

The Legacy of Erich Fromm.

By Daniel Burston. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,
260 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Neil McLaughlin

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. Daniel 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, it 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.

Erich Fromm, a German-born psychologist, was an early member of the Frankfurt School for Social Research—one of the most innovative groups of twentieth-century academic Marxist theorists. As author of such bestselling works of social criticism in the 1940s and 1950s as *Escape From Freedom*, *The Sane Society*, and *The Art of Loving*, Fromm profoundly influenced American intellectual life. Since the 1960s, however, he has fallen out of favor with both academics and left intellectuals.

Fromm's academic critics have accused him of being a simplistic popularizer—frequently the fate of intellectuals who cross disciplinary boundaries and write for a popular audience. Left intellectuals, particularly those influenced by the New-Left-writings of Herbert Marcuse (another former member of the Frankfurt School), often see Fromm as a conformist philosopher of love—the Norman Vincent Peale of the left, as Marcuse once

polemized. 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. 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 am Main. His father was a small wine merchant, but the family descended on both sides from a long line of rabbis. The roots of Fromm's radicalism go back to prophetic Judaism in which he was immersed during years of talmudic studies. His mature radical thought combines this aspect of Judaism with the communitarian and ethical socialism he was drawn to as he left religious practice. The brutality and chauvinism of the First World War made him an early proponent of the view that the personal is political. Although his life's work centered on a synthesis of Marx and Freud, he retained a radical critical stance toward modernity based on the values of traditional precapitalist, pre-modern society.

Unlike other, more intellectually fashionable, members of the Frankfurt School who tended to downplay their Jewish roots, Fromm's thought was always explicitly rooted in Jewish humanist thought. His concern with universal peace and social justice began with the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea. Under the direction of Alfred Weber, Fromm wrote his doctoral thesis in sociology on the Jewish Karaites, the Hasidim, and Reform Jewry. During the 1960s, Fromm published *You Shall Be*

As Gods, a radical interpretation of the Old Testament. His 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 his life's work was centered on Marx and Freud, Fromm drew upon an 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 of 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 and makes a compelling case for Fromm's significant contributions to American intellectual life.

However, even Burston tends to underplay Fromm's influence in the social sciences. For example, it may be true that in contemporary American sociology, Fromm is seldom read, and yet, his work is central to the history of the discipline. His was a pivotal role in the development of studies in American social character in the post-war period that can be traced from David Riesman's classic in the 1950s *The Lonely Crowd* to Robert Bellah's contemporary *Habits of the Heart* series.

Fromm's *The Sane Society* was a more sophisticated and radical version of the 1950s critiques of American conformity by William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* and C. Wright Mills' work, and he was a major influence on the early Port Huron New Left. Fromm was also the foremost popularizer in the United States of the early Marx as a humanist. His book *Marx's Concept of Man* contained the first English translation of Marx's 1844 *Paris Manuscripts* and played a key role in introducing the concept of alienation to American social theory.

Fromm's thought was also the foremost source for the methodology and



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theory of the "authoritarian personality," a controversial perspective developed in a more conservative and positivistic vein by Theodor Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality*.

Although Burston does not mention this, Seymour Martin Lipset's influential essay on the "working class authoritarian" 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 blue collar authoritarianism.

While Burston discusses Fromm's work on social character, he is more at home with Freudian thought than with sociology, philosophy, politics, or social theory. The basic thesis of *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* is the 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 practitioners who share a reverence and respect for Freud, what Burston calls "Freud piety." The author provides a comprehensive critique of the psychological theories and historiographies that dismiss Fromm's work as misguided neo-Freudian revisionism. This 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, largely from the orthodox Freudian establishment, distorted Fromm's indebtedness to Freud's basic ideas of the unconscious, psychological repression, and character, even though his revision of Freud's thought left him unpopular with more dogmatic followers. Fromm was nevertheless Freudian enough to be rejected by both behaviorists and humanistic psychologists, the two major competing currents in American psychology throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike such thinkers as Carl G. Jung, Jacques Lacan, and Melanie Klein, Fromm never developed his own school. Consequently, he was left intellectually isolated and his views were

vulnerable to attack and misunderstanding. Just as Trotsky was airbrushed out of pictures of the Russian revolution, Burston argues, Fromm became a victim of the quasi-Stalinist tactics used by orthodox Freudians who denied him 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 revision of Freudian theory that would later become part of the mainstream perspective. Unlike proponents of what Burston calls the "dissident fringe" such as Jung

and Alfred Adler, Fromm maintained a commitment to Freud, the individual, and to his major theoretical insights. His cultural and existential orientation allowed him to question some of the more worn 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 father-centered Oedipal complex. He replaced Freudian drive theory that places instincts at the center of psychological theory with a focus on the dynamics of individuation, identity, and the forma-

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Vol. 19, No. 1

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