



Thinking about Fromm and Marxism

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Erich Fromm's work is unfortunately neglected in academia today, in no small part because his expansive humanism is out of joint with many forms of radical thought popular in those quarters. In addition, university psychology and psychiatry departments have almost completely excluded Freudians or psychoanalysts of any kind, which leaves no room for Fromm there either. Among the larger educated public in the U.S. and Germany, however, Fromm continues to be read widely, as can be seen in sales of his work. Many assign his writings in college and even high school courses. I have used his *Escape from Freedom* (1941) for years as a main text in an introduction to sociology course. Students, whose response has been very favorable, encounter therein a clear and engaging introduction to social theory (Marx, Weber, and Freud), to the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, to the anatomy of fascism and authoritarianism, and to a critique of the atomization of modern capitalist civilization and its culture industry.

In the face of the academic neglect of Fromm's work, some have continued to discuss Fromm's work in scholarly publications as well. Douglas Kellner's *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (1989) and Stephen Eric Bronner's *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (1994) each give Fromm his due as a core member of the Frankfurt School whose work has continuing relevance. A recent study by Lawrence Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity* (Palgrave 2004), places Fromm's progressive politics rather than psychoanalysis at the core of his intellectual project. In several articles, Neil McLaughlin has discussed Fromm's work, as well as the declining academic interest in it (see for example, "How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual," *Sociological Forum* 13:2 [1998], pp. 214-46). Fromm archivist Rainer Funk published a volume on the centenary of his birth, *Erich Fromm. His Life and Ideas. An Illustrated Biography* (Continuum Books, 2000). Funk covers all aspects of Fromm's development, from his early interest in Jewish theology to his discovery of Marx and Freud in crisis-ridden pre-Hitler Germany. Funk also offers a new account of the disputes between Fromm and the other leading members of the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor Adorno, who opposed Fromm's effort to move away from Freudian orthodoxy. By 1936, Fromm is arguing, "The problem within psychology and sociology is the dialectic intertwining of natural and

historical factors. Freud has wrongly based psychology totally on natural factors" (p. 94), Adorno counters Fromm's "revisionism": "This time I did not like Fromm at all -- he put me into the paradoxical situation of defending Freud" (p. 97). While Funk is clearly partial to Fromm, one does not need to accept the former's entire argument to recognize that the frequent attempts by Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and many of their followers to portray Fromm as somehow more conservative, as well as hopelessly superficial, has distorted the history of the Left.

Below, I reflect on some aspects of Fromm's relation to Marxism, keeping these recent discussions in mind.

Freudian Marxism

NONE DENY THAT IT WAS FROMM WHO FIRST INTRODUCED the Frankfurt School to a form of Freudian Marxism that was at the root of all of their subsequent efforts to theorize "authoritarian personalities." Drawn frequently from the lower middle classes they often combined a masochistic reverence and obedience to higher authority with sadistic urges to dominate the less powerful. Their prime example was fascism, but their argument has been extended to the guards at Abu Ghraib or those drawn to religious fundamentalist movements, including radical Islamism. Fromm summed up these issues in popular form in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), a pioneering analysis of the appeal of fascism to those living under the uncertainties and the atomization of modern capitalist society.

Few are aware that Fromm actually began his attempt to unite Marxian class analysis with psychoanalysis in a critique of the criminal justice system, rather than in the study of fascism as such. Writing in Germany in 1930, he notes in one of his earliest published articles that the criminal justice system continues its punitive ways despite numerous studies by liberal reformers proving that prison or capital punishment are completely ineffective in protecting society from crime. Pointing to "hidden functions" of the criminal justice system, Fromm argues that whether in punishing or in showing mercy, "the state imposes itself as a father image on the unconscious of the masses," working to bind them to the rulers, even against their own economic interests. A second hidden function of the criminal justice system is to divert the anger of the masses over their own social conditions away from the dominant classes and onto the criminal. This allows the masses to express their pent-up anger "in a manner that is harmless for the state." Fromm adds: "Part of the function of war lies in the same direction." ("The State as Educator," in *Erich Fromm and Critical Criminology*, edited by Kevin Anderson and Richard Quinney, University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 126). One need not accept Fromm's Freudian framework *tout court* to recognize that he has put his finger on some of the ways in which the whole issue of crime has ideological dimensions that legitimate the capitalist order.

