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Erich Fromm's Approach to Psychoanalysis

Rainer Funk

„Erich Fromm's Approach to Psychoanalysis,“ in: *Fromm Forum*, Tübingen No. 4, 2000 (English edition), pp. 20-26. [The following text is taken from chapter 5 („Venture of freedom: the new identity“) of Rainer Funk's pictured biography: *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas - An Illustrated Biography*, to be published in March 2000 (New York: Continuum International). The translation from German was done by Ian Portman and Manuela Kunkel.]

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The end of Fromm's cooperation with the Institute for Social Research in 1939 mainly had to do with a new psychoanalytic approach which Fromm developed during the middle of the 'thirties. This innovative, creative approach made the „socialized person“ its point of reference. Fromm maintained that the psychological structure of such a person does not develop according to the inherent dynamics of drives, but develops from and adapts by being related to reality. This notion fell on stony ground at the institute, but was positively received by others and led to new contacts.

One such was the psychoanalyst Karen Horney, Fromm's friend for 12 years and a constant travel companion. Horney was 15 years older than Fromm and helped a great deal in developing his new psychoanalytic approach.

Fromm met Karen Horney through Georg Groddeck in Baden-Baden and they became better acquainted during his studies at the psychoanalytic institute in Berlin. Horney had invited him to Chicago in 1933. Both were interested in the influence of societies and cultures on the human psyche. They also believed that the role of the basic drives which Freud associated with numerous psychological phenomena needed to be revised. Together they received Bachofen's, Briffault's and Morgan's concepts of the maternal and paternal social structures along with ideas from crosscultural anthropology. Both of them had no doubt that Freud's views of human nature, women, the Oedipus Complex, penis envy, etc. had socio-cultural origins. For them Freud's views demonstrated a patriarchal approach to human nature and had to be revised.

It was not to be expected that Fromm's new psychoanalytic theories would be taken up by orthodox psychoanalysts. Gustav Bally in Zurich, however, wel-



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comed Fromm's attempt, in a letter on 8th December 1936, in the following words: „It is not the fact that you distance yourself from Freud's theory of the libido, but the manner in which you do so that meets with my entire approval. I do not think that this theory is a *shibboleth* or key concept of psychoanalysis, rather it is one of those physical-mechanistic skins, which need to be shed so one can develop further.“

Karen Horney, who lived in the USA from 1932 and Erich Fromm made contact with a wide range of people interested in the psychological influences of society and culture. Among them were Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, John Dollard, Harold D. Lasswell and Abram Kardiner. Kardiner remembers the evenings with Dollard and Fromm in Horney's hotel apartment, where they played roulette while Fromm sang „Hassidic songs in a beautiful and soulful voice.“¹

Vital feedback for Fromm's new theory, came from Harry Stack Sullivan. It led in the following years to a new field of activity within psychological theory and practice. On 21st October 1936, Fromm received an invitation from Sullivan who was president of the William Alanson White Psychoanalytic Foundation, to lecture at the new Washington School of Psychiatry in Washington.

Fromm was enthusiastic about the program of the Washington School of Psychiatry. Students of medicine, anthropology, psychology and related disciplines were to be educated in psychiatry and connected studies. The human being was to be approached as a „psychobiological organism, social in orientation“.

Fromm wrote back on 27th October 1939:

„May I express my congratulations [on] ... your plans. The ... school promises to become a new beginning and a center of a psychiatry and of psychoanalytic theory, freed from the shackles of sterile dogmatism and fertile through being rooted in the soil of an understanding of culture and social dynamics.“

Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949) became familiar with psychiatry through the urging of William Alanson White (1870-1937). He tried to understand schizophrenic illnesses through Freud's insights, but using a different concept to understand what is going on in a schizophrenic person. He modified the classical method, which focused all efforts on reconstructing the destroyed ego. Sullivan considered that the most important means of enabling the schizophrenic to reestablish contact with the outer world were a face-to-face communication dealing with the patient's daily problems and offering, above all, emotional attention and warmth.

