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Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm and the Analytical Social Psychology of the Frankfurt School

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„The method and function of an analytical social psychology“, Fromm’s 1932 essay published in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* was really a manifesto of the principles along with psychoanalysis and historical materialism could be merged into one new discipline: analytical social psychology. In the article Fromm argues that

if instinctual life and the unconscious were the key to understanding human behavior, then psychoanalysis was also entitled and competent about the motives underlying social behavior. For ‘society’ too consists of living individuals who must be subject to the same psychological laws that psychoanalysis discovered in the individual“ [*The Frankfurt School Reader* 481].

Asserting the competence of psychoanalysis in the matters of society, Fromm rejoins Wilhelm Reich, who according to Fromm, „restricts psychoanalysis to the sphere of individual psychology and argues against its applicability to social phenomena (politics, class consciousness etc.)“ [ibid.] The controversy goes back to Wilhelm Reich’s 1929 paper „Dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis“, published in Russian and in German in the Komintern theoretical Journal *Pod znamenem marksizma / Unter dem Banner des Marxismus*. The 1929 article was also a manifesto: a manifesto of psychoanalysis combined with *dialectic* materialism, while Fromm put full emphasis on the other, namely *historical*, component of Marxist theory. Reich’s view on the competence of psychoanalysis in socio-

logical problems is very strange, indeed. On the one hand, he explains that „the phenomenon of class consciousness is not accessible to psychoanalysis, nor can problems which belong to sociology – such as mass movements, politics, strikes – be taken as objects of the psychoanalytic method. And so it cannot replace a sociological doctrine, nor can a sociological doctrine develop out of it.“ [*Sex-Pol Essays* 7]. On the other hand, he adds immediately:

[psychoanalysis] can become an *auxiliary* science to sociology, in the form of a *social psychology*. For instance, it can explore the irrational motives which have led a certain type of leader to join the socialist or national-socialist movement; or it can trace the effect of social ideologies on the psychological development of the individual“ [ibid.; my italics – F.E.].

Similar argumentation can be found in Reich’s 1934 pamphlet „The use of psychoanalysis in historical research“. In this pamphlet – which was added later to the revised text of „Dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis“, Reich [070] declares that „we cannot say anything about the background causes of human behavior in the extra-psychical sphere – about the economic laws which determine the social process and the laws of physiology which govern the instinctual apparatus – without immediately embracing metaphysics“ [*SPE* 67]. According to Reich, Fromm’s assertion that psychoanalysis has something „essential“ to say about the „background cause of



social behavior“, opens the way to the abuses of psychology in the spirit of official psychoanalytic sociology, „which Fromm himself would condemn“ [ibid. 66.]. Nevertheless, Reich delineates the proper place of psychoanalytic social psychology in explaining *irrational* phenomena, for example in the case when „the sociological-economic Situation is such that it should really produce a strike, yet no strike occurs“ [ibid. 72].

Reich is naively sincere about the motives of this *negative* definition of the competence of psychoanalysis in social issues. „If I interpret“ – he writes -

the revolutionary will as rebellion against the father [...], I subscribe to the ideology of bourgeois reaction; but if I make a concrete investigation of how far the revolutionary will corresponds to a real Situation, to what extent the *lack* of such a will is irrational, the point at which the revolutionary will really does correspond to an unconscious rebellion against the father, etc., then I have carried the bourgeois ‘preconditionless’ science *ad absurdum*, have done authentic scientific work of my own and have thereby done a Service to the working-class movement and not political reaction [...] [ibid., 64-65].

As we know, Reich’s „service“ was not too much honored in his time. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that his main intention with „Dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis“ was to legitimize psychoanalysis as something perfectly consistent with the official doctrine of the Comintern and Soviet Marxism, to prove its „innocence“. However, his „negative“ argument – psychoanalysis is competent *only* in explaining irrational social phenomena – was scandalous enough to make him by his Marxist colleagues a show-case for all the „bourgeois deviations“ of psychoanalysis. Curiously enough, his accuses directed against Fromm (metaphysics etc.) are used almost literally against Reich himself by his Russian critics (Sapir, Stoljarov etc.). What is even more interesting is that, if we look at the texts, there is hardly any essential difference between Fromm’s and Reich’s positions. They both start out from Freud’s libido theory; they both want to study how unconscious strivings are molded by socio-economic conditions. They

both claim that psychoanalysis can and must understand the nature of ideology as mediator between human drives and the economic Situation. Reich and Fromm assert equally that „the family is the essential medium through which the economic Situation exerts its formative influence on the individual’s psyche“ [FSR 486]. They both agreed in condemning the „psychologization“ of economic and social factors (most notably, Hendrik de Man, the influential Belgian socialist who wrote on the „psychology of socialism“ was an arch-enemy for both Reich and Fromm). Finally, they both are interested in „false consciousness“, that is, to find an explanation to the acts of people which are against their rational interest. The attempt to find this explanation leads both of them to characterological constructions – to the basic characterological dichotomy between neurotic and genital, authoritarian and revolutionary character. [071]

