

Erich Fromm: Biography

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Fromm, Erich (1900-1980)

Forced to flee from Nazi Germany in 1933, Fromm settled in the United States and lectured at the New School of Social Research, Columbia, Yale, and Bennington. In the late 1930s, Fromm broke with the Institute of Social Research and with *Escape from Freedom* began publishing a series of books which would win him a large audience. *Escape From Freedom* argued that alienation from soil and community in the transition from feudalism to capitalism increased insecurity and fear. Documenting some of the strains and crises of individualism, Fromm attempted to explain how alienated individuals would seek gratification and security from social orders such as fascism.

His post-World War II books, *Man For Himself* (1947) and *The Sane Society*, applied Fromm's Freudian-Marxian perspectives to sharp critiques of contemporary capitalism. Fromm popularized the neo-Marxian critiques of the media and consumer society, and promoted democratic socialist perspectives during an era when social repression made it difficult and dangerous to advocate radical positions. Although his social critique was similar in many ways to his former colleague Herbert Marcuse, the two thinkers engaged in sharp polemics from the mid-1950s into the 1970s. Marcuse began the polemic by attacking Fromm as a neo-Freudian revisionist, and Fromm retaliated by calling Marcuse a "nihilist" and "utopian." Marcuse claimed that Fromm's emphasis on the "productive character" simply reproduced the "productivism" intrinsic to capitalism, and that his celebration of the values of love, in books like *The Art of Loving*, and religious values simply reproduced dominant idealist ideologies.

Fromm continued to be a prolific writer up until his death in 1980, publishing a series of books promoting and developing Marxian and Freudian ideas. He was also politically active, helping organize SANE and engaging in early "Ban the Bomb" campaigns, as well participating in the anti-War movement of the 1960s. Fromm continued to argue for a humanistic and democratic socialist position, and claimed that such elements were intrinsic in Marxism. His many books and articles had some influence on the New Left and continue to be widely read and discussed today.

One of the distinctive features of Critical Theory is their synthesis of Marx and Freud aimed at producing a theory of the psychological mediations between psyche and society ignored by traditional Marxism.⁷ The key theoretical essays outlining the Institute's materialist social psychology were published in the *Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung* by Erich Fromm. Fromm was a practicing psychoanalyst who also received a University position as lecturer in the Institute for Psychoanalysis at the University of Frankfurt; he was interested as well in Marxism and sociology, and joined the Institute as their psychology expert in 1929.⁸ Fromm was one of the first to attempt to synthesize Marx and Freud to develop a Marxian social psychology, and many of the other members of the Institute were to attempt similar syntheses, though the precise mixture and interpretations of Freud and Marx were often quite different.

Fromm sketches the basic outline of his project in his article "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology" subtitled "Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism."⁹ He begins by discussing the basic principles of psychoanalysis, and then indicates why he thinks Freud's theory, properly interpreted and reconstructed, is compatible with historical materialism. For Fromm, psychoanalysis is a materialist psychology which analyzes instinctual drives and needs as the motive forces for human behavior. It carries out an inventory of the basic instincts and dissects the unconscious forces and mechanisms that sometimes control human behavior. Psychoanalysis also analyzes the influence of specific life experiences on the inherited instinctual constitution. Thus, in Fromm's view, Freud's theory is "exquisitely historical: it seeks to understand the drive structure through the understanding of life history" (CoP, p. 139).

The key conception of psychoanalysis for Fromm is the "active and passive adaptation of the biological apparatus, the instincts, to social reality" (CoP, p. 141). Psychoanalysis is especially valuable for social psychology in that it seeks "to discover the hidden sources of the obviously irrational behavior patterns in societal life -- in religion, custom, politics, and education" (CoP, p. 141). Fromm therefore believes that an "analytical social psychology" is thoroughly compatible with historical materialism since both are materialist sciences which "do not start from 'ideas' but from earthly life and needs. They are particularly close in their appraisal of consciousness, which is seen by both as less the driving force behind human behavior than the reflection of other hidden forces" (CoP, p. 142). Although historical materialism tends to assume the primacy of economic forces and interests in individual and social life, while the psychoanalytic focus is on instinctual and psychological forces, Fromm believes that they can be fruitfully synthesized. In particular, he believes that an analytical social psychology can study the ways that socio-economic structure influences and shapes the instinctual apparatus of both individuals and groups.

The psychoanalytic emphasis on the primacy of the family in human development can also be given a historical materialist twist, Fromm believes. Since "the family is the medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child," analysis of the family and socialization processes can indicate how society reproduces its class structure and imposes its ideologies and practices on individuals. Psychoanalytic theories, Fromm suggested, which abstract from study of the ways that a given society socialized its members into accepting and reproducing a specific social structure, tend to take bourgeois society as a norm and to illicitly universalize its findings. Historical materialism provides a corrective to these errors by stressing the intrinsically historical nature of all social formations, institutions, practices, and human life.