¹ Quoted after J. L. Rubins, *Karen Horney. Sanfte Rebellin der Psychoanalyse. Eine Biographie*, München: Kindler, 1980, p. 216; 256; 255.



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In 1928, Sullivan had pressured Clara Thompson to be analyzed by Ferenczi. He then underwent a didactic analysis himself with Clara Thompson. From 1930, he practiced in Washington as well as in New York. His first contact with Fromm probably came through Clara Thompson, because, in 1934, she continued with Fromm the analyses that had begun with Ferenczi.

The „Theory of Interpersonal Relationships“ united Sullivan and Fromm. This theory made it much easier to understand Fromm's own new psychoanalytic ideas than did Freud's libido theory. In *Escape from Freedom* (New York 1941, p. 290) Fromm wrote a few years later:

„We believe that man is primarily a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his instinctual needs. In this sense, we believe that individual psychology is fundamentally social psychology or, in Sullivan's terms, the psychology of interpersonal relationships; the key problem of psychology is that of the particular kind of relatedness of the individual toward the world, not that of satisfaction or frustration of single instinctual desires.“

Sullivan's invitation to Fromm in 1936, inviting him to cooperate in the Washington School of Psychiatry, did not come as a total surprise, but was the result of Fromm's contacts with Clara Thompson and with Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, his first wife. Clara Thompson was the first president of the Washington-Baltimore Psychoanalytic Society, of which Sullivan was a co-founder. Until 1939, she commuted between New York and Washington to lecture. Fromm did the same, along with Sullivan, Horney and William Silverberg who had returned from Berlin in 1933.

After she finished the second part of her didactic analysis in 1935, Thompson became a member of the New York Psychoanalytic Society. Her warm relationship with Fromm held up through all confusions and splits of the psychoanalytic societies during the 'forties.

Frieda-Fromm Reichmann knew Sullivan through lectures which he held at Chestnut Lodge, the psychiatric clinic in Rockeville not far from Washington. She got there more by chance than by design. She had escaped the pressure of the Nazis and moved her practice to Strasbourg on 1st July 1933. In 1934 she went to Palestine for six months and finally emigrated to the USA in 1935.

What was intended to be a two months' temporary position, substituting for a vacationing member of staff at Chestnut Lodge, became an engagement lasting 22 years, years which proved very beneficial for those suffering from psychotic illnesses. Her reputation spread throughout the world.



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This international reputation was boosted by Hannah Green's best-selling autobiography *I Never Promised you a Rose Garden*, (later made into a film). In this book, a patient details how a „Dr. Fried“ helped her recover from schizophrenia. „Dr. Fried“ was in reality Frieda Fromm-Reichmann.

Besides Hannah Green's story, there are few descriptions of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann as a therapist. One of her students, however, writes of her: „She was loved and feared by her students in the same time. She was loved because of her warmth, empathy and insight towards everybody, and feared because of her sharp observation of the neurotic negative counter_transference reactions of psychoanalytic students during their work with patients.“²

Frieda Fromm-Reichmann owes a lot to Sullivan's insights and urging in her therapeutic work with schizophrenic patients. She gives her own view of this work in her book *Principles of Intensive Psychotherapy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950). A comparison of her account with those of Sullivan, Thompson and Fromm, demonstrates the influence of Sullivan and Ferenczi on her work.

For Erich Fromm, contact with Sullivan meant a new beginning in various ways. To some extent, Sullivan's theory of Interpersonal Psychoanalysis formed a useful metapsychological framework for Fromm's new approach to psychoanalysis. At the same time it provided a spiritual home for his own psychoanalytic psychoanalytic theory and a new field of activity.

For Fromm the active therapist, contact with Sullivan and the Washington School of Psychiatry brought with it feelings of identification and belonging.

