

# Erich Fromm's Socialist Program and Prophetic Messianism, In Two Parts

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*Abstract: This paper begins by examining Erich Fromm's "Manifesto and Program" written for the Socialist Party in 1959 or 1960, and addresses a simple question: Why would Fromm speak of something so apparently arcane as "prophetic messianism," in his socialist program? When he insists that we have forgotten that socialism is "rooted in the spiritual tradition which came to us from prophetic messianism, the gospels, humanism, and from the enlightenment philosophers," is this simply a literary flourish, a concession to liberalism, or religious sentimentality? Part I, written by Nick Braune, answers the question by examining Fromm's socialist organizing commitments in the context of the late 1950s. Part II, written by Joan Braune, offers further defense of the term "prophetic messianism," distinguishes two types of messianism, and suggests that Fromm may be attempting to address a problem in the Frankfurt School.*

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## **Part I: Fromm's Program and Messianism, In the Context of his Organizing**

*Nick Braune*

**T**his paper was occasioned by its author discovering, and then excitedly reading, a used-bookstore copy of Erich Fromm's original pamphlet: *Let Man Prevail: A Socialist Manifesto and Program* (hereafter, *Manifesto/Program*), written for the Socialist Party-Social Democratic Federation (SP-



SDF) in 1960.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the points in this paper may come as a surprise to those who have fallen for a caricature of Fromm: Wasn't he once a science-minded leader of the Frankfurt School but later a disconnected "flake" praising Buddha, Jesus, Marx, and Socrates in the same breath, all as exemplars of some "art of loving"? But such a caricature is a slander. In actuality, Fromm was always a science-minded, clear-headed socialist humanist, and, in the late 1950s and in the 1960s, he began thinking more as an organizer—only through this perspective can we do justice to the wide work of this radical social psychologist and philosopher. This half (my half) of the paper will focus primarily on the period when the *Manifesto/Program* was formulated, 1959 and 1960, a period of recovery for socialists and other radicals nationally after a disorienting decade; then, the paper will develop Fromm's "prophetic messianism," an odd concept to appear in a socialist program at the time, but an understandable concept if one thinks of Fromm as an organizer. The second half of the paper (by Joan Braune) will expand the idea of prophetic messianism and locate it within critical theory more generally.

The *Manifesto/Program* was not adopted by the SP-SDF, although the party ran at least three printings of it in the 1960s. It was written roughly during the time Fromm was closely studying Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* and was preparing *Marx's Concept of Man*. With SANE (National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) having been recently founded, partially named after Fromm's book, *The Sane Society*, there began an intense burst of public resistance to the 1950s "dog days," those days when many progressives hid from McCarthyism and felt guilty about it. This resistance/peace movement arose in combination with the emerging civil rights movement: Coretta Scott King, for example, was also a founder of SANE. SANE began openly opposing the bomb shelter scam, a mass delusion that after nuclear explosions some of us could survive underground and emerge later to start the world over. (This author's father, incidentally, was arrested in 1961 for protesting bomb shelters, making the front page of the *Olympia*, Washington newspaper.) It was an emotionally important period, specifically 1959 or 1960, when Fromm wrote his *Manifesto/Program*.

The peace movement aspect of Fromm's work must be held in mind to understand the importance of his writings. In the 1950s, America was hardly a freely thinking society. Joseph McCarthy was in Washington, and every

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1. Erich Fromm, *Let Man Prevail: A Socialist Manifesto and Program* (New York: Socialist Party, U.S.A., 1967). Fromm wrote a new forward for this third edition. In 1981, a year after his death, the program was reprinted again without the new forward and without the introduction by Darlington Hoopes, National Chairperson of the Socialist Party-Social Democratic Federation. Because it is far easier for researchers to find the latest version, this paper will cite the pages from the new book, Erich Fromm, *On Disobedience, and Other Essays* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981).

state legislature had a little McCarthy to match him. There were witch-hunts in universities and, as we all know, Hollywood had a red scare where many progressive artists, like Charlie Chaplin, left the country or quit the industry. There was an arms race, brinkmanship, and glorification of big bombers and big bombs. There was “ethnic cleansing” against Mexican-Americans in 1954 (the Eisenhower administration’s worst blotch, “Operation Wetback”), and southern states ferociously defended Jim Crow segregation. Because this was such a chilling time, it should not be underestimated how important a new, open peace movement was in the late 1950s. (This was *culturally* a long time before the widely accepted 1965-73 peace movement.) By 1960, SANE was holding numerous rallies, with various celebrities coming out of assorted stages of political seclusion: Harry Belafonte, Marilyn Monroe, Arthur Miller, Ossie Davis, A. Phillip Randolph, Walter Reuther, Pablo Casals, Bertrand Russell, Albert Schweitzer, and Norman Thomas were among prominent figures who would link up openly with SANE to contest the arms race. Of course, the late 1950s was also still a dangerous time, with the FBI way off the handle, with Bobby Kennedy’s witch-hunts against unions, with state-level investigating committees ranting against subversives, and with the John Birch Society and other rightist and racist groups skulking. So, the public rallying by SANE was important psychologically, exposing the bizarre fascination with fleeing into the ground as another form of insanity.

Because the Communist Party was a shell of its previous self and was trying to recover from its own semi-underground status during the McCarthy period, and because it was trying to digest the shocking “revelations” about Stalin in the 1956 Soviet Congress and the rebellions in the East Bloc, it was reduced to hoping desperately (and fruitlessly, for the most part) to be accepted by the Democratic Party. The Trotskyists had done poorly in the 1950s too—the term “dog days” comes from James Cannon, who used it to refer to a difficult period in the 1920s—and there were deep splits in Trotskyist ranks.

During this time, the Socialist Party also was in flux and was starting to regain its footing. Fromm was on the national committee of the merged SP-SDF and spoke for the party, not just for SANE, at many events, including a 1,200-person rally at Yale and a 2,000-person event at the University of Chicago<sup>2</sup> and he had already been in correspondence (at least fifty letters) with

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2. Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2000), p. 145. Funk says that Fromm “fought passionately” for détente and disarmament, and he was in great demand as a speaker, in 1960 receiving at least thirty invitations a month (p. 144). For a glimpse of the passion of SANE during that period, a good starting source is by a historian of the American peace movement: Milton S. Katz, *Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE* (New York: Praeger, 1987). I am particularly interested in the early period, 1957 to 1962, and the public rallying aspect of the organization, which I think was psychologically important for America and which intersects Fromm’s *Manifesto/Program*. In 1962, the

Raya Dunayevskaya, whose work spawned socialist groupings still active today. I contend that what Fromm was trying to do with his new *Manifesto/Program*, which he hoped would be discussed in unions and left groups, was to provide a rallying cry to all leftists to come out of the 1950s hole and to try something different than repeating the ineffectual “party-building” (“recruitment”) and sectarian proclivities of the left’s recent past. He was hoping to involve the masses in wide-ranging socialist planning, with discussions on educational reform, critiques of bureaucracy, etc.<sup>3</sup>

*Marx’s Concept of Man*, published in 1961, is really the proper companion piece to the *Manifesto/Program* and is one of Fromm’s greatest achievements, spreading the word about the “early Marx” and locating Marx in a humanist philosophical tradition. The “early” Marx, with his talk about “alienation” and our separation from our “species being,” was not accepted well by the old left. The Communist Party was going through one of its intense anti-intellectual phases, burrowing into trade union practices and focusing on telling the workers how money was being taken right out of their mouths and hands by the capitalists every day. You don’t need to know some humanist tradition of thought to get the workers angry about that, they figured. But still, Fromm had immense influence among second-level academic and church layers and the peace movement. Fromm had an impact internationally too—notice that he is one of the few people quoted in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—and was the organizer of the momentous volume, *Socialist Humanism: an International Symposium*, which included important East Bloc intellectuals in 1965. He wrote a striking piece for it, as did Dunayevskaya.<sup>4</sup>

Fromm, from his 1960 *Manifesto/Program* to the 1965 *Socialist Humanism* symposium, provided a powerful critique of Western “democracy” from the Renaissance to the Abolitionists as being removed from its humanist

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organization announced its intention to endorse candidates, which may have changed it a bit, and in 1963 it merged with the more sedate United World Federalists, a merger which Fromm opposed (p. 89). Although Funk does not elaborate on this issue in his biography, Fromm quotes a letter to Polish socialist Adam Schaff in May of 1962: “I have been a socialist since my student days forty years ago, but I have never been active politically until the last five years, when I have been very active in trying to form an American peace movement, on the left wing of which I find myself” (Funk, *Erich Fromm*, p. 148).

3. Fromm, ever an organizer, expanded this basic programmatic proposal later, in 1968, as *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*, including a little clip-out page in the back of the paperback to mail back to him, if workers or others would be willing to work with him to form a new network of “clubs.”

4. Raya Dunayevskaya, “Marx’s Humanism Today,” in *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, ed. Erich Fromm (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), pp. 68-83. Dunayevskaya also translated two essays by East Bloc Marxist humanists for the *Symposium*.

“spiritual” roots. “Democracy” had been reduced to stale and oppressive rituals of rigged slates. The *Manifesto/Program* provided an implied critique of East Bloc “socialism,” the leftist bureaucratic cant about party loyalty, and a certain left sentimental attachment to simple trade union solidarity: I’ll scratch your back if you remember to scratch mine and “buy American.” It also offered an implied criticism of the idea that intellectuals provide a “service” to the cause, matching worker production.

### “Prophetic Messianism”—A Literary Flourish or a Central Concern?

With that social context developed, this paper can now shift to an important concern about the *Manifesto/Program*: Why would Fromm speak of something so apparently arcane as “prophetic messianism” in his socialist program? And, when he insists that we have forgotten that democracy and socialism were rooted in a “spiritual tradition” which came to us from humanism, the Enlightenment philosophers, the Gospels, and prophetic messianism, is not this simply a verbal flourish, fluff, a concession to liberalism, superficiality, and religious sentimentality?

