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Erich Fromm, Feminism and the Frankfurt School

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Erich Fromm is one of the few members of the Frankfurt School who seriously engaged himself with theorizing the problems of gender and the differences between men and women. In certain ways, Fromm anticipated later attempts to produce a feminist Marxism and poststructuralist analyses of the socially constructed nature of gender. Yet Fromm's gender analysis was highly uneven and even contradictory, pointing to the difficulties in the subject matter and perhaps the difficulty in overcoming dominant male perspectives in analyzing the highly charged and conflicted issues of gender and sexuality. In this paper¹, I shall accordingly sort out the various analyses of gender in Fromm's work and shall point to both his anticipations of contemporary feminist perspectives and the moments of sexism and essentialism in his texts.²

1 This paper was first delivered at International interdisciplinary Symposium on Erich Fromm and the Frankfurt School in Stuttgart-Hohenheim on May 31-June 2, 1991 and I am grateful to a number of people for critical comments that helped with its reformulation. In particular, I am grateful to Rainer Funk for providing suggestions concerning Fromm's theory of gender as well as material on the topic from the Erich Fromm archives. I am also thankful to Daniel Burston for comments on my paper and for providing me with an unpublished paper „Fromm's Sexual Politics“ and his book *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (1991). Finally, I would like to thank Renate Hoffman-Korth and Barbara Brick for stimulating discussions concerning the politics of gender, and Steve Bronner and Bernard Görlich for penetrating discussions of Fromm and the Frankfurt School.

2 My reflections in this article were first developed as a paper on Patricia Mills' book *Women, Nature and Psyche* (1987) delivered at the annual meeting of the Society for Existential and Phenomenological Philosophy at Northwestern University in 1988. Mills develops a sharp feminist critique of Hegel, Marx, Freud, and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School while carrying out discussions of the ways that Critical Theory does and does not provide adequate perspectives for contemporary feminism. The thrust of Mills' critique is that the Frankfurt School theorists represent and analyze women's situation from a male point-of-view and exclude the



Bringing up the question of Fromm and Critical Theory raises a whole array of questions concerning the relation of Fromm to the Institute for Social Research, his break with the Institute, their later polemics, and the ensuing discussions of the relations between Fromm and Critical Theory which have been largely critical and dismissive of Fromm.³ Against the tendency to reject Fromm out of hand, I would argue that a re-evaluation of his work is overdue and that, in particular, re-reading of some of his 1930s essays --when he was closely involved in the projects of the Institute for Social Research -- combined with reading of his later analyses of gender and aggression could contribute to a possible synthesis of Critical Theory and feminism. More specifically, his essays on matriarchy contain some provocative perspectives on the question of patriarchy and male domination that project positive views of women and matricentric qualities, thus overcoming the more patricentric perspectives of some of his Frankfurt School colleagues. Moreover, Fromm was the first critical theorist to raise the question of gender and sexual difference and made many important contributions to theorizing the family, patriarchy, and the oppression of women in contemporary societies. [111]

Marxism – Psychoanalysis - Feminism: Fromm’s Early Synthesis

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.⁴ The key theoretical essays

specificity of women’s experience from their theoretical positions, while privileging male self-development, male relations (to father, mother, siblings, and others), and male experience and subjectivity over women’s self-development, relations, experience, and subjectivity. This leads Mills to present (counter) analyses of motherhood, sisterhood, women’s self-development and sexuality, and relations to supplement the exclusion of women from male theory. In this paper, I shall suggest that perhaps Fromm, despite his limitations, is the critical theorist who went furthest in developing Marxist-feminist perspectives for Critical Theory. For my interpretation of Critical Theory, see Kellner 1989a.

3 The Left’s position toward Fromm has been largely polemical. See Marcuse 1955; Jacoby 1974; and the discussion in Burston 1991 who defends Fromm against Marcusean attacks. For an earlier defense of Fromm, see Rickert 1986 who attempts to revise prevailing Left dismissals of Fromm as an idealist, revisionist, and worse by valorizing his positive contributions to radical social theory and by defending Fromm against critiques by Marcuse, Adorno, Jacoby, and others. Unfortunately, Rickert’s project of revalorizing Fromm was cut short by his untimely death.

4 On the project of developing a synthesis of Marx and Freud, see Jay 1973; Jacoby 1974; and the two-volume anthology *Marxismus, Psychoanalyse, Sex-Pol* (Frankfurt: Fisher, 1970) which highlights the role of Siegfried Bernfeld, Wilhelm Reich, and the Critical Theorists as early adherents of the attempt to develop a Freud-Marxism. This project was later taken up by French theorists such as Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari, and the early Baudrillard. On this project, see Kellner 1989b and Best and Kellner 1991.



outlining the Institute's materialist social psychology were published in the *Zeitschrift für 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 1929.⁵ Fromm was one of the first to synthesize Marx and Freud in order 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“ (Fromm [1932a] 1970). 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“ (Fromm [1932a] 1970, p. 139).

