

The Personal Ideology of Erich Fromm

by Marco Bacciagaluppi

The term “ideology” is generally associated with Karl Marx. A more recent discussion of the subject is that by Karl Mannheim (*Ideology and Utopia*, Routledge, London 1960). Following Mannheim, I consider ideology to be a mental fiction designed to veil the true nature of a social or psychological situation in order to stabilize it. In this article I examine what I believe to be the personal ideology of Erich Fromm. In psychoanalytic circles Fromm is either ignored or unconditionally supported by a circle of staunch admirers. I myself am a great admirer of Fromm, but this is all the more reason for examining certain limitations of his, in order to avoid his thinking becoming immobilized in an orthodoxy.

An Overview

Erich Fromm was born in Frankfurt in 1900 of Jewish parents. His roots were orthodox Jewish. His paternal grandfather and great-grandfather were rabbis. He later assimilated the great German cultural tradition. His teachers were Karl Jaspers and Alfred Weber, the brother of Max Weber. He later passed from classical sociology to the Frankfurt school of critical sociology of Horkheimer and Adorno. Finally, he moved to the United States where, together with Sullivan, he gave rise to the interpersonal-cultural approach in psychoanalysis. His most important contribution was psychoanalytic social psychology, according to which every society tries to perpetuate itself by creating the suitable character structures in individuals. This is the social character, made up of traits common to the majority. In creating the social character society avails itself of the family. In this field he carried out important empirical research.

At a socio-cultural level, therefore, Fromm came from an outstanding background and gave brilliant contributions. Although he was a careful reader of Marx and had a clear view of ideology, at a personal level he unwittingly made up a personal ideology in order to prevent himself from seeing certain painful childhood experiences. By “seeing,” of course, I do not mean only an intellectual grasp but also and above all the re-living of experiences in all their emotional impact.

A biographical sketch

In what follows I shall select those traits which led me to my theory, with special regard for Fromm’s somatic disorders.

Fromm was an only child. In an interview towards the end of his life (cited in: Funk, R., *Erich Fromm*, Rowohlt, Reinbek 1983; my translation from the original German) he says: “My father was very neurotic...anxious about anything which concerned me. ...He wanted me to remain a child of three.” He describes his mother as “very depressed.” “She was always crying...I felt that I had to defend her from my father.” On the other hand, his father “loved the orthodox/traditional Jewish world...The religious world of the father exerted more influence on the young boy...and freed him somewhat from his mother.” Fromm soon showed he wished to move away from both parents. He wanted to go and study the Talmud in Lithuania but his parents objected.

Fromm had three wives but no children of his own. His first wife, Frieda Reichmann, was ten years older than he. Before becoming his wife, she was his first psychoanalyst. They married in 1926 and separated four years later. In 1931-32 and again

in 1938 Fromm developed tuberculosis and stayed in Davos. Georg Groddeck was outspoken in regarding Fromm’s illness as psychosomatic. He said “he had to cure his tuberculosis because he couldn’t admit the failure of his marriage with Frieda.” (Funk, op. cit.)

After World War II Fromm developed even more serious health problems. He suffered a first myocardial infarction in 1966 when still in the United States, a second one in 1977 when he was back in Locarno in Europe, a third in 1978, and a fourth and fatal one in 1980.

Psychodynamics

A depressed mother is unable to give to the infant but instead wants to receive. Instead of giving care to the infant and defending it from predators she herself becomes a predator. The infant who is predisposed to develop stronger attachment in the presence of predators paradoxically clings to the very person who threatens it. Later, the parent may use other mechanisms to keep the child bound, such as various types of seduction. In Fromm’s case, one such mechanism was the implicit request to defend the mother from the father.

The anxious father also kept Erich bound although through Judaism he provided a means for him to separate from the mother. Fromm later made use of Judaism to separate from both parents. He turned at first to rabbis he admired and later to other Jewish figures such as Marx and Freud. According to Funk (op. cit.), Fromm drew his orientation from these Jewish roots towards the spiritual sources of man. Fromm himself defined this orientation as “pre-modern.” In these traditional Jewish roots we may see a refuge from a predatory modern society and a turning back to the primordial matriarchal culture. Fromm later found this source described by Bachofen.

