



On the Anniversary of the Birth of Erich Fromm

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The many articles that poured forth in 1980 when Erich Fromm died on March 18 all praised him only as a „famous psychoanalyst.“ The press, by no accident at all, failed to mention that he was a Socialist Humanist. Moreover, in writing *Marx's Concept of Man* (which succeeded in introducing Marx's Humanist Essays to a wide American public), and in editing the first international symposium on *Socialist Humanism*, he did so, not as an academician, but as an activist. In inviting me to participate in that dialogue between East and West as well as North and South, he stressed that „it took quite a bit of courage on their (East Europeans) part to write something for this volume, for no matter how diplomatic the language, they were open attacks on the Soviet Union.“

Erich Fromm was an original. In attempting to fuse Marx and Freud, it wasn't so much the audaciousness of such a move in the 1920s that needs to be stressed, but the fact that even when he was a most orthodox Freudian, it was social psychology that interested him; his use of psychoanalytic mechanisms were as a sort of mediating concept between the individual and the social. In any case, as he moved away from orthodox Freudianism to elaborate his own version, it was clear that he was breaking not only with Freud but with the famous Frankfurt School and its „Critical Theory,“ and that, not because he was moving away from Marxism, but coming closer to it. Here is how he put it in his intellectual autobiography:

„I consider Marx, the thinker, as being of much greater depth and scope than Freud... But even when all of this is said, it would be naive to ignore Freud's importance. ...

his discovery of unconscious processes and of the dynamic nature of character traits is a unique contribution to the science of man which has altered the picture of man for all time to come“ (*Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter With Marx and Freud*).

On Fromm's initiative (and to my great surprise since I kept far away from any psychoanalysts even when they laid claim to Marxism), I received a congratulatory letter from him on the publication in 1958 of my *Marxism and Freedom*. The period of the 1950s was a most difficult one for Marxists, what with McCarthyism as well as nuclear bomb development permeating the land. Dr. Fromm had helped organize the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in 1957, but that was not what he wrote to me about. Rather, the subject that then aroused his passionate interest was the restoration of Marxism in its original form of „a new humanism,“ cleansed of the perversion of Russian and Chinese Communism. So magnificently an objective human being was he that he refused to be deterred either by the fact that I let my hostility to psychoanalysts show by telling him that workers in Detroit shops referred to them as „head shrinks,“ or even by the fact that I criticized his own essay on „Marx's Concept of Man“ as abstract. Here is what he answered me:

„As to your criticism of my essay that it is too abstract and does not discuss the humanism of Marxism concretely, I cannot offer any argument... As to the substance of the points you make about the concrete nature of Marx's humanism, I naturally entirely agree with you. Also about what you



write of the role of the plant psychoanalyst and Daniel Bell's position."¹

Our correspondence continued for two decades. It also gave me rare glimpses into the whole subject of the famous Frankfurt School, of which he was, after all, one of its most famous personages, the one who influenced them all on the „integration“ of psychoanalysis into Marxism. The lengthy unabating, sharp debate with Herbert Marcuse in the pages of *Dissent* over 1955 and 1956 was not the main issue. He retained too much regard for Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* as the seminal work it was. No, what did arouse his ire most was the duality of Adorno's and Horkheimer's departure from Marxism on the one hand, and the attraction that that held for the „New Left.“ Here is how he summed it up in a letter to me dated Nov. 25, 1976:

„I get quite a few questions from various people who study the history of the Frankfurt School. It's really a funny story: Horkheimer is now quoted as the creator of the critical theory and people write about the critical theory as if it were a new concept discovered by Horkheimer. As far as I know, the whole thing is a hoax, because Horkheimer was frightened ... of speaking about Marx's theory. He used general Aesopian language and spoke of critical theory in order not to say Marx's theory. I believe that that is all behind this discovery of critical theory by Horkheimer and Adorno.“

As against the movement away from Marx that he sensed in the Frankfurt School, he himself tried in every possible way to disseminate Marxist-Humanism into all fields, including his own psychoanalysis. Consider his attempt to convince me—who was in no way involved in psychology—to write a piece for a psychoanalytical journal. That suggestion came after I had told him the story about Susan E. Blow—a Hegelian and one

¹ In another letter Fromm wrote: „My relations with *Commentary* are not good. Years ago Mr. Podhoretz rejected something I had written because it contradicted the majority opinion of American Jews. I wrote him a sharp letter about his concept of freedom....“

of the very first women educators—who was a patient of Dr. James Jackson Putnam, an American pioneer of Freudian psychoanalysis. She aroused Putnam's interest in Hegelian philosophy to such a great extent that he, in turn, tried to interest Freud. Freud, on the other hand, was so opposed to introducing philosophy into psychoanalysis that he criticized any attempt to place psychoanalysis, as he put it, „in the service of a particular philosophical outlook on the world.“² - Here is what Dr. Fromm wrote me:

„What you wrote about Dr. Putnam who became interested in Hegelian dialectics through his patient I did not know, and find it of considerable historical interest, and Freud's reaction to Putnam's philosophical remarks [are] also an interesting historical footnote to Freud and the history of the psychoanalytic movement. Why don't you write a note on this and publish it somewhere? I have no connections with psychoanalytic journals except *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, which is published in New York. I am sure they would be glad to publish a note on this historical datum, and it should at the same time be published in the Spanish psychoanalytic journal, *Revista*, of which I am still formally the director. If you would be inclined to do this, I would be happy to send it myself to the New York and the Spanish journals. I shall also look up Freud's letters to find the remark in which he comments on Putnam's letter, or do you know to whom Freud wrote this remark about Putnam?“

Fromm's eyes always were on the future and a new class-less society on truly human foundations. Least known of his multi-dimensional concerns was the relationship of Man/Woman and by no means on just a psychological scale. Rather it was the need for totally new human relations in the Marxian sense: a global vision of the future meant also a look back into the past. Thus, he found Bachofen's studies into matriarchal society very congenial, not because he be-

² Nathan G. Hale, editor, *James Jackson Putnam and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 43.



lieved in the existence of matriarchal society, but because it, at least, allowed one a vision of an alternative society to this patriarchal, class, alienating society in which we live. In relating patriarchy to class domination, he had invented the magnificent phrase for it: „patricentric-acquisitive.“

Far from remembrance of things past being a question merely of memory, it brings into view the unity of Man/Woman; the human being as a totality, being not just a quantitative measure but something dialectical, showing movement, a movement forward. It was what Fromm stressed when, in creating an international forum for his SOCIALIST HUMANISM, he emphasized that Humanism was not just an idea, but a movement against what is, a glimpse into the future. Listen to what he wrote me when he heard I was relating *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy Of Revolution*:

„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. After all, the original exploitation is that of women by men and there is no social liberation so long as there is no revolution in the sex war ending in full equality....Unfortunately I have known nobody who still knows her personally. What a bad break between the generations.“

That letter was written on Oct. 26, 1977. It is now March 19, 1980, and Fromm is dead. And I say, dear Youth, let's not let another „bad break between generations“ occur. To prepare for the future one must know the revolutionary past. Getting to know Fromm as a Socialist Humanist is a good way to begin.