



The Legacy of Erich Fromm, by Daniel Burston, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press 1991, xi + 260 pages, hb £ 23.95

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The authoritarian structure of orthodox psychoanalysis has led to the explicit or implicit ostracism of many of its **practitioners**. Fromm shared this fate with Ferenczi and many others. I mention Ferenczi in particular because of the close links between these two authors. They shared several character traits, such as independence of mind and a loving approach, and these were the very traits which led to their banishment. This ostracism was effective in both cases, as regards professional circles. As Heynal and Falzeder (1991) remark, for several years after Ferenczi's death his work "fell into oblivion" in orthodox circles (p, 17). As to Fromm, Roazen (1989) speaks of his "de facto excommunication" on the part of the psychoanalytic community. Fromm, however, also differed from Ferenczi in important respects: he was very pugnacious and outspoken in his critique of authority, and he had a much wider cultural background. These factors allowed him to circumvent the excommunication and to reach out to the general reading public, and in so doing also to take up Ferenczi's defense on many



occasions. Burston's book is an opportunity for the psychoanalytic community to reassess an author who could greatly contribute to a revitalization of psychoanalysis but who so far has been prevented from doing so.

Fromm's work

Fromm is generally labeled as a "neo-Freudian", together with Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan and Clara Thompson. As Burston states at the very beginning of his book, this definition is restrictive, despite the close personal ties of Fromm to the other neo-Freudians, and his involvement, together with Sullivan and Thompson, in the founding of the William Alanson White Institute in New York. This label, as applied to Fromm, is inadequate for several reasons. On the one hand, Fromm differs from the other neo-Freudians in regarding himself as a continuator of Freud, albeit a critical one. Burston places Fromm in Freud's "loyal opposition", together with Groddeck, Ferenczi, the Freudo-Marxists and the British object-relations theorists (p. 2), although he credits Fromm with "affinities to the dissident fringe" (p. 4). On the other hand, Fromm transcends both Freudians and neo-Freudians by the wealth of cultural traditions by which he was influenced and which he synthesized in his thinking. These multiple influences, and the way they found expression in Fromm's work, are examined by



Burston in a series of distinct chapters.

Burston periodizes Fromm's work in an early, middle and late period. In his early years, Fromm was strongly affected by his Jewish religious background, and especially by Habad Hassidism. Later, at the University of Heidelberg, he assimilated the tradition of German philosophy and sociology. These strands converged in his doctoral dissertation on the sociopsychological structure of three Jewish Diaspora communities. Fromm later abandoned religious observances and advocated a form of nontheistic religion, as expressed, for instance, in his book *You Shall Be as Gods*, of 1966.

Next came the impact of psychoanalysis, culminating in formal training in Berlin, and the influence of Marxism, which led to Fromm's association with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. Fromm's attempt to synthesize these two traditions place him in the group of Freudo-Marxists, whose outlook is thus summarized by Burston: "As Marxists they were committed to the thesis that individual psychology is derived from social structure, not vice versa" (p. 31). In an important series of papers of the early Thirties, Fromm developed his original approach of analytic social psychology, which he also applied in empirical research carried out within the Frankfurt Institute. Briefly, Fromm maintained that in a given society most people share certain character traits which are adaptive in that society and which make up what Fromm later called the social character. Character structures are linked to different



socioeconomic situations, not to phases of **psychosexual** development. The character types which Fromm described in his early work were, in his later terminology, the receptive, the hoarding and the **exploitative**.

Another important interest of Fromm's in these years was **Bachofen's** matriarchal theory. In the light of this theory, Fromm regarded maternal love - as opposed to a patriarchal-authoritarian approach - as characterizing a whole period in cultural evolution. This led to a far-reaching theoretical revision of the Oedipus complex: "[Fromm] argued that the ambivalence toward the father that Freud universalized was a social artifact, not a biological given" (p. 99).

All of Fromm's works written after the Thirties are developments of these **early** interests, to which were added a concern for Zen Buddhism and the Western mystical tradition.

In 1933 Fromm moved to America, and his increasing dissatisfaction with orthodox Freudianism led to his association with the **neo-Freudians**. The books for which Fromm became famous appeared in America during his middle period, and include Escape from Freedom in 1941, Man for Himself (maybe, his central work) in 1947, The Forgotten Language in 1951, The Sane Society in 1955, The Art of Loving in 1956. This period is marked by the development of Fromm's distinctive philosophical anthropology



and by his critique of postwar industrial capitalism.