Sullivan's experiences of therapy were broadly similar to those which Fromm, Fromm-Reichmann, Horney and Thompson came to know through Groddeck, and Ferenczi and which, to varying degrees, they put into practice. They all agreed not to position themselves as therapists using Freud's ideal model of the neutral observer. Observation of patients does not imply objective distance, rather it involves taking part on a human level. Observation can „become understanding only to the extent that the observer understands his participation, without just neutralizing it coolly and objectively.“³

During the middle of the 'thirties, Fromm made a breakthrough in his own psychoanalytic approach and in his own identity as a therapist. Fromm documented both developments. Curiously enough, he made no effort to bring either of

2 G. Reichmann, quoted after the dissertation, which Angelika Schönhagen wrote under the title *Frieda Fromm-Reichmann. Leben und Werk* 1980 in Mainz, p. 27.

3 J. Rattner, *Psychologie der zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen*, Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1969, p. 19.



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these important papers to attention. The *Fundamental Essay* which he wrote in 1937 was rejected by his colleagues at the Institute of Social Research. Although he later extended it, the paper was never published.

Another essay, *Die gesellschaftliche Bedingtheit der psychoanalytischen Therapie* (*The Social Determination of Psychoanalytic Therapy*), in which he deals in detail with the role of the therapist, was published in 1935.⁴ It shows very clearly how Fromm distanced himself from Freud's recommendations about psychoanalytic technique and his argument in favor of dealing with patients using the methods of Georg Groddeck and Sándor Ferenczi.

Although Fromm repeatedly planned to write down his own ideas on therapeutic technique, the results were rudimentary, contributing to the fact that his own approach is virtually unknown and rarely applied today. In *Die gesellschaftliche Bedingtheit der psychoanalytische Therapie*, Fromm deals mainly with Freud's short *Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psychoanalysis*, 1912 and his *Observations on Transference-Love*, 1915. He criticized Freud for shaping his relationship towards patients into a „medical-therapeutic procedure“. (Psychoanalysis had indeed developed out of hypnosis.) Now that Freud had abandoned hypnosis, Fromm considered that he did not give sufficient thought to the „modern, humane side of the situation“.

„The analyst should maintain ‘unprejudiced attention’ and should become ‘neutral’ and ‘cold’, he should be free of ‘therapeutic ambition’ and under no circumstances give in to the patient's desire for love. He should be ‘opaque’ to the patient, smooth as a mirror's surface.“⁵

Fromm had learned Freud's classical psychoanalytic technique in his own training analysis with Hanns Sachs in Berlin and had practiced it for some time. He thus criticized Freud's rules both on the basis of his own therapeutic experiences and as a result of his own theoretical approach.

Fromm justified his criticism in a letter to Otto Fenichel dated 19th March 1936, writing

„during the last few years I have come increasingly to the conclusion that the comparable attitudes towards the patient of Freud, Sachs and others not only reduce the effect of the therapy, but can also do serious harm to

4 Even today, apart from the German original, there exists only one translation -- into Italian. An English translation will be published in an issue of *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* which will be dedicated to Erich Fromm.)

5 E. Fromm, *Die gesellschaftliche Bedingtheit der psychoanalytischen Therapie* (1935a), in: *Erich Fromm-Gesamtausgabe in zwölf Bänden* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, and München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), Vol. I, p. 119, 131, 133-135.



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some patients.“

Fromm's new psychoanalytic approach made this criticism necessary. According to Fromm, psychological structures and neurotic conflicts result from one's actual experience of connecting with outer and inner realities. The inner reality comprises internalized representations of objects and the self, images which usually form during the first few years of life. So Fromm rejects Freud's idea that psychological structures develop through an automatic process whereby one or several built-in drives or partial drives experience and come to terms with reality. Because of this fundamentally different psychoanalytic approach, the „humane side“ of the therapeutic relationship deserves far more attention, according to Fromm:

„Ferenczi was full of productive fantasy and warm, though at the same time, in contrast to Groddeck, soft and anxious. ... As positive features of an analyst he demanded. ... tact and kindness. He mentions as an example the ability to recognize 'when the silence (of the analyst) causes unnecessary torment to the patient'. ... He did not force the patient during the analysis to lie down and have the analyst invisible behind him. He analyzed also in cases where the patient was unable to pay. He often prolonged a session to avoid the shock of a sudden interruption. He also analyzed patients if necessary, for two or more hours on the same day.“ (Ibid.)

