



The prescience and paradox of Erich Fromm: A note on the performative contradictions of critical theory

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Abstract

As social theorists seek to understand the contemporary challenges of radical populism, we would do well to reconsider the febrile insights of the psychoanalytic social theorist Erich Fromm. It was Fromm who, at the beginning of the 1930s, conceptualized the emotional and sociological roots of a new ‘authoritarian character’ who was meek in the face of great power above and ruthless to the powerless below. It was Fromm, in the 1950s, who argued that societies, not only individuals, could be sick. This essay traces the intertwining of psychoanalytic and sociological methods that allowed Fromm to create such new ideas. At the same time, it highlights how Fromm’s sociology was hampered by an economic Marxist approach to the institutions and culture of democratic capitalist societies. Such theoretical restriction prevented Fromm from conceptualizing how institutions like democracy, science, and psychotherapy can provide resources for widespread emotional recuperation and civil repair.

Keywords

authoritarian character, critical theory, *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm, sick society

During this worrisome historical time, when American and European democracies seem dangerously vulnerable to far-right, sometimes neo-fascist populism, it is both instructive and, at the same time, deeply unnerving to return to the life and thought of Erich Fromm.

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Born in Germany to a middle-class, Jewish home, Fromm came to intellectual and moral consciousness amidst the shattering experience of the First World War, and never recovered from the conviction that the stability and promise of modern life was gone forever.¹ Afterward, he studied the Talmud and Jewish mysticism, took a doctorate in sociology, and became a psychoanalyst in the 1920s, joining the Frankfurt School for Social Research before emigrating to New York in the early 1930s. Over the next half century, Fromm became an intellectual prophet, publishing one influential jeremiad after another, powerful political, social, and psychological tracts that, while mostly Marxist, were also unabashed declarations of his belief – long before the Beatles and the Hippies – that the solution for the terrifying problems of the modern world was love, sweet love, along with democratic socialism of course (Fromm, 1956).

Fromm became one of the most influential public intellectuals of the 20th century. His writings were not only widely reviewed but everywhere discussed. He was interviewed by the CBS News megastar Mike Wallace for an hour on primetime network television. He helped found and fund not only Amnesty International but SANE, the once powerful anti-nuclear proliferation organization. His influence extended from Harvard guru David Riesman, who wrote about the other-directed selves in the lonely crowd, to Benjamin Spock, the pediatrician whose manual on child-rearing inveighed against authoritarian parenting and helped re-structure the childhood psyches of American generations. Fromm was a friend of Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee who challenged Dwight Eisenhower during the elections of the 1950s. He offered suggestions about nuclear disarmament to John F. Kennedy, who called Fromm for advice in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He was a feminist before his time, co-founded the William Alanson White Institute in New York City and created the first psychoanalytic society in Mexico, where he lived for more than 20 years.

As a high school and university student, Fromm immersed himself in the study of the Talmud and Jewish mysticism. This experience imparted a humanism that gave to his later, mature thinking a moral but also moralistic foundation, and a quasi-religious, often eschatological tone. This tonality affected the manner in which Fromm ingested and externalized the two disciplines that defined his intellectual life. In his psychoanalytic writing, Fromm continuously tilted toward a utopian wish for a post-regressive I-Thou wholeness that would make neurosis a thing of the past. In his Marxism, Fromm spoke the orthodox language of class conflict and monopoly capitalism, but he walked the walk of Marx's earlier, left-Hegelian philosophical writings, which were steeped in a German romanticism that understood socialism as sublating the subject/object dichotomy (Fromm, 1964, 1965a).

Fromm's lifework was motivated by the double-sided belief that the analysis of society could not be purely sociological and that the analysis of individual emotions could not be only psychological. If one wishes to analyze institutions, cultural patterns, and collective forces, one needs to see how they become manifest emotionally, how they effectuate themselves at the depth-psychological level. 'Any group consists of individuals and nothing but individuals', Fromm argued in *Escape from Freedom*, 'and psychological mechanisms which we find operating in a group can therefore only be mechanisms that operate in individuals' (Fromm, 1941: 136). By psychological, of

course, Fromm meant psychoanalytic, drawing from the Freudian tradition and its variants.

Only a psychology which utilizes the concept of unconscious forces can penetrate the confusing rationalizations we are confronted with in analyzing either an individual or a culture. A great number of apparently insoluble problems disappear once we decide to give up the notion that the motives by which people *believe* themselves to be motivated are necessarily the ones which actually drive them to act, feel, and think as they do. (Fromm, 1941: 136, emphasis in original)

Yet Fromm maintained, at the same time, that understanding the unconscious could not be fully achieved without taking into account socio-historical conditions, the social environment within which the emotional self is compelled to live, if not thrive.

