

The Sociology, Biography, and Politics of Alienation

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Daniel Burston is an intellectual historian who, perhaps more than anyone, has tried to keep the radical humanism-existentialist tradition alive. Burston's writings on Erich Fromm and R. D. Laing offer a powerful challenge to contemporary North American psychology, which is more concerned with its scientific status than with developing a deep understanding of human beings in modern societies that are in deep moral and political crisis. But "Cyborgs, Zombies, and Planetary Death: Alienation in the 21st Century" moves beyond Burston's project of recovering the rich tradition of existentialist psychoanalysis through critical intellectual history and biography to marshaling the brilliant (yet flawed) work of Fromm and Laing to understand human alienation today. It is an important contribution to contemporary debates, albeit one beset by several of empirical, historical, and ultimately political limitations that I will outline in the following.

Burston's use of Laing and Fromm is provocative and insightful, and raises issues that the discipline of psychology, humanist psychologists and citizens can only ignore at their peril. Burston explores the history of the concept of alienation highlighting and elucidating the tensions between the 19th century's psychiatric focus on hallucination and delusions, R. D. Laing's 1960s-era engagement with Heidegger and Sartre's critique of modern consciousness, Erich Fromm's neo-Marxist stress on alienated labor in a society dominated by the marketing character, and the current poststructuralist emphasis on the role of language in early childhood psychological development. In so doing, Burston presents us with the options that social theorists, therapists and social scientists have at their disposal for thinking about alienation today. For all Burston's historical acumen, however, his account of theories of alienation and their potential relevance to today suffer from three major limitations: empirical, biographical-sociology of ideas, and political.

First, the scope and range of Burston's scholarship is impressive, but his overall approach is not sufficiently social scientific. His discussions of alienation are too abstract and theoretical to provide practical blueprints for social change. Granted, sociologists have been studying alienation empirically for decades, often using definitions of the phenomena that are too narrow, and producing a literature that focused largely on workplace dynamics (Israel & Etzioni, 1971). And sociology relies far too much on self-reports on health or psychological well-being. For example, one can ask people on surveys if they are happy at work, and if they say yes, we believe them. But is this really prudent? So in this context, Burston's article is a valuable corrective, given my own discipline's relative inattention to the varied meanings of alienation, and the varieties of

self-estrangement that cannot be measured and evaluated using survey methods and workplace based studies alone.

But even if we reject this kind of naïve empiricism, as we should, the methodological question remains: How can we confirm the accounts offered by Laing or Fromm of alienation in the culture? Is it more reasonable to suggest that the popularity of zombies and cyborgs represents a new depth of alienation and despair in the culture *without* extensive ethnography or in-depth interviews with the consumers of popular culture to gain insights into how people actually experience zombies or interact with computers, for example, in the context of their lives? After all, we now have an extensive body of research in cultural studies that highlights the complex, contradictory, and often ambiguous ways people read, produce, and consume popular cultural texts. And in more mainstream sociology of culture circles, the mainstream stresses the role of *cultural tool-kits* or repertoires that people draw on to make sense of their lives in the context of changing institutions such as marriage, love and the family (Swidler, 1986).

Unfortunately, the cultural studies tradition tends to romanticize popular culture (Aronowitz, 1993), making it difficult to ask the critical questions highlighted by Laing and Fromm. In contrast, the mainstream sociology of culture perspective has carved out a place in the academy as a respected field in sociology by *excluding* the kinds of normative questions Burston puts back on the table. So Burston's analysis is useful precisely because scholarship has been moving away from these broad normative questions about culture. At the same time, Burston's argument for the contemporary relevance of Laing and Fromm belies his relative inattention to questions of methods, data and evidence.

Both early and late in his career, Fromm was engaged in doing systematic social science, as with his innovative study on workers in Weimar Republic that provided the scaffolding for Adorno's postwar research on the *authoritarian personality* tradition (Burston, 1991; McLaughlin, 1999). Fromm deepened and expanded this kind of empirical social psychology in his 1970 *Social Character in a Mexican Village* study with Michael Maccoby. Yet, despite these commendable efforts, Fromm's strength was never in the marshaling of empirical evidence, nor the use of the cutting edge methods that might ensure that his critique of modernity was not overly influenced by his own values and cultural prejudices. Fromm shared the broader Frankfurt School dislike of American popular culture, and his personal cultural biases were always evident in his writings.

Sociologists study society today in a discipline organized into what Robert Merton has called *middle-range theories*, looking at obesity, depression, pornography and the use of social media through the lens of specific specialized fields, for example, of the sociology of food and health, mental health, sexualities and deviance, and media and networks respectively. There is no question that research produced by professional sociology suffers from excessive specialization, narrowness of scope, and generally take the conscious reports of actors at face value (Burawoy, 2005). Burston's "critical psychology" offers a valuable challenge to sociological orthodoxy, but does not seriously address legitimate questions of method and evidence. How would we know if the people that Sherry Turkle discusses in *Alone Together* are not alienated at all, but use computers and the Internet to remain in touch with people off-line and use the technology to stay connected to face-to-face communities in the context of busy lives as the extensive research produced by sociologist Barry Wellman and his "network theory" school of thought suggests (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001)? Are we to simply take Burston's theoretical insights at face value, and assume that readers of zombie novels and watchers of undead movies

experience deep unconscious alienation? Surely, critical sociologists will want to go beneath the surface of popular culture to look beyond prevalent common sense explanations of these phenomena, as Laing and Fromm certainly did. But just as important, we want to guard against accepting social critics' psychological projections of their own cultural values in ways that dismiss the need to empirically examine the actual reception and use of these cultural objects by real people.