The key conception of psychoanalysis for Fromm is the „active and passive adaptation of the biological apparatus, the instincts, to social reality“ (Fromm [1932a] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1932a] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1932a] 1970, 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

⁵ On Fromm's life and work, see Funk 1982 and 1983 and Burston 1991.



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 [112] 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“ (Fromm [1932a] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1932a] 1970, 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. 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“ [114] (Fromm [1932b] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1932b] 1970, p. 185).

Fromm would later (1947; 1955) describe in detail the dominant character types within contemporary capitalist societies. 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“ (Fromm [1934] 1970).⁶ Fromm indicates how Bachofen’s study had been appropriated

6 In presenting Fromm’s interpretation of Bachofen, I am aware of the fierce debates within contemporary feminism and anthropology concerning the nature, history, and normative consequences of the theory of matriarchy and would merely propose taking Fromm’s analysis as a conceptual myth which illuminates certain aspects of the history of gender and which propos-



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 (see Chodorow 1978).

In Fromm's analysis of matriarchy, he emphasizes the positive qualities of women and the negative qualities of patriarchy, thus providing a link between feminist theory and Critical Theory. 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“ (Fromm [1934] 1970, 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 [115] 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“ (Fromm [1934] 1970, p. 120).

One could thus read Fromm's essay on Bachofen as an anticipation of a synthesis between Marxism and feminism and thus the first attempt to develop a feminist dimension within Critical Theory. For instance, 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.“ (Fromm [1934] 1970, p. 124). In his view, a „patricentric complex“ de-

es certain normative ideals for the present; I shall also make some critical comments concerning Fromm's appropriation of Bachofen below. For some contemporary interpretations and debates on Bachofen, see the essays collected in Heinrich 198X. Walter Benjamin also wrote a highly complementary essay on Bachofen; see Benjamin 1980, pp. 219ff. where he notes Fromm's contribution to explicating Bachofen's legacy (p. 231).



velops 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“ (Fromm [1934] 1970, 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 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 (Fromm [1934] 1970, p. 131).

Anticipating current feminist theories of mothering, Fromm positively valorizes female / matricentric qualities and values, while criticizing male / patricentric values and qualities. 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 influ-



ence depended on the specific nature of their drive structure“ (Fromm [1934] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1932] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1932] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1934] 1970, 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 Frankfurt School, 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 (Fromm [1934] 1970, 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“ (Fromm [1934] 1970, p. 126).

While Fromm provides a positive analysis of the matricentric principles valorized by Bachofen and a critique of patriarchal values, it is not certain that his use of the myth of matriarchy is the best conceptual device to valorize the [117] qualities of women. There is wide-spread skepticism today whether matriarchical societies actually existed and Bachofen's romanticization of mothering and matricentric values creates a prescribed normative role for women to fulfill, thus restricting their freedom to choose modes of existence at variance with social norms. Many women today are trying to escape from their definition as mothers which the matriarchy myth uses to define women's essential functions. There are also questions concerning the anthropological and ideological value of Bachofen's work that need to be thought through.

Perhaps, however, it is Fromm's 1930s work on authority and the family that is more valuable for contemporary feminism than his reflections on Bachofen and matriarchy. Fromm played a key role in carrying through a multi-disciplinary inquiry into the connections between family and authority which is the most substantial research project undertaken by the Institute for Social Research in the 1930s. The results of a five-year study were published in a two-volume „research report“ *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (Fromm, Horkheimer, et. al. 1936). The first section consisted of three theoretical studies by Horkheimer, Fromm, and Marcuse and was edited by Horkheimer; the second part was edited by Fromm and consisted of studies of socialization in different classes with special studies of sexual education, socialization of youth, and socialization in unemployed families; the third part edited by Löwenthal consisted of individual studies of a variety of topics in the area of family and authority in different countries.

In his theoretical essay, Erich Fromm attempted to provide conceptual tools to analyze the relations between authority and the family. He and his colleagues sought to specify „the psychological impulses which cause people to submit to authority, and which make this submission pleasurable without regard to the nature of the commands“ (Fromm 1936, p. 908). Fromm claims that the Freudian theory provides „by far the best approach for the understanding of the psychic dynamics of authority,“ and uses the Freudian categories of the ego, super-ego, and sado-masochism to elucidate the mechanisms of authority and submission.

Following Freud, Fromm presents the super-ego as the internalization of social authority,

„and specifically of the father in the patriarchal family of modern times.