From this double-sided emphasis emerged Fromm's singular intellectual-cum-political obsession, what he called in *The Sane Society* 'the pathology of normalcy' (Fromm, 1955: 6), the 'idea that society as a whole may be lacking in sanity' (Fromm, 1955: 6). In Freud's last, deeply pessimistic and despairing book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the founder of psychoanalysis had called for a study of 'social neurosis', expressing the hope that 'one day someone will venture upon this research into the pathology of civilization communities' (Freud, 1962 [1930]: 141–2). Quoting this very passage in the opening pages of *The Sane Society*, Fromm declared, 'this book *does* venture upon this research'! He made this claim for the study of social neurosis in a chapter entitled 'Can a Society Be Sick?' Aren't we are still asking this question today? How can a society, like the United States, which allows hundreds of mass shootings while protecting the right of people to own automatic weapons, not be regarded as crazy?

In the hundred plus years since Freud outlined his revolutionary theories, the efforts to marry psychoanalytic and social analysis have been many. None has come close to succeeding (Alexander, 2014). It is an extraordinarily complex and challenging theoretical and empirical task. Fromm's efforts were pioneering. His intellectual feel for the soft underbelly of modern social structure was acute. He saw modern societies with clarity and without sentimentality: they are too individualistic, too competitive and cold hearted; they had failed to provide security, enough material, ideal, and emotional community to quiet the jangled nerves and ontological anxiety of frightened and worried hearts and minds.

Conceptualizing the emotional response to such social inadequacy, Fromm made a singular contribution to understanding the pathology of our time, introducing the signal idea of 'authoritarian character'. Fromm first worked this idea out empirically in his 1931 survey research of socialist and communist working-class men in Weimar Germany, 20 years before the term was egregiously appropriated without attribution by his erstwhile Frankfurt School colleague Theodor Adorno.² Ten years after his pioneering empirical research, Fromm developed a theory of authoritarian character in *Escape from Freedom*, his first book. To look back at what Fromm had to say in 1941 demonstrates how fundamentally relevant the idea of the 'authoritarian character' still is today (e.g. Afary and Friedland, 2018).

The most important feature to be mentioned is its attitude towards power. For the authoritarian character there exist, so to speak, two sexes: the powerful ones and the powerless ones. His love, admiration and readiness for submission are automatically aroused by power, whether of a person or of an institution. Power fascinates him not for any values for which a specific power may stand, but just because it is power. Just as his 'love' is automatically aroused by power, so powerless people or institutions arouse his contempt. The very sight of a powerless person makes him want to attack, dominate, and humiliate him. Whereas a different kind of character is appalled by the idea of attacking one who is helpless, the authoritarian character feels the more aroused the more helpless his object has become. (Fromm, 1941: 166–7)

This analysis, written almost 80 years ago, clearly resonates today, uncannily describing the infuriating, shameful, and demeaning performances of former American President. Donald Trump fervently admired and submissively submitted himself to powerful dictatorial leaders. At the same time, he despised, dominated, and continually humiliated powerless people, those he sensed were defenseless and weak – the disabled, racial minorities, immigrants, the poor, and political opponents.

The social sources of authoritarian character are powerlessness and its many manifestations, the deep fear that the world is spinning, has already spun, out of control, and that we individuals are alone in the center of this tornado. Conceptualizing authoritarian character as sado-masochistic, Fromm sees it as a defensive adaptation to an emotional-cum-sociological condition. The authoritarian 'admires authority and tends to submit to it' – this is masochism; 'at the same time, he wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him' – this is sadism (Fromm, 1941: 162). Fromm sees this underlying psychological condition as social character rather than perversion or neurosis. It is sociologically normal, representing 'tasks people have to fulfill in their social situation and [the] patterns of feelings and behavior [which] are present in their culture' (Fromm, 1941: 162). Authoritarianism 'represents the personality structure which is the human basis of Fascism' (Fromm, 1941: 162), but it was also, Fromm insisted, the basis for the pathologies of post-war democratic capitalist societies like America as well.

Fromm's diagnosis of a sick society is singular, one of the most penetrating and productive contributions of critical social thinking in modern times. At the same time, his understanding of the social conditions creating such social sickness tended toward the clichéd and conventional, a banal brew of Marxist and mass society nostrums that failed to evolve over the many decades of his intellectual life. 'The mode of life . . . is determined for the individual by the peculiarity of an economic system [that] becomes the primary factor in determining his whole character structure', Fromm intoned at the beginning of *Escape from Freedom* – 'because the imperative need for self-preservation forces him to accept the conditions under which he has to live' (Fromm, 1941: 16). Fifteen years later, in what seemed to most observers to be an entirely different world, Fromm insisted, in *The Sane Society*, that nothing had really changed. Alienation was total. 'Man is estranged from himself', and there is only automatism, conformity, submission, and destructiveness. Culture is ideological distortion. Mass culture is purely delusional, devoted to self-destructive fantasies and advertising. Democracy is a sham, 'not essentially different from the procedure on the commodity market' (Fromm, 1955:

186): ‘How can people express “their” will if they do not have any will or conviction of their own, if they are alienated automatons, whose tastes, opinions, and preferences are manipulated by the big conditioning machines?’ (Fromm, 1955: 185).

