



Fromm's Theory and the Problems of „Real Existing” Socialism

Ferenc Erös

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In the past two years we have been witnessing extraordinary and in many ways unexpected events in the East and Central regions of Europe. In the course of these events, Hungary gradually became a parliamentary democracy, the democratic opposition came to power in Czechoslovakia, the Berlin wall was demolished and the two German states were strikingly quickly reunified, the Ceausescu regime was swept away by the Rumanian revolution, and the whole world has to face now with the beneficial as well as the threatening consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet empire.

I think that without these developments the Pécs meeting on Erich Fromm's teachings probably could have not been taken place in Hungary, for Fromm was a non-desirable or at least a much censured author in the countries of „existing socialism”. From the viewpoint of the official state ideology, he was among those „revisionists” or „petty bourgeois utopists” who deviated from the hard core of Marxism-Leninism. In Hungary, for example, the only available source on Fromm was, for many years, an extremely dogmatic book by an American communist philosopher, Harry G. Wells (Wells, 1963). To be sure, the ideological climate changed considerably in the last ten or fifteen years. Quite a few works of Fromm were translated and published in some of these countries. In Hungary, for example, the translations of *The Art of Loving* (1984) and *Zen-Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1989) are available in this mo-

ment. Naturally, these are both important, but, at the same time, they are the explicitly less political and sociological works. Most of the readers could, doubtlessly, understand Fromm's final message from these essays, too, but they are far from being as representative as, for example, *Escape from Freedom* (E. Fromm, 1941a) or *To Have Or To Be?* (E. Fromm, 1976a). In the countries of „existing socialism”, there was good reason to suppress or to condemn the political implications of Fromm's teaching. For Fromm was, in his whole life, an uncompromising critic of the „existing socialism”. The elements of a critique of this type of social organization was implicit in his writings much before the term „existing socialism” was coined and much before communism came to power outside the Soviet Union.

What are these elements of opposition to „existing socialism” already present in his early writings?

My argument is that a combination of three basic elements, or essential dimensions is characteristic for Fromm's thinking from his earliest to his latest periods. These are the following: a *messianism* of Jewish origin; a *radical critique of capitalism* as both a socio-economic as well as a moral, psychological or characterological system, and, finally, an *anti-authoritarianism* as manifested in his attitude to politics both on the level of society and on the level of psychoanalytical therapy and movement. Each of these dimensions is in a particular and very complex



relationship to what we call „existing socialism” or „Soviet-type societies”. Let us examine these dimensions in somewhat more detail.

1. *Messianism* is something very much at the core of all socialistic ideas from the early nineteenth century. In modern Marxism, there are different ways to face the challenge of messianism inherent in socialist theory. One way is to take messianism seriously and keep it, as far as possible, from concrete historical events, from the ups and downs of revolutions and counter-revolutions, in short: from *empirical reality*. That is the way how Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Ernst Bloch and other „messianic Marxists” of our age have faced the problem of messianism.

The other way is to possibly eliminate messianic contents, to deprive socialism from all of its mythical, quasi-religious, or eschatological dimensions and to adapt it to the changing reality of politics and economy in modern societies. That is, more or less, the attitude of social democracy developed in Western Europe.

The third way is to verbally declare and confirm messianism but, at the same time, to claim that the given conditions represent already the realization of all ideas messianism had fought for, or the given social order is the only road to realizing the messianic goals, therefore, he who doesn't believe in them is either a criminal or a fool. This is the way how the ideology of Stalinism, or Soviet-type socialism distorted the original visions of socialistic ideas.

Evidently, Fromm belongs to those group of Marxist thinkers who firmly and consequently rejected the last two ways of „treating” messianic ideas. Fromm's messianism is, however, more closely rooted in Judaism, than, for example, Lukács's messianism in his influential work *History Consciousness* (1923). For Fromm, redemption is the final reconciliation between Man and Nature, the end of alienation, the victory of „being” over „having”, something which cannot be achieved through a single act, or by a party, a class, a movement or by a prophetic person. Redemption is the goal of history, but history itself is an endless process. Thus, I think that Fromm's lifelong opposition to Soviet-type societies roots in his protest against following any kind of „false Messiah” (on messianism cf. R. Funk, 1987; M. Brumlik, in this volume).