Fromm's essay is primarily programmatic and does not specify in great detail *how* capitalist-bourgeois society reproduces its structures within its members. Rather he is concerned to outline a research program and to argue for the compatibility of psychoanalysis and Marxism proposing that psychoanalysis "can enrich the overall conception of historical materialism on one specific point. It can provide a more comprehensive knowledge of one of the factors that is operative in the social process: the nature of man himself" (CoP, p. 154). For Fromm, natural instincts are part of the base (*Unterbau*) of society, and he believes that our understanding of human behavior and social processes will be enriched by reciprocal knowledge of how society molds and adapts

instincts to its structures, and how human beings shape and change their environments to meet their needs. "In certain fundamental respects, the instinctual apparatus itself is a biological given; but it is highly modifiable. The role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions. The family is the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts its formative influence on the individual's psyche. The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies -- and their unconscious roots in particular -- in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings" (CoP, p. 149).

Fromm also suggests that psychoanalysis can help explain how the socio-economic interests and structures are transformed into ideologies, as well as how ideologies shape and influence human thought and behavior. Such a merger of Marx and Freud will immeasurably enrich materialist social theory, in Fromm's view, by providing analysis of the mediations through which psyche and society interact and reciprocally shape each other. Every society, he claims, has its own libidinal structure and its processes whereby authority is reproduced in human thought and behavior. An analytical social psychology must thus be deeply empirical to explain how domination and submission take place in specific societies in order to provide understanding of how social and psychological change is possible.

In an essay from the same period, "Psychoanalytic Characterology and Its Relevance for Social Psychology," Fromm applies his analytic social psychology to an investigation of how bourgeois society forms dominant character types which reproduce social structure and submit to social authority.¹⁰ A theory of social character would be central to Fromm's work, though in this essay he assumes in rather orthodox Freudian fashion that the "general basis of psychoanalytic characterology is to view certain character traits as sublimations or reaction formations of certain instinctual drives that are sexual in nature" (CoP, pp. 164-165). Fromm then discusses Freud's theory of oral, anal, and genital characters, and how specific social structures produce and reward certain types of character traits while eliminating others. In particular, drawing on Werner Sombart's study of the "bourgeois" and on Benjamin Franklin's diaries, Fromm discusses how bourgeois society produced a character structure in which duty, parsimoniousness, discipline, thrift, and so on became dominant traits of the bourgeois character structure while love, sensual pleasure, charity, and kindness were devalued.

Anticipating later Institute studies of the changes within personality in contemporary capitalism, Fromm writes of developments of character structure under monopoly capitalism and suggests: "It is clear that the typical character traits of the bourgeois of the nineteenth century gradually disappeared, as the classic type of the self-made, independent entrepreneur, who is both the owner and the manager of his own business, was disappearing. The character traits of the earlier business man became more of a handicap than a help to the new type of capitalist. A description and analysis of the latter's psyche in present-day capitalism is another task that should be undertaken by psychoanalytic social psychology" (CoP, p. 185).

Fromm would later describe in detail the dominant character types within contemporary capitalist societies.¹¹ One of the most interesting of his attempts in the early 1930s, however, to develop a materialist social psychology is found in his study of Johann Jacob Bachofen's theory of matriarchy in an article "The Theory of Mother Right and its Relevance for Social Psychology."¹² Fromm indicates how Bachofen's study had been appropriated both by socialist

thinkers such as Engels and Bebel as well as by conservative thinkers. After criticizing the conservative version of the theory of matriarchy, Fromm suggests how it can be appropriated by progressive thought. To begin, Bachofen provides insights, Fromm believes, into how woman's nature develops from social practices; specifically, how the activity of mothering produces certain nurturing, maternal character traits associated with women, thus anticipating recent feminist theories of mothering.¹³

Moreover, Fromm suggests that Bachofen's theory of the matriarchal society reveals "a close kinship with the ideals of socialism. For example, concern for man's material welfare and earthly happiness is presented as one of the central ideas of matriarchal society. On other points, too, the reality of matriarchal society as described by Bachofen is closely akin to socialist ideals and goals and directly opposed to romantic and reactionary aims. According to Bachofen, matriarchal society was a primeval democracy where sexuality is free of christian depreciation, where maternal love and compassion are the dominant moral principles, where injury to one's fellowman is the gravest sin, and where private property does not yet exist" (CoP, pp. 118-119). For Fromm, the crucial question concerning the theory of matriarchy is not whether or not a matriarchal society as described by Bachofen actually existed or not. Rather, the theory of matriarchy represents a certain set of institutions, attitudes, and values opposed to capitalist patriarchal society, and for this reason won wide approval "from those socialists who sought, not reform, but a thoroughgoing change of society's social and psychic structure" (CoP, p. 120).

