

SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HORNEY AND FROMM

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ABSTRACT

The neo-Freudian psychoanalysts have adopted a "cultural orientation" in their study of neurosis in modern society, which suffers from a lack of systematization and from easy assumptions regarding the universality of total-cultural influences within a given culture. What emerges is a confused mélange of historical developments, family influences, group activities, conflicts of values—all descriptively unsorted and unweighted. The work of Karen Horney and Erich Fromm is criticized as to sociological relevance and adequacy.

Although ritual obeisance is still being paid Sigmund Freud by all psychoanalysts, a following group of practitioners has, in fact, abandoned much of his theory. Turning from biology, the neo-Freudians have adopted the social sciences, sociology in particular. Through a critical analysis of the work of Karen Horney and Erich Fromm, the two outstanding proponents of the new orientation, this paper is an evaluation of the effort to explain neurosis in cultural terms.

I

Karen Horney views neurosis as no category to separate the sheep from the goats; neurosis is a matter of degree, for to some extent conflicting cultural ideologies are incorporated in all personalities.¹ But what is a neurosis? And who is neurotic? In the first place, neurosis is described as "overt deviation from a statistical norm." Thus frigidity was normal in the nineties, while a modern frigid woman may be suspected of a neurosis. There are, however, two qualifications made: (1) Neurosis cannot be conceived as a simple deviation from a statistical norm because the man who flouts the cultural imperative to succeed at all cost to other self-goals may be at peace with himself, may suffer no anxiety. (2) No simple addition or subtraction of overt deviations can measure neurosis because the neurotic has a temporally extended *character development*, which is not dependent upon any isolated experiences, actions, or symptoms.

¹ *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1937).

The neurotic is a person who develops certain trends, and his entire life-experience deepens these trends.²

² The development of this clinical orientation—a departure from the Freudian attempt to discover the significant single instance—is perhaps Horney's outstanding contribution. In comparison with other fields, it is most difficult perhaps in personality study to establish *a* as the cause of *b*. Freud always insisted that God was the father of the family of orientation, nothing more, nothing less—a curious conception indeed from the sociologist's point of view. Why was little Hans's wolf merely his father and not all that was large and threatening in his immediate environment? Horney is probably correct in insisting that the proper clinical study of the neurotic is the defensive trends he develops.

Human experience is made up neither of an isolated series of episodes nor of exact recapitulations of previous experiences. The meaning of a new experience or of a modification of an experience continued in time is transmuted for the person in terms of the total meaningfulness, at the various levels of consciousness, of all previous experiences: thus we can avoid what Köhler called the "nothing but" fallacy. Of course, if the orthodox Freudians insist that little Hans's fear of horses is his fear that his father will castrate him and that artistic creation is nothing but a recapitulatory interest in playing with one's own feces, they cannot, on their own grounds, be disproved.

This is not to question the determining effect of single traumatic experiences, but even these have a context. In Koestler's *Arrival and Departure*, Peter's catching his brother on a boat-hook in a sense caused his masochistic need for punishment, but his relationship with his parents, particularly his father, was such that his corroding sense of guilt was carefully nurtured.

Horney's statement of the case has even more therapeutic than theoretical importance. If the trend and not the single determining instance is what the analyst should discover, then therapy may become something which does not consume the patient's pocketbook and lifetime.

The neurotic, then, is defined as a person who attempts to cope with life under "difficult internal conditions" with a "diffuse basic anxiety toward life in general." Lack of precision is admitted. In the first place, no matter what the "individual character difficulties" are, "... these have been engendered . . . ultimately through cultural conditions . . ." because not in all cultures would neurotics use moral perfection or utter helplessness on others as safety devices.³ The only way of distinguishing their neurotic from their "normal" use is "their one-sided compulsive and indiscriminate application."

