



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

Review Essay of Daniel Burston *The Legacy of Erich Fromm*

Mauricio Cortina

First published in: *Arbeit - Entfremdung - Charakter*, Jahrbuch der Internationalen Erich-Fromm-Gesellschaft „Wissenschaft vom Menschen,“ Vol. 4 (1993), pp. 253-260.

Copyright © 1993 and 2011 by Dr. Mauricio Cortina and Dr. Mario Marone, 5 Sunnyside Rd., Silver Spring, MD 20910, USA, E-Mail: mauriciocortina[at-symbol]starpower.net.

Of the many creative and controversial figures in the history of the psychoanalytic movement, Fromm is one of the most intriguing and least understood. His legacy is strewn with ironies. Consider the following.

1. In the 1940s and 1950s Fromm was one of the most popular psychoanalytic writers. *Escape from Freedom*, *The Forgotten Language*, *The Sane Society*, and *The Art of Loving* were all best-sellers. *Escape from Freedom*, a landmark book, helped raise the consciousness of many readers about the nature and origin of authoritarianism and submissiveness. Yet today Fromm's work is almost completely ignored.

2. Fromm was one of the first analysts to expose the weakness of libido theory. As an alternative to Freud's instinctivist and physicalistic metapsychology, Fromm developed a view of human beings as primarily driven by their need to be related to the world and to others. He critiqued Freud's structural theory - id, ego, and superego - and moved toward a self psychology deeply rooted in the humanistic tradition. He went beyond Freud's dualistic drive theory and postulated an elegant theory of existential needs that recognized the multimotivational nature of human experience.

Today, all these issues, which were once considered heretical - the relational matrix, the self as the embodiment of owned and disowned action, and the critique of drive theory - have become the center of some of the most promising developments in Psychoanalysis. Yet Fromm almost never gets credited as a pioneer. (An exception is Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983.)

3. As a leading Freudo-Marxist, Fromm developed one of the most sophisticated Marxist-Freudian syntheses. Despite the genuine explanatory power of this synthesis, Fromm is usually dismissed as naive or utopian.

4. Fromm believed that the concept of neutrality and the couch were often used by the analyst defensively. He advocated an empathic immersion in the patient's experience as a basis for real change. Nevertheless, as Burston observes, he was at times experienced by some who were in analysis with him as intimidating and overbearing. Fromm was not free from the dogmatic tendencies that he so effectively criticized.

Burston's book is the first serious attempt to come to terms with Fromm's checkered and fascinating legacy by debunking widespread misconceptions about Fromm's work while remaining critical of some of its contradictions. Burston has begun to break the complacent silence that surrounds Fromm's contribution, particularly in English-speaking countries. (In Europe and in Mexico, Fromm's work is much better known. There are psychoanalytic groups in Spain, Italy, and Mexico where his work is an important part of the curriculum. In the United States Fromm is still taught at the William 'Alanson White Institute and The Washington School of Psychiatry. The Erich Fromm International Society formed some years ago to study and develop Fromm's work and regularly holds conferences and symposia based on his work.)

Burston points out that any assessment of



Fromm's contribution must be recognizing the profound influence 19th-century German thought had on his work. This lack of contextualization of Fromm by friends and critics alike is partly responsible for the misrepresentation of his work and ignorance of some of its most dynamic aspects.

Burston believes that perhaps the greatest misunderstanding of Fromm's work is his frequent inclusion with the so-called neo-Freudians or culturalists. Fromm himself never accepted this classification, despite the close ties he had with some of the members in this group - he and Horney had a long-term love affair, and he remained a friend of Sullivan and Clara Thompson. Burston notes that Fromm never tried to distance himself from Freud, as Sullivan and Horney did, even though he remained an uncompromising critic.

In a more fundamental sense, I would add that Fromm was never a culturalist in terms of believing that culture was more important than intrapsychic forces in determining character, a common stereotype that critics use to dismiss Fromm's work. Fromm's approach can best be characterized as dialectical. He tried to expand Freud's concept of the dynamic unconscious by pointing out that social forces, as well as individual impulses and beliefs, were repressed. His concept of a social unconscious and the related concept of social character are both functional and dynamic. People often end up believing that they want to do what they must do in order to accommodate social pressures without becoming conscious of conflict. Behavior is rationalized as willed or simply seen as „natural,” rather than imposed, and thus people avoid painful realizations and difficult choices.