Since the outer authority is internalized, the individual obeys its commands and prohibitions, not only because of real fear of external punishment, but also because of fear of that inner censor which he has created within himself. While the super-ego owes its existence to an internalization of authority, this existence is constantly reenforced by a projection of the super-ego upon the representatives of authority. The latter are endowed with the qualities of the super-ego, its morality, its wisdom and strength, in a manner largely independent of the realities of the case. In this way, these authorities become better and better adapted to further internalization and better suited to their role of bearers of the super-ego. In this manner a continuous circuit is established. The super-ego-authority relationship is hence dialectical“ (Fromm 1936, p. 908).

Fromm then describes how the family is the key institution in the production of the super-ego and how development of a strong super-ego facilitates repression [118] of rebellious impulses. Weak egos submit to super-ego authority, thus Fromm calls for the production of a stronger ego that will make possible more independent thought and action. This is particularly urgent since he believed that people’s egos were becoming so weak that „the masochistic character“ appears almost „normal.“ „Character“ for Fromm refers to specific personality structures which result from repression and sublimation of instinctual drives, reaction formations, and socialization processes. Social character refers to dominant character structures in different societies. The masochistic character, Fromm believes, is closely bound up with sadism. Fromm’s main emphasis in his essay is on the sado-masochistic character which he believes is becoming a major part of the psychic apparatus of authoritarian societies. A sado-masochistic character submits to dominant authorities and higher powers, but in turn lords it over those below him or her in the social hierarchy. The masochistic character derives pleasure both from submission to higher authorities and from imposing authority on lower strata. This character type thus helps reproduce social authority and contributes to an increase in social domination and aggression.

Fromm claimed that authoritarian societies produce those needs and satisfactions which in turn result in sado-masochistic character structures. Likewise, Fromm believed that as economic conditions worsened, social anxiety grew, and while the authority of the father in the family might decline, the power of social authorities often grew, submitting individuals to more direct domination by society. In a concluding discussion of insubordination against authority, Fromm calls for rebellion against irrational authority and development of a strong ego which does not derive pleasure from either subordination or domination, and which is independent of hegemonic social authority yet able to recognize ra-



tional authority.

Other Institute members would eventually be more skeptical than Fromm concerning the possibilities of developing independent egos in contemporary capitalist societies, and eventually much more emphasis would be put on the institutions of mass culture and politics in directly socializing individuals (Kellner 1989b). Yet concern with family, authority, and socialization would continue to characterize Fromm's work in the following years. *Escape From Freedom* (Fromm 1941) analyzes the ways that individuals internalized irrational authority during the fascist era and *Man For Himself* and *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1955) analyze how individuals conform to contemporary capitalist and patriarchal societies. The intersection of Marxism, feminism, and psychoanalysis in Fromm's work anticipates certain trends of later feminist theory and provide anticipations of possible syntheses between Critical Theory and feminism. Since analysis of gender is a key aspect of contemporary feminist theory, let us now inquire into what contributions Fromm makes to gender theory and what limitations prevent him from developing a more adequate analysis of the differences between men and women. [119]

Fromm on Gender: Conflicting Models

In essays beginning in the late 1940s until his death, Fromm was the first Critical Theorist to develop perspectives on gender, focusing on theorizing the differences between men and women. His perspectives were constantly changing however, and were strikingly contradictory, testifying to the difficulties of theorizing gender and overcoming dominant ideological prejudices. In a 1943 essay „Sex and Character,“ Fromm takes on the delicate task of characterizing the dominant models of gender and sketching out his own perspectives. He opens by acknowledging the longevity of the project of delineating differences between the sexes, citing Biblical explanations of the essential differences between the sexes, and then points to the highly charged political nature of the endeavor by contrasting liberal Enlightenment positions that there were no innate differences between the sexes with conservative and Romantic claims of essential differences that were used to support male domination and to justify inequality between the sexes (Fromm 1943, p. 21).

Fromm also points to Freud's continuation of conservative perspectives on gender and cites the development of a „culturally oriented“ psychoanalysis which „disputed Freud's findings“ (1943, p. 22). Fromm himself, in this essay, will try to mediate between the positions of biological essentialism and cultural relativism in his analysis of gender difference. Fromm wants to analyze really existing differences between the sexes without valorizing alleged deficiencies that



would justify the domination of one gender by the other. He argues that:

It is the thesis of this paper that certain biological differences result in characterological differences; that such differences are blended with those which are directly produced by social factors; that the latter are much stronger in their effect and can either increase, eliminate or reverse biologically rooted differences; and that eventually characterological differences between the sexes inasmuch as they are not directly determined by culture, never constitute differences in value (Fromm 1943, pp. 22-23).

