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Fromm in America

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The function of reason is to promote the art of life.
Alfred North Whitehead

America embraced Erich Fromm like few other emigrates. But, ironically, the man who made so many tenets of critical theory part of the American political vocabulary was never really associated with that philosophical tendency in the public mind.¹ Most intellectuals knew him as a social psychologist and one of the founders, along with Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan², of the neo-Freudian „culturalist“ school.

¹ It is regrettable that the only full-length study of Fromm's work to appear in English is based on a deadening textual critique which abstracts his arguments from their social and philosophical context in order, usually, to trivialize them. It is noteworthy that the influence of neither critical theory nor the broader intellectual and political milieu of the Weimar Republic is made clear. Rather, in keeping with a peculiarly west coast form of American political theory, the author can arbitrarily refer to everyone from Marcus Aurelius to Vladimir Nabokov without once mentioning Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Bernfeld, Hermann Cohen, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Max Horkheimer, Siegfried Kracauer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Rabbi Nehemiah A. Nobel, Wilhelm Reich, Franz Rosenzweig, Ernst Simon, Isaac Steinberg or virtually anyone else who actually had a significant impact on the subject of his intellectual biography. John Schaar, *Escape from Authority: The Perspectives of Erich Fromm* (New York, 1961).

² On his friendship and conflicts within this circle, see Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: Selbstzeugnissen und*

But no mass public read the wealth of specialized papers he produced or the technical arguments underpinning his „analytic psychology.“ His fame rested on *Escape from Freedom* and what many intellectuals considered „how to“ tracts like *The Art of Loving*, „feel good“ books like *The Heart of Man*, or „dilettantish“ incursions into the field of politics and social theory like *May Man Prevail*. Fromm was ever the „popular writer.“ Few considered him an intellect like T.W. Adorno and he neither became a titan of academic affairs like Max Horkheimer nor the guru of a movement like Herbert Marcuse. But, in contrast to Adorno, his message was one of solidarity and hope; unlike Horkheimer he employed his organizational talents outside the university; and finally, in opposition to Marcuse, he was unsatisfied with „the great refusal“ or a utopian conception irrevocably separated from reality.

Fromm was nevertheless always somewhat patronizingly regarded as the „idealist,“ the „mystic,“ the „naif,“ and—above all—the humanist. But more than any other member of the Frankfurt School, even Marcuse, he touched a nerve in the progressive reading public beyond the university. And that was not, as most commentators maintain, because he „abandoned“ critical theory and a „radical“ perspective. In fact, certainly more than Horkheimer and

Bilddokumenten (Hamburg, 1983), pgs. 54ff and *passim*.



Adorno, Fromm consistently and coherently identified himself with the Left during the dark days of the cold war; he neither placed denigrated social theory in favor of aesthetics like the one nor used religion to justify political paralysis like the other. The truth is that not even Marcuse identified his aims with a practical political tradition or presented ideas for concrete change as forthrightly as Erich Fromm.

Popularity does not preclude political commitment any more than clarity of style precludes clarity of thought. Fromm's influence did not derive from his betrayal of radicalism or his „integration“ by the status quo. It most likely derived from a willingness to reassert the original tenets of the critical enterprise, reformulate them after his own fashion, and present his views in such a way that they might contribute to a broad-based progressive movement that was surfacing in the America of the 1950s and 60s. [042]

It was said of the great Charlie Chaplin that he never discarded a single piece of film; he used everything. Erich Fromm never forgot anything either. He did not simply move from one intellectual phase of his life to another. Born in Frankfurt in 1900, as his death in 1980, he always made use of what he had learned before. That was the case with the Talmudic tradition in which he grew to maturity, indeed Fromm helped establish the legendary *Freie jüdisches Lehrhaus*³, and was no less the case with critical theory into which he was introduced during the 1920s. His earliest works treated religious themes like *The Sabbath* (1927) and, with a Marxian twist, *The Dogma of Christ* (1930) while his dissertation, written for Alfred Weber at the University of Heidelberg, dealt with *The Jewish Law: Toward a Sociology of the Jewish Diaspora* (1922); in fact, the theological strains within his thought would later strike a popular chord. Nevertheless, in America, it was as a social psychologist fusing the thought of Marx and Freud that he first achieved success.

He emigrated early in 1933. Already friendly with a number of important intellectu-

als, having set up a psychoanalytic practice, he immediately became a guest professor at Columbia University and ultimately would teach at the University of Chicago, Bennington, Yale, and the New School for Social Research. *Escape from Freedom*, originally published in 1941, reached an enormous popular audience. It would most likely not have had such impact in an earlier period. During the depression, in the words of Edgar Friedenberg, the populace „did not take any form of psychoanalytic thought to have serious social implications, but tended to dismiss it as a rich man's toy.“⁴ The onset of World War II, however, forced the nation to confront the question of totalitarianism and recognize that Nazism was not merely the work of a clique and that it retained a mass base of millions willing to sacrifice themselves for its goals. *Escape from Freedom* inaugurated what would become a spate of studies on the „authoritarian personality“ and the „origins of totalitarianism“ even as it gave readers a handle with which to confront Hitler's „new man“ and the „SS state.“

There should, however, be no misunderstanding. Fromm's social psychology rested on his appropriation of critical theory.⁵ It is true that by 1939 he had already broken with his former comrades in the Institute for Social Research.⁶ Fromm was angered by what he perceived as a growing discourtesy as well as the refusal of Max Horkheimer to publish *Studies on Authority and the Family* on which they had worked together. Then, too, there was the growing influence of Theodor Adorno whom Fromm heartily disliked.⁷ And the fact is that the

³ *ibid.*, pgs. 28-45; also Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule: Geschichte, Theoretische Entwicklung, Politische Bedeutung* (München, 1988), pg. 67ff.

⁴ Edgar Z. Friedenberg, „Neo-Freudianism and Erich Fromm“ in *Commentary* (October, 1962), pg. 307.

⁵ Arguably, in fact, Fromm was among those on the „periphery“ of the Institute who actually developed the tools of social theory necessary to actualize the formulated intentions of members more closely associated with Horkheimer's „inner circle.“ Axel Honneth, „Kritische Theorie: Vom Zentrum zur Peripherie einer Denktradition“ in *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Vol. 41, No. 1 (March, 1989), pg. 2ff.

⁶ Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, pgs. 298ff.

