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Labor Leader Sidney Lens Discovers Erich Fromm

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Brief context

This paper follows up on two previous pieces exploring Erich Fromm's intense period of Marxist study and writing between 1954 and 1962 (Braune 2014, 2017). Fromm wrote several books which had a considerable effect on anti-war, civil rights and socialist organizing during the political and social ferment of the 1960s and early 1970s (including an effect on me). From 1955 to 1962 Fromm published four important and related books, starting with *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1955a), which biographer Lawrence Friedman, despite his many criticisms of the book, correctly characterizes as »saturated« with the *1844 Manuscripts* of Marx, forefronting labor and the alienation of labor. In 1960 Fromm wrote *Let Man Prevail: A Socialist Program and Manifesto* (1960b) and in 1961 he published *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961b); finally, in 1962 *Beyond the Chains of Illusion, my Encounter with Marx and Freud* (1962a) was published and several shorter pieces I also see as trying to influence the left.

During this period Fromm had contact with a savvy Marxist activist and local union director in Chicago, Sidney Lens, who saw *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1955a) as important for his work, contacted Fromm, and worked with him on several projects. (Although not argued fully here, this article assumes as incorrect the frequent misperception, almost repeated by his recent biographer, that Fromm somehow made some enemies (which is maybe true) and that he was »bested« by a political crowd in the mid-1950s and marginalized (which is not quite right) and that all this is because he was politically awkward, only half-informed, too idealistic and couldn't unite theory and social/political practice.

My research recently has been showing the opposite: Fromm encountered political opponents (both on the right and on the fracturing, infighting, nervous left), mainly because he was clearer in his thinking about what he was doing than most people who were organizing against the current in America, and he was effective, making headway in what he wanted, to push the left toward socialist humanism. This paper examines just one instance, Fromm's interaction with leftist Sidney Lens.



This paper has two parts: Because Lens is not mentioned in the Fromm literature that I have seen and many Fromm scholars may not know Lens or have an adequate sense of the left factions at the time, I first describe Lens's active life before he encountered Fromm in 1956. In the second part, this paper simply reports what Lens says about Fromm in 1956, with some discussion of its importance.

Lens's life up to 1956 and his world of Labor

Sidney Lens (1912–1989) was an important left figure in America all during the middle of the 20th Century; consequently, recognizing his significance, Haymarket Press, one of the largest left activist-oriented presses in America, has reprinted two of his twenty books: one book on imperialism (with an introduction by the groundbreaking left historian, Howard Zinn) and one on labor history. Surely more reprints are warranted, because he was an excellent writer and his books shed clear light on today.

According to Lens's autobiography, *Unrepentant Radical* (Lens 1980), he was born in 1912, raised by a Russian immigrant single mother working in New York's garment district. After attending a religious (Jewish) grade school – he didn't like it – and graduating from a public high school, where he read little, Lens surprisingly immersed himself in serious reading: philosophers (Greeks, Germans), classical economists, creative writers (Chekov, Dostoyevsky). However, Lens only took a small sampling of non-credit evening classes – one in journalism – and never received any college credits. In the rowdy 1930s, the period of labor organizing later honored in his books, serious Lens entered his twenties and was finding his life work: organizing.

Trade union organizing, with its cat and mouse tactics, occasional courageous fighting against scabs and cops, and the special experience of working-class solidarity were all tremendously exciting for him. He became embroiled in leftwing disputes, was talented at them and quickly joined Trotsky's party in 1933–1934; however, he split off with a smaller group following another »worker intellectual« whom young Lens greatly admired, Hugo Oehler. Oehler founded the Revolutionary Worker's League (RWL), which only had maybe two or three hundred members, but Lens insists that the RWL membership was pretty sharp.

The RWL breakoff was based on an optimistic assessment of the workers' understanding and receptiveness. Trotsky's party, in order to break out of isolation in the early 1930s – it was very small and could barely afford a telephone in its office at one point – had recently agreed to merge with A.J. Muste's slightly larger American Workers Party, which had been successful organizing unemployed workers. It was an exciting merger, with Muste the national secretary of the new party and with prominent Trotskyist, James Cannon, the editor of the new paper, *The Militant*. Oehler and Lens were pleased with this effort to unite the employed workers, organizing around union issues, with the huge unemployed sector of workers, organizing for relief programs, against evictions, etc.