Fromm begins his analysis of biological sexual difference by pointing to what he considers salient differences between men and women in the sexual act. The male, he argues, must have an erection and retain it during the act until he has an orgasm; to satisfy the woman, he must maintain it until the woman has an orgasm (1943, p. 23). These biological facts, Fromm believes, point to different male and female sexual anxieties. The male has performance anxiety and the fear of failing. „The woman’s vulnerability on the other hand lies in her dependency on the man; the element of insecurity connected with her sexual function lies not in failing but in being ‘left alone,’ in being frustrated, in not having complete control over the process which leads to sexual satisfaction“ (ibid).

This analysis obviously presupposes heterosexual genital intercourse as the model of sexuality and fails to indicate the ways that oral or manual stimulation could produce orgasm, pointing to the rootedness of Fromm’s analysis in the sexual practices of his own milieu. Independent of this rather serious conceptual flaw, however, one sees Fromm attempting to critique patriarchy and to break down the stereotypes of the dominant sexual mythologies of the period. [120] He criticizes Freud’s extreme patriarchal model of sexuality and analysis of sexual difference and argues that both Freud and traditional ideological interpretations of women as essentially vain are contradicted by what Fromm considers attempts of men to prove themselves, „to demonstrate what a good ‘performer’ he is,“ both in the sexual act and other social spheres where men seek reassurance against the fears of sexual failing through competing for prestige in other areas of life (1943, pp. 25f.). Women, on the other hand, are forced to attract men and thus women’s „vanity is essentially a need to attract, and the need to prove to herself that she can attract, is attractive“ (Fromm 1943, p. 27).

Fromm also argues that the social system as a whole encourages male competition and vanity, as well as power and domination over women to assuage fear of ridicule and to gain prestige to combat insecurity. Fromm suggests that in the battle of the sexes the penis is a weapon with which men can sadistically dominate women, though women can ridicule men and even make them impotent: „Man specific hostility is to *overpower*; woman’s is to *undermine*“ (Fromm 1943,



p. 28). Thus Fromm tends to privilege culturalist features in eliciting sexual difference, though he argues that biological and cultural differences tend to reinforce each other in contemporary societies. After reversing Freud's theory of penis envy by pointing to the possibility that men are envious of bearing children, Fromm replays his Bachofen matriarchy analysis (pp. 28-30) and then argues:

These 'natural' differences are blended with differences brought about by the specific culture in which people live. In present day culture, for instance, in fact and in ideology, women are dependent on men; the craving for prestige and competitive success is found in men. But the presence of these trends has much less to do with sexual roles than with social roles.... What happens is that cultural patterns and social forms can create characterological trends which run parallel to identical tendencies rooted in entirely difference sources such as sexual differences. If that is the case, the two parallel trends are blended into one, and it seems as if these sources were also one (Fromm 1943, p. 30).

Finally, in „Sex and Character,“ Fromm stressed that individual differences between different people were more fundamental than gender differences, writing: „whatever differences exist between the sexes, they are relatively insignificant in comparison with the characterological differences that are found between persons of the same sex“ (1943, p. 30). The emphasis on the primacy of individual differences and the need for individuals to constitute their own identities would also shape his next major essay on gender.

While Fromm's 1943 analysis of gender differences came close to biological essentialism, despite his culturalist qualifications, he turned to a more cultural model in the early 1950s, though he continued to try to mediate between naturalist and culturalist notions of gender difference. In „Man-Woman“, an article published in 1951, Fromm opens by stating that: „The relationship between men and women is a relationship between a victorious and a defeated group“ (1951, p. 4). Taking a proto-feminist perspective on sexual domination, Fromm then recapitulates once again his analysis of matriarchy and patriarchy which he uses again to valorize women's qualities and to critique patriarchy and male [121] domination. This time he does not refer to differences in the sex act as essential, as in „Sex and Character“, but rather points to woman's function of child-bearing and nurturing as producing tenderness as a social quality characteristic of women. Yet he argues against an extreme culturalist position here arguing that there are crucial differences between men and women, but that these are as much due to biology as to cultural conditions. The focus of his analysis, however, is on those socio-cultural conditions that pattern men and wom-



en to use sex to overcome boredom or to prove themselves on the sexual market.

Interestingly, he closes on an agnostic note on the issue of gender in „Man-Woman“, suggesting that we don't really know the „real differences between men and women“ (Fromm 1943, p. 16). He urges individuals not to seek to live up to any pre-conceived notions of what it is to be a man or a woman, but to cultivate their own individuality and not to be guided in one's behavior by cultural stereotypes. Such a perspective is significantly different than his biological analysis in „Sex and Character“ and points to genuine openness on the question of gender in Fromm -- openness that would often, however, be replaced by a return to essentialism in the following years.

