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## Recovering Erich Fromm's Life: Some Dilemmas and Preliminary Solutions

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When I left home to enroll at the University of California in 1958, Erich Fromm was a leading figure in American life and thought. My parents and most of their friends in the Marxist “Old Left” had purchased first editions of his books and I had perused several of them as I was growing up. Fromm was a staple in my undergraduate education; I encountered his works in my history, psychology, philosophy, political science, and sociology classes. By 1960 I was an early “New Left” student activist, writing regular political columns in the student newspaper that were informed by *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *The Sane Society* (1955). Fromm's thoughts were inspirational when I co-founded a student political party which successfully sued the University of California to overturn its Joseph McCarthy era ban on Communist speakers. At the age of twenty, I published my first article in an American national magazine that defended the law suit and cited Fromm and Thomas Jefferson on freedom of expression for support. Next, during my doctoral studies in History at UCLA between 1963 and 1967, Fromm was regarded as a founding figure in the subspecialty I embraced -- “psychohistory.” I also engaged in rather dangerous civil rights work in the deep South during this interval, and discovered that most of my coworkers were familiar with Fromm's ideas. As the American “New Left” connected increasingly, by the late 1960s and

early 1970s, with progressive student protest culture in Europe and Latin America, Fromm came up again. His writings helped to ground our commitment to a humanistic democratic socialist “third way” alternative to both the Western capitalist marketplace and the Stalinist state. Moreover, Fromm's campus lectures and texts helped to mobilize my fellow American student activists against nuclear weapons testing and other Cold War imperatives that might have led to the destruction of humankind. Unlike Timothy Leary, Allan Ginsberg, and other of our icons, Fromm's inspirational positions were deeply reasoned and impressive to even the toughest minded graduate student activist.

At some point in the mid to late 1960s, and assuredly by the 1970s, Fromm's impact on American protest culture began to recede. His troubles began in the mid-1950s when his old Frankfurt Institute colleague, Herbert Marcuse (1955), charged that by abandoning Freud's libido theory, Fromm was purportedly emptying psychoanalysis of its revolutionary content and becoming an architect for adjustment to the status quo. Other American intellectuals and scholars on the Left repeated this charge in dismissing Fromm's significance, and he has continued to be marginalized in American academic culture even as he retained some following among the general American reading public. Based upon his book sales and citation indices, the decline has



been far less stark in heavily Catholic countries like Mexico and Italy, and in former Soviet bloc nations like Poland and Hungary. Nor have Japanese and Korean readers entirely followed the American trend. Nonetheless, intellectuals and scholars communicate a great deal across national lines, especially with the internet, and whatever their initial reception, even classics can decline in appeal. Indeed, for a variety of reasons, Fromm's global readership twenty five years after his death is nowhere as substantial as it once had been.

How can Fromm become more relevant to reading publics globally so that his concepts inform our public dialogues as they did during his lifetime? His literary executor, Rainer Funk, has contributed enormously to this end through his wonderfully comprehensive Fromm archive, his publications, and his dogged capacity to keep most of Fromm's books in print. So has the work of the International Erich Fromm Society and its celebrations, like the current conference. Unfortunately, however, we live in a world increasingly distant from the socialist humanism that Fromm championed. The spread of competitive global capitalism and the values of the untrammled marketplace, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, substantial outbreaks of terrorism, and the intensification of raw nationalism, have all made Fromm's humanism appear less applicable than it once had been. Consider too that Fromm thrived during decades where interdisciplinary public intellectuals like Hannah Arendt, Franz Fanon, and Bertram Russell spoke to wide segments of the public. Yet the ascendance of a far more specialized and discipline bound intellectual culture globally has severely circumscribed the opportunities for public intellectuals to survive economically and to appeal to large audiences.

