

Erich Fromm: Jack of All Trades, Master of None?

Daniel Burston
The Legacy of Erich Fromm
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Review by
Hannah S. Decker

Daniel Burston, instructor of psychology at York University (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), is author of the forthcoming *The Life and Work of R. D. Laing*. ■ Hannah S. Decker, professor in the Department of History at the University of Houston (Texas) and adjunct professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine (Houston), is recipient of the 1987–1988 National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for University Teachers and the 1988–1989 National Science Foundation Scholars Award and is author of *Freud in Germany: Revolution and Reaction in Science and Freud, Dora, and Vienna 1900*.

Since his death 12 years ago, little has been heard about the social philosopher and psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm (1900–1980). Daniel Burston's book is intended to remedy that state of affairs. However, Burston does not succeed in making Fromm accessible. He so faithfully portrays the pastiche that was Fromm's intellectual life that the reader is hard put to discern the main themes in Fromm's work. Burston's best efforts—and they are indeed considerable—have been betrayed by his subject.

Fromm was born in Frankfurt, Germany at the turn of the century, the only child of an unhappy marriage. Like many young Germans of the day, he nourished an antimaterialistic bias, causing him to disdain business affairs, including those of his father. Like many of his generation, he also came away from the devastating experiences of World War I with the conviction that the "Establishment" could not be trusted. Early in life, therefore, he was attracted to psychoanalysis and Marxism and, in keeping with his rebellious streak, was shortly at war with the authorities in both fields. At 22 years old, he earned a doctorate in sociology, embarked soon after on what was to be the first of five brief psychoanalyses, and then became a psychoanalyst. (He later married his first analyst, Frieda Reichmann.) In his late 20s, Fromm dramatically renounced many of the Jewish traditions that had been a fundamental part of his life and schooling. He also became affiliated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, deepening his familiarity with Marxist thought while heading the Institute's section on social psychology.

In 1933, Fromm emigrated to the United States, having separated from his

wife. Following a brief stay in Chicago, he came to New York where he opened a private psychoanalytic practice and renewed his affiliation with the Frankfurt Institute, which had moved to New York after the Nazi takeover. Repeating a pattern already familiar, he broke with the Institute in 1938. After a long affair with the psychoanalyst Karen Horney, he married Henny Gurland, a left-leaning, German–Jewish woman. When she died in 1952, he married yet a third time. It is worth noting that Fromm's love life and professional interests during the first half of his life were inextricably intertwined.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Fromm became widely known among the educated public for his books on modern society, *Escape From Freedom* (Fromm, 1941) and *The Sane Society* (Fromm, 1955) were two popular volumes. In terms of fame and influence, this was probably the high point of his career. This is not to say that his professional career suffered. In Germany, he helped found the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute. In the United States, he cofounded the William Alanson White Institute in the 1940s and, in Mexico City in the 1950s, the Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis. Along the way, he analyzed some prominent thinkers, such as the sociologist David Riesman and the existential psychologist Rollo May.

Fromm continued to write for a professional audience and to teach and travel. From 1957 to 1963, he conducted a "massive multidimensional study of a Mexican village" (p. 111), combining widely acknowledged sociologic and psychoanalytic techniques with psychological test data. The study was "one of the most intriguing experiments in the

history of social psychology, albeit one seldom cited in the literature" (p. 111). In 1974, Fromm gave up his clinical practice, moved to Switzerland, and devoted himself to writing. He died in 1980 of a heart attack.

Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and existentialism

It is hard to define Fromm's primary intellectual attachment. Burston disagrees with the traditional labeling of Fromm as a "neo-Freudian," a member of that group of Freudian revisionists that includes Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, and Clara Thompson. Rather, Burston makes an argument for Fromm being a precursor of the psychoanalytic object relations school because he dropped Freudian biological drive theory and stressed the need for relatedness over the satisfaction of physical needs. Even though he disagreed so thoroughly with Freud on some basic issues, Fromm's self-image as a psychoanalyst always remained very important to him. Burston calls him a member of Freud's "loyal opposition" (p. 2), a view with which Fromm would have concurred.

