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Feminism, Humanism, and Erich Fromm

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In recently writing about Erich Fromm's work having greater relevance to contemporary feminist thought than usually recognized, I criticized Fromm's use of the word »man« (L. Chancer, 2017). My assumption was that Fromm was living in places and circumstances that did not expose him to the sharp explosion of ideas happening with second and later waves of feminisms; otherwise, he would have changed his conventional but historically sexist usage. However, evidence from later Fromm texts shows that Fromm continued to use »man« purposefully.¹ It is possible that something was lost in translation from German to English; more likely he could have changed the linguistic habit but did not. Why? And what does Fromm's persistence bode, if anything, about the compatibility of his ideas and feminist theories broadly speaking?

Fromm may have stubbornly held onto using »man« out of conviction that this was part of clear writing; his work is admirable for its characteristically strong writing and wonderful accessibility that led to virtually all his books becoming bestsellers in the one to many millions of copies. Indeed, in one place, he argued that »to say ›he or she‹ each time would be awkward« and that »it would be somewhat pedantic to avoid the word [›man‹] in order to make

the point that the author does not use it in the spirit of patriarchalism« (E. Fromm, 1973a, p. 20). But Fromm may have also persisted from a sense that using »man« had enough of a history of generic associations as to keep his meaning firmly focused on people – on »everyone« – as was his humanistic intention.

Towards the very end of his career, in *To Have or to Be?* (1976a), Fromm makes explicit reference to such supposedly undifferentiated usage in the humanist tradition, citing also the fact that in his native German the word *Mensch* (as opposed to *Mann*) is set aside for precisely this function. While I respect these explanations, it needs also be emphasized that language – as theorists from Foucault through Derrida and Butler well understood – matters. To write and refer to »man« rather than »people« is arguably to perpetuate, rather than undermine, the sexist and male-dominated history of social theorizing itself. Perhaps stubbornly myself, I suspect that Fromm would have changed this practice had he been closer to and participating in passionate feminist debates from the 1960s through the 1980s – that is, intensely involved with day-to-day discussions that did eventually alter the lens and writing of many (male) theorists. Yet whether he made the change or not, Fromm scholars in contemporary contexts ought to remedy the usage issue themselves/ourselves. Otherwise, Fromm's ideas may remain alienating and relatively removed from, rather than seen as compatible in some important ways with, feminist theorists.

¹ Fromm has an explicit discussion of the usage of »man« in the preambles to both *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973a) and *To Have or to Be?* (1976a)



My purpose here, though, diverges slightly: if Fromm meant »man« (even mistakenly) to stress the humanism that was intended by his work, this begs an interesting question as to whether feminist and humanist ideas are compatible in ways beneficial for feminist and social theories overall – both, not either/or. I wish to argue that humanistic frameworks, tending to be demeaned from the 1980s onward as essentialist and insensitive to differences between people, are nonetheless worth looking at again – a theoretical recuperation already begun in Kieran Durkin’s work (2014), and reiterated here through a simultaneously feminist and Frommian lens.

For even if such connections were not made by Fromm in his own time, combining humanistic and feminist perspectives taps non-essentialist *analytic* categories. These categories can be re-interpreted to show gender categories in ways that contemporary post-structural and intersectional feminists can appreciate, that is, as highly flexible and also encompassing commonalities as well as differences between people. For instance, in my own work *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness* (1992), I borrowed from Fromm’s use of masochism and sadism as processes that involve common psychosocial dynamics at the same time differing by gender, class, race, sexualities, and other social categories. Something similar can also be seen in Fromm’s *The Art of Loving* (1956a), in which love is treated as a psychological phenomenon that has universal characteristics, which are nevertheless experienced divergently across the different social categories in line with their attendant social inequalities. In other words, in this originally best-selling work, which is no longer read or cited frequently,² Fromm made universal claims that can also be interpreted with sensitivity vis-à-vis differences. Nothing about his analysis was »essentially« limited to

² A notable exception being bell hooks [Gloria Jean Watkins], 2000, who approvingly quotes *The Art of Loving* on numerous occasions in her *All About Love: New Visions*.

particular gender, sexual, class, racial or ethnic categories – such social differences affecting but not obviating humanistic arguments about the mutually respecting traits of love that he elaborated.