Among a number of writers currently revisiting Fromm is Kevin Anderson, an excellent sociologist and philosopher, winner of the International Erich Fromm prize for a book he co-edited in 2000, *Erich Fromm and Critical Criminology: Beyond the Punitive Society*. Anderson takes note of the term “prophetic messianism” in a gem of a short essay in *Logos*, “Thinking about Fromm and Marxism.” I will trace Anderson’s short essay, which is helpful in showing Fromm in the context of other intellectuals at the time, in order to introduce this issue of messianism.

Anderson’s opening sentence is insightful: “Erich Fromm’s work is unfortunately neglected in academia today, in no small part because his expansive humanism is out of joint with many forms of radical thought popular in those quarters.”<sup>5</sup> Although Anderson does not elaborate why he thinks Fromm’s expansive humanism has disturbed some radicals in academia, I suggest that one reason many in radical circles may be dismayed with Fromm is that he clearly, repeatedly, includes an Enlightenment current in the humanist tradition he defends. Anderson also criticizes the frequent attempts by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and many of their followers, to portray Fromm as somehow more conservative, as well as hopelessly superficial; and Anderson notes importantly that this has distorted the history of the left. (Anderson may find it ironic that Adorno and Horkheimer are popularly considered to be to the left of Fromm.) Interestingly, in the late

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5. Kevin B. Anderson, “Thinking about Fromm and Marxism,” *Logos: A journal of modern society and culture* 6.3 (Summer, 2007): p. 1. (Anderson’s article is available from *Logos* online: [http://www.logosjournal.com/issue\\_6.3/anderson.htm](http://www.logosjournal.com/issue_6.3/anderson.htm).)



1970s, Marcuse himself said “without reservation” that disagreements with Fromm over his revision of Freud led to an underestimation of Fromm’s contribution to Critical Theory’s early period.<sup>6</sup>

Anderson criticizes a second misconception about Fromm, that his “early writings” are “more steeped in Marxism than his postwar ones.”<sup>7</sup> Although Anderson is aware that Fromm was a Marxist in the 1920s, and although he champions Fromm’s 1941 *Escape from Freedom*, he disagrees with those who think that Fromm somehow backed off from Marxism in his later years. Anderson says that the portrait of the later Fromm as less Marxist than in his earlier days is another indication of the extent to which the pro-Adorno interpretation has become dominant on the left, says Anderson.<sup>8</sup> That Fromm is thought to be less Marxist in his later years is also another indication of how much resentment there was in the mainstream left in the 1950s and 1960s to Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*, which Fromm was defending as importantly Marxist. In regard to the line that Fromm was more Marxist in his early years, Anderson’s point is that the very opposite is true. Fromm’s most important contributions to Marxism came after World War II, when he championed a specifically Marxist humanist standpoint in the public sphere.

Just so that no reader errs in the opposite direction and finds Fromm *before* World War II to have been non-Marxist, let me quote Anderson’s tribute to *Escape from Freedom*:

I have used *Escape from Freedom* (1941) for years as a main text in an introduction to sociology course. Students, whose response has been very favorable, encounter therein a clear and engaging introduction to social theory (Marx, Weber, Freud), to the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, the anatomy of fascism and authoritarianism, and to a critique of atomization of modern capitalist civilization and its culture industry.<sup>9</sup>

Although Anderson, in *Erich Fromm and Critical Criminology*, helped introduce the public to two of Fromm’s very early Marxist sociological writings, he still rightly insists that Fromm’s most significant work in Marxism, contrary to the Adorno/Horkheimer circle, was accomplished post-World War II.

Anderson praises Fromm for doing more than anyone else in spreading the word about Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* to the reading public. Fromm did so much to show Marx as fully concerned about alienation and “spiritual impoverishment,” although much of the left (I contend) was only concerned

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6. Lawrence Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 10.

7. Anderson, “Thinking about Fromm and Marxism,” p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

with Marx's writing on point-of-production exploitation, a narrow vision that reflected their narrow social practice. Fromm was attacked, Anderson reminds us, by academics as well; for instance, the young Richard Bernstein talks about Fromm's "human self-realization" ("in terms prefiguring later-Habermas and post-structuralist critiques") as creating a "dangerous form of absolute humanism."<sup>10</sup> The famous left academic, Sidney Hook, likewise attacked Fromm. By stressing the early, Hegel-influenced writings, Fromm was violating "every accepted and tested canon of historical scholarship," said Hook.<sup>11</sup> (Anderson points out that Hook's acclaimed *From Marx to Hegel* in 1936 ignored Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*.)

Despite his praise of Fromm, Kevin Anderson, in his short but helpful essay, still wonders about the term "prophetic messianism," finding it reflects a "more eclectic form of humanism" than necessary and opening Fromm and Marxism to unnecessary criticism.<sup>12</sup> Because Anderson is this paper's internalized audience, the following section of the paper will suggest to him that Fromm used the term "prophetic messianism" for two reasons: (1) A simple heuristic reason, a "literary reference" that has value in opening up certain readers, getting the readers "into a position" to better see some important things and (2) an historical, factual reason: Fromm thinks prophetic messianism is, in fact, an integral part of the powerful humanist tradition that Marx expresses.<sup>13</sup>

First, the simple heuristic reason: Fromm, as an organizer, was targeting populations with religious backgrounds:

- Fromm may have been trying to awaken some layers of the Jewish population who had previously drawn back to their homes and personal lives for safety during the "dog days" of the 1950s. Fromm was trying to make sure those people did not have to choose between political life and reflective religious life. By using terminology like "prophetic messianism," he identified himself to the community as a fellow Jew, although he always made it clear that he himself was not a "believer," and he was urging them to come forward *with* their reflective personal lives to a socialist alternative. It is worth further research on this matter to remember that the SP-SDF was trying to go through its own "regroupment" process in the late 1950s. Max Shachtman's participation, for all its weaknesses, brought very interesting new layers and discussions to the SP, and the middle 1950s had also seen the attempt

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10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. In a section to follow I will show how Fromm nuances his concept of "prophetic messianism," making sure he is not returning to some "enchanted garden" concept of history, and how he develops a concept of Judaism that removes many of the esoteric religious trappings which perhaps Anderson thinks accompany the idea of messianism.

to recruit the Jewish Labor Bund to the SP. Those must have been very interesting discussions, because the JLB was non-Zionist, internationalist, socialist, not very religious in usual ways, and bitter toward Stalin.

- He may have been targeting some Jews who were struggling with the increasingly publicized national interests of established Israel. Fromm believed that one of the characteristics of prophetic, revolutionary messianism is that it is not nationalistic. Even the Biblical escape from Egypt was “primarily not a national but a social revolution; the Hebrews are not freed because their life as a national minority is intolerable but because they are enslaved by their Egyptian masters.”<sup>14</sup> Fromm also developed a history of Judaism which presumes that the Jewish attachment to the *land* of Israel was an historically conditioned (in fact, feudal) addition to Judaism.<sup>15</sup>
- He also, however, may have been discussing messianism as a way of targeting Christians. The Old Testament sways Christians too, of course. Christianity was in pretty bad shape in the 1950s, with most churches responding to the climate of McCarthyism by becoming more and more anticommunist. Take notice of “liberal” Reinhold Niebuhr, who made the cover of *Time* magazine, and his “liberal” *Christian Century* in that period. (Because religion became a litmus test for patriotism, of course, “under God” was inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance in the early 1950s to taunt those “godless Communists.”) And yet there was a hope, under the surface, for what would become Vatican II liberalism in the Catholic Church. In the late-1950s and the 1960s, Fromm was exchanging letters with Catholic reformer Thomas Merton, had contact with Ivan Illich, and was living, on and off, in the culturally Catholic country of Mexico. He reached out as well to those being influenced by Paul Tillich and consistently praised Protestant and Catholic liberatory movements when he saw them emerging in the 1960s. (Marxist-Christian dialogue was in the air, particularly spurred by Vatican II.)<sup>16</sup> One theme in the dialogue might well be labeled “compassionate solidarity,” a call for empathy with, communion with, and living with the poor and the working class, the sort

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14. Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 72.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

16. Funk, *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas*, p. 148. On this same page, Funk shows how serious Fromm was about Marxist-Christian dialogue: “In 1963 he developed plans for a magazine to be called *Humanist Studies*, in which he wanted to bring humanists of different colors together, but it never came to fruition. According to the letter of the 18<sup>th</sup> of September, 1963, the publishers were to be the Catholics Karl Rahner and Jean Danielou and the Protestants Albert Schweitzer and Paul Tillich. Philosophy and science were to be represented by Bertrand Russell and Robert Oppenheimer, the Marxist side by Adam Schaff and Fromm. Buddhism was to be represented by Daisetz T. Suzuki and another Buddhist who was still to be named.” And in 1966 he tried to persuade Pope Paul VI to call an international conference; however, the effort failed.



of solidarity found in Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker houses or in the ascetic social practice of Simone Weil, whose *Gravity and Grace* Fromm had read. But Fromm may well be trying to impart some emotional awareness of a "prophetic solidarity" (my term), an affirmed unity in hope, found in Fromm's writing, that a reign of peace and time of plenty, fulfillment, and freedom is actually possible within history—this empowering, unifying, anticipation could fulfill "compassionate solidarity."<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, there is an historical, factual reason Fromm speaks of prophetic messianism. Although Fromm is surely speaking of prophetic messianism for simple heuristic reasons, to catch the attention of certain groups, I think he also believes the concept is essential to Marxism and for the success of the humanist socialism he envisions and omitting the concept will deform the movement. He is intervening psychologically in the socialist movement so it can grow, calling it back to its actual (expansive) humanist roots; Fromm is ever the organizer.