This leads me to my second major critique of Burston's article. His decontextualized discussion of Laing and Fromm gives little recognition to the importance of a sociological reflexivity that takes account of biography and professional field position (Gross, 2009). Burston made his reputation writing biographies that highlight the role played by personality and life in shaping the ideas of important theorists and thinkers. But paradoxically, this article asks readers to accept a decontextualized account of ideas of alienation that emerged in various times and places. This is reasonable if we want to produce a provocative essay that comes under 30 pages of double-spaced printed copy, but there is an intellectual cost to this rhetorical strategy.

From the perspective of the contemporary sociology of ideas, however, thinkers such as Laing and Fromm should be understood as being embedded in psychiatric and psychoanalytic fields as well as the various cultural fields associated with producing ideas and culture. Burston has published *The Wings of Madness: The Life and Work of R. D. Laing* (1996) and *The Crucible of Experience: R. D. Laing and the Crisis of Psychotherapy* (2000), telling the story of Laing's emergence as what sociologist Lewis Coser might call a "celebrity intellectual" in the context of the antipsychiatry and new left movements of the 1960s. And Burston's *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (1991) did an excellent job of recovering the history and influence of a thinker who was in danger of becoming a "forgotten intellectual" (McLaughlin, 1998). But here we read about Laing's and Fromm's ideas, applied rather to contemporary society with no discussion of the ways in which these thinkers were shaped by their personal lives and their structural positions in various fields of intellectuals and scholars. Bringing biography and sociology back to the analysis raises questions about both Laing and Fromm, something that can be done without descending into biographical gossip or sociological reductionism.

Laing was born in the Govanhill district of Glasgow in 1927 and was academically gifted, creative in both music and philosophy. He attained the rank of captain and served as a psychiatrist in the British army by the age of 24. Laing had many troubled relationships and marriages; was not responsible with his children; experimented with LSD, meditation, and gurus; and was widely criticized as a therapist and clinician for unorthodox and highly controversial practices. Yet, as Burston puts it in *The Crucible of Experience* (2000, p. 1), "at the height of his career Laing was the most widely read psychiatrist in the world, reaching people across disciplinary boundaries and in all walks of life." It is true that "Laing captured the imagination of the sixties generation" with "angry and despairing words" when Laing wrote "If I could turn you on, if I could drive out of your wretched mind, if I could tell you, I would let you know." But more accurately, it should be said that Laing captured the imagination of a certain *radical* segment of that generation, the readers of his provocative best-selling books such as *The Divided Self* (1960), *The Politics of Experience* (1967), and *The Politics of the Family* (1976). Moreover, these books were written based on his work with schizophrenics—a rather atypical population. And although he certainly was addressing, as Burston points out, "the normal or nominally sane members of society" does Laing's analysis of their modalities of alienation hold up to critical scrutiny?

Laing had useful things to say during the 1960s and 1970s about the authoritarianism of the mental health professions, the abuses inflicted on patients by excessive use of drugs and shock

therapies and the pre-'60s inattention to children's and patients' rights, but surely the sensationalism accompanying him being a book-writing *social critic* linked to the new left movement is a potential source of bias we should critically address. Laing did not even strive to attain objective academic detachment, and his judgments were often unreasonable. He was wrong to argue single-mindedly for the social and family cause of schizophrenia, an added cruelty and indignity to parents confronting a terrible condition. In Burston's books on Laing, he takes an even-handed, fair-minded and balanced view of these matters, but "Cyborgs, Zombies and Planetary Death" does not go far enough in contextualizing and historicizing Laing's analysis, or the genre of commercial books that made him famous. And without this sociological perspective, one is left questioning whether Burston's analysis of our "zombie and cyborg" culture is not just another restatement, albeit in a more sophisticated way, of some of Laing's initial exaggerations.

