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## **Fromm's Social Psychology and His Left-Wing Critics: A Historical and Theoretical Approach**

One of Freud's great contributions to the history of human thought was his insistence that normality is not simply a self-evident fact, but something that requires scientific scrutiny and explanation. On the basis of extensive clinical experience, and in keeping with ideas current in his day, Freud argued that many features of civilized life promote neurotic misery, and that many of the processes that underlie neurotic disability are present in normals as well (Freud, 1901; Freud 1908). Freud's philosophy of cultural development was premised on a supposedly intractable conflict between explosive libidinous and aggressive impulses, and countervailing collective requirements for peaceful and solidary social bonds, created by the secondary transformation of libido through aim-inhibited and sublimated love (Freud, 1933). Accordingly, while Freud thought our membership in society is consolidated by the libidinous energies invested in collective myths and transferences to charismatic leaders (Freud, 1927), he also insisted that despite our surface sociability, in the core of our being, even the most civilized among us are "enemies of civilization", and eager to unleash the beast within.

The first forthright challenge to Freud's pessimistic cultural critique in analytic circles came from Wilhelm Reich. In the late 1920's, Reich rose to prominence for his pioneering contributions to the analysis of resistances,



and orthodox Freudians still cite Characteranalysis, his classic treatment of this subject, despite his subsequent fall from grace (1933b). Reich was expelled from the International Psychoanalytic Association for his Marxist sympathies and political activities in 1933. And by then, his views on analytic technique also raised a few eyebrows. Even at this relatively early date, Reich was beginning to put less emphasis on the *verbal* analysis of resistances, and increasing emphasis on the manipulation of the patient's musculature and breathing patterns, which presumably ameliorate or dissolve their characterological rigidity. Following Freud's early concept of the "actual neuroses", Reich imagined that the cure for psychoneurotic disturbances lay in unconstrained sexual satisfaction, so he devoted his increasingly non-verbal therapeutic technique to facilitating "orgastic potency", assuming that when it is restored, irrational or destructive behavior patterns become robbed of their energy source, and simply atrophy or disappear (Reich, 1979).

In addition to being a gifted but controversial clinician, Reich promoted a program of radical social reform. Among Reich's proposals -- which distressed even his communist colleagues -- was for the sexual liberation of adolescents. This went far beyond what Freud envisioned, and as Reich's biographers have ably attested, Freud's book Civilization and Its Discontents was an oblique but deliberate reply to Reich's revolutionary program (Boadella, 1974; Cattier, 1971). Freud said that males past twenty suffer greatly from abstinence (Freud, 1908), but thought teenage abstinence (for both sexes) is a vital prerequisite to the development of aim-inhibited and sublimated libido, that would presumably constrain and channel our inborn aggression into socially useful pursuits (1933).



**Not surprisingly, Reich disagreed. Reich saw human sociability as something inborn, instinctive, and regarded the sadism and destructiveness Freud feared as inevitable by-products of an exploitive and sexually repressed society. In the preface to the third edition of his classic work, The Mass psychology of Fascism, Reich declared that**

**Extensive and painstaking therapeutic work on the human character has led me to the conclusion that, as a rule, we are dealing with three layers of the biopsychic structure . . . these layers of . . . character . . . are deposits of social development, which function autonomously. On the surface layer of his personality the average man is reserved, polite, compassionate, responsible and conscientious. There would be no social tragedy . . . if this layer of his personality were in contact with the deep natural core. This, unfortunately, is not the case. The surface layer is not in contact with the deep, biologic core of one's selfhood; it is born by a second, intermediate layer, which consists exclusively of cruel, sadistic, lascivious and envious impulses. It represents the Freudian 'unconscious' or 'what is repressed' . . . (Reich, 1932b, pp. xii-xv)**

**Freud's error, Reich intimated, lay in taking the second, intermediate layer of character for what he called "the biologic core", or the most deeply repressed part of the self, which under favorable conditions, is not cruel and mendacious, but loving, rational and industrious. The implications of this for politics and society, as well as for clinical work, were far reaching. Freud thought that character is formed as a result of processes of organic repression, sublimation and reaction-formation against primitive pregenital drives. In Reich's work, character structure also derives from anal or oral strivings, and more or less ingenious methods of negating or sublimating**



them on the level of manifest behavior. But character also serves the additional function of armoring or insulating the individual from experiencing the natural and healthy biological pulsations emanating from their biologic core. The resulting neurotic equilibrium, like its Freudian counterpart, is a creature of conflict and compromise, the difference being that *what is repressed* now includes many healthy and pro-social tendencies (Reich, 1933a; Reich, 1933b).

