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Erich Fromm's Socio-Psychoanalytic Re-Vision of Freudian Theory

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The following paper by Rainer Funk and the comment by Sandra Buechler were presented on January 18, 2017 in a Discussion Group on the "History of Psychoanalysis" at the National Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York. The discussion group was led by Prof. Peter Rudnytsky.

Erich Fromm shares the fate of several other pioneers in psychoanalysis who did not follow the mainstream of what once was called "Freudian orthodoxy" and as a result were ignored and forgotten. I could tell you the story of how this happened in the case of Fromm (cf. Funk 2000), but this would take too long.

By way of introduction I will first give a short overview of the life of Erich Fromm, before explaining why and how Fromm revised psychoanalytic theory; and I will then outline some of the implications of his socio-psychoanalytic approach, to launch a discussion of whether Fromm's ideas contribute to our present understanding of psychoanalysis. Let me start with a short biographical sketch.

Biographical Sketch

Erich Fromm was born in March 1900 in Frankfurt in Germany and died in March 1980 in Locarno, Switzerland. In 1934 he immigrated to the United States in order to escape the Nazis. He became a citizen of the United States and had his main residence until 1950 in New York and Bennington. From 1950 until 1973 his main residence was in Mexico, but he continued to lecture in the United States for three months and more every year. In 1974 he decided to spend the rest of his life in Locarno, Switzerland, where I became his last assistant and finally his literary executor and trustee of his scientific papers and his reference library.

Fromm grew up as an only child in an orthodox Jewish family and studied sociology at the University of Heidelberg. For his PhD he wrote a sociological dissertation on the function of Jewish law (Thora) as a social cement keeping diaspora Jews together (Fromm 1989b). Shortly after he had finished his dissertation in 1922, he became acquainted with Freud's psychoanalysis with the help of his girlfriend Frieda Reichmann (who in 1926 became his first wife). This acquaintance with psychoanalysis changed Fromm's life and interests fundamentally. At this time Fromm linked the idea that human beings are related to each other by more or less uncon-



scious strivings (stemming from pre-genital and genital forms of sexuality) to the subject of sociology, namely society and societal processes.

Fromm finished his psychoanalytic training in Berlin and started his own psychoanalytic practice; at the same time he followed up his own interest in the social-psychological question of what makes many human beings think, feel, and act in similar ways. For nine years Fromm collaborated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, and from 1934 on in New York, in order to explore this question by using Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

**Fromm's stroke of genius:
Society is represented in our psychic structure formation**

Fromm's stroke of genius was in bringing together the objects of sociological and of psychoanalytical investigation – namely society and the individual – by showing that the societal aspect, with its requirements regarding life, survival, and communal living must be represented in each individual human being in the form of a libidinal structure formation. To quote a paper from 1932: "Every society has its own distinctive *libidinal structure*" (Fromm 1932a, p. 160), which can be studied by looking at the libidinal structure which causes large numbers of individuals to think, feel and act similarly. The study of this socially molded libidinal structure not only makes it possible to formulate statements about the impulses which are at work in a societal group but also explains why human beings passionately and gladly contribute whatever they *must*, in the form of psychic and social acts of accommodation, in order to bring about a successful communal life.

The crucial point is the new determination of the relationship between the individual and society. In Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach, the two are no longer antipodes. Rather, society is present with its expectations in each individual in the form of libidinal impulses, and the individual cannot exist in any other way than as a social being. Fromm's interest as a trained and practicing psychoanalyst was to overcome the traditional split between individual and society.

Yet this idea, that "every society has its own distinctive *libidinal structure*" (Fromm 1932a, p. 160) was not the end of Fromm's re-vision of psychoanalysis. There are numerous indications that Fromm was increasingly doubtful about the Freudian libido theory that he had used to explain the passionate strivings as libidinal drives caused by societal requirements. Examples here are Fromm's interest in matricentric cultures, his criticism of Freud's appraisal of the Oedipus Complex, and his criticism of Freud's view of women; also important, however, were Fromm's new contacts in the United States: with Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict and their cross-cultural anthropological studies, and with Harry Stack Sullivan, in whose view human beings are driven by an existential need for relatedness and not by the desire to satisfy libidinal wishes.

