

Psychoanalysis for Collective Liberation

A Review of Erich Fromm's Critical Theory

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Contents

Prophetic Messianism, the Social Character, and Trumpism	3
Humanism, Feminism, and <i>Social Character in a Mexican Village</i>	5
Authority and <i>The Working Class in Weimar Germany</i>	7
Critique: History, Sexuality, and Internationalism	8
Conclusion	9

Erich Fromm (1900–1980) was a humanistic psychoanalyst, writer, and activist who was principally influenced by the theories of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, though he was critical of both figures. A German-American Jew from an Orthodox, middle-class family, Fromm studied sociology with Alfred Weber (brother of Max), joined the Institute for Social Research—otherwise known as the Frankfurt School—in 1930, and fled Nazi Germany in 1934 for exile in New York. He embarked on his own iconoclastic journey when his erstwhile comrades Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno expelled him from the Institute in 1939 for questioning Freudian orthodoxy about the libido, or human sexuality. Controversially, in place of Freud’s idea that erotic satisfaction is life’s driving force, Fromm suggested that our goals in existence are in fact relatedness, rootedness, identity, a frame of orientation (or object of devotion), and transcendence (or agency).

While this original thinker is perhaps best known for his book *The Art of Loving* (1956), in which he develops the idea of authentic and productive bonds of love based on mutual recognition, the editors of and contributors to the new volume, *Erich Fromm’s Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism, and the Future*,¹ underscore the intellectual’s innovative concepts and enduring relevance to a number of key topics. These include humanism, feminism, the social character, conformity, authoritarianism, and anti-fascism, among others. To this point, co-editor Joan Braune aptly points out the glaring absence of psychoanalysis and critical theory in the numerous books published in recent years that attempt to explain resurgent conservative-authoritarian populist and neo-fascist trends (219, 225n13). New studies of fascism by anarchists are not exempt from this trend, with the result that the left overlooks important considerations and strategies for understanding and resisting the far right. In essence, we ignore Fromm at our peril (40).

Prophetic Messianism, the Social Character, and Trumpism

According to Michael Löwy, one of the contributors to the volume, Fromm was a romantic Jewish intellectual and a “religious atheist,” inspired by the “universal utopian perspective” of Jewish messianism (45). On this reading, Fromm was a “religious romantic anti-capitalist—not [a] Marxist—” who interpreted Weber’s sociology in a critical way (48). Likewise, he hailed the Hasidic Judaic tradition as being critical of capitalist modernity. In *The Dogma of Christ* (1931), Fromm lauds the early Christian community as an anti-bureaucratic, revolutionary “free brotherhood of the poor” that at once opposed Roman imperialism and instituted “love communism” (49). Anticipating his colleagues Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument about history and fascism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1947), and echoing Karl Kautsky’s own analysis of the foundations of Christianity’s betrayal as starting with the empowerment of the bishops over the prophets and apostles (1908), Fromm traces the integration of Christianity with the state as parallel commentary on the destruction of the Russian Revolution by the Bolshevik Party. In Kautsky’s words, “The organization of a proletarian, rebellious communism thus became the staunchest support of despotism and exploitation, a source of new despotism and new exploitation.” Whereas Löwy suggests that this implicit parallelism communicates Fromm’s disgust with Stalin and sympathy with Trotsky’s analysis in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), it may also convey the psychoanalyst’s convergence with anarchism. Indeed, in 1936, Adorno anxiously complained to Horkheimer about

¹ Kieran Durkin and Joan Braune, eds., *Erich Fromm’s Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism, and the Future* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Fromm's "anarchistic deviations" and "sentimental ... blend of social democracy and anarchism," concluding, "I would urgently advise him to read Lenin" (152). Yet Fromm did read Lenin and considered that the "destruction of Socialism" began with him.²

As a critical social psychologist and public intellectual, Fromm is perhaps best known for his creative, neo-Freudian analyses of political and social authoritarianism. Integrating Marx, Freud, and Weber, Fromm theorized about alienation, neurosis, hierarchy, and sadomasochism. Per Freud, neurotic mood disorders may impart an expression of trauma, unmet needs ("the return of the repressed"), or even a rebellion against dominant norms. Fromm, for his part, concluded that alienation results from one's embeddedness within defective social relations that build "artificial needs and drives"—namely, the will to power, exploitation, and domination—and so lead to the dehumanization and instrumentalization of self and others. To such understandings, writer Michael Thompson adds that neurotic frustration may signal the breakthrough of critical consciousness over pathological social relations, while communicating the losses and sacrifices we must endure due to the systemic "abuse of the social bond" under the iron cage of capitalism, patriarchy, and the state (27). In contrast, robust bonds promote mutual recognition, community, creativity, knowledge, (self)discovery, and autonomous self-determination.

