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## Overcoming alienation as the practice of adult education: The contribution of Erich Fromm to a critical theory of adult learning and education

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### Abstract:

*Erich Fromm's analysis of the commodification of contemporary life, his description of automaton conformity and his call for the overcoming of alienation represent important, though ignored, elements of the critical tradition that have great resonance for the practice of adult education. Brookfield argues that his congeniality of tone makes Fromm's work a statement of critical theory that is particularly accessible to an audience accustomed to thinking in terms of the psychology of the individual adult learner.*

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### [Headnote]

Erich Fromm's analysis of the commodification of contemporary life, his description of automaton conformity, and his call for the overcoming of alienation represent important, though ignored, elements of the critical tradition that have great resonance for the practice of adult education. Drawing particularly on the early Marx of the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Fromm conducted a radical, yet highly accessible, analysis of adult life and learning. He argued that learning to penetrate ideological obfuscation, and thereby overcome the alienation this obfuscation induced, was the learning task of adulthood. Adult education as a force for resistance would make people aware of ideological manipulation and educate them for participatory democracy. By calling his ideas humanist, Fromm ensured that his work beckoned enticingly to many educators. But his normative humanism was a militant, Marxist humanism, entailing the abolition of capitalist alienation and the creation of democratic socialism.

Within major adult education research journals and at major research conferences, critical theory and postmodernism are influential theoretical discourses. Yet, when we look at the field of practice, adult education's apolitical emphasis on personal development programs or on the incorporation of human capital perspectives into learning at the workplace allows the andragogical paradigm to reign supreme.

Why should this apparent contradiction exist? What could be the reasons for critical theory's lack of impact on the world of adult education practice? Is it a function of the Marxophobia identified by McClaren (1997)? Or, as a Eurocentric, White male, emancipatory grand narrative, is critical theory rendered irrelevant because of postmodern, Afrocentric, feminist, and postcolonial critiques? Could it be an example of repressive tolerance (Marcuse, 1965) whereby the dominant order allows for the expression of critical perspectives while effectively marginalizing them? In my own

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conversations with adult education graduate students, teachers, and program developers who have dismissed the critical tradition as irrelevant to their practices, these reasons are rarely mentioned. Instead, the language of critical theory's major texts seems to be the problem. Graduate students tell me this work is opaque, impenetrable, and intimidatingly unfamiliar. Work your way past Marxophobia and you have to contend with a German philosophical tradition grounded in the complexities of Hegel. Accessible is about the last word that springs to mind when critical theory is mentioned. The "Seven Habits of Highly Effective Theorists" it is not.

In my search for texts that could interpret the critical theory tradition in terms congenial to American sensibilities, I recently began to re-read the work of Erich Fromm. Perhaps precisely because of his accessibility, Fromm has not enjoyed the same critical acclaim as his contemporaries, sometimes being regarded as "Frankfurt lite." As a self-proclaimed social psychologist, Fromm emphasized the psychology of the individual as much as political critique. But his analysis always insisted that both psychological and sociopolitical understandings needed to coexist if contemporary life were to be fully understood. Books such as *The Art of Loving* (1956a) exhibit a tone and terminology that make them congenial reading for adult educators influenced by American, rather than European, intellectual traditions. Fromm strove constantly for an accessibility and consistency of language, interpreting ideas drawn from the critical tradition in terms comprehensible to the average reader. His comment in the foreword to *The Art of Loving* (1956a) that "to avoid unnecessary complications I have tried to deal with the problem in a language which is non technical as far as this is possible" (p. vii) could apply to most of his work. As a consequence, his books have been read by millions who would be very suspicious of opening texts such as *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, *The German Ideology*, or *Lenin and Philosophy*.

In this article, I want to argue that this congeniality of tone makes Fromm's work a statement of critical theory that is particularly accessible to an audience accustomed to thinking in terms of the psychology of the individual adult learner. His work is potentially important for adult educators trying to build a case for taking this body of work more seriously. Critical theory should not be Balkanized within gatherings of academic researchers such as the Adult Education Research Conference (United States) or the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (United Kingdom), while the wider field of practice honors self-actualization and human capital theory. That Fromm can write in terms acceptable to a chiefly nonpolitical audience, and that he can do this while unapologetically showing how this work is grounded in a Marxist-influenced critique of capitalism, makes him particularly important to the critical-theory tradition in American adult education. Fromm undertook a powerful Marxist analysis of adult life and learning, drawing consistently and explicitly on concepts of commodification, objectification, and alienation, yet managed to conduct this analysis in a very accessible way that ensured his words were read by millions. It was not so much that he developed startling new theoretical constructs (though I believe he articulated the phenomenon of automaton conformity with a particularly American twist) but that he managed to illuminate the forms of alienation produced by capitalism in a manner understandable to middle America. Moreover, his plan for the overcoming of alienation through the teaching of a structuralized worldview and the creation of a network of dialogic groups to further participatory democracy constitute two

