We do not doubt for one second that we have found an objective, critical, yet at the same time productive, helping friend in Roger DuTeil.

Signed Wilhelm Reich

* Nils Heitman was the State Director General of Health, beginning in 1931. See, e.g., his publication 'Tuberkulosedødelighetens nedgang i siste 5-årsperiode 1926–30', *Tidsskrift for Den norske lægeforening*, 1933, 53: 78–81.