Despite the distressing changes in the world since Fromm's death, biography remains a deeply appealing genre. Next to innocuous self-help literature, readers still buy biographies. An artfully constructed biography offers possibilities for human empathy and identification to emerge more than any other genre. When we learn of the likes, fears, and hopes of another, we seem inevitably to compare these qualities to our own. As important as Erich Fromm has

been, he lacks a full comprehensive biography. Studies by scholars like Donald Hausdorff (1972) and Daniel Burston (1991) have drawn almost entirely upon Fromm's publications and have focused on his thought. So have an abundance of primarily European dissertations, articles, and books. But other than Rainer Funk's wonderful pictorial biographies (1983 and 2000), we have no scholarship on how his life and emotions connected to his intellectual production. Nor do we know very much about Fromm's connection to the Frankfurt Institute, to the American Socialist Party, to the emergence of Mexican psychoanalysis, or to Europe's Green parties. Although he forged warm friendships with other public intellectuals like David Riesman, Clara Urquhart, and Ivan Illich, we know precious little about these. Major political figures like J. William Fulbright consulted Fromm regularly, but the nature of these relationships remain unclear. Although he was on very close terms with feminist psychoanalysts like Karen Horney and Clara Thompson, these remain largely undetailed. Finally, although he was heralded as a very skillful psychoanalyst, we know precious little about Fromm's clinical practice.

A full comprehensive biography, engagingly written, not only satisfies a scholarly need, but should serve our efforts to increase Fromm's global prominence. Yet, given the wonderfully comprehensive Fromm archive in Tuebingen, why has the effort not been made? Why has the focus remained almost entirely on Fromm's intellectual contribution exclusive of his feelings and emotions and with precious little on the day to day social, professional, and institutional contexts of his life? It took me some time to answer this question.

I undertook a full, comprehensive biography in 2002, and within a few years I had mastered the most important source – Dr. Funk's vast archival holdings in Tuebingen. This was supplemented by interviews with key Fromm family members and associates in the United States, Europe, and Mexico. I also unearthed some important letters held in private hands. A few more archival collections need to be examined and a few more interviews conducted. But I now realize why scholars like Daniel Burston and Lawrence Wilde stopped decidedly short of com-



prehensive biographies.

Erich Fromm was very suspicious of biographies. For the most part, he regarded them either as futile exercises in hero worship or coarse intrusions on a subject's need for privacy. Whenever a biographer sought Fromm's assistance to help understand a close associate like Karen Horney, he refused to cooperate. Indeed, Fromm was adamant that no full comprehensive biography be written about him and instructed Annis Freeman, his third wife, to destroy all correspondence pertaining to his personal life if she survived him. She followed this instruction all too zealously. Consequently, when Burston, Wilde, and other potential biographers pursued his life, they encountered such a major limitation in personal correspondence that they restricted their coverage largely to the ideas that he expressed in his publications.

When I encountered this barrier, I struggled for ways to surmount it, drawing on my experience writing two prior biographies of twentieth century psychological thinkers (Karl Menninger and Erik Erikson). Scouring the Fromm archive from top to bottom, I found that Annis missed perhaps a dozen key personal documents. She also missed letters with a choice sentence here and a key paragraph there. Finally, she could not trash letters Fromm wrote to others like William Fulbright and David Riesman which were housed in their own archival collections. This is not to say that I encountered a plentiful supply of information on Fromm's personal life in his correspondence. Rather, I found enough to give me a sense that the biographical endeavor was possible if I exploited other sources rather zealously.

Fromm never wrote an autobiography. However, in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (E. Fromm, 1962a, pp. 3-12), he wrote a short essay on his early life which, when coupled with the bits of correspondence that have survived, gives the biographer considerable insight into his childhood and adolescence. We learn, for example, that he was "an only child, with an anxious and moody father and a depression-prone mother..." To escape the pains of being "a lonely pampered boy," Fromm described how he drew inspiration from the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, and how he also

sought out mentors for his study of the Old Testament. He explained how, after World War I broke out, the "crazy pattern of hate and national self-glorification" made him increasingly skeptical of unexamined premises; he came to prioritize reasoned thought. From that point on, he would seek "to understand the irrationality of mass behavior." (*Ibid.*) Fromm became passionately interested in politics and social movements, sensing he was more temperamentally suited to be an analyst and theorist than an activist. As a young man in the 1920s, he discovered that Freud and Marx helped anchor his thoughts and he became a secular Jew.