Obviously, they felt that the employed and unemployed could fight the capitalist class whose greed and shortsightedness had brought about the Great Depression, with its lower wages and humiliating breadlines and evictions. However, when Trotsky wanted the merged group to merge again, to join Norman Thomas's larger Socialist Party (Social Democrats), the »Oeh-



lerites« objected, wanting no »French Turn« as it was called after Trotsky had tried it in France. Although Muste also thought the new merger would not work, the Oehlerites opposed it on principle and walked out angry, forming the RWL and expecting rapid worker recruitment. The workers would surely recognize soon that the RWL had the correct line. (Lens 1980, p. 42). Members referred to »the line« devoutly (ibid., p. 49).

With dynamic union organizing taking off like a rocket in the 1930s, witnessing the beginning of the CIO (industry-wide unionism, not limited to the simple, older, AF of L »business unionism« protecting various specific trades), the Oehlerites felt that Trotsky and his close American circle had underestimated the potential of the workers. Due to the militancy of the workers, who unquestionably were learning a lot about capitalism in their struggles during the Depression, Oehlerites felt it was no time for a compromise with Social Democracy. It was time for revolutionaries to daringly announce the need for a Leninist revolutionary party and not some confusing intermediate organization with the old Socialist Party crowd led by some ex-minister, Norman Thomas.

In fact, Oehlerites clearly minimized the traditional Trotskyist slogan to »build a Labor Party,« a third party which could run candidates locally and nationally to build momentum and expose the two capitalist parties. (Lens makes no mention of RWL candidates in his autobiography.) The task now was, they felt, to tell the many workers who had fought scabs and police on the picket lines, workers who had stuck together with militant trade unionism, and who indeed would soon start »occupying« the plants in the 1937 »sit-down strikes,« to join the real revolutionaries and prepare for self-defense and build worker councils to take power. The RWL named its paper *The Fighting Worker*, obviously trying to sound more radical than the bigger Trotskyist paper, *The Militant*. But the daring RWL, although surely catching the interest of the workers, did not inspire them.

Oehler himself left the U.S. in the late 1930s for a dramatic stint in Spain fighting Franco, was jailed there, and later became oddly secretive and went into hiding during World War II (ibid., p. 91) leaving Lens at 29 or 30 as the virtual leader of the RWL, which was not prospering. Visiting locals, watching funds, organizing meetings, writing letters to make international contacts, becoming a primary writer for *The Fighting Worker*, and (starting in 1941) earning his living as a director of a local union, which he had broken loose from a Chicago mobster, Lens stayed really busy during the war years.

In his autobiography written decades later, Lens looks at some of RWL's strengths and weaknesses, particularly its »self-isolating purism« and its »personal diatribes and factionalism« (ibid., p. 42, 60). He recalled a conversation he once had with Oehler. He had suggested to Oehler that maybe they should study psychology. Oehler responded abruptly that that comment was a »dereliction« (ibid., p. 179). I suspect Oehler was telling his protégé something like this: It should be sufficient to study the »objective situation« the workers face: when the workers have been disadvantaged and held back by capitalism to a certain »saturation point« (a frequent Lens term), they will surely respond with revolutionary intent. We scientific socialists, Oehler probably told his understudy, don't need lessons from psychology and subjective speculation.

By 1949, *The Fighting Worker*, despite having talented members, had formally folded, and Lens



had entered a period of »scattershot politics« (Lens 1980, p. 133, 150, 158). He was using his left connections and his status as a local union leader in Chicago to help in certain reform efforts, but he was lacking the felt mooring of a party line and membership he once treasured. He felt like an »unfulfilled, abbreviated man« (ibid., p. 206). He could not go back to the Trotskyists, but was too much a Trotskyist to work with the Communist Party circles; he found the Shachtmanites, who also broke from Trotsky, as still too Trotskyist and generally cocky and distasteful, and he couldn't join Norman Thomas's Socialist Party because it was not radical enough (ibid., p. 206). And sadly, the nation was taking a turn to the right. He was frustrated and angry, no doubt. But he did not want to hide, which *many* did in the McCarthyite 1950s.

For two years Lens had also been working on a book about labor, and in 1949 he published it, *Left, Right and Center: Conflicting Forces in American Labor* (Lens 1949). It sparkled with insider savvy about labor, an obvious love of workers in struggle and a powerful argument for the importance of unions. It was published by Regnery Press, an established Chicago press and was an immediate success, even reviewed by *The New York Times* and *The London Times*. Lens received many speaking engagements. Someone in the University of Chicago labor relations program arranged for one of Lens's articles to be published in the *Harvard Business Review* and offered him a University of Chicago doctorate if he would spend a year in residence and complete another book – Lens turned it down, saying he did not want to leave labor for academia.