Most commentators regard Fromm's early writings as more steeped in Marxism than his postwar ones. This is another indication of the extent to which the pro-Adorno interpretation has become dominant on the Left. In fact, the opposite is true. Fromm's most important contributions to Marxism came after World War II, when he championed a specifically Marxist humanist standpoint in the public sphere in the U.S. As the radical psychologist Joel Kovel aptly notes, Fromm's move away from orthodox Freudianism led to "the introduction of Marx's humanism -- the humanism of the 1844 Manuscripts -- in place of Freudian instinct theory," something that "distinguishes him from the other psychoanalytic Marxists of the time" ("Foreword," to the *Erich Fromm Reader*, Humanities Press, 1994, p. xi). In *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (1962), Fromm acknowledged publicly that Marx was for him the more important of the two thinkers.

The Unpublished Discussion of Trotsky

ONE INDICATION OF FROMM'S RENEWED INTEREST IN MARXISM after World War II was his decision to write a review of *Trotsky's Diary in Exile*, published in 1958 by Harvard University Press. Fromm may have intended to publish it in the mass-circulation *Saturday Review*, for which he often wrote during this period. In his review, Fromm deplors the "general habit of considering Stalinism and present-day Communism as identical with, or at least a continuation of revolutionary Marxism," especially the attempt to link "Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky" to "the vengeful killer Stalin, and to the opportunistic conservative Khrushchev." Concerning Lenin and Trotsky, he adds:

They were men with an uncompromising sense of truth, penetrating to the very essence of reality, and never taken in by the deceptive surface; of an unquenchable courage and integrity; of deep concern and devotion to man and his future; unselfish and with little vanity or lust for power.

Fromm concludes that "just as was the case with Marx, ...the concern, understanding and sharing of a deeply loving man ...shines through Trotsky's diary."

Fromm strongly objects to one aspect of Harvard University Press's publication of Trotsky's diary, however, a passage in the publicity copy referring to Trotsky's "underlying fanaticism and selfishness." I am aware of no similar defense of the life and work of Lenin or Trotsky in the writings of other members of the Frankfurt School. (Quotations from "A Recently Discovered Article by Erich Fromm on Trotsky and the Russian Revolution," *Science & Society* 66:2 [2002], pp. 266-73).

Marx's Humanism

WITH HIS BOOK *MARX'S CONCEPT OF MAN* (1961), Fromm probably did more than any other individual to introduce Marx's *1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* to the American public. *Marx's Concept of Man* consists of a 90-page discussion by Fromm, Tom Bottomore's translation of 110 pages from Marx's *1844 Essays*, 23 pages from other texts by Marx (primarily *The German Ideology* and *The Critique of Political Economy*), and 40 pages of reminiscences from those close to Marx. Despite subsequent claims that Fromm expresses in his introduction a preference for the young Marx over the "mature" Marx of *Capital*, the text does not support such claims.

Fromm's was not the first effort to launch a discussion of the *1844 Manuscripts* in the U.S. Marcuse had discussed them more profoundly in his *Reason and Revolution* (1941), and the Marxist humanist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya continued the serious theoretical discussion in her *Marxism and Freedom* (1958), a volume that also included the first published English translation of two of the more important *1844 Manuscripts*, "Private Property and Communism" and "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic." A full translation of the *Manuscripts* appeared in 1959 in a small edition from Progress Publishers in Moscow. These previous discussions and translations drew relatively limited responses, however. Fromm's stature as a public intellectual and his extremely popular form of presentation helped to spark a far wider discussion of the young Marx, not only among the broad intellectual public, but also in mass media outlets such as *Newsweek*, which conceded that "Marxian scholars have long known that there is an amazing world of difference between the mythical Marx and the real man."

An interesting and unfortunately still relevant part of Fromm's own contribution to *Marx's Concept of Man* is his critique what he terms "the falsification of Marx's concepts" in the mass media and even among intellectuals. He adds that "this ignorance and distortion of Marx are more to be found in the United States than in any other Western country" (p. 1). Too often, he writes, Marx is portrayed as a crude materialist who "neglected the importance of the individual" (p. 2). Fromm refutes this, holding that "the very aim of Marx is to liberate man from the pressure of economic needs, so that he can be fully human" (p. 5).

