



## Escape From Orthodoxy

Review of David Burston's The Legacy of Erich Fromm (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991)

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Intellectuals thrive on debunking myths and shattering illusions, yet few are willing to look critically at the ways in which their own ideas are determined by fads, intellectual trends, personality squabbles and turf wars over status and power. David Burston's The Legacy of Erich Fromm is a provocative book that sheds light on these issues in an attempt to bring the currently unfashionable psychology and social theory of Erich Fromm to the attention of scholars. An in-depth study of the merits of Fromm's social theory and clinical practice, The Legacy of Erich Fromm tells a fascinating story of how Fromm's influence and status declined as a result of Freudian factional politics, personal conflicts, and the numerous misconceptions and distortions of Fromm's work that have gone unchallenged for nearly thirty years.

Fromm, a German born psychologist and sociologist, was an early member of the Frankfurt School for Social Research -- one of the most innovative groups of 20th century neo-Marxist theorists. As the author of such bestselling works of social criticism in the 1940s and 1950s as Escape From Freedom, The Sane Society and Man for Himself, Fromm was profoundly influential in American intellectual life. Since the 1960s, however, Fromm has fallen out of favor among both academics and left intellectuals.

Fromm's academic critics accuse him of being a simplistic



popularizer -- a fate often suffered by intellectuals who cross disciplinary boundaries and write for a popular audience. Left intellectuals, particularly those influenced by the New Left era writings of Herbert Marcuse, often see Fromm not as a genuine radical, but as a conformist philosopher of love -- the Norman Vincent Peale of the left, as Marcuse once polemicized. Contrary to the widely held view of Fromm as, in Burston's words, a "naive utopian, a naive environmentalist, or an accomplice in the so-called Americanization or trivialization of psychoanalysis" Burston argues Fromm's work contains many valuable insights that should be rescued from relative obscurity. Despite Marcuse's caricatures, Fromm remained a radical social critic until his death in 1980 and deserves recognition as a major intellectual.

Fromm was born in 1900 in Frankfurt and was an early proponent of the view that the personal is political. He was politicized both by childhood experiences and the brutality and national chauvinism of the First World War. While Fromm's father was a small wine merchant, both sides of his family were descendants of a long line of rabbis. The roots of Fromm's radicalism can be found in the prophetic Judaism he was immersed in throughout years of Talmudic study. Fromm's mature radical thought combines the best of conservative Judaism with the communitarian and ethical socialism he was drawn to as he left religious practice. As Fromm entered adulthood he embarked on a lifelong project of synthesizing Marx and Freud. Yet he retained his radical critique of modernity based on the best values of precapitalist and premodern



traditionalism.

Unlike the more intellectually fashionable members of the Frankfurt School who tended to downplay their Jewish roots and stress what Cornel West has called "rootless universalism," Fromm's thought was always explicitly rooted in the tradition of Jewish humanism. Fromm's lifelong concern with universal peace and social justice began with the Old Testament and the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. Under the direction of Alfred Weber, Fromm wrote his sociology doctoral thesis on the Jewish Karaites, the Hasidim, and Reformed Jewry. During the sixties Fromm published You Shall Be As Gods, a radical interpretation of the Old Testament. Fromm's various writings on religion, ethics and humanism make him a major precursor of the kind of communitarian social criticism recently developed by Robert Bellah, Alan Wolfe and Alasdair MacIntyre and magazines such as New Oxford Review, Tikkun and the now defunct Democracy.

While Fromm's life work centered on Marx and Freud, he drew upon a diverse array of influences and scholarship. Thus, Burston's comprehensive study includes discussions of German romantic thought, existentialism, J.J. Bachofen, prophetic Judaism, Buddhism, Christian mysticism, and the sociology and political thought of Max Weber, Wilhelm Reich and the Frankfurt School. Given his intellectual range, any study of Fromm is bound to suffer from a certain eclecticism and superficiality (charges often leveled against Fromm himself). Yet, Burston does an admirable job of sifting through a vast intellectual history to make a compelling



case for Fromm's significant contributions to American intellectual life.

However, even Burston tends to defensively underplay Fromm's extensive influence in the social sciences. If one looks at contemporary American sociology, for example, Fromm is seldom read yet his work is central to the history of the discipline. Fromm played a pivotal role in the development of post-war studies in American social character, a tradition that can be traced from David Riesman's 1950s classic The Lonely Crowd to Robert Bellah's contemporary Habits of the Heart series. Fromm was the intellectual mentor of the retired Harvard sociologist and educator Riesman.

