

Dark Shadows: Erich Fromm, Socio-Psychoanalysis and Systemic Racism

Roger Frie



Abstract: As a psychoanalyst, Fromm felt compelled to speak to the social and political crises of his day. Fromm's socio-psychoanalysis was a radical departure from Freudian psychoanalysis and has important implications for how psychoanalysts can address social issues in their work with patients. I examine Fromm's exploration of authoritarianism and racial narcissism and then turn to the effects of systemic racism in the present. Following Fromm, I consider the way in which psychoanalysis is shaped by society and culture. I draw on my work as practicing psychoanalyst in Canada to address the racial discrimination experienced by Indigenous patients and examine how the therapeutic setting is implicated in the broader structures of systemic racism.

Introduction

In 1939, shortly before the start of World War II, Karl Menninger, a leading member of the Freudian establishment in the United States, wrote a heated letter objecting to an article by Erich Fromm, arguing that it «misrepresented Freud» and contained «egregious errors.» The letter was communicated to Harry Stack Sullivan, editor of the new interdisciplinary journal, *Psychiatry: Journal of the Biology and Pathology of Interpersonal Relations*. Menninger went on to say that Fromm's article was causing «a great many uncomplimentary things» to be said about the journal's «misrepresentation of psychoanalysis» and that it should not stand «unrefuted» (cited in Perry 1982, p. 381). *Psychiatry's* purpose was to explore the interconnections between psychoanalysis, the social sciences and the humanities, in essence to learn from their productive interaction. As an interdisciplinary scholar and psychoanalyst, Fromm

was an ideal fit for the journal. Not surprisingly, Sullivan had little regard for Menninger's political machinations and came to Fromm's defence. Sullivan responded firmly but politely, «I am much distressed by your reaction to Dr. Fromm's article,» adding that «Dr. Fromm's merits» are not in question (cited in Perry 1982, p. 382).

This letter exchange was part of a larger struggle for psychoanalytic supremacy that would isolate Erich Fromm from mainstream psychoanalysis for decades to come. Given Fromm's fame as a mid-century public intellectual and social critic, it is easy to overlook his role as a pioneering psychoanalyst and a founder of the interpersonal school. In fact, Fromm's psychoanalytic practice was perhaps the one constant in life that spanned different disciplines, continents, cultures and languages. Over the course of his long career, Fromm co-founded psychoanalytic institutes and organizations including, but not limited to, the Southwest German Institute for Psychoanalysis in Frankfurt in 1929, the William Alanson White Institute in New York in 1943, the psychoanalytic section of the medical school of the National Autonomous University of Mexico City in 1951, the Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis in Mexico City in 1956, and the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies in 1962.

The purpose of my talk is to consider with you just how radical and important Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic ideas were at the time, and how they continue to be relevant today, particularly in helping us to address the dark shadow of racism. Fromm's dual training as a sociologist and a psychoanalyst prepared him to comment on the social crises of his day. In contrast to mainstream psychoanalysts, who retained a chiefly clinical orientation, Fromm felt ethically compelled to speak to the unfolding political and social realities around him. His socio-psychoanalytical approach grew out of his notion of the social character and formed the basis for his account of authoritarianism in *Escape from Freedom* (1941a), and of racial narcissism in *The Heart of Man* (1964a). I will examine both these works briefly before turning to consider how Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach can help us to address the discriminatory effects of systemic racism we see today. I will use an example from my work as a practicing psychoanalyst in Canada to illustrate this process.

Psychoanalysis and Social Character

The trajectory of Fromm's life (1900–1980) was shaped by the traumas and tragedies of the twentieth century. Fromm was born in and grew up in the city of Frankfurt in an orthodox German Jewish family. As a young man he was alarmed by the nationalist fervor that gripped Germany during the First World

War. After the war, Fromm began studying law but soon switched to sociology, receiving his doctorate in 1922, under the supervision of Alfred Weber at the University Heidelberg.

In addition to religion and sociology, Fromm became interested in psychoanalysis, working first with Frieda Fromm-Reichman and then with Wilhelm Wittenberg in Munich. This was followed by a period of supervision with Karl Landauer at the Southwest German Psychoanalytic Study Group in Frankfurt. In order to finish his psychoanalytic training, Fromm moved to Berlin in 1928, where he entered the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and completed his training analysis with Hanns Sachs, a personal friend of Freud's and one of the earliest psychoanalysts.