In some ways, Fromm's major post-War texts -- *Man For Himself*, *The Art of Loving*, *The Sane Society*, and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* -- constitute a sometimes profound regression behind the gender analysis of some of his earlier texts. His major books either lack discussion of gender or sometimes reproduce cultural commonplaces on the differences between men and women without any sustained reflection on sexual difference, gender, and relations between men and women. *Man For Himself* (1947), for instance, totally lacks gender analysis. Although Fromm utilizes categories such as temperament and character which lend themselves to gender analysis, he does not undertake any gender differentiation of these categories. And although he discusses a variety of ethical problems, he ignores problems of gender and sexuality in this book. Instead, he focuses throughout on a universal human situation that does not differentiate between the situation of men and women and his humanism does not deal specifically with the oppression of women and the need for their liberation.

In the *The Art of Loving* (1955), Fromm takes up the question of gender neglected in *Man For Himself*, but his analysis degenerates to an appalling extent. The analysis is marked by sexual conservatism and traces of sexism, essentialism, and idealism and mysticism. Although Fromm notes differences between men and women, his analysis is rather superficial. Analyzing the differences between men and women in the sexual act, he turns from his earlier focus on male performance anxiety and female fear of dependence on the male for satisfaction that marked his gender analysis in „Sex and Character“ -- and that stressed negative and disturbing features of sexual experience -- for rather idealist comments on the elements of giving in the sexual act. Thus Fromm erases the antagonism between the sexes that characterized his earlier analysis of sexuality for a more idealist model of giving and union. For Fromm, the man gives the woman his organ and semen and the woman gives too, opening „the gates to



her feminine center“ (1956, p. 19). [122]

In this book, Fromm interprets love as the most satisfactory way of resolving the tensions of the human situation and in achieving a fusion and oneness with the other and the world. Fromm would continually argue that Freud did not over-emphasize sex, as many revisionists would claim, but that he restricted it to a mechanical, physiological activity of tension and release. This model, Fromm believes, underestimates the importance of sexuality which he sees as an overcoming of separation and the joining of the masculine and feminine poles (Fromm [1956] 1989). For Fromm, sexuality, on this model, is a metaphysical event that grounds human existence in one's opposite pole and is not merely a pleasurable release of tension à la Freud.

For Fromm, the phenomenon of love essentially manifests a desire for union with one's opposite gender and, taking up an essentialist position on love and gender, he claims that love best fulfills the need for union between the masculine and feminine poles (Fromm 1956, pp. 27ff.). Continuing in the essentialist mold, Fromm describes the masculine character „as having the qualities of penetration, guidance, activity, discipline, and adventurousness; the feminine character [is defined] by the qualities of productive receptiveness, protection, realism, endurance, motherliness“ (p. 31). Fromm does qualify this by indicating that: „It must always be kept in mind that in each individual both characteristics are blended but with the preponderance of those appertaining to 'his' or 'her' sex“ (ibid). Yet there is something of a naturalistic essentialism in his views of men and women, for he indicates that homosexuals can never attain the profound union of masculine and feminine in love because they are bonded to the same sex (Fromm 1956, p. 28). Such views indicate that Fromm's perspectives on men and women are deeply shaped by the prejudices of his cultural milieu and that like other male Critical Theorists he tends to take a heterosexual male point of view in analyzing gender and sexuality (see Mills 1987)..

Fromm does, it is true, criticize Freud's „extreme patriarchalism, which led him to the assumption that sexuality per se is masculine, and thus made him ignore the specific female sexuality“ (1956, p. 30). Yet it is not clear that Fromm himself analyzes „the specific female sexuality,“ though he does analyze „motherly love“ which he contrasts to „brotherly love.“ Curiously, while in his analysis of Bachofen's theory of matriarchy, the matricentric principle represented equality, now it is brotherly love that represents the principle of humanism, the love of all other human beings, and the principles of care, compassion, and responsibility for all human beings in an egalitarian ethic. Motherly love, by contrast, represents instilling the love of life in the child and is essentially altruistic and



unselfish, albeit narcissistic (Fromm 1956, pp. 41ff).⁷

It might be interesting to speculate why Fromm provided anticipations of the current feminist stress (in some currents) on mothering and yet failed to explore female sexuality or sexual difference. It might be also interesting to speculate on why Fromm shifted so radically from a feminist and culturalist position on gender in the 1940s and early 1950s to the essentialist and heterosexualist position in the *The Art of Loving*.⁸ His analysis is full of normative prescriptions that legitimate a sexual conservatism, as when he writes: „Love should be essentially an act of will, of a decision to commit my life completely to that of one [123] other person“ (1956, p. 47). His analysis also takes an idealist turn in a long analysis of „love of God“ (pp. 53ff), though there are some occasionally acute socially critical remarks in his analysis of „Love and Its Disintegration in Contemporary Western Society“ (pp. 70ff).