The contributors to *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory* justly emphasize the importance of the humanist's social-character theory and related insights into the psychosocial aspects of political movements. Social character can be defined as an intermediary between consciousness and the given socio-economic structure: the "most frequent pattern typical in a particular society ... and also the dominant characteristic" (194). Generally, social character serves adaptive and stabilizing functions, ensuring the persistence of the "pathology of normalcy" (6). Even so, Fromm identified different types. To name just two: the marketing character, which corresponds to the automaton conformity expected of monopoly capitalism, versus the productive character, which channels adversity into the creation of meaning and love. With Hilde Weiss (1900–1981), a brilliant student of the council-communist Karl Korsch, Fromm designed a study into the social character and political attitudes of German workers toward the end of the Weimar Republic (1929–1931). The findings of this survey, which will be discussed in more detail below, illuminate the great error of Marx's almost mechanistic faith in the working classes, who are "not reliably socialist or anti-authoritarian" (135). In reality, the Weiss-Fromm study confirmed among many participants simultaneous psychological masochism and the idealization of strong men (144).

Connecting past with present, several of the essayists appearing in this volume seek to apply Fromm's framework to the project of understanding the growth of extreme right-wing movements. This analysis is most welcome in the wake of the Trump regime and the associated legitimization of neo-fascism. Charles Thorpe views the Trumpist phenomenon as "regressive identification," to quote the English sociologist Anthony Giddens: The disgraced former president's foot-soldiers "simply become dependent children again" and so surrender their consciences to the would-be dictator (181). Such a diagnosis is especially apt when considering the attempted coup incited by President Trump on January 6, 2021. In a Frommian sense, reactionary countermovements can be understood, at least in part, as anxious backlashes by those privileged in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality to rapid, progressive societal changes that might threaten their dominance in the social hierarchy (85–86). Like Reagan and the shareholders in the 1980s, who rebelled against "bureaucracy" and "Communism" by imposing neoliberalism, the authori-

² Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (London: Routledge, 1955), 258.

tarian syndrome of Trumpism represents a false revolt that re-entrenches privilege, irrationalism, and established tendencies toward aggressive self-destruction. Although the right in the United States often relies on community-building and the development of familial, in-group bonds for its propagation, rightist politics both presuppose and reproduce the bourgeois coldness of life in the capitalist, imperialist, and settler-colonial United States (167).

Humanism, Feminism, and *Social Character in a Mexican Village*

George Lundskow, in his essay on “The Necessity of Prophetic Humanism in Progressive Social Change,” differentiates between “two basic forms” of spiritual life: universalist emancipation and xenophobic idolatry. In Freudian terms, this conflict can be reinterpreted as the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, libido and *mortido*, or “a faith in life and a faith in death” (55). Lundskow’s universalist perspective is intimately connected with biophilia, or love of life, whether human or nonhuman, and the prophetic-messianic Judaic tradition. Concurring (perhaps controversially) with Fromm that evolution demands that we all have a “frame of orientation and an object of devotion in order to survive,” Lundskow discusses Black Panther Huey P. Newton’s passion for revolutionary suicide—to sacrifice oneself for the people—in place of the *reactionary suicide* demanded by capitalism and authority (53). Channeling Hermann Cohen’s understanding of messianism as “the dominion of the good on earth,” the writer advocates the construction of a new “revolutionary religion” as a means of transforming the world (68). In like manner, in *The Ministry of the Future* (2020), the science-fiction novelist Kim Stanley Robinson depicts one of his characters calling for the founding of a new religion to unite humanity and save the planet.³