A younger analyst training in Berlin during Reich's rapid rise to prominence in the late 1920's was Erich Fromm. Although the favorable references to Groddeck and Ferenczi suggest that Fromm was influenced by them, he left no indication of his early clinical orientation save a paper entitled "The Social Conditions of Psychoanalytic Therapy" (1935), where he attacked the idea of analytic neutrality as a smokescreen for unconscious bourgeois attitudes. However, because of Fromm's writings on social psychology in the 1930's, we know that he was in agreement with Reich on the primary sociability of human beings, and that he was profoundly indebted to Reich for his theory of the authoritarian character (Fromm, 1936). Moreover, it was principally in this connection that Fromm remarked, as had Reich earlier, that sexual guilt and intimidation hamper our capacity to think critically, and to emancipate ourselves from irrational authority.

Beyond that point, however, the consensus between Reich and Fromm begins to dissolve. For in Fromm's estimation, the vicissitudes of the libido are not the decisive problem, either in the clinical arena, or in the genesis of social character. Indeed, Fromm later remarked that a society might allow for the full and unconstrained satisfaction of our physical or biological drives, yet leave us existentially impoverished. In Man for



Himself (1947) and The Sane Society (1955), Fromm argued that the socially patterned defects such as those Reich addressed were a result of society's failure to address the individual's *existential* needs; needs for self-actualization, for solidarity with others, and for a framework of orientation and devotion. Fromm also emphasized that prevailing social relations and methods of production lead to an atrophy of humanistic conscience, because in the normal course of events, society constrains us to fulfill our basic material needs in ways that do violence to the fundamental solidarity of all human life, and are at variance with our deeper spiritual strivings (Fromm, 1968).

But this was the later or mature Fromm -- the Fromm most of us are familiar with. When Fromm first began to write on psychoanalysis and social psychology, he was working in Reich's shadow, and attempting to formulate and express his own distinctive point of view. This wasn't easy, I suspect, because of Reich's forceful personality and prolific mind, and because of the wide area of agreement that actually obtained between them at that time. Like Reich, Erich Fromm was a student of matriarchal theory, and questioned the universality of the Oedipus complex, arguing that it is not the hidden basis of all social organization, as Freud believed, but an artifact of patriarchal society (Burston, 1991). Like Reich, Fromm emphasized the family as the chief agent of socialization, by means of which socio-economic adaptational imperatives are filtered down to the developing individual. And like Reich, Fromm cautioned that the prolonged repression of genital sexuality resulted in a regressive reactivation of old libidinal positions, and as a result, in the intensification of narcissistic and anal-sadistic trends in the population at large. And as a necessary corollary of this, he imagined that the relaxation of unnecessary sexual constraints



and taboos would enhance our chances of developing a just and rational social order.

On all of these theoretical points, Reich and Fromm were emphatically in agreement. Moreover, no one who examines the record will doubt Reich's priority in thematizing these issues for the analytic world and the general public. People are often surprised to discover that the early Fromm had so much in common with Reich, and mistakenly infer from this that Fromm simply jettisoned his earlier ideas and commitments as he rose to public prominence. This is not true, however. Despite important changes in outlook and emphasis, Fromm never ceased believing that the Oedipus complex is not universal, or that the family is the primary agent of socialization, or that economic conditions take precedence over all others in the formation of social character. Moreover, Fromm never ceased believing that sexual repression and guilt leads to intellectual intimidation, as Reich and Freud had done earlier (e.g. Fromm, 1947, pp.159-160). Nevertheless, Fromm and Reich irrevocably parted ways in 1933, after an acquaintance of about four or five years. How did this come about? Let's try to reconstruct it chronologically.

