

# Introduction:

## Mapping Fromm's Critical Theory

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The early part of the twentieth-first century has borne witness to what can only be described as a Fromm renaissance. After decades of relative neglect by scholars – particularly in the English-speaking world – Fromm's writings are once again finding a deep resonance amongst scholars old and new, his ideas increasingly turned to in the quest to make sense of what is becoming an ever more fractured world. Since the turn of the century, a number of studies that place Fromm at their centre have appeared in print.<sup>1</sup> This in itself is significant, but it is the *nature* of these studies that is particularly worth remarking on. What has been evident in these works is a determination to look anew at Fromm's writings: to rescue them from semi-obscurity and the assaults of his erstwhile

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<sup>1</sup> Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*; Wheatland, *Frankfurt School in Exile*; Braune, *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope*; Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*; Miri, Lake, and Kress, *Reclaiming the Sane Society*; Langman and Lundskow, *God, Guns, Gold, and Glory*; Funk and McLaughlin, *Towards a Human Science*; Thorpe, *Necroculture*.

critics, and to draw on the largely untapped potential that they have to speak to our present moment. In contradistinction to the majority of earlier writings on Fromm, these more recent writings evince a renewed focus on the *social and political aspects* of Fromm's thought, and, often implicitly, on articulating something of the uniqueness of the *form* of the critical theory that can be found within them. This is important, and it is so for a number of reasons.

### **Fromm and the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research**

It is important, first of all, in terms of intellectual history – in relation to countering what is a powerful tendency in academic circles to reduce Fromm's contribution to intellectual life to what is considered to be the *pre*-history of Frankfurt School. In this picture, Fromm is represented as little more than a footnote – an incidental figure at the margins of critical theory during the nascent stage of its development, and, therefore, more or less dispensable.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these more recent studies, it has become abundantly clear that Fromm was a central figure in the early period of Max Horkheimer's directorship of the Frankfurt *Institut für Sozialforschung*, playing a pivotal role in the development of the Institute's early research programme and methodology.<sup>3</sup> During this period, Fromm worked intimately with Horkheimer, leading the pioneering study of the Weimar German working classes that prefigured *The Authoritarian Personality* and the development of authoritarian studies more generally. Second only to Horkheimer, it is not an exaggeration

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<sup>2</sup> There is scant reference to Fromm in Schroyer *The Critique of Domination* and Tar *The Frankfurt School*, and even those works that accord Fromm a greater degree of recognition – such as Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, and Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School* – fail to really see Fromm in his true significance.

<sup>3</sup> This is apparent in McLaughlin, 'Origin Myths in the Social Sciences'; Wheatland, *Frankfurt School in Exile*; and Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of Critical Theory*.

to suggest that during this period Fromm functioned as part of the central “collaborative pair” that formed the intellectual heart of the Institute.<sup>4</sup>

Fromm was particularly instrumental in the Institute’s integration of psychoanalysis and sociology that was to characterise the early Institute studies. Having studied at the Berlin Psychoanalytical Institute prior to his association with Horkheimer, and being personally acquainted with Freida Reichmann, Siegfried Bernfeld, Karen Horney, Georg Groddeck, and Wilhelm Reich, Fromm brought with him a ready grasp of the practicalities involved in this interdisciplinary synthesis. Around the time he became associated with the Institute, Fromm also helped set up the Frankfurt Psychoanalytical Institute, alongside Karl Landauer, Heinrich Meng, and Frieda Reichmann. At the inauguration of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytical Institute, Fromm gave a short paper on the relationship of psychoanalysis and sociology in which he outlined the potential psychoanalysis has to advance Marxian sociology.<sup>5</sup> In it, Fromm stressed the need to avoid the reduction of analysis from the sociological level to the psychological level, or vice versa, but also the need to be alive to situations where the issues at hand are *simultaneously* sociological and psychological, and where, therefore, analysis needs to be social-psychological in its entirety.

Publication of *Die Entwicklung des Christusdogmas, Eine Psychoanalytische Studie zur Sozialpsychologischen* in 1930 (it was published in English as *The Dogma of Christ* in 1963) – demonstrates the degree to which Fromm had advanced down this path. In this highly original work, Fromm undertakes a historical social-psychoanalytical analysis of early Christian communities, probing the motives conditioning the evolution of Christian dogma by relating the ideas conveyed in it relative to each stage of its development. Fromm was concerned to “show what influence social reality had in a specific situation upon a specific group of men [sic], and how emotional trends found expression in certain dogmas, in collective fantasies, and to show further what psychic change was brought

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<sup>4</sup> Durkin, *Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno Reconsidered*; and Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of Critical Theory*.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm, “Psychoanalysis and Sociology,” 37.

about by a change in the social situation.”<sup>6</sup> In particular, he wanted to enquire into how it could be that the psychic change found expression in new religious fantasies that could be said to have satisfied specific unconscious impulses. According to Fromm, Christianity arose as “a significant historical messianic-revolutionary movement,” whose original adoptionist doctrine of man elevated to God spoke to unconscious wishes of the poor and oppressed classes.<sup>7</sup> As a feudal class state arose, in which nationalities were levelled and in which infinite dependencies were set up under the power of the emperor, Fromm notes that Christian dogma undergoes a corresponding change, morphing into a doctrine whereby love and grace are bestowed upon God the father, a God who had undergone an anthropological conversion and literally *become* a “man.” The psychic response that accompanies this shift, Fromm contends, is one from revolutionary passion and identification with God to one of submission in which displaced anger comes to be directed upon the self. Fromm is clear that his concern in the study is with the “character matrix”<sup>8</sup> that might be said to be common to a particular group of individuals, and that is not necessarily dominant in the character structure of each individual.

