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Title:

Sex, Lies and Bookburning: Wilhelm Reich and the US Food and Drug Administration

Abstract:

Psychoanalyst turned laboratory biologist Wilhelm Reich in the 1920s-30s developed an unorthodox theory of a biological pleasure function of the orgasm. By 1940 his research led him to an experimental cancer treatment, which he began testing on mice. Starting in 1941 “hopeless case” human cancer patients asked to try the treatment—his so-called “orgone energy accumulator.” Reich agreed only if patients signed an affidavit acknowledging it was experimental, that no cure had been promised, and that no money was charged. Though there were some promising effects, in the end, as Reich reported in his published findings, all the patients died, and Reich concluded the focus must be on prevention. Nonetheless, when the story of these experiments was brought to the US Food and Drug Administration in 1947, they aggressively investigated what they wrongly believed was “some kind of sex racket.” After a seven-year investigation the FDA filed a formal Complaint for Injunction against Reich’s work in federal court. Reich chose to respond in a highly unusual way. The court issued the Injunction in default. Later a student of Reich’s directly violated the interstate commerce provision, leading to a criminal charge of contempt of court against himself and Reich. Having fled Germany in 1933 as the Nazis burned his books, Reich was thus forced in 1956 to witness the US Government burn far more of his books and journals, some illegally. Found guilty of contempt, he also died after 7 months in Federal Prison. Reich’s legal strategy has been considered naïve, or even evidence of mental instability. This talk—part of a larger scientific biography in progress—will examine that strategy in some detail and consider other interpretations as well.