Why was the book so successful? For a first book, *Left, Right, and Center* was surely good, but part of its success should really be attributed to the mixed climate surrounding its publication. McCarthyite witch-hunts and the Cold War were beginning to brew, and in the book could be found some very damning critiques of the Communist Party's »Stalinist« role in the unions. They were shown as manipulative, deceitful and even capable of roughing up opponents. (His negative portrait of the Communists was overdone, in my estimation – and Lens seems to acknowledge that indirectly through his autobiography, written decades later. But Lens would write another book on labor a decade later, 1959 – after he read Fromm in 1956, I might add – which had a different tone: *The Crisis of American Labor* (Lens 1959).

Another reason the 1949 book was especially successful is connected: not only was there a popular effort to weed communists out of the unions, but there was a simultaneous effort portraying the unions as gangster-ridden – and Lens's book had a section on gangsters. He had tangled with one in Chicago, and condemned them boldly. (Fighting union gangsters was popular: think of Marlon Brando confronting longshore hoods in the heralded 1954 movie »On the Waterfront.« It won eight academy awards including »best picture« for its politicized treatment, when the left in Hollywood was hiding from McCarthy.)

Although there were definitely areas where criminals were operating, right-wing anti-union legislators and newspaper writers were surely exaggerating the issue. Consequently, those eager for a book explaining the importance of unions – and union membership was on everyone's mind since unions had grown immensely during the 1940s, due greatly to government encouragement – and those eager to understand the ideals of labor and various left approaches to unions would find much to like in Lens's book, and those who were suspicious of unions and wanted to find evidence of pro-Soviet or underworld influence also would find the book worth buying. (There were not just angry descriptions of complacent and stagnant »business



unionism« separating unions from their heroic history, but there was so much about Stalinism and gangsters in the unions described in his emotional book, that one subtitle proposed for the book was »Trojan Horses in American Labor,« a title Lens sensibly rejected.)

After his book came out, and all during the first half of the 1950s, Lens continued as a local union director in Chicago, the Midwest industrial hub, engaged in his scattershot left politics, and was a minor celebrity. After his book was published and selling, he took some months off work to go on a long trip through Europe. It broadened his labor and left contacts and his celebrity: he became a proficient left and labor journalist, who could be depended on to send back to newspapers and magazines insightful perspectives and interviews. (By the end of his life he had visited 94 nations, several more than once, always sending articles back for publication. He was often paid for his articles.)

A strong left was badly needed because America was undergoing vicious military expansion, McCarthyite witch-hunts in Hollywood, in universities, in unions, in local and national government, but the left as a whole was not responding well. To use a term used in another context by James Cannon, leader of the Trotskyists, it was generally »dog days« for the left, with socialist membership way down in all the groupings. However, some leftists were listening with hope and searching out new allies. Lens was one of those »listening,« partially because his travels alerted him. There were new concepts and aspirations arising in Europe's left, in the East Bloc and the Third World. Interestingly for Fromm scholars, Lens was such a left celebrity and obviously so alert and optimistic that Bessie Gogol, a relative of Raya Dunayevskaya and a member of her small pro-worker group, wrote Lens a charming letter asking him for help in getting Dunayevskaya's first book, *Marxism and Freedom* (1958), published. That book would interest Fromm when it was published and lead him to contact Dunayevskays; and interestingly she and Lens had several other similarities: same age (a decade younger than Fromm), both had broken from Trotsky, didn't go to college but wrote books, came into contact with Fromm at about the same time, wouldn't »write off« the workers in the 1960s, and called their radicalism »humanism.«

Labor celebrity Lens was »connected« well and should have been thrilled with one apparent prospect for change in America during the 1950s: the unions had grown in numbers immensely. True, the left was weak, but organized labor itself had been growing massively since the rowdy 1930s. (During World War II, union membership had been encouraged by the government and industrial corporations were booming and encouraging unions too. The unions felt patriotic and successful, collecting dues from members with the help of the companies and not having to spend any of that money on striking workers, because there were few strikes.) By the mid-1950s, the booming CIO (wider industrial union tradition energized by the remarkable United Auto Workers) was merging with the AF of L (craft union tradition) to create the AFL-CIO: »Big Labor,« with the implication it could be a progressive player with Big Government and Big Business. Labor now had newfound importance, was consulted by city councils and legislators. Furthermore, unions were not just in marginal corners but in the industrial engine of the country, automobile manufacturing – »See the USA in your Chevrolet« and maybe you need a two-car garage – which in turn stimulated all the steel, rail, and oil connections to it.