Fromm would occasionally return to the feminist and culturalist emphases of some of his early writings in his later works, though here too one notes some essentialism and sexual conservatism. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, one of his last major books (1973), Fromm repeats the high evaluation of matriarchy found in the 1930s essays and utilizes anthropological commonplaces to delineate the differences between men and women. In his discussion of anthropology (especially pp. 155ff.) Fromm examines the „central role of the mother“ in Neolithic villages and cites „the older division of labor, where men hunted and women gathered roots and fruits, agriculture was most likely the discovery of women, while animal husbandry was that of men“ (p. 155). In a parenthetical aside, he notes: „Considering the fundamental role of agriculture in the development of civilization, it is perhaps no exaggeration to state that modern civilization was founded by women“ (ibid). Fromm suggests that the earth’s and mother’s capacity to give birth probably gave women a primary role

7 Fromm’s equation of brotherly love with equality and democracy here is odd since he earlier equated democracy and equality with matricentric qualities, an equation which he would also return to in later writings; see, for instance, Fromm 1970, p. 103 (cited below) and Fromm 1986, pp. 21-22.

8 Rainer Funk suggested in conversation that perhaps Fromm’s varying analyses of gender were related to his different relationships with women. In the 1930s and early 1940s, he was involved with two strong women in the psychoanalytic movement, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and Karen Horney, both of whom were ten years older than him and extremely independent and creative women; Fromm’s second wife, Henny Gurland was also a strong leftist, who escaped from France on the fateful trip in which Walter Benjamin committed suicide; she died in 1952 and his third wife, Annis Freeman, with whom he lived until his death, was more traditional and „feminine“ than his previous wives who might have inspired him to take more feminist positions. We shall see, however, that even in the late Fromm there are some feminist impulses.



in Neolithic society and then cites the evidence for „the central role of women“ (pp. 155ff.) and Bachofen’s theory of matriarchy (pp. 58ff.).

Following Mumford, Childe, and others, Fromm next discusses the „urban revolution“ and the transition to male-dominated society, writing: „These social and political changes were accompanied by a profound change in the role of women in society and of the mother figure in religion. No longer was the fertility of the soil the source of all life and creativity, but the intellect which produced new inventions, techniques, abstract thinking, and the state with its laws. No longer the womb, but the mind became the creative power, and with this, not women, but men dominated society“ (pp. 163-164). Fromm thus identifies women here in a rather essentialist and patriarchal fashion with the womb, while men are identified with the mind, replicating a trope of male philosophy that runs through Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and others. Symptomatically, when describing the powers of the mind, Fromm invests it with male sexual traits as when he writes of „the potency and subtlety of penetrating, theoretical thinking“ (p. 159); indeed, „penetration“ is one of his favorite terms for intellectual achievement thus exhibiting a phallogocentric view of thought.

Yet his analysis in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* continues with a critical presentation of patriarchal rule „in which the principle of control is inherent: control of nature, control of slaves, women and children“ (p. 164). But, like other critical theorists, whereas he provides an excellent critique of domination, including patriarchal domination, Fromm fails to develop adequate perspectives on gender. And yet probably his most important connection with contemporary feminist theory is evident in this book and many other texts of the 1960s and 1970s: critique of aggression and advocacy of the values of peace and disarmament. [124]

Fromm, the Peace Movement and Feminism

Fromm was a member of SANE and other groups struggling for disarmament and strongly supported the anti-war movement of the 1960s directed against U.S. aggression in Vietnam. His book *May Man Prevail* (1961) critiqued the myths of the Cold War and analyzed „Sane versus Pathological Thinking in Politics,“ carrying out a critique of paranoid thinking, projection, fanaticism, and automaton thinking which are still useful in analyzing contemporary political discourse and reality. These concepts, as well as his analyses of necrophilia and biophilia (1973), link Fromm with important tendencies within feminism which focus on peace research, the analysis of aggression, and the possibilities of limiting human destructiveness.



Indeed, in the late Fromm one discovers a return to progressive perspectives on gender and positive references to the women's liberation movement. In an essay on „The Significance of Mother Right for Today“ in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (1970), Fromm argues that the matricentric principles outlined in Bachofen are „the basis of the principle of universal freedom and equality, of peace and tender humaneness. It is also the basis for principled concern for material welfare and worldly happiness“ (1970, p. 103). He then argues that these principles are relevant in analyzing the „failure of the patriarchal-authoritarian system“ to fulfill its function“; the democratic revolution; the women's revolution; the children's and adolescent's revolution; the revolution of radical youth; and the sexual revolution. Valorizing matricentric principles in these contemporary revolutions, Fromm also critiques the continuation of patriarchal domination: „The purely patriarchal society cares nothing for love and equality; it is only concerned with man-made laws, the state, abstract principles, obedience. It is beautifully described in Sophocles' *Antigone* in the person and system of Creon, the prototype of a fascist leader“ (Fromm 1970, p. 106).