2. *Radical anticapitalism* is a dimension closely related to messianism. For if one takes messianism seriously, one has to reject also those systems which violate the basic moral principles of humanism, love and solidarity. Fromm's anti-capitalism is radical in the sense that it is against capitalism not only as an economic and social system, but also as a moral and psychological system. The main object of the Frommian social critique are those character structures and orientations which are determined, reinforced and reproduced by the „acquisitive” morality, by the „having” mode of existence. From this perspective it naturally follows that „existing socialism” has been only one version of capitalism. I quote Fromm's *To Have or To Be?*:

„It was a historical necessity that an anti-capitalist idea, propagated at the very peak of capitalism, had to be utterly transformed into the capitalist spirit if it was to be successful. And this is what actually happened. Western social democrats and their bitter opponents, communists within and without the Soviet Union, transformed socialism into a purely economic concept, the goal of which was maximum consumption, maximum use of machines... Every socialist or communist party that could claim to represent Marxian thought would have to be based on the conviction that the Soviet regimes are not socialist systems in any sense, that socialism is incompatible with a bureaucratic, thing-centered, consumption-oriented social system, that it is incompatible with the materialism and cerebralization that characterize the Soviet, like the capitalist, system” (E. Fromm 1976, pp. 159f.).

This view - the condemnation of Soviet type systems as the perversion or the betrayal of the original, revolutionary ideas, as the reestablishment of exploitation and commodity relations in the form of a hardly disguised „state capitalism” - was a widespread argument from Trotsky to Mao and to many currents of the New Left, too. This idea was also present at Herbert Marcuse, Fromm's otherwise bitter theoretical critic and opponent (cf. M. Jay, 1973; R. Wiggershaus, 1988), who believed that the two world systems, American imperialism and Soviet communism were on the way of their convergence into one, common system of



domination.

In retrospect, it seems that the leftist critiques failed, in many respects, to recognize the real nature of Soviet type societies, for these societies could never fulfill any of the capitalistic functions and goals (free market, accumulation of capital, mass production and consumption etc.). Nor, as a matter of fact, did they want to; their aim, first of all, was the realization of a totalitarian utopia: „the dictatorship over needs” (F. Fehér, A. Heller and G. Márkus, 1983). The introduction of „consumerism” and „limited market” or „second”, even „third” economy in some of the so-called socialist states could be regarded only as a concession to popular demand, an attempt to „neutralize” potential dissent and rebelliousness (as was the case with Kádár’s policy in post-1956 Hungary). It is an other question that, in final analysis, these concessions had contributed to and quickened the collapse of these regimes.

Nevertheless, Fromm himself falls in the trap of mixing up rationalizations with facts, when he gives credit to Khrushchev’s concept of „goulash communism”, according to which „the aim of socialism was to give the whole population the same pleasure of consumption as capitalism gave only to a minority” (E. Fromm, 1976, p. 156.). For Fromm, of course, the realization of Khrushchev’s impossible promises would have been an utmostly undesirable outcome. On the other hand, for Khrushchev, it would have been a genuine revolution, the final victory of socialism over capitalism in the sphere of production. In a strange and perhaps paradoxical way, Fromm, like many of his contemporaries, also believed in or even mystified *the* revolution.

„While the political revolution of the twentieth century,” he writes in *To Have Or To Be?*, „the Russian revolution, has failed (it is too early to judge the final outcome of the Chinese revolution), the victorious revolutions of our century, even though they are only in their first stages, are the women’s, the children’s, and the sexual revolution” (E. Fromm, 1976, p. 76.). The very concept of „revolution” by Fromm is filled with messianic content. Revolution, is, by definition, a process which transforms the totality of human existence; consequently, all revolu-

tions which fail to achieve this transformation, are doomed to be betrayed, and necessarily lead to a „psychological Thermidor” (H. Marcuse, 1957). Betrayed revolutions sow, however, the seeds of new revolutions. Fromm retains - of course, in quite different context - Trotsky’s concept of „permanent revolution”.

But the question emerges: why do revolutions fail at all? This is the age-old Freud-Marxist question from Federn and Reich to Marcuse and Fromm. In their approach, the answer lies in the character structure that prevents people to act according to their own interests. It is the character structure which forces people to give up their freedom, which exiles them into the state of non-freedom. People who are incapable to live with freedom create, in their longing for authority, dictatorships, which, in turn offer them the security of „belonging somewhere”. I am not intending to go into the details of the problem of social character in Fromm’s lifework. The concepts and descriptions of basic human character types or orientations went through many modifications and enlargements from his early characterological works to *Man for Himself* (E. Fromm, 1947) or to *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (E. Fromm, 1973). It is also true that his later theory on social character represents the most elaborate and empirically sound explanation in psychoanalytic social psychology - as compared to the classic works on „fascist” or „authoritarian personality” by Reich or by Adorno and his collaborators (W. Reich, 1933, Th. W. Adorno et al., 1950).