During the 1920s, Berlin exemplified the liberal and democratic outlook of Weimar Germany, but the dramatic political changes that would take hold in 1933 were already underway. Fromm's academic background in sociology enabled him to comment on the events around him. In 1928 he presented a paper on «Psychoanalysis of the Petty Bourgeoisie,» a topic that would soon find expression in his research on the authoritarian tendencies of German workers. In 1929, Fromm gave a lecture in Frankfurt on «Psychoanalysis and Sociology» (see Fromm 1929a), which seeks to understand and explain the process of socialization. Fromm's work brought him to the attention of Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institute for Social Research, who invited him to join. Horkheimer recognized Fromm's psychoanalytic prowess and under the auspices of the Institute Fromm began his project of integrating Marxism and psychoanalysis.

By 1930 Fromm had been certified by the German Psychoanalytic Association (DPG) and he set off on a career of combining social analysis with psychoanalytic practice. However, the threatening political events in Germany shaped the trajectory of his life and work. His study of the character structure of the German working class during the late Weimar Republic (Fromm 1980a) suggested that only a small percentage (15%) of the respondents to the questionnaires he developed demonstrated clear anti-authoritarian beliefs. In other words, workers who were presumed to be solidly against authoritarianism revealed pro-fascist tendencies.

Throughout the 1930s, Fromm's research sought to show how people are shaped by socio-economic class, religion and political systems. Fromm's approach is evident in a number of different works from the period, in which he inverts the traditional focus on the individual psyche in order to shed light on the role of social factors in human experience. According to Fromm, societies are structured in such a way that individuals take on the roles their particular society requires of them. He was particularly interested in demonstrating how society produces persons who unconsciously adapt to meet society's economic

needs even though these may conflict with our own emotional well-being.

As he developed his socio-psychoanalytical approach, Fromm became increasingly critical of orthodox psychoanalysis. Fromm questioned the centrality of the Oedipus complex and the primacy of the patriarchy in Freud's work. In place of libidinal stages of development, Fromm began to conceive of human development in terms of imagined and actual relations with other people. This line of critique finds its fullest expression in Fromm's article, *Man's Impulse Structure and its Relation to Culture* from 1937. Fromm focuses above all on the limitations that follow from Freud's emphasis on the drives, which fail to account for the social and cultural factors in the shaping of the person. The point, for Fromm, is that society was always at work in the person, so that the person exists as a fundamentally social being. As Fromm states:

«Society and the individual are not «opposite» to each other. *Society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual exists only as a social human being.* His individual life practice is necessarily determined by the life practice of his society or class and, in the last analysis, by the manner of production of his society, that is, how this society produces, how it is organized to satisfy the needs of its members. [...]. We shall call this *the socially typical character*.» (Fromm 1992e, p. 58, original italics.)

This viewpoint comes to fruition in Fromm's well known statement from 1949: «It is the function of social character to shape the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behavior is not left to conscious decisions whether or not to follow the social pattern but that *people want to act as they have to act*» (Fromm 1949a, p. 5, original emphasis).

The further Fromm ventured from Freud, the closer his associations with other like-minded psychoanalysts became. Fromm first met Sullivan in 1934, soon after arriving in the United States. Their relationship blossomed as each discovered how much he could learn from the other. Sullivan became acquainted with Fromm's study on German workers, his socio-psychoanalytical perspective and his critique of Freudian psychoanalysis. Fromm, in turn, learned about the ways in which Sullivan conceptualized the self in a nexus of interpersonal relations and was introduced by Sullivan to the culture and personality movement.

In 1936, Sullivan invited Fromm to teach in the newly established Washington School of Psychiatry, which Fromm gladly accepted. Fromm's psychoanalytic associations in New York consisted of friends and colleagues, including Sullivan, Horney, Thompson, Fromm-Reichman and others. It was through Sullivan that Fromm also met and interacted with like-minded interdiscipli-

nary researchers. Among this number were such well-known anthropologists as Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Edward Sapir. The influence of anthropology on Fromm, Sullivan and Horney led their combined work to become known as «cultural psychoanalysis,» a term that was indelibly associated with the early William Alanson White Institute, founded in 1943 (Frie 2014).

Thus in 1939, when Fromm's article *The Social Philosophy of «Will Therapy»* appeared in *Psychiatry*, Fromm and Sullivan had already been working together for five years. The fact that Sullivan published the article despite the opposition it would surely face speaks to the importance he placed on it. Given Menninger's complaint, it is easy to assume that Fromm's article was a lengthy and critical exegesis of Freud. In fact, Fromm's account of Freud forms only a small part of a wider discussion, the chief purpose of which is to examine the work of Otto Rank.¹ It is what Fromm says about Freud in those few brief pages that matters (the following quotes from Fromm's 1939 article are from pp. 230–232).