In this essay from 1935 Fromm already saw that Ferenczi was in fundamental contradiction with Freud over his manner of relating to patients. It is „the difference between a humane, kind attitude which wholeheartedly promotes the wellbeing of the patient, in contrast to a patricentric-authoritarian, basically misanthropic 'tolerance'.“ (Ibid.)

It should be pointed out that Ferenczi did not see erotic love as a model for the therapeutic relationship; the analyst was to feel „no erotic love ... but rather motherly or fatherly love or, putting it more generally, loving care“. ⁶ Much of what Fromm here said about Ferenczi, he himself held true and practiced. ⁷ To

6 E. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (1960a), p. 112.

7 Fromm's most important publications on technical therapeutic questions are: *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (1960a) in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, 1960, a short article *The Oedipus Complex: Comments on the „Case of Little Hans“* (1966k, in: E. Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 1970a), a lecture from 1954 under the title *Remarks on the Problem of Free Association* (1955d, in: *Psychiatric Research Report*, Washington, Vol. 2 (1955), pp. 1-6), three lectures in 1959, which were published only posthum under the title *Das Unbewußte und die psychoanalytische Praxis* (1992g [1959]) and have not been published in English so far [The Transcript of these lectures are published in *Fromm Forum* No. 2/1998 and in No. 4/2000]; a lecture with the title *Factors Leading to Patient's Change in Analytic Treatment* (1991c [1964]), in:



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distinguish his own therapeutic approach, he later referred back to Ferenczi and Sullivan.

„Sullivan thought that the analyst must not have the attitude of a detached observer, but of a *'participant observer'*. ... In my own view, Sullivan may not have gone far enough, and one might prefer the definition of the analyst's role as that of an *'observant participant'*. But even the expression *'participant'* does not quite express what is meant here; to participate is still to be outside. The knowledge of another person requires being inside him, to *be* him. The analyst understands the patient only inasmuch as he experiences in himself all that the patient experiences. ... In this productive relatedness between analyst and patient, in the act of being fully engaged with the patient, in being fully open and responsive to him, in being soaked in him, as it were, in this *center-to-center relatedness* lies one of the essential conditions for psychoanalytic understanding and cure. The analyst must become the patient, yet he must be himself; he must forget, that he is the doctor, yet he must remain aware of it. Only when he accepts this paradox, can he give *'interpretations'* which carry authority because they are rooted in his own experience. The analyst analyzes the patient, but the patient also analyzes the analyst, because the analyst, by sharing the unconscious of his patient, cannot help clarifying his own unconscious. Hence the analyst not only cures the patient, but is also cured by him.“⁸

There is no doubt Fromm's understanding of the role of the therapist considers the „modern, humane side of the situation“ within the therapeutic process in a totally different way from Freud. Ferenczi and Sullivan were the midwives for Fromm's own therapeutic approach as well as for his therapeutic identity. At the Washington School of Psychiatry, Sullivan offered Fromm a new psychoanalytic spiritual home in several respects.

With the help of the William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, from 1938 on, Sullivan was able to publish the psychiatric magazine *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Process*, to which Fromm contributed four important

E. Fromm, *The Art of Listening*, New York: Continuum, 1992, pp. 15-41; die discourse *The Dialectic Revision of Psychoanalysis* (1990f [1969]), in: E. Fromm, *The Revision of Psychoanalysis* (Boulder: Westview Press 1992, pp. 19-80), which deal with the questions of therapeutic techniques in the last paragraphs, the recording of a psychoanalytical seminar with case examples from the year 1974 with the title *The Art of Listening* (1991d [1974]), New York: Continuum, 1992, pp. 45-193. - To be mentioned is Fromm's German lecture *Die Bedeutung der Psychoanalyse für die Zukunft* (1992h [1975]), which he held on the symposium in Locarno on the occasion of his 75th birthday, as well as his book *The Forgotten Language* (1951a), which dealt with the symbolic language of the unconscious.