⁷ „Die persönliche Beziehung Fromms zu Marcuse war anders als die zu Horkheimer und Adorno. Mit Adorno gab es nie eine freundschaftliche Beziehung. Horkheimer machte sicher in den dreissiger Jahren



Frankfurt School did change its view of Freud no less than its political perspective when Fromm left and Adorno became a full-fledged associate in 1938. But political differences, personal conflicts, and subsidiary concerns regarding the particular appropriation of this or that philosophical perspective have tended to distort an overall perception of critical theory. Too often the views of a given participant in the „inner circle“ like Adorno or Horkheimer is used as a standard with which to judge the allegiance of others to the enterprise. This necessarily narrows a sense of the original undertaking. Critical theory is neither a set of fixed claims nor iron-clad philosophical proscriptions. It is better seen as a project predicated on certain values and concerned with certain themes. [043]

Critical theory initially sought to develop an interdisciplinary perspective that would connect philosophy and empirical analysis; it was believed that social scientific inquiry would thus become imbued with a normative component and overcome the position of those who would separate „fact“ from „value.“ None of Fromm’s future work, in this regard, evidences a sharp break with the past. All of it builds on two of his earliest contributions to the *Journal for Social Research*. These essays, dating from 1929 and 1931, already emphasized that the psychological is neither divorced from the sociological nor its mechanical complement; they already raise questions about the links between the economic and the psychic realm, the manner in which the ego is organized, how the psychic apparatus affects the development of society, and the extent to which psychology can aid the political confrontation with inhuman conditions.⁸

einen starken Eindruck auf Fromm. Die vor allem von Adorno betriebene ‘Rephilosophierung’ der später ‘kritische Theorie’ genannten marxistischen Gesellschaftstheorie bekam Fromm über Horkheimer zu spüren. Fromm interpretierte diese Entwicklung bei Horkheimer später als Rückwendung zum Bürgertum und zur bürgerlichen Gesellschaft, die ihren konsequenten Ausdruck in Horkheimers Wiederentdeckung der etablierten Religion (‘die Sehnsucht nach dem Anderen’) und in der Annahme der Ehrenbürgerschaft der Stadt Frankfurt fand.“ Funk, *Erich Fromm*, pg. 98.

⁸ Erich Fromm, „Psychoanalysis and Sociology“ as well as „Politics and Psychoanalysis in Critical The-

Escape from Freedom (1941) employs this interdisciplinary perspective in order to analyze a specific historical occurrence: Nazism. Much to the chagrin of his former comrades in the Institute, most of whom were still virtually unknown, the book created a sensation with its depiction of the sado-masochistic character as the specific historical response to the loneliness and alienation caused by capitalism and the political institutions it engendered in Weimar Germany.⁹ Identifying neurosis as a social product, whose mitigation or intensification depends upon the transformation of living conditions¹⁰, it culled insights from work undertaken with Horkheimer during the thirties in which the family was seen as a primary agent of repressive socialization. Inaugurating what would become a virtual obsession with the „authoritarian personality“ among American intellectuals, this study provided a concrete example of the manner in which socioeconomic conditions are translated into a particular „social character.“

The influence of Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, whose emphasis on the role of interpersonal interaction in producing anxiety never resonated with other members of the Frankfurt School, was surely evident in Fromm’s elaboration of the concept. Still, it served as an

ory, in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York, 1989), pgs. 37-39, 213-218.

⁹ Too often, however, American critics have mistakenly believed that Fromm identified the formation of the authoritarian personality with the degree to which capitalist individualism flourished and then criticized him for ignoring the fact that fascism was not successful in the United States or Great Britain. The political moment, with which Fromm is also clearly concerned, thus drops out in favor of a prefabricated economic idea of Marxism with which Fromm never identified himself. For an instance of such misguided criticism, see Bruce Mazlish, „American Narcissism“ in *The Psychohistory Review* Vol. 10, No. 3/4 (Spring/Summer, 1982) pg. 192-3.

¹⁰ „Every neurosis is an example of dynamic adaptation; it is essentially an adaptation to such external conditions as are in themselves irrational and, generally speaking, unfavorable to the growth of the child.“ Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York, 1965 ed.), pg. 30;



important contribution to critical theory. That philosophical tendency, after all, had emerged in response to the failure of the proletarian uprisings following the First World War and the inability of that class to make good on the „objective conditions“ for revolutionary transformation provided by the economic collapse of 1929. The concern with various aspects of what had previously been considered the „superstructure“ by the Institute must be understood in this light. That is also the case with the increasing emphasis placed on the debilitating role of „the culture industry“ by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse.

Interestingly enough, however, Fromm never took this construct very seriously. Even in *Escape from Freedom* the Nazi propaganda apparatus receives scant attention and that is also the case in the political analysis that informs *The Revolution of Hope*.¹¹ Part of the reason most likely lies in the fact that „social character“ served Fromm as a substitute category. And a good one at that. It is, of course, quite legitimate to claim that „culture“ is a business and as such inherently driven by thoughts of profit maximization. But it is quite another thing to suggest that its works are phenomenologically predicated on appealing [044] to the lowest common denominator and that all revolutionary impulses are necessarily absorbed or invalidated once they become popular. Indeed, according to this necessarily mechanistic and elitist notion, contradictions are squashed from above as the character of mass consciousness becomes a simple product of manipulation and „false“ by definition.

Perhaps it is true that Fromm's notion of the social character never methodologically confronts the differentiated ways in which institutions effect particular individuals.¹² But then,

while no other critical theorist has really dealt with this matter either, Fromm's thought is not tainted by an elitist theory of aesthetics or an emphasis on the false consciousness of a contemptible public. And this is a matter of political as well as philosophical importance. If the culture industry indeed absorbs all radical impulses then piecemeal reform becomes invalidated a priori. By the same token, if the culture industry is the mechanism which insures conformity, individuality must emerge in opposition to it rather than in terms of a solidarity that can respond to the contradictions of the existing order. An elitist rejection of the status quo in the name of an abstract aesthetic alternative is the logical consequence of this position.

Fromm, of course, would never shirk from criticizing the debilitating effects of mass culture and the deplorable level of politics in the United States, but his rejection of elitism enabled him to show a respect for the egalitarian values of American public life and participate in a way that his former comrades could not. Nor does this imply a rejection of critical theory. The concept of „social character“ actually reaffirms the original commitment of the enterprise, in keeping with how it developed from Korsch and Lukács, to situate all phenomena within the context of the totality. Thus, unlike those who would reify a particular moment like the culture industry, Fromm defines his category in the following way:

„The concept of *social character*, refers to the matrix of the character structure common to a group. It assumes that the fundamental factor in the formation of the „social character is the *practice of life as it is constituted by the mode of production and the resulting social stratification*. The „social character“ is that particular structure of psychic energy which is molded by any given society so as to be useful for the functioning of that particular society. The average person must want to do what he *has* to do in order to function in a way that permits so-

¹¹ Moving public opinion to effect institutional decision-making was, whatever the „obstacle“ posed by the mass media, always considered a „real possibility.“ Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York, 1968), pg. 143.