Fromm's The Sane Society was a more sophisticated and radical version of the 1950s critiques of American conformity represented in The Organization Man and the work of C. Wright Mills, and had a major influence on the early Port Huron New Left. Fromm was the major popularizer of the early humanist Marx in the United States. His book Marx's Concept of Man contained the first English translation of Marx's 1844 Paris Manuscripts and played a key role in bringing the concept of alienation into American social theory.

In addition, Fromm was the major source of the methodology and theory of the "authoritarian personality," a controversial perspective developed in a more conservative and positivistic direction by Theodor Adorno's Authoritarian Personality. Although Burston doesn't mention this, political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset's influential 1950s "working class authoritarian" essay was



an American version of the Fromm/Adorno thesis. Lipset's work is an interesting example of how European social theory was adapted in conservative 1950s America -- Lipset shifted Escape From Freedom's focus on the lower-middle class roots of Nazism to a thesis about blue collar authoritarianism.

While Burston discusses Fromm's work on social character, Burston is more at home with Freudian thought than with sociology, philosophy, politics or social theory. The core thesis of The Legacy of Erich Fromm is Burston's contention that Fromm, far from being a simplistic "neo-Freudian" responsible for purging Freudian theory of its core ideas and radical potential, was part of Freud's "loyal opposition" -- a diverse group of psychological theorists and practioners who share reverence and respect for Freud -- what Burston calls "Freud piety." Burston provides a comprehensive critique of psychological theories and historiographies which dismiss Fromm's work as misguided neo-Freudian revisionism. His detailed rebuttal to Fromm's critics suggests that Fromm developed an original and compelling revision of Freud's overly biological and patriarchal thought.

For Burston, the attacks on Fromm's work that largely came out of the orthodox Freudian establishment distorted just how deeply Fromm's thought was indebted to Freud's basic ideas of the unconscious, psychological repression, and character. Unfortunately, Fromm's revisions of Freud's thought left him unpopular with Freud's more dogmatic followers. Ironically, Fromm was Freudian enough to be rejected by both behaviorists and



humanistic psychologists, the two major competing currents in American psychology throughout the 60s and 70s. Moreover, unlike such thinkers as Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein, Fromm never developed his own school. Consequently, Fromm was left intellectually isolated and his views were vulnerable to attack and misunderstanding.

Just as Trotsky was air-brushed out of pictures of the Russian revolution, Burston argues that Fromm was a victim of quasi Stalinist tactics practiced by orthodox Freudians and was denied his proper place in the history of psychoanalysis. Burston shows that Fromm played an important role in the development of modern psychoanalysis by being an early proponent of revisions in Freudian theory that would later become part of the mainstream perspective. Unlike proponents of what Burston calls the "dissident fringe" such as Carl Jung and Alfred Adler, Fromm maintained a commitment both to Freud as an individual and to Freud's major theoretical insights. Yet, Fromm's cultural and existential orientation allowed him to constructively question some outworn Freudian orthodoxies.

Among Fromm's key revisions of Freudianism noted by Burston were: a stress on the developmental importance of the mother in contrast to Freud's almost exclusive father-centered Oedipal complex; the replacement of Freudian drive and instinct theory with a focus on the dynamics of individuation, identity and the formation of the self; and an emphasis on the fear of death and the search for meaning as key motivating factors in human behavior.



Fromm argued that Freud's brilliant insights into the dynamic and irrational forces motivating human beings were distorted by his intellectual roots in medical science and 19th century positivism. Consequently, Freud overemphasized early childhood and sexuality at the expense of sociological perspectives.

Burston is aware that Fromm was not the only theorist to emphasize the issues of identity, meaning and the self in the history of psychoanalysis. Burston argues that Fromm was an important part of a broader movement within the discipline that came to similar conclusions largely independently. This diverse group of Freud's "loyal opposition" includes the British school of "object relations" (represented in American intellectual life by feminist scholars such as Nancy Chodorow, Lillian Rubin and Jessica Benjamin), a perspective that shares often unacknowledged assumptions with Fromm. Moreover, Fromm's concern with meaning, death and identity was shared with various post-war existentialist philosophers and psychologists such as Ernest Becker, Rollo May and Victor Frankel.

Burston argues that Fromm's willingness to criticize Freud as well as his relative isolation from the organizational and personal networks of the Freudian establishment allowed him to raise issues often articulated by dissidents who had broken with Freud. Fromm was in a unique position that allowed him to help bring innovations into Freudian theory without, for Burston, spiritually leaving the church.