Consequently, and pursuant to these two examples, combining feminism and humanism points to precisely the kind of multi-dimensional thinking-and-feeling about commonalities-and-differences (again both, not either/or) that twenty-first century theorizing – and, more importantly, life – demands (see L. Chancer, 2019). Moreover, by highlighting love and a wide range of emotions, including anxiety and insecurity (which lead people, for example, to want to »escape from freedom«), Fromm reveals himself as an early »psychosocial« theorist. Both sociologically and psychoanalytically trained, Fromm’s work calls attention to how emotionality and rationality function inseparably in day-to-day life for most of humanity.

Where, then, does this leave us? This paper looks at Fromm’s thought and its implications for feminist theorizing from the perspective of both understanding gender dynamics *and* generalizing beyond them to non-essentialist conclusions. For I contend that despite its problems, Fromm’s work in the contemporary context emerges as (perhaps surprisingly) compatible with developments in feminist and queer theorizing. Because I believe advantages as well as disadvantages can be culled from his ideas, I turn now to what is strikingly relevant about Fromm’s work, before turning to places where essentialist thinking about gender sometimes crept in, nonetheless. The former ideas are well worth developing while the latter merit corrective. Overall, I argue that while not necessarily obvious or generally recognized the work of Erich Fromm is much more consonant with feminist theories and thought than usually recognized.

Advantages of Fromm’s Thought for Combining Feminism and Humanism

Fromm’s work is helpful for overcoming still frequent assumptions that Freudian-influenced



psychoanalytic theories are incompatible with feminist beliefs. First and foremost, feminists are not always aware that some of Fromm's analyses sound like they could have been written by radical feminists of the American second wave. Two important examples can be cited, the first relevant to the practice of psychoanalysis, and to the critique of the patriarchal assumptions that mar its classical statement. In what is an incisive critique of Freud's famous *An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1997) at the very end of his life, Fromm (1979a) sheds light on Freud's sexist use of power in that psychoanalytic situation. In Fromm's hands, Dora was not so much a »case study in hysteria« as an example of a therapist/patient reproduction of patriarchal inequalities of power and powerlessness. Fromm showed himself an astute social observer while never letting go off his belief in unconscious and psychoanalytically-attuned processes. He perceived Dora's rebellion from the sexist psychoanalytic situation in which she had been cast as unequal (Dora had been placed in a subordinated position within the therapeutic »couple,« whether or not Freud was taking the psychoanalytic encounter in a direction that made sense and was resonant for her). Indeed, Fromm was able to perceive that for Dora leaving her analysis with Freud could be an act of liberation, a means of exiting the patriarchal and unequal relationship that *prevented* her from freeing herself.

As previously suggested, one can re-interpret *The Art of Loving* (1956a) as consistent with radical feminist critiques of unequal sexist relationships and of marriage and romance (to the extent the latter depend on notions of women needing men to have fulfilling lives). Indeed, traditional romantic ideologies have conventionally portrayed women as »incomplete« unless »completed« by romance, by a partner, by – historically – a »man«. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) described in *The Second Sex*, young girls' day dreams and musical lyrics become filled with the supposed benefits of »merging« for women: take »someday he'll come along – the man I love,« a seemingly bygone lyric that nonetheless still accords with fairy tales of Cin-

derella and Rapunzel as well as songs across a range of music styles. But images of women incomplete without love and romance is quite at odds with Fromm's notion of love in *The Art of Loving* (1956a). For Fromm, and in many later feminist critiques from de Beauvoir to Shulamith Firestone, love is impossible unless between two people who are wholes – not parts – each loving themselves or, in whatever combination and permutation applies, loving her and him, him and her, her and her, him and him, and so on. In this regard, Frommian and feminist ideas appear parallel in both insisting that the very idea of love needs revision if gender equality is to be experienced and achieved.

If a first advantage of Fromm's thought thus involves feminist-consistent insights into the subtleties and dynamics of unequal power – whether in quotidian interactions (including psychoanalysis) and/or as embedded in cultural discourses and ideologies of romance and love – a second compatibility returns us to the benefits of humanism. Again, Fromm's categories of analysis were and remain radically humanistic and anti-essentialist. More to the point, his discussions of character structure, biophilia and necrophilia, and of productive and non-productive orientations are neither affected nor broken down according to the binaries of a gender-skewed world. In other words, such Frommian concepts have nothing to do with biological determinism and everything to do with human capacities and possibilities across men and women, races, nationalities, and sexualities. They are not intrinsically gendered at this historical moment (the almost 2020s) when deterministic thought – about women, races, particular groups such as immigrants – remain widespread and often the basis of ongoing modes of dominance and subordination.

