



Erich Fromm, Judaism, and the Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School had a highly ambivalent relation to Judaism. On one hand, they were part of that Enlightenment tradition that opposed authority, tradition, and all institutions of the past -- including religion. They were also, for the most part, secular Jews who did not support any organized religion, or practice religious or cultural Judaism. In this sense, they were in the tradition of Heine, Marx, and Freud for whom Judaism was neither a constitutive feature of their life or work, nor a significant aspect of their self-image and identity.

And yet the Frankfurt School's relation to Judaism was varied. Several of the key members of the group had orthodox Jewish upbringings, or at least studied and practiced some elements of Judaism. Moreover, for some of the members, Judaism played an important role in their life and work. For Walter Benjamin and Erich Fromm, their Judaic heritage figured importantly in key stages of their lives and works. Judaism was of some but arguably not major significance at different stages of their lives for Lowenthal and Horkheimer; and Judaism appears not to have been particularly important for Marcuse and Adorno.

Yet all Jews were outsiders in Weimar Germany and all of the Frankfurt School were forced into exile because of their Jewish background after the rise of fascism in 1933. One could argue



that the members of the Frankfurt School were also to some extent outsiders in the United States where they found exile in part at least because of their Jewishness. At this time, the Frankfurt school made anti-semitism, prejudice, and the situation of the Jews a major thematic focus of their work.

During the years in Weimar prior to emigration in 1934, however, the Frankfurt School did not thematize the issue of the situation of the Jews in their major works and in a 1938 article the Director of the Institute for Social Research, Max Horkheimer, wrote an article "The Jews in Europe" in which anti-semitism was explained as a mere reflex of the vicissitudes of monopoly capitalism in the end of its liberal phase. During World War II, however, they began serious studies of anti-semitism, publishing some brilliant "Theses on Anti-Semitism" in the seminal text by Horkheimer and Adorno Dialectic of Enlightenment (with Leo Lowenthal adding some material to the "Theses"). In addition, the Frankfurt School published a series of books Studies on Prejudice that focused on anti-semitism and were funded in part by American Jewish groups.

In this entry, I will discuss the ways that Judaism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism intersected in the work of Erich Fromm, constituting a distinctive mode of Jewish writing that combined religion and Enlightenment conceptions. I argue that Fromm was at once traditionally Jewish and radically secular, and that his early immerse in Jewish religion and culture came



to shape his distinctive views and work.

Judaism, Psychoanalysis, and Marxism: The Early Fromm

The Frankfurt School was one of the first groups to bring Freud and psychoanalysis into their social theory. Erich Fromm (1900-1980) was one of the first to carry through a synthesis of Marx and Freud, and to develop a Marxian social psychology. Born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1900, Fromm was affiliated with the Institute for Social Research from 1928-1938. Trained in psychoanalysis, Fromm combined Freudian psychology with Marxian social theory. Yet Fromm was also deeply immersed in Judaism and later indicated how he was influenced by the messianic themes in Jewish thought: "More than anything else, I was moved by the prophetic writings, by Isaiah, Amos, Hosea; not so much by their warnings and their announcement of disaster, but by their promise of the 'end of days.'... The vision of universal peace and harmony between nations touched me deeply when I was twelve and thirteen years old."

Fromm told a story of how his great-grandfather, Seligmann Fromm, would sit all day in his little shop and study the Talmud. When a customer would come in, he would look up, impatient with his interruption, even telling the customer to go to another store. Fromm himself was born into an orthodox Jewish family and both of his parents came from families of rabbis. Fromm was deeply influenced by the serious scholarship of his ancestors and was himself a very dedicated scholar who was also



strongly animated by a sense of moral values and a passionate desire for justice -- motifs influenced by his Jewish upbringing.

Throughout his youth, Fromm was deeply involved in the study of the Talmud and with his friend Leo Lowenthal, later an important member of the Frankfurt School, he joined the circle around the eminent Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, rabbi of the largest Frankfurt synagogue. Moreover, as Martin Jay documents in another entry in this volume, Fromm was involved in the formation of the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus (Free Jewish School) in Frankfurt in the 1920s with Franz Rosensweig, Martin Buber, and other prominent Jewish intellectuals. It was "free" because there were no restrictions on admission and it was wholly administered by the teachers and students themselves, governed by no outside authority.

After studying in Frankfurt for two semesters, Fromm went to Heidelberg in 1919 where he studied sociology, psychoanalysis, and philosophy and completed a doctorate in sociology on Jewish Law: A Contribution to the Sociology of the Jewish Diaspora, directed by Alfred Weber. While studying in Heidelberg, Fromm became acquainted with Habad Hasidism, via Rabbi Salman Rabinkow, who also imbued Fromm with a messianic version of socialism. Fromm was impressed by the Hasidic emphasis on the importance of the rituals of everyday life and the importance of moral values and how one actually lived, as



opposed to the intellectualistic rationalism of some forms of Judaic theology.