Two years later, in conjunction with his work on the German workers study, Fromm was responsible for two important papers that appeared in the *Zeitschrift for Sozialforschung*, the Institute’s journal.<sup>9</sup> In the first of these pieces, the discussion is explicitly focused on the capacity of psychoanalysis to investigate the role of the psychic apparatus in the overall functioning of the social process. Focusing on the *subjective factor*, Fromm stresses that psychoanalysis provides the potential to demonstrate, in a way that Marx and Engels could not, precisely *how* it is that the economic situation comes to be transformed into ideology via the human passions and drives. Through demonstration of how the content of ideologies are intimately connected to the wishes, instinctual drives, interest and needs of

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<sup>6</sup> Fromm, *Dogma of Christ*, 20, 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Fromm, “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology;” and “Psychoanalytic Characterology and its Relevance for Social Psychology.”

groups and individuals (all of which expressed in the form of rationalisations), the dialectically materialist social psychology Fromm proposes proclaims to be able to offer an account of the *psychological basis* of the social structure – the active foundation upon which that structure rests, and a primary reason for its stability. Fromm develops on this foundation in his second piece. Here the focus is on the functionality of individual and collectivised character traits, and on the “social reward” they offer the individual in terms of adaptation to the demands of the social structure, suggesting also that such a focus provides a notable improvement upon the then prevailing understanding of the *spirit* of an epoch. Studies concerned with the spirit of a period, Fromm argues, mistakenly focus solely on ideology, rather than on “the sum total of character traits that are typical of human beings in this society” and that “can find expression in a wide variety of different and even opposing ideologies.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of loosely speaking of the “spirit” of a given period, Fromm instead suggests that we think of the *dynamic function of character* as providing the psychic basis of that society and, thereby, as a productive force alongside the material base and ideological superstructure. In this connection, Fromm traces the social influence of society on character primarily to the family, which he describes as “the chief medium through which the child’s psychic formation is oriented toward the surrounding society.”<sup>11</sup> It is through the family and the wider educational process that the child’s strivings are either suppressed or intensified, this suppression and intensification taking place generally in line with the wider economic, social, or class structure to which the family is related.<sup>12</sup>

Fromm’s central role as part of institute life was apparent up until 1936, with publication of *Studien über Autorität und Familie (Studies on Authority and the Family)*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fromm, “Psychoanalytic Characterology,” 150, 158.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>12</sup> Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of Critical Theory*, points out that it is highly likely that it played a significant role in influencing Horkheimer’s early formulation of critical theory and in the development of certain of his essays from the period.

<sup>13</sup> At this point in time, this document remains unpublished in English.

Following the research programme set out by Horkheimer in his inaugural address, *Studies on Authority and the Family* was primarily concerned with the transformation of the bourgeois character taking place in twentieth-century European capitalist societies. Fromm's contribution, "Sozialpsychologischer Teil" ("Social-Psychological Aspects"), appears in the theoretical first section of the volume, and is concerned with mapping out the social psychological rise of authoritarianism in European capitalist societies. Fromm begins his account with a discussion of the decline of ego strength that he contends was brought about by changes in the dominant patriarchal family structure. The family, as the primary agent of socialisation, had long been an important theoretical focal point for psychoanalysis. What Fromm argues here is that the routine suppression of emotional drives found within patriarchal family relations had actually intensified in the face of monopoly capitalism, but with a difference: as the influence of the family declined in proportion to the development of monopoly capital, feelings of powerlessness and inconsequentiality on behalf of large sections of the population lead to the powerful psychological drives to connect with the dictates of a "superior power." Masochism – which is inseparable from sadism, and together forms an *authoritarian syndrome* – acts to fill the void.

Fromm's work here builds directly upon the empirical material collected as part of the Weimar study, the analysis of which was actively taking place at the same time as *Studies on Authority and the Family*. The interpretative basis of this study was the very same notion of *authoritarian-masochistic character*, this time operationalised in relation to the attitudinal responses of purportedly left-wing workers. Fromm and his team – including Hilde Weiss, who played a central role in the study<sup>14</sup> – were concerned with eliciting the deep emotional connections that lay behind ostensible political opinions. In pursuit of these underlying realities, they found that the majority of respondents, whilst outwardly

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<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Bonss stresses role of Hilde Weiss – who largely executed the study, and who brought an extensive knowledge of Weberian tradition – in his introduction to *Working Class in Weimar Germany*, 24. David Smith elaborates upon Weiss' contribution to the study in his chapter in this volume.

associating with the left-wing slogans of their party nevertheless demonstrated a much-reduced radicalism in response to other, seemingly unpolitical questions.<sup>15</sup> On the basis of these findings, Fromm and his team developed the notion of the “authoritarian attitude,” which is marked by the affirmation, seeking out, and enjoyment of the subjugation of self and other under higher powers. The conceptual and empirical work carried out by Fromm in these early years of the Institute, was clearly central to the development of the Institute’s research programme in these years. These newer studies into Fromm’s thought have hewn out much of this history.