A specific example of this radically anti-essentialist character of Fromm thoughts pertains to my own doctoral dissertation that later became the book *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (1992). My own thought was very much inspired by Fromm's, especially by *Escape from Freedom* (1941a), wherein Fromm discusses the



process whereby individuals seek to defend themselves against the loneliness and anomie of modern *gesellschaft* (societies). Here Fromm points out the fact that this need to defend oneself against these stresses can take the form of submission to a more powerful being (masochism) or of exerting controls over a relatively powerless party (sadism). Thus, masochism and sadism emerge in Fromm's conceptualization as social defense mechanisms. Noteworthy about this for the feminist »appropriation« of Fromm, is how non-essentialist renderings of sadomasochism free such psychosocial understandings of power-and-powerless relationships from essentialist ideas like those of Helene Deutsch (1944). In Deutsch's much more deterministic psychoanalytic treatment, with which Fromm would have been familiar, women are innately masochistic by virtue of biology and their/our connection with birth. According to Deutsch, biology trumps social construction, an association that has made the use of masochism by social theorists badly in need of revision.

On the other hand, and indeed helping with such progressive revision, Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) provides no indication whatsoever that sadism is inherently the province of men nor masochism that of women; this, too, influenced me in *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (1992). One of the real strengths of Fromm's theorization here is that it allows for seeing that society pushes people into skewed gendered directions (men toward sadism, women toward masochism) but not in such a way that is biologically based nor essentialist. For women can be sadistic or men masochistic, depending on the nature of the situation. Rather, sadism and masochism can be present in the same individual: someone who is a woman may be socialized into, say, submissiveness toward a male partner or husband while enacting masochism toward a relatively less powerful person in her life. On the other hand, anyone familiar with literary and popular cultural depictions of sadomasochism is likely to recall depictions of powerful men whose dominant sadism (during the day) may transpose (at night) into sexual desires to be beaten and dominat-

ed. Socialized patterns exist then, as Fromm indicates, but they are not biologically given and can reverse under certain existential circumstances and at differing historical moments. Moreover, and again, this is a non-essentialism that is very much consonant with feminist insistence – not only with de Beauvoir's classic work but extending through the recent »classic« writings of Judith Butler about gender fluidity and the poststructural character of socially (not biologically based) oppressions.

But I also see third and fourth advantages of utilizing Fromm in the ongoing process of feminist theorizing. Third: whereas this is not always the case with progressive theorists, Fromm is marked out by his insistence on offering positive (one might even say, with a Foucauldian nod, productive – M. Foucault, 1991) alternatives to the sadomasochistic social arrangements he saw around him. Whether in *The Sane Society* (1955a) or in *The Art of Loving* (1956a), Fromm envisioned personal and political relationships of exactly the kind – that is, entailing interdependence between self and others – that feminist object relations theorist Jessica Benjamin (1988) more recently dubbed »mutual recognition« in her now well-known, Frankfurt School-influenced work *The Bonds of Love*. Both Fromm and Benjamin – the latter a feminist sociologist who received her Ph.D. in Sociology from New York University before becoming a full-time psychoanalyst – understood how mutual recognition differs from master/slave or sadomasochistic dynamics, wherein one person takes away the freedom of another so as to render himself (or herself) more secure. For Benjamin, the philosophical underpinnings of mutual recognition – so consonant with Fromm's ideas – is that individuals are necessarily social beings while simultaneously endowed with individual, psychic, and psychoanalytic uniqueness. Consequently, people are both independent and connected – an apparently paradoxical, but phenomenologically recurring, diagnosis of human interdependence that also inspired other dynamic thinkers from G. F. W. Hegel through Fromm. Most relevant to this chapter, though, is that for Fromm, like



psychoanalytically oriented feminists including Benjamin, critiques of sadomasochism became themselves interconnected with prefigurative visions of what non-sexist relationships would look like on both individual and social levels.