Yet, Fromm was organizationally excommunicated by orthodox





Freudians, and Burston insists that Fromm contributed to his own marginalization. Fromm was a difficult and strongheaded man. His unwillingness to diplomatically negotiate the political complexities of the Freudian movement and academia cost him dearly in terms of influence. Moreover, Fromm's insistence on constructing a social science that dealt with all aspects of human behavior and experience meant that his work was often superficial - professional philosophers, historians, literary critics and social scientists all have important criticisms to make of Fromm's work. Yet, Burston is right to argue that despite his limitations, Fromm's basic project has left a legacy worth building upon, especially in the context of the narrow and overly specialized atmosphere that dominates modern universities.

While Burston's argument is compelling, there are three major problems with his book. First, for someone writing about such a public intellectual as Fromm, Burston is overly academic. Much of the book is a detailed exegesis on the complexities of Freudian theory and clinical studies. While Fromm built his theories on the basis of his own clinical experience, he always insisted that Freudian thought must directly engage social theory and historical studies as well as be in dialogue with the general educated public. Burston's work, while provocative, shows its origins as a revised Ph.D. thesis, a product of the university system of which Fromm was highly critical.

For example, there is a whole chapter in The Legacy of Erich Fromm on the "appraisals of Fromm" that appears to consist largely





of Burston's reading notes on various psychological textbooks. While this section illustrates how distorted recent scholarship on Fromm has been, it breaks up the interesting intellectual history Burston had begun to outline. The last chapter is an overly technical discussion of the famous 1950s Fromm/Marcuse debate in Dissent magazine. While this debate is important, Burston largely ignores the political context to the polemics between Fromm and Marcuse. Both chapters would have been better reorganized as an appendix.

More importantly, the major thesis of Burston's book is distorted by his academic orientation. It simply is not true that Fromm's work needs to be rescued from relative obscurity as Burston asserts. Fromm is still read today -- his major books have recently been republished and he retains his worldwide reputation and audience. In fact, Fromm is much more famous than the vast majority of the theorists that Burston discusses -- including other members of the Frankfurt school such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas and even Herbert Marcuse. What is left unexplained is Fromm's decline in influence among academic intellectuals and thinkers in the U.S. left (Fromm maintains a large following among the left in Latin America and Germany). Fromm's rise and decline is a particularly interesting case study in the sociology of knowledge precisely because there is such a radical disjuncture between his reputation among academics and radical intellectuals and the educated public in the United States.

In addition, Burston's basic thesis that Fromm's work is best



understood from within the context of Freudian thought is questionable. While Burston does a great service by correcting the widespread view that Fromm had given up on Freudian thought, Fromm never suffered from the "Freud piety" that Burston posits. Fromm had immense respect for Freud's genius and revised psychoanalytic thought was a major component to Fromm's social psychology and social criticism. Yet Fromm had little respect for the "organization men" of the Freudian establishment and he wrote several books critiquing the mindless Freud worship that dominates Freudian scholarship. Fromm's contribution was precisely his ability to transcend uncritical reverence for Freud while insisting on his genuine contributions to social theory.

While Burston is aware of the diverse influences on Fromm's thought, his tendency to read Fromm through the lens of the Freudian paradigm weakens his argument. Burston systematically underplays the political and sociological dimensions of Fromm's work. The enduring value of Fromm's legacy ultimately will not be his revisions of Freudian thought -- other thinkers have more systematically developed Fromm's basic criticisms of Freud's overemphasis on early childhood and sexual instincts. Fromm deserves more than a footnote in the history of psychoanalysis, but his major contribution to modern social theory has been his insistence (against the protest of both orthodox Freudians and sociologists) on combining revised Freudian theory with the best traditions of German sociology and humanistic Marxism.

Attempts to combine Freud and sociological theory have not



been particularly successful. American sociologists have often ignored the Freudian tradition, tending towards what Dennis Wrong has called an "oversocialized conception" of human behavior that focuses on social structure at the expense of social psychological dynamics. Those in the micro-sociological tradition have generally neglected Freud, preferring various forms of social behaviorism, from George Herbert Mead to Erving Goffman.

The few sociologists who have seriously engaged the Freudian tradition have either tended to defend the most implausible aspects of Freudian orthodoxy (those sociologists influenced by Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, Wilhelm Reich and Christopher Lasch) or, as in the case of the object relations school, lacked Fromm's historical and philosophical range and political sensibility. Even the promising work of Nancy Chodorow has, until her recent Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory, overemphasized the clinical data that focuses on early childhood at the expense of sociological imagination and a comparative perspective.