An example of social character can be seen in the current changes in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe. The social character traits best adapted to centralized command economies are submissiveness, passivity, and cynicism. The human factors necessary for establishing a market economy require what Fromm called productive marketing character traits, that is, purposefulness, open-mindedness, and flexibility. Social character theory would predict that in order for leaders to succeed in the transformation from a command to a market economy, it is not

enough to consider economic and political changes alone; psychological and cultural factors must also be taken into account.

In explaining Fromm's contributions, Burston challenges the stereotypes that continue to hinder psychoanalytic scholarship by developing an interesting classification based on attitudes of loyalty toward Freud - what Burston calls „Freud piety” - that are manifested as contributors begin revising the master's ideas.

The „loyal opposition” is characterized by analysts who continued to consider themselves Freudians despite substantive disagreements with Freud. This group includes a mélange, such as Freudian-Marxists like Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, and Otto Fenichel, object relations theorists like W. R. D. Fairbairn, John Bowlby, and Harry Guntrip, and an independent group comprising, for example, Georg Groddek, Sándor Ferenczi, and Karen Horney in her earlier career. I would add to Burston's „loyal opposition” grouping the Rappaport „disciples” such as Robert Holt, Roy Schafer, and George Klein.

The „dissident fringe” - that is, those who broke with Freud after an initial infatuation with him - also includes a varied lot, such as Alfred Adler, Carl Gustav Jung, Otto Rank, Ian Suttie, Harry Stack Sullivan, and the later Karen Horney. Finally, the „crypto-revisionists” disguise their clear departure from orthodoxy by continuing to pay lip service to hallowed concepts such as psychic energy and drive theory while making substantive revisions. Prominent members of this group include Melanie Klein, Heinz Kohut (in his early writing), Margaret Mahler, Donald Winnicott, Erik Erikson, and Heinz Hartmann.

Burston observes that these differences from Freud are largely ideological and tell us very little about the actual content of the ideas. For instance:

“The conceptual difference between Jung and Rank (dissident fringe), Fromm and Fairbairn (loyal opposition), and Mahler and Jacobson (crypto-revisionists) on the importance of individuating from the intrauterine or the symbiotic matrix is comparatively small in comparison with the substantive difference between Hartmann



and Lacan (crypto-revisionists) on the nature and function of the ego.” [pp. 3-4].

It is these ideological schisms, Burston holds, that have interfered with recognizing Fromm’s relationship to important contributors in psychoanalysis and his role within the psychoanalytic movement. For instance, Fromm and Fairbairn are historically linked in their early efforts to revise Freud along very similar lines. Burston notes that Fromm, working from Bachofen’s matriarchal and patriarchal principles, had, as early as 1934, formulated the following revision:

“There is a basic difference between the typology based on pregenital character structures and the matricentric and patricentric typology. The former signifies a fixation to the oral and anal level, and is basically opposed to the mature „genital character.” The latter conceived in terms of *dominant object relations* does not stand in opposition to the genital character. The matricentric type can be an oral character in the case where the person is more or less passive, dependent or in need of others’ help. But the matricentric type can also be a genital character, i.e., psychically mature, active, not neurotic or arrested. - Here we cannot enter into a full discussion of psychoanalytic categories. ... I do believe, however, that a typology based on object relations, rather than on erogenous zones or clinical symptomatology, offers fruitful possibilities for social research.” [Quoted by Burston, p. 61, italics added].

Burston points out another striking resemblance between Fairbairn and Fromm. Both develop a critique of Freud’s libido stage theory by observing that contrary to what the theory predicted, health and pathology are not necessarily associated with the oral-anal-genital sequence. Here is Fromm (1964):

“The problem cannot be solved by the evolutionary assumption that the earlier orientations are the roots of the more pathological orientations. As I see it, each orientation in itself has various levels of regression

reaching from the normal to the most archaic. ... I propose therefore to determine pathology not according to the distinction between levels of libido development but according to the degree of regression within each orientation.” [Quoted by Burston, p. 64.]

Compare Fromm’s statement with the position of Fairbairn, who came to see the dynamics of different character pathologies as „techniques” used to negotiate the vicissitudes of object relations as opposed to fixations to any given stage.