In discussion of the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, Fromm suggests some of the ways that the patriarchal social structure "is closely bound up with the class character of present-day society.... The patriarchal family is one of the most important loci for producing the psychic attitudes that operate to maintain the stability of class society." (CoP, p. 124). In his view, a "patricentric complex" develops in bourgeois society which includes "affective dependence on fatherly authority, involving a mixture of anxiety, love and hate; identification with paternal authority vis-a-vis weaker ones; a strong and strict superego whose principle is that duty is more important than happiness; guilt feelings, reproduced over and over again by the discrepancy between the demands of the superego and those of reality, whose effect is to keep people docile to authority. It is this psycho-social condition that explains why the family is almost universally regarded as the foundation (or at least one of the important supports) of society" (CoP, p. 124).

In a patricentric society, one's relation to the father is central. Going beyond Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex which also ascribes the father-son relationship primary importance in psychological development, Fromm inventories various ways in which paternal authority is introjected in socialization processes, and the ways that such processes reproduce the values of capitalism and bourgeois society. Fromm then contrasts children's relations with their mother and the matricentric values involved in this relation. While relation to one's father is often conditional on one's behavior, success, and ability to fulfill his expectations, there is at least an unconditional element to mother love and less rigid introjection of values, guilt, and needs to succeed to win love:

"Summing up, we can say that the patricentric individual --and society -- is characterized by a complex of traits in which the following are predominant: a strict superego, guilt feelings, docile love for paternal authority, desire and pleasure at dominating weaker people, acceptance of

suffering as a punishment for one's own guilt, and a damaged capacity for happiness. The matricentric complex, by contrast, is characterized by a feeling of optimistic trust in mother's unconditional love, far fewer guilt feelings, a far weaker superego, and a greater capacity for pleasure and happiness. Along with these traits there also develops the ideal of motherly compassion and love for the weak and others in need of help" (CoP, p. 131).

After a historical sketch of the association of matricentric culture with the Middle Ages and Catholicism, and patricentric culture with the bourgeoisie, capitalism, and Protestantism, Fromm concludes that: "the real, full-fledged representative of the new matricentric tendencies proved to be the class whose motive for total dedication to work was prompted basically by economic considerations rather than by an internalized compunction: the working class. This same emotional structure provided one of the conditions for the effective influence of Marxist socialism on the working class -- in so far as its influence depended on the specific nature of their drive structure" (CoP, p. 134).

In Fromm's reading, Bachofen points out the relativity of existing societal relationships and institutions such as marriage, monogamy, private property, and other bourgeois social forms. Fromm suggests that such views on the social constructedness of social arrangements should "be welcomed by a theory and political activity that advocated a fundamental change of the existing social structure" (CoP, p. 123). There were other political reasons as well why such a theory could appeal to progressives: "Aside from the fact that the theory of matriarchy underlined the relativity of the bourgeois social structure, its very special content could not but win the sympathy of Marxists. First of all, it had discovered a period when woman had been the authority and focal point of society, rather than the slave of man and an object for barter; this lent important support to the struggle for woman's political and social emancipation. The great battle of the eighteenth century had to be picked up afresh by those who were fighting for a classless society" (CoP, p. 123).

Fromm concludes the study by pointing to compatibilities between the matricentric tendencies and Marxism -- and thus between Marxism and feminism: "The psychic basis of the Marxist social program was predominantly the matricentric complex. Marxism is the idea that if the productive capabilities of the economy were organized rationally, every person would be provided with a sufficient supply of the goods he needed -- no matter what his role in the production process was; furthermore, all this could be done with far less work on the part of each individual than had been necessary up to now, and finally, every human being has an unconditional right to happiness in life, and this happiness basically resides in the 'harmonious unfolding of one's personality' -- all these ideas were the rational, scientific expression of ideas that could only be expressed in fantasy under earlier economic conditions: Mother Earth gives all her children what they need, without regard for their merits" (CoP, p. 134-135).

While one might contest Fromm's equation of matricentric culture with Marxian socialism, it is interesting to note his concern for the emancipation of women and his attacks on patriarchy. One also notes in the article his concern, shared by other key members of the Institute, for sensual gratification and happiness. He believes that Bachofen's emphasis on "material happiness on earth" and "social hedonism" in his theory of matriarchy helps explain its appeal to socialist thinkers (CoP, p. 125), and underlines Fromm's own commitment to material happiness and

sensual gratification in a discussion of how sexuality "offers one of the most elementary and powerful opportunities for satisfaction and happiness" (CoP, p. 126).