¹² Note, in the way of contrast, the „progressive-regressive“ method that would inform both the over-riding social theory and later analysis of Flaubert elaborated by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a*

Method trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1968), pg. 85ff.



ciety to use his energies for its purposes.¹³

This concept of „social character“ lies at the root of Fromm’s revision of Freud. But too many misconceptions surround their intellectual relationship. It was not that Fromm denied the validity of categories like the Oedipus complex, the unconscious, or the existence of a certain instinctual energy. His claim is rather that each society retains a certain libidinal structure which has an impact on the lives of its inhabitants. He is also willing to speak of human nature—though one that is neither fixed nor infinitely malleable. Were it static, change would prove impossible a priori; were human beings totally malleable, the need to resist oppression would be sociologically extinguished.¹⁴ Fromm’s approach maintains that a „dynamic adaptation“ of human nature to the contradictions of a given social complex will occur;¹⁵ the result can prove beneficial under stable circumstances and explosive when the economic infrastructure is in a state of [045] rapid change. Under any circumstances, while modifying the somewhat functional or mechanical view of the relation between the psychological and the sociological apparent in his earliest essays, Freud’s emphasis on a fixed, libidinally centered, ahistorical theory of the instincts surrenders to a historically unique „social character.“

Of crucial importance, however, is the generally overlooked fact that Fromm’s revision of instinct theory made possible an interpretation which renders Freud, Marx, and even Nietzsche for that matter, epistemologically compatible. This had been one of the central concerns of the Frankfurt School almost from the beginning. But

the ahistorical character of Freud’s instinct theory and Nietzsche’s vitalistic subjectivism created a logical stumbling block for those seeking to integrate their thinking with that of historical materialism. No accident then that the attempts by Wilhelm Reich should have floundered on the reef of vitalism even as freeing the subject for Adorno and Horkheimer would ultimately involve breaking not only with history, but society as well.

According to Fromm, society remains at the center. Rejecting Freud’s ahistorical characterization of individuals through distinct structural categories like the id, ego, and superego, he chose to view the individual from the perspective of an integrated being grounded within society.¹⁶ And so, if the existence of psychic energy is recognized, it is no longer identified as biological or with sexual libido; this energy, which Nietzsche also emphasized, becomes manifest in the living of life as a social being. A logical connection emerges with the anthropological perspective of the young Marx wherein „the eye becomes the human eye, the ear the human ear.“¹⁷ It is the complex of existing institutions which, according to Fromm, subsequently either inhibits or facilitates the expression of subjective potentialities which Nietzsche understood in the reified form of a „will to power.“ The existential need to overcome loneliness and find meaning can thus occur in a „productive“ or „destructive“ fashion.¹⁸

Opposing the metapsychology of Freud,

¹³ Erich Fromm, „The Application of Humanist Psychoanalysis to Marx’s Theory“ in *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium* (New York, 1966), pg. 231.

¹⁴ Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry Into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York, 1947), pg. 21ff.

¹⁵ Thus he „emphatically disagrees with (Freud’s) interpretation of history as the result of psychological forces that in themselves are not socially conditioned. It disagrees as emphatically with those theories which neglect the role of the human factor as one of the dynamic elements in the social process.“ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pg. 28-9.

¹⁶ Note the excellent discussion by R.B. O’Neill, „Character, Society, and the Politics of Hope: A Comparative Look at the Theories of Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse“ in *The Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring/Summer, 1975), pgs. 39ff.

¹⁷ Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York, 1961), pg. 133.

¹⁸ At stake is „the dialectic character of the process of growing freedom. Our aim will be to show that the structure of modern society affects man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more independent, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid. The understanding of the whole problem of freedom depends on the very ability to see both sides of the process and not to lose track of one side while following the other.“ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pg. 124.



especially with respect to the power accorded the ahistorical „death instinct,“ seeking to employ categories like the Oedipus complex to explain forms of social action¹⁹, Fromm’s approach stands in accord with the critique of metaphysics developed by Korsch, Lukács, and in the writings of Horkheimer prior to World War II. Repression, from such a perspective, retains an intrinsically historical dimension and can take a manifold set of social forms. In fact, unless the death instinct and repression are seen historically, the existence of the one can always be used to justify the maintenance of the other. The „ruthless critique of everything existing“ demanded by the young Marx thus becomes necessary in order to confront authority and actualize the full potentiality of each individual. Thus, it only makes sense why Fromm could maintain that „understanding the unconscious of the individual, presupposes and necessitates the critical analysis of his society.“²⁰

His attempt to establish a unified social psychology placed him at the center of postwar debate in his discipline and opposed to the desire of his former comrades at the Institute to preserve an arena of autonomous psychological subjectivity from society.²¹ Marcuse, for example, argued that individuality must be understood „either“ in terms of a repressive social order „or“ in transcendent utopian terms. According to Fromm, however, such a standpoint [046] is reified from the start; freedom for the subject, from a dialectical perspective, cannot appear as some state of pure otherness beyond any positive determinations or as predicated on the existence *ex novo* of a new biological infrastructure for humanity.²² Indeed, since subjective

freedom is a social phenomenon, maintaining sanity depends upon the ability of the individual to fill a social role and affirm his fullest potential.²³

Fromm’s belief in the need for some objective referent in the discussion of subjectivity is the principal reason why his „revisionism“ was condemned and seen by his former associates as a betrayal of the radical impulse within Freud’s thought.²⁴ Adorno, in particular, believed that the libido theory provided a substratum for subjective experience and a way of attesting to the „non-identical“ character of the individual in relation to society. Only in a society where all contradictions are abolished is a methodological integration of subject and object legitimate.²⁵ But this would necessarily sever any connection between theory and empirical research as well as the freedom of the individual and the determinate conditions in which he lives.²⁶ Fromm thus will have little use for a „negative dialectic“ which views the freedom of the subject from „outside“ the existing order, an avant-gardist notion of „the great refusal“ (Marcuse), or some quasi-religious commitment to what Horkheimer termed „the totally other.“

According to Fromm, in keeping with Aristotle, only when freedom is identified with the potentialities of the subject within society can it inform political struggles. The attack on Marcuse’s utopian interpretation of Freud’s metapsychology, in this vein, surely distanced him from the radical minority. But his critique certainly does not subvert the need for an alternative; „social character“ was, after all, intended to offer criteria to distinguish between the social interactions of the existent and those of an emancipated order. Nor is it legitimate to claim that Fromm engaged in some capitulation to the forces of exploitation and conformism. In fact, against various exponents of ego psychology,

¹⁹ (19) Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, (New York, 1955), pg. 40ff.

²⁰ Erich Fromm, *Sigmund Freud’s Mission* (New York, 1959), pg. 109-111.