I personally knew people on the edges of the socialist movement in the 1960s who were unable to fully join it for its workerism and anti-intellectualism. And Fromm may be thinking that some (many) in the socialist movement who rejected religion were doing so out of anti-intellectualism. A "bread and butter" socialist attached in sentiment to trade union practice might ask, "Why bother with intellectual traditions? We know—the workers know—the answers already. If we start getting involved in talk about 'hope' with Fromm and Ernst Bloch, and 'the meaning of life' and worries about 'spiritual impoverishment,' we could get trapped, wandering backward into periods of time (feudalism)

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17. This distinction between the two types of Christian solidarity, compassionate and prophetic, should not imply that the two exclude each other. (Dorothy Day, for instance, embodied both.) Fromm's Marxism was in dialogue with some particularly Catholic tendencies; he was interested, for instance, in Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, and Simone Weil. In the case of Simone Weil, Fromm quotes her briefly in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1973) and in *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956) almost two decades earlier, and he includes a short selection from her *Notebooks* in a philosophy "reader" he co-edited with the Mexican philosopher Ramon Xirau in 1968, placing Weil's selection right after Jean Paul Sartre's and right before Edith Stein's (Erich Fromm and Ramon Xirau, *The Nature of Man* [New York: Macmillan Company, 1968]). Linking Weil to Tolstoy and Christian monks—Fromm exchanged many letters with Thomas Merton—Fromm speaks (and not disparagingly) of those who are "giving up all one's secular concerns and sharing the life of the poorest" (Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 110). Weil's deeply motivated choice to live the life of the French factory worker is certainly a kind of solidarity and the term "compassionate solidarity" seems appropriate; however, those interested in Marxist-Christian dialogue at the time might have recognized how prophetic solidarity might transform compassionate solidarity and be more beneficial psychologically for the workers.

when religion dominated. We could get caught up in a lot of literary works not written by workers and socialists, not practical for us now, and fall into those endless philosophical debates that are paralyzing academia.” Fromm was, of course, countering such responses.

Related to this concern about anti-intellectualism, it may also be that Fromm, the social psychologist, believed that the socialist movement (not just the Soviet Union) was infected with emotional stagnation rooted in bureaucracy, holding onto given organizational status and given relationships with outsiders, and was rooted in nationalism far more than it was willing to admit. (Heartily aware since his teen years that the socialist movement is capable of having Sunday speeches in favor of internationalism and still being deeply corrupted by nationalism, Fromm was always concerned about organizational allegiance and nationalism.) The socialist movement was rarely critical of the union bureaucracy—note, however, that Rosa Luxemburg was critical of simple trade union “solidarity” itself—and the socialists were usually uncritical of the unions’ nationalism: UAW’s International (sic) House comes to mind, ceaselessly pounding workers to buy American cars.

Older readers may remember that when the left newspapers, although usually propitiating the union bureaucracy, would become critical of union “bosses” and rhapsodize about the “rank and file,” it was often done with the least critical, least searching, “bad apples versus good apples” rhetoric, failing to grapple with the unions as social phenomena which channel social practice certain ways. In some manner, Fromm’s whole intellectual life revolved around 1914 and the moral collapse of the German Social Democracy; despite its proclamations and manifest banners honoring Marx and Engels, the great party betrayed Marxist internationalism.<sup>18</sup> In the 1930s, Fromm’s work was focused on his daring empirical study of the German workers, who overwhelmingly reported left-wing views, recited the left-wing “line,” but would not be able to act against fascism because of a “social character” disorder, a form of authoritarianism mixed with fear.<sup>19</sup>

Fromm saw the left as narrowly “materialistic” in organizing practice and perhaps he raised the issue of prophetic messianism to address this problem. Fromm repeatedly said that it is a slander that socialism sees human motivation as basically monetary and acquisitive, and it is actually the capitalists who think that way and yet Fromm knew that the socialist nations and the socialist movement had utterly bought into *homo consumens*<sup>20</sup> in their

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18. Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1962), pp. 5-13.

19. Erich Fromm, “The Revolutionary Character,” in *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1973), pp. 137-154.

20. Fromm, *Socialist Humanism*, p. 236.



programs and practice.

Fromm's *Manifesto/Program* explicitly stresses prophetic messianism as an emotional and intellectual corrective to present day democracy and to socialism. He believed that we have to save historic democracy, the dream of the post-feudal world, and save socialism, the dream of the nineteenth century; he believed both were effectively killed in 1914. Our modern democracy is a profound historic achievement, although today it has lost its roots. Because it has been reduced to a "purely political" concept and because it has lost its roots in the hearts and longings of man, it has become an empty shell. If I may build on Fromm's insight here: Think of the famous humanist writers who extol democracy, people like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and John Dewey. Were they praising "democracy" as a simple political process carried out annually on election days? No, they were caught by the messianic spirit democracy can contain. Democracy has become an empty ritual, with plebiscites where one can choose one of two managed slates, and where fundamental issues of foreign policy—should we have atomic brinkmanship imperiling mankind?—are left out of the individual's range of choices.

And socialism, like democracy, is also a great historical achievement, although it too has lost the prophetic messianic sense, as is most clearly seen in the misinterpretation of socialism as a purely economic movement.<sup>21</sup> Here is an important passage on messianism from the *Manifesto/Program*, dealing with democracy and setting up his discussion of socialism:

The political ideas of democracy, as the founding fathers of the United States conceived them, were not purely political ideas. They were rooted in the spiritual tradition which came to us from prophetic Messianism, the gospels, humanism, and from the enlightenment philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. All these ideas were centered on one hope: that man, in the course of his history, can liberate himself from poverty, ignorance, and injustice, and that he can build a society of harmony, peace, of union between man and man, and between man and nature. The idea that history has a goal, and the faith in man's perfectibility within the historical process, has been the most specific element of Occidental thought. It is the soil in which the American tradition is rooted, and from which it draws its strength and vitality. What has happened to the ideas of the perfectibility of man and society? They have deterio-

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21. I suggest again that the pre-1914 Social Democratic Party (SPD), which seems to have impressed almost everyone but Luxemburg, was ever on Fromm's mind when he looked at unions and the Soviet bloc. Although thoroughly Marxist, he also had Weber's fascination with cage-like bureaucracy, reflecting his sociological training under Max Weber's brother, Alfred.

rated into a flat concept of “progress,” into a vision of the production of more and better, rather than standing for the birth of the fully alive and productive man. Our political concepts have today lost their spiritual roots. They have become matters of expediency, judged by the criterion of whether they help us to a higher standard of living or to a more effective form of political administration. Having lost their roots in the hearts and longings of man, they have become empty shells, to be thrown away if expediency might warrant it.<sup>22</sup>

Note that Fromm’s concept of messianism is not strangely recondite: He sees evidence of it in the rising capitalist era’s Enlightenment-shaped conception of democracy—democracy understood not as simply a voting procedure or a license to desire more “things,” but as a gateway to more fully alive and productive humans, and prophetic messianism does not come about through wishes or prayers but historically, where man can liberate himself from various sorts of impoverishment and can unite with man and nature more humanly.

Several pages later, Fromm recaps his theme, this time shifting his attention to socialism: “Just as the ideals of democracy lost their spiritual roots, the idea of socialism lost its deepest root—the prophetic-messianic faith in peace, justice and the brotherhood of man.”<sup>23</sup> Although socialism in the nineteenth century was “the most significant humanistic and spiritual movement in Europe and America,” it succumbed to the capitalism it was trying to replace. “The failure of the socialist movement became complete when in 1914 its leaders renounced international solidarity and chose the economic and military interests of their respective countries as against the ideas of internationalism and peace which had been their program.”<sup>24</sup>

Although I was initially taken aback by the idea that the failure of the socialist movement was “complete” in 1914, I do see wisdom in it, and Fromm surely knew that it would really rile Leninists and those SP-SDF members reading his proposed program when he said that socialism’s failure as a humanistic and spiritual movement was “complete” in 1914. Yet Fromm was implying that the socialist humanism movement was re-founding socialism: hence his use of the word “Manifesto.” I suspect that Raya Dunayevskaya, for one, was not too disturbed by Fromm’s sharp comments, having herself broken successively with the Communist Party, Trotskyism and Schachtmanism, and having herself spent two decades trying to figure out Lenin’s response to the SPD collapse in 1914. Trotskyists particularly, whom Fromm has criticized

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22. Erich Fromm, *On Disobedience, and other essays* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 63-4.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 71-2.

although defending Trotsky himself from defamation by pro-capitalist detractors,<sup>25</sup> would be distressed by the comment about 1914. They see Social Democracy as dead in 1914, for sure, but not the tradition of Lenin through Cannon, which they affirm as the living, uncut (organizational/programmatic) continuum of Marx's and Engels' movement.<sup>26</sup> Fromm continues in the *Manifesto/Program* to show how socialism has lost its spirit:

The misinterpretation of socialism as a purely economic movement, and of nationalization of the means of production as its principal aim, occurred both in the right wing and the left wing of the socialist movement. The reformist [right] leaders of the socialist movement in Europe [SPD—no doubt] considered it as their primary aim to elevate the economic status of the worker *within* the capitalist system, and they considered as their most radical measures the nationalization of certain big industries. Only recently [Fromm was in touch with Raya Dunayevskaya at this time] have many realized that the nationalization of an enterprise is in itself not the realization of socialism, that being managed by a publicly appointed bureaucracy is not basically different for the worker than being managed by a privately appointed bureaucracy.<sup>27</sup>

Fromm explains that the left, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as opposed to the Second International, had the same problems in terms of their aims. Arising in an area without solid democratic traditions, however, the problems became far worse than anyone expected. Their state capitalism became “economically successful eventually but humanly destructive,” and more rigid than their capitalist competition. Rigidly bureaucratic, using nationalism to drive the workers—Fromm is ever-nervous about nationalism—the Communist Party defined socialism in terms of nationalization, centralization, and the satisfaction of economic needs. “In order to win the support of the masses who had to make unendurable sacrifices for the sake of the fast accumulation of capital, they used socialistic, combined with nationalistic, ideologies and this gained them the grudging cooperation of the governed.” This program negated what socialism stands for: “the affirmation of individuality and the full development of man.”<sup>28</sup>

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25. Anderson, “Thinking about Fromm and Marxism,” p. 4.