In her intervention considering the relationship between humanism and feminism, Lynn S. Chancer rightly chastises Fromm for his distance from the feminist movements that surged in the 1960s and 1970s and his related use of sexist language. At the same time, she praises Fromm’s concept of love as mutual recognition, finding it to be a framework that implicitly challenges the gender binary that encodes sadistic male chauvinism on the one hand and masochistic feminine passivity on the other. The struggle against sadomasochistic character orientations *and* practices—being “mechanisms of escape” that drive wars, exploitation, ecocide, and aggression—would be a process to redirect society toward a more peaceful, egalitarian, and erotic future (197). In such a world, the interrelated “social defense mechanisms” of sadism and masochism would be attenuated, in both the individual and collective, and interdependence would serve as an alternative to the master/slave relationships of past and present (99). Chancer praises Fromm’s concern for “care, loving, sanity, and reason” as implicit critiques of toxic masculinity, sexism, *and* heterosexism, being systems that “have coercive consequences by limiting people’s gender and sexual freedoms” (101). While she criticizes the psychoanalyst’s gender essentialism and identifies his lack of interest in human sexuality—what fellow contributor David Norman Smith terms a “desexualized psychoanalysis”—as reflecting a “pre-oedipal” orientation that would stress relatedness over the libido, Chancer does not seem to acknowledge the link between Fromm’s own sex-negativity and heterosexist biases (102–05, 131).

In “Sociopschoanalysis and Radical Humanism,” Neil McLaughlin and Fromm’s own co-author Michael Maccoby note the following paradox: Though he was trained in sociology, Fromm is marginal to the core of this discipline, as to academia as a whole. This is in stark contrast to

³ Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry of the Future* (Orbit, 2020), 254–55.

Pierre Bourdieu, or indeed, Michel Foucault. Dialectically, Fromm's academic marginality provided him independence of thought but also disregard from the professoriate (109–10). This is sadly the case for his most scholarly late works, such as *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970) and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973). In contrast, Bourdieu played the academic game and enjoyed considerable rewards and privilege as a sociologist in universities in Paris and Lille. While both figures were radical public intellectuals who engaged in similar projects of socioanalysis, or *sociopschoanalysis*, and criticized Western and Stalinist crimes alike—with Bourdieu protesting in his writings against the Algerian War and Fromm publicly opposing the Vietnam and Cold wars—Bourdieu made such arguments from within the academy, while Fromm made them from without. Insightfully, Maccoby and McLaughlin tie Fromm's "intellectual decline" to his numerous conflicts "with orthodox Marxists, Freudians, neoconservatives, anti-humanist thinkers," and his former comrades from the Frankfurt School, especially Herbert Marcuse, who resurrected Adorno's opportunistic line against him in the 1950s (119).

These contributors productively compare Fromm's social-character theory to Bourdieu's theory of an internalized, unconscious *habitus*. This *habitus* perpetuates class society and the division of labor by mandating obedient participation and social reproduction. Otherwise known as the "cultural unconscious" or "mental habits," the theory of *habitus*, for all its usefulness, "downplay[s] an explicit psychoanalytic analysis of emotions which is the core strength of Fromm's social character theory" (122–23). Plus, in his focus on elites, structures, and symbolic violence, Bourdieu overlooks the self-defeating and self-destructive psychodynamics that often contribute to the reproduction of exploitation and domination. To this point, he was critical of Frantz Fanon's concept of internalized oppression. However, Bourdieu's deficit here can perhaps be corrected by Fromm's social-character theory, particularly as applied in the Mexican village of Chiconcauc, Morelos state. During the 1950s and 1960s, Fromm and his colleagues carried out an empirical research study there into some of the psychological aspects of class stratification among *campesinos* (peasants) after the Revolution of 1910–1920. Tellingly, the resulting publication, *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, found that only single-digit percentages of the villagers interviewed had radically democratic character structures.⁴ The rest were divided among enterprising-sadistic and passive-receptive *campesinos*, with the divisions correlated to family status before the revolution. Many of those who capitalized on the new opportunities made available by the redistribution of lands had previously been landowners, while those who suffered greater rates of violence and alcoholism were typically descended from peons of the *hacienda* system imposed by Spanish colonialism (118).