Fromm's stated aim is to analyze Freud's social philosophy in order «to illustrate the general point that a psychological system is rooted in certain philosophical premises.» His critical discussion of Freud articulates many of the points for which interpersonal psychoanalysis has since become known. Fromm covers a range of topics, but in the main, his arguments are aimed at Freud's perceived neglect of the interpersonal dimension. According to Fromm, Freud's focus on the drives and on early childhood experience is achieved at the expense of accounting for the wider social «milieu.» As Fromm states, Freud's «instinctivistic approach» is in «some contradiction» with the social surround. In this sense, Fromm continues, Freudian psychoanalysis is «not consistent with the progressive, philosophical premise of environmental determination.» Fromm also expresses concern about the degree to which Freudian psychoanalysis ends up helping the individual to simply adapt to the needs of society. And a psychoanalysis that serves the needs of a society necessarily neglects the needs of the patient. While the arguments Fromm made against Freud are today an accepted part of the relational canon, at the time his critique was considered heresy by many.

Escape from Freedom

Two years later Fromm published his first major work, *Escape from Freedom*.

1 In a personal communication, Rainer Funk has shared that when Fromm's collected works were being compiled, Fromm expressed unhappiness about his early interpretation of Rank, but stood by his interpretation of Freud.

Fromm includes an Appendix entitled, «Character and Social Process,» in which he elaborates his psychoanalytic position contra Freud and explicitly allies himself with Sullivan. As Fromm states,

«The fundamental approach to human personality is the understanding of the human being's relationship to the world, to others, to nature, and to him or herself. We believe that the human being is primarily a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his or her instinctual needs. *In this sense, we believe that individual psychology is fundamentally social psychology, or in Sullivan's terms, the psychology of interpersonal relationships.*» (Fromm 1941a, p. 290, my emphasis.)

This is perhaps the best articulation to date of the emerging interpersonal position that unites Fromm and Sullivan. Fromm's express aim is to show how the social character of a group «determines the thinking, feeling and acting of individuals who belong to that group.»

Escape from Freedom was published in 1941, just as the United States officially declared war on Germany and Japan. The book met with great success and spoke to an American readership that was eager for an explanation of Germany's enthusiastic embrace of Hitler. Sullivan recognized the immediate value of *Escape from Freedom* and arranged a series of eight separate reviews written by such well-known scholars as Ruth Benedict. The reviews were published in *Psychiatry* in 1942. It was a significant achievement for Fromm, but Menninger would not be silenced. That same year, Menninger (1942, p. 317), wrote a caustic review in the journal, *The Nation*, in which he sought once and for all to ostracize Fromm: «Erich Fromm was in Germany a distinguished sociologist. His book is written as if he considered himself a psychoanalyst.» The rift between Fromm and the Freudians was seemingly complete.

Menninger's critical appraisal of Fromm overlooked a key fact: the interdisciplinary approach used by Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* is what gave the book its power. It brought together psychoanalytic insight with social psychology and history. But perhaps above all, *Escape from Freedom* gave voice to Fromm's ethical need to speak out, even while others remained silent. Indeed, *Escape from Freedom* was one of the only psychoanalytic texts to address the reality of fascism at the time.²

2 Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* was published in German in 1933, but it did not appear in English until 1946. In contrast to Fromm, who was concerned with the social forces that shape individuals and groups, Reich used a more traditional psychoana-

According to Fromm, Hitler and the Nazi party provided Germans with a means of escape by submitting to a larger power in the face of anxiety and economic and societal crises that followed their defeat in World War I. The emotional appeal of Nazi ideology, according to Fromm, lay in «its spirit of blind obedience to a leader and of hatred against racial and political minorities, its craving for conquest and domination, its exaltation of the German people and the «Nordic Race»» (1941a, p. 182). Fromm's analysis was shaped by his first-hand experience of the rise of the Nazism. What remained unspoken but indelibly present as Fromm wrote *Escape from Freedom* was the immense threat faced by his family members who remained in Germany. Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, he sought to find ways to help them escape. Despite all his attempts, many of Fromm's aunts, uncles and cousins were murdered in the Holocaust.

The fact that most psychoanalysts at the time did not address the malignant political forces of the day should give us all pause. I believe we need to ask ourselves whether we, as members of the psychoanalytic profession, are sufficiently addressing the social crises we see today, whether in our therapeutic practice and in the world around us (Frie 2018, 2021).