26. In a wonderfully entertaining work, *Sigmund Freud's Mission*, Fromm criticizes followers of Freud for forming a psychological “International” and proving their allegiance to an unbroken and unsullied tradition, while veering further from their own earlier humanist intentions. I think the book is also a dig at the socialists.

27. Erich Fromm, *On Disobedience*, p. 72.

28. *Ibid.*



### Prophetic Messianism: Its Revolutionary (Humanist) Jewish Roots

Fromm’s concept of prophetic messianism, mentioned in the *Manifesto/Program*, obviously has religious roots, but he uses the term carefully. Fromm’s prophetic messianism is of course a concept drawn from, but not limited to, Judaism, and Judaism to Fromm is an evolving revolutionary aspiration. Fromm reminds us that Judaism is shaped historically. It differs in ancient Palestine, in Babylonia, in Spain, in Christian medieval Europe, in Czarist Russia, and in the current regionally powerful military state of Israel. Still, there are two discernable trends of the messianism of the Jewish tradition, one of which is revolutionary. The following chart is drawn mainly from comments made in the *Program/Manifesto* and *You Shall Be as Gods*. Fromm is attempting to separate out the revolutionary core of messianism, perhaps the way Feuerbach separates “love” from its reflected corruption, “faith,” in *The Essence of Christianity*.

#### Two Kinds of Messianism: Revolutionary versus Non-revolutionary<sup>29</sup>

Universalism, radicalism, tolerance	Nationalism, conservatism, fanaticism
Horizontal concerns (this world)	Vertical concerns (other world)
Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea	Later prophets: Daniel and others up to 200 AD
“The days to come”	“The end of days,” the world to come
This world—historical world	Other world—trans-historical world
The Messiah comes at point of mankind’s progress toward self realization	Messiah comes at point of mankind’s greatest corruption
Savior comes somehow from within us	Savior is an external agent coming in
Self-emancipation	Mysterious deliverance
Attitude of doing	Attitude of waiting

Both of the above tendencies can coexist and do, and both tendencies presume a change in mankind and not simply a change in the fate of one individual, but still there is a decided difference between them. Recently, in an exciting student philosophy club discussion about this chart, at South Texas College,

29. This chart is drawn, *passim*, from Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), pp. 96-118. Also helpful is Lawrence Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pp. 48-9.

the students spontaneously started talking about the period right after 9/11. As Fromm's schema above would suggest, some Americans became very *nationalistic* (intensely anti-cosmopolitan, wanting even to change the name of "French fries") and *fanatical* (intolerant, as in the treatment of the Dixie Chicks) and seemed to be *waiting* (inactively) for the government to *deliver* them from terror (self-emancipation being ruled out, while our constructive role became simply to "go shopping," under the advice of the nation's president).

A concluding reflection: Messianism (as a *rational* component of humanism, for Fromm) should not stand embarrassed by its Jewish religious roots. Fromm's Judaism, influenced by Hermann Cohen, the neo-Kantian Jewish scholar, is revolutionary, rational, and profoundly instructive. Fromm demonstrates its radicalism by tracing three stages of religious development in Judaism, stages through which in some sense all persons must pass to reach full rationality and human potential.

In the first, earliest stage, God is viewed as our maker in the sense that the pot maker is the maker of the pot.<sup>30</sup> God makes the pot, can paint it or not paint it, and God can break the pot. A dazzling creator whom we cannot understand, God is the inscrutable, powerful maker, according to this early view. (Of course, unconsciously dominant in this powerful image of God is the idea that God does not countenance rivalry well.) How can man relate to this all-powerful being? Only one way, by submission.

However, breaking through that original submission, a second (higher) stage of development<sup>31</sup> is also evident and beautifully portrayed in Judaism, particularly in the story we have been given of Abraham, although it is a stage that no doubt matures hundreds of years after the historical Abraham. Abraham is said to have been commanded by God to go and convert Sodom and Gomorrah from their wickedness. (Fromm cites rabbis who interpret the "sinfulness" there as selfishness not homosexuality.) If they do not convert, God says, they are to be destroyed. Fromm describes how Abraham "drew near" to God and asked if the good were to be slain with the unrighteous, which obviously did not seem fair to Abraham. So he asked if God could make a concession. Even if Abraham could not get them all to convert, maybe God could concede to spare the cities if Abraham could convert fifty of them. Abraham lectures God: Far be it from me to kill the righteous with the wicked and far be it for you, God, to do it. Coming into agreement with Abraham, God agrees not to destroy the people if there are fifty righteous ones. Abraham has struck a deal. Maybe God is not so inscrutable. Although Abraham is thankful and humble, he presses on in the bargaining, trying to get the number down to forty-five; it seems wrong and petty to destroy the city because we are five people short of fifty! God agrees with Abraham again: God will save the

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30. Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), pp. 21-2.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-5.

city if there are forty-five righteous. Abraham gets the number down to forty, down to twenty, and then all the way to ten by whittling away in a negotiating process. God had originally wanted Abraham to convert them all or they all would be destroyed and now Abraham only has to convert ten to save the cities. This amazing story is no longer portraying an inscrutable God to whom we submit, suggests Fromm.

Abraham develops confidence that God reasons as humans do and is not an arbitrary ruler but a being with whom humans can argue. This is the stage of the Jewish covenant. Mankind can challenge God in the name of common principles and shared rationality. Mutual promises can be made. (I once heard a rabbi say that it is acceptable to praise God and it is acceptable to scold God, but it is not acceptable to ignore God.) This leads Fromm to the third stage, which is beyond the contractual level and the level of power.

In the third stage of Judaism's religious development,<sup>32</sup> we see a second negativity—we do not see God as a master nor as an entity to be contracted with, in fact, not as an “object” at all. When God refused to name himself to Moses and gave the non-name—I do not have a name; I just am—God is no longer a something or other to contract with, but God just is. As opposed to a subject/object relationship, the suitable relationship, according to Fromm, becomes a commitment to inter-subjectivity: No longer I-It but rather I-Thou, in Feuerbach's and Buber's terminology. (Buber and Fromm were both in the mystical, story-telling tradition of the Hassidics and both were influenced by Feuerbach's I-Thou and his Love vs. Faith dialectic.) God, in the third stage of encounter, should never be responded to as an idol, a name-able object outside me, but humans too should never be objectified—and the humans are really Fromm's concern here—because they share God's nature.<sup>33</sup> Surely modern socialists should not be embarrassed by the Jewish roots of Fromm's prophetic messianism, as if religion were inherently pre-radical by nature. Fromm's Judaism is liberatory, humanist, and simply part of Marxism.

Because Judaism emerged through those three stages of religious development, dealing with issues of submission and authority and arriving at an affirmation of intersubjectivity, it brings with it a sensitivity needed on the left. The year after writing the *Manifesto/Program*, Fromm wrote a beautiful, terse essay: “The Revolutionary Character.” (According to his essay, a “revolutionary” is properly biophilic and hopeful, but a “rebel” is not.) A revolutionary is not certified objectively, by participating in a revolution or quoting a program. Rather, a revolutionary is understood as someone

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32. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-9.

33. Fromm, perhaps like Hegel, often plays with Meister Eckhart's negative terminology: if we do not seek God as an object we will find God, and we humans can hence learn to avoid treating others as things, not submitting, not dominating, and not simply contracting as opposing interests.

committed to changing society radically but who does not draw strength (like a rebel) from a symbiotic relationship to authorities and subordinates. Because too often our “revolutionaries” are simply internalizing external authority, tailoring themselves to fit that authority, their commitment can become ferocity, a kind of “burning ice,” feeling strong and burning with “life” only when acting coldly.<sup>34</sup> (The author of this paper knew a leftist who was overjoyed at making the coldest organizational decisions.) And because of unresolved relationships with authority, opportunistic acceptance of “help” from the powers outside has always plagued the left: “Twentieth century political life is a cemetery containing the moral graves of people who started out as alleged revolutionaries and who turned out to be nothing but opportunistic rebels.”<sup>35</sup>

The prophetic messianic root of humanism, with its confidence to act on the possibility of peace and tolerance and brotherhood, with its openness to inter-subjectivity, and its continual awareness of the perfectibility of man through human history, is a challenge to socialism and its proclaimed revolutionaries. Everyone on the left should at least reread Fromm's *Manifesto/Program*, *Marx's Concept of Man*, and “The Revolutionary Character”—they have not lost their sting in these fifty years—but we should attempt to read Fromm as a philosopher/organizer, working on several levels, not as a simplistic popularizer.

## Part II. Prophetic Messianism: An Excursus and Further Defense

Joan Braune

As Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and some of Jürgen Habermas' recent work have brought to wider attention, Marxism and the Frankfurt School owed much to “messianism,” a partially secularized version of the traditional Jewish hope and enthusiasm for the coming of the messianic age. This half of the paper explores Erich Fromm's interconnected concepts of “hope” and “messianism.” According to Fromm, hope—the motivating force of true messianism—leads one to become actively involved in building a better society, neither idly waiting for a better age to come, nor attempting to “force” the messianic age to come before its proper time. Fromm distinguishes two conceptual approaches to this messianic age, two kinds of messianism—“prophetic” messianism and “catastrophic” messianism—which can be seen as two opposing perspectives on the nature of revolutionary change.

