

REDISCOVERING ERICH FROMM

Robert Genter

Lawrence J. Friedman. *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. xxxv + 410 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$29.95.

In a scene from Elia Kazan's 1957 film, *A Face in the Crowd*, a group of writers discusses the surprising popularity of Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes, a Southern drifter-turned-television star whose ability to manipulate his viewing audience into buying certain products or supporting particular political candidates deeply troubles them. Hanging on their office wall is a sign that reads "Escape from Freedom," a reference to German psychologist Erich Fromm's 1941 study of the rise of fascism in Europe. Kazan's nod to Fromm's book reflects not only the importance that *Escape from Freedom* had in framing discussions in the United States about the appeal of totalitarianism but also the widespread influence that Fromm had within American culture in general. In this well-researched and splendidly written biography, Lawrence Friedman reveals the many "lives" of this influential European intellectual—psychoanalyst, social psychologist, peace activist, self-help guru, German elitist, democratic socialist, radical humanist, and religious thinker. Throughout, Friedman reminds us of the important legacy of this peculiar "Renaissance man" (p. xix), whose academic star has waned since the height of his influence in the 1960s, but who "helped to pave an alternative path for his day and for ours, one contoured by love and what he called humanism" (p. xxxv).

In many ways, Fromm's fame rested on the success, both in popular and academic circles, of *Escape from Freedom*, which shaped mid-twentieth-century interpretations of totalitarianism. Most American social scientists in the 1940s and 1950s—David Riesman, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Paul Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, Gabriel Almond, and many others—leaned heavily on Fromm's work to explain not just the appeal of totalitarian movements but the formation of political beliefs in general. Borrowing themes from Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, Fromm argued that the origins of totalitarianism rest in the changes produced by the rise of capitalism, which uprooted the foundations of medieval society and liberated the individual from the bonds of family, church, and caste. Free to determine his or her way in the

world, the modern individual ironically came to feel lonely and anxious, particularly in the advanced stages of capitalism in the twentieth century, when large bureaucratic structures and faceless industries dominated the landscape. According to Fromm, freedom therefore became a burden, leading the individual to abdicate responsibility for his or her own existence and to submit instead to a totalitarian state as an antidote to his or her psychological malaise. Fromm characterized this “escape from freedom” in psychoanalytic terms, seeing within the modern individual sadomasochistic impulses that led to the individual subordinating himself or herself to domineering state authorities while encouraging the ruthless destruction of others as scapegoats for the individual’s powerless condition. Politics, argued Fromm, became an outlet for individual psychological pathologies. *Escape from Freedom* resonated with intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic trying to understand the rise of fanaticism, nationalism, and ethnic and racial prejudices.

Naturally, as Friedman argues, Fromm’s personal history shaped his understanding of totalitarianism. Born in 1900 in Frankfurt, Germany, to lower-middle-class Jewish parents, Fromm struggled to escape the jingoistic culture around him. He also struggled, as Friedman details, to escape the “smothering possessiveness” of his mother and the “neurotic unevenness” of his father (p. 6). Luckily, Fromm found others in his life to guide him, including his father’s employee, Oswald Sussman, who introduced him to the writings of Karl Marx; his uncle, Emmanuel Fromm, who acquainted him with the riches of European culture; and Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, the leader of Frankfurt’s Orthodox Jewish community, who helped Fromm embrace Jewish mysticism. All three traditions—Marxism, European high culture, and Jewish mysticism—shaped his intellectual development. But, as Friedman notes, Fromm also struggled as a young adult to understand the “bloody and traumatic” experience of World War I (p. 9). After meeting and falling in love with Frieda Reichmann while completing his studies at the University of Heidelberg, Fromm was introduced by Reichmann to psychoanalysis, which helped Fromm to understand the depths of the human psyche. Although ten years younger than her, Fromm eventually married Reichmann and, with her help, immersed himself in the burgeoning German psychoanalytic community, studying at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and opening his first psychoanalytic practice. As fate would have it, Fromm was also a member of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute, which shared the same building with the Institute for Social Research, the Marxist-oriented group colloquially known as the Frankfurt School, led by Max Horkheimer. Interested in incorporating psychoanalytic themes into their research on advanced industrial capitalism, Horkheimer and his compatriots reached out to Fromm to help advance their brand of interdisciplinary Marxism.