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important adult education projects. In the following paragraphs, I outline Fromm's analysis of alienation under capitalism and review the adult educational responses he suggested to counter this.

## FROMM As RADICAL HUMANIST

Of all the theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, Fromm is probably the one who in his time was read by the largest number of readers, including many non-Marxists well outside the critical tradition. Why should this be the case? Perhaps one reason is that he frequently described his commitment to radical humanism. To contemporary adult educators, humanism is a benign, friendly word associated with notions of self-actualization or self-fulfillment and drawing on Rogers, Maslow, and Allport. A humanistic perspective on adult education is usually interpreted as one that emphasizes respect for each adult learner's individuality and that seeks to help the individual realize her or his potential to the fullest extent possible. There is little attention to the political underpinnings of adult education practice and to the way political economy makes self-actualization a luxury for a certain social class. In contrast to this, Fromm's normative humanism is a militant, Marxist humanism, one that contends that each human's realization of potential entails the abolition of capitalist alienation and the creation of democratic socialism. But because they are called humanist, Fromm's ideas beckon enticingly to adult educators who would not dream of touching anything remotely considered Marxist.

So, despite the accessibility of his writing, Fromm's essential radicalism needs to be recognized. Make no mistake about it, his analysis of contemporary society and his belief in adult education as crucial to a sane society are grounded explicitly in a Marxist analysis of capitalism, particularly the alienated nature of work and learning. Working firmly within the "ideology as false consciousness" perspective, Fromm (1976) observed that through "a complicated process of indoctrination, rewards, punishments, and fitting ideology... most people believe they are following their own will and are unaware that their will itself is conditioned and manipulated" (p. 83). For Fromm, learning to penetrate ideological obfuscation, and thereby overcoming the alienation this obfuscation induced, was the learning task of adulthood.

Fromm clearly saw a direct link between a healthy society free from capitalist alienation and a strong system of adult education. In his major book interpreting Marxism for a popular audience, Fromm (1956b) wrote that "a sane society must provide possibilities for adult education, much as it provides today for the schooling of children" (p. 346). Adult education as a force for resistance to false consciousness would make people aware of ideological manipulation and educate them for participatory democracy. In such a democracy, Fromm (1968) claimed, people "regain control over the social and economic system" to make "optimal human development and not maximal production the criterion for all planning" (p. 101). If adults were to understand and confront their alienation, they needed to understand how history and psychology intersected to construct a social character prone to follow fascist or totalitarian leaders and subject to the influence of automaton conformity. The difficulties entailed in this form of learning could not be overcome by children or adolescents. In Fromm's (1956b) opinion, To really understand the problems in these fields, a person must have had a great deal more experience in living than he has had at college age. For many people the age of 30 or 40 is much



more appropriate for learning. (p. 346)

## FROMM'S DEBT TO MARX:

### OBJECTIFICATION, COMMODIFICATION, AND ALIENATION

The chief outlines of Fromm's critique of contemporary society-and, by implication, of adult education-are drawn directly from Marxist thought, particularly Marx's outline of the way in which work in capitalist society has become objectified, that is, experienced by workers as separated from their creativity and identity. In 1961, Fromm published Marx's *Concept of Man*, a translation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, along with his own interpretive commentary. The first manuscript translated is "Alienated Labor," Marx's (1961) classic statement on the way in which capitalist economics means that "the individual worker sinks to the level of a commodity, and to a most miserable commodity" (p. 93). In this essay, Marx described the development of monopoly capitalism and the decline of the individual entrepreneur. In capitalist economies, "the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands," a development Marx viewed as "a restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form" (p. 93).