As regards the former theme, although "Fromm was keenly aware of the influence of social conditions and gender roles on the development of character ... he also believed that there is a universal human nature" (p. 84). "In attempting to explicate human nature, Fromm harked back to the tradition of philosophical humanism" (p. 85). Fromm's own contribution consisted in defining human nature in terms of "existential needs". As Fromm himself put it, "man's essence lies in the very contradiction between his being in nature ... and at the same time transcending nature by his lack of instinctual equipment and by the fact of his awareness". "Owing to our lack of an instinctive adaptation to our surroundings, Fromm contended, we seek communion with others to alleviate a potentially devastating sense of isolation" (p. 71). Existential needs arise from this situation. Burston lists three needs as basic: the need for (1) a framework of orientation and devotion, (2) a sense of rootedness, and (3) a sense of transcendence (p. 88). The various solutions to these needs fall into two basic alternatives: the regressive and the progressive solutions. This framework has consequences for therapy. "Fromm regarded the aim of therapy as more than mere symptom alleviation" (p. 72). "Fromm felt its ultimate goal lay in the recovery and gradual derepression of modalities of experience that are normally proscribed by society" (ibid.) by means of "social filters". Only then "will we experience our



universal or common humanity" (p. 73).

Another **Frommian** theme which emerged during this period was the critique of postwar capitalism. Whereas nineteenth-century capitalism tended to favor the hoarding and the exploitative character **orientations**, modern capitalism gives rise to a new type of character orientation: the marketing character. "People increasingly experience themselves as commodities for sale, and accordingly, their sense of self-worth fluctuates in response to external symbols of acceptance" (p. 118), but this leads to a lack of genuine contact with others, a "pathology of **normalcy**".

Finally, another fundamental Frommian theme which was developed during this period is that of **aggressiveness**. In his final formulation, Fromm distinguished between benign, or defensive **aggressiveness**, which is biologically conditioned and is reactive to threats to the organism, from malignant **aggressiveness**, which - in contrast to Freud, although with some contradictions - is not regarded as innate, and may manifest itself either as sadism - the control over others - or as necrophilia - the destruction of others. This view led Fromm to define a further character type: the **necrophilic** character.

After the war Fromm spent several years in Mexico, where he founded his own school of psychoanalysis and carried out some further important - but still underrated - empirical studies in analytic social psychology, before coming back to Europe in the last years of his life. The main works of his final years are



The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (1973) and To Have or to Be? (1976). According to Burston (p. 7), in addition to his earlier interests, the subject which occupied Fromm most in this period was the crisis of psychoanalysis, which was also the title of a collection of essays of 1970.

Connections

The account reported above would in itself be sufficient to demonstrate the breadth of Fromm's interests. An additional merit of Burston's book is to make explicit a wealth of connections between Fromm and other authors. The wealth of the connections established by Burston matches the richness of Fromm's own interests.

To start with Fromm's early period, Burston draws a comparison between Fromm and Marx. "Unlike Marx, Fromm insisted that our essence is given in the conditions of our existence ... Even in the absence of oppression or privation, we would still struggle for a newfound unity with ourselves"(p. 95).

Both in the chapter on Freudo-Marxism and in the chapter on Fromm's clinical contributions, Burston also discusses the affinities ~~with~~ ^{and} ~~between~~ the conflicts between Fromm and Wilhelm Reich - a fellow Freudo-Marxist. Fromm agrees with Reich in thinking that "what is repressed includes many healthy and



prosocial tendencies" (p. 59). "Like Reich, Fromm (and Horney) was concerned to establish and maintain contact with the alive and healthy core of patients" (*ibid.*). The difference was that "Fromm soon jettisoned the drive-reduction theory of motivation **and characterological** development, according the need for relatedness primacy over the satisfaction of tissue needs" (*ibid.*).

Other connections which are established in the book are those between Fromm and his erstwhile colleagues of the Frankfurt Institute, Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. After their initial collaboration, a rift developed between Fromm and the Institute, which declined to publish the results of Fromm's study of German workers. One reason may be that Fromm's work pointed to the existence of an "authoritarianism of the left" which Horkheimer and Adorno preferred to ignore (p. 110). On his side, Fromm criticized Adorno's later study of the authoritarian personality because it failed to distinguish between a traditionalist and an authoritarian orientation (p. 112).

The main factor behind the bitter and lengthy debate with Marcuse was Fromm's estrangement from orthodox Freudianism, which Marcuse dismissed as "revisionism". Marcuse, on his side, supported pregenital sexuality and regressive strivings. Burston suspects that, behind the theoretical debate among the **Freudo-Marxists**, the real driving force was sibling rivalry - "the need to establish who was the true son and heir to Freud,



or at any rate to the radical Freud" (p. 226).