Racial Narcissism

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the specter of racism and human destructiveness held Fromm's attention. In 1964, at the height of the civil rights movement in the United States, Fromm published *The Heart of Man*, which addressed the racial terror inflicted on African Americans and drew direct links to the treatment of Jewish citizens in Nazi Germany. Fromm speaks to the insidious nature of racism when he writes:

«The narcissistic conviction of the superiority of whites over blacks [...] demonstrates that there is no restraint to the sense of self-superiority or of the inferiority of another group. However, the satisfaction of a group requires also a certain degree of confirmation in reality. As long as the whites [...] have the power to demonstrate their superiority over the blacks through social, economic, and political acts of discrimination, their narcissistic beliefs have some element of reality and thus bolster up the entire narcissistic thought-system. The same held true for the Nazis.» (Fromm 1964a, pp. 82–83.)

lytic lens to explain fascism as a consequence of sexual repression at the level of family and community.

Fromm was describing, in effect, the system of white supremacy in the United States, enforced through racial laws and racial terror. As Fromm suggests, a similar racial structure was present in Nazi Germany, allowing the Nazi regime to create what he called a «narcissistic thought-system.»

In a manner reminiscent of *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm argued that the social and economic anxieties experienced by many whites created a fertile ground for their racism: «Economically and culturally deprived» whites who have no «realistic hope of changing» their situation, have «only one satisfaction [...] being superior to another racial group that is singled out as inferior.» According to Fromm, members of this group felt that «even though I am poor and uncultured I am somebody important because I belong to the most admirable group in the world — I am white»; or, «I am Aryan» (1964a, p. 76). Turning to the nature of narcissism itself, Fromm suggests that racial narcissism of the group and the malignant narcissism of individuals is directly related. They are both «crudely solipsistic as well as xenophobic» (1964a, p. 74). As Fromm explains, «the group narcissism of the «whites» or the «Aryans» is as malignant as the extreme narcissism of a single person can be» (1964a, p. 77).

Fromm's observations in *Escape from Freedom* and *The Heart of Man* help us to understand the social and psychological dynamics of racism and xenophobia at the time. But they also have a powerful contemporary resonance. In the United States, a base of overwhelmingly white, largely working-class voters elected Donald Trump to power and continues to campaign for his return. During the Trump presidency, the long-simmering racial divisions in the United States erupted into the open and acts of racial violence against Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) increased exponentially.

Confronted with this upsurge in racial violence and hatred, psychoanalytic institutes in the United States began to shake off their long-standing hesitancy to speak openly about race and racism. This has had important consequences. In the United States, the overwhelming majority of psychoanalysts are white. The absence of diversity in the psychoanalytic profession, in contrast to society as a whole, together with the lack of direct experience with racism, revealed significant blind-spots. In the discussions that followed, African American psychoanalysts reported many instances of being told by white psychoanalytic colleagues and supervisors that the question of race and racism was not relevant (cf. Stoute 2021). The discussions that followed helped majority white psychoanalysts begin to confront their own conscious and unconscious racial biases and think about what needs to change. The process of addressing the dark shadow of racism in psychoanalysis, as in society as a whole, has not been easy (Wilkerson 2020).

So long as we associate racism with the acts of individual persons, socie-

tal and structure discrimination remains difficult to understand and address. By focusing not just on individuals, but on the way in which societies and groups are themselves discriminatory, Fromm set the ground work for the development of what is today referred to as «systemic racism.» The concept of systemic racism sheds light on the systems and structures of a society that discriminate against a minority racial group, often to the benefit of the racial majority. Systemic racism shows just how intractable racial discrimination in society really is.

Fromm helps us understand systemic racism by inverting the relationship between the individual psyche and society. For Fromm, the intrapsychic realm is not only secondary to the interpersonal dimension, the interpersonal dimension is itself subordinate to the wider sociocultural context of all experience. In other words, society is always at work in human relationships, and the individual person exists as a fundamentally social being. How might this fundamental insight help us to understand what it is like for the psychoanalyst to practice in a systemically racist context?

I want to offer some concluding observations on how systemic racism shapes not just the patient who is discriminated against, but also the psychoanalyst and way in which we understand and practice psychoanalysis. To do this, I will draw from my experience as a practicing psychoanalyst in Canada, a country known for its multiculturalism. Canada does not share the level of racial divisiveness we see today in the United States. But the popular image we have of Canada masks the dark history of Indigenous genocide on which the country was built, as well as the continuing injustice experienced by Indigenous people today (Frie 2020).

Psychoanalysis and Systemic Racism

As Fromm reminds us over and over again, the practice of psychoanalysis never exists in a vacuum. The social forces that shape us as individuals also and inevitably shape the therapeutic process. In a systemically racist society which benefits members of the majority, the discriminatory process of social shaping can be difficult for members of the white majority like myself to recognize. However, if we accept that the therapeutic setting cannot be separated from the systemically racist society in which it takes place, then it follows that the language and theories we use to explain the therapeutic process are similarly embedded in discriminatory social structures. One of the clearest examples of what I am describing can be found in the use of the terms «primitive» and «primitivity,» which were popularized by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1915).

