Letters to the Editor

Foreign Policy and The Heritage Foundation

To the Editor:

I wish to apologize to The Heritage Foundation for incorrectly aligning it with those "promoting the isolationist line" in my article "In Search of Foreign Policy" in the September/October 1992 issue of *SOCIETY*. On the contrary, in its recent publications, The Heritage Foundation has espoused active United States engagement in world affairs and has sought to reconcile the best in traditional conservative principles with the policy dilemmas that face the country. I regret any inconveniences that may have arisen as a result of this error.

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Erich Fromm's Legacy

To the Editor:

I read Neil McLaughlin's review of my book *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* in the July/August 1992 issue of *SOCIETY* with an odd combination of profound pleasure and deep dismay. To begin, I take exception to his suggestion that my book is overly academic. After all, the book was written for an academic audience in the hope of alerting scholars and social scientists to Fromm's contributions in a variety of disciplines. It was not intended for the general public and the claim that a book about Fromm should be written in the subject's own style, which was usually accessible to all (after 1941), is nejther logical nor justified.

I also have reservations about McLaughlin's characterization of my chapter on the Fromm/Marcuse debate as "overly technical." I did focus on the substance of the controversies to the detriment of their social and political contexts and ramifications. But I am certain Fromm would have welcomed the tone and content of my remarks which prefigure his final reflections on this bitter, contentious episode. These reflections appear in a posthumous work entitle *The Revision of Psychoanalysis*, soon to be published. Fromm devoted two chapters to this subject, compared to my one, which, along with the book's title, underscores how important his revision of psychoanalytic theory was to him. (This also goes for the majority of social scientists in America, whom McLaughlin claims to represent.)

By a curious twist of fate, I wrote the chapter on the Fromm/Marcuse debate long before I encountered Fromm's posthumous book, and in retrospect, I feel I have nothing to modify or add. On the contrary, I think *The Revision of Psychoanalysis* bears witness to my faithfulness to the substance of his thought, if not to the vagaries of his style.

I also take issue with McLaughlin's closing characterization of my book. He writes, "Fromm deserves more than a footnote in the history of psychoanalysis. His major contribution to modern social theory has been his way of combining his revised Freudian theory with German sociological thought and humanistic Marxism." To someone who has not read my book, this parting salvo conveys the impression that I couched my discussion of Fromm entirely within the history of psychoanalysis to the manifest neglect of his sociological background and Marxist inclinations.

In commending my book to my publisher, Rainer Funk, the founder and president of The International Erich Fromm Society in Tübingen, Germany, and author of a very competent Fromm biography, said that he had never read an English language treatment that shows greater familiarity with, and appreciation for, nineteenth and twentieth century German thought and letters, particularly as regards the social sciences. At the risk of seeming immodest, I would assert that my work represents the best discussion of these matters available in English to date, and that this fact fails to register at all in McLaughlin's critique, which is both uncharitable and inaccurate in this regard.

Finally, I am very ill at ease with McLaughlin's gloss on my discussion of Fromm's "Freud piety." For analysts of Fromm's generation, and the majority of analysts to this day, some degree of Freud piety was both integral and essential to membership in the analytic guild. The refreshing thing about Fromm's work, as I repeatedly point out, was the extent to which he jettisoned much of the idolatrous mythology about Freud and engaged in frank, forthright, clear-sighted criticism of the master and the movement.

While I deliberately point to some significant instances of lingering Freud piety on Fromm's part, which are to be expected in a man of his time, my references to Fromm's frequently scathing assessments of Freud and his followers are far more copious. Once again, this simple fact is not reflected, indeed it is occluded, in McLaughlin's review. This might account for my astonishment at his somewhat bizarre suggestion that my treatment of Fromm is "read through the lens of the Freudian paradigm." Any treatment of Fromm written from this perspective would have to be cursory and dismissive, for reasons I made abundantly clear in my book. I therefore must respectfully insist that mine is neither, and that McLaughlin might profit from re-reading the pertinent passages.

Having said all this, I must also confess that since reading McLaughlin's review, I stand corrected on several points. To begin with, as McLaughlin notes, the fact that Fromm is so seldom cited in the academic literature is not necessarily proof of his declining influence in America, which evidently continues even though he is almost never credited by the influential authors who unconsciously echo his ideas. All I can

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say is that in writing *The Legacy of Erich Fromm*, I was expressly concerned with elucidating the sources and inspiration for Fromm's work, which were predominantly Continental, and neglected to document his contemporary impact as diligently and comprehensively as McLaughlin evidently means to do.