The injuries of monopoly capitalism surface repeatedly in Fromm's work. Even in widely popular books written for a mass audience such as *The Art of Loving* (1956a), he writes that under modern capitalism "we witness an ever-increasing process of centralization and concentration of capital" in which "the ownership of capital invested in these enterprises is more and more separated from the function of managing them" (p. 84). When the owners of capital can command labor to produce goods that increase the return on the owner's investment, then a hierarchy emerges in which "amassed things, that which is dead, are of superior value to labor, to human powers, to that which is alive" (p. 84). Work under such a system is physically exhausting, mentally debasing, and creatively moribund. Because people work for someone else, their labor becomes converted into someone else's property. The products produced by people's labor have nothing of their own creativity or identity contained within them:

The object produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object and turned into a physical thing; this product is an objectification of labor. The performance of work is at the same time its objectification. (Marx, 1961, p. 95)

Using Fromm's analysis as a starting point, it is quite possible to interpret adult learning processes through the lens of objectification. In mandatory continuing education, compulsory training, and the required participation of employees in human resource development programs, it is easy to see how learning undertaken to satisfy external authorities ceases to become the adult learner's intellectual project. Very frequently, the products and measures of learning-essays, test scores, papers, exams-take on physical form and stand apart from the learner. The exam does not measure the adult's engagement in creative work that confirms her or his identity but rather exerts a coercive pressure requiring the learner to improve her or his performance according to criteria she or he has no chance of affecting.



When labor is objectified, something peculiar happens to the worker's emotions: "The more the worker expends himself in work, the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself" (Marx quoted in Fromm, 1961, p. 96). In devoting themselves to the production of objects, workers somehow find that their own identity has diminished as the power of the objects they produce has increased. Like the demented ventriloquist who sees his doll gain life and start to control him, so "the worker puts his life into the object, and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object [which] sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force" (p. 96). It is not so much that workers are exploited and dominated by the owners of production but rather that they are overwhelmed by the world of objects itself, which now becomes experienced "as an alien and hostile world" (p. 99).

The Marxist concepts of objectification, commodification, and alienation surface again and again in Fromm's work, constantly underpinning his own normative humanism. In commenting on Marx, Fromm (1961) argued that Marxism was less a political creed, more "a spiritual existentialism in secular language" (p. 5). To Fromm, "Marx's aim was that of the spiritual emancipation of man, of his liberation from the chains of economic determinism, of restituting him in his human wholeness, of enabling him to find unity and harmony with his fellow man and with nature" (p. 3). Marx, Fromm believed, was not concerned primarily with equalizing income. His main interest was in stopping work from being an alienating experience. He quotes Marx's comments in volume 1 of *Capital* that methods of production under capitalism "mutilate the laborer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil" (p. 52). So for Fromm, "Marx's central criticism of capitalism is not the injustice in the distribution of wealth; it is the perversion of labor into forced, alienated, meaningless labor" (p. 42).

In fact, Fromm's analysis of alienation deepened and broadened Marx's initial exposition of the idea. Fromm (1961) contended that Marx underestimated the intensity and pervasiveness of alienation that had become "the fate of the vast majority of people, especially of the ever increasing segment of the population which manipulate symbols and men, rather than machines" (p. 56). In contemporary society, people "worship things, the machines which produce things-and in this alienated world they feel as strangers and quite alone" (p. 57). In such works as *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Man for Himself* (1947), and *The Sane Society* (1956b), Fromm illustrated the power of the concept of alienation, extending it from the world of work into the domains of politics, recreation, and intimate relationships. Commodification has distorted even our language to the point that our "speech style indicates the prevailing high degree of alienation" (Fromm, 1976, p. 31) we feel. Fromm asked us to consider the colloquial phrase "I have a problem" and the commodification this signifies: "by saying 'I have' a problem instead of 'I am troubled,' subjective experience is eliminated; the I of experience is replaced by the it of possession ... I have transformed myself into 'a problem' and am now owned by my creation" (p. 31). This commodification of language further ensures that in all aspects of modern life "one experiences oneself as a commodity or, rather, simultaneously as the seller and the commodity to be sold" (p. 146).



As a counter to alienation, Fromm (1965) proposed a version of socialism that he called humanistic or communitarian socialism. This kind of socialism did not stress the equalization of income or distribution of profits. Its emphasis was on the creation of a workplace in which workers controlled the pace and form of production. Instead of being separated from each other and denied the opportunity to exercise their own creative energies, workers in a socialist system experienced work as an associative and creative activity. He traced this version of socialism to what he claimed were the humanistic underpinnings of Marx's version of socialism. Fromm (1961) wrote that "the principle goal of socialism for Marx is the recognition and realization of man's true needs, which will be possible only when production serves man and capital ceases to create and exploit the false needs of man" (p. 59). To Fromm, socialism is more about human creativity than economic arrangements. It is "a form of production and an organization of society in which man can overcome alienation from his product, from his work, from his fellow man, from himself and from nature" (p. 59). A socialist society is one in which people feel connected to each other, able to discover and exercise their own creative impulses, and aware of their relationship to the natural environment. In such a society, a person will be able to "return to himself and grasp the world with his own powers thus becoming one with the world" (p. 59).