### **Towards a Distinct Form of Critical Theory**

The newer studies on Fromm are important for a further reason, however. In addition to demonstrating the centrality of Fromm’s involvement with the early Institute (and the prefiguration of later studies such as *The Authoritarian Personality*), these studies have also suggested at, and sought to laud, the *distinctiveness* of Fromm’s thought considered relative to and beyond other Institute figures. They have engaged in greater detail with the central *differences* between Fromm and his Institute colleagues – differences which can be said to have played a role in Fromm’s eventual split with Horkheimer and break from the Institute in general. Around the time that *Studies on Authority and the Family* was published, Fromm was engaged in a fundamental re-examination of Sigmund Freud’s writings on psychoanalysis, which manifested in a lengthy, critical essay on Freud’s system that Horkheimer declined to publish in the *Zeitschrift*.<sup>16</sup> In this essay, Fromm targets what he claims is the untenable sexual reductionism and bourgeois mechanicism that frames Freud’s whole schema: the theory of the Oedipus complex, Freud’s account of

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<sup>15</sup> Questions pertaining to whether or not women should wear lipstick and to admirable historical figures were used to elicit responses that revealed less radical societal attitudes.

<sup>16</sup> Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture.”

the psychology of women, the role of the family, and the theory of drives (and libido theory) are all implicated. In its place, Fromm proposes a far-reaching revision, which he sums up in a letter to Robert Lynd in the same year that the unpublished essay was submitted. In the letter, Fromm outlined what he now saw as the task of psychoanalytic theory, namely: the attempt “to understand the structures of character and instincts as a result of adaptation to the given social conditions and not as a product of the erogenous zones.”<sup>17</sup> The resulting alternative position is described by Fromm as a “dialectical interpretation of psychic processes” in which “the psychic structure of man is regarded as the product of his activity and his manner of life and not as the reflex thrown up by his physical organization.”<sup>18</sup>

The more recent studies on Fromm have acknowledged not only the fact of this revision, but also its progressive character *vis-à-vis* the position adopted by Horkheimer, Adorno, and others.<sup>19</sup> This goes against the view that has prevailed for more than half a century, in which Fromm has been accused of “common sense psychology” and of “psychologiz[ing] culture and society,”<sup>20</sup> and of thereby harmonising social antagonisms by positing a direct – and thus undialectical – connection between the institutional sphere and social experience. Fromm, in fact, has wrongly been included in the culturalist school of thought, alongside Harry Stack Sullivan and Karen Horney. This is a significant oversight given that, although Fromm readily admitted that Sullivan and Horney influenced the development of his thought, he repeatedly stressed that his position was more critical from the outset.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Funk, *Erich Fromm*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and its Relation to Culture,” 23.

<sup>19</sup> Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*; Durkin, “Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno Reconsidered;” McLaughlin, “Origin Myths.”

<sup>20</sup> Horkheimer to Leo Löwenthal, October 31, 1942, quoted in Funk, *Erich Fromm*, 99.

<sup>21</sup> In response to a question on his connection to the culturalist school in an interview given in 1966, Fromm expressed his differences with that school thusly: “rather more emphasis [than is given by the culturalist] should be placed on social structure, class structure, economic structure, the impact these elements have on the development of the individual, and the practice of life which follows from each of these,” *Dialogue with Erich Fromm*, 58.



Social contradictions were not ironed out by Fromm; they were very much there at the basis of his system, merely reconfigured in terms of existential-relational as opposed biological-libidinal terms.<sup>22</sup> The removal of libido as the driving force does not mean that depth (i.e., the unconscious) was surrendered; were this the case, it would not have been possible for Fromm to have spoken of the irrational pathogenic drives that develop as a response to the demands of different types of society.<sup>23</sup> As Rainer Funk has shown, the issue is one of relating our drive structure to the environment via adaptation, this adaptation taking place in various ways related to various characterological syndromes.<sup>24</sup>

In line with this, these studies have pointed to the fact that Fromm's dialectical revision of Freud – along with his parting from the Institute, and the Institute's realignment along more Benjaminian and Adornoian lines of inquiry – separate him from the stronger identification with Frankfurt School critical theory as canonically understood.<sup>25</sup> There are evident similarities of outlook that can be traced to similar geographical and biographical connections, of course, but also definite differences that need to be more fully understood.<sup>26</sup> Central to this is the willingness – evident in these newer studies on Fromm – to challenge the dualistic assumption that Fromm's earlier works as part of the Institute constitute the *entirety* of what can be said in a positive sense about his contribution to intellectual life. Although it is fair to point to the fact that after his split with the Institute Fromm's writings were increasingly pitched to the educated general public, insufficient attention, particularly in the social and political sciences, has been accorded to the serious *substance* of these later works. This is particularly important given the opprobrium that has often greeted Fromm's works during this period.

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<sup>22</sup> Libido theory is far less dominant in the current psychoanalytical tradition, surpassed by a more relational form of psychoanalysis as seen by thinkers such as Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin. As Lynn Chancer demonstrates in this volume, Fromm's position was markedly more progressive for the feminist agenda.

<sup>23</sup> See Durkin, *Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 72–77, 93–101.

<sup>24</sup> Funk, "Erich Fromm and the Intersubjective Tradition."

<sup>25</sup> See Durkin, "Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno," and *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*.

<sup>26</sup> See Durkin, "Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno Reconsidered."