Fromm never did conceive a developmental scheme, based on object relations, as Fairbairn did. I agree with Mitchell (1983) that this lack of a fleshed-out developmental perspective is perhaps one of Fromm’s greatest theoretical weaknesses. Nevertheless, Fromm’s views are clearly consistent with Fairbairn’s belief that it is the quality of the dependence of the relationship with the mother, and not the erogenous zones, that is the determining factor leading to health or psychopathology. This view has found extensive confirmation in the fields of attachment research and developmental psychopathology.

Fromm was a prolific writer, and his extensive scholarship resists summarizing. Burston’s book is fairly comprehensive, a feat in itself. I will not attempt to cover all the areas he analyzes, but will concentrate, instead, on Fromm’s perspective on the human condition, a conception with a distinct existentialist flavor. Burston, while critical of Fromm’s tendency to make sweeping generalizations of the productive character („the masters of being”), believes that Fromm’s concept of human nature is an important and original contribution. It rarely receives comment and is a unifying theme in all his work. I will also suggest a critique of my own.

Burston likens Fromm’s existentialism with Heidegger’s concept of ‘athrownness’ (*Geworfenheit*), „the precarious, contingent character of our existence in the world, which is rendered all the more problematic by the fact of human self-consciousness” (pp. 85-86). As I see it, what is original to Fromm is how he arrives at this conception. Fromm combines psychoanalysis and humanism with an attempt to ground a concep-



tion of humanity within an evolutionary perspective that can account for the process of hominization. Fromm (1973) speculates that two converging evolutionary tendencies define the human condition: the „ever decreasing determination of behavior by instincts” (p. 223) and the development of the neocortex, which greatly extends the human capacity for self-reflective action and, by extension, self-awareness.

As a consequence, Fromm sees human beings as radically uprooted from their biological heritage („a freak of nature”). Endowed with reason, imagination, and self-awareness, humans are both cursed and blessed with the search for a new identity that will give meaning and purpose to their existence. This condition gives rise to „existential needs,” that is, the need for a frame of reference and devotion (a cognitive and spiritual map), the need for roots (relatedness), the need for unity (social integration), the need to be effective (competence motivation, mastery), and the need for active stimulation.

Each of these needs is constrained or enhanced by a complex mixture of individual, social, cultural, and historical factors that give rise to different expressions of human nature. Each of these manifestations can be considered a „solution” to the riddle posed by the human condition. But for Fromm it is the „questions,” not the historically conditioned „solutions,” that are the essence of human life. It is here that Fromm is at his best, providing us with the dialectical tools to grapple with an age-old philosophical conundrum. And it is from this perspective that Fromm was able to provide an alternative vision to Freud’s compelling conception of human nature. Fromm believes that the most hideous, as well as the most sublime, manifestations of our nature are not determined by destructive or erotic drives built into our biology, but are the result of our attempts to transcend our creatureliness:

“Creation and destruction, love and hate, are not two instincts that exist independently. They are both answers to the same need for transcendence, and the will to destroy rises most when the will to create cannot be satisfied. However, the satisfac-

tion of the need to create leads to happiness; destructiveness to suffering, most of all for the destroyer himself.” [Quoted by Burston, 1991, p. 69.]

Burston notes that this view of destructiveness as „negative transcendence” competed with other unfolding biological speculations of questionable value and the recasting of Freud’s life and death instincts into the concepts of biophilia and necrophilia. While this is true, Fromm’s view of „the origins of human destructiveness never lost sight of the dialectical conception of human nature, and ultimately it is the dialectical approach, not the biological speculations, that pervades in Fromm’s work.

The strength of this formulation of destructiveness as negative transcendence is that it provides some insights into the diverse array of human behaviors that are puzzling and terrifying. What motivates serial murderers? What motivates a Himmler or a Stalin? Fromm argues that whatever the developmental path(s) that may lead to these monsters, it is ultimately the intoxicating passion to have control over life and death, to overcome one’s insignificance in an orgy of sadism and cruelty, that animates these perversions. Attempts to explain these behaviors by postulating a destructive instinct fall short. Human destructiveness, Fromm would say, is not bestial; it is all too human. Fromm’s hypothesis on the nature of necrophilia and sadism finds ample support in psychological profiles of serial killers.