In this sense, *Social Character in a Mexican Village* provides insight into some of the psychosocial dimensions of class divisions and social hierarchy as a whole. It confirms the Freudian notion that sadomasochism, or authoritarianism, is a psychosocial system with constituent parts that may either accept their socially expected roles or rebel against them—whether productively or destructively. Similar critical studies could be conducted today into gender, class, caste, and ethno-racial inequalities, as well as political differences, throughout the world. Nevertheless, in light of the hostile and supremacist contemporary discourses around the "culture of poverty," Maccoby and McLaughlin are right that Fromm's social-character theory risks blaming the victims of given social structures (119–24). This is certainly a quandary that requires more reflection and investigation.

⁴ Erich Fromm, *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996).

Authority and *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*

In his inquiry into “Anti-Authoritarian Marxism,” David Norman Smith explains how, in the twilight of the Weimar Republic, Fromm’s cousin Heinz Brandt sought to organize a united front of all anti-fascist forces against the rising Nazi menace. This initiative was promptly crushed by Stalin, in line with the Soviet despot’s disastrous imposition of the doctrine of “social fascism,” which equated the Social Democrats with the Nazis (135–36). Due to such betrayals, Brandt spent a total of 14 years in Nazi and, later, East German prison camps. Intriguingly, Smith traces Fromm’s instinctual revulsion over Stalinist hegemony, and almost unconscious approximation to Trotsky, about whom the psychoanalyst raved: He is “always stimulating, always alive” and “penetrating to the very essence of reality” (138). Such flourishes about the Red Army commander suggest, firstly, that Fromm was ignorant of the fate of the Russian Revolution’s “Third Revolution,” represented by the Kronstadt Commune, the Greens, and the Makhnovist movement: namely, to be crushed by the “People’s Commissar,” Trotsky. Furthermore, despite the analyst’s explicit homophobia, Fromm’s attraction to Trotsky provides evidence of the Freudian theory of universal bisexuality.

Crucially, as well, Smith introduces Hilde Weiss, a Jewish student of industrial sociology, a mass-striker, and an affiliate of the Red Trade Union International (RTUI). Weiss was the primary author of the study on German workers’ attitudes, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, that is more commonly attributed to Fromm himself.⁵ Using social-character theory, Weiss and Fromm predicted that small minorities of workers would be militantly *for* (10 percent) or *against* (15 percent) a Nazi takeover of Germany, while the vast majority (75 percent) would remain passive and essentially indifferent (217). The study also found a significant discrepancy between the 82 percent of respondents who professed fidelity to left parties (the Communists and Social Democrats), and the 15 percent who consistently responded with anti-authoritarian views.⁶ In a parallel study, Weiss revealed how workers often deified their bosses, in a revealing example of commodity fetishism *and* sadomasochism, as well as an exhibition of the persistent psychocultural legacy of Prussian militarism and elitism. These self-defeating ideologies were so pervasive as to even permeate Germany’s pyramidally organized left parties—in turn, laying the groundwork for the rise of Hitler.

Although such critique is very apt, it is unclear why someone like Weiss, who lauded Lenin and conformed to Marxist notions of the “dialectical” use of state authority, should be considered a principled anti-authoritarian herself. After all, she joined the RTUI rather than the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers’ Association, co-founded by Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Rudolf Rocker, among others, in 1922. In this vein, Weiss echoes the confusions of the libertarian-communist Otto Rühle, author of “The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism” (1939), who cherished his personal friendship with his fellow exile in Mexico, one of the leading Bolsheviks—none other than Trotsky himself (151).

⁵ The version published by Harvard University Press in 1984 lists Fromm as the primary author.

⁶ Lawrence J. Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love’s Prophet* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 43–44.

Critique: History, Sexuality, and Internationalism

Whereas *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory* is undeniably an important intervention in psychoanalytic, humanist, and radical theory, some caution is needed with an expressly Marxist interpretation of Fromm's lifework. For example, some contributors express anxiety over the "neo-idealism" of critical approaches based in morality or norms, despite the fact that Fromm himself (like Freud) dedicated much of his life to contemplating the mind, dreams, socialization, and ethics, or the superego (37, 77). Plus, as Maccoby and McLaughlin correctly note, Fromm "rejected the inattention to emotions, morality, and human nature in [the] orthodox version of Marxism" (115). This tension may have to do with an unwillingness on the parts of the editors and contributors to do as Fromm did and criticize Marx himself.