The first public indication Fromm gave of his differences with Reich came in an essay entitled 'Die Psychoanalytische Charakterologie und ihre Bedeutung für die Sozialpsychologie' (1932a). In this paper, Fromm tried to show how early capitalism and the industrial revolution fostered the proliferation and intensification of anal character traits (Fromm, 1932a). Echoing Max Weber's remarks on the inner-worldly asceticism that is the characteristic ethos of early industrial capitalism (1912), Fromm argued that under capitalist auspices traits of industry, sobriety, self-denial and the miserly pleasures of hoarding wealth are exquisitely adaptive, and



destined to prevail as long as the structure of capitalist relations remained unchanged. Indeed, Fromm argued that early industrial capitalism taps and intensifies instinctual energies of a pre-genital variety, harnessing them as "productive forces" that fuel the engines of economic development.

Fromm's analysis of early capitalist society, while influenced by Reich, no doubt, was also indebted to Max Weber and Sandor Ferenczi (1914).

What was original to Fromm, however, was his suggestion that pregenital drives are not just obstacles to the emergence of a just and rational social order -- which had been Reich's primary point of contention -- but engines of economic development in their own right. Yet unlike Reich -- or Freud, for that matter -- Fromm did not imagine that the vicissitudes of the libido are the most critical variable in the formation of social character. On the contrary. Fromm observed that sexual instincts allow of almost indefinite postponement, sublimation and substitutive gratification through the medium of phantasy, while the ego instincts, which safeguard survival, require real and immediate gratification *in reality* to achieve their objectives. Although we achieve vicarious or substitutive gratification for deflected sexual desire, people cannot eat imaginary food, or drink imaginary water, etc. Accordingly, when a conflict between the sex-instincts and the ego-instincts emerges, the ego-instincts invariably take precedence. This means that as regards social character and cultural patterns, the domain of work and its vicissitudes take precedence over sexual life as the primary determinant of collective behavior.

Despite his differences with Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm evidently followed his work with interest. In 1933, Fromm reviewed Der Einbruch der Sexualmoral, a recent effort of Reich's, with obvious enthusiasm in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Fromm, 1933). This fraternal gesture was



not reciprocated, however, as Reich unleashed a storm of abuse at Fromm in an essay entitled 'The Use of Psychoanalysis in Historical Research', which was later appended to a justly celebrated collection of essays called Under the Banner of Marxism, and later entitled Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis (Reich, 1934). The specific occasion for this polemic was a paper of Fromm's published in 1932, entitled 'Über die Methode und Aufgabe einer Psychoanalytische Sozialpsychologie' (Fromm, 1932b), in which Fromm contrasted Reich's position with his own in footnotes appended to the body of the text, intimating that Reich's methodology had undergone a welcome change that heralded possibly more convergent perspectives in the future.

In response, Reich angrily refuted the suggestion that there was any change in his methodological assumptions. And in fairness to Reich, this may have been true, or partly true -- though if Fromm's evaluation *was* sound, I am not sure I credit Reich with enough impartiality to recognize or own to that fact candidly. In any case, Reich then went on to liken Fromm to what he called "scientific jugglers of a certain well known type" (Reich, 1934, p. 69), implying in effect that Fromm was a charlatan. Society, Reich continued, has no id, ego or super-ego, i.e. is not a unified psychological subject, so that analysing the 'latent content' of mass phenomena like strikes is a pointless and misleading exercise (ibid.). In truth, however, Fromm never suggested that society has an id, ego or super-ego, or that its structure is analogous to the structure of the psyche. On the contrary, like Reich, Fromm insisted that in order to understand the "shared libidinal structure" that all members of a society share, it is vital to study their socio-economic conditions -- that psychic structure is derived from social structure, not the other way around (Burston, 1991).