It is further advised that normal might be distinguished from neurotic on the basis of compulsive and indiscriminate behavior as applied to "normal" trends in the culture, i.e., to attempt to secure recognition for achievement might be considered normal in our culture, but if this success drive becomes a devouring passion at the expense of all other activities and satisfactions, such an ambition might be labeled "neurotic." The difficulty here, it is admitted, is that arbitrary judgments might be set up of "good attitudes towards the self" and "free use of energies" in a social contest in which a large group or a whole people were acting "neurotically." This would be awkward because "... 'neurotic,' however we may define it, has the connotation of impairment of function. But the group as a whole and an individual belonging to such a group may function well within the given cultural limitations. . . ."⁴

This quotation constitutes an admission of failure to differentiate between "individual" and "cultural" neurosis in sociological terms. Horney's final conclusion only makes this more evident: "The decision whether or not to call an individual neurotic must ultimately be based on merely practical criteria, such as the degree of being handicapped or the degree of suffering."⁵ But this

³ Karen Horney, "What Is a Neurosis?" *American Journal of Sociology*, XLV (1939), 431.

⁴ *Ibid.*, D. 432.

⁵ *Ibid.*

is still supposed to allow a bridge to be drawn between the "anthropological" or "socially oriented" view of neurosis as deviation from average conduct and the clinically oriented view, by adding the clinical proviso that "... the deviation does not primarily concern the manifest behavior but the quantity or quality of basic anxiety as well as that of the deviation developed for the sake of security."⁶

Since sociologists have discovered that deviant social types within highly organized subcultures (e.g., the professional beggar) tend to develop integrated, adjusted personalities, Horney seems well advised to have dropped any attempt to correlate neurosis with overt behavior. From the clinical point of view, the foregoing "practical" definition of neurosis is fairly adequate.⁷ Nevertheless, to view neurosis in terms of anxiety deviation establishes no bridge between culture and neurosis.

One will seek in vain for a statement in Horney's writings of how cultural trends become personality trends. There is no recognition of social structure as such, and the discussion of general-cultural conflicts of values is completely removed from her excellent description of a general type of family which engenders neurotic trends and symptoms. (These may, incidentally, be labeled "middle-class." Horney makes no differentiations according to class.) There are two most important questions left unanswered: (1) Since in modern society no individual participates in the total cultural complex totally, but primarily in a series of population segments grouped according to sex, age, class, occupation, region, religion, and ethnic group—all with somewhat differing norms and expectations of conduct—how do these combine in different ways to form varying backgrounds for individual

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ It could be revised to state that the neurotic is a person whose anxiety, guilt, and feelings of inferiority make painful his attempts to establish self-satisfactory roles and goals. His roles and goals serve as the bridge between cultural and clinical factors.

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etiologies of neurotic trends?¹ To what extent do these various population segments share the imputed conflict of general-cultural values? (2) How do cultural factors become incorporated in the personality? Why do some become neurotic and not others under the same general-cultural conditions? Nowhere does Horney come any closer to combining cultural and individual factors than this: "A similar answer can be given to the question as to why only some persons become neurotic, and not all, when they live under the same difficult cultural conditions. The persons who succumb to a neurosis are those who have been more severely hit by the existing difficulties, particularly in their childhood."²

Horney has simply failed to do what she claims. As was noted above, Horney made the unqualified statement that, no matter what the individual character difficulties might be, they were ultimately determined by cultural conditions (and, for Horney, "cultural" conflicts are limited to ideological conflicts). But in another context appears this statement: "In regard to neuroses . . . the conflicting trends constituting them are determined ultimately by disturbances in human relationships."³

¹ This is asking a great deal, and the job would probably require several volumes. The only legitimate exception to be taken here is with Horney's assumption of a single unit, "culture," which is treated as a residual category in her etiological descriptions. Culture becomes a constant from which individual experience develops its own trends. Various neurotic symptoms and trends are described as more or less self-contained dynamisms, with no further reference to "culture" as such. In the middle-class general family type described as engendering neurotic trends, *the parents are themselves neurotic, as symptomatically defined*. As for differentiating according to population segment, the only one Horney introduces is a sexual differentiation (see "Feminine Psychology," *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1939], chap. vi, pp. 101-19).

