



Erich Fromm's Concept of Man and Society in the Tradition of Dialectical Thinking

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I. Introduction

The concept of dialectics is as old and polymorphous as Occidental philosophy. Nevertheless it is a special tradition of dialectical thinking which gives meaning to the most different items of Erich Fromm's thinking. By the attempt to understand all parts of Fromm's thoughts one is surprised that his thinking all over his writings follows a special form of thought which one can characterize as paradoxical logic (in contrast to the Aristotelian logic) or as a special way of dialectical thinking. Ernst Topitsch has identified this way of dialectics as originated in an ecstatic-cathartic model of conceptualization of man and society.

Defining the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model in the dialectics of Hegel and Marx allows us to see that with his philosophical-anthropological, religio-critical, and ethical views, Fromm stands in the tradition of this model. Although he explicitly traces the most important concepts to Marx, he makes, apart from some reflections on „paradoxical logic” in „The Art of Loving” (1956a) no comments on dialectics. Nonetheless, it is obvious that his roots are in this tradition. It can also be shown that Marx was not the primary mediator of this model.

II. Fromm's Thought in the Tradition of the Ecstatic-Cathartic Conceptual Model

1. The meaning of the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model according to Ernst Topitsch

To begin with I first want to trace what Topitsch does mean with the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model.

The origins of the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model must be looked for in the gnostic myths. „The basic gnostic motif is the pressure of reality that is experienced with cutting incisiveness and its result, the need for salvation that seeks satisfaction in a corresponding interpretation of the human self and of the entire world process.” (E. Topitsch, *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, p. 187f.) The gnostic interpretation of the human self sees in men souls of light that have fallen away from a divinity conceived as unknowable. Since they lost their knowledge of their divine origin in their fall, they can either become completely estranged from that origin or recover knowledge of it - that means „gnosis” - by becoming aware of their divine character. Man's salvation is gnosis, a becoming aware of „the divinity of his own 'true' self” (l.c., p. 187).

This idea of the alienation of the human soul from its divine origin and its salvation through gnosis subsequently became the model for an interpreta-

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tion of the entire world process. This model of „próodos” (emanation) and „epistrophé” (return) gives rise to the Alexandrine world schema. The assessment of any given present as a time of necessary alienation and calamity explains the attraction this ecstatic-cathartic construct of Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism had for Judeo-Christian apocalypticism. Both the apocalyptic and the gnostic traditions see „the present, pressing evil as a necessary negative stage on the way toward ultimate salvation” (E. Topitsch, *Maxismus und Gnosis*, p. 245).

Topitsch traces the ecstatic-cathartic construct through history all the way down to the concept of dialectics in Hegel and Marx. He proves the presence of this form of thought in Isaac Luria’s Kabbala and in Jewish mysticism and demonstrates that a tradition runs from there to the Protestant theology at Tübingen when Hegel and Schelling studied there.

2. Biographically notes on Fromm’s rootedness in the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model

After this short lines I like to show how Erich Fromm biographically was related to the tradition of the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model.

Fromm grew up in a Jewish spiritual and social milieu and was influenced by the cathartic element of this religion, which orthodoxy especially emphasizes. As a young man, he was much influenced by his Talmud teacher, Salman Baruch Rabinkov, who was both a Habadnik and a socialist and responsible for Fromm’s interest in socialist thought. One may plausibly assume that it was primarily Rabinkov and the mysticism of Habad Hasidism, and only secondarily Marx’s religio-critical modification of the conceptual model, that shaped Fromm’s thought.

Hasidism is primarily a development of the Lurianic Kabbala and its apocalyptic version in Sabbatianism and shares the concerns of Jewish mysticism with these. It is not surprising that Jewish mysticism should be a stimulus for an ecstatic-cathartic construct. It is principally with the Zohar and on the

basis of the Sefirot doctrine that Jewish mysticism was elaborated in Spanish Kabbalism. The Sefirot doctrine represents a theosophical speculation that synthesizes various gnostic, Neoplatonic, and apocalyptic traditions in a typical ecstatic-cathartic construct, the kabbalistic one. (Cf. G. Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, p. 224-266.) In the „breaking of the vessels,” the gnostic doctrine concerning the sparks became the kabbalistic cosmogony that included all those details that are characteristic for an ecstatic-cathartic construct.

While the tradition of the ecstatic-cathartic model that runs from the Lurianic Kabbala to the Christian Kabbala and Swabian pietism and on to Hegel and Marx is relatively hazy, the link to Hasidism and the Habad Hasidism, which was founded by Shneur Zalman in the 18th century is clear and direct: the most important source for the Habad doctrine is the Zohar and Luria’s Kabbala. The Habad doctrine itself can be seen as a transformation of the theosophical speculation into „an instrument of psychological analysis and selfknowledge” (cf. Scholem, *l.c.*, p. 374) in which the ecstatic-cathartic construct retains its validity. The process by which mysticism becomes ethos, which accompanies the transformation, and the emphasis on the „way” this entails opens up an understanding of many philosophical-anthropological and psychological and ethical views of Fromm, and also facilitates access to ecstatic-cathartic constructs in the mysticisms of Asia. So Fromm’s thought was given a specific turn by Habad Hasidism, and his most important interests during the twenties - Freud’s doctrines, Karl Marx, and Buddhism - were reinforcements of already existing forms of thought within an ecstatic-cathartic conceptual construct.