Curiously enough, what Reich did *not* tackle in his long-winded critique of Fromm was the real bone of contention between them in the clinical arena: the relative primacy of sexual or self-preservative drives. After all, in Reich's system, "orgastic potency", as he himself termed it, is the chief or indeed the *defining* characteristic of mental health, much as the ideas of productivity and humanistic conscience would later become for Fromm. Even so, in light of their conjoint emphasis on the impact of economic conditions on character structure, and on the role of the family in shaping character, their other differences seem petty by comparison. Reading Reich's polemic, one searches in vain for any real, substantive disagreement that would warrant the length or urgency of his diatribe. So what prompted Reich to accord Fromm's tactfully worded disagreements such momentous significance, and to deliver a rejoinder that seems almost willfully obtuse?

A variety of things are possible. To begin with, political theorists and Marxist intellectuals would make much of the fact that when Reich spoke of Marxist theory, he used the phrase "dialectical materialism" more often than not, while Fromm, like his colleagues at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, invariably referred to it as "historical materialism" instead. To those unversed in Marxist theory, this may seem to be a minor or merely scholastic matter, but to those involved, these rival designations for Marxist methodology fairly bristle with epistemic and partisan political significations which are too deep and divisive to explore in detail here.

Then again, as noted previously, there was the disagreement in the clinical area about the relative priority of the sexual instincts, and the implications this has for the study of society. In truth, however, theoretical disagreements were not the central issue. Judging from the tone of Reich's



remarks, I think more personal interests and feelings were also at stake. Had Fromm's social psychology been a derivative treatment, a mere carbon copy of Reich's, Reich would probably never have attacked him this way. Instead, Fromm ventured an independent (though not unsympathetic) theoretical viewpoint, and Reich interpreted what was a mild criticism coupled with great (and well deserved) praise as a hostile attack -- a typical gesture for this brilliant, courageous but vain and competitive man.

Leaving their theoretical differences to one side, I suspect that Reich's egocentric investment in leading the Freudian left uncontested sharpened the bite of his invective against Fromm. In the course of his meteoric career, Reich came to see himself as a figure of world-historical importance, who would ultimately reconcile or indeed transcend the rival systems and ideas of Marx and Freud (Reich, 1973). The idea that anyone might equal or surpass him in this capacity -- on either a practical or theoretical level -- was probably a threat to his ego, and beyond that, perhaps, to his whole sense of personal identity. Even so, given his high public profile, and his uncontested leadership of the *Deutscher Reichsverband für Proletarische Sexualpolitik*, (which numbered 40,000 at its height), Reich's denunciation of Fromm seems a bit pointless and meanspirited.

Though he did not reply to Reich publicly, Fromm was angry about this degrading experience for many years thereafter. We know this because references to Reich in Fromm dwindle sharply after 1936, and because Fromm gave vent to his anger and disappointment in his private correspondence with Otto Fenichel, complaining about Reich's "pathological self-love and arrogance" (Jacoby, 1983, p.109). Other clues to Fromm's feelings about the whole affair can be gleaned from a humorous story Fromm told. Ivan Illich relates that when Fromm visited him one



afternoon, Fromm admitted that he had been an ardent Reichian in his late 20's, when certain problems with his theories emerged with vivid clarity, making personal contact between them difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, Fromm continued, whatever else you could say about him, Reich had an absolutely uncanny ability to persuade others that he was the only man on earth who knew what it was *really* like to experience orgasm (Illich, 1989).

Of course, anyone who tries to persuade us that he is uniquely capable of understanding a profound but relatively common human experience would strike most of us as a fraud, or as being a little bit crazy. Judging from this anecdote, this is how Fromm came to see Reich, though to the best of my knowledge, he never said so in public. (Judging from Reich's own memoirs, this is how Einstein experienced him as well). Unfortunately, in 1954, the Federal Food and Drug Administration chose to interpret Reich's claims on behalf of his latest invention as an instance of deliberate fraud, and he died in a lonely jail cell for his inalienable right to sell orgone boxes to the general public unmolested. Despite the guilty verdict handed down by the court, Reich's stubborn campaign to put his life's work, his competence and his whole personal reputation on trial along with these silly devices show how unbalanced and lacking in judgement he was by that time.