² *Ibid.*, p. 178. A virtual duplication of this statement may be found in a previous publication (see "Culture and Neurosis," *American Sociological Review*, I [1936], 230).

³ *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, p. 78.

Erich Fromm's position in many ways parallels Karen Horney's; and his view of the fundamental antagonism between person and culture is even more arbitrary than Horney's. Culture, however, is viewed not so much as a system of conflicting values as a historical struggle to gain freedom from the "shackles" of such social institutions as the church, government, and capitalism. Fromm's main theoretical formulation is a psychological extension of Max Weber's analysis of the Protestant Ethic. Briefly, man's medieval primary ties were irretrievably broken; individualism and the middle class slowly emerged. Lutheranism and Calvinism brought religious freedom, which was accompanied by a new powerlessness and anxiety. Compulsive activity and work as a duty developed to allay feelings of doubt and insignificance. While "Western man" freed himself from certain specific authorities, he developed only a pseudo-self and acted out roles he assumed were his own but which actually were imposed upon him.⁴

No theory is ever "wrong" or "right," only more or less adequate to explain a given body of fact. The Protestant Ethic, with all it implied, was of unquestionable significance as a causal link in the development of the modern obsession with work and success. But in itself it is inadequate to explain that development, and it is certainly inadequate to explain, *as a directly channeled historical development*, any putative psychological condition of "modern man."

In the first place, the adequacy of an imputed causal chain to explain a given body of fact as of a given moment in time is not impaired by shortening the chain, i.e., using a shorter time scheme.⁵ Conversely,

⁴ See Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1941).

⁵ In fact, the historical sequence has significance only for immediately successive links in any imputed chain (see Robert M. MacIver, *Social Causation* [Boston: Ginn & Co., 1931], particularly the "Simplified Diagram of an Historical Sequence," on p. 190).

farther back the imputed chain starts, more do intervening factors change the character of the original factors introduced the arbitrary starting-point. While the Protestant Ethic formed a common background for the development of social structure and value systems in Britain, Germany, and America, subsequent changes in all these national cultures have deviated sufficiently not only to justify but to compel other, and time-shortened, explanations of those national cultures and their psychological effects. For example, in neither Germany nor Great Britain did a frontier ethos ever develop, with its emphasis on independence and self-help and its intensification of personal competition. The ethos of modern capitalism in this country assumed those values almost entirely in striving for success, but this became a significantly different phenomenon from anything comparable in the other two national cultures.⁶ Where was the "automaton" on the American frontier? And how do we conceive of a definitive and final break of all primary bonds with the end of the medieval period when eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America exemplified the rural-familial way of life?⁷ Foster

⁶ See Talcott Parsons, "The Problem of Concluded Institutional Change," *Psychiatry*, VIII (1945), 79-101. Parsons points out that, while Germans are more obsessed with status than Americans, attempts at status fulfillment in Germany are largely directed outside the internal class structure, while individual competition for achievement within the class structure has characterized this country. It, in itself, has many implications for different psychological explanations of neurosis within the two national cultures. For a temporally limited explanation of the value of success in this country see Arnold Green, "Duplicity," *Psychiatry*, VI (1943), 24.

⁷ See W. E. Woodward, *The Way Our People Lived* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1944). Even the present day, such a thesis is inadmissible. No matter how fractured modern social structure now splintered modern values, in the socialization process the person incorporates other models and other values from his immediate environment—indeed, his very conception of himself—and thus is related to some area of the total social structure and value system.