The hitherto accepted wisdom concerning Fromm in this period is that he undergoes a regression from critical theorist to “business-like revisionist” and “sermonistic social worker.”<sup>27</sup> Implicated here is his revision of Freud, but also the very substance and tenor of his post-Institute works, which, as suggested, were notable by virtue of their attraction of a far wider audience that had been the case for Institute publications. *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm’s first post-Institute work, appearing in 1941, made Fromm a noted figure in US intellectual culture, but it was also seen as exhibiting a worrying idealist tendency that threatened to pull him away from the stringent materialism practiced at the Institute. Particularly objected to, was the apparent “existentialist” stress on *freedom* as a transhistorical category.<sup>28</sup> In defence of Fromm, it should be stressed that *Escape from Freedom* was explicitly framed around the general expression of newer social and political (and psychological) trends that had hitherto received insufficient analysis in the academic and wider community. In this work, Fromm focuses on post-First World War democracy (and its process of diminishment) as the proximate culmination of a series of developments stretching back to the Italian Renaissance related to the successive abolition of forms of external domination (political, religious, and social) and, thereby, the increased freedom of the individual. What Fromm wanted to particularly focus on was the development of “new systems” (fascism, authoritarianism, and state capitalism) which denied “everything that had been won in centuries of struggle,” and that functioned on the basis of sadomasochistic group conformity.<sup>29</sup>

What should be clear is that the concerns that animate *Escape from Freedom* are direct extensions of the work Fromm was previously engaged in at the Institute, and that had erupted so violently in the wider world at the time. Importantly, this is not only representative of *Escape from Freedom*. *Man for Himself* and, later, *The Sane Society*, develop some of the central themes of the Institute’s work, even prefiguring the later

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<sup>27</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*: 60; Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> See Knapp, *The Art of Living*; and Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*.

<sup>29</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 2.

critical theory concern with the critique of conformity, the culture industry, and so on. In his accounts of *automaton conformity*, the *marketing character*, and the *pathology of normalcy*, Fromm was staking out a ground that overlapped with that of his erstwhile colleagues. At the same time, these accounts are advanced in a framework that manifests a marked difference – one that centres particularly on the issue of *humanism*.

The explicit (and thematic) humanism that marks Fromm’s post-Second World War writings, whilst not constituting a rupture in Fromm’s thought<sup>30</sup> does nevertheless represent a conscious decision to *foreground* this central aspect of his thinking. Explicit humanistic statements can be found in *Escape from Freedom* itself (which was written *during* the war), but it is certainly the case that they are even more clearly foregrounded in *Man for Himself*. Here Fromm speaks in universalistic terms, talking explicitly of the “human condition,” and of aspects of what can be considered our “nature” as human beings. Fromm is explicit here in pitting humanist and authoritarian ethics against one another – the former centred on the development of the human individual in itself and on self-legislated norms, the later on harsh and extraneously imposed norms that entail the submission of the human individual to higher powers. This is followed in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* by the application of the humanist/authoritarian distinction to the religious sphere, with humanist religions depicted as centring around individual and collective self-realisation, and authoritarian religions depicted as centring around the individual and collective surrender to a power transcending the human.<sup>31</sup>

What is demonstrated here is Fromm’s continued engagement with the issue of religion during this period.<sup>32</sup> The analytical preoccupation with the social-psychological effects of religion that characterised Fromm’s early works – as we have seen earlier, and as can be seen in Löwy in this volume – is evident in *Escape from Freedom*, in which Fromm

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<sup>30</sup> See Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, Chapter 2 for a defense of this position.

<sup>31</sup> Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 34-7.

<sup>32</sup> Fromm’s doctoral dissertation was concerned with a comparative analysis of the Jewish sects in early twentieth-century Germany, and his first publication was an analysis of the Sabbath. See Braune, *Erich Fromm’s Revolutionary Hope*, and Micheal Löwy in this volume on these writings.

undertakes an analysis of the psycho-social effects of the doctrines of Luther and Calvin on their followers. What becomes increasingly clear in Fromm's post-Institute writings, however, is the extent to which the somewhat negative Freudian view of religion is transcended, and a new, atheistic mysticism takes hold. The change is first registered in *Man for Himself*, in his account of the existential dichotomies that he identifies as structuring human existence. This notion is further developed in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, in which Fromm speaks of religion in general terms as "any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion."<sup>33</sup> On this conception, every culture has religion in this broad sense: the question is not *whether* religion, but *which kind of religion*, and whether or not it furthers the development of the individual. The theme is continued in *The Sane Society*, where Fromm outlines a number of what he contends are universal existential human needs, which can be satisfied in better or worse ways for individual and collective human flourishing.

What we see in these works, is an increasingly explicit drawing-out of the underlying evaluative and normative humanism that can be said to have animated Fromm's institute studies. In works such as the Weimar study, for instance, while the accent was clearly on the analytical, evaluative presuppositions are never far from the surface. While Fromm's central concern is with revealing social psychological connections, there is nevertheless a clearly implicit evaluative schema found in his opposition of a radical as opposed to a reactionary attitude to authority.<sup>34</sup> The works of the post-Institute period are notable primarily because of their explicit stress on this normativity; but it is an error to suggest that critical and historical analysis fades from Fromm's writings. That this is so, is apparent from a book such as *The Sane Society*, in which a normative social psychological analysis that is historically contextualised and indexed to some of the main critical concerns of the

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<sup>33</sup> Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, 209.

day (such as affluent alienation) is advanced. The normative humanism Fromm advances here, whilst universal, is not a bland, abstract universalism, even if it is unashamed in affirming the pedagogical value of at least some abstraction. Fromm makes clear in *Man for Himself*, in relation to his philosophical anthropological discussion of man:

Man, however, does not exist “in general.” While sharing the core of human qualities with all members of his species, he is always an individual, a unique entity, different from everybody else. He differs by his particular blending of character, temperament, talents, dispositions, just as he differs at his fingertips. He can affirm his human potentialities only by realizing his individuality.<sup>35</sup>