Nevertheless, I think that the core of Fromm’s characterological teaching has had, and in some sense retained, the basic dichotomy between the „authoritarian” and „revolutionary” or „radical” character structure. This dichotomy was, I suppose, an essential part of the *Weltanschauung* of the German leftist intelligentsia in the Weimar period. It was an expression of their hopes and fears in face of rising fascism. As Fromm showed in his empirical works on the German workers and employees in the early thirties, authoritarian tendencies could be found even among those members of the working class who otherwise favored leftist parties (Communists and Social Democrats). The closer the ques-



tions concerned private life and human relations, the more ambivalent or authoritarian answers were given (E. Fromm, 1980). This is closely related to the problem of the „authoritarianism on the left” (cf. R. Christie, M. Jahoda, 1954) which intrigued much of the Frankfurt school social psychology, but was rarely faced in its depth.

Naturally, Fromm and his contemporaries realized, and I think quite early (probably in the period of the Moscow trials), the real nature of Stalinism. He was, as I emphasized earlier, a life-long critic of „existing socialism”. For him, Stalinism was more than a political system. It was also „character assassination”, and it was probably not by accident that in his critical review on Ernest Jones’s biography on Freud (E. Fromm, 1958) he calls the British authors’ way of treating Sándor Ferenczi and Otto Rank, two outstanding members of the psychoanalytic movement, an instructive example of „Stalinist type rewriting of history”, according to which all deviations from the „only truth” are themselves proof of some „mental disturbance” (cf. E. Fromm, 1970. - On Fromm’s relation to Jones, Rank and Ferenczi see also F. Erös, 1989).

Nevertheless, Fromm’s explicit opinions and evaluations of the Soviet-type societies are known for us mainly from brief remarks, references, allusions. I might risk the proposition that Fromm shared the ambivalent feelings or even the schizophrenia of many leftist intellectuals toward the Soviet Union. For them, originally, there were two main evils: political fascism on the one hand, and „cultural fascism”, the alienated, „one dimensional” consumer society and „mass culture” on the other. Communism, far from being attractive or even „progressive”, was „the lesser evil”. It seemed to retain some elements of hope for the left, or, at least, in the period of the Cold War (which seems to be finished only now) it was, also for tactical reasons, not advisable to attack Communism too openly. This attitude of the left is very clearly described by Arthur Koestler in his essay *The God That Failed*. According to Koestler, „the addiction to the Soviet myth is as tenacious as any other addiction. After the Lost Weekend in Utopia the temptation is strong to have just last one drop, even if watered down and sold under a differ-

ent label.” (A. Koestler, 1965, p. 66.)

I do not claim that Koestler’s bitter words apply to Fromm’s intentions, nor I want to judge Fromm for his latent ambivalence toward „existing socialism”. I think, however, that his analysis and critique of capitalism (both private and state capitalism) has become obsolete. In order to understand what happened and what is happening now in Eastern and Central Europe, the mechanical application of Fromm’s ideas would be in particular, inadequate. We have to go beyond the extrapolations and projections of the experiences of fascism and Cold War. „Existing socialism” as a political and social system belongs now - more or less - to the past. However, the social psychological structures created by it are still existing and even flourishing; they probably will survive for a long time in the future. These structures are reinforcing „character deformations” in Fromm’s sense: authoritarianism, acquisitive morality, marketing orientation, and the like. For social scientists living and working in these countries one of the most important tasks is to understand and to analyze these structures with all of their socio-economic conditions. It is also important to maintain and to reinforce a *critical* position. Fromm helps us to think and to act in the spirit of humanism, active solidarity and ecological consciousness.

But the dilemmas start only after this. What is the meaning of messianism in our days? Is it reasonable to be radically anti-capitalist in face of all experiences with a society where the very abolition of the market leads to extreme economic and also social crises? Can we still think in terms of the characterological dichotomy of authoritarian and democratic personality? For Fromm and his contemporaries, it was taken for granted that extreme political movements have been based on extreme people in the psychological sense. Indeed, totalitarianism can successfully exploit extreme needs, wishes, and behaviors, and thus create clear distinction between „good” and „evil”. The projection of the totalitarian experience would be illegitimate or even dangerous. Maybe, we can again believe in the strength of a representative democracy which is to effectively prevent the mobilization of authoritarianism on both extremes? These are questions to which the answers would be too



broad. But I think that all these questions lead, in the final analysis, to the question of *freedom*.