²¹ Note the intelligent discussion by Honneth, „Kritische Theorie,“ pg. 22; also, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston, 1973), pgs. 229ff.

²² Erich Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx, and Social Psychology* (New York, 1970), pgs. 1-30; also, on the debate between these two thinkers, see Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, pgs. 106ff.

²³ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pg. 159.

²⁴ Note the discussion by Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Boston, 1975), pgs. 13-15, 33ff.

²⁵ Note the discussion by Martin Jay, „The Frankfurt School in Exile“ in *Perspectives in American History* Vol. VI (1972), pg. 351.

²⁶ Fromm, „The Application of Humanist Psychoanalysis to Marx’s Theory,“ pg. 233.



Fromm never stressed adaptation by a „rational“ ego to the repressive values of the status quo and, in the name of the „social defect,“ he explicitly opposed the idea that a „consensual validation“ of norms by the members of society attests to their truth or emancipatory value.²⁷ The rejection of cultural and political conformism was precisely what made possible his appropriation by so broad an audience on the left. „Conscience,“ he would write, „by its very nature is nonconforming; ...to the degree to which a person conforms he cannot hear the voice of his conscience, much less act upon it.“²⁸ By the same token, no less than Freud, he retained a willingness to examine collective neurosis and social pathologies.²⁹ Indeed, Fromm’s belief that a profound alienation existed beneath the affluence of America in the 1950s and 60s made for his popularity and animated his controversial contention that „destructiveness is the outcome of the un-lived life.“³⁰

* * *

Erich Fromm’s work did not achieve such enduring popularity among progressives simply because it provided a psychological analysis of a totalitarian [047] regime. *Escape from Freedom* was not just a book about what the United States was fighting against, in the sense of a freedom from authoritarianism, but also raised the existential question of the purposes freedom should serve. The defeat of the fascist enemy left a world dominated by two superpowers and what would soon become a type of spiritual malaise. The onset of the nuclear arms race poised humanity at the edge of the abyss and seemed to render the life of the individual meaningless. The experience of Hitler coupled with the revelations about Stalin’s concentration camp universe, and his policies in Eastern Europe, simultaneously produced a politics of cold-war partisanship and a left culture in which Kafka, the existentialists, and the „beats“ claimed center stage. The growing British movement to abolish nuclear weapons would

²⁷ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 32-4.

²⁸ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, pg. 173.

²⁹ *ibid.*, pg. 12ff, 40ff, 237ff and passim.

³⁰ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pg. 207.

admittedly become an important influence on the new social movements of the sixties and many were thrilled by the great struggles for national self-determination in the Third World. Beyond the burgeoning civil rights movement in the United States and the anti-communist hysteria inspired by Senator Joseph McCarthy, however, a new intellectual absorption with the self coupled with an uncritical belief in the promise of science and technology gripped the United States.

Fromm’s popularity in this period, no less than the one that followed, is directly attributable to the manner in which he confronted these concerns. While Horkheimer began his retreat from any kind of radical political involvement, warning against political activism or turning philosophy into „propaganda,“³¹ Fromm was playing an important role on the political left. A co-founder in 1957 of the *National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy*, he helped develop a critique of both West and East that would further the commitment to a „socialist humanism;“ indeed, his international symposium on that topic brought together the thinking of more than thirty of the world’s leading socialist scholars in a quite influential volume that appeared in 1965. Ironically, Fromm would become precisely the type of person which his one-time critic Russell Jacoby would later long to see: a „public intellectual.“

The practical aspect of this engagement involved participation in various progressive organizations like Amnesty International, the Socialist Party of America, and a number of small journals on the left. But it was not as if Fromm suddenly became a „party man.“ His association for example with the Socialist Party, which he joined in 1960, was tumultuous. His political activity was as an intellectual and when he offered his well known platform for the movement it was harshly criticized. American social democracy, far more than on the continent, was animated by an uncritical economism. And so, when „Let Man Prevail: A Socialist Manifesto and Program,“ was published during 1960 in *Socialist Call*, its insistence that the movement „aim

³¹ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York, 1947), pg. 184.



at a goal which transcends the given reality“ was perceived as a slap at the traditional wisdom.

Whether it *actually* was or not is an open question. His comrades like Irving Howe, Lewis Coster, H. Stuart Hughes, Sidney Lens, Norman Mailer, and A. J. Muste on the editorial board of *Dissent*, the leading social democratic journal in the United States, had in 1953 basically reached the conclusion that the socialist movement could not effectively intervene in American political life and that a new educational project to instill critical ideas was on the agenda.³² It was not so much that they abandoned trade union economism as that they saw the need [048] to provide a new intellectual justification for it in a particularly reactionary climate. Staunchly anti-communist, essentially conservative on cultural matters and always wary of spontaneous activism from below, *Dissent* was not particularly enamoured of Fromm's existential psychological concerns any more than his critique of technology. He was subsequently always on the outside; this was equally the case, though for different reasons, with a somewhat more radical journal, *New Politics*, founded by Julius and Phyllis Jacobsen. Nevertheless, in countless articles and a number of important books, Fromm presented a set of forward-looking positions with a clarity and rationality that is enviable. Indeed, even while no expert in political science or foreign policy, he stood in the forefront of those committed to nuclear disarmament and willing to distinguish between ideology and reality in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.

Under conditions where an entire generation has grown up with the idea of the Soviet Union as what President Reagan called an „evil empire,“ and a legitimate assault on Stalinism has led to a total recasting of the cold war period in favor of the West, it is important to consider what Erich Fromm had to say. That is particularly the case with respect to his contention, underpinning his entire position, that the Soviet Union was neither „revolutionary“ nor „expansionist,“ but rather cautious in terms of its for-

eign policy and concerned with maintaining the status quo.³³ Without in any way excusing the repressive policies pursued by that nation,³⁴ particularly when it came to the lack of independent trade unions,³⁵ this implied the need to distinguish between ideology and reality when dealing with the Soviet Union. And it is in this way that the attack on the legacy of Joseph McCarthy becomes most pronounced. For according to Fromm, the ability to make such a distinction is impeded by „paranoid thinking,“ „projection,“ and „fanaticism.“³⁶ Indeed, these characteristics did not merely define a certain perspective on foreign matters in the United States, but also the type of domestic anti-communism undertaken by the far right.

By now, such terms have entered the mainstream political discourse on international relations. Still, Fromm, gave them a relatively precise meaning which is often forgotten. Paranoid thinking, in his view is not simply a form of irrational fear; it is the willingness to substitute an abstractly deduced logical *possibility* for the *probability* that a particular form of action will occur. Developing a realistic and sensible foreign policy is difficult when that occurs. And the difficulty is only increased when the intentions of one party are unconsciously identified with those of its enemy. This kind of projection, no

³² Leland M. Griffin, „The Rhetorical Structure of the New Left Movement“ in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. L, No. 2 (April, 1964), pg. 114.