Rhea Dulles' *America Learns To Play* depicts a national-cultural transformation of recreation values, from the seventeenth-century "detestation of idleness" to the twentieth-century belief in the right of every citizen to hedonistic enjoyment. Today, how much does Middletown's rock-bound faith in "Magic Middletown" counteract the sense of worthlessness and insignificance? In a period of contracting capitalism, with increasing emphasis upon consumption outlets and state-guaranteed economic security rather than upon expanding production, saving, and individual responsibility, the compulsion to work may be expected to change radically in character.

From the standpoint of this analysis a more important point than Fromm's use of historical materials is that he, like Horney, implicitly conceives of culture as a unity, operating as a universal stimulus in a simplified stimulus-response relationship. Complex cultures do not lend themselves easily to the explaining of behavior in general-cultural terms. Since individuals interact within a small segment of a differentiated society and are inculcated with the specialized values of their various segments as well as with the general-cultural values, extreme caution is required in the use of such a concept as "modern man."

As for defining neurosis and establishing a bridge between a cultural and an individual etiology—problems already discussed in reference to Horney's work—a much greater confusion is encountered. In another context Fromm drops the general-cultural explanation of neurosis and asserts that neurosis arises from individual experience of personal relationships: "What appears as a feeling of guilt . . . is actually the fear of displeasing those of whom one is afraid."⁸ And ". . . the scars left from this defeat [in the family] in the child's fight against irrational authority are to be found at the bottom of every neurosis."⁹

⁸ Erich Fromm, "Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis," *American Sociological Review*, IX (1944), 382.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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On the other hand, the family mediates the "social character of their society or class" to the child,¹⁷ apparently the cultural "normal." To some extent Fromm solves this seeming dilemma by viewing the neurotic as one who struggles against normality, and the individual normal as one who has accepted the cultural normal. But if the neurotic is neurotic because he deviates from the cultural normal, and at the same time is neurotic because he does not deviate sufficiently from the cultural normal, the etiological picture becomes chaotic. A fundamental antagonism between individual and society is expressed, which is even more extreme than that of Freud, who advised a young male patient to be continent, but under protest.

Fromm envisages a complete separation of values, social structure, and neurotic symptoms as Horney defines them. Two views of "normal" or "healthy" are adopted: "... there is a discrepancy between the aims of the smooth functioning of society and of the full development of the individual. This fact makes it imperative to differentiate sharply between the two concepts of health. The one is governed by social necessities, the other by values and norms concerning the aim of individual existence."¹⁸ And modern psychiatrists are reputed to make this error: "... the person who is normal in terms of being well-adjusted is often less healthy than the neurotic person in terms of human values."¹⁹ Confronting the "pathology of normalcy [sic]," he considers the analyst's task to be "... to recognize that the individual's ideal of normalcy may contradict the aim of the full realization of himself as a human being."²⁰ There is more than a semantic difficulty here. To cut the neurotic off from the starveling limb which relates him to the

¹⁷ *Escape from Freedom*, p. 287.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁰ "Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis," p. 384.

total social structure is not therapy but the most cruel disservice. And neither the analyst nor the patient has the political power to uproot the tree.

III

One would be in error in supposing that Fromm's pitting such imprecise and value-laden terms as "healthy" and "realization of self" against "pathological normalcy" stems from confusion. Indeed, it makes a great deal of sense in that his therapy is not primarily aimed at relieving neurotic symptoms but rather serves to introduce a program of social reform.

A review of that program must be prefaced by an evaluation of the possibilities of using Fromm's therapy in the present. According to Fromm, the giving-up of spontaneity and individuality in a compulsive conformity to arbitrary authority results in a thwarting of life; "positive freedom" is to be promoted which consists in "the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality."²¹ There "is no higher power than this unique individual self." Further, "... there is only one meaning of life: the act of living itself."²²

²¹ *Escape from Freedom*, p. 258. Horney's proposed therapy is an exact replica of Fromm's (see *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, p. 11).