Labor celebrity and local union director Lens should have been thrilled, but was questioning his



life and world; for one thing, he couldn't get the members to attend meetings. Members benefiting from all manner of union benefits (health coverage, pensions, multi-year contracts with »cost of living« benefits built in, etc.), members proudly wearing union buttons or caps, didn't attend. Union meetings often could not get quorums. Lens was annoyed to find out some couldn't attend because they wanted to watch Bob Hope or Milton Berle on their new TV (Lens 1980, p. 207). Lens also was not happy about the AFL-CIO merger.

Still, everyone knew Big Labor was important. And Lens was an important enough figure that he could be listed as one of the six contributing editors of the new *Dissent* magazine in 1955, along with major novelist Norman Mailer, renowned labor figure from the 1930s A.J. Muste, and Erich Fromm.

1956, Lens thinks about Fromm

Lens recommended Fromm's *The Sane Society* (1955a) in 1956 in two letters: The first letter, in January, 1956 is an informal one to Dr. Austeih, a New York dentist who knew Sidney Lens's mother back in New York. In his letter Lens thanks his friend for sending some poetry from the *Rubaiyat* and praises the dentist himself for writing poetry. Then Lens says:

»Aprapos [sic] of this [the dentist sharing his interest in poetry]: you may perhaps have read Erich Fromm's new book, *The Sane Society*. It is a rather brilliant work, bringing psychology, politics and a number of other sciences together into a synthetic approach to society. Society, like men, he claims, are often insane. Our own society, both in the capitalist and the communist nations, *has alienated the individual from himself, has made values abstract and material rather than human*. The individual has no moorings, or at least is losing them, and Fromm speaks of a democratic socialism *which not only improves material man, but the human man*, makes him feel he belongs, makes him feel an individual importance. This it seems to me is the problem both at home and in the Soviet orbit: *the full man is never utilized, has talents never brought to the surface.*« [Emphasis mine] (Chicago Historical Museum, Lens 1956 Box, January.)

Lens significantly follows up his praise of Fromm's book by telling the dentist that Gandhi had a similar thought, insisting we have to »change the world and ourselves.« In the context of this letter, when Lens mentions Gandhi's call for changing ourselves, Lens is perhaps connecting it to Fromm's focus on the character structure of the workers: they will have to change in order to be the vehicle of change in society. Lens, following Fromm, could no longer simply be concerned with what workers will say they believe and will do to win a strike, fight fascism or change the world but rather with what Fromm identifies in *The Sane Society* as their deeper characterological capacity to change and act. Lens, of course, was also indicating that he himself was willing to make changes.

When Lens was explaining Fromm and reminded of a quote from Gandhi, he was also reflecting a reawakened contact with his socialist ally from the 1930's labor struggles, A.J. Muste, who had become fascinated with India's post-war break from colonialism and was advocating some of Gandhi's tactics for the left. When Lens was reading Fromm's book which was trying (in my interpretation) to open up and regenerate the left, Lens was also working on some projects with Muste, who interestingly would also soon be in touch with Fromm, and who – may-



be not surprisingly – would run afoul of *Dissent's* Irving Howe as Fromm did.

Lens makes it clear in his autobiography that Muste's Gandhian tactics were not his, but that he grew to greatly respect much of Muste's general philosophy, his willingness to work with pacifists and religious thinkers and his non-sectarianism toward the left. (This openness can also be found in Fromm.) Moreover, when Lens was writing his dentist about Fromm and also thinking of Gandhi, the amazing Montgomery Bus Boycott was in its second month, with echoes of India's famous boycotts and civil disobedience under Gandhi.

In the quoted paragraph above, when Lens is discussing the »full man« (which he significantly describes as human and not just material), Lens is still not as careful as Fromm, so sometimes his terminology is distracting. For instance, note how Lens clumsily says he or she (the full human) is never »utilized.« And, also somewhat clumsily slipping from Fromm's approach, Lens says the individual should »feel« he or she belongs and has individual importance. Utilizing people more fully and having them feel they belong, would appeal to Lens as the director of a local union trying to get his members more active, but this wording does not quite reflect Fromm's concern for the workers to joyfully direct their lives.