Fromm's dissertation carried out sociological investigations of three Jewish communities -- the Karaites, the Hasidim, and Reform Jewry. Fromm concluded his dissertation by arguing that Hasidism "does not seek to change religion for the sake of the economy but to overcome need through the power of religion.... Karaism and Reform lack new religious ideas, they dogmatize religion. Hasidism, in contrast, integrates its specific religious life in the sociological structure of Judaism, avoids dogma, and retains the objective validity of the law. Reform Judaism is the non-creative, ideological way out that takes the place of mass baptism. Hasidism is the creative, religious way out that overcomes pseudo-messianism."

Throughout his life, Fromm would distance himself from any dogmas and always affirm more creative and open solutions to the problems of human existence. Although he later distanced himself from Judaism, it is reported that Fromm never tired of singing Hasidic songs or studying scripture. In an unpublished memoir on Rabbi Rabinkow, summarized in Rainer Funk's book on Fromm, Fromm praises his teacher's synthesis of the politics of protest with traditional Jewish religiosity, mediated by the spirit of radical Humanism.

In the 1920s, Fromm was active in several groups which promoted Jewish religion and culture, and helped found the Free



Jewish School, at which he taught for some years. The return to Jewish tradition in Weimar was partly influenced by the extremely precarious economic and political situation, which included outbursts of anti-semitism. Fromm was deeply involved in the cultural life of Weimar, becoming editor of a small Jewish newspaper at the age of 23 and participating in attempts at forming a revitalized Jewish community.

In the middle of the 1920s, Fromm was introduced to psychoanalysis via the Jewish psychoanalyst Frieda Reichmann, who later became his wife. Reichman ran a private psychoanalytic institution in Heidelberg which practiced Jewish traditions, earning the Institute the nickname of the "Torah-peutic Clinic." Fromm himself trained as a psychoanalyst, opened his own practice in 1927, and married Reichmann.

Fromm's first published essay was on "The Sabbath" and, drawing on psychoanalysis, he argued that "The Sabbath originally served as a reminder of the killing of the father and the winning of the mother; the commandment not to work served as a penance for original sin and for its repetition through regression to the pre-genital stage." Later, Fromm was more sympathetic to the Sabbath, relating it and other religious holy days to the human desire for transcendence, for stepping out of mundane routine, and consecrating individuals for spiritual goals above and beyond commerce and worldly matters.

Fromm's critical position toward Judaism and bourgeois



society at the time was no doubt influenced by his move toward a socialist Humanism which would lead him to attempt to combine Marx, Freud, and, I would, argue a version of a Humanism animated by concern with morality and justice that was shaped by his early immersion in Judaism. During the late 1920s, Fromm became a prominent member of the Frankfurt Institute of psychoanalysis (the second such Institute to be formed in Germany, after one in Berlin). He also began lecturing at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and affiliated himself as well with this Institute, becoming one of its most influential members during his tenure with the Institute from 1928-1938.

In his essays of the late 1920s and 1930s, Fromm elucidated the common dialectical and materialist elements in Marx and Freud, and applied his Marxian social psychology to interpret such phenomena as religion, the sado-masochistic roots of the authoritarian personality, and the dominant bourgeois character types. One of his first major essays was on "The Dogma of Christ" (1930; reprinted 1963) in which Fromm argued against the interpretation of the origins of Christianity of another psychoanalyst, Theodor Reik. Where Reik saw the doctrine whereby the Son was of the same single substance as God the father as a victory for the Oedipal drive to displace the primacy of the father, which was analogous to individual compulsive neurotic symptoms, Fromm saw the concept as the result of a long social



process whereby early Christian radicals matured and accepted equality with the father. Fromm thus rejected both Reik's tendency to see religious phenomena as merely neurotic symptoms and argued for the primacy of sociological developments in explaining religious and other phenomena.

Fromm also presented a quasi-positive view of Protestantism, suggesting that its individualism and stress on the activity and belief of the individual indicated a modern era in which it was possible for the masses to play an active role in social life and thought, "as opposed to the infantile-passive attitude of the Middle Ages." In the Medieval era, by contrast, Catholicism, with its "veiled regression to the religion of the Great Mother," offered the infantilized masses the fantasy-gratification of being a child loved and cared for by its mother.