In the winter of 1936-1937 Fromm took a few months off to re-formulate his social psychoanalytic approach more accurately and to delve into the "basic principles" of Freud's libido theory, as he wrote in a letter to his Institute colleague Wittfogel: "I am trying to demonstrate that the urges which motivate social activities are not, as Freud supposes, sublimations of sexual instincts, but rather products of social processes." (Letter to Karl August Wittfogel on 18 Decem-



ber 1936 – Erich Fromm Archive – cf. Funk 2013.) In this 85-page paper, Fromm (1992e) states in detail his reasons for saying that most psychic structures are not only formed by the object relations of man but are also independent of libidinal drives.

Sullivan's relational approach naturally influenced Fromm's revision of psychoanalytic theory in the sense that the individual's underlying *psychic* problem is not the satisfaction of drives but rather the satisfaction of his or her need for relatedness. For Fromm, however, every person must always stand in a relationship not only with reality and with other human beings, as Sullivan made clear with his interpersonal and (as one would say today) intersubjective approach. The hunger to be related to oneself and to the social group one belongs to arises with the same existential urgency from this relational approach.

Implications of Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach

I would now like to point out certain implications of the socio-psychoanalytic approach developed by Fromm.

(1) Given his view that individual and society are not antipodes, but are structurally joined so that "society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual can live only as a social human being" (Fromm 1992e, p. 58), Fromm from the very beginning understands the *individual as a socialized being*. This is also reflected in how Fromm expanded Sullivan's relational approach by postulating an existential hunger for ties to a social group which makes every type of psychology a form of social psychology.

Every person has an inescapable need for relationship with a social group. And the formation of every psychic structure must satisfy this genetically pre-programmed need for a relationship not only with persons of reference but also with the social group. In my view, this *primary sociality of man* often receives too little attention in the discussion of Fromm's thought, even though his thesis in *Escape from Freedom* is based upon man's existential fear of isolation.

Fromm expressed his ideas even more clearly in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (1962a, p. 126), where he wrote:

"For man as *human being* [that is to say, inasmuch as he transcends nature and is aware of himself and of death] the sense of complete aloneness and separateness is close to insanity. Man as man is afraid of insanity, just as man as animal is afraid of death. Man must enter into relationships with others, he *must* find union with others, in order to remain sane. This need to be at one with others is his strongest passion, stronger than sex and often even stronger than his wish to live."

Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach is based on a view of man that highlights his need for social attachment – an approach confirmed in turn by Bowlby, whose studies of attachment behavior were greatly prized by Fromm. And this view undergoes further development in socio-biology and evolutionary biology.

(2) If we view Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach against the backdrop of our deep-rooted fear of social isolation and the psychic structures whose formation it makes necessary, a number of other implications with theoretical impact come into view. Freud's concept of "*primary narcissism*", for example, and the notion that man is "primarily self-sufficient and on-



ly secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his/her instinctual needs" were emphatically rejected by Fromm (1941a, p. 290) and were criticized by him point by point in one of his later writings (Fromm 1979a, pp. 43-54). The concept has also been quite clearly disproven by the studies of infants and attachment.

From the very beginning, every human person is a being in relation to reality, one who requires a bond with other individuals, to a social group, and to him- or herself for his or her interactional behavior, his or her group behavior, and his or her self-regulation. In this regard, the latter, i.e. the relationship with oneself, has in my view and in that of Fromm himself nothing to do with narcissism (cf. Fromm 1964a, pp. 62-94).

(3) However, this attachment behavior, which is guided by inherent affective reactions and attachment patterns, is subject to a process of development and – as it takes shape – is dependent for long periods on relational experiences which take root via internalization processes in the *formation of psychic structures*.