This is not to say that Fromm’s works are free of aspects of ethno- and andro-centrism. It is certainly the case that his universalism does at times fail the test of precision., and there are definite silences on race and sexuality, and some clumsy statements on gender which are rightly critiqued today.<sup>36</sup> But Fromm is also at pains in many works from this period to engage “Eastern” as well as “Western” traditions, and he often repeats as his motto Terence’s famous humanistic sentiment, “nothing human is alien to me.” This openness to all aspects of experience however ethnocentric the framing may have been at times, was an absolutely central pillar to his humanist psychoanalytical approach that, in fact, sought to transcend the psychoanalytical encounter. Fromm’s engagement with Eastern sources – particularly Buddhism – is not tantamount to a form of Orientalism on his part, although it does beg the question as to the existence of other world communities, and their contributions to knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Lynn Chancer in this volume points to Fromm’s stubborn retention of the gendered use of “man” despite awareness of strong feminist arguments to the contrary, as well as some regrettable biologicistic lapses.

<sup>37</sup> See Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, 80, fn 6, for a partial defence of Fromm.

Fromm's works have also been criticised for their popular and supposedly idealist framing. Whilst there are some justified concerns over idealism<sup>38</sup> and definite lapses into homily at points, it must be acknowledged that many of the pieces that are critiqued on these grounds were written as self-confessed activist contributions – interventions into the national and world debate framed and composed so as to stimulate action and discussion on the part of the wider population. In interventions such as *The Art of Loving*, *The Sane Society*, *Marx's Concept of Man*, *Let Man Prevail?*, *Socialist Humanism*, *The Heart of Man*, and *The Revolution of Hope*, an explicit prophetic tone is to the fore, accompanied by the postulation of a series of alternatives framed around the respective paths of emancipation and regression. What emerges from Fromm's committed attempt to try to revivify the public sphere of his time towards a democratic form of socialism is the basis of a radical moral cosmopolitanism and revolutionary empathy that is indexed to a social and historical picture of human development and to practical change in the world. Fromm's is a particular kind of critical theory: one that takes praxis, and its organic connection to social transformation, seriously, as opposed to rendering it opaque, if not wholly sundered, as is characteristic of certain other forms of "critical theory." Fromm's engagement does not elicit a "cult of subjectivity"<sup>39</sup> but clearly calls for individual development that leads out into structural changes as part of one and the same motion. There is, in fact, a strong case to be made in this connection for seeing Fromm as deviating productively from some of the more problematic aspects of Frankfurt School critical theory.<sup>40</sup>

The more Fromm's writings are built around this prophetic axis the more intimate the connection with the community to which he is speaking becomes, the more can it be characterised by a degree of self-referentiality. The directness and practical leaning

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<sup>38</sup> What should be stressed is that Fromm's works in this period – from *The Sane Society*, to *Marx's Concept of Man*, to *Let Man Prevail?*, to *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, *Socialist Humanism* – also demonstrated a renewed engagement of Marx. While this engagement tends at times towards what might be called an existential analysis, and certainly with almost no engagement with issues of class, it was a notable contribution to the dissemination of Marxist theory in the United States in this period. For a discussion of this influence, see Anderson, "Fromm, Marx, and Humanism."

<sup>39</sup> Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*, 77.

<sup>40</sup> See Durkin, "Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno Reconsidered", as well as the contributions by Thompson and by Foster in this volume.

adopted by Fromm in many works of this period has perhaps led to an underappreciation of the *understated complexity* of these works. It should be acknowledged that Fromm admits the foundational nature of much of what he writes during this period: there is repetition here also, and the works tend to lack the more encyclopaedic quality of his works with the Institute, but they are full of fruitful even if not always fully developed postulations.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that Fromm's writings grapple with issues that have come into even sharper focus today: the rise of authoritarianism and other related issues, but also certain academic impasses, such as those that have followed the rise of structuralism, poststructuralism, and the various types of anti-humanism associated with these traditions. This is something that the more recent works on Fromm have brought to the fore, and something that the contributors in this volume seek to amplify and explore.

### **A Radical Humanist and Prophetic Critical Theory**

The essence of Fromm's distinctive form of critical theory can be traced to its resolutely *humanist* character. Although what is meant by "humanist" today is not always clear, for Fromm humanism is the necessary grounding for a theory that wants to speak simultaneously to analytical-descriptive *and* normative categories (which it unites in the process), but also, and thereby, to categories capable of encouraging individual and collective praxis in the world at large. Fromm's humanism was not incidental to his thought, but, rather, the central defining feature that unites all its various elements. In practical terms, and at its most basic, humanism for Fromm is *radical*. It is radical, in its most literal sense, in that it *goes to the root* (i.e. to the heart of what makes us human). In contradistinction to the hegemonic anti-humanism that proliferates in certain spheres of the

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<sup>41</sup> It should be pointed out that books such as *You Shall Be As Gods*, *Social Character in a Mexican Village* and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* were significant academic accomplishments that resemble Fromm's earlier Institute works.

academy, Fromm's critical theory operates with a provisional philosophical anthropology, positing human life as circumscribed by a series of "existential needs" and questions that need to be met and answered: needs for fulfilment, meaning, connection.<sup>42</sup> It is radical also because it concerned with furthering *human emancipation* from alienating political, social, and economic relations.