In discussing matriarchal theory, Burston points out that, in the concern for the primary tie with the mother - under Bachofen's influence - Fromm had been preceded by Jung and Rank (pp. 45-47). In a later chapter, Burston also discusses the similarities and differences between Fromm and Jung. Whereas "Jung ... construed all forms of communion or community as flights from authentic individuality ... Fromm saw individuation as a prerequisite to genuine relatedness" (p. 72).

In the same chapter, Burston also points out hitherto unrecognized analogies between Fromm and the Scottish psychiatrist Ian Suttie, who in the Thirties, under Ferenczi's influence, expressed a critique of Freud's misogyny. This convergence was presumably due to a shared interest in the British anthropologist Robert Briffault. Burston speaks of "impressive" parallels between Fromm and Suttie, and others which "are almost uncanny" (p.49).

More connections are established by Burston when, in discussing Fromm's concept of the "pathology of normalcy", he traces the origins of this concept to past systems of thought such as the elitist Platonic tradition (to which Freud was more akin) or the more democratic prophetic and Stoic tradition (to which Fromm was closer) (p. 137).

Burston also compares Fromm's social psychology with the work



of Solomon Asch on the pressure to conform and that of Stanley Milgram on obedience to authority (pp. 151-158).

In the chapter on Fromm's clinical contributions, Burston makes another most important connection when he points out the "profound affinities", hitherto unrecognized except by David Schecter, between Fromm and the British middle school (p. 63). In particular, he discusses the many parallels between Fromm and Fairbairn. As early as 1934 Fromm had written that "a typology based on **object-relationships**, rather than on erogenous zones or clinical **symptomatology**, offers fruitful possibilities for social research". Burston goes on to say that "there is a striking similarity in spirit between Fromm's early object-relations orientation and his later clinical formulations" (p. 63). According to Burston, "Fairbairn, then, like Fromm, came to regard the various syndromes and processes he described as solutions to the problem of relatedness" (p. 65). Another parallel pointed out by Burston is with Guntrip: "Guntrip also spoke of restoring the capacity for ego relatedness in language that is strikingly reminiscent of what Fromm termed 'core to core relatedness'" (p. 62). My own suggestion is that these analogies between Fromm and British authors are due to the influence of Ferenczi on both sides of the Atlantic, and that



these important connections deserve to be explored further.

Conclusions

Burston also dicusses various points on which Fromm's thinking may require revision. One is the persistence of Freudian residues, such as the single-track view of development, which appear in Fromm's work and which are in contrast to other formulations of Fromm himself (p. 64). Another point is Fromm's pessimism regarding modern society, which is not shared by David Riesman and Michael Maccoby - both analysands and colleagues of Fromm's - (p. 128), and by other authors who have discussed Fromm, such as Ruth Munroe (p. 168).

Following Michael Maccoby, Burston also criticizes Fromm for often quoting "Masters of Living" such as Isaiah, Buddha, Meister Eckhart and Spinoza. Burston maintains that Fromm thus claimed universalism for norms that were themselves historical products and often implied the idealization of models of past epochs (p. 87). He also states that to quote these thinkers of the past "amounts simply to another appeal to authority" (ibid.). Whilst not denying a prescriptive tendency in Fromm, it could be maintained that certain great thinkers of the past - such as the sixth-century-B.C. seers wh^o~~ich~~ characterized what Karl Jaspers called the Axis Age - were not merely historical products. They may have permanent value if we view them as the expression of the reaction of our species against adverse



cultural developments.

Burston's criticism may reflect his personal preference for certain aspects of Fromm's work as compared to others. While showing due regard for the variety of Fromm's themes, it is possible that Burston has no special sympathy, for instance, for Fromm's interest in mysticism. The name of Meister Eckhart does not even appear in his index. This shift in emphasis is evident if we compare Burston's book with an earlier book by Rainer Funk, Erich Fromm: The Courage to Be Human.

This remark in no way detracts from the merits of this very timely book, which could at last stimulate the reassessment of a very important but often underrated writer. As regards in particular Fromm's relevance to psychoanalysis, two consequences could accrue from this book. In the first place, Fromm deserves recognition for having anticipated ideas which have now gained wide acceptance - and which Burston lists on pp. 204-205 - such as the critique of the Oedipus complex and of the therapist's neutrality, and the primacy of the tie to the mother. A second consequence, which concerns the future and which is only implicit in Burston's book, is that Fromm may have important



contributions to make to further developments in psychoanalysis.

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