It is precisely here that Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach takes effect, since it becomes important here to make a basic distinction between two different types of psychic structure formation, using their functions as criteria, namely:

- those types which help to lay the foundation for the *formation of individual character* on the basis of quite individual circumstances and experiences in the first years of life (for example parental divorce, the birth of a sibling, an unusually empathic motherly reference person, etc.)
- and those types which help to lay the foundation for the *formation of social character* on the basis of circumstances and experiences which are shared with the social group (for example being forced to assume a position of either rivalry or cooperation)

In designating these types of psychic structure formation, Fromm built on and developed the Freudian concept of character in the sense understood by Karl Abraham and taught at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin, where Fromm concluded his psychoanalytic training. After abandoning libido theory, Fromm appears to use the term "character structure" by and large as a synonym for the term "psychic structure".

The formation of psychic structure or character goes hand-in-hand with a decisive change in the dynamics of relatedness: relational behavior becomes more and more independent of both real reference persons and of identification with the social group, since it is now guided by the internalized images of experiences and character orientations. What we generally call "*autonomy development*" and "*the process of individuation*" always presuppose the development of a corresponding inner structural formation.

(4) The study of character formation processes always goes hand-in-hand with an evaluative question, namely the question of what *impact* character formation has on a human being and his or her potential for development, individuation and co-existence with others: is it *in a human sense productive or non-productive*?

We are quite familiar with such value-oriented scientific questions which focus on the individual. Most branches of psychology are guided by the concepts of what is healthy and what is



pathological, and what allows the person to succeed or fail as a human being. However, value-oriented science becomes far more complicated in the socio-psychoanalytic approach developed by Fromm, in that it takes two different structure formation processes as its point of departure.

While it is true that the impact of the individual and of the social character should be humanly productive, the task of the social character consists first and foremost in contributing to stability and to the *successful development of a specific society*. This functional determinant has the result that the social character often does not contribute to the individual's psychic success but is rather directed towards a financial and social success which can often be achieved only *at the cost of a successful outcome on the part of the individual* – one need only think of the subservient authoritarian character type who is plagued by inhibitions and anxieties, or of individuals today who are ill from "burnout". Above all non-productive social character orientations that are shared with the majority are rationalized as "normal", although from a socio-psychoanalytic point of view they are to be identified as a "pathology of normalcy" and a "socially patterned psychic defect" (cf. Fromm 1955a, pp. 12-21).

The productive or non-productive quality can differ between the individual and the social character; in addition, non-productive qualities of character orientations are usually repressed and unconscious, so that an inner psychic conflict arises between the conscious and unconscious orientations of the two character formation processes and can bring about *illness* as a result. Hence the conflict which Freud discussed between libidinous wishes and a culturally required renunciation of instincts is no longer present as such in Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach; its place is taken by the potential conflict between the conscious and unconscious orientations of the individual and the social characters and their respective productive or non-productive quality.

(5) This leads us to another aspect of Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic re-vision of psychoanalysis: the role of economy, society, the work situation and culture, how these are organized, and what effects they have on individuals should receive more attention than psychoanalysis usually pays to these issues. If the requirements for a successful development of society are represented in the social character formation of the many individuals, then the conflict between what makes society successful and what makes the person successful will be avoidable only if the conditions for living together in a society are also oriented toward the successful development of human beings. For Fromm (1955a, p. 72), it was the case "that mental health cannot be defined in terms of the 'adjustment' of the individual to his society, but, on the contrary, *that it must be defined in terms of the adjustment of society to the needs of man*".

From a socio-psychoanalytic point of view, psychoanalysis bears some responsibility in regard to what is going on in economics, organizations, the work situation, society and politics. Fromm's psychodynamic theory of different social character orientations and their alienating or productive effects on the individual allows, much more than the Freudian concept of man and society does, psychoanalysis to be applied to the world beyond the therapeutic treatment of suffering individuals.

(6) Therefore Fromm's re-vision of psychoanalysis implies that the main pathogenic conflict should be seen as emerging from the patient's conflict between, on the one hand, his human



needs to be related in a productive way to reality, to others, to a social group and to oneself and, on the other, the demands of society, which are often contradictory because of their non-productive and alienating effects. To quote from a lecture Fromm gave in 1956: "Man is not only a member of society. Man is a member of the human race. Man has necessities of his own which exist quite independently of any other society. It is true that man has to live in such a way that he will fulfill the demands of society, but it is also true that society has to be constructed and structuralized in such a way that it will fill the needs of man." (Fromm 1992f, p. 108.)