The most difficult part of writing on a life is to frame the subject's early years where written materials are the most sparse. Fromm's autobiographical essay helped me enormously. I sought amplification through available letters to and from the friends of his childhood and youth like Ernst Simon. I also examined the random recollections that Fromm jotted down about early mentors like Rabbi Nehemia Nobel, Alfred Weber, and especially Salman Rabinkow. Within a short while, I sensed that I was building a rather solid outline of his early life.

Successful biography requires not only a broad understanding of one's subject, but substantial detail on the fabric of his or her daily existence. Given the deliberate destruction of much of Fromm's personal correspondence, I soon realized that such "thick description" would not be possible from written archival materials alone. I needed other sources. Fortunately, photographs of all stages of Fromm's life have survived. By studying these photographs as closely as I examined Fromm correspondence, new insights arose. Like many middle class Germans, his mother Rosa took Erich to a local photographer during his early years, where she followed the custom of having him photographed with long hair and a dress so that he was scarcely distinguishable from a girl. By the time their sons reached five or six, most German mothers insisted that they appear with cropped hair and distinctly boy's attire. Rosa was very late to make this change, suggesting a preference for a daughter. A photograph of Erich as an adolescent reveals Rosa pressing his head to her bosom and looking off in the distance, as if she



was displaying a trophy. Other photographs of mother and son together underscore the emotional distance between them, with taunt bodies and little eye contact. Photographs of Erich and his father Naphtali contrasted, but were also revealing. Often he tried to emulate the father's posture and facial expression. Well into adolescence, he would hug Naphtali and even, from time to time, would sit on his lap. Naphtali seemed to take great joy in this closeness with his son, though his expressions also revealed considerable tension and anxiety. There are several photographs of Erich with fellow students in Frankfurt's Wöhlerschule, where he appears far more relaxed and convivial than with his parents. Erich left home to enroll at the University of Heidelberg in 1919. Photographs of him during the 1920s register an increasingly proficient and serious scholar and professional. This was how he appeared as he received a sociology doctorate while studying with Weber and Rabinov, become acquainted with Freudian premises and techniques, and joined Max Horkheimer's Frankfurt Institute as researcher in social psychology. From photographs with his three wives, we see caring and affection; but they suggest that deep joy and unbound love seemed to elude him before he became engaged to Annis Freeman. I visited and photographed the Fromm residences in Cuernavaca and Locarno. His large study in Cuernavaca, where he wrote his books at one end of the room and treated patients on the other, was especially revealing. He clearly prioritized a regularized process of daily writing at a desk overlooking beautiful gardens. But the dark corner of the room where he conducted analyses had a subdued and calming quality. Jorge Silva suggested to me that temperamentally there were two Fromms – the ambitious, driven scholar and psychoanalyst who came to Mexico to live in 1950, but also the much softer, more relaxed and assuring sage in his last decades. Fromm photographs gave substantial documentation to this slow change in his personage. As well, photographs from the 1970s reveal the marked physical deterioration that was brought on by persistent heart attacks and other ailments, but they also underscored his sense of deep joy in life.

Interviews are at least as important as photographs in revealing the personal Fromm that the massive destruction of personal letters made elusive. Twenty five years after his death, all of the friends of Fromm's childhood and youth, his colleagues at the Frankfurt and White Institutes, and close friends of his adulthood like David Riesman and Ivan Illich have passed away. So have all three wives. He had no children, and stepson Joseph Gurland suffered from dementia when I began my research. Fortunately, tape recordings of several interviews of Fromm were conducted late in his life have survived. I have consulted those by Guido Ferrari, Hans Juergen Schultz, Richard Evans, and a few others. The problem with most of these is that Fromm steered the interviewers into theoretical topics, intellectual history, and ethical abstractions, and away from his personal life. If an interviewer resisted and sought to move back to the personal, Fromm might well have terminated the interview. This is why Gerhard Khoury's skilled recordings with Fromm during his final years are such valuable documents. Fromm revealed to Khoury a vast array of personal memories with remarkable ease and trust.