While Fromm was raised an orthodox Jew, was educated by Talmudic scholars, and engaged in dialogue with various religious thinkers throughout his career, he broke away from Jewish religious practice as a young man and thereafter always asserted that he was “not a [religious] believer.” Although

34. Fromm, “The Revolutionary Character,” p. 141.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Fromm often appropriates terms (like “messianism”) from theological discourse, his use of these terms can generally be understood as political and not theological. (However, for reasons that cannot be addressed here, I reject strict dichotomies between the sacred and the secular. It might not be possible to neatly cleave the political from the theological sense of these terms.) Fromm’s messianism is primarily not a *religious* hope, but a *political* hope for a better future beyond capitalism, a future “messianic age” or utopia.<sup>36</sup>

*Prophetic* messianism, which Fromm supports, views the messianic event as the outcome of historical progress and united human effort. He traces its origins to the Old Testament prophets’ denunciations of injustice and sees it manifesting itself in certain marginal movements in the Middle Ages, in Renaissance humanism, in the Enlightenment, in utopian socialism, and in Marxism. By contrast, *catastrophic* messianism, which he opposes, is motivated by a kind of despair that masquerades as hope, and is reactionary in its political consequences (though not necessarily in its conscious motivations, since many leftists are catastrophic messianists). Catastrophic messianism awaits a messianic event that will follow from a catastrophic situation, into which some force or individual from outside of history will intervene, to save a corrupted humanity from itself.

In defending prophetic messianism and criticizing catastrophic messianism, Fromm was challenging certain predominant perspectives on the left and perhaps critiquing the work of a number of Frankfurt School thinkers as well. Although the focus of this paper is on Fromm’s conceptions of hope and messianism and not on the Frankfurt School at large, it will become clear at several points that there are significant differences between Fromm’s conception of messianism and that of some other prominent members of the Frankfurt School. The paper concludes that Fromm’s prophetic messianism is more useful to political praxis than catastrophic messianism.

### Erich Fromm’s Concept of Hope

Fromm’s discussion of hope rests mainly on a dialectical account of “what hope is not,” a question he states is easier to address than the more difficult question of “what hope is,” a question he suggests can be more adequately answered through the medium of the arts than through a philosophical treatise.<sup>37</sup> Fromm describes three things that are not hope but that often masquerade as hope. (The third of these negations will contribute the most to clarifying Fromm’s

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36. The concepts of messianism and utopia may not be entirely synonymous for Fromm—the messianic age connotes another *time*, utopia another *place*—but he seems to see them as closely connected.

37. Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Towards a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 6, 11.



distinction between the two kinds of messianism.) Hope is not (1) mere desiring or wishing, (2) the passive, inactive expectation of a better future, or (3) “forcing of what cannot be forced” (i.e., “forcing the Messiah”).

Firstly, Fromm states that hope is not mere desiring or wishing, but rather is a kind of “certainty.”<sup>38</sup> One can wish for something without believing that one will ever attain it. True hope, by contrast, is grounded in a *humanistic faith*, a “*paradoxical certainty*” that human beings will bring about a better future.<sup>39</sup> This certainty is paradoxical because it nevertheless rejects determinism. People cannot (and should not) be *forced* to choose a better future when faced with crucial alternatives: to choose, e.g., socialism over barbarism, or nuclear disarmament over nuclear annihilation. But the person of humanistic faith nevertheless feels a kind of certainty—an inward conviction—that humanity will make the right choice when confronted with such crucial alternatives.

Another reason that hope is not mere desiring or wishing is that, while hope involves a certain kind of activity aimed at bringing about the goals for which it strives, this activity does not look like the frantic attempt to meet desire after desire, through the consumption of consumer goods.<sup>40</sup> While people in our society are often “busy,” they do not possess the “activeness” that Fromm seeks. He writes,

Our whole culture is geared to activity—activity in the sense of being busy, and being busy in the sense of busyness (the busyness necessary for business). In fact, most people are so “active” that they cannot stand doing nothing; they even transform their leisure time into another form of activity.<sup>41</sup>

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38. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

39. Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 157. A very clear expression of this paradoxical certainty in a Marxist context can be found in Georg Lukács' essay, “The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg,” in *History and Class Consciousness*. Responding to those who sneer that Marxism is “religious faith,” Lukács does not reply—as one might expect—by insisting that Marxism is not a faith but a science. Instead, he responds by criticizing science, rejecting determinism, and stating that there is “no ‘material’ guarantee” of the proletariat's success. He then professes his “*certitude that regardless of all temporary defeats and setbacks, the historical process will come to fruition in our deeds and through our deeds.*” Here Lukács expresses a kind of faith in the coming of socialism, not a scientific conclusion that the coming of socialism is “determined” (Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press), p. 43).

40. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 6.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

But while hope may not be frantically busy, like the harried shopper, it cannot be passive and inactive either.

Secondly, hope is not passive, inactive waiting, even if coupled with the confident expectation that some lofty object of desire (“fuller life,” “liberation,” “salvation,” “revolution”) will arrive in the future.<sup>42</sup> True hope actively seeks to bring its goals into reality, while passive waiting can be a “cover for resignation,” “mere ideology,” or even an idolatry of history or progress, in which history and progress become gods to whom humans submit, rather than realities that they actively shape.<sup>43</sup> (Here Fromm references Marx’s adage, “History is nothing and does nothing. It is man who is and does.”<sup>44</sup>) Passive “hope” is dangerous, because even when the hoped-for event presents itself as a very real possibility—for example, when the revolution is imminent—the person who has inculcated a false, passive form of hope may be unable to seize the opportunity and take action.<sup>45</sup>

Thirdly and finally—and this will require some rather lengthy explication—hope is not manifested by “forcing of what cannot be forced,” i.e. “forcing the Messiah.”<sup>46</sup> The Jewish Talmudic tradition, in which Fromm was trained before studying psychoanalysis and joining the Frankfurt School, warns against “forcing the Messiah” by becoming “carried away by one’s hopes and wishes” and attempting to calculate the date of the Messiah’s arrival or announcing that the Messiah has come.<sup>47</sup> Fromm observed an attempt to force the Messiah in fascism’s deification of leaders, yet he also thought that the left was not itself immune to the kind of false hope that attempts to force the Messiah.<sup>48</sup>

Some clarification of Fromm’s puzzling condemnation of “forcing the Messiah” can perhaps be obtained through an examination of his “radical interpretation of the Old Testament,” *You Shall Be as Gods*. There he offers a brief history of the various false Messiahs who arose throughout Jewish history. Among these was Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), who in 1648 declared himself the Messiah and announced the impending apocalypse. This being a time of rampant persecution and consequent eschatological hope, many European Jews accepted his message and sold their homes, preparing to move to Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> This new “Sabbatean” movement would likely have ended after Zevi, under threat of martyrdom, converted to Islam, had it not been for the movement’s development of a strange doctrine of “redemption through sin.”

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42. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

47. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 153.

48. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 8.

49. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 146.

Although Fromm does not address the doctrine of “redemption through sin” directly in his book, he would surely have known that the doctrine was loosely motivated by the Lurianic Kabbalah’s teaching that God’s creation of the world involved God withdrawing himself from creation, the argument being that if God had not been somehow absent from creation, he would have created a double of himself, a logical impossibility given the infinite nature attributed to God.<sup>50</sup> In line with this doctrine of God’s withdrawal from nature, according to which God’s absence caused the entry of evil into creation, the Sabbateans argued that Zevi had had to sink into the depths of sin, through infidelity to his faith, in order to re-create and redeem the world.<sup>51</sup> The Sabbateans honored their doctrine of “redemption through sin” through various ritualistic violations of religious and social mores, “which were supposed to make manifest the power of negation in the execution of actions which were at the same time destructive and liberating.”<sup>52</sup>

It is sufficiently perplexing that Fromm would write a book on interpretations of the Old Testament in the middle of the tumultuous 1960s (as Nick Braune addresses in detail above). But it is perhaps even more baffling that Fromm would discuss in that same book the story of Sabbatai Zevi, whose story was likely an embarrassment to most Jews (the book’s main audience). There are a number of possible reasons for Fromm’s inclusion of Zevi in the book. For one, Fromm probably knew, although he does not say so in *You Shall Be as Gods*, that Gershom Scholem—long-time collaborator of Walter Benjamin and leading scholar of Jewish mysticism, with whom Fromm had been in contact in his younger years—had done considerable research on Sabbateanism. Fromm would later criticize Scholem for holding a catastrophic form of messianism.<sup>53</sup> Further evidence that Fromm may have introduced Zevi to make a point about the dangers of catastrophic messianism, can be found in a passage following shortly after Fromm’s discussion of Zevi, in which he writes of the disillusionment that so many felt about the Soviet Union, after Marx, Engels, and Lenin had had such high hopes that the “Kingdom of Heaven” was near.<sup>54</sup> In the face of this disillusionment, the left needed to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of despairing withdrawal from politics, on the one hand, and, on the other, the assertion that the messianic age had already come (“forcing the Messiah”) in the form of the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup>

Elsewhere, Fromm suggests that in the context of politics the hopelessness that leads to false Messiahs (“forcing the Messiah”) is characterized

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50. Rudolf Siebert, *The Critical Theory of Religion: The Frankfurt School* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2001), pp. 306-7.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Erich Fromm, *On Being Human* (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 141-2.

54. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 156.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7.

by “phrase making and adventurism,” “nihilism,” and “disregard for reality,”<sup>56</sup> and he worried that such hopelessness was rapidly becoming characteristic of some of the young activists of his time.<sup>57</sup> (It was only a few years after Fromm’s worry to this effect that there was a resurgence of groups on the left, such as the Weather Underground and the Baader-Meinhof, that tried to “force” the revolution without building a mass movement.) He saw Herbert Marcuse’s philosophy as a further expression of the rise of nihilistic attempts to force the messiah. (*The Revolution of Hope* was largely a response to Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, although Fromm directly addresses Marcuse’s thought only briefly.) According to Fromm, because Marcuse seemed to suggest (in *One-Dimensional Man*) that all the concepts and structures present within capitalist society were useless in the struggle against capitalism, Marcuse was forced to adopt an approach to revolution (his “Great Refusal”) that advocated a dramatic and total break with present conditions, leading to a future that is not imaginable or conceivable from the standpoint of the present; this approach seemed to Fromm to make any realistic revolutionary strategizing—any theorizing about the “steps between the present and the future”—impossible.<sup>58</sup> (I discuss Fromm’s critique of Marcuse’s Great Refusal in a forthcoming book chapter and will return to this critique briefly below.)