Freud's idea of the primitive mind was adopted from social evolutionary paradigm of the late nineteenth century. This paradigm identified universal evolutionary stages to classify different societies as being in a state of savagery, barbarism, or civilization. Freud's anthropology takes as its starting point the mental world of savages, which is linked to that of children and neurotics. By contrast, and in line with the social evolutionists, rationality is presented as the marker of mature European civilization. Thus, written into the heart of psychoanalysis was an inherently racist and colonial viewpoint that contrasted the superior rational and white European mind with the savage and primitive non-white other.

This same social evolutionary outlook formed the rationale used by the Canadian government in the nineteenth century to justify the forced assimilation of Indigenous children in so-called Indian Residential Schools. For almost one hundred and fifty years, Indigenous children were taken from their families and sent to schools run by Catholic and Protestant churches, where they were subjected to extreme sexual and physical abuse, starvation and electrocution (Fontaine 2016). The last of these schools closed only in 1996. Indigenous children died in huge numbers, often being hastily buried in unmarked graves. This past summer, over a thousand bodies of Indigenous children were found. Many more discoveries are expected in the years to come. The effects of these violently racist policies are still apparent in Canadian society today, in the form of systemic racism. Many First Nations across Canada have no access to drinkable water, lack adequate housing and healthcare, and receive subpar education. Substance abuse and suicide are widespread, especially among younger generations. Indigenous youth today make up 8% of Canada's youth population, yet account for almost 50% of all admissions to youth correctional services.

What might it mean for me, a majority white psychoanalyst in Canada to practice in a society with this track record of severe racial discrimination? How might I work with or be of help to my Indigenous patients? To begin, the direct link between my patients' individual suffering and the racial violence that First Nations endure in Canadian society must to be recognized and not reduced to an outcome of libidinal drives. As a majority white Canadian, I am also a participant and beneficiary of the racist society that is the cause of my patients' suffering. I am offered societal privileges that are not shared by my patients, privileges that I take for granted and may not be aware of by virtue of my identity. Unless I can recognize my own subject position, no matter how uncomfortable it may make me feel, I simply continue to exacerbate the existing societal dynamics. There is no easy resolution. Even when I acknowledge my social position and the benefits I accrue by virtue of my identity, the inequities

created and sustained by systemic racism in Canadian remain. They reappear, week after week, shaping my patients' experience and determining what I am able to see and hear. It requires us to be aware of and be willing to speak to the realities of living in a systemically racist society on an ongoing basis.

Recognizing discriminatory societal dynamics and their daily effects on our clinical work with patients also requires us to think critically about the theories we use to understand and explain the therapeutic process. And here we return to the very language that remains embedded in psychoanalysis. The terms «primitive» or «primitivity» are not race neutral concepts (Frosh, 2013). The psychoanalytic idea of mature subjectivity in the cultural evolutionary scale set out by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* harks straight back to the racist outlook used by colonial powers to commit violence against Indigenous people. As the psychoanalyst, Celia Brickman, reminds us, the «norm of mature subjectivity was [...] a rationalism whose unstated color was white» (2003, p. 72). This is not just a history lesson. Nor am I suggesting that the psychoanalyst who uses this terminology is racist. But at the very least, it behooves us to recognize that the discriminatory societal dynamics that have shaped our patients' lives are also inherent in language and understanding we use.

Conversations about race can often be difficult. Being asked to accept our own implication in systemic racism can lead to powerful counterreactions. Psychoanalysts and psychotherapists are especially susceptible to presumptions of innocence. We like to believe that our psychological and educational awareness makes us less susceptible to racial discrimination. But as Fromm helps us to understand, the process of socialization shapes us all, both consciously and unconsciously. Racism is inherent in the very structures of the societies that makes us who we are, be it as individuals or as practicing psychoanalysts. The belief that we can create a race neutral consulting room is surely a comforting illusion, but does little to actually address the ongoing reality of racial discrimination in our daily human interactions, or in the social practices we take for granted.

If we are going to have a meaningful dialogue about race and racism, we need to accept our own limitations and be unsettled by them. We need to find ways to listen to, respect and work to open ourselves to the perspective of the other. As I have sought to show this evening, Fromm's socio-psychoanalysis shines a light on how we are all, psychoanalysts and patients alike, shaped by social and political forces. Psychoanalytic engagement with racism is often assumed to be a recent phenomenon. Fromm's work suggests otherwise. I believe he has much to teach us — if we are willing to listen.

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