It is not an enormous stretch to see in Fromm's vision of communitarian socialism a larger vision of the processes that would be observable in adult education classrooms striving to realize some principles of participatory democracy. In such classrooms, the object would be to make adult education serve the true needs of learners instead of satisfying their false needs. False needs will be those that uncritically mimic the aspirations of the dominant culture such as learning to compete more effectively against other learners, learning skills that allow people to acquire more and more possessions they do not really need, or learning how to adapt one's thinking and behavior to prevailing mores and cultural patterns. In seeking to overcome the individual adult's alienation from learning and from her or his fellow learners, an adult classroom would emphasize cooperative ways of working. It would regard the individual pursuit of truth, beauty, and knowledge as the exception to the collaborative rule. Adult education as communitarian socialism would be dialogic, an attempt to create a continuous conversation among learners in which all voices would be heard equally.

It is because of their suspicion of how learning can become objectified and experienced by adults as hostile to their real needs and inner yearnings that so many adult educators have stressed, and continue to insist on, the voluntary underpinnings of genuine adult education. From Lindeman (1926) to Horton (1990), a school of adult education has contended that adult education only happens when adults opt voluntarily for a program of learning they have designed. This tradition regards mandatory adult education as an oxymoron. It focuses instead on how adult education can help learners develop skills and knowledge that will help them understand and change the communities in which they live. This learning happens through a collaborative analysis of adults' experiences during which the roles of teacher and learner move among participants. Adult education formats attempt to replicate the best features of participatory democracy, with all participants actively involved in deciding aspects of what and how to learn.

## THE ALIENATING CHARACTER OF CAPITALISM



Fromm views the distinguishing character of capitalism as the elevation, to practically the exclusion of all else, of the economic domain of life. Its leitmotif is the use of people as if they were economic objects: the owner of capital uses other men for the purpose of his own profit... a living human being, ceases to be an end in himself, and becomes the means for the economic interests of another man, or himself, or of an impersonal giant, the economic machine. (Fromm, 1956b, p. 93)

A necessary corollary of assessing human worth in economic terms is the elevation of materialistic values over human values of compassion, skill, or creativity. Thus, "in the capitalistic hierarchy of values, capital stands higher than labor, amassed things higher than the manifestations of life . . . things are higher than man" (Fromm, 1956b, p. 95). Humanity is diminished as qualities such as a person's energy, skill, personality, and creativity become objectified-assets to be sold on the market of interpersonal relations. Under capitalism, "the market decides the value of these human qualities" with the result that "relations between human beings ... assume the character of relations between things," as each person "sells himself and feels himself to be a commodity" (Fromm, 1941, p. 140).

In describing how the laws of the market corrupt personal relations, Fromm anticipates Habermas's ideas on the colonization of the lifeworld, a theme that has produced some provocative critiques of contemporary adult education (Newman, 1999; Welton, 1995). In the United States today, "our whole culture is based on the appetite for buying, on the idea of a mutually favorable exchange" (Fromm, 1956b, p. 3). Human communication and interpersonal feelings are distorted by the application of a cost-benefit analysis way of thinking to our relationships: "In all social and personal relations the laws of the market are the rule" (Fromm, 1941, p. 139). The logic of the exchange economy pervades all aspects of life, Fromm (1956b) argued, because "in capitalistic society exchanging has become an end in itself" (p. 146); thus, "the whole process of living is experienced analogously to the profitable investment of capital, my life and my person being the capital which is invested" (p. 148).