Of course, those sympathetic to Reich -- or at any rate, to the earlier Reich -- might take exception to Fromm's anecdotal characterization, though as a description of Reich's personality *after* his arrival in America, I find it certainly rings true. Despite the fact that Reich had been a bold and visionary theorist and activist in earlier days, his writings after World War II, though strewn with fascinating insights and reminiscences, are pompous and self-glamorizing, and full of grandiose, messianic ideas that



seriously cast doubt on his sanity. However, what is more important, in the present context, is that in relating his experience with Reich in the 20's, Fromm did not mention to Illich anything about Reich's attack on him in print. Instead, he was apparently trying to master the memory of his former association and its associated traumata in a harmless and pleasant way.

Of course, despite his absurd imprisonment and death in 1954, Reich's ideas enjoyed a considerable renaissance in the 1960's and 70's, and as a result, Fromm's lengthy public silence about Reich dissolved suddenly in 1970. In "The Crisis of Psychoanalysis", for example, Fromm criticized the psychoanalytic establishment for its conformist posture, and commended Reich for taking some of Freud's radical insights into the pathology of civilized communities to their ultimate logical conclusions. However, he was careful to point out that after his arrival in America, Reich became quite reactionary, and a great admirer of Dwight D. Eisenhower (Fromm, 1970).

Later still, in Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought, published in 1980, Fromm made several new pronouncements that are startlingly at variance with his earlier public utterances. According to Fromm, now in his 80th year, Reich

**thought that inhibition of sex creates  
antirevolutionary characters and that sexual  
freedom would create revolutionary characters . . .  
Of course, Reich was quite wrong, as later  
developments showed. This sexual liberation was  
largely part of the ever increasing consumerism . . .  
(Sexual activity) is after all the most simple and  
cheapest of all consumption. Reich was misled  
because at his time the conservatives had a strict  
sexual morality and he concluded from this that  
sexual revolution would lead to an**



**anticonservative, revolutionary attitude. Historical development has shown that sexual liberation served the development of consumerism and if anything weakened political radicalism. Unfortunately, Reich knew and understood little of Marx and could be called a "sexual anarchist" (Fromm, 1980, p. 135).**

**With all due respect, I suggest that this is Fromm at his most thoughtless and polemical. It may seem cynical to say so, but it almost appears that the underlying intention of these remarks was to obscure the fact that Fromm once shared Reich's enthusiastic hopes for sexual liberation, or to have the proverbial last word in what became an unnecessarily contentious and adversarial relationship, despite the theoretical affinities that might otherwise have drawn them closer.**

**To give Fromm some credit here, Reich obviously did *not* anticipate how the partial relaxation of social restrictions on sex from adolescence onward would be co-ordinated into the designs of an increasingly technological and consumer oriented society. While this much is fair enough, Fromm also implied that Reich's early critique of patriarchy and sexual repression was based in a simplistic political analysis, and that Reich would have wholeheartedly endorsed the so called sexual revolution of the 60's and 70's; an absurd concoction of half-truths and misattributions. Moreover, Fromm's suggestion that sexual liberation *per se* is inherently consumeristic, and therefor anti-revolutionary, is eerily reminiscent of the rhetoric hard core Leninists used when they ousted Reich from their midst in 1934. Indeed, Fromm conveniently forgot that in sexual matters, the Bolsheviks were as puritanical as their conservative counterparts. I find this lacuna a little disturbing. Finally, Fromm's parting salvo wouldn't have**



seemed so harsh or mean-spirited if he had uttered it while Reich was around to defend himself. And more to the point, perhaps, it contrasts markedly with his remarks in "The Crisis of Psychoanalysis", which are fair and balanced by comparison. The question then emerges; why did Fromm choose to end on this sour note?

One possibility, that Reichians will entertain for some time to come, perhaps, is that Fromm really *was* the opportunistic and untrustworthy little sneak that Reich privately denounced him for being after 1932, and that he never really understood the first thing about sexual politics. Another possibility is that Reich's polemical and private utterances in 1932-1933 actually hurt Fromm in a very deep and personal way, and that Fromm's effort to master this disturbing adult trauma was ultimately unsuccessful. As a result, the bitterness broke through in the end.