Fromm concludes the essay, however, with a call for a synthesis of matricentric and patricentric principles combining matricentric values with justice and rationality, tempered by matricentric mercy and equality (ibid). This Hegelian vision of a higher synthesis of the opposing principles thus deconstructs an absolute sexual difference and provides guidelines for the production of personalities that combine so-called masculine and feminine features and the construction of a society that combines matricentric and patricentric principles. Fromm continues to sketch out this vision in his late book *For the Love of Life* where he diagnoses once more „the crisis of the patriarchal order“ and positively valorizes the „feminist revolution“ and its „remarkable advances“:

Women, like children, used to be regarded as objects, as the property of their husband. That has changed. They may still be at a disadvantage in a man's world, receiving less pay, for example, than a man does for the same work; but their overall position, their consciousness, is considerably stronger than it was. And all the signs would seem to indicate that the women's revolution will go forward, just as the revolution of children and young people will. They will continue to define, articulate, and stand up for their own rights (Fromm 1986, p. 25). [125]

In a 1975 interview published in Italy, Fromm directly comments on the feminist movement. When asked to comment on perceptions of the feminist movement as „an open, violent fight against men,“ Fromm answers:

One cannot understand the psychology of women, and for that matter the psychology of men, and one cannot understand the element of sadism, of



hostility and destructiveness in men and women if one does not consider that there has been a war between the sexes going on in the last six thousand years. This war is a guerrilla war. Women have been defeated by patriarchy six thousand years ago and society has been built upon the domination of men. Women were possessions and had to be grateful for every new concession that men made to them. But there is no domination of one part of mankind over another, of a social class, of a nation or of a sex over another, unless there is underneath rebellion, fury, hate and wish for revenge in those who are oppressed and exploited and fear and insecurity in those who do the exploiting and repressing (Fromm 1975, p. 59).⁹

As to the allegedly naive and coquettish traits traditionally ascribed to women by some, Fromm answers:

Women have been so thoroughly oppressed that they have accepted unconsciously the role that the ruling sex, man, gave to them. They have even believed in male propaganda, which is very much the same as the propaganda in other wars, wars against colonial people, etc. Women have been considered to be naive: Freud said that they were narcissistic, unrealistic, cowardly, inferior to man anatomically, intellectually, morally. The fact is that women are less narcissistic than men, for the simple reason that there is almost nothing that man does which has not some purpose of making an impression. Women do many, many things without this motive and in fact what you might call women's vanity is only the necessity to please the victors. As far as the lack of realism in women is concerned, what should we say about male realism in an epoch in which all western governments, consisting of men, are spending their money building atomic bombs, instead of taking care of threatening famine, instead of avoiding the catastrophes which threaten the whole world? (Fromm 1975, pp. 59 and 94)

The war between the sexes, Fromm believes, has created a great deal of hate and sadism on both sides: „The exploited and the exploiters are both in the same boat as are the prisoner and his guard: they both threaten each other and hate each other, they both have to be afraid of the other's attacks. So men are afraid of women and they only pretend they are not“ (Fromm 1975, p. 94). Fromm concludes the interview, however, by criticizing the current feminist movement as a mildly reformist one, in which men will share power, and patriarchal values will not be overturned, rather than having a „truly revolutionary aim, in which women become humanly emancipated“ (ibid). Identifying the

⁹ I am using the English text from which the interview was translated into Italian; thanks to Rainer Funk for providing this material to be from the Erich Fromm Archive.



women's liberation movement with its reformist wing is probably unfair, though Fromm's comment probably appropriately characterizes much of what has become known as „liberal feminism.“

Until his death in 1980, Fromm continued to project hopeful perspectives on human Liberation and to advocate love of life, while attacking patriarchy, aggression, and destruction. Fromm's most profound connection with feminism thus resides in his perspectives on life and peace and his critiques of [126] patriarchy and aggression. While he never adequately developed perspectives on gender, he at least attempted to confront the issue and continually struggled, with some regressions, to present perspectives on gender that would combine feminist perspectives with critical social theory. Thus Fromm provides some anticipations of the synthesis of Critical Theory and feminism which remains one of the crucial tasks of Critical Theory today.

A Possible Synthesis?