Fromm relied heavily on Marx's idea of commodity fetishism (the worship of things to the extent that they are imbued with magical qualities and powers) to explain how alienation is experienced in contemporary society. In terms drawn straight from Marx's manuscript on the subject, Fromm (1956b) defined alienation as "a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien... estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts" (p. 120). The roots of this sense of alienation lie in the nature of modern work, which requires that people pour their energy into making products that then assume an existence apart from, and over, them. In the contemporary workplace, the worker finds that "his life forces have flown into a thing" (p. 121) that becomes "something apart from himself, over and against him" (p. 122). Fromm's extension of commodity fetishism into an analysis of rampant consumerism is still accurate half a century after it appeared. A major purpose of life in capitalism is to consume the commodities we produce, yet the experience of compulsive consumption is itself alienating. In Fromm's (1956b) era and certainly pronounced today, we experience "an ever increasing need for more things, for more consumption... but our craving for consumption has lost all connection with the real needs of man" (p. 134). We develop what Fromm called the receptive orientation, in which we desire "to have something



new all the time, to live with a continuously open mouth as it were" (p. 136). Creativity, artistic expression, and personal fulfillment are equated with consuming more and more things. Fromm became positively lyrical in his description of how commodity fetishism becomes converted into the consumer ethic: "The world is one great object for our appetite, a big apple, a big bottle, a big breast; we are the sucklers, the eternally expectant ones, the hopeful ones-and the eternally disappointed ones" (p. 166).

Education (including adult education) is, of course, no exception to the process of commodification. The education system "generally tries to train people to have knowledge as a possession, by and large commensurate with the amount of property or social prestige they are likely to have in later life" (Fromm, 1976, p. 48). Educational institutions "give each student a certain amount of cultural property" (p. 43) or a "luxury-knowledge package" with "the size of each package being in accord with the person's probably social prestige" (p. 49). Knowledge becomes equated with content, with "fixed clusters of thought, or whole theories" (p. 37) that students store. In this system, teachers are reduced to "bureaucratic dispensers of knowledge" (Fromm, 1968, p. 120). This commodified content, transmitted bureaucratically, is alienated from learners' lives and experiences: "The students and the content of the lectures remain strangers to each other, except that each student has become the owner of a collection of statements made by somebody else" (Fromm, 1976, p. 37).

Fromm (1962) also extended Marx's idea of commodity fetishism into the realm of political discourse, observing that "the fetishism of words is as dangerous in the realm of political ideology as it is in that of religious ideology" (p. 159). Words have become a substitute for concrete political action, so that making a speech is considered a significant act of social change. Yet, language as a substitute for political intervention is illusory, allowing politicians the indulgence of an endless reinvention of self. Words do not change the world, deeds do: "The idea which remains a word only changes words" (p. 177). A media and politically literate adult must be helped to see that "words have meaning only in the total context of deed and character; unless there is unity among these factors words serve to deceive-others and oneself; instead of revealing, they have the function of hiding" (p. 159). In terms echoing Orwell's (1946) analysis of the perversions of political language, Fromm argued that a task of adult education must be to make adults aware of doublespeak, of when an utterance means exactly the opposite of what it purports to mean, as in "calling Franco and other dictators representatives of the free world" (p. 160).

Fromm's (1956b) analysis of political alienation looks back to J. S. Mill's ideas on the tyranny of the majority and forward to the contemporary perversion of political discourse by television advertising. We are alienated politically when our political participation is reduced to our being forced to choose between candidates we had no hand in selecting and who represent mammoth parties financed by giant, yet often invisible, corporate interests. Voters are blanketed by political commercials that dull the capacity for critical thought. Not surprisingly, "this situation gives the average citizen a deep sense of powerlessness in political matters" with the result that "political intelligence is reduced more and more" (p. 191). Given the current widespread cynicism regarding politics, and the widespread dismissal of political commercials as propaganda, this may seem an overly pessimistic conclusion to draw. However, it is salutary to reflect on Fromm's (1941) warnings of the effects that the

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"increasing power of monopolistic capital" (p. 141) would have on the political process. Writing before the influence of corporate lobbyists and political action committees had become the accepted currency of politics, Fromm decried the fact that "an enormous though secret power over the whole society is exercised by a small group, on the decisions of which depends the fate of a large part of society" (p. 141).