While I have some sympathy for the Reichian perspective, I favor this last line of explanation for the most part. For while Fromm's sexual politics were admittedly colored by strong conservative or traditionalist undertones, and his comprehension of Reich's work was less than perfect, perhaps, his early pieces on psychoanalysis and Marxism are not derivative or second rate. On the contrary, they are the product of a prolific and independent intelligence, that owes as much to J.J. Bachofen, Max Weber, Sandor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham as it does to Reich. Although they differ from Reich's on essential points, Fromm's early essays on psychoanalytic characterology, and its relevance to the social sciences, are models of lucid and comprehensive exposition, and of penetrating and finely honed ideological critique. Both in style and substance, they compare favorably with the Freudian classics in elegance and acumen, and Reich had no business abusing Fromm as he did.



**Another possible influence on Fromm at the time was Max Horkheimer, director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. I say "possible influence" quite deliberately, because as historian Martin Jay points out, the evidence suggests that Fromm influenced Horkheimer more than the other way around (Jay, 1973). Horkheimer's social psychology had several features that bear comparison with Fromm's. Among these was his assertion that the ego-instincts, or instincts of self-preservation, take precedence over sexual ones in the determination of social behavior. In a fragment published around 1960 (entitled "Instinct of Self Preservation"), Horkheimer declared**

**. . . Freud was right in . . . differentiating between self-preservation and libidinous instincts. The latter are plastic, the former brook no delay. But insistence on the libido easily makes one forget that self-preservation is primary. Freud no longer saw the connection. The derivatives of the partial drives as he called them, narcissism, avarice and ambition, lust for power and cruelty, are just as much the transformations and fixations of phases of self-preservation as of sexuality. Indeed, sexuality is probably that tendency toward self-preservation which is innate in the species and transformable in the individual. (Horkheimer, 1978, p. 167)**

**In the interests of historical accuracy, I feel obliged to point out that the first one to insist on the primacy of self-preservation over sexual instincts in this way was actually Carl Gustav Jung, whose remarks on orality around 1912 and 1913 put considerable emphasis on the so called "nutritive instinct" (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 697). The fact that left-wing Freudians fail to remember or remark on this fact is scarcely surprising.**



however. Jung never developed this idea in a rigorous and systematic way, and in the 1930's, when they were writing, his ruthless political opportunism and apparent anti-Semitism were becoming more palpable by the day. Consequently, it is very difficult to determine what influence, if any, Jung's ideas had on Fromm and Horkheimer, who might have come to their conclusions independently.

Anyway, despite their convergence on this point, which differentiated their work from Reich's, Fromm and Horkheimer parted company in 1938, as Fromm broke with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, now in exile at Columbia University. Meanwhile, it would be another three years before Fromm's mid-life conceptions of social character came into print in his best-read volume, Escape From Freedom (Fromm, 1941). By this point, Fromm's thinking was largely disentangled from Freud's libido theories, and the fact that his work was already moving in this direction was one of the factors that contributed to his estrangement from the Frankfurt School. We know this because in response to a query from Ernst Kris, Horkheimer remarked in 1942 that "a psychology without libido is in a way no psychology" (Jay, 1973, p. 102).

Moreover, in dramatic contrast to Reich and Fromm, who regarded Freud's conjectures about the death instinct as radically misguided, Horkheimer believed them to be very fruitful. As a result, perhaps, Horkheimer was unaware of the basic incompatibility between the biological rationale for Freud's earlier drive dualism -- between sexual and ego instincts -- and the later drive dualism between Eros and Thanatos, which Fromm thematized very perceptively in his essay "Freud's Model of Man and Its Social Determinants" (Fromm, 1970).



In other words, while emphasizing the primacy of the ego or self-preservative instincts -- as Fromm did initially, and in contrast to Reich -- Horkheimer's thinking on psychology remained within the instinctivistic framework that Fromm later abandoned. The same could be said of Horkheimer's associates, Adorno and Marcuse, who directed some very strident polemics at Fromm in the years that followed (Jay, 1973). In Eros and Civilization, philosopher Herbert Marcuse defended the "death instinct" by emphasizing the search for absolute quiescence or absence of striving that presumably underlies it (Marcuse, 1955). It never occurred to him to ask how a striving for quiescence and absolute cessation of effort could give rise to the destructive frenzy Freud warned about, which presumably compels the painful and laborious domestication and deflection of libido into secondary or subsidiary pathways to stave off its potentially catastrophic effects. After all, destructiveness does not require insight, planning or concern for the object, but it does require a considerable *expenditure of energy* to achieve its aims. Viewed from either a logical or experiential standpoint, a striving for effortless quiescence is a rather implausible source for an active and disruptive drive like this.