Friedman argues for the importance of Fromm to the early intellectual history of the Frankfurt School and rightfully challenges scholars such as Russell Jacoby and Christopher Lasch, who have either ignored or mocked both Fromm's empirical research and his theoretical perspective. In fact, Fromm's early work—in particular, his study of the political attitudes of the German working class in the 1930s—set the framework for later classics such as Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*. Through a blending of Marx and Freud, Fromm argued that the libidinal development of the individual, which Freud had extensively detailed, was not inherently stable but continuously modified by the demands of changing social and economic conditions. Thus, the individual's "social character," as Fromm termed it, was a product of "the entire interaction between changing instincts and changing social forms" (p. 36). Using this analytic lens, Fromm argued that the attitudes of German workers, which he measured through an elaborate questionnaire, contradicted their underlying social character, which explained why so many espoused leftist political opinions but failed to join progressive movements. Consequently, Fromm and his colleagues worried about the possibility of authoritarian sentiments residing within the German working class, and much intellectual effort was spent figuring out the socioeconomic conditions, particularly within the family structure, that led to reactionary beliefs.

Fromm brought this analytic perspective to America in the 1930s when he helped to secure the relocation of the Frankfurt School to Columbia University during the rise of fascism in Germany. But by then, Fromm had already begun to distance himself, both personally and intellectually, from Horkheimer's group. Mocked by Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse for his revisions of Freudian theory, Fromm separated from the Frankfurt School in 1939 and quickly found a new circle of academic supporters in the neo-Freudian movement led by Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, and others who were sympathetic toward Fromm's efforts to trace man's changing social character. Like Horney, whom he briefly romanced in the 1930s, Fromm came to see limitations within orthodox psychoanalysis, which, as Fromm argued, had incorrectly universalized the Oedipus complex, had sterilized the therapeutic relationship, and had ignored the impact of social changes on libidinal development. In response, Fromm dissected the ways in which modern society, buttressed by orthodox psychoanalysis, distorted the healthy development of the individual. The result was a series of books, including *Man for Himself* and *The Sane Society*, which established Fromm's reputation as a sharp critic of consumer culture, social conformity, and modern capitalism and as a defender of individual spontaneity and creative living. Many American intellectuals were convinced, and Fromm's ideas shaped the arguments of several popular mid-century books such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s, *The Vital Center*.

Friedman openly admits that he did not want to write an intellectual biography, recognizing that works such as Daniel Burston's *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (1991) and Lawrence Wilde's *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity* (2004) have already traced Fromm's intellectual development and outlined the themes in his corpus. To add to these studies, Friedman argues that knowledge of Fromm's "biographical particulars" (p. 67) is necessary to understand the urgency of Fromm's prose, and Friedman does his best to link Fromm's personal history to his writings. For instance, Friedman argues that the tone of *Escape from Freedom*, blending Fromm's pessimism about the psychological condition of modern man with his optimism about the persistence of democratic and humanistic values, emerged in part from his efforts while writing the book to help friends and family members—in particular, his mother, Rosa—escape Nazi Germany. Other biographical tidbits, including similar troubled moments in Fromm's personal life, also help to enliven Friedman's efforts to present a clearer picture of the German thinker. Friedman describes the collapse of both Fromm's marriage to Reichmann, due to their age difference, and the tragic end of his second marriage to Henny Gurland, who committed suicide in 1952. He argues that the tone of Fromm's very successful 1956 book, *The Art of Loving*, which called for a form of love that transcended narcissistic self-involvement and extended to all of humankind, was due both to his troubled romantic past and to his burgeoning relationship and eventual marriage to Annis Freeman.

Such biographical details are too few, however, due in part to the dearth of archival sources on Fromm outside of his voluminous published and unpublished works; consequently Friedman's book reads more like an intellectual biography than he had intended. Recognizing this, Friedman makes the mistake of trying to analyze Fromm's personal life too much, outlining, for instance, the "emotional triangle" of "exuberance, depression, and marginality" (p. xxx) that supposedly shaped Fromm's behavior throughout his life. But Friedman does little with this analytic lens, and, in the end, readers will still be confused about the character of a man who wrote poetically about love but continued to have affairs most of his life; who talked about relatedness but was often self-centered and distant, even to his patients in therapy; and who warned against the perils of consumerism but enjoyed fancy German baked goods and expensive wine. As Friedman admits, Fromm was a "flawed man" (p. xxxv) whose explorations into Jewish mysticism and Zen Buddhism testified not only to his open-minded approach to resolving the contradictions of the world but also to his own personal contradictions.