Lens's casual letter to his dentist friend clearly shows an initial attraction to Fromm and an attempt to work with his ideas in very early 1956, and to connect Fromm's socialist humanism with insights of Muste and the Montgomery events. Lens's interest would grow and be better formulated in a few years in his 1959 book, *Crisis in American Labor*, a book that quotes Fromm and has a chapter on »The Alienated Worker,« something Lens could not address well in his successful earlier book on labor in 1949. (Lens's 1949 book in fact had a weak »bad apple« analysis: the apple barrel is filled with healthy workers, eager for more militancy and a better world, but the barrel is being ruined by a few bad apples, such as the business union in-crowd, and those »Trojan horse« Stalinists and gangsters. Lens's later (1959) book tries to understand the character of the workers he loves so much and how they must change.)

In June, just a few months after the January letter to the dentist, Lens had contacted Fromm – they later would do some joint work on several projects – and then Lens wrote a second letter to someone recommending *The Sane Society*. In fact, now Lens *defends* Fromm and his socialism. This second letter (excerpted below) in August 1956, is to Frank Marquart, recommending *The Sane Society* as a »monumental work, a real addition to socialist literature« and importantly acknowledging that Lens knows his view is controversial among certain of »our friends.«

»The Fromm book [*The Sane Society*] is a classic, the first combination of psychoanalysis and socialism that makes sense. It is naïve in some political points – that I concede. But it is a monumental work, a real addition to socialist literature. I think that some of our friends have a tendency – inherited from the old movement – of insisting that every dot and every letter be simon pure, perfect, clear, unvacillating and thoroughly in accord with every whit and dittle of their own viewpoint. That's childish in my estimation. Whatever Fromm's weaknesses – and I could list a few – they are so outbalanced by his solid and truly important contributions that I can't understand the criticisms you've confronted.« (C.H.M. Lens 1956 Box, August.)

To understand the importance of the August letter to Marquart requires some context. Lens is



not just recommending *Sane Society* to a family friend this time, not just recommending an interesting book rising to fifth on the *New York Times* best seller list which he thinks his acquaintances might like to read. The letter, strongly endorsing Fromm's book, has importance because it is written to a prominent figure in his own labor and radical world, a world in the mid-1950's nervous about any politics or sounding »different.« Marquart was education director for UAW (Auto Workers) local 212 in Detroit (the UAW hub city) – and also one of six contributing editors to *Dissent* magazine (along with Fromm, Muste and Lens), who had all clearly heard criticism of Fromm from »our friends.«

The UAW that Marquart worked for had particular importance to Lens. In his books, he frequently honored the UAW's amazing history, its courageous and clear-thinking membership as the soul of the CIO. (I recently personally purchased from an old book store an issue of *The Fighting Worker* that in the 1940s ran a front-page call to the UAW workers to take back their union from the encroaching bureaucrats. This »call to the workers« was an unsigned editorial which I assume Lens wrote.) And one of Lens's closest allies in his »scattershot« period, which began for Lens after the collapse of *The Fighting Worker*, was a UAW local representative in Chicago, Charles Chiakulas, a Lens sidekick for fifteen years with whom he worked on labor, civil rights and peace issues. (Lens 1980, p. 151, 205, 152)

Furthermore, in Lens's 1959 labor book – where he quotes Fromm and builds the chapter on »The Alienated Worker« around Fromm's ideas – one can sense an appeal to the UAW members, in particular, to lead the way out of the normalcy, mediocrity and bigness that had trapped labor. (The longest chapter in Lens's 1959 book is laudatory toward Walter Reuther, the President of the UAW, and is trying to call his loyal admirers back to the spirit of the earlier, non-bureaucratic Reuther of the 1930s.)

Lens surely knew that labor was big enough in 1959 to massively change America by seriously committing funds and energy to organize the non-union South and to support the emerging civil rights movement, and that unions could link with the »peace movement« trying to stop the Cold War and shift investment away from war. And the UAW and Reuther could be the agency to move labor that way. (Lens believed that Reuther had fleeting thoughts about a run for the U.S. presidency.) Again, the UAW, the virtual hope of the CIO, was always on Lens's mind; so, in the August 1956 letter to Marquart, he is conscious that he is telling a UAW leader to re-read Fromm's book, and Lens would not just casually defend Fromm's book to someone in the UAW ingroup. I think it is an important letter for Lens.