Finally, Marcuse was impervious to the fact that the underlying bio-physical rationale for the "death instinct", which was derived from Fechner, was dubious in the extreme, and that all the available evidence demonstrates that living organisms constantly violate the second law of thermodynamics, upon which the "death instinct" was very loosely based. Indeed, sound biological evidence for a death instinct such as Freud imagined is not merely scarce; it is altogether non-existent (Rycroft, 1968, p. 27).



**In fairness to Horkheimer and associates, Fromm's revisionist orientation did *not* make sufficient allowance for sexuality as both a formative and disruptive factor in human development, or as a commonplace phenomenon in the transference. However, in fairness to Fromm, his disenchantment with Freudian instinctivism prompted him to engage in a critical evaluation of features Freudian theory that the Frankfurt School simply took for granted. The sad irony here is that the philosophical approach shared by Horkheimer and associates is usually referred to as "critical theory". But as regards Freud, their capacity for critical judgement, which was so conspicuous elsewhere, was simply not in evidence. With minor qualifications, Horkheimer et. al. took Freud's instinctivistic psychology at face value, and made no attempt to expose or unravel its internal contradictions, or to test it empirically. They took Freud as a given, more or less, and attempted to apply his theories in a rather speculative and free-wheeling manner, unimpeded by the pedestrian requirements of logic or of empirical constraints.**

**Another of Fromm's left-wing critics was Otto Fenichel. Like Fromm, and unlike his erstwhile associates, Fenichel was acutely conscious of the incommensurable premises underlying Freud's earlier and later drive theories. And like the younger Fromm, he made it his self-appointed task to implement a consequent and rigorous (or "correct") application of Freud's methodology to the sociological arena (Harris and Brock, 1990). Indeed, from the available evidence, it now appears that in the early 1930's Reich, Fromm and Fenichel were all competing to see who could best formulate the "correct" way to apply psychoanalytic methodology to the study of society, as I have argued in The Legacy of Erich Fromm (Burston, 1991). This introduced an adversarial element into their personal relations which**



mad ~~ical consensus all the more difficult to achieve. As a~~  
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consequence, the sectarian bitterness that contaminated their relationships lingers on in the work of people like Russell Jacoby, for example, who blends elements of Fenichel's and Marcuse's critique of Fromm in a way that some people find persuasive, and others, like myself, find quite objectionable (Jacoby, 1975, 1983).

In the final analysis, the differences between Fromm and Fenichel can be summed up as follows. Whereas Fenichel *persisted* in his attempts to elucidate the "correct" application of Freudian theory (minus the death instinct) to politics and society, Fromm *abandoned* this project by the late 1930's, as he began composing Escape From Freedom. For Fromm, the attempt to find the "correct" application of orthodox Freudianism to social phenomena was really a fruitful *point of departure*, but not an end in itself, once he realized that Freud's theory was actually very narrow and untenable in several important respects.

Fenichel, by contrast, adopted the attitude of the pedant or the religious exegete, who strives to expound and elaborate the doctrinal implications of a complete and unassailable body of knowledge to a new domain, without seriously calling its basic premises into question (Harris and Brock, 1990). Even Fenichel's rejection of the death instinct fits this mold, as he could pride himself for his adherence to the earlier doctrine, much as Reich had embraced the "actual neuroses" before heading off into orgonomic theory. Despite the scholastic thoroughness with which Fenichel approached his task, which is quite commendable, up to a point, the tone of his works often suggest a verbose scientism, rather than a genuinely scientific curiosity and skepticism (ibid). As a result, Fenichel's contributions to psychoanalytic social psychology are rather sterile, while



