



BOOK REVIEW

The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study. By Erich Fromm. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984. 320 pp. \$22.50.

In 1980, an empirical study of workers in late Weimar Germany was published, based on a survey conducted 50 years earlier in 1929. The Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, well-known center of critical theory, had gathered information on the German working class, its living and working conditions, political orientations and inclinations, and cultural and social attitudes. The analysis unveils a sociotypology of that class on the eve of the Third Reich, its potential for resistance as well as seduction.

The study, now also available in English, is no historical perspective on who followed Hitler and why. Quite the contrary, the analysis was completed in 1936/37 without ever being published; the circumstances of its retention as well as its eventual disclosure are as significant as its famed author, Erich Fromm (1900-1980).

In 1977, Wolfgang Bonss discovered in a German magazine a letter from Fromm and decided to visit him at his place of retirement, Locarno, Switzerland, at which time he came across a box with fragments belonging to an unpublished study entitled *German Workers 1929—A Survey, Its Methods and Results*, Fromm's original manuscript. Fromm consented to its publication and Bonss has contributed a comprehensive introduction with editorial remarks, explaining the historical and theoretical background of the study, evaluating its methods and findings, and giving reasons for the delayed publication.

In his introduction, Bonss points out the dual importance of the investigation. It is a contribution to contemporary history which adds to the few early German *enquêtes sociales* a unique analysis of subjective perceptions in relation to social reality at a crucial point in German history. It is also a significant document in the history of science since it appears to be a precursor of later studies on *Authority and Family* (1936) and, 10 years later, on *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Last but not least, it reflects the status of theoretical discussion among members of the Institute for Social Research. The Institute's mode of interdisciplinary research had attracted diverse personalities, and the history of

the manuscript in question reveals deep rooted antagonisms among the Institute members which were partially responsible for the delayed publication. At first, Fromm, and later Adorno and Horkheimer, planned to publish, but without success. In 1939, when Fromm broke with the exiled Institute, he took all the documents with him. Even as late as 1980, when the book was forthcoming, the surviving members of the Frankfurt Circle opposed publication and denied Fromm's authorship.

What was the background for this important work? After the First World War the German Left experienced a dilemma. Left intellectuals, devoted to a critical theory which tried to explain the formation of society by its historical dialectic and the changing conditions of economic production, became increasingly aware of the contradiction between "basis and superstructure." The proletariat had by no means forged a revolution, nor had capitalism collapsed; rather, many workers had adopted petty bourgeois attitudes. Meanwhile, the Social Democratic Party, the organized expression of the labor movement, pursued power and reform policies. Orthodox Marxian theory had not come true in real life. Hence, pressure mounted to refine materialist theory by introducing a social psychological dimension to explain why the political behavior of workers, given their class origin, was not in line with what theory would expect.

Recourse to earlier theories of subjectivity and of social character, as produced by idealistic philosophy, was rejected as inappropriate for a materialistic understanding of social-psychological character formation. On the other hand, Freud's biologically based (hence materialist) psychology of the unconscious seemed to offer the most useful point of departure for theoretical refinement.

Although the intellectual left was rather ambivalent in its reception of Freud, psychoanalytic theory became a practical new frame of reference for explaining the mediating processes between individual (subjectivity) and society (objectivity). The result was the "sociologization" of psychoanalysis and the integration of Freudian psychology with Marxist social theory. The German workers study was therefore regarded as an important empirical step in the verification or falsification of the psychoanalytic approach to explaining the revolutionary potential within the labor movement.

As it turned out, however, this approach could not resolve the theoretical issue of mediation between individual and society, a relationship which is simultaneously antagonistic and dependent. How, for instance, does personal identity emerge? How does the individual obtain autonomy? How does society socialize its members? And how do social groups produce collective behavior? Another important contradiction also remained unresolved: Whereas Freud had regarded his as a "natural science" that uncovers the natural laws of mankind, the Marxian conception of history considered mankind's condition to be alterable through conscious action.

Following these theoretical premises, the 1929 study maintained the Ger-

man tradition of older *enquêtes sociales*, but enriched them with social-psychological perspectives. The battery of 271 questions incorporated the following dimensions: social status, workplace conditions and relations, living conditions, family situation, home equipment, culture and aesthetic standards, philosophies, social and personal attitudes, and affiliations to parties, corporations, and unions.

Although he was only loosely associated with the Frankfurt Institute, Fromm was appointed director of the study because he was trained in psychoanalysis as well as in sociology, was a practicing psychoanalyst, and had completed a Ph.D. thesis with Alfred Weber. Thus, he fulfilled the essential prerequisites for the study. Horkheimer and Pollock, the dominant figures of the future Frankfurt Circle, elevated the project to first rank for the further development of critical theory: It was to connect empirical evidence to the theory and vice versa. This dialectic research strategy also determined the choice of research method, a write-in questionnaire with many open-ended questions. Fromm and his team saw in this vague and non-standardized procedure the most adequate "method of classical Freudian psychoanalysis" to be rigorously transferred to "social phenomena."

