A BRIEF DECOLONIAL HISTORY OF ALEXANDER LOWEN

PART II

POR GEFFERSON EUSÉBIO - JOURNALIST AND CBT IN BIOENERGETIC ANALYSIS

In our first historical overview of the life of Alexander Lowen, the father of Bioenergetic Analysis, we examined his ancestry, aiming to look beyond the limits of the historiography told by the man himself. We explored a trajectory shaped by a Russian-Jewish diaspora, with his parents migrating to a rising New York, full of contradictions and implications characteristic of that historical period.

For this second part, the goal is to explore aspects of Lowen's biography that remain unsaid: how Wilhelm Reich and his body-centered therapy shaped Lowen's awareness and ambitions, and how Lowen often omitted details about the mentor who, as he frequently acknowledged, changed his life.

To situate this story historically, we need to understand Lowen's encounter with Reich in the context of the deadliest conflict humanity had ever witnessed—a war whose echoes reach us even today. What stands out in Lowen's autobiography, *A Life for the Body*, is how little he discusses this historical period. He recounts the end of his relationship with Reich in a simple, almost unemotional way, lacking the warmth or intensity he attributes to their therapy sessions in the 1940s. He hardly considers that Reich was a political exile in the United States, persecuted by Nazi-fascists. Lowen portrays the surrounding environment lightly, as if these historical facts were commonplace.

This approach might suggest some self-censorship about sensitive subjects in the U.S. at the time. Yet, given that the biography was written many years later, the shallow treatment of the broader social context points more to a lack of emotional connection with those events.

A bit more history

Here, we aim to provide readers with a brief historical framework: postwar Europe—particularly Switzerland, where Lowen studied medicine—and the absence in his narrative of the McCarthy era in the U.S., which directly affected his greatest influence, Wilhelm Reich.

Lowen does not explain why he chose Switzerland for medical school, though this was a requirement from Reich and something Lowen himself recognized as necessary to fully grasp Reichian techniques.

As research shows, American hegemony was on the rise at the time, especially regarding global migration. After World War II, U.S. dominance shaped refugee management—from camps in Germany, Austria, Italy, and Greece to resettlement programs worldwide. U.S. military ships, funding for international organizations such as the International Refugee Organization, and the push for capitalist development all shaped postwar mobility and globalization.

In his autobiography, Lowen notes the strength of the U.S. dollar against local currencies, allowing him luxuries for that time: buying a car, later moving to a privileged rural area—"we were called rich Americans," he recalls.

Lowen's move to Europe followed rejections that prevented him from completing medical school in New York. Despite teaching anatomy and managing a lab, he suspects one application form caused problems: he mentioned that his interest in medicine was linked to Wilhelm Reich's work.

> "To my surprise, I was only called for an interview. The interviewer told me my age (32) worked against me; younger students, with more years to practice, were a better investment for the school. Looking back, I think it was a mistake to mention Wilhelm Reich and my special interest in his work… medicine was even less open then." (p. 67)

Regarding Switzerland, Lowen barely mentions postwar hardships, aside from occasional water shortages or missing essentials. Some studies describe Switzerland as largely spared from Europe's destruction. Even when conflict reached its borders - like bombings in northern Italy - most Swiss citizens were shielded from war's worst horrors.

Lowen recalls how pleasant life in Geneva was. It was there that he and Leslie conceived their only child, Fred, before returning to the U.S., where Leslie was eight months pregnant.

Wilhelm Reich: impact, involvement, and erasure

Lowen's account of meeting Reich leaves readers puzzled about Lowen's own character - even in bioenergetic terms, given that this method emphasizes connecting body and emotions. Lowen writes about his admiration for Reich's reinterpretation of Freudian theory and his appreciation for Reich's social insights on human symptoms.

Equally significant was Lowen's therapy with Reich, which provided the foundation for what became Bioenergetic Analysis. In his first session, Lowen describes an unexpected scream bursting out of him, signaling a need to release repressed memories and emotions:

> "When I left his office, I knew I had to face the unknown within me" (p. 49).

Lowen also admits that one of his goals in therapy was to become famous. This desire - sometimes naïve, sometimes ambitious - appears throughout his writings. It makes sense, given the industrial boom and social reproduction shaping U.S. culture then. If, in the first part of this narrative, we used Walter Benjamin's "history against the grain," here we might turn to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and their critique of the "culture industry."

That concept helps frame the cultural allure of fame during Lowen's years with Reich. Adorno and Horkheimer saw the culture industry as mass-oriented cultural production that transformed citizens into consumers. The rise of superheroes like Batman and Superman, the popularity of radio and cinema stars, and new forms of mass entertainment nurtured the idea that fame was the pinnacle for the average American.

Even critics like Umberto Eco, in *Apocalyptic and Integrated*, who questioned the rigidity of Adorno's term, acknowledged the historical moment: a society where cultural production was being reshaped, especially in the U.S.

Lowen's fascination with becoming renowned through his future medical and therapeutic work was shaped by that cultural landscape, as well as by the personal growth he experienced through Reich's methods.

Beyond influencing Lowen's theory, Reich inspired him deeply. Lowen describes himself as once shy and ashamed, unable to find his place in the world, until Reich's guidance transformed him:

> "I needed a firmer foundation for my personality, one that could sustain a stronger self-image. I needed to grow and become a more virile man. Reich changed my life." (p. 53)

Yet questions linger: why does Lowen's biography, written decades later, omit the persecution Reich endured from the Food and Drug Administration during the McCarthy era? How could such a politically charged moment go unmentioned?

While other historical works on Bioenergetic Analysis document this period, Lowen's book seems to avoid anything that might distract from his main goal: becoming a doctor and practicing the therapy he learned from Reich.

Regarding Reich's central role, what emerges is not outright denial but a gradual softening of his importance - especially his contributions to social psychology, public health, and politically engaged therapy aimed not at producing "successful" individuals but socially connected, humane subjects.

Toward what comes next…

This second part sought to recount historical themes from a pivotal period, offering a broader perspective for our community. The next and final installment will discuss Lowen's writings and the social contexts in which they emerged.

This work is a small contribution to framing Bioenergetic Analysis within a wider social lens - not limited to trends or organicist tautologies that constrain the lived experience of bodies in an endlessly complex world.

References:

- LOWEN, Alexander. Uma vida para o corpo: autobiografia de Alexander Lowen. São Paulo: Summus, 2005.
- PAIVA, Odair da Cruz. Migrações internacionais pós Segunda Guerra Mundial: a influência dos EUA no controle e gestão dos deslocamentos populacionais nas décadas de 1940 a 1960. Marília: UNESP, [s.d.].
- PEREIRA, Valéria Sabrina. A neutralidade suíça em xeque nas obras de Christian Kracht e Friedrich Dürrenmatt. [S.l.: s.n.], [s.d.].
- ADORNO, Theodor W.; HORKHEIMER, Max. Dialética do esclarecimento: fragmentos filosóficos. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1985.
- ECO, Umberto. Apocalípticos e integrados. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1979.
- REICH, Wilhelm. Análise do caráter. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001.