## POLITICAL LITERACY AND ADULT EDUCATION

In his uncovering of elite influence within the monopoly capitalism of the media, Fromm outlined a political literacy project for adult education. Any socially responsible adult education program must include within it an attempt to lay bare the purchase by those with the most capital of access to opinion-making organizations. It must show that free speech is often bought speech, that getting one's ideas or opinions into the public sphere depends on having the capital to buy media outlets that can disseminate these ideas. Such a program would show how media must always be thought of as big businesses and how news divisions of major media outlets are heavily influenced by the interests of corporate sponsors and the need to present news in an entertaining way to keep the maximum audience. In particular, Fromm's emphasis on how an unrepresentative minority exerts disproportionate influence clearly anticipates Newman's (1994) call to name the enemy that encourages adults to retreat into abstract ideas about freedom and democracy. If, as Fromm says above, "an enormous though secret power over the whole society is exercised by a small group," and if this group can exert control over political discourse out of all proportion to their size in the society, then a crucial adult educational task becomes to conduct appropriate research and inquiry to name the members of this group. In Newman's (1994) words, "we need to ask: who are the people, what are the organizations promoting the reorganization of capitalism? Where do they operate? Can we name them and do they have an address?" (p. 149).

Alienated politics is most tragically evident in the practice of democracy, for many people the most hopeful grand narrative of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Fromm (1956b) rejected the rhetoric of democracy as liberation from tyranny, arguing instead that the democratic process had transmogrified into the tyranny of the majority. In our age of conformity, "the democratic method has more and more assumed the meaning that a majority decision is necessarily right, and morally superior to that of the minority, and hence has the moral right to impose its will on the minority" (p. 340). He cited with scorn the advertising slogan that "Ten Million Americans Can't Be Wrong" as evidence of how the epistemic distortion of equating validity with majority opinion had spread through society. "Nothing is further from the truth," Fromm (1941, p. 14) argued, than to believe that agreement and consensus represent a higher epistemological authority. To Fromm, "consensual validation as such has no bearing whatsoever on reason or mental health" (p. 15); in fact, it is often represented as a deliberate suppression of critical thought through the exclusion of divergent opinions.

It is interesting to remember these words when we find ourselves practicing the difficult and contradictory process of trying to democratize adult education classrooms. Adult educators committed to democratic process can easily find themselves turning instinctively to the principle of majority vote when working with a group of adults to decide collectively what and how to learn. Yet, as Fromm points out, the majority opinion in an adult classroom may stand firmly against anything that



disturbs the familiarity of teacher authority, didactic transmission of information, and curriculum being decided by omniscient strangers in far-off places. As Shor (1996) and Cale (2001) illustrated, a majority of adults will usually choose not to rock the boat by challenging conventional thinking on race, class, or gender, or by opting to explore political dynamics outside, but especially inside, the adult classroom. Cale's study of a writing class for adults shows how an apparent act of resistance-asking adults to take a measure of control in choosing what to learn-can end up reproducing dominant ideology. His students chose to avoid contentious racial issues and to stay close to home with familiar topics.

Here is one of the unresolvable tensions of critical practice: how to respect the agendas adults bring to a democratic negotiation of curriculum while contradictorily challenging these agendas by offering (and sometimes insisting on) radically different, politically contentious options for study. As Fromm argued, if adult educators stop short of insisting on some attention being paid to alternative, minority viewpoints, then the process of automaton conformity, of choosing to think and do what one supposes everyone else thinks and does, runs rampant. A deliberate suppression of alternative perspectives in the name of a democratic honoring of the people's will was one of the chief indicators that automaton conformity was in place and unchallenged.

#### ALIENATION AS AUTOMATON CONFORMITY

Alienation as a pervasive mode of existence was most evident in the phenomenon of automaton conformity. This idea is explained most fully in Fromm's (1941) *Escape from Freedom*, although its presence is felt in all his writing. Automaton conformity describes the process of social manipulation that results in the adult's striving to be exactly the same as he or she imagines the majority to be. When we succumb to such conformity, we become "cogs in the bureaucratic machine, with our thoughts, feelings, and tastes manipulated by the government industry and the mass communications that they control" (Fromm, 1976, p. 12). The flight into automaton conformity was one of the two possible responses Fromm identified to the fear of freedom (the other being to seek refuge in submission to fascist and totalitarian regimes).

Of these two avenues, it is automaton conformity that is the most subtle and intriguing and ultimately the most alienating. The individual attempts to escape the burden of freedom "by transforming himself into a small cog in the machine, well fed, and well clothed. ... yet not a free man but an automaton" (Fromm, 1941, p. xii). The subtlety of automaton conformity is that the pressure to conform is applied internally, not externally, an example of disciplinary power in action: "People want to conform to a much higher degree than they are forced to conform, at least in the Western democracies" (p. xii). The authority one is submitting to by conforming is anonymous: the authority of imagined common sense, public opinion, and conventional wisdom. Fromm sounded a distinctively Foucaultian note in his observation that "in anonymous authority both command and commander have become invisible" (p. 190), obscured by social habit and political ideology. Information about the correct ways to think and act is inscribed in the cultural DNA.

