

ERICH FROMM AND THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN RECENT AMERICAN HISTORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH LARRY FRIEDMAN

Conducted by Randall Stephens

LARRY FRIEDMAN TAUGHT IN THE DEPARTMENT OF history at Indiana University for thirteen years before coming to Harvard University in 2008, where he is professor of history in Harvard's Mind, Brain, and Behavior Initiative. Friedman has published a variety of books and articles on the history of psychology, the history of race and racism, and the history of social reform movements. His books include: *The White Savage: Racial Fantasies in the Postbellum South* (Prentice-Hall, 1970), *Inventors of the Promised Land* (Knopf, 1975), *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism,*

1830–1870 (Cambridge University Press, 1982), *Menninger: The Family and the Clinic* (Knopf, 1990) and a definitive study of developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, *Identity's Architect* (Harvard University Press, 1999). He's currently working on a biography of one of the most influential psychologists and public intellectuals of the 20th century, *Erich Fromm*. Historically Speaking editor Randall Stephens recently spoke to Friedman about his historical work and the place of the public intellectual in American life.

Randall Stephens: The popular psychologist and social critic Erich Fromm was once one of the most influential public intellectuals in the West. Yet many are unfamiliar with his life and work today. Could you say something about his context and significance?

Larry Friedman: Yes, that's true. But his influence is still felt in many quarters around the globe and, as you say, he was once a major public figure.

Fromm received a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Heidelberg and was trained to be a psychoanalyst at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. Fromm's approach made him a central figure in what was called the neo-Freudian movement of psychoanalysts who departed from Freud and his followers. He was linked to and a leader of many of the causes and movements of his day, from critiques of consumerism and nuclear disarmament to popular psychology and Western humanism.

Fromm is significant for a number of reasons. But, perhaps most importantly, he had a wide influence as a best-selling author. His first book, *Escape from Freedom* (1941), linked Nazi and authoritarian regimes with the individual's fear of freedom and autonomy. To escape from freedom was to find a greater sense of order in sado-masochism and its cycle of degrading others. Fromm's *The Sane Society* (1955) railed against consumerism and made the case for local face-to-face democracy. His most enduring and popular work, *The Art of Loving* (1956), called for the love of self as a central component in the capacity to befriend and love others. It sold a staggering 30 million copies globally and was available in airports, drug stores, you name it. In 1973 he published *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, which suggested that a conflict exists in all people between necrophilia and biophilia, a rage for death and annihilation on one hand and an affirma-



Liss Goldring's photograph of Erich Fromm, 1970. Courtesy of the Literary Estate of Erich Fromm.

tion and love of life on the other. To complete this book, Fromm took up the study of neuroscience, physical anthropology, linguistics, and other fields far outside of his training in psychoanalysis to explain why some favored death and destruction while others preferred life and love. We might speculate that if mainline psychoanalysis had branched into other fields as Fromm had done, psychoanalysis might have escaped the doldrums of recent decades.

Stephens: Your early work focused on the 19th century, and then you moved into 20th century topics. Was that a difficult transition to make?

Friedman: Not really. The books I had written on earlier periods tended to focus on the relation of psychology to ideas and culture. So, when I wrote about abolitionists, I situated them in their social psychological contexts. My first book, *The White Savage: Racial Fantasies in the Postbellum South* (Prentice-Hall, 1970), explored the social psychology of white racism. Then I wrote *Inventors of the Promised Land* (Knopf, 1975). I was looking at the early national period and the growing divisions—sectionalism, racism, and sexism—that tore at the fabric of nationalism. I carried my interest in the relationship between psychology and culture into the 20th century.

Stephens: You've moved over quite a lot of ground. You also wrote about the Menninger Clinic, a major psychoanalytically informed American mental hospital.

Friedman: That's right. I did a couple of semesters of interdisciplinary work at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. That work was mainly in personality theory, and I, of course, went to see founder and distinguished psychiatrist Karl Menninger, who was about 89 at the time. We hit it off tremendously. Menninger would ask me if I'd read *The Brothers Karamazov*, or *Moby Dick*. If I had, he would then say, "well, let's read it again tonight and talk about it in the morning." I visited Menninger every few days to talk about books. One day he threw a set of keys on the table, and I said "What are those?" He replied, "They're keys to the Menninger Clinic archives. And you're going to write our history." I said, "I don't think so." But he insisted. You can't turn something like that down. This was the major psychiatric center in America, and its story had yet to be told. So, in an odd twist, working with the Menninger Clinic marked my jump into the 20th century. I've been working on 20th-century topics ever since.