Finally, in retrospect, I agree with McLaughlin's contention that my fear that Fromm needs to be rescued from impending obscurity is probably exaggerated, and certainly premature. When I wrote these words, however, many of Fromm's books had been out of print for several years, and I frankly had an inkling that they would be reissued soon. Since then, and as a result of my book, I have encountered a widening circle of people who still take Fromm seriously. Despite the reservations I have about McLaughlin's review, I take the obvious passion and enthusiasm he brings to his subject matter as an encouraging sign. Let us hope that our collective efforts falsify my dire predictions in years to come.

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Neil McLaughlin replies:

Daniel Burston's response to my review of his book *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* raises some important issues. First, Erich Fromm's work is indeed incomprehensible without serious discussion of its roots in nineteenth and early twentieth century German social theory and philosophy. Moreover, as Burston's book convincingly documents, Fromm was deeply indebted to Freudian theory and, unlike orthodox Freudians, he was able to transcend "idolatrous mythology about Freud." Finally, Burston's book is the best and most comprehensive work published in English on Fromm and an important text for anyone interested in twentieth century intellectual history.

These points of agreement are clearly reflected in my review. I wrote that Burston "does an admirable job of sifting through a vast intellectual history" that includes German sociology and romantic thought as well as existentialism, Marxism, and various religious traditions. The review prominently discusses both Burston's emphasis on the dogmatism of orthodox Freudian critics and Fromm's differences with the defenders of the faith. I did argue that Burston's book is an important and fascinating study that challenges numerous widespread distortions of Fromm's work. Burston is overly sensitive, perhaps an occupational hazard for intellectuals who write about thinkers unfairly maligned as was Fromm.

Yet Burston and I disagree on at least three issues worth debating. I would put more emphasis on the need for social scientists to produce works that are both academically serious and written in a clear, concise fashion. Bookstores are full of readable but unoriginal popularizations as well as dense academic treatises. What we need is more works that transcend these polarities and put our best social science in the public domain. Burston has important things to say, but he could have said it better.

Secondly, while Burston is aware of the numerous influences on Fromm's thought and writes about them competently, but ultimately his emphasisis on Fromm's dialogue with the Freudian tradition. It is not possible to write about Fromm today without taking account of Burston's detailed and insightful reading of Fromm and the various versions of Freudian revisionism, particularly the object relations school. Yet Burston would hardly claim nor would he want the final word on Fromm. His "Freud piety" thesis is unconvincing and more emphasis should be placed on Fromm's intellectual relationship with humanistic Marxism, 150 years of socialist thought, and contemporary empirical sociology.

While Burston's book makes an important contribution to our understanding of German social theory, it would have benefitted from more discussion of the limitations of the German tradition. Ultimately, Fromm's living legacy must emerge in dialogue with contemporary empirical social science. Burston is particularly interested in Fromm's essays written in the 1920s and 1930s and while he provides useful criticisms of Fromm's later writings, the later work is ultimately more compelling. In *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, written in 1973 with Michael Maccoby, Fromm lays out his mature theoretical perspective and seriously engages the most current academic literature in relevant areas. This is a major improvement over his earlier tendency of being too dismissive of competing perspectives.

Erich Fromm was committed to putting ideas to empirical tests, yet his work often suffers from generalizations. He often took strong positions without marshalling adequate evidence. Our social sciences need more of the theoretical insights of Continental philosophy, but these traditions cannot be swallowed whole as some academic promoters of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism have been prone to do. Burston and I would agree on much of this, particularly with regard to the subject of postmodernism, but his book suffers from not sharply addressing these issues.

Neil McLaughlin
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Correction:

Due to an inexplicable oversight, a major contributor to the thirtieth anniversary issue of *SOCIETY* (November/December 1992, vol. 30, no. 1) was not listed on the cover. The name of Nathaniel J. Pallone, author of "Scientific and Professional Psychology," obviously should have appeared. His is a central statement on the theme of the issue: The State of the Professions. We extend to him our sincere apologies.

The Editors

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After the Fall

Intelligence and Secrecy
WALTER LAQUEUR

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IWONA IRWIN-ZARECKA

Public Enemies
VLADIMIR TISMANEANU

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PAUL HOLLANDER

Untangling Student Loans

JOSEPH J. EGLIN

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DAVID A. HAMBURG

Bricolage Among the Trash Cans

ANDREW M. GREELEY

Book Reviews

WALTER E. WILLIAMS ON *TWO NATIONS*

RICHARD C. BRUCE ON *IN THE SPIRIT OF THE EARTH*

LAWRENCE M. MEAD ON *OUT OF THE BARRIO*

BARRY R. GROSS ON *EQUALITY AND PARTIALITY* AND *RACISM AND JUSTICE*

Thorstein Veblen and the Place of Science

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