²² *Escape from Freedom*, p. 263. Indirectly, in *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm contradicts this statement. A system of morality is implied with the phrase "... man should not be subject to anything higher than himself . . .," i.e., men should not manipulate others for ends extrinsic to the relationship itself. But this would have to be learned as a rule of behavior and respected as something apart from any given interactional context, else one man's spontaneity be an invitation to another's exploitation. This paradox emerges: Where men interacted "spontaneously," a greater deliberation over which course of action to adopt in each relationship would be necessary than in a caste society in which all relationships are rigidly defined. Actually, no organized society could exist where men oriented their behavior anew in each relationship, while at the same time the relationship referred to nothing outside of the other's "unique personality." Fromm is far from meaning what he says, since he also claims that men must on occasion sacrifice their lives, "which can be the utmost assertion of our individuality."

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This is patently absurd. No society of which we have any knowledge has ever resembled the Garden of Eden: men have lived, and can live, only for various ends—the clan, the guild, the family; to kill, to succeed, to spread the Word of God, to renounce the world in monastic seclusion—but certainly not "to live." But more important than this, a therapy of "spontaneity" shows a lack either of knowledge or of understanding of the kind of social conditioning "modern man" undergoes, and particularly "middle-class modern man."²³

A description of that conditioning may be summarized as the systematic suppression of impulse to insure that the available channels of vertical mobility remain open. Revising a felicitous phrase of the Lynds, members of the middle class are trained to live at the future and to regard their friendships, associations, hobbies, and intellectual interests in terms of their potentiality as means to attain ends of wealth, prestige, and social status. And middle-class man is increasingly finding his occupational position not as an independent shopkeeper, business, or professional man but as a minor functionary in vast, bureaucratically organized²⁴ corporations and government bureaus, where one must learn complex tech-

²³ It will suffice here to define "middle-class modern man" as a sociopsychological ideal type whose attitudes and values are welded into a lifetime of striving toward an improvement of personal socioeconomic position within the class structure. His position is one of psychological vulnerability: he is protected from the stresses and strains of a period of rapid social change, which is currently contracting the channels of vertical mobility, neither by the relative acquiescence of status by "lower-class man" nor the assured status of "upper-class man." Fromm has some insight into the modern objective cultural restrictions upon a spontaneity therapy ("Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis," p. 381), but "inner compulsions" remain essentially imposed by a functioning society and are not viewed as a set of interiorized social ends and goals which relate the person to social structure.

²⁴ For insight into the psychological demands of placement in a bureaucratic organization see Robert K. Merton, "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality," *Social Forces*, XVIII (1940), 560-68.

niques of avoidance, withdrawal, and approach—all of which require a studied manipulation of others' personalities and a schooling of one's own reactions so as not to antagonize but to please.²⁵ Within a personnel hierarchy (large city hospital, prison, army, government bureau, university, business corporation) lower space may approach upper only through the mediation of middle space. These are in no sense neurotic manifestations but objective cultural demands which the individual must meet if he is to marry,²⁶ raise a family, participate in social organizations made up of members of his

²⁵ For an analysis of personality manipulation, see Green, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Significantly, Thoreau never married. It seems doubtful that any wife would have appreciated his spontaneous ruminations with nature while his bean-patch went unhoed. But Fromm said that man must become an integral part of life through work and love. There is only one way for a modern member of the middle class to implement a philosophy of spontaneity, and that is to step outside the success schema altogether. Yet this would mean renouncing almost all present associations and insulating the self with a way of life for which virtually no support could be found within the present social structure and scheme of values. Such drastic action may be necessary in individual instances, but as a general approach to therapy it is hardly advisable.