Accordingly, some of the volume's contributors attempt to defend Marx's legacy in a way that is at variance with the historical record. For example, Smith claims that "Stalin's new course—which entailed the violent expropriation of the peasantry, the intensified exploitation of workers, and the eradication of opposition—was a sharp reversal of Marxian doctrine" (132). The distinction made here is questionable, considering how Marx arbitrarily expelled the anarchists Mikhail Bakunin and James Guillaume from the First International in 1872 in order to outmaneuver them, while wrecking the organization, and its cause, in the process.⁷ Additionally, in *Capital, volume 1*, Marx welcomes both the expropriation of the peasantry *and* the regimentation of the industrial workers as historically necessary steps in the "dialectical" struggle for communism.⁸ For their part, Lenin and Stalin were enthusiasts of Taylorist and Fordist management styles.⁹

It is true that Fromm's critical theory elides easy classification as being either primarily Marxist *or* anarchist. Perhaps, he transcends and sublates both categories. To this point, the Anarchist FAQ Collective identifies the psychoanalyst as a "libertarian Marxis[t] close to anarchism." Similarly, Roger Foster and Charles Thorpe view Fromm as a socialist interested in "deep democratization rather than a managerial project," and one who believed in a decentralized, planned economy, as well as humanistic social planning, respectively (90–91, 185). In the end, it was Fromm's radical iconoclasm, arrived at through reflection and self-discovery, that so disturbed Adorno and doomed the psychoanalyst's tenure in the Frankfurt School. Then again, it liberated him to follow his own path.

Unfortunately, this volume has little to say about ecological problems such as global overheating, except in passing, as manifestations of capital's self-destructive tendencies (75, 184–85, 210). Lundskow curiously equates "raw-food vegan[ism]" with Puritanism, when the Puritans were neither vegetarians nor vegans (59). What is more, in contrast to Puritans, vegans are not necessarily sex-negative. In this vein, we welcome Lundskow's praise for Huey Newton's explicit support for the queer community but lament that no one in this volume acknowledges Fromm's own homonegativity, which is derived from Freud's paternalistic view that gay people suffer from arrested development (65).¹⁰ Rather than be ignored, such limitations must be brought out and criticized.

⁷ Robert Graham, *We Do Not Fear Anarchy; We Invoke It* (Oakland: AK Press, 2015).

⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 873–95.

⁹ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 31.

In terms of international analysis, Langman and Lundskow use a Marcusean term to hail the Arab Spring as an important “great refusal” of domination, but they do not differentiate among the fates of the different uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (205). Thorpe suggests that the “upsurge of imperialist war in the Middle East has been a major cause of the growth of authoritarianism and nationalism” (177). Presumably, he means war in Iraq, Syria, and/or occupied Palestine, but he does not say. While such a view may partially explain the recent resurgence of the far right in Europe and the United States, it overlooks the specific actors and mechanisms involved in the case of Syria, who are themselves quite authoritarian and nationalist: principally, Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin. These fascists, in their bloody suppression of the Syrian Revolution over the past decade, have killed up to a million people and displaced millions more across international borders. According to Rohini Hensman, committing atrocious war crimes to provoke mass-refugee flows from Syria has been a deliberate strategy on Putin’s part to destabilize the European Union.¹¹ In the struggle to bring Syrian, Russian, U.S., and Israeli war criminals to justice, and to study their examples in the hopes of preventing similar atrocities from recurring, critical Frommian perspectives have much to contribute.

Conclusion

The co-editors and essayists of *Erich Fromm’s Critical Theory* have performed an important service by re-engaging the public with the history of Fromm’s sociopschoanalysis, in the hopes that the theorist’s insights be heeded in the cause of humanistic social reconstruction. Both history and the present attest to the strong anti-humanist tendencies professed by many considered to be on the left—from Georges Sorel and Stalin in the past to the GrayZone of today—thus corroborating Maccoby and McLaughlin’s fitting diagnosis of the left as “contradictory, an admixture of tendencies humanist *and* anti-humanist” (135, emphasis in original). In light of this problem, as well as the realities of global warming and ecocide, persistent political authoritarianism, entrenched sadomasochistic social systems, and disorganized working classes, we see the prospect of new Frommian studies on social character; humanistic, internationalist resistance toward anti-humanist opportunists; and the integration of left psychoanalysis with labor and community organizing as important components in the ongoing struggle for universal emancipation.

¹¹ Rohini Hensman, *Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* (Haymarket Books, 2018), 233–38.

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