In the following years, Fromm would always insist that sociology and psychology must be combined in the study of religious and all other socio-cultural phenomena. Fromm sketched the basic outline of his project in his article "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology" subtitled "Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism." He argued that Freud's theory, properly interpreted and reconstructed, is compatible with historical materialism. For Fromm, psychoanalysis is a materialist psychology which analyzes instinctual drives and needs as the motive forces for human



behavior. It carries out an inventory of the basic instincts and dissects the unconscious forces and mechanisms that sometimes control human behavior. Psychoanalysis also analyzes the influence of specific life experiences on the inherited instinctual constitution. Thus, in Fromm's view, Freud's theory is "exquisitely historical: it seeks to understand the drive structure through the understanding of life history."

Fromm thus believed that both Freudian and Marxian theory were deeply historical and perhaps the Judaic emphasis on redemption in historical time, on breaks and ruptures in history, led Fromm to historicist views. In any case, his appropriation of Freud and Marx was always mediated by a strong concern for morality, justice, and the well-being of the individual -- motifs that were part of his assimilation of his Jewish heritage.

Yet in the late 1920s, Fromm began to become more critical of organized religion. The key conception of psychoanalysis for Fromm is the "active and passive adaptation of the biological apparatus, the instincts, to social reality." Psychoanalysis is especially valuable for social psychology in that it seeks "to discover the hidden sources of the obviously irrational behavior patterns in societal life -- in religion, custom, politics, and education." Fromm was thus beginning to see all organized religion as forms of irrational behavior that manipulated human needs -- a conception that was also advanced by Freud in Future



of an Illusion. Thus, Fromm was definitely distancing himself from orthodox Judaism.

Moreover, Fromm's position was strongly secular, identifying with the secular ethos of modernity. He believed that an "analytical social psychology" is thoroughly compatible with historical materialism since both are materialist sciences which "do not start from 'ideas' but from earthly life and needs. They are particularly close in their appraisal of consciousness, which is seen by both as less the driving force behind human behavior than the reflection of other hidden forces." Fromm thus comes to reject a spiritual dimension as a guiding force in human life, seeing all intellectual responses as derivative of material needs and social experience.

Yet Fromm never subscribed completely to a reductionist version of either Freudian or Marxian theory. Although historical materialism tends to assume the primacy of economic forces and interests in individual and social life, while the psychoanalytic focus is on instinctual and psychological forces, Fromm believes that they can be fruitfully synthesized. In particular, he believes that an analytical social psychology can study the ways that socio-economic structure influences and shapes the instinctual apparatus of both individuals and groups.

For instance, the psychoanalytic emphasis on the primacy of the family in human development can also be given a historical materialist twist, Fromm believes. Since "the family is the



medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child," analysis of the family and socialization processes can indicate how society reproduces its class structure and imposes its ideologies and practices on individuals. Psychoanalytic theories, Fromm suggested, which abstract from study of the ways that a given society socialized its members into accepting and reproducing a specific social structure, tend to take bourgeois society as a norm and to illicitly universalize its findings. Historical materialism provides a corrective to these errors by stressing the intrinsically historical nature of all social formations, institutions, practices, and human life.

For Fromm, natural instincts are part of the base (Unterbau) of society, and he believes that our understanding of human behavior and social processes will be enriched by reciprocal knowledge of how society molds and adapts instincts to its structures, and how human beings shape and change their environments to meet their needs. "In certain fundamental respects, the instinctual apparatus itself is a biological given; but it is highly modifiable. The role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions. The family is the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts its formative influence on the individual's psyche. The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies -- and their



unconscious roots in particular -- in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings."

Fromm's belief that there was a core of human nature, shaped by society, though which possessed its own dynamic structure combined the instinct theory of Freud and the Humanism of Martin Buber, who also stressed the primacy of social relations in shaping human beings, though Buber's focus was more ethical than instinctual. Later, Fromm will attempt to define what he considers basic human needs, some derived from human biological and natural being (i.e. needs for food and sex); others deriving from individual's social being (i.e. the need for relatedness), while others derive from human spiritual being (i.e. the need for meaning and transcendence).

Following Marx, Fromm believed that ideologies play a key role in shaping human thought and behavior and believed that psychoanalysis can help explain how socio-economic interests and structures are transformed into ideologies, as well as how ideologies shape and influence human thought and behavior. Such a merger of Marx and Freud will immeasurably enrich materialist social theory, in Fromm's view, by providing analysis of the mediations through which psyche and society interact and reciprocally shape each other. Every society, he claims, has its own libidinal structure and its processes whereby authority is reproduced in human thought and behavior. An analytical social psychology must thus be deeply empirical to explain how



domination and submission take place in specific societies in order to provide understanding of how social and psychological change is possible.