Friedman does not fully unravel these contradictions and chooses instead to focus more on Fromm's writings and his political commitments. Although Fromm's influence within intellectual circles eventually waned, Friedman argues that "his general influence expanded in the 1950s, underscoring a gap between academic and popular discourse" (p. 197). Friedman makes much of

Fromm's role as a public intellectual and of his political activism, from helping to found the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in 1957 to helping to fund the creation of Amnesty International. Fromm also advocated for American recognition of communist China; he supported calls for the creation of a Jewish-Arab state in the Middle East; he established connections with the vibrant socialist community in Eastern Europe; and he actively supported the American Socialist Party. But, as Friedman notes, Fromm hoped to extend his influence into governmental circles, befriending Senator J. William Fulbright and presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson and even contacting President John Kennedy, who was apparently familiar with Fromm's frequent newspaper editorials calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament. Yet Friedman strains to convince that Fromm's role as a public intellectual was comparable to others around him, such as David Riesman—or Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose political influence, at least in terms of government policy, was much greater. If anything, Friedman should have done a bit more to explain Fromm's *readership*, describing the general reception of his books outside of academic reviews to explain why, for example, millions of copies of *The Art of Loving* have been sold over the decades.

Indeed, readers will wish that Friedman had offered a more spirited defense of Fromm's intellectual legacy and his importance today. For instance, Friedman seems to accept the criticisms of Fromm made by the Frankfurt School, arguing that Herbert Marcuse won their 1955 debate over Freudian theory in the pages of *Dissent* magazine. Over the years, Fromm routinely criticized Freud's metapsychology, refusing to believe, as Adorno and Marcuse did, that emancipation was predicated upon the individual's separation from existing society. Unlike other members of the Frankfurt School, Fromm took history seriously and argued that what constituted human nature was actually mediated by shifting socioeconomic conditions that needed to be analyzed. Of course, as Friedman notes, Fromm's history was often wrong (see, for instance, his incorrect reading of lower-middle-class support for Hitler); but he understood that any vision of a utopian alternative or of a liberated subjectivity needed to relate, at least in some measure, to current society. Consequently, Fromm never retreated to the aesthetic realm in the face of political despair, as Theodor Adorno did, and never supported the excesses of the student movement like Herbert Marcuse did. He also never fell for the confusions of staunch anticommunism as Sidney Hook or Lionel Trilling did (or as Adorno did when he returned to Germany).

Of course, many of Fromm's books appear dated today, couched in the language of the early writings of Karl Marx, which Fromm helped to translate and popularize in the 1960s. Fromm deserves credit for helping to keep Marxist thought relevant at the height of the Cold War and for helping to remind the New Left of the legacy of the Old Left. But his specific political vision,

centered on a decentralized, communitarian-based society (a vision shared by Paul Goodman and Dwight Macdonald), seemed to betray his commitment to finding an alternative from within present-day society. Similarly, his overwrought concern with questions of alienation and his criticisms of consumer society no longer hold the same relevance today as they did in the 1960s. As Friedman notes, most of Fromm's later works such as *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* and *To Have or to Be?* were repetitive, borrowing from themes he had developed in the 1930s and making few references to his contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, Friedman ends his book abruptly, after spending only a few pages on Fromm's death and funeral in 1980 and offering little summary of Fromm's many "lives." Friedman might be correct that "*Escape from Freedom* remains critical to our lives nearly seven decades after publication" (p. 67) but, other than noting the existence of "authoritarian and semiauthoritarian governments" today, does not explain why it is critical. In our post-9/11 world, does Fromm help us to understand the appeal of radical political and religious movements? Does he point the way forward to a sane society? Perhaps the legacy of Fromm is less the specific prescriptions he offered and more his willingness to engage, with enthusiasm and love, the existential issues facing all of us.

Robert Genter is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Nassau Community College. He is also the author of *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (2010). He is currently working on a new manuscript tentatively titled *Cold War Confessions: Speaking the Self in the Age of McCarthyism*.