The main difference between Reich and Fromm in this early period was mainly that of political backgrounds and affiliations. They had to appeal to different tribunals: Reich had to defend psychoanalysis in front of „dialectical materialism“, that is, Stalinist ideology, while Fromm appealed, first of all, to the psychoanalytic Community and wanted to prove that there is „nothing wrong“ with Marxism which does not contradict to psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Fromm’s connection with the Frankfurt School had a liberating effect in the sense that he was free from direct party obligations and he could rely freely to historical materialism which was *eo ipso* suspect in the eyes of the representatives of the „official Marxism“. Fromm was strongly committed to the endeavour of the Frankfurt School thinkers to reconstruct Marxism and to give a philosophical solution to the problem of subjectivity as outlined by György Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*. Analytic social psychology, as outlined by Fromm, was also part of this reconstruction. In the same years as Fromm published his essay on social psychology, in 1932, Max Horkheimer published a study under the title „History and Psychology“. Horkheimer wrote:

That man preserve economic relations which they have outgrown in force and need, instead of replacing them through a higher and more rational form of organiza-



tion, is possible only because the actions of a numerically significant social stratum are not determined by cognition but by an instinctual motive force that falsifies consciousness. In no way do mere ideological manoeuvres form the root of historically important moment [...] on the contrary, the psychic structure of these groups, that is the character of their members, is constantly renewed in connection with their role in the economic process [quoted by Russel Jacoby: *Social Amnesia* 86].

Thus, Fromm's endeavour to develop an analytical social psychology was part and parcel of a larger, interdisciplinary, academically respected project, while Reich only carried on his lonely, almost quixotic struggle against the Soviet Marxist, as well as against the psychoanalytic, „officialdom“. Nevertheless, as I argued before, they have much common in their approach, their starting points and basic assumptions are very similar even if Fromm's presentation is, of course, more sophisticated. They are also common in their „dogmatism“. It would be difficult to deny, that, in final analysis, they both imagined the combination of Marxism and psychoanalysis in a rather mechanical way: no one of them went beyond the basic tenets of orthodox psychoanalysis and orthodox Marxism, they do not question the validity of the Freudian instinct or libido theory as well as they accept without any doubt the (vulgar) Marxist explanation of the relationship between „base“ and „superstructure“. Thus, the whole debate between Reich and Fromm on the competence of psychoanalysis in explaining social phenomena reminds us the passionate religious dispute on „homousion“ or „homoiusion“. Did they, then, arrive to a dead end? I would rather say that it was only a beginning which implanted the seeds of further developments, problems, questions, and later controversies. In the later years Reich and Fromm went much beyond their original Standpoints and in very different directions. The way out from their respective positions in 1929 and [072] 1932 can be described as attempts to „escape from dogmatism“. For Reich, this escape was marked by a total alienation from his earlier sympathies with and links to the Communist as well as to the psychoanalytic movements. Reich

subsequently left the original field of the Freudo-Marxist discourse and landed, as it is well known, on the „orgon theory“. His later natural philosophy and prophetic messianism was, however, despite the radically different language, contingent with his original notion of „dialectal materialism“. Namely, this naturalism was already contained in his 1929 essay which stressed that psychoanalysis, in its quality of an „auxiliary science“, is a natural science, which, by definition, can not contradict to dialectical materialism.