As has been shown, Fromm’s negative definition of hope was a warning about the dangers of reducing hope to mere desiring or wishing, inactive waiting, or “forcing the Messiah.” Although Fromm warns that it is difficult to give a positive account of hope, he does offer some brief positive remarks as well. It has already been noted that Fromm conceived hope as a “paradoxical certainty.” He also described hope as a “state of being,” an “inner readiness,” “activeness,” and “to...be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not to become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime.”<sup>59</sup> He adds that hope has an unconscious component, found in all “life and growth,” even the growth of plants.<sup>60</sup> “When hope has gone life has ended, actually or potentially,” he writes, and although he does not say so explicitly, he seems to be making a rather Aristotelian point, that all living things have a *telos* for which they are striving, and that to stop striving for this *telos* is both to die and to abandon hope.<sup>61</sup> This parallels Fromm’s ongoing defense of his “socialist humanism,” according to which the human essence is a potential yet to be actualized. According to Fromm, “the socialist movement was radical and humanistic—radical in the...sense of going to the roots, and

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56. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 8.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12, 9.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

61. *Ibid.*

the roots being man; humanistic in the sense that it is man who is the measure of all things, and his full unfolding must be the criterion of all social efforts.”<sup>62</sup>

### Fromm's Concept of Prophetic Messianism

“Messianism” is a recurring theme in Fromm's work and is addressed in many of his books and articles, from the time of *The Sane Society* (1955) to *To Have or To Be?* (1976). As noted previously, Fromm distinguishes two kinds of messianism, prophetic and catastrophic.<sup>63</sup> *Prophetic* messianism, which Fromm supports, conceives of the messianic event as occurring *within* history and time, and not as rupture with history and time.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, *catastrophic* messianism, which Fromm opposes, conceives of the messianic event as entering history from outside, not as an outcome of human activity. While prophetic messianism is a “horizontal” longing, a longing for human-made change, catastrophic messianism is a “vertical” longing, a longing for some external savior (perhaps a human leader, a party, a nation, or some deterministic law governing history) which is conceived as transcendent and which is expected to enter history from a realm outside of human affairs.<sup>65</sup> Since prophetic messianism views the messianic event as the outcome of human progress, it encourages *productive and revolutionary action*, but since catastrophic messianism views the messianic event as the outcome of catastrophe, with the “Messiah” entering history to rescue a helpless and lost humanity, it encourages *passive waiting or even destructive activity* aimed at speeding the coming of the apocalypse.

Fromm's prophetic messianism stands in sharp contrast with other conceptions of messianism prevalent in the Frankfurt School, most notably in Walter Benjamin and also perhaps in Herbert Marcuse, both of whom seem to be closer to catastrophic messianism.<sup>66</sup> Probably due to a dearth of

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62. Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: The Courage to Be Human*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. 206.

63. Fromm uses a number of terms to differentiate between these two kinds of messianism, but in a later work (unpublished during his lifetime), he offers the particularly useful terms of “catastrophic or apocalyptic messianism” (hereafter, “catastrophic messianism”) and “prophetic messianism,” and I will employ these terms here (Lawrence Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004], p. 49).

64. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 88.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

66. It is quite possible that no messianic thinker's theory perfectly fits all aspects of Fromm's description of prophetic messianism or of catastrophic messianism. One may perhaps conceive these two kinds of messianism as Weberian ideal types. The various messianisms of Fromm's time (H. Marcuse's, T.W. Adorno's, M. Buber's, E. Bloch's, H. Cohen's, etc.) could be charted upon a spectrum, from the most “prophetic” on one end to the most “catastrophic” on the other.



Fromm scholarship (a dearth that is only lately beginning to be remedied), characterizations of the Frankfurt School's messianism are likely to exclude Fromm's conception of prophetic messianism and to present the Frankfurt School as wholly motivated by a kind of catastrophic messianism. In a recent essay, a revised version of an essay originally published as an introduction to Jürgen Habermas' *Religion and Rationality*, Eduardo Mendieta addresses Habermas' attempt to grapple with the tradition of "Jewish messianism" and its reverberations in "Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse—and to extend legitimately Gershom Scholem's list, Erich Fromm and Leo Löwenthal."<sup>67</sup> Although Mendieta makes a point of including Fromm in his list of important "Jewish messianic" members of the Frankfurt School ("legitimately...Erich Fromm..."), Mendieta then lists what he considers to be four key aspects of the Jewish messianism motivating the Frankfurt School, the first three of which seem to contradict Fromm's prophetic messianism and are much closer to the catastrophic messianism he opposed. Mendieta draws this list mainly from Anson Rabinbach, whom he cites.<sup>68</sup> Rabinbach was describing a new version of messianism that arose in Germany in the early 1900s, from around 1915-1925. This new messianism was characterized by opposition to the Enlightenment and neo-Kantianism. Fromm, however, seems to have stood in a different camp on this issue, remaining (critically) loyal to neo-Kantianism and the heritage of the Enlightenment.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Jewish thinkers in the Enlightenment tradition, like Hermann Cohen and Leo Baeck, had theorized Judaism in Kantian terms as the "religion of reason." Before becoming a psychoanalyst and subsequently joining the Frankfurt School, Fromm was a founding member of the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* (Free Jewish Study-House) in Frankfurt. The *Lehrhaus* was a hub of leftwing Jewish intellectual life in 1920s Germany, whose many famous participants included Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Löwenthal, Ernst Simon, Leo Baeck, and Abraham Heschel. During this time, like many others in the *Lehrhaus*, Fromm was influenced by the thought of Hermann Cohen, whom he later called "the last great Jewish philosopher" and praised for grasping the

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67. Eduardo Mendieta, *Global Fragments: Globalizations, Latinamericanisms, and Critical Theory* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 142-3.

68. Rabinbach's first three points are roughly the same as Mendieta's, although Rabinbach's fourth point seems different from Mendieta's. Rabinbach's fourth point is that there is an "ethical ambivalence" in messianism, an ambivalence which stems from the fact that human action aiming at bringing about the messianic age is superfluous for this conception of messianism, since the messianic age is not the outcome of human action (cf. Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 31-4, and Mendieta, *Global Fragments*, p. 143).

connection between “messianism and socialism.”<sup>69</sup> Universalist (non-Zionist and anti-nationalist), humanist, socialist, and rationalist, Cohen’s messianism influenced a generation of German-Jewish intellectuals.

According to Cohen, central to Judaism was the belief in a coming Messiah, that would be neither an individual nor a select nation of people, but *humanity as a whole*, who would make world history together, a view of history that he held was first advanced by the Hebrew prophets.<sup>70</sup> The arrival of the messianic age depended upon humanity becoming the subject/object of universal *knowledge*<sup>71</sup> and *love*.<sup>72</sup> Humanity’s love would be manifested through suffering, freely chosen out of compassion and out of fidelity to ethical principles.<sup>73</sup> The oppressed would thus become their own Messiah,<sup>74</sup> their spirit being one of “opposition to the acceptance of superficial human reality as displayed in power, in splendor, in success, in dominion, in autocracy, in imperialism; as an opposition to all these signs of human arrogance.”<sup>75</sup>

Both Fromm and Cohen (and, one could argue, Marx) held that until the messianic age (or full communism) arrives, humanity does not yet fully exist.<sup>76</sup> In working for the messianic age, one is also working for the fulfillment of human nature. Also, Fromm’s and Cohen’s messianism was radically forward-looking,<sup>77</sup> while still holding that the future is linked to the present and can be understood or imagined to some extent from the standpoint of the present. The messianic event was not to be an unpredictable, non-conceivable, dramatic rupture from the present but was to be built and planned for in the present.<sup>78</sup> Through their attainment of self-knowledge and love, humans could catch a glimpse of the future messianic age through their own action in the present.

But Cohen’s messianism—and to some extent Fromm’s—stands in sharp contrast to the later, cataclysmic, semi-Romantic messianism that arose among some German Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals at the beginning of World War I. Cohen soon represented a mainstay of Enlightenment optimism and Kantian rationalism that many of the young radicals repudiated as outmoded. Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and many others in the *Lehrhaus*

69. Fromm, *On Being Human*, p. 143.

70. Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 236.

71. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1995), p. 249.

72. Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, pp. 236-7.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 242, 245.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

circle who were initially attracted to Cohen's ideas eventually broke away from his thought.<sup>79</sup> (While Cohen's capitulation to German nationalism and endorsement of the war surely played a role in his loss of popularity on the left, other factors, including his vocal opposition to Zionism, played a role as well.) The new messianism—romantic, nihilistic, anarchic, and catastrophic—envisioned a messianic future that would arrive not as a product of human progress or planning but suddenly, in a time of disorder and despair, through a dramatic “rupture” with the present and with all prior history. Fromm stands, sometimes isolated, as a prominent Marxist theorist who continued to defend the pre-war universalistic messianism and who saw it as true to Marx's vision.

Anson Rabinbach argued that the new messianism—shared by Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, on the left, and Carl Schmitt, on the right, among others—was characterized by four “dimensions.”<sup>80</sup> The first three of these are summarized and slightly modified by Mendieta, as follows.

- (1) “Restoration” through anamnesis and through breaking with the past, as opposed to restoration of some past, historical “Golden Age,”
- (2) “Utopianism” that contradicts “Enlightenment utopianism” and views progress as “catastrophe,” and
- (3) An apocalyptic rupture with the past and present, leading to a future that is not even “imaginable” from the standpoint of the present.<sup>81</sup>

Contra Mendieta, Fromm's prophetic messianism has little in common with these points, while (2) and (3) actually sound like aspects of the catastrophic messianism Fromm so vehemently opposed. Addressing each of these points with regard to Fromm will elucidate his prophetic messianism and show how it differs from the messianism adopted by some other members of the Frankfurt School. In what follows, I will discuss the first three points in the order they are presented by Mendieta.