³³ Erich Fromm, *May Man Prevail? An Inquiry into the Facts and Fictions of Foreign Policy* (New York, 1961), pg. 67ff; also note the articles collected in *Ethik und Politik: Antworten auf aktuelle politische Fragen* hrsg. Rainer Funk (Weinheim, 1990) pgs. 53-86. On the character of Soviet foreign policy, see Heinz Pachter, *Weltmacht Russland: Aussenpolitische Strategie in Drei Jahrhunderten* (Oldenburg, 1968). For my own views on the transformation of the Soviet Union from a „revolutionary“ state to a partisan of the status quo, see *Socialism Unbound* (New York, 1990), pgs. 91ff.

³⁴ His critique of Soviet repression with respect to its eradication of an independent ethical realm no less than its puritanism and authoritarian attempts to insure conformism and production, interestingly enough, rely heavily, on the important study by his principal antagonist in the debate over Freud: Herbert Marcuse *Soviet Marxism* (New York, 1958).

³⁵ Fromm, *May Man Prevail?*, pg. 57.

³⁶ *ibid.*, pg. 17ff.



less than the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time, is justified by fanaticism in the form of some particular idolatry. And Fromm knew that such prejudices can taint technocratic thinking which is presumably value-free. It is subsequently no accident that he should have criticized the notion of „tactical nuclear war“ developed by Dr. Henry Kissinger, which would thrust the future Secretary of State into the limelight and turn him into an object of satire in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, as well as the truly insane attempts by Dr. Hermann Kahn to calculate the effects of thermonuclear war in terms of cost/benefit analysis.

As always, however, Fromm's critique was informed by the vision of a positive alternative directed to a broad progressive public. He believed that [049] foreign policy is a strategic rather than a tactical enterprise which, holding in abeyance whether it should be or not, is highly debatable.³⁷ Henry Pachter, a socialist political theorist and friend of Fromm's, was probably more on target in suggesting that even the aims of foreign policy are inherently specific to a particular moment in time. And that moment passes. Judging Fromm's views thus becomes difficult under circumstances when the assumptions underpinning the cold war are no longer valid.

Even when viewing the past from the perspective of the present, however, he was clearly correct in opposing any monolithic view of communism and maintaining that the split between the USSR and China was real.³⁸ Recognizing that splits did exist in the communist world prevented Fromm from falling for the „domino theory“ and, without romanticizing Mao or national liberation movements like those in Vietnam, made it possible for him to take seriously the groundswell of support for them no less than the way in which backing right-wing dictatorships throughout the Third World undermined the credibility of American foreign policy. Fromm, anticipating thinkers like Paul Kennedy, suggested that a „multi-polar“ world loomed on the horizon. Still, he knew that a certain threat from the USSR existed. And so, he did not sim-

ply embrace the calls by a minority for total unilateral disarmament by the West; his commitment to arms control, however, anticipated the „nuclear freeze“ movement of the early eighties while his criticism regarding the economic stake of the given system in a high defense budget obviously retains a certain relevance in the present period.

Fromm probably did not see how the cynical exaggeration of the expansionist threat posed by the USSR served to create an arms race that would economically weaken the USSR; nor did he extend his critique of the United States to the incredibly foolish priorities created by the Soviet establishment. Arguably, in this respect, he was a man of his times. But no less so than those committed to the „totalitarianism“ thesis who maintained that no change had occurred from the time of Stalin, that the possibility of internal reform was non-existent, and that the Soviet Union would forever ruthlessly hang on to its empire. Finally, Fromm's belief in the need for a *modus vivendi* between east and West appears justified insofar as internal socio-economic pressures actually created the conditions for reform in the Soviet Union while pressure from below ultimately produced the great revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe.³⁹

Fromm's general stance on foreign policy, no less than his interventions on specific issues like Cuba and Vietnam,⁴⁰ fit nicely with what would become the basic worldview of the New Left. But more is at stake here than his support of the presidential candidacy of Sen. Eugene McCarthy or the apocryphal story that *The Sane Society* was one of the four or five books that inspired Tom Hayden in working on the founding document of Students for a Democratic Society: The Port Huron Statement. Fromm was able to emphasize certain fundamental strands which, whatever the crucial differences, tied the political theory of the Old to the New Left.

Interestingly enough, he accomplished this by drawing on the origins of critical theory. And

³⁷ Fromm, *Ethik und Politik*, pgs. 135ff.

³⁸ Fromm, *May Man Prevail?*, pg. 154ff.

³⁹ Note the debate over Fromm's claim that non-intervention was a necessary cold-war policy even if it meant maintaining the status quo in *New Politics* Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1962) and Vol. 1, No. 4 (Fall, 1962).

⁴⁰ Fromm, *Ethik und Politik*, pgs.94ff; 132ff; 204ff.



here perhaps it is important to mention that, prior to the publication of *One-Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse in 1964, most [050] intellectuals were totally unaware of the Frankfurt School.⁴¹ The notion that „critical theory“ was somehow of importance to the formation of the New Left is actually a myth.⁴² *History and Class Consciousness* by Georg Lukács only appeared in 1971, Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* was first published in 1970, and a severely edited version of Benjamin's *Illuminations* only in 1969; Horkheimer's collection entitled *Critical Theory* along with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* were published in 1972, *Negative Dialectics* in 1973, while Ernst Bloch *Principle of Hope* appeared in 1986. None of these works became known when the movement was on the rise, or even when the future of Martin Luther King's „Poor People's Movement“ was actually on the agenda, but rather only when the original flame began to flicker.

Long before 1968, however, Fromm was already a figure. *Escape from Freedom*, *The Sane Society*, and *The Art of Loving* were acknowledged bestsellers when *The Revolution of Hope* appeared. All these works were animated by the concept of alienation and a humanism which, whatever its roots in pre-capitalist thought, was fundamentally inspired by the writings of the young Marx. In fact, it is probably fair to say that Erich Fromm's *Marx's Concept of Man* introduced the young Marx to America and provided the dominant interpretation of this thinker for the students of the New Left.