Fromm's work is **not** subject to changes in emphasis and subject matter --  
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While Fromm's left-wing critics attacked him on many different fronts, one thing they all shared was a need to denounce him for abandoning the libido theory. Inasmuch as Freud warned, in the wake of Jung's departure, that false prophets would arise who deny the primacy of sexuality in the name of deepening or extending the psychology of the unconscious, one can sympathize with them. But in view of the quasi-religious character of Freud's convictions on the subject of sexuality -- which Jung, to his credit, saw clearly -- the unwavering loyalty evinced by most of the Freudian left on this point involved a hefty price tag. With the partial exception of Reich, perhaps, all of Fromm's left-wing critics evinced a blinkered and uncritical acceptance of the biological underpinnings of Freudian theory, which are riddled with internal contradictions, and remain utterly uncorroborated by contemporary biological knowledge (Gould, 1977; Sulloway, 1979). Leaving aside the loss of objectivity that this obstinate Freud piety entailed, the naive and dogmatic attitude that many of Fromm's critics shared toward Freudian dogma rendered them insensible to the ideological sub-texts about gender and authority that suffuse Freud's metapsychology and philosophy of history. As a result, Fromm was often more perceptive on these points than they were.

Another feature shared by Fromm's left-wing critics, which follows from the preceding one, was a tendency to link Fromm's work together indiscriminately with that of the other neo-Freudians. They were not alone in doing so. Every English-language text book on personality and social psychology I have seen does precisely the same thing. Yet Fromm objected strenuously to being treated this way. In conversation with Richard Evans,



Fromm commented that he felt like Freud's "pupil and translator", and expressed the wish that others would take cognizance of that fact (Evans, 1966, p. 59). Evidently, he felt that being put in the same category as Horney and Sullivan minimized his continuing intellectual loyalty and engagement with Freudian theory.

My research bears out Fromm's complaint on a number of levels. Freud wasn't jesting when he said that collective delusions and transferences are the primary mechanisms that insure our participation in social groups. And while Fromm adduced needs of a non-libidinous nature that presumably insure our sociability -- needs for relatedness and solidarity with other human beings, and the need to avoid falling mad -- Fromm also developed his social psychology with the intention of elucidating why so many of us are radically estranged from the truth about ourselves and our social surround. This spirit of relentless cultural critique was not shared by Horney and Sullivan. Horney could conceive of socially patterned defects, or widespread characterological dynamics, as being inscribed deeply in the prevailing cultural pattern, but ultimately inimical to the individual's happiness, and injurious to their capacity for objectivity and truthfulness. But she did not share Fromm's insight or emphasis on the role that specifically *economic* processes and inequalities play in buttressing collective false-consciousness. At an even further remove from this, Sullivan's attempt to define mental health in terms of behavior and perceptions that are subject to consensual validated is completely antithetical to Fromm's critical and historical methodology, and lacks the anguish, anger and lucidity that Fromm and Freud evinced in their probing search for the truth underlying our collective illusions.



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~~those who are still tempted to classify Fromm as a neo-~~  
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**Freudian should remember that Fromm was the only so called neo-Freudian who attempted to blend Marxism and psychoanalysis, and the only Freudo-Marxist to venture a intellectual synthesis that embraced the work of J.J. Bachofen, Max and Alfred Weber and the prophets, Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism besides.**

Having said that, I do not wish to suggest that Fromm's synthesis was entirely successful. On the contrary, as I've indicated elsewhere, it was a bit too ambitious for that (Burston, 1991). Moreover, even where it appears to succeed brilliantly, Fromm's social psychology raises as many questions as it answers, and many of these questions have not yet been answered or even addressed satisfactorily in the secondary literature yet (ibid). But despite their shortcomings or oversights, Fromm's theories of social character, of the social unconscious and of social filters -- which collectively comprise his social psychology -- are among the most illuminating concepts we have for understanding social reality, and we ignore them only at our peril. Unlike other theories in psychology or the social sciences, which purport to embrace or express a purely "disinterested" search for truth, however, the elaboration, extension and correction of Fromm's social psychology in future is not possible unless we share Fromm's deep commitment to uncovering the truth, and his willingness to question authority -- be it the authority of Marx, Freud, Reich, or indeed, of Fromm himself.



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