Obviously, Khoury's recordings were not enough. I had to pursue interviews of my own among a limited number of survivors. Fromm's first cousin, Gertrud Hunziker-Fromm, was invaluable on Erich's early years. During several days in Zurich we reviewed the lives of past generations on his father's side of the Fromm family – their personalities and temperaments, spouses, and occupations. Gertrud Hunziker-Fromm also gave me a sensitive psychoanalyst's take on the evolution over many decades of Erich's temperament and character. There was not only a deeply serious young man Erich and a more convivial late Erich, but all shades of change in between. After one of my visits, Gertrud mailed to me copies of several letters and essays concerning her relationship to her first cousin Erich.

For an understanding of his mother Rosa Krause's side of the family, archival letters pointed me to Miriam Krakauer Rothbacher, a distant cousin. When I visited her in Vienna home and we began long hours of review of the Krause family, Miriam presented me with a vast



correspondence revealing how some members of the family escaped from the emerging Holocaust while others went to the concentration camps. As we reviewed these letters, it became clear to both of us that personal correspondence represented a form of emotional glue that held the Krause family together as Nazi aggressions sent those who remained in Germany to concentration camps while prompting migrations to Bolivia, Chile, the Soviet Union, England, and any other country that might accept a German Jewish exile. Erich Fromm was very much a part of this correspondence network. The exchange of letters within a troubled family stirred up strong feelings within him as he began to write his classic, *Escape from Freedom* (1941). It was no accident that the book explored the historic and psychological roots of the rise of the European totalitarianism that was threatening his family. I had found a central personal dimension to probably his deepest and most important volume. But my contact with Miriam Rothbacher yielded another, if less spectacular breakthrough. She insisted from memory and family lore that Erich's mother Rosa was far more complex than a depressed mother who was possessive of her son. There was also a kind and loving side – a woman who could spread good cheer and happiness. Perhaps I had embraced too quickly Erich's retrospective view of his mother and was characterizing his parental household too negatively.

What became clear from my interviews of Gertrud Hunziker-Fromm and Miriam Rothbacher is that oral history not only jogs memory. It can facilitate an interviewee's willingness to reveal personal correspondence that is considered too precious or intimate to deposit in archives. Although other interviewees did not come up with such substantial materials, almost all provided at least a document or two or a photograph. The divide between archival research and oral history was hardly as rigid as one might suspect.

Because Fromm lived for twenty-three years in Mexico (1950-1973) where he trained the earliest generations of Mexican psychoanalysts, it was an obvious location for additional oral history. From Aniceto Aramoni, Jorge Silva, and Salvador and Sonia Millán, I learned much

about the origins, structure, and factionalism within the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute and on Fromm's role as a training analyst. They also offered cogent insights on Fromm's personal life. But I learned even more of the personal dimension from two people who came to know Fromm as children. Rebecca Aramoni Serrano (Aniceto Aramoni's daughter) recalled how Fromm was always very generous and welcoming, embracing her with his soft and fluffy hands even when she disturbed him in his writing. He loved pasta and pastries and taught Rebecca how to make his special pineapple punch. He also walked regularly, meditated, practiced Tai Chi, and seemed increasingly comfortable living in Mexico. The son of Fromm's live-in cook (Alicia Camacho Garcia) is Hernando Ibarra, and he detailed similar experiences from a child's perspective. Fromm regularly provided funds for the medical and educational needs of all of Alicia's children and urged them to excel in whatever calling they elected. Ibarra agreed with Serrano that Fromm loved good food and drink, and he provided a very detailed survey of Fromm's dietary preferences. More important, he explained rather convincingly how Fromm never fully adjusted to Mexican culture even as he felt more comfortable in the country. Fromm found the traditional delicacies too spicy, rarely read Spanish language publications, and was uncomfortable with the Mexican disregard of punctuality. For Ibarra, Fromm always seemed more German and even more American than Mexican. From Serrano and Ibarra, I learned what I should have known beforehand – that memories of our childhoods are likely to be not only more personal than the memories we have of our adulthoods. They can also yield some striking insights that adult situated memories tend to "overlook".