(7) Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach has tremendous implications concerning therapeutic treatment.

a) Fromm's re-vision of psychoanalysis implies focusing therapeutic interest on the present social situation and lifestyle of the patient rather than on his childhood. Of course, many neuroses have their origins in childhood and in complications arising during the differentiation of psychic structure, when character structure is established. But one should bear in mind that the pathogenic denials, projections, identifications and internalizations, as well as the repressions which were unavoidable in the patient's childhood, very often resulted from the dynamics of social character orientations exemplified by the parents as agents of society. By and large, many pathologies, including many severe ones originating in early childhood, are the result of non-productive social character orientations still at work; in many cases, they are stronger today than in childhood and reinforce the pathological solutions found then.

b) Fromm's emphasis on the effects of social character orientation greatly affects *the patient as well as the analyst*. Both represent specific social character orientations. The less an analyst recognizes his own social character traits and the less he or she maintains a critical distance to the dominant social character orientation, the more likely are analyst and patient to unconsciously fall victim to the "pathology of normalcy" (E. Fromm 1955a, pp. 12-21) and to dismiss the disorder by rationalizing it away. The sick society doesn't generally suffer from this "defect", rationalizing it away instead as "normal". Thus Fromm suggests calling this unconscious suffering along with society a "socially patterned defect" (E. Fromm 1955a, p. 15) as opposed to the individual neurotic disorder suffered by the patient, more or less in isolation.

c) The role which the psychoanalyst's own social character plays in the treatment means that analysts must be trained to understand their own predominant social character orientations and to strive for greater productiveness in their own social character. So-called didactic analysis should lead to a growth of the analyst's own human strengths, such as will enable him to really relate to and take an interest in other human beings and patients. This, and not primarily possession of a skill or therapeutic technique and "know-how", is what qualifies the analyst. "I'm convinced", says Fromm in a lecture on the analyst given in 1959 at the William Alanson White Institute, that

"you cannot separate your mode of relatedness to the patient, your realism as far as the patient is concerned, from your mode of relatedness to people in general and from your realism in general. If you are naive and blind to your friends and to the whole world, you will be exactly as naive and blind to your patients." (Fromm 1992g, p. 149.)



Only by being aware of one's own social character orientation as a therapist and by strengthening one's own productive orientation can alienation from productive forces be overcome. At the end of the posthumously published book *The Art of Listening* Fromm writes that the analyst

"must be endowed with a capacity for empathy with another person and strong enough to feel the experience of the other as if it were his own. The condition for such empathy is an optimal of the capacity for love. To understand another means to love him – not in the erotic sense but in the sense of reaching out to him and of overcoming the fear of losing oneself. Understanding and loving are inseparable. If they are separate, it is a cerebral process and the door to essential understanding remains closed." (Fromm 1991a, pp. 225 f.)

The most decisive healing factor in psychoanalytic treatment is not a technique but the psychoanalyst's productive character orientation that enables a direct meeting in the therapeutic situation to occur. For Fromm, there was one definitive characteristic of this kind of direct encounter with the other: "If you really see a person (...) you will stop judging provided you see that person fully." (Fromm 1992g, p. 178.) No matter how often we are forced to pass judgment on what we want and what we resist in the course of living and in safeguarding our existence, in a "direct" encounter with the other, we must refrain from judgment, if we truly want to see him or her. To quote again from a lecture which Fromm gave in 1959: "There is a feeling of human solidarity when two people – or even one person – can say to the other: 'So that is you, and I share this with you.'" (Ibid.)

For Fromm the main question is not a specific technique of treatment but the ability to live in a mentally productive way and to regain this ability through psychoanalytic treatment by becoming aware of the unconscious irrational strivings that stem from individual or social character formations.

Although Fromm in the 1940s was a co-founder of the New York William Alanson White Institute and established a psychoanalytic society and training institute in Mexico, he never wanted to establish his own psychoanalytic school. He called himself a Freudian who made some revisions of Freud's meta-theory in order to overcome the social amnesia that for a long time was typical of the mainstream of psychoanalysis.

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