Erich Fromm's ideas were also shaped by the specifics of his life and his position on the margins of psychoanalysis, sociology and radical political movements, something that Burston, himself, has documented and analyzed in *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (1991). Although Fromm was never as controversial as R. D. Laing was, he was frequently attacked by neo-conservatives, Stalinists, dogmatic Freudians, and many critics (and erstwhile colleagues) within the Frankfurt School (Burston, 1991; McLaughlin, 1998). Born in Germany in 1900, Fromm moved away from his orthodox Jewish roots to engage with, and then reject, the orthodoxies embedded in the sociological, Freudian, and Marxist traditions that shaped his successful career as a psychoanalyst, social scientist, and social critic. Fromm's personal credibility was never in doubt to the same extent as Laing's was, for he was a more grounded individual, preferring Buddhist meditation to LSD, and maintaining far more connections to mainstream political figures and audiences than Laing desired or was capable of. With that said, Lawrence Friedman's biography of Fromm, entitled *The Lives of Erich Fromm* (2013), raises new questions about Fromm based on allegations of sexual relations with patients, and no doubt, this fact will be discussed in the literature in years to come. Even so, Fromm retains far more credibility in intellectual circles than Laing because his ideas, while radical, represent a far less fundamental challenge to contemporary psychological assumptions about mental health and happiness and were rooted in better evidence and research.

Nonetheless, Fromm's social position as a trained sociologist remained relatively marginal to mainstream sociology publishing, scholarship and professional networks, which lead to his theories on alienation being relatively untested and unrefined. Like Laing, Fromm's most influential writings were commercial press books, a genre that tends to substitute rhetoric and moral arguments for carefully designed empirical research performed by networks of scholars who examine research methods, data interpretation and findings critically. In fairness, perhaps, Fromm's later work did engage then current research findings in neurosciences, archeology, and anthropology in his *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) and history and sociology in his *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (written with Michael Maccoby; 1970). These were serious attempts to place his ideas about social character, emotions, and alienation in dialogue with other traditions of scholarship, a fact that Friedman's biography tends to ignore (Friedman, 2013). Friedman's omissions on this score are partially corrected by Burston's insistence on rooting a discussion of Fromm's theories in a more disciplined focus on their philosophical origins. Nonetheless, a sociological perspective on Fromm's writing on alienation is well written, but ultimately polemical, books like *The Sane Society* (1955) suggests the need for more skepticism regarding his conclusions about our culture than Burston's essay exhibits.

My final critical comment on Burston's article is that, ultimately, we need a more *political* analysis of the reception of Laing's and Fromm's works. One strength of Burston's reading is his insistence on looking at Fromm's theory of alienation in the context of his relationship to Soviet orthodoxy and various strands of socialist-humanism that arose in opposition to it. The dynamics of academic professionalism can lead to a reading of both Fromm and Laing that depoliticizes their work, making them modern social psychologists and, thus, underplaying the utopian and critical vision they articulated and that lies at the core of their respective theories of alienations. Burston's highlighting of the climate change crisis and the relevance of theories of alienation for helping us think of possible responses is helpful, even though, in the end, it is not at all clear how politically relevant Laing or even Fromm are today without a serious reformulation of their ideas and approaches to politics.

To use some of their insights in a politically effective way, one must go further than Burston does in rejecting the excesses of Laing and the strong elements of preaching that mars Fromm's popular writing (Maccoby, 1995). To suggest, as Laing does, that modern culture is alienated to the core is not much less of a political dead-end than the Lacanian focus on early childhood language. Fromm's book, *To Have or To Be?* (1976), on the other hand, is more relevant to climate change debates since it had an enormous influence on the Green movement in Germany. Yet Burston does not do enough to think through some of the problems of a contemporary Frommian influenced politics. Fromm's emphasis on the productive character and the "having" mode of Being provide a solid foundation for thinking about how a new ecological consciousness might take root and help save the planet. But can the ecological crisis we face be overcome by a change of consciousness from *having* to *being*, or do we require a political strategy that mobilizes political parties, social movements, organizations and strategies that deal with political compromises and forges coalitions?

One of the useful things about Lawrence Friedman's biography of Erich Fromm is that we learn how Fromm influenced the Kennedy administration's disarmament policies (Friedman, 2013). In addition, we learn how his political strategizing, his writing, and his massive funding of Amnesty International (using money from the proceeds of 30 books that sold over a million copies each) made Fromm one of the most effective spokesperson for global human rights in the 20th century (Friedman, 2013). Fromm was never as politically naïve as some of his critics suggested (for example, Jaccoby, 1975). In comparison, Laing and Lacan are academic footnotes in the cultural history of the 20th century.

But in the end, did Fromm succeed in taking his theories about alienation into the public sphere, to shape real world politics, and help us address our coming ecological crisis? Perhaps this is too high a standard to set for evaluating Fromm, and it would not be fair to ask Burston to fully address these broader questions. But then, it is Burston himself who rightly wants to ask us to how we can save life on our planet. I submit that, despite his theoretical insights and rhetorical brilliance, Fromm's legacy is marred by the fact that too many of his contemporary followers are *true believers*, not politically engaged public intellectuals or activists. What we need, instead, are political strategies that convince people who do not share the radical humanism that Burston, Fromm, and I embrace in order to pull together coalitions of religious and secular humanists from a range of political perspectives to bring about practical change in a world divided by massive global inequality, rising authoritarianism and a widespread cultural escapism that pushes us in the wrong political directions. At the same time, however, Burston is right; Fromm's work still represents an important contribution to contemporary conversations on the coming

ecological crisis, and I look forward to reading his response to the questions I am raising here on the political relevance of these theories of alienation.

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