### 1. Restoration through *Anamnesis*: The Role of Memory and the Past in Messianism

Karl Kraus' statement “Origin is the Goal”<sup>82</sup> became a popular slogan of

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79. Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 59.

80. Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, pp. 3, 31-4.

81. Mendieta, *Global Fragments*, p. 144.

82. Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, p. 31.

the new messianism described by Rabinbach and was adopted by Walter Benjamin,<sup>83</sup> among others; Herbert Marcuse does Kraus homage<sup>84</sup> and alludes to the principle, though perhaps he never quotes the slogan. For Benjamin, history was a long chain of catastrophes, and historical memory served to spark messianic hopes for redemption while simultaneously convincing people that this redemption cannot come by means of human effort in history. For Marcuse, memory seems to serve a more subversive role, in that it is the memory of past utopian dreams as well as of humanity's original polymorphous perversity, that fuel revolutionary sentiment. In dealing with memory and the past, Fromm takes a different approach from that of Benjamin and Marcuse, seeing memory as having progressive as well as reactionary potential.

Although Fromm differs profoundly from Mendieta's points (2) and (3) (see below), Fromm does share some commonalities with this trend (1) in the new messianism. For example, memory seems to play a potentially messianic role in his book *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths*, which argues that humanity has forgotten—and needs to remember—how to interpret the potentially subversive “language” of “dreams and myths.” Furthermore, Fromm suggests in *You Shall Be as Gods* that prophetic messianism seeks a restoration of the state of Paradise, i.e. a restoration of a time when society was lacking in the alienation and fragmentation that are so prevalent in late capitalism. Messianism seeks to rectify “the fall,” which for Fromm was an allegorical way of speaking about a “historical” (as opposed to metaphysical) event, the point in time at which humanity lost its original sense of oneness with nature and its fellow humans.<sup>85</sup> Fromm writes, “The messianic time is the time when man will have been fully born. When man was expelled from Paradise he lost his home; in the messianic time he will be at home again—in the world.”<sup>86</sup>

Although Fromm does seem to say that the messianic age restores the state of Paradise that exists prior to the fall, it is also important to note that Fromm saw the fall as a needed step in human development. The fall was not a loss of humanity's dignity, nor was it a sin, but rather it was an important step in human development, a part of humanity's process of “growing up,” of learning not to blindly obey the orders of authority figures (orders such as “don't eat from that tree”), and breaking its infantile bonds to blood and soil.<sup>87</sup> But, expelled from its original oneness with nature and with its fellow humans, humanity now feels helpless and unprotected, and longs for the former safety of

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83. Ibid.

84. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 196, and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 145.

85. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 122.

86. Ibid., p. 123.

87. Ibid., pp. 122-3.

“Paradise.” In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm warned of the dangers of yielding uncritically to this longing, since it was this very feeling of helplessness that led humanity to seek relief in authoritarianism, including fascism. Hence, there is a need to rediscover the importance of disobedience. Humanity has so far been unable to recognize the promise of the serpent in Genesis—“You shall be as gods”—as a blessing and not a curse.

Since Fromm was wary of the danger of the masses feeling overwhelmed by helplessness and seeking to escape the burden of their freedom through blind obedience to irrational authorities, he probably viewed the new messianism’s emphasis on memory with a degree of suspicion. Following Hermann Cohen, who argued that what was unique about Jewish messianism was its future-oriented-ness, Fromm’s messianism was highly future-oriented, and he adamantly rejected any romantic or nationalistic attempts to turn back the clock to some earlier stage of human history. It is probably because of this concern on his part that one finds far less discussion of memory in Fromm than one does in Benjamin, Marcuse, or Adorno.

The messianic future envisioned by Fromm is a dialectical synthesis of, on the one hand, the primal oneness with nature and one’s fellow humans that humanity experienced at its earliest stages of historical development—variously characterized by Fromm as primitive communism, as matriarchy (following Bachofen), or (allegorically) as Paradise/Eden—and, on the other hand, the individuality and autonomy of persons that was celebrated by much of the tradition of humanist thought and especially by the Enlightenment. He writes, “There is a dialectic relationship between Paradise and the messianic time. Paradise is the golden age of the past, as many legends in other cultures see it. The messianic time is the golden age of the future.”<sup>88</sup> Consequently, *anamnesis* of humanity’s early unity and non-alienation can be progressive for Fromm, and need not result in a reactionary attempt to flee from the pressures of the present. But, although Fromm holds that “paradise is the golden age of the past” and “the messianic time is the golden age of the future,” it should be noted these two states are quite different.<sup>89</sup> Fromm’s notion of history is not cyclical, the future is not simply a return to the past and the origin is only half of the goal. The pre-historic golden age is defined by “man’s not yet having been born” and the messianic golden age by “man’s having been fully born.”<sup>90</sup> The coming messianic time is a stage in human development that has never before been achieved, marking progress beyond both past and present, but it is a stage in which history will be sublated and brought to fulfillment.

## 2. Messianism’s Response to the Enlightenment: Or, Progress vs.

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88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid., pp. 123-4.





## Catastrophe

Fromm saw the Enlightenment as one of the historical manifestations of prophetic messianism and he rejected the view that a catastrophe must precede the messianic event. These two positions (2a and 2b, below) are linked by Fromm's openness to the Enlightenment ideal of historical progress.

### 2a. Fromm and the Enlightenment

Fromm saw the Enlightenment as radical in its humanism, its devotion to freedom, its commitment to moving history forward, and its rejection of authoritarianism (“authoritarian idolatry”).<sup>91</sup> Fromm would likely agree with Jürgen Habermas' characterization of the Enlightenment as an “unfinished project” that needs to be continued in certain respects. Like Ernst Bloch,<sup>92</sup> Fromm held that the Enlightenment retained an unconscious affinity with radical undercurrents latent in religious eschatology prior to the Enlightenment. Despite the Enlightenment's attempt to jettison religious concepts, it was “only a new form of thought expressing the old religious enthusiasm, especially as far as the meaning and purpose of history was concerned. In the name of reason and happiness, of human dignity and freedom, the Messianic idea found a new expression.”<sup>93</sup>

According to Fromm, Marxism stands within the same prophetic-messianic tradition as the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment's messianism helped give rise to Marxism. Condorcet's radical messianism, Fromm claims, influenced Proudhon and the utopian socialism of St. Simon and Comte, and in turn Marx; similarly, Marx was influenced by Lessing, Fichte, and Hegel, all of whom Fromm also sees as inspired by Enlightenment messianism.<sup>94</sup> Marx's own thought was “Messianic-religious, in secular language.”<sup>95</sup> This messianic spirit suffered various setbacks throughout history, with one of the most significant in recent Western history being German Social Democracy's capitulation to nationalism, which marked a loss of the “messianic pathos, its appeal to the deepest longings and needs of man.”<sup>96</sup>

Fromm wrote that the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and of (Jewish

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91. Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955), p. 235.

92. Those interested in Bloch's interpretation of the Enlightenment should also check out his essay in Fromm's anthology, where he argues that Marx continued the tradition of the Enlightenment: Ernst Bloch, “Man and Citizen According to Marx” in *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, ed. Erich Fromm (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965).

93. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 235.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*, p. 122.

theologian and anarchist revolutionary) Gustav Landauer were meant to snuff out the messianic project,<sup>97</sup> while fascism and Stalinism dealt further near-deadly blows to messianism.<sup>98</sup> A revival of prophetic messianism would be largely dependent, for Fromm, upon a rediscovery of Marx's prophetic messianism, and Fromm held that such a rediscovery was occurring in his time, through the work of Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, and Paul Tillich, among others.<sup>99</sup>

Although Fromm defended the Enlightenment as a radical and unfinished project, contributing to the birth of Marxism, it should not be inferred that Fromm was an uncritical defender of the Enlightenment. He leveled a number of insightful criticisms against the Enlightenment, criticizing the Enlightenment's determinism<sup>100</sup> and pointing out that the Enlightenment's humanism bordered on a fetishistic idolatry of humans, resulting in despise of nature.<sup>101</sup> In *Escape from Freedom*, he also addressed the psychological consequences of the Enlightenment, which, while liberating in important respects, included feelings of loneliness and disenchantment among Europeans.

Nor did Fromm's defense of the Enlightenment lead him to an ardent or dogmatic rejection of religious ideas (as his engagement with concepts like messianism attests), of the Medieval world, or of Christianity, though such repudiation is sometimes considered a characteristic of defenders of the Enlightenment. That Fromm's work was influenced by various religious thinkers (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist) is evident. Fromm also evolved a greater openness toward Christian thought, and Catholicism specifically, over the course of his career, without this leading him to a blanket rejection of the Enlightenment. Especially later in his career, he drew from various radical Catholic thinkers: Thomas Merton, Karl Rahner, Latin American theologians, French worker priests, Eastern Europeans involved in Marxist-Christian dialogue, and others. In a 1954 letter to Thomas Merton, he wrote, "I am sure that my picture of the Middle Ages is somewhat oversimplified... Having been brought up in a Protestant country, it took some effort on my part to overcome the negative attitude toward the Middle Ages which was conveyed to me in the first 20 years of my life."<sup>102</sup> He was also increasingly attracted to Renaissance

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97. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 239.

98. *Ibid.*, pp. 237-9.

99. Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (London: Continuum, 1994), pp. 6, 57.

100. Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 21.