This aspect of Fromm's humanism ought not to be seen as evidence of a "naïve" humanism, but rather a grappling with the question of what it means to be human that meaningfully expands our analytical and normative conceptions of the individual and social life. As opposed to some theories that also bear that name "emancipatory," Fromm's critical theory, by dint of its humanist character, is *explicitly normative*. His account of *normative humanism* – based on the assumption that there are better and worse, satisfactory and unsatisfactory solutions to the problem of human existence – is the crux of his account. This is not a thick prescriptivism, as some claim, but a *thin normativism*, in which many varied ways of living are consistent with human flourishing. It is prescriptively normative in only one sense: that living in certain ways will lead to certain psychological and practical consequences for self and others, these consequences mapped by Fromm in their individual and social manifestations so as to guide us towards a better world. It is here that the *prophetic* nature of Fromm's thought comes to the fore. Fromm's prophetic orientation foregrounds the elementary alternatives that structure human existence – and particular human existence under conditions of modernity and late modernity, working so as to provide us with the evaluative and motivational tools for appraising the social relations that structure our lives. Central to the prophetic element of Fromm's critical theory is a stress on *hope for* and *faith in* our capacity to make the kind of individual and social changes that will ensure human creative and solidaristic flourishing at the highest level. This hope and faith is not marked by passivity but, rather, by activity,

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<sup>42</sup> Fromm speaks of needs for relatedness, identity, and transcendence in *The Sane Society*.



ever aligned as it is to the humanist conviction in the possibility of change whilst remaining wary of overoptimistic adventurism in relation to the determinate possibilities for change.<sup>43</sup>

Fromm's notion of *pathological normalcy* is also central to his critical theory. The observation that normalcy itself can be (and is) pathological – that certain social relations that obtain and may be considered normal or even desirable are damaging – is the analytical basis of any truly critical theory: the grounds from which to appraise the world in its immanent and emancipatory relationships. The first step in moving towards social change is to acknowledge the widespread social pathology that characterises so much of our lives, and that is instantiated at various levels of the social structure. Crucially, Fromm's account of pathological normalcy is related, and points back, to his account of normative humanism, and to the prophetic character of his theory. It is here that the stress on objective norms assumes its particular importance, being leveraged against his account of the structural forces that are mediated through ideological and characterological factors. The notion that we can, and need to, speak *at some level* in objective terms in relation to the existence of social pathology and alternatives to this state of affairs goes against the extreme constructivism and sociological relativism that often obtains in the social sciences and humanities. These bifurcated social theoretical paths are coming into sharper focus in the present moment, with developments in the world outside of academia such as the rise of right-wing authoritarianism, heightened racism, sexism, heterosexism, and related forms of xenophobia.<sup>44</sup>

Importantly, Fromm's critical theory is set up with the intention of encouraging critical reflexivity and mutual recognition: what Fromm terms *productive relatedness*. Fromm places a central stress on embracing *positive freedom*: i.e. of overcoming narcissism (both individual and group narcissism), and replacing hateful for loving,

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<sup>43</sup> See Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, but also Braune, *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope*, and Micheal Löwy in this volume.

<sup>44</sup> See Foster, Lundskow, Thorpe, and Langman and Lundskow in this volume.

destructive for creative, and sadomasochist for humanist forms of relationship. The religious analogy of overcoming idolatry-alienation is important here – the idols to be overcome are those of flag, state, identity, race, ethnicity, and status, as well as productive and political relations that leave human individuals beholden to powers beyond their rational and empathetic control. The central pathological feature in Fromm’s critical theory is of course capitalism, with the elementary alienation and other reifying effects that result from its de-humanised structures; but Fromm approaches this in a manner that focuses on experiential aspects and emotions and values pitched at the level of the ideological superstructure as well as material forms of development in the base. This is a focus that brings the individual and the societal together: a concern for the “art of living” indexed to a wide social platform for the humanisation of institutions and structures.<sup>45</sup> Prefiguration is thus a central part of Fromm’s critical theory: a theory is critical in its fullest sense because it *also* concerned with the steps between the present and the future. These steps in Fromm’s critical theory are doubly important as intermediate revivification – praxis altering, radical reformist steps towards realistic utopias hewed out in the midst of a society that works hard to deny the possibility of transcendence.<sup>46</sup>

The lynchpin of Fromm’s critical theory is his account of *social character*. The fruits of his synthesis of Marx and Freud, Fromm’s account of social character attempts to explain the *dynamic process* whereby socially shaped needs and desires for characteristic human forms of relationship are fostered in a particular society (and for particular groups of that society in similar and different ways). The social character for Fromm is the *intermediary* (in both direction) between the socio-economic structure and the ideas and ideals prevalent in a given society or subsection of that society. It is through this theory that Fromm is able to account for the dynamics of the psychological process operating

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<sup>45</sup> In books such as *The Sane Society*, *The Revolution of Hope*, and *To Have or To Be?* Fromm develops a form of practical philosophy that speaks to the need to interpersonal and collective engagement in terms of groups, clubs, and town hall meetings.

<sup>46</sup> See Lundskow in this volume on aspects of this.

within the individual *as well as* the role of the wider cultural forces on that individual, and the relationship between each aspect. Fromm's stress on the deep, varied, and dynamic psychological processes that characterise social life means that this account of the social shaping of subjective being is able to extricate itself from a closed structural-functionalist analysis without losing connection to structural and functional elements that nevertheless circumscribe this reality. The role of emotions, repression, and other unconscious processes interacts with the processes of socialisation, never being fully reduced to it. In this way, Fromm's critical theory can account for ideology as filtered through and channelled into characterological drives, opposing the anti-agentic depictions of social reality found in the structuralist tradition.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Structure of this Book**

This collection is divided into three parts, reflecting what we feel are the three central areas of study pertaining to Fromm's critical social theory today. As with the nature of Fromm's writings, there is considerable overlap between each area – a fact that is reflective of the deeply integrated texture of Fromm's thought.