Marx had been a casualty of the cold war. Identified in America with vulgar materialism and economic determinism, the laws of *Das Kapital* and the dogma of Lenin, Fromm revived

him with an enormously popular presentation of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. He offered a critique of Marx very different from the claims of the mainstream that his thought intrinsically led to totalitarianism. The problems for Fromm were that Marx did not fully acknowledge the moral factor in social relations, that he underestimated the resilience of capitalism, and that he considered the socialization of the means of production a sufficient condition for the transformation of the capitalist into the socialist society.⁴³ But, ultimately, Fromm gave the humanitarian, idealist, and romantic proponents of the New Left a Marx they could love. His interpretation emphasized Marx's contribution to establishing a philosophical anthropology and a „critique of political economy,“ which presupposed that people are not driven merely by pursuit of narrowly „rational“ or material interests.⁴⁴ Indeed, from this perspective, it is precisely the dependence on such interests which the socialist project must confront insofar as it distorts and alienates all social interactions.⁴⁵

Was it the real Marx that came to life? That is a false question. Revolution and economic contradictions, class struggle and the unaccountability of political institutions, vanished from Fromm's analysis.⁴⁶ But no less than in the time of the First International, or the Second or the Third, Marx was interpreted to fit the needs of the time. Fromm's Marx was a thinker whose roots lay in the liberal tradition and whose promises seemed betrayed by the USSR. This Marx gave primacy to the creative fulfillment of individual potential and the creation of a „free

⁴¹ Even in Europe, „Erst mit der Studentenbewegung, die sich in einem Prozess der Orientierungssuche auf die Schriften des „Instituts für Sozialforschung“ zurückbesann, ist sie als ein einheitliches Theorieprojekt in das öffentliche Bewusstsein getreten.“ Honneth, „Kritische Theorie,“ pg. 1.

⁴² It did, however, have a marked influence on the intellectuals who comprise what has been called „the generation of '68.“ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984), pg. 19.

⁴³ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, pgs. 263ff.

⁴⁴ „Marx's concern was man, and his aim was man's liberation from the predominance of material interests, from the prison his own arrangements and deeds had built around him.“ Fromm, „The Application of Humanist Psychoanalysis to Marx's Theory,“ pg. 228-9.

⁴⁵ „Man's drives, inasmuch as they are transutilitarian, are an expression of a fundamental and specifically human need: the need to be related to man and nature and to confirm himself in this relatedness.“ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 69.

⁴⁶ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Breakdown III* trans. P.S. Falla (Oxford, 1978), pg. 386ff.



association of producers“ predicated on social equality and participatory democracy. Indeed, Fromm’s Marx provided a critical perspective with which to confront the „military-industrial“ complex and the affluence bought through a deadening standardization of production and consumption, work and leisure.⁴⁷ [051]

Tradition, organization, style, and some basic values separated the New from the Old Left. Unique about Fromm was that he bridged the gap. Along with most partisans of the New Left, he no longer believed that the working class constituted a revolutionary subject. He also assumed that the business cycle had run its course and that American economic supremacy would remain as it had been since the close of the Second World War. Enough social democrats, however, tacitly held similar views. Admittedly many progressives from the Old Left were skeptical about the New Left’s critique of consumerism.⁴⁸ Then too, they saw that he had no use for the type of mysticism and irrationalism propagated by elements within the New Left or the burgeoning commitment to cultural relativism;⁴⁹

⁴⁷ „The majority of the population in America is well fed, well housed, and well amused, and the sector of ‘underdeveloped’ Americans who still live under substandard conditions will probably join the majority in the foreseeable future. We continue to profess individualism, freedom, and faith in God, but our professions are wearing thin when compared with the reality of the organization man’s obsessional conformity guided by the principle of hedonistic materialism.“ Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 27.

⁴⁸ In fairness, however, it is important to note that Fromm did not believe „production as such should be restricted; but that once the optimal needs of individual consumption are fulfilled, it should be channeled into more production of the means for social consumption such as schools, libraries, theaters, parks, hospitals, etc.“ Fromm, „The Application of Humanist Psychoanalysis to Marx’s Theory,“ pg. 238.

⁴⁹ „The growing doubt of human autonomy and reason has created a state of moral confusion where man is left without the guidance of either revelation or reason. The result is the acceptance of a relativistic position which proposes that value judgments and ethical norms are exclusively matters of taste or arbitrary preference and that no objectively valid statement can be made in this realm.

Fromm’s commitment to the Enlightenment never wavered.⁵⁰ Indeed, he was outspoken in his conviction that democratic regimes like those in the United States demand basic support even should they not live up to their promises.⁵¹

Nor did Fromm ever abandon his commitment to basic socialist demands. He was completely committed to the need for vigorous independent trade unions and programs which would provide national health insurance and a guaranteed income; above all, he maintained a critique of capitalism as a system of suprapersonal market forces wherein individuals must treat others as potential competitors and so become estranged from themselves and their own possibilities.⁵² Where he differed from other social democrats like Daniel Bell, a thinker equally concerned with the effects of inequality and even alienation, was in his skepticism about the priority accorded a technocratic resolution of grievances.⁵³ This did not make Fromm a lud-

But since man cannot live without values and norms, this relativism makes him an easy prey for irrational value systems... Irrationalism, whether veiled in psychological, philosophical, racial, or political terms, is not progress but reaction. The failure of eighteenth – and nineteenth – century rationalism was not due to its belief in reason but to the narrowness of its concepts. Not less but more reason and an unabating search for the truth can correct errors of a one-sided rationalism – not a pseudo-religious obscurantism.“ Fromm, *Man for Himself*, pg. 4-5, ix.

⁵⁰ „The contemporary human crisis has led to a retreat from the hopes and ideas of the Enlightenment under the auspices of which our political and economic progress had begun... The ideas of the Enlightenment taught man that he could trust his own reason as a guide to establishing valid ethical norms and that he could rely on himself, needing neither revelation nor the authority of the church in order to know good and evil.“ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 143.

⁵² Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pg. 80.

⁵³ „Planning itself is one of the most progressive steps the human race has taken. But it can be a curse if it is ‘blind’ planning, in which man abdicates his own decision, value judgment, and responsibility. If it is alive, responsive, ‘open,’ planning, in which the human ends are in full awareness and guiding the planning process, it will be a blessing.“ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 55.



dite; he recognized the need for large scale enterprise in certain institutions and businesses as well as the need for organizational planning. Nevertheless, in keeping with the New Left, he feared that a mechanized society with a centralized bureaucratic apparatus might turn its members into automatons despite the institutional foundation for a multiplicity of interest groups and formal democratic guarantees.⁵⁴

Lacking in the vision of the Old Left was a perception of how the technocratic consumer society debilitated the internal lives of individuals and a program that stood for something beyond piecemeal reform from above. Where he wondered was the „whole human being“ of whom Marx and host of visionaries before him had spoken? Where was the concern with a new emancipated relation between man and nature? Socialism, for Fromm, was not reducible to an economic enterprise. It was rather a quintessentially moral project capable of providing a system of orientation and devotion so that every person might deal with what the meaning and aim of his life might prove to be.⁵⁵ Indeed, according to him, the validity of socialist thought for the modern age would depend upon its ability to answer the question: what kind of society is fit for unmutated human beings?