By separating from his parents Fromm satisfied his second basic inborn need, his need for autonomy. However, he lost touch with the suffering infantile part of his personality that was tied to his mother in an anxious attachment and which he never really saw and overcame. The adult side of his personality knew well that his anxious father and depressed mother were trying to detain him and he wanted to separate from them. This side of his personality, so full of stimulating theories, left the infantile part in the clutches of his predators. Fromm had an intellectual understanding of his relationship with his mother and he described it in the interview but he refrained from fully re-experiencing that relationship.

Frieda Reichmann, ten years older than himself and his first analyst, was obviously a mother figure. If Frieda was the mother, then Fromm experienced an incestuous symbiosis with her. This was one of his concepts but he did not apply it to himself. Separation from her was very painful, but Fromm, completely taken by his autonomous interests, had lost touch with his infantile self and the pain was only expressed through the body by developing tuberculosis. This of course refers to the psychological component of Fromm’s illness, mediated by the effects of stress on the immune system. It in no way detracts from the crucial importance of Koch’s bacillus. To quote the title of the English translation of one of Alice Miller’s books, “the body never lies.” (A. Miller, *The Body Never Lies*, Norton,

New York & London 2005) Groddeck was right in his diagnosis, but Fromm did not succeed in taking him seriously. His marital separation was definitive in 1940 and, perhaps in anticipation of his divorce, he had relapsed in 1938.

His myocardial infarctions began after the war. These were increasingly dramatic and dangerous somatic symptoms. I suggest that they expressed the unrecognized suffering due to the failure of a complete fulfillment of autonomy. Fromm had reached this fulfillment at the level of his thinking but had not succeeded in achieving a full marital relationship which would have separated him definitely from his mother. Again, as in the case of Fromm's tuberculosis, the psychological component was presumably mediated by the effects of stress but also required other factors in order to arrive at the final outcome. A recent discussion of the relationship between psychological factors and heart disease was given by Charles Nemeroff, M.D., Ph.D., as the Opening Night Speaker at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry ("Heartache & Heartbreak: The Remarkable Relationship Between Depression and Cardiovascular Disease"). Fromm never had children of his own and his second wife was a widow with a son. He felt he was not allowed to father a child because his mother, in an inverted relationship, was his child. The denial of a vital possibility leads to despair.

Again, Fromm did not pay heed to the messages from his body. In the last years of his life he consistently practiced self-analysis and Buddhist meditation, but he neglected to analyze the psychological aspect of his infarctions. Had he paid heed to the messages from his body, his infantile part would have felt understood and would have emerged from solitude and despair.

Towards the end of his life he felt threatened by someone who was supposed to look after him (Rainer Funk, personal communication). He needed that person and could not break away. A threatening caregiver is a parent who, instead of being caregiving, becomes a predator. The last infarction was so severe that the hospital in Locarno advised transfer to Zurich. Fromm was taken by ambulance and died there. The traumatized infantile part of his personality at first displayed the symptomatic behavior of trusting a threatening caregiver. The consequent despair then showed up in the psychological component of the infarction. The infarction may be viewed as a desperate and vain attempt to leave Locarno and escape the predator, but in the end the predator killed him.

To synthesize Fromm's somatic symptoms as regards the psychological component, the tuberculosis may be regarded as a reaction to separation from a good aspect of the ambivalent mother, the first myocardial infarctions as a sign of the subjection to the predatory mother who prevented full autonomy, and the final infarction as a complete submission to the predator re-experienced with the caregiver.

These vicissitudes may also be interpreted at a biological level, which is necessarily reductive. Fromm's intellectual hyperactivity may be viewed as a form of chronic hypomania, the expression of a gene for bipolar disorder transmitted by the mother, who thus provided both the genotype and the chronically traumatic environment with which the genotype interacted to give the phenotype. A severe trauma was superimposed onto the customary expression of the gene when separation from Frieda occurred. Instead of a manic or depressive episode, Fromm reacted with the somatic symptom of tuberculosis. Later, the lack

of children was a long-lasting traumatic situation which led to the infarctions. The final infarction was due to the most severe trauma of all, the explicit presence of the predator.