There are exceptions to this dearth of psychologically sophisticated sociology. Lillian Rubin, Jessica Benjamin and Richard Sennett as well as writers influenced by Eric Erikson, particularly Robert Jay Lifton and Robert Coles, have all produced interesting research informed by psychoanalytic perspectives. Yet this work has not yet succeeded in integrating Freud with the classical sociological tradition. Moreover, they have tended to ignore Fromm who, despite his limitations, provides an important starting point for attempts to build psychologically sophisticated



sociological theory.

The final missing piece in Burston's The Legacy of Erich Fromm is that although he recognizes that Fromm's work went out of fashion in the sixties, he doesn't explore this significant fact. The intellectual and cultural turmoil of the sixties are central to understanding the rise and fall of Erich Fromm. More importantly, the intellectual legacy of the sixties is a key starting point for social theorists concerned with seriously engaging social psychology.

Throughout the 1950s, there were three major groups of intellectuals attempting to adapt Freud to social science: the cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Abram Kardiner, Ralph Linton and Ruth Benedict; the structural functionalist followers of Talcott Parsons; and Erik Erikson's group of young psycho-historians. Fromm shared very similar intellectual interests with these networks of writers and had worked closely with the anthropologists. Fromm was widely respected in the social sciences at the time despite the fact that Fromm's Marxist and socialist convictions set him apart from both the dominant politics of Cold War America and its liberal critics such as Erikson and Riesman.

By the middle of the sixties, however, these various thinkers had little influence on the psychologically inclined young radicals of the New Left generation. Young intellectuals were now reading Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, Norman O. Brown, R.D. Laing, John Paul Sartre, Franz Fanon and the rediscovered work of Wilhelm



Reich. It is not difficult to understand why young intellectuals found these thinkers appealing. The political sensibility of the New Left was, after all, based on what Marshal Berman has called the "politics of authenticity." Moreover, the sexual revolution, growing hostility to the patriarchal family, counter cultural attacks on Western rationality and the anger of the Black power movement of the late sixties predisposed many young people to a whole new generation of psychologically oriented sexual and existential radicals.

It was in this context that young intellectuals were receptive to Marcuse's dismissals of Fromm, who now seemed stodgy, moralistic and, worst of all, liberal. By this time Marcuse's "Great Refusal" was more gratifying and seemed more plausible than Fromm's appeal for a "Sane Society" or his 1968 call for a "Revolution of Hope." Ironically, the young male theorists of the New Left generation were attracted to the same orthodox Freud (mediated through Marcuse and Brown) promoted by cultural conservatives such as Lionel Trilling, Philip Reif and Christopher Lasch. Fromm had fallen through the cracks. He was too much of a political radical and Freudian revisionist for the 1950s generation of social psychologists, yet not radical enough for the "Days of Rage." By the 1970s, Fromm was no longer taken seriously among scholars and his reputation among the left was as a "New Age" proponent of self-actualization.

Despite Fromm's early critiques of Freud's patriarchal bias, he did not fare any better among young feminist thinkers. Feminist



theorists were initially hostile to the whole Freudian tradition. By the time Juliet Mitchell and Nancy Chodorow popularized a new wave of feminist psychoanalysis, Marcuse, Reich and the French theorist Lacan were fashionable and Fromm and his former associate and friend Karen Horney had become passe.

Fromm also contributed to his lack of influence among young feminists. When the modern feminist movement reemerged in the late sixties, Fromm was almost 70 years old. His work bears the mark of his age and traditional upbringing. Fromm's popular book The Art Of Loving is marred by both a sexist and a homophobic bias. In addition, Fromm does, as Burston suggests, underestimate the value of the sexual revolution. Yet these flaws hardly explain Fromm's marginal influence in feminist theory. Feminist theorists were quite capable of overlooking the fact that the sexual revolution outlined by Norman O. Brown and Marcuse was, as Nancy Chodorow has argued, largely a male event. Moreover, Reich's militant homophobia never seriously damaged his reputation among New Left cultural radicals.

This history is important not simply for the sake of Fromm's tarnished reputation. The issues involved in these debates are central to the weaknesses in contemporary social psychological theory in at least three ways. First, the major problem with the social psychology that came out of the sixties was that most of the New Left generation came to Freud through philosophy and literature, not social science. Consequently, sixties Freudian social theory is dominated by the most speculative aspects of



Freud's thought, particularly the death instinct and a sexually driven Oedipal complex. Because the German trained Fromm was philosophically and historically sophisticated, he was able to transcend the limitations of the positivist social science and overly technical clinical research that young intellectuals were rebelling against. Yet, Fromm always insisted that social psychological theory must be based on evidence, whether this involves clinical cases, historical research or community studies.