Fromm’s rendering of the human condition is, of course, not without flaws. I believe its single most important flaw derives from the fact that infant research and comparative ethological studies do not support Fromm’s belief that the biological equipment of humans is minimal. The motivational systems that we are born with provide the human infant with surprising competencies (Stern, 1985). These innate capacities are similar to the motivational systems observed in other primates. The attachment motivational system is a case in point. Attachment behavior in humans is not only comparable to other primates (Rosenblum and Paus, 1991), but, if anything is more influential in human development due to the prolonged and intense parenting re-



quired before reaching maturity. Plainly, there are many more continuities within our evolutionary lineage than Fromm thought.

How do we explain the discontinuities? I have observed elsewhere that according to Gould (1977), development can be powerfully influenced by accelerating or retarding it, a phenomenon known in biology as heterochrony (Cortina, 1988). Retarding development (neoteny) has a series of cascading effects that are the hallmark of hominization. These include late sexual development, extended life cycles, and prolongation of embryonic growth beyond birth (leading to larger brains). Late maturation and small litters lead to intense parental care. In turn, these effects greatly increase opportunities for learning and play. According to Gould (1977), all these developments have been associated with K reproductive strategies. Essentially, K strategies favor small litters in environments that are stable over r strategies, which select for large litters in unpredictable environments. In other words, K strategies select for quality; r strategies select for quantity.

“By now, this associated complex of characters - neoteny, large brains, K selection, slow development, small litters, intense parental care, large body size - must have suggested a look at the mirror. A neotenic hypothesis of human origins has been available for some time but it has been widely ridiculed and ignored. Nonetheless, I believe it is fundamentally correct and the framework I have established may help vindicate it.” [Gould, 1977, p. 351.]

Assuming these hypothesis hold, and consistent with Fromm’s dialectical approach, I would suggest reinterpreting the human condition as one in which increased flexibility and adaptive competencies have been achieved at the „cost” of making humans much more dependent on the quality of the parental care and the social and cultural environment that we create. We continue to share all the motivational systems that are present in other species with whom we are closely related. It is not, as Fromm would have it, that the plasticity of human behavior has been achieved by the decrease of instinctual mo-

tivation, but rather that motivational systems that we share with other species have been *transposed into a new key driven by K selective strategies and neoteny.*

Following Gould’s neotenic hypothesis, I would suggest that some of the surprises associated with the evolutionary transformations of our species - the discontinuities - such as the emergence of consciousness and self-awareness, interact synergistically with the need for prolonged and intense parental care to produce some of the „existential needs” that Fromm described. Despite the difference in interpretation, Fromm’s view of the human condition - its contingent and fragile character and our passionate need for security - still speaks to us eloquently and provides a corrective to what Mitchell (1988) has called the „developmental tilt” that permeates so much of object relational theories.

“But the more obvious fact - that the infant needs a mothering person - has obscured the fact that not only the infant is helpless and craves certainty; the adult is in many ways no less helpless. Indeed he can work to fulfill the tasks ascribed to him by society; but he is more aware than the infant of the dangers and risks in life; he knows of the natural and the social forces he cannot control, the accidents he cannot foresee, the sickness and death he cannot elude. What would be more natural, under the circumstances, than man’s frantic longing for the power which gives him certainty, protection and love? This desire is not only a „repetition” of his longing for mother; it is generated because the very same conditions which make the infant long for the mother continue to exist, although on another level.” [Fromm, 1964, pp. 120-121.]

Burston has begun to reclaim the work of one of the most gifted heirs of the psychoanalytic movement. Fromm’s work went against the grain of the keepers of the faith, and he paid dearly for it. In addition, his Marxist approach and his prophetic belief that it was possible to develop universal norms for humane living met deaf ears in academia.

The Fromm who emerges from Burston’s



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

book is a living thinker. Fromm amply deserves a new hearing; I can think of no greater tribute to honor his legacy.

References:

Cortina, M. (1988): Erich Fromm's concept of man revisited. Presented at the Washington School of Psychiatry legacy series. Washington, DC.
Fromm, E. (1964), *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*. New York: Harper & Row.
- (1973): *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier Books.
Gould, S. (1977): *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*. Cam-

bridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press.
Greenberg, J. R., and Mitchell, S. (1983): *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Mitchell, S. (1983): *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Rosenblum, L., and Paus, P. (1991): „Evolutionary and environmental factors influencing attachment patterns in non-human primates.” In: *Intersections with Attachment*, ed. by J. Gewirtz and W. Kurtines. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 23-37.
Stern, D. (1985): *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. New York: Basic Books.