I would classify Fromm as a Marxist who tried to combine various other schools of thought with his Marxist views and thus altered his views on Marxism accordingly. Although he accepted psychoanalysis as a valid treatment, he believed that the environment and social structure—particularly the marketplace and means of production—form character and personality. Thus, he argued that capitalism makes anal personalities and deprives people of a sense of self-worth. Not only did Fromm's brand of psychoanalysis have no room for drive theory, but it deprecated the primacy of sexual needs and the role of unconscious fantasy. Early in his life he also adopted an un-Freudian and typically Marxist, optimistic belief that it is possible for a human being to achieve personal freedom even though many of the goals of society are at odds with individual desires. Existentialism also tempered Fromm's psychoanalysis: A person's uniquely human self-consciousness, an awareness that he or she is "thrown into the world without his will, and taken away against his will" (p. 86), means that human beings have certain psychological needs that "are not reducible to . . . the exigencies of erogenous satisfaction" (p. 86).

The net result of Fromm's intellectual potpourri was that he was never completely accepted by either Marxists, psy-



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choanalysts, humanistic psychologists, or social psychologists, most of whom regarded him as somewhat of a dilettante or eccentric. Thus, he failed to attract any substantial number of followers in his lifetime and, at present, references to him are quite rare.

Has Fromm bequeathed a legacy?

This state of affairs brings us to an evaluation of Burston's book, which was written in an attempt to assess Fromm's contribution and revive interest in his work. First, Burston must be congratulated for his evenhanded approach. In his frequent evaluations of both Freud's and Fromm's thought, Burston is very fair in both his negative and positive critiques. For example, Burston points out that Fromm's clinical reputation was often hurt by his moralizing. Second, Burston has produced an erudite study on the history of ideas in which he places Fromm's work within a context of 19th- and 20th-century intellectual thought. However, this achievement is a double-edged sword. Burston attempts to make the reader develop an appreciation of the many strands of Fromm's thought and to think of Fromm as an important figure in post-Enlightenment Western thinking. Burston is only marginally successful in rehabilitating Fromm by this method. In his long discursions into intellectual history, Burston usually neglects to tell the reader why the material is appearing. He interrupts the narrative flow and obscures his main points. Consequently, it is not until the seventh chapter (out of nine) that Fromm at last emerges as an understandable thinker.

Burston's book is titled *The Legacy of Erich Fromm*. The title is more wish than reality because only briefly at the end does Burston directly address the issue of Fromm's legacy. The lion's share of Burston's effort has gone into showing the roots of Fromm's ideas and how different aspects of Fromm's thought vied with each other for dominance. If Fromm has a legacy that speaks to present-day thinkers, this book, for all its intellectual richness and depth, is not its transmitter. Fromm has not found his Boswell in Burston.

References

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Cognitive Views of Psychopathology: Theory and Research

Peter A. Magaro (Ed.)
Cognitive Bases of Mental Disorders
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Review by
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A major task faced by any student of psychopathology is to keep abreast of the rapid developments in theory and research in diverse domains such as neurology and cognitive research. It is difficult enough to remain informed of such advances within one's own area of specialization (e.g., schizophrenia); the task becomes particularly daunting when one attempts to keep up-to-date across diagnostic categories. The *Annual Review of Psychopathology*, based on the model provided by the *Annual Review of Psychology*, seeks to provide the field with a reference that will ease this burden.

The first issue of the *Review*, *Cognitive Bases of Mental Disorders*, takes on the formidable goal of reviewing and integrating the explosion of cognitive theory and research across such diverse areas as the personality disorders, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), mania, and schizophrenia. A further goal of the *Review*, as stated by the editor, Peter Magaro, is not only to provide an integration of knowledge within each diagnostic category but also to "demonstrate the commonality of the research findings to other types of psychopathology" (p. 8).

This issue of the *Review* does indeed provide a comprehensive integration of research findings in each of its chapters.

Each chapter provides a thorough overview of the topic domains of focus. Of particular note are the chapters on depression by Ingram and Wisnicki and on mania by Grossman and Harrow. In these two chapters the authors come closest to the model described by Magaro. That is, they provide reviews relevant to the primary diagnostic construct on which the chapter is based as well as discuss the relationship between these findings and other related diagnostic categories. The remaining chapters, although certainly competent in their respective topic areas, do not provide this broader discussion to a satisfactory degree. Rather, the reader is left with the task of determining if and how findings from various diagnostic domains may relate.

Another notable aspect of this issue of the *Review* is the choice of diagnostic categories covered and those that are conspicuously absent. For example, the chapter by Andrews and Moore provides a social cognitive perspective of the "histrionic/overconventional personality." Although these authors provide a rationale for focusing on this prototype personality disorder, the reader seeking information pertinent to *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*-based nosology may be frustrated with



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