I conclude with a set of remarks concerning why I think that a synthesis of Critical Theory and feminism is possible and desirable. To begin, Critical Theory's dialectic of domination and liberation provides a conceptual framework for feminist social theory, although the critiques of domination developed by classical Critical Theory demands supplementation by feminist critiques of patriarchy and perspectives on women's liberation. In this paper, I have argued that the conceptual space for such a project is already provided by the (inadequate) analysis of the relation between patriarchy and social domination within Critical Theory and will conclude will discussion of some contemporary attempts by women to merge Critical Theory and feminism in the United States.¹⁰

Seyla Benhabib and Drusilla Cornell have edited a book *Feminism as Critique* (1987) which brings together the perspectives of feminism and Critical Theory. Contributions to the anthology develop feminist issues within the context of critical social theory. In *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, Benhabib (1987) ends a critique of „the aporias of Critical Theory“ with a call to develop an „emancipatory politics in the present that would combine the perspective of radical democratic legitimacy in the organization of institutional life with that of a cultural-moral critique of patriarchy and the industrial exploitation of the nature within and without us.“ Benhabib is concerned to develop an ethics and social theory within the framework of a Critical Theory of society that takes into account feminist

¹⁰ I am aware that there have been syntheses of Critical Theory and Feminism in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, but I am only discussing here these efforts in the United States with which I am familiar.



concerns.

In her book *Unruly Discourses* (1990), Nancy Fraser carries out a feminist ideology critique of Foucault, Lyotard, Habermas, Rorty, and Derrida from the standpoint of developing a feminist social theory. She practices the Frankfurt School tradition of ideology critique though defines critique in the sense of the early Marx as „the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age’„ (Fraser 1989, p. 2). In her studies, Fraser valorizes concrete struggles as the agenda setters for Critical Theory; posits social movements as the subjects of critique; and argues that it is in the crucible of political practice that theories meet their ultimate test of validity. In these ways, she politicizes Critical Theory and provides a feminist dimension which connects theory to practice more powerfully than some of the more abstract and apolitical versions of Critical Theory.

In addition, Critical Theory intersects with a tradition of feminist thought in its critique of the ways that science and technology serve the interests of human domination, and with its positing of alternative values of reconciliation, gratification, and peace. In fact, a major theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is its [127] radical critique of science, technology, and instrumental rationality that continues to be of value during an epoch when tendencies described by Horkheimer and Adorno are increasing in scope and intensity. This critique was later taken up by Marcuse and Habermas as well and provides an important area of intersection between Critical Theory and feminism.

There are also contemporary attempts to combine Critical Theory with feminism and psychoanalysis. Jessica Benjamin in some early essays (1977 and 1978) and *The Bonds of Love* (1988) carries out a systematic development of a psychoanalytic feminism with roots in Critical Theory. Benjamin produces a critique of domination based on psychoanalytically and feminist inspired theories of love, family, and everyday life. She thus provides systematic perspectives of the sort first anticipated within Critical Theory by Fromm, though she is more influenced by Marcuse and Adorno.¹¹

Finally, as I argue in my book on *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*, the emancipatory perspectives of Critical Theory offer positions on cultural and sexual politics which are akin to some of the more progressive tendencies in various new social movements --including feminism -- which also provide correctives to frequent deficiencies in at least some of the new movements. Critical Theory has always been concerned with the aesthetic-erotic dimension of expe-

¹¹ Benjamin briefly discusses Fromm in a note on the Frankfurt School analyses of authority and fascism, writing: „Rejecting instinct theory, but using Freud’s notion of the mass leader... Erich Fromm developed the idea of the search for the ‘magic helper’ in *Escape from Freedom*.



rience, and has defended pleasure, happiness, play, and sensual gratification. Its emphasis on the body and materialist focus on needs and potentialities thus lends itself to dialogue with the sort of sexual politics advanced by progressive feminism. Indeed, Critical Theory has always emphasized the importance of human sexuality for individual life, and has stressed the need for better human relations between and within the sexes. Critical Theorists have also pointed to the importance of the family as an instrument of socialization, and have criticized the ways that the patriarchal family produced authoritarian personalities while oppressing women and children (see Kellner 1989b, Chapters 3 and 4). While some (male) Critical Theorists often projected male attitudes and perceptions in their works, others, like Marcuse, had relatively progressive perspectives on sexual politics, and responded positively to feminism from the time of its first appearance (see Kellner 1984).

In any case, Critical Theory is consistent with development of the sort of critique of patriarchy and demand for women's liberation advanced by feminism. Mills (1987), Fraser (1989), and others have discussed the limitations of classical Critical Theory from a feminist perspective, while a variety of individuals have attempted to synthesize Critical Theory and feminism in recent years. This is a promising development for after the celebration of otherness and fragmentation of radical thought and politics during the 1980s -- fragmentation and inter-cine warring which primarily benefits the intellectual and political establishments --it may be time to begin overcoming differences, to begin engaging in more productive dialogue, to building new syntheses. Which raises a final question: has otherness been fetishized and can we develop intellectual and political projects which respect and valorize individuality, difference, and otherness which at the same time aim at commonality, solidarity, and community? The future of Critical Theory will depend, I submit, on the answers that we provide to such questions. [129]

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