There is more to this letter to Marquart (defending Fromm from »our friends«) than just the UAW connection alone. Marquart, remember, was also, along with Lens, Muste and Fromm, one of the six contributing editors of *Dissent*. *Dissent*, founded in early 1954, had a small editorial board headed by Brandeis professors, Lewis Coser and Irving Howe – Lens apparently saw the magazine as having a bright future, because the dominating figure in *Dissent*, according to Lens, was Irving Howe (Lens 1980, p. 222).

Young, fluent Professor Howe had a labor background and had coauthored a laudatory book, *The UAW and Walter Reuther*. Lens was very aware that the dominating figure of *Dissent* was close enough to Reuther to have written that book. *Dissent* had emotional ties to the UAW, which surely pleased Lens when he became one of the six listed contributing editors. Not only



was contributing editor Marquart up in the UAW ranks, but Lens also considered contributing editor A.J. Muste to be one of the founders of the UAW («Musteites» had led the heroic Toledo Auto-Light Strike in the 1930s and Muste maintained many connections to the union) – and again, not only were there links to the UAW at Lens’s contributing editor level, but *Dissent* was headed by Howe, who had written the UAW-Reuther book and whom Lens admired as savvy about labor. That admiration would be tarnished soon.

Here is a question: What happens next, after Lens starts to find that the three contributing editors – himself, Muste and Fromm – are all three moving to a sort of newer open left perspective, even talking about the necessity of changing themselves to change the world? Maybe some Fromm scholars have guessed the surprise answer: The respected UAW-connected leader of *Dissent*, Irving Howe, attacks Fromm! And Muste and Lens! That is the context for Lens’s letter to Marquart: Lens knows that Marquart knows that Howe has turned against Fromm and is not pleased with Lens and Muste. It is a brave declaration when Lens, in the weird world of the mid-1950s, says Fromm’s book is socialist and »a monumental work« which »our friends« with habits »from the old movement« are attacking.

Dissent had just run its long article by Herbert Marcuse attacking Erich Fromm as a »revisionist and conformist.« And it was during a difficult time period, 1954 through 1956, for left and liberal circles, where just being in the left no doubt created considerable nervous »politics« (who was really »in« and who was not) in liberal, left, and labor circles. Because of the Cold War and the result of about seven years of »McCarthyite« witch-hunts in unions and academia and publishing at the time – Lens’s wife, a teacher in labor-strong Chicago still had to give up a year’s salary (!) for refusing to sign a loyalty oath – the left and liberals were very circumspect, and getting along was not easy. However, leftists and liberals were not just jittery about some rightists labeling them »Communist« or the government charging them with espionage, but were nervous about everything, and particularly their »position« in the left. The left was isolated and small, splitting and »regrouping« or self-righteously refusing to regroup with other leftists, and the right wing of the country had been *successfully* courting very prominent ex-leftists to speak for the Cold War; consequently, the leftists were easily irritated with each other, with each alert to smell subtle differences and personal and political agendas. (Fromm describes in other contexts how religious institutions and the left at times can both be very worried by the slightest changes in wording and can have scrupulous concern with proving continuity with the »correct« historic positions and succession. Note Lens’s comment to Marquart about »our friends« picking over »every whit and dittle« of *The Sane Society*.)

The Marcuse attack on Fromm has been interpreted in the literature various ways. Marcuse’s followers in the late 1960s and the 1970s saw it as a Marcuse victory, but there are different ways to look at it. One lingering shadow over the attack in *Dissent*, which I mentioned earlier, needs countering: some see the attack on Fromm as evidence that he was over his head politically, naïve and consequently »bested« by Marcuse. It is connected to the interpretation, waning thankfully recently, that it showed Marcuse was more radical than Fromm or that Fromm was a lightweight in the left and a »popularizer.« I view Fromm as a savvy Socialist Humanist intervening in the left. Fromm’s latest biographer would disagree. Fromm’s often unfriendly biographer, Lawrence Friedman, says this about *Dissent*’s founders:



»Close colleagues of the ›New York Intellectuals,‹ [*Dissent*'s editors] Howe and Coser were suspicious of abstract ›programs‹ for remaking the world [which would obviously make them annoyed later with Fromm whose book boldly encouraged looking for and discussing new models of socialist planning as crucial before socialism] but, unlike Cold War liberals, they hoped to maintain a reflective commitment to democratic socialism. They included Fromm on their editorial board owing to his prominence, his critique of mass culture, and the widely acknowledged importance of *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a) in the scholarly community. But Howe and Coser soon regretted their selection, finding Fromm arrogant and *difficult to work with, often uncompromising, sometimes naïve in his politics, and wedded to utopian visions of a democratic socialist society*. [Biographer Friedman does not pause to refute these characterizations despite their problematic quality.] In time, the two *Dissent* editors lost any sense of affinity with Fromm [although, despite Fromm's supposed ›arrogance‹ and ›naiveté,‹ they kept Fromm as contributing editor for 18 more years] and thus had no compunction about offending him by publishing Marcuse's essay.« (Friedman 2013, p. 192; my emphasis.)

Although biographer Friedman does not defend Fromm and usually undervalues his impact, Friedman at least admits the *Dissent* attack was nasty. Marcuse was not just some distant philosopher expressing a different interpretation of Freud's philosophy: »[B]eginning in 1952 when he accepted a position at Columbia University,« Marcuse was welcomed by the academy, and »befriended the so-called New York Intellectuals of the anti-Stalinist left social critics such as Lionel Trilling and Alfred Kazin who frequented the offices of *Partisan Review*.« [*Partisan Review* was part of the group sucked into the ›Cultural Cold War,‹ splitting the left.] Although two scholarly reviewers of Friedman's biography, one by philosopher Joan Braune (2013) and one by Robert Gentner (2014), a cultural historian of the McCarthy period, both criticize the biographer for minimizing the contributions of Fromm and for his constant amateur psychologizing of Fromm, whom Friedman thinks had an »emotional triangle« of »exuberance, depression and marginality,« Friedman still can't help but admit that the attack on Fromm was done unfairly. It broke the usual pattern for critical exchanges in such magazines like *Dissent*. Biographer Friedman makes the point:

»Although a debate such as this [with Marcuse writing an article against the work in general of a major professional psychoanalyst like Fromm] typically ended with a rebuttal from the ›aggrieved‹ party, Marcuse's exchange with Fromm seemed to carry a momentum of its own. [The debate] enlarged *Dissent*'s modest readership [...] and so when Marcuse asked Howe and Coser if he could rebut Fromm's rebuttal, they consented without asking Fromm. The deck was stacked.« (Friedman 2013, p. 195.)

Lens and Muste and probably even Marquart saw the nasty nature of the attack. It must be noted that the first article written by Marcuse, attacking a whole group of revisionist psychologists including Fromm, could almost be understood as a learned philosophical discussion of different interpretations of Freud. Fromm's counter in the next issue, explains where Freud went wrong and he himself was right. Marcuse did not attack *The Sane Society* (1955a) in the first article he wrote. He apparently had not read it. He only mentions Fromm's 1947 book, *Man for Himself* (1947a) and a 1950 book, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950a). When »the fix was in«



and Howe agreed to a surprise attack on Fromm, it was six months after Marcuse's previous article, it was not so much a dispute about Freud this time but an attack on *The Sane Society*, what Lens calls Fromm's »magnum opus,« Fromm's »monumental« work calling for a more open and humanistic and collaborative socialist movement.

Socialist humanism is the crux of *The Sane Society*. It includes one of the earliest mentions of Vera Zazulich's comments on the importance of studying the *mir* and primitive communal life for socialist planning and introduces Fromm's amazing concept that Lessing, Fichte, Hegel and Marx expressed, »prophetic messianism,« a concept which Fromm later develops as the essence of socialist humanism, and surely a concept countering the terror and conformity of the 1950s. The attack on Fromm as a »fix« and a call for political conformity could not be missed by Lens and Muste.

Fromm's new call for socialism was important and greatly shaped the emerging young leadership for the 1960s; it is widely noted that *Dissent* played almost no role in the 1960s. Another reason Lens and Muste kept contact with Fromm and not Marcuse was because, I suspect, a comparison of *The Sane Society* and Marcuse's alternative *Eros and Civilization* (1955) would show Fromm's book as more valuable for the working class they were trying to rouse. Fromm would point out several times over the years that the problem with Marcuse's »Great Refusal« is it could offer no program, was pessimistic.