Fromm would for the next several decade be an important force in advocating a Marxist Humanism that would be concerned both with the full development of the individual and the creation of a just and egalitarian society. Such a project was obviously thwarted by the rise of fascism, and Fromm and his fellow members of the Institute for Social Research, in exile in the United States after 1934, dedicated much effort to clarify this strange phenomenon of an aggressively anti-modern doctrine appearing in the midst of modernity, utilizing modern techniques of communication and manipulation to control the masses and modern technology to carry out imperialist war, as well as war against the Jews.

Escape from Fascism

Forced to flee from Nazi Germany in 1933, Fromm settled in the United States and lectured at the New School of Social Research, Columbia, Yale, and Bennington. In the late 1930s, Fromm broke with the Institute of Social Research and with Escape from Freedom (1941) he began publishing a series of books which would win him a large audience in the U.S. and eventually throughout the world.

Escape From Freedom argued that alienation from soil and community in the transition from feudalism to capitalism



increased insecurity and fear. Documenting some of the strains and crises of individualism, Fromm attempted to explain how alienated individuals would seek gratification and security from social orders such as fascism. Protestantism, with its emphasis on individual salvation and damnation, increased individual's fear and made them susceptible, he argued, to social powers. Moreover, capitalism, with its emphasis on individual gain and harsh market which mediated success and failure, also contributed to feelings of insecurity. Migrations from country to towns and factories, central to industrial modernity, created a new urban civilization which increased individual's feelings of rootlessness.

In the late 1930s, Fromm broke with the Frankfurt School, in part over his interpretation of Freud and in part over personality conflicts with key members such as Adorno and Marcuse. Henceforth, Fromm would go his own way and often appeared as a prophet in the desert of American affluence and consumerism, as he attacked the "marketing orientation," the bourgeois proclivity to privilege having over being, and indeed the entire American system of institutions and values.

His post-World War II books, Man For Himself (1947) and The Sane Society (1955), applied Fromm's Freudian-Marxian perspectives to sharp critiques of contemporary capitalism. Fromm popularized the neo-Marxian critiques of the media and consumer society, and promoted democratic socialist perspectives



during an era when social repression made it difficult and dangerous to advocate radical positions. Although his social critique was similar in many ways to his former colleague Herbert Marcuse, the two thinkers engaged in sharp polemics from the mid-1950s into the 1970s. Marcuse began the polemic by attacking Fromm as a neo-Freudian revisionist, and Fromm retaliated by calling Marcuse a "nihilist" and "utopian." Marcuse claimed that Fromm's emphasis on the "productive character" simply reproduced the "productivism" intrinsic to capitalism, and that his celebration of the values of love, in books like The Art of Loving (1957), and religious values simply reproduced dominant idealist ideologies.

Part of the Fromm/Marcuse split might have resulted from their various responses to Judaism. Although Fromm distanced himself in the 1920s from organized Jewish religion, Jewish motifs and values continued to animate his work, while Marcuse committed himself to more secular goals -- notably to the happiness and gratification of the individual -- as well as to a revolutionary overthrow of existing society. Like Marcuse, Fromm maintained staunch socialist and anti-capitalist perspectives, but was more committed to Enlightenment values and a version of moral Humanism. Perhaps Fromm's radicalism -- and that of the Frankfurt School -- derived in part from his outsider status as a Jew forced into exile. But in Fromm's case, it was the Jewish commitment to values, justice, and community



that shaped his particular set of values and position of critique, as well as his commitment to Marxian socialism and Humanism.

Fromm's aversion to the horrors of World Wars I and II made him suspicious of nationalism and although he was briefly a Zionist in the 1920s he was critical of Israel's policy toward Arabs and of Jews who supported their oppression. Rather, Fromm's Humanism was broad and ecumenical and his desire for justice universal. In 1966, he published a book on the Old Testament, You Shall Be as Gods, in which he developed "a radical interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition."

Fromm continued to be a prolific writer up until his death in 1980, publishing a series of books promoting and developing his unique synthesis of Marxian, Freudian, and Judaic-inspired or inflected ideas. He was also politically active, helping organize S.A.N.E and engaging in early "Ban the Bomb" campaigns, as well participating in the anti-War movement of the 1960s. Fromm continued to argue for a humanistic and democratic socialist position, and claimed that such elements were intrinsic in Marxism. His many books and articles had some influence on the New Left and a broad public and continue to be widely read and discussed today.

Fromm thus represents a unique blend of secular and religious writing, influenced at once by Judaism, the Enlightenment, Marxism, Freud and other forms of humanist and



radical thought. He represents a form of thought that is both radically secular and yet attempts to preserve elements of Jewish culture that he deems valuable. At times, Fromm himself adopted a prophetic style and always fought for justice and a more humane social organization.

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