101. Lawrence Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*, p. 49.

102. Erich Fromm, Letter to Thomas Merton (University of Kentucky Special Collections Library), December 8, 1954. (Fromm exchanged roughly thirty letters with Thomas Merton, over the course of fourteen years. Fromm's part of the exchange is housed mainly at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University and the Special Collections Library at University of Kentucky, both of which archives kindly allowed



humanism,<sup>103</sup> and his attempt to meld the contributions of Enlightenment thought with those of Christian humanism eventually culminated in his proposal for a “*City of Being*,” providing “a synthesis between the spiritual core of the Late Medieval world and the development of rational thought and science since the Renaissance,” melding the Medieval vision of the “*City of God*” with the Enlightenment’s ideal of the “*Earthly City of Progress*.”<sup>104</sup>

Although Fromm’s support for the Enlightenment was cautious and not uncritical, he nevertheless seems to differ from the approach of most of the other Frankfurt School thinkers (prior to Habermas) to the Enlightenment. Unlike Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, he saw the Enlightenment as an essentially radical and progressive period of human history leading to the development of Marxism. Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (which was initially intended to be co-authored by Horkheimer and Marcuse), took a considerably more negative approach to the Enlightenment than Fromm did. Benjamin, as will be noted briefly in the following discussion of catastrophe (2b), was also intensely critical of the Enlightenment.

## 2b. Progress and Catastrophe

Fromm lived in an era that, perhaps much like our own, was aware of the threat of catastrophe but seemed unwilling to take action to avert the catastrophe. He was especially disturbed by discussions of bomb shelters and by the widely held view in the U.S. that families could hide below ground in the event of a nuclear catastrophe, fight off the invading hordes attempting to steal their goods, and then reemerge to entirely rebuild civilization. That so many people were willing to accept such a possible outcome to human history, Fromm saw as profoundly pathological. Fromm’s involvement with SANE aimed at awakening the world to the need to prevent nuclear catastrophe in an insane time of nuclear “deterrence.” In a 1961 letter to Thomas Merton, Fromm wrote,

I have been thinking a good deal lately about the increasing discussion of what people will do in their fall-out shelters in case of an atomic attack. It seems that most people take it for granted that they would defend their shelters with guns against neighbors who want to intrude...This whole discussion shows what kind of

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me access. Some of Merton’s letters to Fromm are published in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (Ed. William H. Shannon.)

103. Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, p. 81.

104. Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 202.

life we would have, even if millions of people could stay alive by protecting themselves from fall-out in shelters. Of course big cities are written off, and those who would survive would be the part of the population in the country, removed from the cities. It would be a life of complete barbarism...Neighbor defending his life against neighbor by force, children starving, life reduced to its most primitive components of survival. Anyone who believes that in this way we can save freedom, I think, is just dishonest or cannot see clearly.<sup>105</sup>

Passages like this one indicate that Fromm seemed to think that people were *aware* of the potential for catastrophe, and yet the impending catastrophe did not motivate them to revolt, and if the catastrophe were actually to occur, would be more likely to lead to barbarism than to socialism.

A quite different approach to the question of catastrophe can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Gershom Scholem. In Benjamin's case, although there are certainly links between his messianism and Marxism,<sup>106</sup> his conception of messianic time as a rupture from history—a “Messianic cessation of happening”—is oddly un-dialectical for a Marxist.<sup>107</sup> Fromm's conception of the messianic event as an outgrowth of history, not a break from it, differs dramatically from Walter Benjamin's assertion that, “Messianism demands a complete repudiation of the world as it is, placing its hope in a future whose realization can only be brought about by the destruction of the old order.”<sup>108</sup>

Gershom Scholem, Benjamin's longtime collaborator and correspondent, likewise emphasized the catastrophic nature of messianism. Perhaps more than any other Jewish messianic thinker of his time, Scholem stressed that the messianic event would result from an apocalyptic rupture, a result of “*transcendence breaking in on history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source.*”<sup>109</sup> It is telling of Fromm and Scholem's deeply entrenched intellectual differences, that while Fromm and Scholem were participating in the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus*, Fromm led a study group on the Biblical book of Exodus (in which the Jewish people made history through their confrontation with the Pharaoh) and Scholem led a group on the book of Daniel (which

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105. Erich Fromm, Letter to Thomas Merton (Thomas Merton Center), October 9, 1961.

106. Benjamin Lane, *Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing Through the Catastrophe* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 9.

107. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

109. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 10.

Fromm considered to be an example of catastrophic messianism).<sup>110</sup> Decades later, Fromm noted that Scholem's view was "that the concept of the messianic age was to be virtually a catastrophic one."<sup>111</sup> It is also telling that, according to Habermas, Scholem viewed Marx and Freud (Fromm's two intellectual heroes), as heretics influenced by the same dangerous spirit as the false Messiahs and the Enlightenment.<sup>112</sup>

Marcuse, for his part, often makes references to "catastrophe" and quotes some messianic remarks of Walter Benjamin's very approvingly, in both *Eros and Civilization*<sup>113</sup> and *One-Dimensional Man*.<sup>114</sup> Marcuse held that the distortion of language by capitalism meant that the revolutionary potential of terms like "hope" and "love" had been severely inhibited. Consequently, revolutionary activity must not—contra Fromm—attempt to build upon concepts already present under capitalism ("love," "hope," "progress," etc.) but rather attempt to create an opening or rupture into which something *entirely new* could enter. In a passage worth quoting at length, Marcuse suggests sabotaging the mainstream media, the "mere absence" of which, he suggests, would "plunge the individual into a traumatic void," from which he or she would obtain a profoundly new understanding of self and from the rubble of which, society would be reconstructed for the better.<sup>115</sup> Such proposals were deeply worrying to Fromm, who held that successful revolutions are motivated by a radical kind of productivity (in the sense of Marx's conception "species-being," or human nature as fundamentally productive). For Marcuse, the revolution is sparked not through building up dual power or through party-building, but rather by a mere *absence* of what has become commonplace and by an ensuing *crisis*. While Fromm attempts to build upon the present, Marcuse's approach seems to depend more on destroying and then rebuilding society.

## (1) Imagining the Future

Finally, Mendieta's third point remains to be addressed: whether the messianic future is "imaginable." In contradistinction to a number of other thinkers in the Frankfurt School, Fromm held that the messianic future *is* imaginable from the standpoint of the present. He saw potential in a kind of "utopian"

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110. Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas: An Illustrated Biography*, trans. Ian Portman and Manuela Kunkel (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 42, and Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, pp. 133-4.

111. Fromm, *On Being Human*, pp. 141-2.

112. Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, Religion, and Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), p. 145.

113. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 233.

114. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 257.

115. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-6.



thought, as he argued in his “Forward” to Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and “Afterword” to George Orwell’s *1984*. Although there are certainly limits to one’s ability to describe the socialist future while living under the conditions of capitalism—no doubt Fromm would think it impossible to so completely understand the present and predict the future as to decide, as Fourier had attempted, how garbage-collection would work under socialism—Fromm nevertheless saw some potential in the utopian imagination. Furthermore, his openness to the Enlightenment and his rejection of the view that the messianic event would have to result from an ahistorical rupture, allowed him to use certain concepts present under capitalism to describe the socialist future. For example, we can legitimately say that the socialist future would be one of “love,” and it is not the case that we cannot know anything about love under capitalism. Fromm writes (largely in response to Marcuse),

[Some] share the opinion of the basic incompatibility between love and normal secular life within our society. They arrive at the result that to speak of love today means only to participate in the general fraud; they claim that only a martyr or a mad person can love in the world of today, hence that all discussion of love is nothing but preaching. [*Author’s note:* Marcuse had accused Fromm of “sermonizing” in their famous debate in *Dissent* magazine.] This very respectable viewpoint lends itself readily to a rationalization of cynicism... This “radicalism” results in moral nihilism.<sup>116</sup>

Fromm continues, defending his view that love is not inconceivable or impossible under capitalism:

I am of the conviction that the answer to the absolute incompatibility of love and “normal” life is correct only in an abstract sense. The *principle* underlying capitalistic society and the *principle* of love are incompatible. But modern society seen concretely is a complex phenomenon... “Capitalism” is in itself a complex and constantly changing structure which still permits of a good deal of non-conformity and of personal latitude.<sup>117</sup>

It seems that Fromm is pointing out that the seeds of any new society are present in the preceding one; while catastrophic messianism suggests the need for a radical rupture from current society, Fromm preferred to nurture the seeds of the next society that are already present within the current one.

Although a helpful rubric for elucidating Fromm’s messianism, it has been seen that the aspects of messianism described by Eduardo Mendieta do

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116. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 131.

117. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

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not adequately explain Fromm's prophetic messianism, but rather in large part describe a catastrophic messianism that may be found in the work of other members of the Frankfurt School, such as Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, while Fromm differs in conceiving of the messianic age as a product of a this-worldly, historical, human effort. In rejecting the view that the messianic age must arise from catastrophe or a rupture from history, and in critiquing false conceptions of hope, Fromm presents a vision for revolutionary action. An attempt to recover this alternative version of messianism should lead critical theorists to a thoughtful reengagement with Fromm, a reengagement that is currently under way but still quite fledgling. In the process, unique trends in messianism can be differentiated, and the left may be able to better articulate what it is that we mean when we express our hope or faith in the coming of a future that fulfills our utopian longings.

Although Fromm knew that messianism had suffered severe setbacks in the twentieth century (the Second International's capitulation to German nationalism, fascism, the devolution of the Soviet experiment into bureaucratic "state capitalism," and the rise of the nuclear arms race)—he was not naïve about how arduous a struggle it would be to recover the prophetic-messianic spirit—he remained committed to a socialist humanism which saw the masses as capable of envisioning and creating a future that could better meet their needs. Today, in a time of heightened threat of catastrophe, both economic and ecological, it seems to this writer more imperative than ever that we adopt neither a passive, "waiting" stance—we cannot rely upon the Obama administration to play the role of savior, entering history to solve our crises for us—nor a strategy of blanket destruction, attempting to "force the Messiah" without building a mass movement, in the hopes that crises will spur revolt. Rather, the socialist movement has much to learn from Fromm's "expansive humanism," as we continue to further the prophetic-messianic vision. — • —