The personal ideology

Fromm never wanted to set up a school with an attendant ideology, as Freud did. However, without realizing it, he built up a private ideology of his own, in order not to look at his too painful remote past.

Fromm's personal ideology consists in a set of concepts aimed at preventing himself from looking too closely at his relationship with his mother. In his posthumous book *The Revision of Psychoanalysis* (Westview Press, Boulder etc, 1992), Fromm states that "the infant for biological reasons passes through a phase of intense 'mother fixation'." (p. 40) Fixation, of course, is a Freudian concept. It implies that this is a normal phase. Actually, according to John Bowlby (his views are summarized in *A Secure Base*, Basic Books, New York 1988), what is normal is an infant's attachment behavior. If the mother responds with the complementary caregiving behavior, secure attachment then leads to exploration and finally to increased autonomy. If the mother's response is not appropriate, insecure attachment follows. The mother's most inappropriate response is role reversal, described above in relation to Fromm's mother.

However skewed, "fixation" is Fromm's psychogenetic view. In any case, this view is subordinated to "existential" considerations. Fromm states (op. cit., *ibid.*): "This tie to the mother...is one of the 'spiritual' answers to human existence... we would be thinking too much in genetic terms if we were to focus on the attachment to mother, rather than on the function of this experience."

Fromm displays the same disregard for the real relationship with the mother when referring to transference. In another section of the book he discusses fixation on idols. "The average person...carries within himself a deep longing to believe in an all-powerful, all-wise, and all-caring figure." (p. 42) "I suggest that we call all of these figures by the generic name 'idols.' An idol is the figure to which a person has transferred his own strength and powers." (*ibid.*) All this description is quite to the point at a socio-cultural level. Then Fromm goes on to say: "The most frequently observable example of the mobilization of the 'idolatric passion' is the phenomenon of 'transference' (op. cit., p. 45). "The crucial problem is how one interprets the transference - as a repetition of childhood experience or as the mobilization of the ubiquitous desire for an idol?...this longing is not necessarily...a repetition of childhood experience but, rather, is part of the 'human condition'." (p. 51)

This is where I suggest that Fromm's personal ideology comes in. His discussion of "idols," to which he brings his sophisticated culture, ranging from the Old Testament proscription of idols to the hegelo-marxian concept of alienation, is used to downplay the importance of the early real relationship with the mother.

At the cultural level Fromm had an infallible instinct for the most vital trends. After his passionate defence of Ferenczi in 1935 he integrated Sullivan's interpersonal orientation, which was a continuation of Ferenczi, with his own cultural orientation. Unfortunately, he was unable to address this vitality to his suffering infantile self and therefore subjected it to the antivital internal predator. His Jewish roots taught him to despise predatory culture, based on profit, but he was unable to look at predation in his own childhood.

We could say that Ferenczi and Fromm both died of ideology. But in Ferenczi's case ideology came from outside (the Freudian orthodoxy which condemned him). In Fromm's case he created his own ideology in order not to look at the internal predator. Not having looked at the internal predator, he submitted to an external one who killed him.

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The Wolf

by Leah Davidson, M.D.

Introduction: This story was written at the same time as *The Tin of Snuff* (Academy Forum, Vol. 57 #1, spring 2013) and is a metaphoric mirror image of the crippling effects of segregation on the white man's psyche. People in the story are either shallow and unknowing or crippled by what they understand of their life situations. The Wolf in Paul Syke's dream, which appears against the background of a magnificent house, is a symbol of the darkness and the dangers of apartheid, which was always lurking underneath the good life of the white man in South Africa.

Sheila and Jerry, coming down the grey steps of the hotel, agreed that it was a perfect day. To what purpose they would put the afternoon had not yet been decided, but it was certain that a combination of windless sky and sunshine would bless the undertaking.

