Knightmare in Armor: Reflections on Wilhelm Reich’s Contributions to Psychoanalysis

~Villiari I. Grussurian

The fate of theories, like that of people, lies in their character.
—Avin RAPAPORT (1967, p. 684)

ONE OF THE more curious by-products of the political and social unrest of the late 1960s, has been the emergence of and survival of interest in the writings of Wilhelm Reich (1897—1957). In the last few years, new translations of his books have appeared and some of his early work has been translated for the first time. A biography, magazine articles, and various surveys of his work convey the impression that his ideas are timely, or at least that they are historically important. However, I believe that the current enthusiasm for Reich owes more to the problems that interested him than to the light he shed on them. His great appeal for radical youth is based on his advocacy of social and sexual reform, for which he provided ideological support through a Marxist-psychoanalytic synthesis. By the technique of anthropological, economic, and psychological, analysis, Reich tried to provide a scientific justification for revolutionary hopes.

Although famous for the Marxist beliefs which he abandoned, and the orgone research for which he was martyred, it was with psychoanalysis that Reich began his troubled career. He first encountered Freud’s writing in 1920, while a medical student in Vienna. In an interview with Freud, “the professor” encouraged him to begin psychoanalytic studies, and by the time of his graduation from medical school in 1922, he was already a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. The energetic Reich was soon writing and presenting his findings to the Society, where he was accepted and respected. It is said that at first Freud thought Reich his most gifted pupil. By 1924, he was conducting a seminar on technique, which he continued until 1930. During this period, he exercised considerable influence on the thinking of his colleagues, especially those younger than he. His “radicalization” occurred in 1927, when he witnessed the famous burning of the Ministry of Justice and was horrified at the massacre of workers by the police. While remaining a member of the Austrian Socialist Party, he joined the medical group of the Arbeiterhile, an affiliate of the Austrian Communist Party. He de voted the next few years to the Marxist education of analysts, the psychoanalytic education of Marxists, and, with apparently greater success, the sexual education of the workers. Although he succeeded for a