Brown, Marcuse and such works as Dorothy Dinnerstein's influential The Mermaid and The Minotaur defended an overly speculative and explicitly anti-empirical approach. Fromm articulated a view that critiqued the narrow positivism of mainstream social science yet always maintained the need for research methods, evidence and rational forms of intellectual argumentation. Contemporary post-modernists may be attracted to Brown and Marcuse - Daniel Bell is right to argue that Brown was a pre-mature proponent of this latest intellectual trend. Yet Fromm's work is better suited for helping facilitate a methodological and substantive dialogue between Freudian theory and interpretive versions of sociology.

Secondly, the dogmatic insistence on instinct theory and the centrality of early childhood experience that has dominated Freudian thought has stifled interesting work in social psychological theory. Few thoughtful observers would deny that early childhood socialization shapes personalities in profoundly enduring ways. Moreover, instincts and biological factors cannot





be ignored in any serious attempt to explain gender differences, human aggression or any other important questions worth studying.

Nonetheless, only a historically sensitive sociological/anthropological perspective can explain the cultural variability of human societies. Moreover, we now know enough about the importance of various social institutions, the state, community structures, family and modern mass media to be suspicious of ahistorical assertions of instinct driven behavior patterns that are set in stone by early childhood. While contemporary American sociologists have tended to ignore Freud, New Left psychologists and their conservative allies have tended to ignore sociology and substitute their own libidinal urges or neo-conservative pessimism for the kind of dialectical approach to the nature/nurture question that Fromm attempted to develop.

Finally, the most serious flaw in the social psychology of the sixties is rooted in the influential dismissal of bourgeois morality by Marcuse, Sartre and the later New Left. The early New Left of SNCC and Port Huron was a movement led by young people outraged by the hypocrisy of racism, injustice and conformity in America. Demanding that America live up to its liberal and democratic values, the Left of the 1950s and early 60s was attracted to the writings of Erich Fromm partly because his was a moral radicalism that fit into the spirit of the "King era" while maintaining a radical critique of modern industrial capitalism.

Many young radical intellectuals lost faith in a moral foundation of politics for a variety of reasons, not the least of



which was the spineless behavior of American liberals in response to the civil rights revolution and their leading role in the morally unconscionable war in Vietnam. There were many reasons why so many sensitive young people could see America as a "One-Dimensional" totalitarian society and thus would be attracted to the romance of violence promoted by Fanon and Sartre. Lacking a historical perspective and with few older role models worth following, R.D. Laing's inversion of the traditional definitions of sanity and insanity seemed plausible. And worst of all, after Martin Luther King's death, talk of morality seemed the exclusive property of hypocritical liberals or reactionary conservatives.

Erich Fromm's social psychology is the psychological foundation for a politics that could have charted a "road not taken" out of the turmoil and chaos of the 1960s. Fromm's was a moral politics that built upon the best of liberal, utopian and democratic socialist thought. In doing this, he attempted to avoid liberal complacency while maintaining a commitment to the liberal democratic values of tolerance and the political institutions that protect basic human liberties. He built upon the vision of the utopian tradition while largely avoiding the naivete and elitism that often went with it. Moreover, Fromm's democratic socialism explicitly rejected both the nihilistic elements of the New Left and the authoritarianism of the Communist tradition.

The most interesting writers today are those who, like Robert Bellah, Alan Wolfe, Cornel West and Jean Bethke Elshtain have returned to the great sociological questions first articulated by



19th century French theorists Henri de St. Simon, August Comte, Alexis de Tocqueville and Emile Durkheim. What is the moral foundation of a good society? How do we hold together modern diverse societies when the social cement of traditional religion and small communities have disappeared forever? What are the institutional arrangements -- the right balance between market, state and society -- that best promote democracy and human happiness? How do we balance freedom and commitment, rights and obligations and diversity with universal human concerns?

Erich Fromm did not have the answers to these questions. Yet, Fromm's psychological theories remain profoundly useful for grappling with just these issues. The great sociological theorists -- Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Tocqueville -- all lacked the kind of psychological insight provided by Fromm's revised Freudian perspective.

Unlike the social psychology of the 1950s, Fromm was willing to ask difficult questions and maintain an uncompromising critical stance towards the injustices and inequalities in modern society. Yet, unlike much of the radical psychology of both the sixties generation and contemporary post-modernists, Fromm was willing to concern himself with how to hold a good society together not simply how to tear an unjust one apart.