Fromm's description of automaton conformity also echoes Gramsci's writing on hegemony. The power of anonymous authority comes from its all-pervasive, yet



invisible, nature. Like fish unaware of the water in which they live, citizens swim unsuspectingly in the ocean of anonymous authority. We are surrounded by an "atmosphere of subtle suggestion which actually pervades our whole social life ... one never suspects that there is any order which one is expected to follow" (Fromm, 1941, p. 190). Under the enveloping influence of anonymous authority, "the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns and he ... becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be" (pp. 208-209). Any anxiety people might feel about this kind of existence concerns whether or not they are sufficiently assiduous in pursuing and realizing the pattern of conformity. The automaton conformist's credo can be summarized thus:

I must conform, not be different, not stick out; I must be ready and willing to change according to the changes in the pattern; I must not ask whether I am right or wrong, but whether I am adjusted, whether I am not "peculiar," not different. (Fromm, 1956a, p. 153)

Automaton conformity has crucial consequences, according to Fromm. Although freedom of thought, speech, and action are cornerstones of American ideology, he believed automaton conformity had worked to erase these elements from the culture. In Fromm's (1941) view, "original decision is a comparatively rare phenomenon in a society which supposedly makes individual decision the cornerstone of its existence" (p. 225). We venerate the ideal of a society full of staunchly rugged individuals defending the right to think, say, and do whatever they wish, but the reality is that "we have become automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals ... everybody and everything has become instrumentalized" (p. 279).

This decline in originality of thought and decision inevitably worked to kill critical thinking. As we strive to conform to anonymous authority, and as we feel increasingly powerless in the face of the massive structures (corporations, political parties, labor unions) and forces (advertising, political propaganda) confronting us, we lose the capacity to think critically. In Fromm's (1941) view, "these methods of dulling the capacity for critical thinking are more dangerous to our democracy than many of the open attacks against it" (p. 150). We are unable to see the big picture, to realize that we are part of a system that operates deliberately to diminish our agency and suppress our ability to ask critical questions. It was clear to Fromm that a most effective "way of paralyzing the ability to think critically is the destruction of any kind of structuralized picture of the world" (p. 276). Life becomes seen as "composed of many little pieces, each separate from the other and lacking any sense as a whole" (p. 277).

## TEACHING A STRUCTURALIZED WORLDVIEW

In advocating the teaching of a structuralized worldview, Fromm offers us a clear purpose for adult education, one that fits firmly within the tradition of adult education as a field of practice focused on helping adults learn democracy. A structuralized view of the world requires a familiarity with history, political economy, and sociology. Fromm argued that the development of such a view was really only possible with adult learners. In his way of thinking, adults not only had a greater interest in developing such a perspective, but they also possessed the intellectual capability to do this in a way that was not possible for them in adolescence. An



interpretation of Fromm's call to develop a structuralized picture of the world is something that Fromm's contemporary C. W. Mills attempted to provide. Like Fromm, Mills (1962) had written a popular text on Marxism, and like him he had thought deeply about the social purpose of adult education. In a slim pamphlet published by the Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults in 1954, Mills anticipated Fromm's (1959) argument in *The Sociological Imagination* that a structuralized view of the world emerges when adults learn "to turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and rationally open problems" (p. 12). If adults start to see situations in their private lives as concrete manifestations of broader social and political contradictions, they will see that changing their individual lives is impossible without political action. Hence, "to the extent that the adult college is effective, it is going to be political; its students are going to try to influence decisions of power" (p. 16).

Fromm and Mills both emphasized the necessity of adults' understanding how the particular circumstances of their lives were produced by the intersection of political decisions, social and economic trends, and the workings of capital. Divorce, unemployment, unhappiness, and isolation must be interpreted not as the capricious workings of a cruel fate but as the result of decisions made by the (often secret) few in positions of enormous power. Factories close and jobs are lost not because the economy somehow catches a cold; these things happen because companies relocate to other states or countries where nonunionized labor is cheap and plentiful, or because governing boards decide to merge with other boards, or because by "downsizing" or "rightsizing," a company's stockholder dividends are likely to be higher. Even the most private and traumatic tearings in the fabric of personal relationships, such as divorce, should be understood as social and political phenomena. The restlessness and unfulfilled desires that lay behind a divorce were manifestations of the receptive orientation that predisposed people to want more and more with no prospect of more than temporary satisfaction—the eternally expectant ones forever doomed to be the eternally disappointed ones, as Fromm put it. Alternatively, divorce, unhappiness, and isolation were the result of people's needing to leave their home communities in search of work that would provide them with the financial means to satisfy their appetite for the commodities they felt were necessary to create the good life.