On the other hand, therapists who accept the "spontaneity" dictum, while at the same time affirming the desirability of success, involve themselves in curious contradictions. On p. 160 of John Dollard's *Victory over Fear* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942) appears this statement: "If you can see no reason for fear but are still afraid there is only one way out. Do what you are afraid to do. Carry out the dangerous act in exactly that situation in which you are most afraid." And on p. 175: "Possessions stand between us and the worst pains and rigors of life; high position is a guarantee against misery." But it is precisely the efforts to secure possessions and status that result in the most morale-sapping fears which members of the middle class experience—fear of failure, fear of inability to "win friends and influence people," fear of economic depression, fear of antagonizing the boss. Carrying out the feared dangerous act might mean telling someone in authority exactly what one thought of him, but at what price to possessions and status? Certainly, there is no easy answer for the therapist, and most certainly no general advice that he can offer.



own class, occupy a recognized position in his community—all of which have become his self-expectations, early assimilated from the expectations of family, friends, teachers, Boy Scout masters, and clergymen. Any labeling of these expectations as "pseudo-selfness" and "imposed authority" does not dispose of the fact that they occupy the core of middle-class personalities. Any attempt to uproot them not only would intensify anxiety but would also require actual withdrawal from the current area of social interaction. Unfortunate as it may be, life for the middle class is comprised largely of a conscious reckoning of personal means-ends relationships projected into the future; and the conception of self in the present tends to reflect whatever successes were scored through those relationships in the past. The career becomes "subjectively . . . the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him."⁷

Exactly with whom is one's behavior to be spontaneous? With one's employer? With one's army officer? With one's clients? By acting spontaneously now, one may be insuring the loss of opportunity to do so in the future. The middle-class career may be conceived as a series of carefully preserved relations with a long line of superiors, any one of whom is in a position seriously to endanger the ultimate goal. Dale Carnegie has written the book which best illuminates the spirit of our era.

It is by turning his projected therapy into a program of social reform that Fromm avoids answering the question of how "spontaneity and freedom" are to be released in patients today:

Only in a planned economy in which the whole nation has rationally mastered the economic and social forces can the individual

⁷ Everett C. Hughes, "Institutional Office and the Person," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLIII (1937), 409-10.

share responsibility and use creative intelligence in his work. All that matters is that the opportunity for genuine activity be restored to the individual; that the purposes of society and of his own become identical, not ideologically but in reality. . . .⁸

The currently fashionable proviso is added that planning from the top must be "blended with active participation from below," combining "centralization with decentralization," since "man should not be subject to anything higher than himself."

This is the first planned *economy* dedicated to "the actual freedom, initiative, and spontaneity of the individual." If "spontaneous freedom" is to have any reasonably demonstrable referent, it must mean the opportunity of expressing and implementing a wide diversity of ends, something which no planned economy could tolerate. Combining centralization with decentralization is pure word magic, as is the hope of participation from below in the planning. A modern economy which is "planned," i.e., controlled by a power hierarchy to insure that machinery and men produce and distribute according to a predetermined national schedule, must, of internal necessity, exact conformity at all points. If could not possibly operate with a permitted expression and implementation of a wide diversity of ends. And once political pronouncement instead of the open market determined the points of juncture in the economic sphere, the power hierarchy of necessity, perhaps even apart from personal desire, would be forced into an imposition of values and goals outside the economic realm.

Meanwhile, there is no need of waiting for any restructuring of society. Much can be done in psychotherapy within present cultural limitations, and the sociologist may contribute. It will not be along the lines of general-cultural analyses, however, but in more intensive studies of the actual proc-

⁸ *Escape from Freedom*, p. 273.

esses of socialization. The sociologist's knowledge of the social pressures which become incorporated as conflicting self-goals, to which persons of different sexes, ethnic groups, races, classes, and regions are subjected, in conjunction with the clinician's techniques for probing out individual neurosis etiology, should, if combined, become a valuable co-operative endeavor.

And whatever new therapeutic goals are defined, it does not seem likely that they will follow the lines established by Horney

and Fromm. Those goals are not applicable today; no therapist is in any position to advise exactly what political activity the neurotic should engage in to help establish a better culture for the future. Irwin Edman may have been right when he said that not a new argument but a new society would cure the soul of man. The modern neurotic, however, will not live to see the dawn of that day. In the meantime, he is entitled to whatever help can be afforded.

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