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Erich Fromm and the Psychoanalysis of the Social Unconscious

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During my studies in the Postdoctoral Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy at New York University, from 1964 to 1968, I had the good fortune to work with Erich Fromm.¹ Under his supervision, I gained insights that not only helped me to resolve analytic problems with which I was grappling, but also broadened my approach to therapy. Fromm's principles continue to inform my view of the psychoanalytic process and relationship, as well as my analytic goals.

Like other theorists, Fromm believed that through self-knowledge we can break the hold of unconscious forces that drive us to self-destructive behavior; that with consciousness can come the freedom to make more satisfying and fulfilling choices in the way we conduct our lives. He did not believe, however, that personality development could be attributed solely to biological factors and/or early childhood relationships. His unique contribution to psychoanalytical knowledge was his insistence on the importance of social values and mores in the development of personality; that is, the ways in which we adapt--and often distort--our human needs to meet the requirements of our social system. His work expanded the scope of psychoanalytic inquiry to include a focus on uncovering the contents of the social unconscious.

The prescription for what is expected of us is laid down by our parents. Identifying with the parents, the child learns how to behave, adopting parental values in order to be accepted within the family system. To a helpless, dependent child, nothing is more terrifying than the prospect of separation or ostracism from the source of physical and emotional sustenance. Likewise, in the larger world, we do what we have to do to fit in. We accommodate to what is societally valued. We buy what is being sold, whether goods or ideas. Unfortunately, as Fromm pointed out, the price we pay may be our individuality, our deepest desires, and our emotional health.

Fromm held that only through a thorough psychoanalysis of the social unconscious is it possible to de-regress impediments to individuality: to break the „chains of illusion“ and become free to tap into one's creative and emotional potential. To develop the qualities Fromm deemed essential to fostering autonomy in a patient, the analyst, too, must have undergone, thorough psychoanalysis, a de-repression of his or her own social unconscious. Only through such awareness can the analyst be free to fearlessly examine the unconscious motivations of the analysand.

The question must be raised as to why Fromm's ideas have been relatively ignored by most psychoanalytic conceptual systems. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) attribute the neglect to Fromm's insistence on including negative social influences, similar to those pointed out by Marx, as important in personality development. Marx's social philosophy holds scant appeal for those whose primary fo-

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cus has been on individual motivations rather than economic and political conditions.

Fromm made no secret of the fact that he viewed contemporary Western society with alarm. In 1961, addressing an international psychoanalytical congress, he characterized the „central experience“ of modern life as becoming more and more “I have“ and less and less “I am.“ He feared that modern man had become “an enterprise“ in which his life is „his capital.“ If he invests the capital well he succeeds. If he fails, he becomes “a thing ... an object.“

Forty years later, the situation is, if anything, worse. We live in a culture in which more and more the accumulation of wealth is a primary goal to which all else--art, ethics, philosophy, humanistic concerns--take a back seat. We exult in teenage tycoons and encourage grade school children to manage their own stock portfolios. We would like the have-nots, the homeless to shut up and go away.

Fromm’s warnings about the negative impact of the marketplace mentality are difficult to sell in the psychoanalytic community because they criticize the way so-called adaptive, successful people live. (Don’t we analysts feel a certain cachet treating rich or influential patients?) Even when analysts perceive the toxic effects of a skewed society, they’re hard to buck. The analytic chamber is crowded--not only with those who have influenced the analysand’s development, but also those who influence the analyst: peers, authorities, and, of course, these days, the managed care experts who determine reimbursement and what constitutes legitimate treatment. I recall a supervisee who subtly, but actively, discouraged a patient from pursuing a musical career, even though he had achieved some success in his country of origin. Instead, the therapist encouraged him to get training in computer repair, in which he had no interest, because it was more likely to bring in a secure income. Not incidentally, it would also please the patient’s wife, even though she earned more than enough to support them.

In *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* Fromm described the „gentlemen’s agreement“ entered into by analyst and analysand. The patient obeys the rules. He pays and talks. The analyst colludes in the unspoken agreement not to disturb the universe.

In my own practice, largely as a result of Fromm’s influence, I no longer regard pathology as residing only in the analysand. I can consider psychological symptoms as a form of protest, a way of calling attention to what is wrong in a person’s interpersonal world. In this way, the psychological inquiry can be directed into the deterrents to psychological growth, the limitations of opportunities imposed by family, social group, or the broader society in which we live.

One of my current patients is a 50-year-old writer who achieved early fame and fortune, but whose later work has not been commercially successful. Despite having more than enough money to support his family and continue writing, he had become artistically blocked and severely depressed. His attitude was, if it doesn’t sell, I’m a failure. Happily, after a year-and-a-half of our work together, he is beginning to write again.

The problems women bring to therapy more often concern their fear of failure in the social marketplace. Irrespective of professional or personal achievements, a woman who is single or not involved in an „important“ relationship is made to feel inadequate. These feelings can induce anxiety in women still in their twenties, and become desperation by the time they reach their thirties or forties when the biological clock begins to run down. A 31-year-old patient, attractive and successful, is engaged to a man whose treatment of her, as a person and sexual partner, is cavalier and clueless.

But her parents are pushing her to marry, and she wants to be a „good girl“ and please them. It is my hope that through therapy she can develop the strength to make her needs and wishes known, and if the man does not respond, to end the relationship. Another woman, happy in work and love, is frantically trying, in her forties, to have a child. It is not clear to her or to me that she really likes or wants children, but she has been conditioned to believe that a childless woman is

incomplete.

In addition to his emphasis on the social unconscious, Fromm departed from the conventional psychoanalytical wisdom in other ways. He shunned, for example, transference regression, which he believed encouraged infantile dependency. He abandoned the couch for face-to-face therapy. He thought that anonymity in the analyst was neither possible nor necessary. He publicly supported humanist social and political causes.

Fromm summarized his philosophy in a 28-point „humanist’s credo,“ published in *On Being Human* (Continuum, 1998). It concludes: „I believe in the possible realization of a world in which man can be much, even if he has little; a world in which the dominant motivation of existence is not consumption; ... a world in which man can find a way to giving a purpose to his life as well as the strength to live free and without illusions.“

I have been heartened in recent years by a growing reemergence of interest in Fromm’s ideas. For a long while now, we have been caught up in the excitement generated by neurological research and the development of psychotropic medicine. But as we observe a world growing more and more alienated, I think it is critical we not lose sight of the human needs and problems that cannot be fixed with a pill.

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