In spite of material prosperity, political and sexual freedom, the world in the middle of the twentieth century is mentally sicker than it was in the nineteenth century We are governed by the fear of the anonymous authority of conformity We have . . . no convictions of our own, almost no individuality, almost no sense of self. (Fromm, 1955: 102)

In 1965, one-quarter century after *Escape from Freedom* first appeared, Fromm wrote a new forward for the book, which had been published during the dark night of Nazism when it appeared that the forces of violent racism and despotism might be victorious. In 1965, Fromm acknowledged, things *looked* very different.

The United States has shown itself resistant against all totalitarian attempts to gain influence. Important steps toward the political and social liberation of the Negroes have been taken, all the more impressive because of the courage and discipline of those in the forefront of the fighting for Negro freedom – both Negroes and whites. All these facts show that the drive for freedom inherent in human nature, while it can be corrupted and suppressed, tends to assert itself again and again. (Fromm, 1965b: xv)

But Fromm immediately caught himself. ‘All these reassuring facts must not deceive us’, he warned, ‘into thinking that the dangers of “escape from freedom” are not as great, or even greater today than they were when this book was first published’ (Fromm, 1965b: xv). Really? At the very height of social liberalism, in the midst of gathering anti-war and radical student movements, and on the horizon of an emergent feminism, American society posed greater dangers than Fascism? Fromm-the-American-citizen was moved to celebrate the ‘drive for freedom’ in a moment of liberal achievement, asserting that, no matter what the opposition, liberty would assert itself powerfully time and time again. The problem was that Fromm-the-social-theorist had failed to identify the social, cultural, and psychological resources which feed such positive counter-tendencies of modernity.

For reasons of intellectual biography and personal history, Fromm was unable intellectually to conceptualize the elements in Western culture, social structure, and personality that could, and often did, provide resources for social health, for ameliorating symptoms of a sick society. He ignored Dewey-inspired progressive schooling, the rationality of experimental science, the sustaining warmth of friendship, the truth-telling of responsible journalism, the promises of citizenship and an independent judiciary, the empathic and often expansive feelings of civil solidarity (Alexander, 2006), and, indeed, the role of psychoanalysis and critical social thinking itself (Alexander, 2009). Fromm was certainly aware of these phenomena and the resources they provided for expanding freedom rather than escaping from it. It would seem, however, that he felt himself morally bound to highlight the negative alone. In *Escape from Freedom*, after acknowledging that Protestantism provided a ‘subjective individual experience’ that was a ‘source of the development of political spiritual freedom in modern societies’, Fromm immediately countered that, ‘since this book is devoted mainly to freedom as a burden

and danger, the following analysis, being intentionally one-sided, stresses [only] the fundamental evilness and powerlessness of man' (Fromm, 1941: 74). In *The Sane Society*, one finds the same peculiarly self-justifying and self-blinding tic. Fromm allows, 'an objective examination of the relation between society and human nature must consider both the furthering and the inhibiting impact of society on man' (Fromm, 1955: 77). He immediately counters, however, that 'since most authors have emphasized the positive influence of modern society on man, I shall in this book pay . . . attention [only] to the neglected pathogenic function of modern society' (Fromm, 1955: 77).

The prescience and paradox that marked Erich Fromm's writings were specific to his historical situation, intellectual formation, and personal character. They are hardly unique, however, in the history of critical social thought, which has always been haunted by the same performative contradictions. Even as Marx argued that capitalism made democracy into a hollow shell, he flourished amongst the freedoms and protections provided by a British civil sphere whose communicative and regulative institutions preceded industrial capitalism and provided crucial resources to reform its worst depredations. Just as Marx had escaped German repression to Britain's safe harbor, so did Frankfurt critical theorists, a century later, take refuge inside the civil sphere of the United States. Neither Marx nor his later Frankfurt disciples could bring themselves to theorize the resources for critical thinking and social emancipation that – despite harsh inequalities and blatant hypocrisies – the societies of their exile managed to continuously sustain. As we develop critical analyses of radical populism and the reemergence of authoritarian character, we need to avoid such debilitating paradox, keeping the contradictory qualities of democratic capitalism more fully in mind.

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Notes

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1. I draw here from Friedman (2013).
2. Adorno's colleague and Frankfurt School Director, Max Horkheimer, prevented Fromm's survey research study from being published, though it eventually saw the light of day more than 50 years later as *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study* (Fromm, 1984).

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