What Fromm sees as a second "falsification" of Marx, this one carried out by both Western intellectuals and Stalinist ideologues, is the forced identification of Marx with the single-party totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and Maoist China. During the Cold War, this led even leftist intellectuals to take sides with either the West (for example, Sidney Hook) or Communism (for example, Jean-Paul Sartre) as the lesser evil. Fromm will have none of this, as he sharply differentiates "Marxist humanist socialism," on the one hand, from "totalitarian socialism," on the other (p. viii), with the latter in reality "a system of conservative state capitalism" (p. vii).

Again, this critique on Fromm's part has relevance for today, in light of the many attempts to tie the collapse of the Soviet Union to the "death" of Marxism.

Unfortunately, in his introduction to *Marx's Concept of Man*, Fromm sometimes imposes his own more eclectic form of humanism on Marx himself, as for example when he writes that "Marx's philosophy constitutes a spiritual existentialism in secular language" and that Marx's concept of socialism is rooted in "prophetic Messianism" (p. 5). Cold War liberals and some of those on the left who had "chosen" the West seized upon these weaknesses to attack not only Fromm, whom they already resented for his critiques of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, but also the whole new view of Marx as a radical humanist that he was presenting. (These critiques grew even louder after the publication the same year of Fromm's critique of nuclear weapons, *May Man Prevail?*)

In a review of *Marx's Concept of Man*, the young philosopher Richard Bernstein dismisses the *1844 Manuscripts* as "a series of jottings." In language prefiguring later Habermasian and post-structuralist critiques of Marx, Bernstein also warns that Fromm's talk of human "self-realization" in Marx was a "dangerous" form of "absolute humanism" that "as history has taught us... can by subtle gradations turn into an absolute totalitarianism" (*New Leader*, Oct. 2, 1961). Sidney Hook, an originator of the "Hegel and totalitarianism" school who had ignored Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* in his acclaimed *From Marx to Hegel* (1936), pontificates in another hostile review: "To seek what was distinctive and characteristic about Marx in a period when he was still in Hegelian swaddling clothes... is to violate every accepted and tested canon of historical scholarship" (*New Leader*, Dec. 11, 1961). Nonetheless, the ground was shifting toward a fuller appreciation of the whole of Marx and toward a new type of radicalism that would attack not only economic exploitation, but also alienation.

The Fromm-Dunayevskaya Correspondence

IT WAS WHILE PUTTING TOGETHER *MARX'S CONCEPT OF MAN* that Fromm began his thirty-year correspondence with Raya Dunayevskaya. Although they never met face to face, over 100 of their letters have survived and are to be published in the coming years. (At present, they can be found in the microfilm Raya Dunayevskaya Collection and in the Erich Fromm papers in Germany.) One major topic in their correspondence is Marx, especially the young Marx. Their correspondence documents the process by which Dunayevskaya contributed an essay to *Socialist Humanism*, the 1965 international symposium that Fromm edited, and Fromm's assistance in obtaining a publisher for her 1973 book, *Philosophy and Revolution*. In a 1961 letter Dunayevskaya mentions that she first read the *1844 Manuscripts* in 1939, after which she suggested to Sidney Hook that they be published, only to have him dismiss the idea. This foreshadowed Hook's harsh attacks on Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* in 1941, as well as his subsequent ones on *Marx's Concept of Man*, cited above. Other important letters include some

pungent critiques by both Fromm and Dunayevskaya of Frankfurt School members Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer, as well as Sartre.

The Fromm-Dunayevskaya correspondence also contains an illuminating discussion of gender. In 1976, while working on her *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (1982), Dunayevskaya writes to Fromm concerning the "lack of camaraderie between Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky." She asks: "Could there have been, if not outright male chauvinism, at least some looking down on her theoretical work, because she was a woman?" A year later, not having received a response to the above, Dunayevskaya writes to him again on Luxemburg and feminism, this time mentioning Luxemburg's reference to Penthesilea the Amazon queen. This time Fromm responds, although he has been hospitalized following a heart attack: "I feel that the male Social Democrats never could understand Rosa Luxemburg, nor could she acquire the influence for which she had the potential because she was a woman; and the men could not become full revolutionaries because they did not emancipate themselves from their male, patriarchal, and hence dominating, character structure." (Most of Fromm's letter appears in Dunayevskaya's *Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution* [Wayne State University Press, 1996], p. 242).

Fromm's life and work centered on how human beings could realize their full humanity, not only in psychological terms, but also politically and philosophically. Always searching for a pathway out of the alienated world of capitalism, he played a major role in the discussions of Marx and of socialist humanism in the U.S. and internationally.

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