*Part I* of the collection focuses on the social theoretical, philosophical, and religio-ethical bases of Fromm's critical theory. Michael Thompson's contribution stresses the ontological nature of Fromm's theorising, a feature which he claims marks Fromm out from the third-generation Frankfurt School theories of thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst. In contradistinction to the "neo-Idealism" of these theorists, who pay insufficient attention to the structuralist and functionalist aspects of the social process, Thompson praises Fromm's position for its incorporation of

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<sup>47</sup> See Thompson and Maccoby and McLaughlin in this volume.

the affective and cognitive *along with* the structural and functional. This approach, Thompson argues, avoids the ‘reductive noumenalism’ of the third generation Frankfurt School thinkers that “reduces social relations to the noumenal structures of consciousness.” Fromm’s thinking, on the contrary, for Thompson, grows out of a theory of freedom and judgement that also takes into consideration the deep ontological shape of social relations that possess a constitutive power over not only the individual self, but society as a whole. Central to Thompson’s argument is Fromm’s account of humanistic ethics – an account which Thompson contends is not severed from the functional-structural part of Fromm’s analysis, but, rather, explicitly drawn out of it. On this reading, Thompson makes the case for the deep normativity that exists in Fromm’s thought, that has been missing in critical social theory in its more contemporary manifestations.

Michael Löwy’s contribution engages a discussion of Fromm’s earliest writings – those dating from the period between 1922 and 1930, and which have historically been the least studied of all Fromm’s works. As Löwy demonstrates, these early writings were marked by the intersection of Fromm’s Judaic, social psychological, and Marxian interests, all of which Löwy contends were unified through Fromm’s “messianic/revolutionary spirituality.” Löwy places Fromm in relation to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century renaissance of Jewish thought and culture, describing him as a romantic Jewish “pariah intellectual,” related to but distinct from thinkers such as Gustav Landauer, Ernst Bloch, the young Georg Lukács, Manès Sperber, and Walter Benjamin. As with these other thinkers, Löwy identifies in Fromm a strong romantic antipathy to capitalist civilisation and a related nostalgia over the loss over certain aspects of premodern society. Löwy identifies aspects of this Jewish Romanticism intermingling with methodological and conceptual borrowings from Max Weber in Fromm’s earliest works, although he points out that Fromm belongs, like Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and others, to a group that developed “anti-capitalist interpretations” of Max Weber, quite opposed the *wertfreiheit*

definition. In this connection, Löwy traces the evolution of Fromm's thought into more outwardly Freudo-Marxist terrain in works such as *The Dogma of Christ*.

George Lundskow's contribution focuses on a later manifestation of Fromm's engagement with religion, specifically, with the potential that Fromm's social psychological of an "object of devotion" has to play in progressive social change. Primarily referencing the US context, Lundskow identifies the dominance of a reactionary "religious nationalism" that he implicates in the manifest racism, sexism, and general xenophobia that characterises support for Donald Trump. Lundskow draws on Fromm's distinction between *humanistic* and *authoritarian* religion, as well as his distinction between revolutionary and rebellious character, to make the case for a concept of "productive transcendence." This account is expanded through a discussion of Black Panther Huey Newton's call for a "spiritual humanism" in which revolutionary religion and spiritual morality are united. From these sources, Lundskow puts forward a Frommian account in which progressive social change can only happen if social movements are able to "articulate and practice an inspirational spirituality that elevates progressive moral imperatives above mundane concerns." The "vision of becoming" that Lundskow has in mind, is one that merges faith and reason, and that draws motivation from a transcendent and sacred urgency into a practice that is based on mutual respect and love.

In *Part II* we look at the integration of sociology and psychology that is the methodological cornerstone of Fromm's account. Roger Foster's contribution explores the potential that Fromm's social psychology possesses to explain the contemporary rise of nationalism and xenophobia. Noting the parallels between the present social and political crisis of the post-industrial democracies, and the crisis of laissez-faire capitalism that formed the backdrop to the first generation of the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and 1930s, Foster draws on Fromm's psychosocial perspective to explain how it is that capital has been able to weaponize the fears and anxieties that arose in the fast-paced socioeconomic

change of the *Trentes Glorieuses* and the neoliberal era. Through a reading of Boltanski and Chiapello's thesis in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, and the humanistic psychoanalysis of the mid-twentieth century (of which Fromm was amongst the most notable), Foster posits a deep-seated "structural conflict between progressive and regressive tendencies and forces" at the heart of the dynamic of capitalism in which we have seen the systematic alienation of increased potentials for autonomy and personal growth. Posing the question as to how we overcome "the neoliberal colonization of humanist aspirations," Foster is clear as to the need to identify and rescue the emancipatory tendencies that underlie the social and cultural change and that are the cornerstone of Fromm's account of an unalienated social character.

Lynn Chancer's contribution is concerned with the relationship between feminism and humanism in Fromm's work. Chancer focuses on texts such as *Escape from Freedom* and *The Art of Loving*, and the tools that they provide for analysing psychosocially caused gendered effects which have been somewhat neglected by leading feminist thinkers. She demonstrates how Fromm's accounts of sadomasochism and love offer related insights into the subtleties and dynamics of unequal power, as well as, and at the same time, cultural discourses and ideologies of romance and sexuality. As part of this discussion, Chancer interrogates Fromm's social psychology, laying bare some significantly gendered and even biologist lapses in Fromm's writings, but nevertheless making the case for the overall progressiveness of Fromm's work for feminist and queer theorising. She points out Fromm's humanism operates on the basis of "common psychosocial dynamics at the same time differing by gender, class, race, sexualities, and other social categories," and that thus, in spite of his biologist lapses, Fromm's overriding concern in his writings was 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 so doing, Chancer stresses the degree to which "feminist and humanist ideas are compatible in

ways beneficial for feminist and social theories overall,” and that critiques of sadomasochism, or of alienated love, are, in Fromm’s writings, “interconnected with prefigurative visions of what non-sexist relationships would look like on both individual and social levels.”