The collapse of the East and Central European communist dictatorship, the general crisis of the so-called „socialism” as practice and as ideology all over the world from Moscow to Havana can be added as a new chapter to Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*. It seems to be a very convincing argument that the peoples of Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and other countries have liberated themselves from the bondage of dictatorial bureaucracy, from the one-party rule, from the vast power of the state which controlled their life in political, ideological, economic, and even personal aspects. The question is now: what do they do, what can *we* do with this newly acquired freedom? The concept of *freedom from* and *freedom to* constitutes another major dichotomy in Fromm’s life work. But there is a fundamental philosophical problem behind it: can we define freedom „positively” (I. Berlin, 1958)? For there is a long tradition in European social philosophy for which freedom means only negative freedom, that is, the freedom from any interference to the life of individuals and communities. So far, any attempt to give a positive meaning to the concept of liberty has led to dictatorships. Fromm, I think, in his own way understood this difficulty. This understanding explains why he gave to his concept of „freedom to” a religious or transcendental dimension, without giving „prescriptions” to the use of liberty. But it is our task to work out a concept which goes beyond Fromm’s original formulation: a new concept which I would like to call *freedom to freedom from*.

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Zusammenfassung: Fromms Theorie und die Probleme des real existierenden Sozialismus

Nach Auffassung des Autors ist eine Kombination von drei Grundelementen oder wesentlichen Dimensionen für Fromms Denken von den frühesten Anfängen bis zu seinen spätesten Schriften maßgebend. Es handelt sich um die folgenden: ein Messianismus jüdischen Ursprungs; eine radikale Kritik des Kapitalismus, soweit er sowohl ein sozio-ökonomisches, als auch ein moralisches, psychologisches oder charakterologisches System darstellt; schließlich ein Anti-Autoritarismus, der sich in der politischen Einstellung sowohl auf gesellschaftlicher Ebene, als auch in der psychoanalytischen Theorie und Bewegung manifestiert. Im vorliegenden Beitrag wird die Beziehung jeder der drei Dimensionen zum „existierenden Sozialismus“ bzw. zu „Gesellschaften sowjetischen Typs“ untersucht. Es wird die Folgerung gezogen, dass Fromm zeitlebens ein Kritiker des „real existierenden“ Sozialismus war, obwohl er dem Sozialismus gegenüber die ambivalenten Gefühle seiner „linken“ Zeitgenossen innerhalb und außerhalb der Frankfurter Schule teilte. Abschließend werden aktuelle und überholte Implikationen der Frommschen Auffassung für das Verständnis der Vorgänge in Ost- und Zentraleuropa diskutiert.

Riassunto: La teoria di Fromm e i problemi del socialismo realmente esistente

L'autore sostiene che il pensiero di Fromm, dalle sue fasi iniziali a quelle finali, è caratterizzato da una combinazione di tre elementi fondamentali, o tre dimensioni essenziali: un messianesimo di origine ebraica; una critica radicale del capitalismo come sistema sia socioeconomico che morale, psicologico o caratterologico; e un antiautoritarismo che si manifesta nel suo atteggiamento verso la politica sia a livello della società che a quello della terapia e del movimento psicoanalitici. In questa relazione si esamina il rapporto tra ciascuna di queste dimensioni e il „socialismo reale“ ovvero le società di tipo sovietico. La conclusione è che Fromm è stato per tutta la vita un critico del „socialismo reale“, benché condividesse alcuni dei sentimenti ambivalenti dei suoi contemporanei di sinistra all'interno e all'esterno della Scuola di Francoforte. Infine, si esaminano le implicazioni attuali e quelle superate dell'insegnamento di Fromm per la comprensione delle trasformazioni nell'Europa orientale e centrale.

Sumario: La teoría de Fromm y las problemas del socialismo „real“.

El autor arguye que una combinación de tres elementos básicos o dimensiones esenciales es característica del pensamiento de Fromm desde sus primeros hasta sus últimos períodos. se trata de las siguientes: un mesianismo de origen judío, una crítica radical del capitalismo tanto como sistema socio-económico como sistema moral, psicológico o caracterológico; y un anti-autoritarismo manifestado en su actitud política tanto a nivel de sociedad como a nivel de la terapia y del movimiento psicoanalítico. En este trabajo es examinada cada una de estas dimensiones en relación al „socialismo existente“ o „sociedades de tipo soviético“. La conclusión es que Fromm fue durante toda su vida un crítico del „socialismo existente“ a pesar de haber compartido algunos de los sentimientos ambivalentes de sus contemporáneos izquierdistas al interior y fuera de la Escuela de Francfort. Finalmente son discutidas las implicaciones actuales y también las obsoletas del pensamiento de Fromm para la comprensión de las transformaciones en Europa del Este y Central.