Finally, a fourth compatibility between Frommian and feminist theories strikes me as particularly interesting and promising for concerns about »toxic« forms of masculinities with which current feminists are, of course, also deeply concerned. One reason for the relative neglect of Fromm's thought may be that books like *The Art of Loving* (1956a) can seem, in retrospect, as though merely psychological self-help books; they may be perceived as »soft« or »touchy feely,« reactions that ignore their deeply sociological insights into the importance of transcending gender-based dichotomies between reason and emotion, affect and instrumentality. With Fromm, one aptly draws on the language of caring, love, sanity and reason as well as art and joy. In other words, »macho« categories of thought that may socially construct divides between »hard« and »soft« emotions and experiences, tend to be surpassed in the very process of »doing« and »talking« about both Frommian and feminist theories and practices. By extension, Fromm's ideas can be deduced to be consistent with recent critiques of masculinity and masculinities as found in the work of Raewyn Connell (1995), C. J. Pascoe (2011), and Michael Kimmel (2009). This is because, arguably, not only sexism but also heterosexism presupposes masculinities steeped in maintaining rather than transcending rigid emotional dichotomies that are inconsistent with contemporary feminist ideas, and which have consequences by limiting people's gender and sexual freedoms.

From Thesis to Antithesis:

Problems of Fromm's Analyses for Feminists

Moving along this argument, if there are so many relationships of compatibility, of intellectual and theoretical and philosophical affinity between Frommian and feminist thought, why do feminists rarely if ever associate themselves with the Frommian tradition? What are reasons

that may help to explain why Fromm and feminism have not been perceived as consonant? With this, I now turn to three disadvantages that feminists in contemporary context may associate with Fromm's ideas.

A first problem, and possible contradiction, one that distances Fromm and feminists despite the theoretical advantages just elaborated, involves – indeed – language and discourse. For despite his penetrating critiques of sexist power and inequalities, Fromm continued to use the gendered noun »man« to describe all of humanity. This is clearly evident even in the title of a book such as *Man for Himself* (1947a) and is something that recurs throughout many of his writings about the human condition. This is something I noted long ago when initially reading Fromm, and it is an observation that can easily be passed over and ignored relative to the intellectual power of his ideas. On the other hand, and certainly in this context, the usage is arguably quietly, subliminally, even unconsciously sexist, especially in our contemporary context and in its English language usages. Let us assume that the problem is not primarily or entirely one of translating German into English: ought Fromm to have known better insofar as other of his contemporaries were not making quite so much use of »man« in their writings around the same period? Arguably so, since Fromm lived until 1980, passing away when he was close to eighty, he ought to have had time, by then, to have become familiar with early feminist classics from S. de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* (itself published in the United States in 1951) through well-known liberal and radical feminist books published by Kate Millett (2016) and Shulamith Firestone (2003), among others, in the 1960s and 1970s. Again, however much he was accustomed to using the species-oriented term »man,« perhaps having feminist theorists closer at hand would have influenced Fromm to change this linguistic habit so as to be more in line with the entirety of his other clearly feminist beliefs and insights.

But a second disadvantage also helps to explain why Fromm's ideas are not generally seen as



relevant to feminist thought: this one involves how, despite his overall social constructionist and anti-essentialist leanings (ironically enough, this comprising one of the previously alluded to »advantages« of Fromm for feminists), in other contexts and places, Fromm referred rather contradictorily to »feminine nature«. For example, in *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy: About Gender* (1994a), Fromm discussed the anthropological ideas of Bachofen, writing approvingly of Bachofen's »discovery of mother right« and of this notion's ongoing relevance for social psychology. Lawrence Wilde (2004) described this aspect of Fromm's thought as follows: »During his years as a member of the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm developed a strong interest in the idea that there were distinctive male and female character orientations,« and drew on the »positive evaluation of matriarchy« made by Bachofen in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, as Fromm also knew, Bachofen's idea – to wit, matriarchy having (allegedly) existed prior to its destruction with the rise of patriarchal societies – had been cited by Friedrich Engels, too, the latter describing an historical progression whereby matriarchal societies were overturned and replaced by patriarchal (and also property-based capitalistic) rule. According to Bachofen, Engels, and later Fromm, then, patriarchy is relatively recent »and was preceded by a state of culture in which the mother was the head of the family, the rules in society, and the Great Goddess« (E. Fromm, 1994a, p. 4).