My most extensive and frequent interviews were with Michael Maccoby, who worked with Fromm in Mexico, and Rainer Funk, who worked with him when he lived in Locarno during his final years. Both had published very different appraisals of Fromm before I interviewed them. In print, Maccoby (1996) characterized Fromm as always alternating between a rational, analytic approach that yielded profound insights, on the one hand, and a prophetic or messianic



mode that undermined the rationality. In contrast to Maccoby's interpretation, Funk (1983 and 2000) characterized Fromm as a humanist in his thought and in his life, with the humanism rooted in his early Jewish background and training. Fromm evolved into a world-class intellectual who constantly rethought and deepened his formidable insights on the nature of our humanity. Maccoby and Funk amplified considerably on their appraisals as we talked. Both also provided much detail on Fromm's personality. Over time, I realized how profoundly both interpretations were rooted in specific and sometimes rather emotion-charged personal encounters with Fromm. Because I lacked comparable experiences, they could not possibly represent my interpretation. I would have to come up with my own appraisal and access for myself Fromm's basic legacy.

In the past year or so, I have tried to put together all that I could find from surviving correspondence, photographs, and interviews on Fromm's private personal life to match the abundant record of his public contributions and thereby facilitate a comprehensive, balanced biography. Despite the destruction of most correspondence related to his private life, I found that I had a broad sense of his personal qualities. He was almost always lively and energetic, happiest when writing books and exemplifying what he described as the "productive character." When he was not working, he loved good food, good jokes, and the laughter and the love of friends. Initially, he had the carriage of a tough-minded and systematic German scholar, suspicious of political and cultural elites but also suspicious of popular culture. Indeed, there was an arrogant and distancing quality in his relationships with others. But slowly during his middle years, he "softened" and became more self-assured. He was more convivial and less driven - more relaxed and intuitively supportive of friends and colleagues. Yet if my research had allowed me to fashion, at least preliminarily, the broad outlines of Fromm's evolving personality, much more detail was required if the portrayal was to be convincing. Given that I had already explored most archival data, examined most extant photographs, and conducted a good number of interviews, where was I to find an

abundant new source of information that would enable me to describe the concrete personal texture of his everyday life?

In July of this year, I read through *Ethics and Politics* (1990b), a posthumous collection of Fromm political essays assembled by Rainer Funk. In these writings, Fromm analyzed global dangers at the height of the Cold War -- the Cuban Missile Crisis, the status of Berlin, the Sino-Soviet relationship, decolonization and the needs of the Third World, the Test Ban Treaty, and much more. As I studied these essays, I found that I was able to spot a good many specific sentences and paragraphs that revealed the integration of Fromm's personal and public selves. In his role as a social commentator and essentially a political psychologist, he was providing the reader a great deal about his personal life. He portrayed himself, for example, as a gadfly free of official national narratives or dominant political and economic interests. He was also remarkably tough and pragmatic, especially on the place of Germany in U.S.-Soviet discord. Indeed, Fromm had mastered vast detail on almost all pressing global issues, the realistic political needs of the statesmen involved in those issues, and a willingness to settle for whatever measures might keep the human species alive in a less than "sane society." Over and over, Fromm explained how hard he worked to understand and cooperate with those who articulated perspectives and values violating his "radical humanist" goals. Rather consistently, he preferred meliorative change in global trouble spots to none at all. Fromm also indicated that he was struggling within himself to transcend what his colleague Michael Maccoby characterized as two competing sides to Fromm's temperament -- the prophetic, messianic and rather polemical side, on the one hand, and the tempered, analytic, scholarly side on the other. I saw that he was working rather assiduously to integrate the two dispositions so that he would not flip from one to the other. Fromm was seeking to espouse a passionate humanism while disciplining it with close reasoning, abundant evidence, and pragmatic reformist considerations. Erik Erikson characterized this merger (which Erikson sought as well in himself) as a form of "disciplined subjectivity." In short, I discovered that in very public



documents on international affairs, Fromm revealed a good deal about his personal life and temperament that the scholarly community has not quite recognized.