Michael Maccoby’s and Neil McLaughlin’s contribution explores the intellectual relationship between Fromm and influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Their comparative analysis charts the respective careers of both thinkers, exploring the dynamics that led to two very different positions within the sociological field, and to the relative sociological inertia that can be said to hold in the case of Fromm relative to Bourdieu. They highlight broad areas of convergence between both thinkers: their shared sociological heritage, strong critiques of positivism, and opposition to the structure/agency dualism, but also the relatively unexplored commonalities (and divergences) between their respective “sociopschoanalytic” and “socioanalytic” accounts. As part of this discussion, Maccoby and McLaughlin explore commonalities between Fromm and Bourdieu’s most closely comparable empirical works, and between their respective accounts of “social character” and “habitus.” What they particularly want to highlight, is the productive relationship between the two thinkers over the issue of depth psychology, and the unrealised potential of a research agenda that is able to synthesize Fromm’s psychoanalytical account with Bourdieu’s more cognitivist framing. Such a synthesis, they point out, which would deepen mainstream contemporary sociological accounts of the emotions, has assumed greater importance in our contemporary political and cultural climate, and would thus possess the potential to rejuvenate sociological research and theorising into areas that are pivotal to the lives of millions today.

*Part III* of the volume is primarily concerned with the issue of authoritarianism and the ways in which we can monitor and transcend it. David Norman Smith’s contribution looks at Fromm’s anti-authoritarian Marxism as it developed in the 1920s and 1930s, in the

context of political developments in Germany and the USSR. Smith details Fromm's concerns during this period as they intersect with other Institute members and leading socialist and communist figures, including Karl Wittfogel, Otto Rühle, and Hilde Weiss. Smith devotes particular attention to Weiss – “one of the truly neglected figures in the history of the Frankfurt School” – and her role on the German workers study. Weiss is shown by Smith to have been, in many senses, the principal architect of the study, and a very influential but tragically unsung figure in the Institute in general. Through his discussion of Fromm's friendships with Weiss, Rühle, and Wittfogel, Smith is able to shed new light on Fromm's positions in relation to the defining politics of the age. Particularly at issue is the figure of Leon Trotsky, and the crossroads facing the USSR under Stalin's rule. Fromm's relationship to Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Eduard Bernstein is also touched upon. In this connection, Smith reveals how Fromm's revision of Freud during this period is integrally related to his radical humanist concerns for human emancipation that he unequivocally held in the face of the battle between humanism and authoritarianism that came to define the middle part of the twentieth century.

Charles Thorpe's contribution engages in an intertextual reading of Fromm and Anthony Giddens on the issue of anxiety and reflexivity. Outlining the development of political economy in the UK and the US in the last thirty years, Thorpe charts the role Giddens' account of the Third Way played in “creat[ing] the social and psychological conditions for the authoritarian backlash against reflexivity” in the US and UK. Central to his argument is the way in which structural economic changes, and related changes towards a “politics of lifestyle,” have threatened demarcations of identity that have destabilized ontological security. Global economic turbulence and the anxiety associated with that and other forms of insecurity (in terms of status and cultural identity), have become interiorised, according to Thorpe, “creating susceptibility to authoritarian forces offering escape from this anxiety.” Common to both Fromm and Giddens is the notion that



modernity calls for social transformation towards a higher form of individuality – that which Giddens calls “reflexivity” and which Fromm termed “positive freedom.” But whereas Giddens’ account of reflexivity is somewhat restricted to a politics of lifestyle, unconnected to a structural account of market dynamics, Fromm’s account of positive freedom is “connected to the structural question of the social control over economic forces.” Thorpe draws upon Ronald Inglehart’s notion of existential security, developing a response to it in which emphasis is placed on Fromm’s conception of “humanistic planning” as the basis for a programme for the institutional articulation of life politics in which existentially rooted moral questions are answered alongside, and as part of, the need for economic security.

Langman’s and Lundskow’s contribution applies Fromm’s notion of social character to the differentiated process of characterological change taking place at the present juncture in advanced capitalist countries, such as the United States. Developing on the Gramscian theme of our present moment as one of “interregnum,” when the old values are dying but the new values are still to fully emerge, Langman and Lundskow identify a battle between reactionary movements and progressive movements. As with Foster in Part I, their analytical lens focuses on the changes that have taken place in US society since the 1960s. Central to their discussion here are the developments towards ‘liquid selfhood’ and increased degrees of mutual recognition (if not always strong ideological commitment) found amongst large sections of younger cohorts, especially among later Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. Evoking Fromm and Maccoby’s notion of “social selection,” Langman and Lundskow pit this “new, emerging and growing form of social character” against the more authoritarian and reactionary older social character, which they note often erupts in “desperate attempts to halt, and in some cases reverse...the social changes giving rise to more a democratic and even productive social character.” In light of this struggle, and movements such as the Arab Spring, the Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives

Matter, and that behind the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, they pose the vital question: “Is the flexible, multiple self capable of effecting social transformation and working towards a ‘sane society’?”

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