* * *

An answer to that question could only emerge through an attack on „alienation.“ No concept gripped the white student radicals of the 1960s like that one. [052] The score of academic books and articles dealing with the concept pale before the degree to which it became manifest in popular movies like *The Graduate*, which turned Dustin Hoffman into a star, or the music industry and the first great hit by the Rolling Stones: *Satisfaction*. Of course, in the process, alienation tended to become a pose and the current skepticism about such unpragmatic concerns has a certain validity. By the same token, however, the search for personal meaning and the creation of an emancipated social order were an intrinsic part of the movement; Fromm, in fact,

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pg. 32-35.

⁵⁵ Erich Fromm, *To Have Or To Be?* (1976), 155-160.

was surely correct in claiming that such concerns play a role in every genuine movement.

Of course, in a way, Fromm had already tackled the problem in *Escape from Freedom*. There, in keeping with Max Weber and the Frankfurt School, he noted how technological society had „disenchanted the world“ and eradicated both religious faith and the humanistic values bound up with it. Freed from feudal bounds, the individual now stood isolated on the market without roots in the world. Fromm's interpretation of Marx, however, resulted in a broadening and deepening of the concept. Alienation was now no longer confined to the objective effects of the division of labor or any particular class.⁵⁶ Fromm made the concept live by analyzing how it effected personal life. The issue for him was not merely the mechanized society over which humanity has lost control, though that was important enough, but the internal passivity and mental dullness that it fostered. His works spoke to the young people sick of the men in grey flannel suits and fearful that a mechanized society had put them „out of touch“ with their own feelings and those of others as well. Public administration, which simply reduced social concerns to particular issues, thus could not possibly provide an adequate response. A new emphasis on civic participation and social interaction alone seemed capable of confronting the crisis. And, that is precisely what Fromm provided in his notion of „communitarian socialism.“⁵⁷

His vision of a decentralized and egalitarian order anticipated and then converged with the type of Jeffersonian populism associated with the New Left.⁵⁸ It gave Fromm something in common with Paul Goodman, the great anarchist educator who was nevertheless also a long-

⁵⁶ „The managerial elite are also different from those of old in another respect: they are just as much appendages of the machine as those whom they command. They are just as alienated or perhaps more so, just as anxious, or perhaps more so, as the worker in one of their factories. They are bored, like everyone else, and use the same antidotes against boredom.“ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 32.

⁵⁷ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, pg. 183ff.

⁵⁸ Fromm, *The Philosophy of Hope*, pgs. 107-113.



standing member of the Dissent editorial board until his tragic death, as surely as with the thinking of Martin Buber to whom he is so often compared.⁵⁹ Critical of hierarchy, contemptuous of the ideology behind an all-pervasive consumerism, Fromm sought a new spirit to actuate human relations. He was concerned neither with the introduction *ex nihilo* of a „new man,“ in the manner of Herbert Marcuse or Frantz Fanon, nor with finding some way in which to „escape from authority.“

Just as he distinguished authoritarian ethics from humanistic ethics, insofar as the former assumes the inability of the mass to know what is good or bad and so answers the question in terms of what benefits authority itself,⁶⁰ so does he differentiate „rational“ from „irrational“ authority. Such a distinction is deeply lacking in the main proponents of „critical theory.“ Of course, Fromm’s view on rational authority lacked an adequate analysis of the relation between law and ethics. Nor did his theory have an institutional referent or a coherent view of the constraints on freedom produced by the existing logic of accumulation.⁶¹ But this only makes sense given that the most important influence for his social [053] theory derived from the tradition of anarcho-socialism exemplified by figures like Buber, Gustav Landauer, and Augustin Souchy.

None of these anarchists was „revolutionary“ in the sense that they believed in imposing their will through violence and the centralization of authority like Lenin or by insisting on an explosive moment of transformation like Bakunin; indeed, the point was rather to extend socialism „from the center to the periphery“ pre-

cisely because „the freedom of all can only be achieved when realized in the self-consciousness of each.“⁶² How that would occur always remained open to question. These communitarians were thus utopian insofar as they stressed the responsibility and goodness of individuals without really discussing how contemporary conditions and values effected the populace, the transformation of society without engaging in the existing political arena, the creation of a new order without reference to the institutions by which its emancipatory character could be maintained, and the introduction of new values without reference to any mass movement.

But indebted as Fromm was to the anarcho-socialists, he shifted the focus. Arguably, he was just as abstract. Unwilling to accept the notion of a radical rupture between present and future,⁶³ ready to question whether the mere existence of a subjective need is a sufficiently valid reason for its fulfillment, his ill-fated call to project the „Voice of the American Conscience“ through public councils was an attempt to build consciousness in the present without constructing an over-arching organization.⁶⁴ His formulation was assuredly naive. But, for all the sarcasm it spawned, the idea nonetheless fit nicely with a burgeoning populist set of attitudes in America. It was an attempt at reform, but not from above. His suggestion was not viewed as elitist. He was trusted. Recognized as a spokesperson for the importance of community, and the need for every individual to assert himself through it, everyone knew that the learning process Fromm had in mind was directed to the heart as well as the mind. He liked to speak of „being“ rather than „having;“ a person, according to Fromm, was more than what he accumulated just as education was more than the minimum knowledge necessary to function properly at work.⁶⁵ Then too, in keeping with the original thrust of

⁵⁹ Note in particular Buber’s *Paths in Utopia* trans. R.F.C. Hull (Boston, 1958).

⁶⁰ Fromm, *Man for Himself*, pgs. 9-10.

⁶¹ Schaar is correct in noting that Fromm’s use of alienation lacks the „precision“ of Marx’s original formulation. Unfortunately, however, he doesn’t carry through this insight and focuses his criticism on an exaggerated rendering of Fromm’s *lebensphilosophie* rather than the problems caused by the lack of emphasis placed on class, institutions, and production which have become ever more important in the present era. Schaar, *Escape from Authority*, pgs. 193ff.

⁶² August, Souchy, ‘Vorsicht: Anarchist!’ *Ein Leben für die Freiheit: Politische Erinnerungen* (Darmstadt, 1977), pg. 11.

⁶³ „For if one is not concerned with steps between the present and the future, one does not deal with politics, radical or otherwise.“ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 8-9.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, pg.154-6.