From *Ethics and Politics* (1990b), I returned to *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Man for Himself* (1947), *The Sane Society* (1955), and the other books and articles that have been the almost exclusive focus of those who have written on Fromm. I found what I suspected during my reading of *Ethics and Politics* -- that several years examining Fromm correspondence, photographs, and interviews had given me an eye for key aspects of his personal life and a capacity to spot personal detail in his public writings that I had been unable to see before. Familiar text passages now yielded new evidence. If Fromm wanted to keep his personal life from view by eliminating personal correspondence, that approach had its limits. As a social critic, a political psychologist of global affairs, and an analyst of the human condition, his personage mixed decidedly with his public writings. Because Fromm's humanism was personal as well as a construct to enlighten his readers, the import with which he regarded public issues opened a large window into his private concerns.

### Conclusion

We noted earlier that Fromm's reputation has taken a decided turn downward among American intellectuals and scholars on the left. This came after Herbert Marcuse (1955) charged that by rejecting Freud on the primacy of libidinal drives and the centrality of the Oedipus Complex, Fromm had emptied psychoanalysis of its critical and radical content. For Marcuse, Fromm had become not a radical Marxian-Freudian, as he characterized himself, but a proponent of liberal reformist accommodation to basic capitalist social and political institutions and values. Coming from a respected European socialist intellectual and who pioneered in Critical Theory, Marcuse's charge not only diminished Fromm's American following. With the increasingly global marketplace for ideas, it hardly enhanced his reputation within the European Left or even among Latin American socialists. To be sure,

scholars like Lawrence Wilde (2004) and John Rickert (1986) offered what has become a stock rebuttal in America and Europe -- that Fromm's humanist vision was quite radical and hardly conformist accommodationism. Fromm was not calling for palliatives or social adjustments, they noted. Rather, he always insisted that social structures had to be altered fundamentally if the individual's full potential for productivity and happiness was to be realized. Indeed, Finnish historian Petteri Pietikainen goes further, characterizing Fromm's humanist vision of a "sane society" as socialist utopianism on the order of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1960).

This stock rebuttal may sit well with certain enthusiastic supporters of Fromm's prophetic "radical humanism." But it is shallow and distortive. Indeed, Fromm's longtime friend and analyst, David Riesman, felt that the rebuttal belittled the complexity of the man he knew so well. With increasing success, Riesman advised me years ago, Fromm meshed or integrated his prophet-like humanist visions with a hard-headed realism. As his biographer who has discerned a new way to access Fromm's personal side, I must agree. Even as he wrote *The Sane Society* (1955) and *The Revolution of Hope* (1968), Fromm recognized that the odds were long against achieving a fully humanistic society that allowed its citizens to realize their complete productive potentials. Indeed, Fromm knew that in his lifetime, at least, his crusade for humanistic changes would yield mixed results at best. Thus, given ideological and psychological constraints that were bound to persist, most people would have to settle for a less than entirely happy and productive existence. Consequently, Riesman privately urged Fromm after the Marcuse attack to state quite explicitly what his books did not always make entirely clear -- that he was a radical in his basic humanist vision, but that he was a persistent champion of very concrete and achievable mid-twentieth century liberal reforms-- enhanced social welfare, expanded civil rights and civil liberties, strong trade unionism, specific workforce measures to diminish alienation, and pragmatic (perhaps half-way) steps to avert nuclear war. In his advocacy of these programs that could be effected without fundamental structural change, Fromm de-



veloped close friendships with and strongly influenced a number of important liberal reformist activists in the United States, Latin America, and Europe – perhaps most notably J. William Fulbright, Adlai Stevenson, Paulo Freire, Danilo Dolci, and Bertrand Russell. That is, Fromm worked for much of their “liberal tradition” of ameliorative accommodation within capitalist structures. He saw liberal reform measures as important in themselves as well as potential steps toward his more radical vision of a humanist and essentially democratic socialist order that continues to elude us. His life was a complex, changing synthesis of humanist visions and concrete, pragmatic reforms. Unlike Marcuse and other colleagues from the Frankfurt School who criticized him since he broke from them in 1939, Fromm was able to claim that he contributed to some tangible victories during his lifetime – measures to curb the testing and spread of nuclear weapons, for example, a stronger United Nations, and measures enhancing the welfare state. Thus far, these achievements have survived the attacks of Bush and Blair and their “war against terrorism” even as humanist socialism has continued to elude us.

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