Although Marquart may have thought differently, Lens and Muste couldn't join the attack on Fromm. They themselves were attacked at the same time. First, Howe let it be known that he was annoyed that Lens and Muste founded a new journal (*Liberation*) with a new and maybe younger spirited crowd which opened a month before the Montgomery bus boycott. Howe was clearly displeased and Lens defensively felt the need to write him that this new journal that A.J. Muste and Lens were starting up, *Liberation*, was not intended to steal subscribers from *Dissent*. But *Liberation's* readership did indeed expand quickly. For one thing, it had less of what Lens calls a »college professor tone« and, unlike *Dissent*, it had an important African American on its board.

Bayard Rustin, a liberal/left figure of stature in the 1950s, was central to the Montgomery bus boycott and its Gandhian civil disobedience tactics. *Liberation*, because of Muste, was very interested in Gandhian »symbolic« and mass resistance tactics. Rustin was probably key to arranging for the second issue of *Liberation* to run the historically important strong proleptic piece by Martin Luther King Jr. urging the concerned Northerners to get on board the boycott. *Dissent* was looking less important all the time. (Lens notes (1980, pp. 221–225) that Rustin, a decade later however, would cave in to the anti-Stalinist liberals like Max Shachtman and the *Partisan Review* crowd who backed off scared from King when he bucked President Johnson by linking civil rights and opposition to the Vietnam War; however, Lens insists that left readers should not underestimate the importance of Bayard Rustin in the 1950s.)

A second, but related, issue was dividing Lens and Muste from Howe and the intellectual crowd around Max Shachtman – an initiative which Muste convinced Lens to join. In 1955, two years after Stalin's death, Muste decided the left circles he knew were in error for excluding Communist Party members from left discussions. Lens was anti-Stalinist from the 1930s, but he was won over increasingly to Muste's view. They organized a petition to Congress to free



the Communists who had been convicted under the Smith Act and started organizing forums for Communist Party members who wanted reform in their party and for those recently leaving it, so they could talk openly and programmatically to other sections of the left. Lens's book is unclear about the dates involved, but says this about *Dissent*: »Through the years I however developed misgivings about the publication's tendency to read the Communists out of the radical movement, to label them in fact as reactionary.« (Lens 1980, p. 222.)

Howe grew furious about Muste and Lens's activity and finally denounced Lens and Muste in an editorial in *Dissent* in Summer 1957 for giving undue privilege and »protective coloration« to members of the Communist Party. The group that Muste and Lens founded was called the American Forum for Socialist Education. Both Howe and Max Shachtman went to one meeting and quit attending (Lens 1980, pp. 233–236). There was tension around this in 1956, at the time when Fromm was attacked by Marcuse at Howe's nod. Lens and Muste could probably tell that *Dissent* just wasn't their ally for an open and new left. Lens says that Howe eventually refused to publish a Lens article which discussed the issue of communists and eventually asked Lens to step down as contributing editor. (It is not clear in Lens's biography what year that was, but his name was removed as a contributing editor for only one issue in 1957, and Lens said that Muste resigned from *Dissent* in protest. This fuss was patched up publicly a bit, because Lens and Muste's names stayed on *Dissent's* list through the mid-1960s.)

Conclusion

Below is a fun, short passage from Lens's autobiography, mentioning Fromm's membership in the Socialist Party. (Note that Lens will take a job at sociologist David Riesman. Lens and C. Wright Mills were annoyed at a »world famous sociologist« – I surmise the sociologist was Riesman, one of the leaders of the Committees of Correspondence peace group they all had belonged to – for not signing a protest letter after Kennedy's reckless Bay of Pigs invasion. Lens wrote the protest statement, and Muste called up Fromm and Stewart Meachem, a 1930's labor radical who had become a leader in the Friends Service Committee, to sign it. (Lens 1980, p. 255) Cuba was important for Lens, who became a leader in Fair Play for Cuba, and he had exchanged letters with Fromm hoping to create a fact-finding trip there together.)

Although there are several more connections and contacts between Fromm and Lens, to be explored in a future paper, this paper concludes with this passage from Lens's autobiography:

»After a couple of years, the *Committees of Correspondence* folded their tent; Riesman, so far as I know, played no further role in the antiwar movement. Erich Fromm, with whom I had corresponded for many months about publishing a theoretical socialist magazine in English and Spanish (another effort that expired, this time because we couldn't raise the money), joined the Socialist Party and tried with might and main to convince Muste, Meacham, and myself to follow him.« (Lens 1980, p. 255.)

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