⁶⁵ Fromm, *To Have or To Be?*, pgs. 40-41.



critical theory, Fromm believed in happiness and always maintained that „every increase in joy a culture can provide will do more for the ethical education of its members than all the warnings of punishment or preachings of virtue could do.“⁶⁶

All this endeared him to the counter-culture. And, surely, he had a good influence on its proponents. His interest in the Third World was serious rather than fashionable; helping found the Mexican Psychoanalytic Association in 1962, beyond his activities in opposition to the Vietnam War and numerous organizations, he would become one of the most influential figures in the development of Latin American psychoanalysis.⁶⁷ His openness to Eastern philosophy was also carried on with seriousness and dignity; his philosophical emphasis on faith and hope was, in fact, never dogmatic or somehow opposed to rational inquiry any more than his search for the good life was ever reducible to the mystical quest for „the totally other“ (Horkheimer). No less than Martin Buber, the Baal She'em Tov, or the great exponents of the Talmudic tradition, he treated religious experience not simply as some form of inner „knowledge,“ but as a type of practical „wisdom“ capable of being employed [054] in the world;⁶⁸ his „religiosity“ never came at the expense of the world and, thus, his concern with exploring the possibilities of subjective experience was never self-indulgent.

The Art of Loving, perhaps his most popular book, also evidences this quality. There is, in this vein, something snide about viewing it merely as some „how to“ manual. Lapses into the type of vacuous pseudo-philosophical language that anticipate the worst excesses of the counter-culture admittedly occur.⁶⁹ But, in the

consumer society of the fifties with its stultifying conformism and basic belief that happiness can simply be bought, his book served an important and legitimate purpose.⁷⁰ Not only did it attempt to help individuals confront the emptiness of their lives by bringing out the best in themselves, it also finally overcame the vacillation between subjectivity and solidarity which had plagued the thinking of the Frankfurt School from its inception.⁷¹

The Art of Loving established an existential relation between autonomy and dependence. Fromm's view of love, after all, is not based on narcissism or social conformity, sentimentality or sexual attraction. Quite the contrary.⁷² His concern, no less than that of the early Horkheimer, Cf. Max Horkheimer,⁷³ involved developing an ethical perspective that was not confined by formal rationalism. But, where Horkheimer sought to employ Schopenhauer's concept of „compassion,“ Fromm emphasized a notion of love that has much in common with the concept developed by Feuerbach. The love between two people thus ultimately rests on a generalized notion itself predicated on a sense of individual self worth, or what Rousseau called „amour propre,“ along with a moral willingness to care for

each other by being one with themselves, rather than by fleeing from themselves. There is only one proof for the presence of love: the depth of the relationship, and the aliveness and strength in each person concerned; this is the fruit by which love is recognized.“ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York, 1956), pg. 103.

⁶⁶ Fromm, *Man for Himself*, pg. 230.

⁶⁷ Funk, *Erich Fromm*, pg 116ff.

⁶⁸ Even the attempt to view this as a „negative theology“ places a philosophic and systematic character on this perspective which it does not have. Cf. Rudolf J. Siebert, „Fromm's Theory of Religion“ *Telos* #34 (Winter, 1977-78), pgs. 111ff.

⁶⁹ „Even whether there is harmony or conflict, joy or sadness, is secondary to the fundamental fact that two people experience themselves from the essence of their existence, that they are one with

⁷⁰ „Success, prestige, money, power – almost all our energy is used for the learning of how to achieve these aims, and almost none to learn the art of loving... Could it be that only those things are considered worthy of being learned with which one can earn money or prestige and that love, which 'only' profits the soul, but is profitless in the modern sense, is a luxury we have no right to spend much energy on?“ *ibid.*, pg. 6.

⁷¹ Jay, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, pg. 343ff.

⁷² „I want the loved person to grow and unfold for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me. If I love the other person, I feel one with him or her, but with him as he is, not as I need him to be as an object for my use. Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, pg. 28.

⁷³ *Dämmerung: Notizen in Deutschland* (Zürich, 1934).



humanity;⁷⁴ indeed, Fromm liked to quote the great Rabbi Hillel: „If I do not stand up for myself, who will; but if I stand up only for myself, what am I then?“

It only makes sense, from such a perspective, that violence should have been anathema to him; he opposed guerilla tactics not only for their practicality, but also on principle.⁷⁵ Similarly he sought a „sane society“ rather than a utopian one which might solve every basic existential dilemma.⁷⁶ The unqualified claim that „Fromm, in short, is a revolutionary and a utopian“ is thus misleading if not preposterous.⁷⁷ Rejecting any stance that would view the individual as something other than an end unto himself, maintaining the original pacifism of the social democratic movement, and never showing the least contempt for the masses, it is obvious why his humanist philosophy should have dovetailed so nicely with the concerns fostered through the grass-roots organizing of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1950s and 60s. Nor is it any wonder that Fromm should have had so little influence on the abstract utopian thinking of that „revolutionary“ minority existing on the political fringes of left-wing politics which, around 1968, was able to steal the limelight precisely because the truly radical potential of the older movement had already begun to wither.⁷⁸

The passing of Fromm's influence can be understood in the same terms. With the fragmentation of the New Left, and the rise of a relativist and non-essentialist postmodernism, his work now appears almost quaint. The old concern with inner development, or the emancipatory content of those social relations that would inform a new order, is no longer what it once was. What John Kenneth Galbraith termed „the affluent society“ has changed. America has become [055] poorer following the triumph of conservatism in the 1980s; its cities are rotting, a rollback of the welfare state has taken place, a new militarism has become manifest, and an ideological counteroffensive has taken hold. „Issues“ have supplanted the concern with alienation and the like. Too often, however, they appear only as the demands of „special interests;“ the moral spirit that enabled activists to believe that they stood with history and justice is conspicuously absent in the new pragmatism. Erich Fromm has a role to play in rekindling such progressive convictions and the commitment to decency as well. The critics were wrong; his socialist humanism defies what has become the dominant logic of both the Left and the Right. As for that „logic, (it) is doubtless unshakable; but,“ no less than Kafka, Fromm always believed that „it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living.“ Indeed, such is the hope that makes politics possible. [061]

⁷⁴ „The point I want to make is to uphold the principle that a person has an inalienable right to live—a right to which no conditions are attached and which implies the right to receive the basic commodities necessary for life, the right to an education and to medical care; he has a right to be treated at least as well as the owner of a dog or a cat treats his pet, which does not have to „prove“ anything in order to be fed.“ Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, pg. 125.

⁷⁵ Even while maintaining that they were irrelevant for politics in advanced industrial society, he opposed guerilla tactics on principle. *ibid.*, pg. 142.

⁷⁶ „The assumption that the problems, conflicts, and tragedies between man and man will disappear if there are no materially unfulfilled needs is a childish daydream.“ *ibid.*, pg. 107.

⁷⁷ Schaar, *Escape from Authority*, pg. 22.

⁷⁸ Note my discussion in „Reconstructing the Experiment: Politics, Ideology, and the New Left in America“

in *Moments of Decision: Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1991).