8 E. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (1960a), p. 112.



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articles between 1939 and 1943.

Sullivan's Washington School of Psychiatry, founded in 1936, became Fromm's new home in another respect. He now could pass on his new psychoanalytic approach to practicing therapists at this institute. He also came into contact with potential patients. For Fromm, as for all psychoanalytic immigrants, it was difficult to find patients. Until 1936 he mainly analyzed sociologists and anthropologists - those who wanted to apply psychoanalysis within their fields.

With his psychoanalytic teachings, his interests shifted: he now was much more in demand as a theoretician of psychoanalysis and as a psychoanalytic clinician not so much as an empirical social-psychologist and member of the Institute for Social Research.

It is not by chance that Fromm published his essays in Sullivan's *Psychiatry* for the first time in English. Now that he had found a new spiritual home as a psychoanalyst, he wrote in English. The Fundamental Essay of 1937, which perhaps marked the transition from his old home in the Institute of Social Research and the new in the Washington School of Psychiatry, had been written in German. The change of language points to his new identity as a psychoanalyst with a new approach in theory and practice and also to his American identity, (although he did not become a citizen until 1940.)

His first change to make an active contribution to the clinical training of psychoanalysts came in 1941, when Karen Horney and others left the New York Psychoanalytic Society following a dispute.⁹ Karen Horney was, as a medically qualified doctor, a member of this psychoanalytic society and active within therapeutic training. This right was disputed after she published her book *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* and resulted in the foundation of a new society, the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis (AAP).

Erich Fromm, a member of the group since its formation, was to become an honorary member, since he had no medical qualification. He was opposed to this, however, and made his membership dependent on his being fully recognized as a training analyst with supervisory responsibility. This happened in November 1941.

Conflict about Fromm's status was predictable, however. A year later, in January

9 I explained and documented the history of Fromm's loss of his membership in the Deutschen Psychoanalytischen Gesellschaft (D.P.G.) (German Psychoanalytical Society) and the foundation of his own, non-orthodox umbrella organisation, the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies (IFPS) in 1961, in the article *Erich Fromm's Role in the Foundation of the IFPS. Evidence from the Erich Fromm Archives in Tuebingen*, in *Fromm Forum*, Ed. International Erich Fromm Society, (ISSN: 1437-1189), Tuebingen, Vol. 3 (1999), S. 17-27.



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1943, students applied to the faculty-board for permission for Fromm to hold a „technical“ seminar „in light of his stimulating clinical presentation.“¹⁰

The board of Karen Horney's institute rejected the application because psychoanalysis by medically unqualified personnel would then be officially sanctioned. A suggestion for a compromise, which was to confine Fromm to theoretical groups excluding clinical seminars, was rejected. Clara Thompson, president of the institute at that time, declared her solidarity with Fromm and left along with others in April 1943.

Biographers of Karen Horney give other reasons for the change in the professional relationship between Horney and Fromm. Their personal relations became more intimate in 1934, just as Fromm's influence and fame as a psychoanalyst grew. This must have been difficult for her.

With his book *Escape from Freedom* 1941, Fromm became suddenly famous. „There is much testimony that Horney envied Fromm's new fame and his success as a teacher and wanted 'to be the one and only star' at the institute.“¹¹ In addition both had close relationships with others: Karen Horney with Paul Tillich and Erich Maria Remarque; Erich Fromm with the 29-year-old dancer, choreographer and ballet mistress, Katherine Dunham. Fromm's behavior hurt Horney so deeply that she split up not only with him, but also with Ernst Schachtel, because he continued to see Fromm.