Why does this matter, though, so much to Fromm? Unlike Engels's theorization, which links the overthrow of »mother right« to forced monogamy and the beginnings of property, Fromm's concern is with the rise of cultural and gendered norms that led to psychosocial harms and alienated/alienating personalities and character structures within capitalistic and patriarchal societies. In Fromm's words (1994a, p. 6),

»As a further consequence, the basic principles of the mother-centered culture are those of freedom and equality, of happi-

ness and the unconditional affirmation of life. In contrast to the motherly principles the fatherly principle is that of law, order, reason, hierarchy; the father has his favorite son, the one who is most like him, the most suited to become the heir and successor to his property and worldly functions. Among the father-centered sons, equality has given way to hierarchy, harmony to strike.«

Significant to underscore here is the fact that a deterministic stance is thereby suggested, going back to Bachofen. The »essence« of differences between motherly and fatherly love are biologically based insofar as they are linked with women's role in reproduction. (Ibid., p. 5) Fromm quotes Bachofen to the effect that »maternity pertains to the physical side of *man*« (my emphasis), concluding that

»two traits, therefore, characterize the relationship of matriarchal society to nature: passive surrender to nature; and recognition of natural and biological values, as opposed to intellectual ones. Like the mother, nature is the center of matriarchal culture; and mankind ever remains a helpless child in the face of nature.« (Ibid., p. 23.)

With this, though, an explanatory clue emerges about this obvious contradiction between Fromm's typically social constructionist (and feminist) writings and the biologism evident from his endeavors to understand how the system socialist feminist Zillah Eisenstein (1978) dubbed »capitalist patriarchy« evolved. For possibly, through Bachofen's allusions to a matriarchal past and the concept of »mother right,« Fromm tried to reconcile the sadomasochistic, deeply oppressive inequalities of capitalism (and the pathological deviation he witnessed arise in Fascist Germany) with his own anti-patriarchal sympathies. The »reconciliation« for Fromm might have been to posit a »feminine« principle through which the possibilities of a different society based on love, caring, compassion and mutually recognizing human beings could be envisioned as more than



simply utopian – a notion which is surely fantastical given the anthropological documentation Bachofen proffered.

By way of evidence for this interpretation, note how Fromm complains in *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy* (1994a) that previous arguments for women's equality in bourgeois society were based on presuming men and women to be biologically equal. Making a case resonant of critiques by radical and socialist feminists of liberal feminists who wanted nothing more than formal equality with men, Fromm writes (*ibid.*, p. 26),

»The theory that woman and man were identical formed the basis for demanding her political equality. But whether it was expressed or only implied, woman's equality meant that she, in her very essence, was the same as man in bourgeois society. [...] The ›human‹ emancipation of woman really meant her emancipation to become a bourgeois male.«

Does this justify Fromm's essentialism? Not persuasively. More to the point is that it explains this out-of-sync biologism while also providing insight into why Fromm may have thought himself progressive – and even consistently feminist (if socialist/radical, not liberal feminist!) – when excavating an allegedly matriarchal history to ground imaginings of a humanistic future. But I would argue that Fromm did not need to theorize matriarchal roots, thereby veering into essentialist territory, in order to comprehend the strength of gender differences that empirically separate men and women so that the former often becomes/became, say, more »aggressive« and the latter often becomes/became, say, more »nurturant«. Alternatively, Fromm could have stayed consistent with his usually admirable social constructionist leanings by attributing divergent characteristics to the deeply sociological enculturation that bequeaths and reproduces gendered patterns from generation to generation as well as from country to country. Clearly gender socialization differs not only according to class/national background but along

racial, sexual and other intersectionally divergent lines – as Fromm, too, was not known for noting – while still creating clusters of behaviors and practices *across* race and class through broad personality patterns of »masculinity« (and masculinities) and »femininity« (and femininities). From this, persistent patterns of gender-divided »habitus« – to tap Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) own creative and solidly sociological concept – can be derived so as to render biologicistic allusions superfluous. Moreover, it is literally impossible to know what is biological or culturally caused so long as the two are overdetermined. Ironically enough, social determinants of gender discrimination would have to »wither away« entirely to know, for sure, what was or was not biologically caused: nothing of the kind, that is, elimination of gender's social concomitants, has yet happened in Fromm's time or our own.

However, whereas feminists can still arguably benefit from Fromm's thought is in relation to the psychological/psychoanalytic part of »psychosocially« caused gendered effects, which have been relatively less explored or expanded upon by movements from the second wave until now. Obviously, as Fromm understood even better than Freud, given the former's far more explicit critiques of patriarchy and sexism, gendered patterns create terrible harms for both men and women. These patterns are at once »objective« and »subjective,« and social as well as psychological; as such, they bequeath emotional as well as rationalistic reactions, including anger and guilt, at both conscious and unconscious levels. For this reason, in concluding, I turn to whether and how Fromm's ideas can be rediscovered not only in the present context of rising political authoritarianism but that of persistent sexist subordination also. How can Fromm's ideas regarding feminism be reconciled post facto even if this happened only partially (albeit significantly) in his own time, place and space?