Fromm's „escapes from dogmatism“ proved to be more successful and more fruitful. He could elaborate different „mechanisms of escape“. The first, and perhaps most important way out from the dogmatism of the original Freudo-Marxist formulation was the *empirical investigation* itself. In the notion of the Frankfurt School thinkers, empirical research is a corrective of mere speculation, even if blind data or their purely quantitative or classificatory presentation are not sufficient in themselves; they need qualitative Interpretation and critical self-reflection to the method itself. The great sociological enterprise of the Frankfurt School which was led and organized by Fromm, the survey on the character structure of the German workers and employees on the eve of the Third Reich was thoroughly analysed and criticized by many authors. I would like to stress here only that the results of the empirical investigation give us an unprecedented insight into the ideological structure of the German lower middle class, even if the vast technical and methodological problems obscured this mirror in many ways. It should also be noted that the fact that the results did not fully support or even falsified the original theoretical formulations proved to be in itself very important and instrumental in the further development of analytic social psychology as well as in many fields of modern sociology and social psychology in general (attitudes, public opinion, research on mass communication and propaganda etc.).

The other way out from dogmatism was the reinterpretation of psychoanalytic theory itself. In the thirties, Fromm subsequently abandoned orthodox psychoanalysis. His critique of Freud, was not, however, an external critique: it was an immanent critique through the reception



and Integration of some new developments of psychoanalysis, most notably, Fromm's appreciation of Sándor Ferenczi's teaching on love and mutual understanding as well as of Ferenczi's „active technique“ which challenged the „neutrality“ of the orthodox psychoanalyst. (See e.g. Fromm's article „Die gesellschaftliche Bedingtheit der psychoanalytischen Therapie, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 1935.) Fromm's turn toward the problem of relatedness in the thirties opened the way toward cultural and interpersonal psychoanalysis (Horney, Sullivan etc.), as well as toward a radical reconstruction of the Freud-Marxist position in *Escape from Freedom*. „The book“, he writes,

is based on the assumption that the key problem of psychology is that of the specific kind of relatedness of the individual towards the world and not that of the satisfaction or frustration of this or that instinctual need *per se*; furthermore, on the assumption that the relationship between man and society is a static one. [073] [...] Man's nature, his passions, and anxieties are a cultural product; as a matter of fact, man himself is the most important creation and achievement of the continuous human effort, the record of which we call history [*Escape from Freedom* 26-27].

The *historical* materialism of the 1932 article remained only on a declarative level, history was only a slogan; in *Escape from Freedom* Fromm could really integrate history. This integration or reintegration was made possible by taking over the Marxian concept of *human nature* and *alienation*, elaborated in the *Economic-philosophical manuscripts* from 1844.

The first complete theoretical realization of Fromm's „escape from dogmatism“ was, then *Escape from Freedom*. In the subsequent elaboration, refinements, and application of this new Freud-Marxist analytical social psychology, Fromm went far beyond and distanced from the Frankfurt School position (see e.g. the Marcuse-Fromm debate). Nevertheless, Fromm remained faithful at least in one respect to the original Frankfurtian analytical social psychology as well as to Wilhelm Reich's theories: namely, in his emphasis on social characterology, on different character types or character orientations which

express basic differences in the individuals' relation to the world.

The question emerges: why social characterology acquired such a privileged role in the whole Reichian and Frankfurtian analytical social psychological enterprise? The answer would require detailed examination which I can not do now. I would like to call attention only to one aspect: to what I call the *totalitarian experience*. That is, the basic principles of Reich's and Fromm's analytical social psychology were formulated directly against Fascism, and, perhaps latently, against Stalinism. It is one of the most important socio-psychological characteristics of totalitarian movements and regimes, that they require, use, exploit and manipulate extreme characters in as they have a special appeal to psychologically imbalanced, rigid and power-oriented individuals. Therefore, totalitarian politics are close related to and build on the „authoritarian personality“. Established and organically rooted democracies can effectively prevent the predominance of extreme character types, even if numerically there can be the same amount of authoritarian „high scores“ in a democracy as in Fascist or in a Communist dictatorship. For the political psychology of a democracy, the original concept of social character proved to be falsifiable, and exactly this failure of the original characterological dichotomy gave rise, after the second world war, new paradigms for analytical social psychology (such as, e.g. Alexander Mitscherlich's concept of „inability to mourn“, Erik H. Erikson's identity model, or even Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action).

The dissolution of the communist dictatorships in Eastern and Central Europe raises new questions for analytical social psychology. The classical hypotheses of Reich, Fromm, Horkheimer, Adorno should be tested both empirically and theoretically in a new kind of reality which is marked not by transition from democracy to dictatorship (as in 1932, when Fromm first formulated his thoughts on the tasks and methods of analytical social psychology), but, on the contrary, by transition from dictatorship to democracy. Who will formulate the tasks and methods of a new analytical social psychology? [074]