„Horney never found another lover of the stature of Erich Fromm, nor did she expose herself again to the kind of disappointment she had experienced with him. ... She rushed from one relationship into another, but she protected herself by not investing her feelings as deeply as she had done with Fromm.“¹²

Some of those who had left Horney's Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis (AAP) in 1943 joined members of the Washington-Baltimore Psychoanalytic Society to set up a New York branch of the Washington School of Psychiatry. The founders were Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Clara Thompson, David and Janet Rioch. A little later, Ralph Crowley, Hilde Bruch and Meyer Maskin joined in. To get things off the ground, Sullivan, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and David Rioch traveled every three weeks from Washington to New York.

10 Quoted after J. L. Rubins, *Karen Horney. Sanfte Rebellin der Psychoanalyse. Eine Biographie*, München: Kindler, 1980, p. 216; 256; 255.

11 Bernard J. Paris, *Karen Horney. A Psychoanalyst's Search for Self-Understanding*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, p. 155; 149; 147.

12 Ibid.



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After the Second World War, activities could be significantly expanded. In 1946, the New York branch was renamed the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology. As in the Washington School, the study of psychoanalysis was linked to other human and social sciences.

Fromm's aims were „[to] train psychiatrists and psychologists in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, and to instruct teachers, ministers, social workers, nurses, and physicians in the psychoanalytic concepts which will extend their skills in their own professions.“¹³ As a further special feature at one of the first clinics, the institute ran an ambulance, which was available also for people in reduced circumstances. In 1946, Fromm took charge of the training and the supervision of the teachers. In June 1950, he moved to Mexico. From 1953 onwards, he returned every year, however, for several months to lecture and hold clinical seminars at the institute in New York.

On his difficult journey to a psychoanalytic identity and a spiritual home, Fromm concerned himself for several years with the psychodynamics of authoritarian structures. In a section on social-psychology in his *Studien über Autorität und Familie (Studies in Authority and Family)*, 1936, he explained the authoritarian character with reference to sado-masochism:

„A person with masochistic tendencies seeks to abandon his individuality to another authority ... sacrificing his own happiness. The aim is to dissolve in [another's power] and to find pleasure and satisfaction within this surrender. In pathological cases this involves incurring physical pain. In opposition, one with sadistic tendencies seeks to destroy the will of another, make him a defenseless and will-less instrument of his own will, to dominate him absolutely, in extreme cases forcing him to suffer and to express the feelings induced by this suffering.“¹⁴

It seemed natural to use this notion of the authoritarian character to explain the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy. As early as 1936, Fromm started to write a book, which he intended to call *Der Mensch im autoritären Staat (The Individual in the Authoritarian State)*. In 1941 it became his first best-seller, *Escape from Freedom*. In it he analyzed the authoritarian character and the psychology of Nazism, but expanded his perspective to incorporate the notion of escape into authoritarianism within a history of freedom in the modern age.

13 Quoted after WAWI (William Alanson White Institute) *Newsletter*, New York, Vol. 8 (No. 1, Autumn 1973), p. 2.

14 E. Fromm, *Sozialpsychologischer Teil* (1936a), *Erich Fromm-Gesamtausgabe in zwölf Bänden* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, and München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999) Vol. I, p. 172.



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With the publication of this book in 1941, Fromm suddenly found himself in the academic and political limelight. With the help of his theory of the authoritarian character, Fromm could explain specifically why the petty bourgeoisie in Germany and Italy, driven into insignificance, sought salvation by submitting to a megalomaniac leader – Führer or Duce - following him in blind obedience.

There was no particular submissive instinct; neither was the German national character particularly destructive. It was rather the desperate economic and social circumstances of the petty bourgeoisie after the First World War, brought about by staggering inflation and a world-wide depression, that lay behind this escape into authoritarianism. This reaction brought Hitler to power and led most Germans blindly to follow his destructive exercise of force.

Six years after his emigration, Fromm became an American citizen on 25th May 1940. Meanwhile, his political thinking became more American. The disputes with the Institute for Social Research were confined to the past just as much as his tuberculosis. His own understanding of psychoanalysis in theory and clinical practice was defined and was enthusiastically discussed in the Sullivan circle. With this first major book, his psychoanalytic theory passed its first crucial test.