Stephens: You wrote a biography of developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, and now you're working on Erich Fromm. Are there parallels?

Friedman: Both were born at the turn of 20th century, and both died at the end of the century. Both Fromm and Erikson looked at the psychosocial dimensions of reality. The intersection of one's inner and outer world fascinated them. Fromm, though, was breaking from the Freudian framework and stressing social and cultural aspects that help form an individual. A person is not, in that view, entirely the sum of his or her inner world.

Stephens: How does the legacy of Erikson compare with that of Fromm?

Friedman: That's a difficult question. It seems that public intellectuals of the mid-20th century—of the caliber of Fromm or Richard Hofstadter—have lost much of their earlier appeal. My students don't know any of those authors until I assign their books in class. With Erikson it's a different matter. To this day, psychology textbooks highlight his eight-stage life cycle. All sorts of people speak of an "identity crisis," though many don't know what that means today.

Stephens: Erikson's ideas, then, really have trickled into the larger culture.

Friedman: That's right. Many of Erikson's students are still around in places like Cambridge, Massachusetts. That makes for an interesting contrast to Fromm. Quite a few academics considered Fromm to be a popularizer by the 1960s. But Fromm is not viewed that way by European academics or academics in Japan or Korea. Overseas he is still thought of as a heavyweight. So the legacy is different, if anything, outside of the American academy. Fromm is still big.

Stephens: It's interesting about the public intellectual's shifting stature in the U.S. Many undergraduates would know something about novelists from the 1950s and 1960s, and they would certainly know about celebrities from that era. Perhaps the influence of mid-century intellectuals is tied to the major political issues of that era: the Cold War, consensus liberalism, the culture wars of the 1960s. Tony Judt has written about the difficulty of teaching Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind* (1953) to undergraduates. The question of communism's appeal is just not something that a twenty-year-old today would naturally care about.

Friedman: It is tough to get students to understand the context of mid-century America—the debates of the day and the major issues. They have trouble historicizing the themes. Interestingly, when we read Fromm, they naturally want to think in terms of universal truths, not cultural context.

Stephens: Is Fromm's legacy tied in some ways to psychoanalysis and Freudian psychology? Has his legacy suffered as a result of the waning of psychoanalysis?

Friedman: No. I don't think so. In my estimation these are separate issues. I think psychoanalysis is in deep trouble. Psychoanalysis has become less and

and causes to the average educated reader today?

Friedman: For one, his writings on war and devastation are still remarkably discerning. Of course, in *Escape from Freedom* he was concerned with the perils of Nazism and Stalinism. But he also pointed to future developments, like McCarthyism and the Red Scare. And he is exceedingly relevant even to today's



Richard Hofstadter

less relevant, and that's because the orthodox psychoanalysts stuck with a fairly simplistic version of Freud. We have to keep in mind that Freud was a neurologist, not a scientist. Psychoanalysis became very rigid, and as an intellectual force it's spent. We need to pay attention to it as historians, of course, but it's lost its vibrant influence on society. Surely, certain psychoanalytic ideas have remained popular: identity crisis, ego, and the like.

Since Fromm's focus was on social and political institutions his legacy should be secure from that decline in psychoanalysis. Fromm is also relevant because of his political influence. Unlike Erikson, Fromm was very active politically. Fromm was an adviser to Senator J. William Fulbright. He consulted Adlai Stevenson and David Riesman. Fromm used the enormous royalties from his books to fund the anti-war Committee on Correspondence and bankroll the Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy. He also gave large sums to Amnesty International. Fromm was the chief funder of the Eugene McCarthy presidential campaign of 1968. Fromm also wrote numerous op-eds in the *New York Times* and other outlets on nuclear disarmament and war.

Stephens: How relevant are Fromm's interests

world. Take, for instance, his position on the Mideast, specifically Israel. He was very critical of Israeli belligerence. His views bear some resemblance to those of Noam Chomsky.

Stephens: Your historical work has had a heavy psychological component. What's your opinion of the psychohistory of the 1960s and 1970s?

Friedman: I thought much psychohistory had become reductionist by the late 1960s. I felt that it was giving psychological exploration a bad name. It overemphasized the psychoanalytical element and did not employ cognitive psychology or neuroscience. It tended to be ahistorical. Now what is sometimes called the new cultural history is heavily psychological, but less reductionist than the old psychohistory of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Stephens: Your next book is about Richard Hofstadter and the mid-century New York scene. I wonder if you'd say something about that.