A structuralized view of the world moved adults away from magical consciousness (in Freire's terms) to an awareness of how ideology, culture, and economics intersected to shape individual lives. Possessing such an awareness was the necessary precursor to deciding that alienating social arrangements could be reshaped by individual and collective will. Helping people develop a structuralized view of the world was one way adult education could lay the foundations for social action. Without this view, there was little chance that people could recognize, let alone oppose, "the consensus of stupidity" (Fromm, 1962, p. 182) that would most likely ensure environmental self-destruction. The task of adult education was to break the chains of illusion that bound people to an individualized view of life and to develop in them the capacity for reason: "the capacity to recognize the unreality of most of the ideas that man holds, and to penetrate to the reality veiled by the layers and layers of deception and ideologies" (p. 179).

## ADULT LEARNING AS DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION



If "human activity is paralyzed in the capitalist system," then the goal of socialism must be "to restore full humanity by restoring activity in all spheres of life" (Fromm, 1976, p. 99). Politically this meant the creation of a participatory democracy that would liberate people from the commodified, "having" mode of existence. Fromm proposed a network of face-to-face groups that would coalesce into town meeting-sized assemblies of not more than 500 people. This network of assemblies would constitute a Lower House to monitor and advise the elected legislature on a day-to-day basis.

Within these groups, adults were enjoined to behave in ways appropriate to participatory democracy. In outlining these ways, Fromm focused quite concretely on the conditions and dispositions for dialogic learning. In participatory adult-learning groups, members are disposed to help others learn because they regard their peers' learning as crucial to their own individual development. They strive to understand what others are saying and to "help the other to clarify his thought rather than to force him to defend formulations about which he may have his own doubts" (Fromm, 1968, p. 115). Adults in these groups are in a "being" mode of learning and strive for the loss of ego that the best adult teachers also strive for:

They respond spontaneously and productively; they forget about themselves, about the knowledge, the positions they have. Their egos do not stand in their own way ... they carefully respond to the other person and that person's ideas. They give birth to new ideas because they are not holding on to anything. (Fromm, 1976, p. 42)

Although he does not reference Lindeman, Fromm is here reprising some of Lindeman's sentiments regarding the nature and function of adult discussion groups in a democratic society (Lindeman & Smith, 1951) and then adding a more psychological sheen by focusing on the loss of ego. To a social psychologist such as Fromm, diminishing egocentrism and opposing capitalist commodification are two sides of the same coin. When adult learners in discussion groups are disposed to help others learn, they also help the other "to transcend his or her egocentricity" (Fromm, 1976, p. 42). In furthering the loss of ego, "the conversation ceases to be an exchange of commodities (information, knowledge, status) and becomes a dialogue in which it does not matter any more who is right" (p. 42). As conversation as combative posturing recedes, so "the duelists begin to dance together... with joy" (p. 42).

To Fromm (1976), "the knowledge that one's decision has an effect" (p. 179) is crucial to the functioning of participatory democracy and the missing element in many superficially democratic formats. What is true for democratic experiments in the wider society is just as true for the adult classroom. A basic indication that a degree of democracy is in place is that the opinions adults express have some impact on the situation in which they find themselves. This does not mean that the will of the majority must, by definition, prevail. Indeed, the minority's perspective may be the more valid one (as would be the case in an insistence that dominant ideology obfuscates the extent of repressive power). But where hard-fought decisions emerge from true dialogue, the originators of those decisions need to know that they will have some effect. Otherwise, why bother?

Fromm (1956b) believed that opposing adults' uncritical adherence to dominant



ideology required an educator "to stick to one's convictions even though they are unpopular" (p. 127). To do what was right, one had to call forth "the courage to judge certain values as of ultimate concern--and to take the jump and stake everything on these values" (Fromm, 1956a, p. 126). In staking everything on helping adults overcome the alienation inherent in capitalist society, Fromm's work reaches out to us from across the millennial divide.

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