A first disadvantage of using Fromm pertains to his use of sexist language (and, thereby, his ignoring power inequalities, even though he usu-



ally otherwise acknowledges them). A second, related disadvantage, which I have discussed, is Fromm's veering into essentialism via Bachofen (and Bachofen interpreted too biologically), even where Fromm is arguably admirably and radically anti-essentialist. A third disadvantage – and one that may have contributed to Fromm being a *forgotten intellectual not just in general but for feminists* – may have to do with the fact that Fromm was not as interested in libido theory as much as stressing human relatedness, which can be considered »pre-oedipal« in its developmental importance. In so doing, while Fromm gained much, it is nevertheless the case that he did stop analyzing sexuality in the ways that contemporary feminist theorists, influenced by Butler among others, are now very concerned about, and which involves talking about pleasure, desire, and taking on the socially constructed and imposed, and often discriminated against character of diverse sexuality and sexualities. Here, as with the advantages, it seems possible to revise Fromm back toward a reconciliation between his ideas and feminisms. It is no longer necessary to use »man« when writing about Fromm unless when (of course and reasonably) quoting him directly. It is possible to use Bachofen in a way that refers to how patriarchal societies mandated divisions between matriarchal and patriarchal parts of ourselves so that they are perceived as biologically based when they are actually deeply cultural. (In other words, one can revise Fromm's interest in Bachofen so that it is interpreted culturally and sociologically rather than biologically and essentialistically – since to smack of »essentialism« seems overall anti-Frommian). And finally, the fact that Fromm shifted away from libido does not have to mean – and I do not think it *would* mean – that he did not understand the joys of sex as well as the joys of love and creativity and productivity in all other spheres of life. Nor do contemporary discussions of Fromm and feminism have to focus only on sexism rather than also – and importantly in feminist theories of the present – about heterosexism as well. There is nothing that ought to make us think that Fromm would not under-

stand and be willing to embrace these levels of complexity – especially as he did not rule out physicality (and may have also been ahead of his time in understanding the limits of social constructionism when taken to an extreme).

Coming Full Circle Then: Why Does »Fromm and Feminism« Matter?

Perhaps the greatest value of Fromm's thought for contemporary feminism is its centrality in any body of work purporting to demonstrate the compatibility – rather than incommensurability – of sociological and Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic ideas. As Rainer Funk (2013) has underscored, Fromm maintained a depth psychological reliance on unconscious defense mechanisms but saw human beings as structured by social as opposed to primarily biological forces. Moreover, reflecting the influence of Karen Horney (1992) within psychoanalytic (if not more anti-Freudian feminist) circles, Fromm's concerns about anxiety and relatedness led him to anticipate object relations theory of precisely the kind further developed within psychoanalysis by Melanie Klein (1975) and within sociology (and psychoanalysis) by Jessica Benjamin (1988) and Nancy Chodorow (2001).

But is it possible to see beyond the essentialism that nonetheless appears in some, though by no means all, of Fromm's writings on gender and sexuality? By now, Fromm's essentialist view of maternalism seems historically obsolescent, as men as well as women more commonly parent and co-parent as single parents, in different types of couples, or in group settings from kibbutzim to other communes. And, by now, it seems obvious that nurturance is and can be provided to babies such that non-patriarchal modes of relating empathetically, with oneself as well as others (as, in *The Art of Loving* (1956a), Fromm so clearly and well understood) can result: apparent at this point is that what matters most is not gender but the presence of absence of compassion, love, and respect in parent/children as well as adult relationships. But yet, one wonders if biological as well as psychological differences between peo-



ple are matters that extreme social constructionism has rendered as though unbroachable. Without resorting to gender essentialism, are there realms of biological differences (of, say, weight or height as pertains to – perhaps – what one person or another can carry or a space that can be fitted into) that can be referred to without judgment but detachedly? Is biology still something that can be discussed (even if theories of biological origins are not at all close to being easily ascertained) insofar as even conceivably a dimension of life – and death – not reducible to the social? While this was not what Fromm had in mind, sociologists and feminists may still find his work interesting insofar as allowing complexity and multidimensionality to be debated, examined, investigated, and explored without fear of sadomasochistic repercussions and punishments – and in the spirit of mutual recognition, at once potentially intellectual and psychic and cultural, that Fromm so brilliantly and ahead of his time advocated.

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