Friedman: Hofstadter was one of the greatest historians of the modern era. You can say he's wrong

on a number of points, but he's brilliantly wrong and always worth going back to. Current debates about the role of conservative religion in America or the influence of anti-intellectualism revolve around some of Hofstadter's basic ideas. His take on the American political tradition continues to in-

fluence high school curricula. He remains amazingly relevant. What interests me especially is mid-century New York City. His friends and associates who lived there, intellectual giants like Peter Gay, helped shape our basic understandings of history and culture. Hofstadter also interacted with Manhattan's

theater community and art world. Hofstadter's New York in the 1950s and 1960s was a fascinating intellectual and cultural hub.



FROM CUSTER'S LAST STAND TO WOUNDED KNEE: A REVIEW ESSAY

Paul Harvey

The clear-eyed vision of a Lakota warrior named He Dog puts these two books into perspective. In 1919, asked about Custer's last stand by an army officer who was there on behalf of the fallen cavalryman's myth-spinning widow, Libbie, He Dog shifted attention to the real story. If the officer "wanted to know the cause of that trouble, he would have to look in Washington . . . the place all those troubles started."

In Indian affairs, at the very least, nothing much good came out of Washington during the episodes recounted in these two volumes: the Battle of the Little Bighorn (June 1876), and the Wounded Knee Massacre (December 1890). Indeed, much of the problem lay in the desire for glory in Washington. For example, in *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, Nathaniel Philbrick reveals Custer's overweening ambition to achieve a quick and glorious victory. Custer dreamed of riding in triumph to the Democratic National Convention in July 1876. That fantasy led him to take some foolish risks that had once worked for him—at Gettysburg, and in the Battle of Washita—but led this time to his doom. Heather Cox Richardson's *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre* details how the Republicans shamelessly rushed to statehood several thinly populated western territories in order to shore up the Grand Old Party's hopes in the 1892 elections. She also describes how Republicans established military bases by pandering to the desires of local populations for economic growth. As a result of these shortsighted policies, U.S. troops butchered 200 starving and cold Indian men, women, and children at Wounded Knee Creek.

Historians will be more naturally drawn to Richardson's work, while Philbrick's will doubtless reach a larger popular readership. But both books marry excellent analysis with fine storytelling. Academic historians will admire Richardson's expert interweaving of story and analysis, and may feel

that for all its virtues, Philbrick's book values story sometimes at the expense of rigorous analysis. That is not likely to matter to general readers looking for a great yarn. They will be drawn in by Philbrick's skillfully served small plates of often fascinating details. My favorite: the jealousy among

Little Bighorn saw an opportunity to get their revenge at Wounded Knee. The killing of Sitting Bull, the political and spiritual leader of the Indian alliance that routed Custer at Little Bighorn, was an important part of the prelude to Wounded Knee. In both cases accounts of the battles were designed

to serve political interests. Disinformation campaigns from army officers and political operatives made for distorted narratives that exonerated the guilty and secured military and political careers. And ever since, most of what has appeared in print about these two events depends more on legend than fact. But Philbrick and Richardson show that historians can tell entertaining—even gripping—stories that rely exclusively on facts, which is

what makes these two books such welcome additions to our American history bookshelf.

Heather Cox Richardson, *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre* (Basic Books, 2010).

Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Viking, 2010).

Sitting Bull's two wives, which forced him to sleep on his back so that he would not be facing one or the other in bed.

Both books cover ground trod by generations of historians, mythmakers, visionaries, political activists, and reenactors. This is most especially true of Philbrick's book. Custer's Last Stand is surely one of the most extensively studied—overstudied, really—topics in American history. Wounded Knee, too, appears in every textbook, usually in conjunction with a summary of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. To their credit, though, both authors shed fresh light on their subjects (most especially Richardson).

These books complete a chronological narrative from one "last stand" in 1876 to another in 1890. Neither, of course, was a "last stand"; that's part of the mythology that the books deconstruct. The handoff point between the two volumes occurs when General Nelson Miles enters the picture late in Philbrick's account and takes over the military side of U.S. Indian affairs (including chasing and subduing the Indians who had defeated Custer). He then plays an instrumental role in Richardson's account of the origins of Wounded Knee. Memories of Little Bighorn played directly into the massacre at Wounded Knee. Veterans of

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