Fromm favored the method even more as he recognized only marginal differences among individual, group, and mass psychologies. It permitted interpretation of data according to "the paradigmatic core of the psychoanalytical explanation of consciousness arising from unconsciousness." Thus Fromm transferred the Freudian equation for the psychic structure of the individual—the result of drives plus repression or sublimation—to the "libidinous structure" of society: As a "product of the effect of socioeconomic conditions on instinctual tendencies," the libidinous structure is supra-individual, and at the same time is anchored in the individual himself, in his libido-controlled psychic apparatus of repression and sublimation.

According to Fromm, the libido adapts to the economic structure of society and therefore stabilizes class relationships. Through sublimation and repression, however, unconscious drives are displaced, and idealistic transferences occur which hide the contradictions of social relations and maintain relations of dominance and subordination. This displacement of libidinous tendencies finds its expression in norms and ideologies, and manifests itself in cultural codes. Society is therefore constituted essentially by these rerouted libidinous forces. By connecting the instinctual base to social and cultural needs, Fromm arrived at an explanation of the genesis and efficacy of ideologies. The necessary mediating processes took place in the family in which individual and social character are formed.

In his later studies Fromm extended and differentiated the concept of social character formation to include three divergent sources: instinctual drives, existential needs and human passions, which vary as a function of the degree of

individual freedom. The German workers study, however, was only the first attempt to investigate a psychoanalytically based theory of social types. In this still rather narrow approach Fromm constructed social characters based on Freud's definitions of oral, anal, and phallic constitutions. To explain the connection between personality traits and political propensities Fromm applied a dual concept: On the one hand, there was the anal character of the petty bourgeois, striving for thrift, order, duty, discipline and competitiveness, and manifesting an attitude of respect for paternal authority; on the other hand, the genital character structure, ascribed to the proletariat, reflected the equivalence of an emancipated and well-balanced psychosexual and social development.

Three thousand questionnaires had been sent out in 1929, and within a year 1100 were completed, but in 1934 only 584 had survived the different stages of regime-enforced emigrations which the research team had to endure.

Already at that time some members of the Circle doubted if the project should be continued. According to Fromm, Horkheimer was most opposed. Hilde Weiss, who had conducted the study on the operational level, seemed to have pushed the analysis ahead anyway. In 1936, parts of the study were integrated in a publication of the exile Institute on *Authority and Family*, of which Fromm had written the social-psychological part. In the meantime, the significance of the study had changed. It had become an important historical document explaining political development in late Weimar Germany and the role which the working class had played in Hitler's rise to power. Numerous workers in Germany supported the Nazi regime, but German emigrants in the United States, viewing themselves as part of the "better Germany" in the non-fascist tradition, could not comprehend why the materialist social theory had failed to predict the course of events. A publication at that time became more and more inopportune; the data seemed to point at a fascist-prone German working class.

The manuscript, which nevertheless was completed, cannot be regarded as an elaborate analysis compared with its theoretical aspirations; in particular, the part in which Fromm was most interested, the construction of societal character, remained fragmentary.

A great many questions proved to be insufficient for further analysis. The analysis was therefore restricted to a selected set of questions broken down according to a limited number of social categories such as social status and political affiliation, the two major dimensions of theoretical importance. The scheme of analysis included, on the one hand, Unskilled Manual, Skilled Manual, White Collar, Unemployed and Other Workers; and, on the other, Social Democrats, Left Socialists, Communists, Bürgerliche (including Liberals and Conservatives), National Socialists, and nonvoters.

In a second step the respondents were classified according to their reactions to three different types of questions: political attitudes, attitudes to authority, and attitudes towards fellow human beings. Fromm denominated them as follows:

Revolutionary (radical) Socialist, Authoritarian, Reformistic and compromise oriented, and Other (neutral attitudes). On the basis of this classification, Fromm studied consistent and inconsistent patterns of attitudes from which he derived syndromes of authoritarian, radical and rebellious personalities. These were further differentiated according to the degree to which they were anchored in psychic structure—superficially on the cognitive level, or emotionally on a deeper psychic level, which meant that they should be more resistant to change.

Leaving aside the many methodological shortcomings, the study did not verify Fromm's concept of the various class-related societal characters which his materialist approach would have required. Among other things, the analysis revealed that Communists were more radical (43%) than were the Left Socialists (31%); radicals numbered fewer still in the Social Democratic camp (19%). Authoritarian types were most prominent among National Socialists (47%) and the Bürgerliche (28%). Skilled workers tended to be more radical, whereas unskilled and white collar workers leaned more to authoritarian or conventional attitudes. Contrary to theoretical assumptions, many adherents of the political left proved to be only spuriously related to the genital and socially emancipated radical character. The Social Democrats in particular showed an unexpected lack of radical psychic structure. Fromm's project therefore stands as an outstanding example of those few studies which have falsified theories of human behavior.

Wolfgang Bonss resumes Fromm's final conclusion, emphasizing the study's historical significance and noting that "despite all the electoral successes of the Weimar Left, its members were not in a position, owing to their character structure, to prevent the victory of National Socialism."

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