"If only we had a car!" wished Jerry. "It's an ideal day to take the kids for a drive."

Ahead of them the "kids," two in number, crossed the street with their "nanny." And tumbled buckets and laughter into the sand.

"Oh, Jeanette!" Sheila reproved catching up with them, "Mind the gentleman's book. Look! You've kicked sand all over it!"

"I'm so sorry," she glittered impersonally at the man beside her, then catching sight of the unpadded calves stretched like flat oars on the towel, she added, "I'm really terribly sorry."

"That's alright, no harm done." He smiled and blew the remaining grains from the page with tolerant acceptance.

Sheila removed her beach wrap, conscious of her figure molded into the new black costume. "I'm glad I insisted on the one with the lace insets," she thought. "Something novel and a little daring – that's my style!" "This is the life!" she murmured snuggling against Jerry's chest.

"S'allright," Jerry pronounced from under the hat he used as a beach umbrella. "But I still wish we had brought the car."

The man with the crippled legs turned a page of his book and Jeanette, moving back to admire her sand castle, promptly sat on it.

"Hullo," said the man, "and what's your name?"

"J'nette. And what's yours?"

"Paul. How old are you, Jeanette?"

"Free. And you?"

"Oh, old as old," he laughed. "I'm the old man of the sea!"

"Have you got pennies?" she suddenly asked.

"Lots."

"Will you buy us an ice-cream, me and Dennis?"

"Really, Jeanette!!" Sheila sat up: "You mustn't ask people for things. Jerry, do tell her! She's always doing it."

"Please let me," Paul intervened. "It's a pleasure. I don't often get a chance to treat a pretty girl to an ice-cream."

"One really shouldn't spoil them you know, but it's very kind of you, and just this once..." she relented, disarmed by the secret pride of one whose children are admired.

"Come on, you two," Paul called, strapping thick walking irons to his legs. Saucer-eyed, Jeanette watched him struggle to his feet.

"What are those?" she asked.

"He's a robot-man, you silly!" explained six-year old Dennis. "Can't you see?"

"Shush!" whispered Paul. "It's a secret! I come from Mars. In Mars the ice-creams are as big as footballs..." he continued as he led them with weighty thrusts along the pavement.

"Amazing man!" commented Jerry, watching him out of reach. "I'd be ashamed to come down here like that."

"Why?" said Sheila. "He's not a leper. He's got a right to swim if he wants to."

"Yes, of course. But a man is not a man if he can be like that and not mind. People staring at him, I mean. Look at Annie here."

Amazed amusement openly registered on the child-face of the servant, formalized to pity at the mention of her name. "Hau, poor master, shame," she politely offered.

"Holiday resorts are all alike," Paul reflected, for the sea at noon had turned the color of a shaded leaf, the color of reflection. "The same crowds, the same children, the same mothers, fat and old, or young and natty in their bathing costumes. Birth, copulation. Death. Death. Birth. Copulation. Death. That's T.S. Eliot."

The surf thundered the words behind him on the quiet noon-day beach, on the golden crescent of sand where he lay flat as an eel, wriggling. He reached the blue spot of towel and dropped on it face down heaving. Warmth waxed through him, sand-given, sun-given, till his blood ceased its canter, ebbing and flowing like the tide in rhythmic regularity.

"Some treatment!" he grunted, satisfied with his achievement. A dog-eared book fluttered in the breeze beside him, the pages white as bones in a shadowless desert. From the red trunks up, sturdy knots of brown muscle rippled to a thick dark tangle of hair, wet-black and glistening. The tides of other summers sang in that stubborn head, eyes grey and laughing, the mouth and chin firm. The rest was robot.

"Apt definition – out of the mouths of babes," he thought, recalling the morning. The mother had been embarrassed by his irons. Queer how they couldn't bear to look straight at you, as though it might hurt! The doctors did, but then they also only saw the robot man. It was a game of see-what-we-can-do. Before the branch had seared, before that chilly spring, he might have...