Freud himself clearly expressed the conviction on which his movement was founded: „Where Id was, there shall Ego be.”

In this process of „enlightenment”, reason plays a decisive role, but it is a reason that governs the unconscious and irrational passions and frees man of the power of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis is primarily interested in the cathartic aspect of reason, and catharsis is therefore a central concept in



Freud. Even after Fromm's break with Jewish orthodoxy, both Buddhism and his study of Marx contributed, each in its own particular way, to his retaining the forms of thought of the ecstatic-cathartic construct in which he had been rooted up to that point.

As one surveys the various phenomena in Western intellectual history and other cultures that stimulated Fromm's interest, one notices that they are primarily thinkers, movements, and facts that can be classified as belonging to the ecstatic-cathartic construct insofar as their understanding of man, his world, and his history is concerned. What is invariably involved is a „radical knowledge,” a „becoming aware” of man's innermost productive capacities, an „illumination,” the awakening of „humanitas” - in short, gnosis.

3. Fromm's bias towards paradoxical logic

Before sketching how Fromm's thought is rooted in the cathartic construct by examining his views on man and man's history, we will turn our attention to his reflections on paradoxical logic. (To the following cf. E. Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (1956a), p. 61-68.) Besides Aristotelian logic, which is based on identity, contradiction, and the excluded middle, there exists, according to Fromm, another mode of thought whose existence in the West can be traced to Heraclitus and which later shows up as „dialectics” in the thought of Hegel and Marx. The principal home of this mode of thought, however, is the East-China and India. It can be called paradoxical logic and is a form of thought that assumes, as Heraklitus did, that „the conflict between opposites is the basis of all existence.” In contrast to Aristotelian logic, paradoxical logic, such as Taoism or Brahmanic philosophy, attempts to find a solution beyond all dualism: „The harmony (unity) consists in the conflicting positions from which it is made up.”

What thinking within an ecstatic-cathartic construct means can be recognized most clearly when one examines the consequences of the summary

concept „paradoxical logic”. An example would be Fromm's emphasis on the meaning paradoxical logic has for a negative concept of God and his assertion that the philosophy that follows the Veda contains the idea that god is the extreme form of ignorance. Fromm writes (l.c., p. 64f.): „We see here the connection with the namelessness of the Tao, the nameless name of the God who reveals himself to Moses, of the 'absolute nothing' of Meister Eckhart.” According to Fromm, another consequence of paradoxical logic is that man can never grasp unity intellectually but only in the „experience of oneness,” so that the mystical experience of the ONE becomes the only adequate form of religion. This means that doctrinal contents and science are not of primary importance; rather, the emphasis is on transforming man and knowing „the right way” (halacha, Tao). „Paradoxical logic ... led to tolerance ... the paradoxical standpoint ... to the emphasis on transforming man.”

4. Fromm's thought in the tradition of the ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model

It is impossible to overlook the closeness of what is here called „paradoxical thinking” to the ecstatic-cathartic construct. The construct emerges with greater clarity in Fromm's view of man, society and his history, however. The following comments will sketch the affinity between the two by comparing Fromm's statements on man's nature and history and the typology of the ecstatic-cathartic construct.

In the question concerning man's self-understanding, the point of departure is the difference between man and animal, which has been established by abundant empirical research. Not only a comparison between this point of departure and traditional definitions of man's nature but also a glance at other contemporary philosophical anthropologies shows that the definition of man as a contradictory being is not a necessary inference from empirical data. It is merely a possible, and perhaps optimal, interpretation. To see man's nature in his contradictoriness is consonant with the



ecstatic-cathartic construct, whose basic motif is the pressure of reality that expresses itself in various dichotomies and is to overcome. Gnosticism sees man as light souls that have fallen out of a primordial unity and become alienated from their origin. Fromm believed that man's dichotomy derives from a break with the harmony of nature. The contradictoriness results from the fact that man is both part of, and more than, nature. In transcending nature through the consciousness of what he is, and through his reason and imagination, man expresses the ecstatic as well as his need for salvation.

In Gnosticism, the fate of the fallen light souls is either total alienation or the becoming aware of their divine character and the abolition of the alienation through gnosis. In Fromm's thought, man's reason, which is responsible for his having „fallen out of” harmony with nature and for the demand that he resolve his dichotomies and the specific human needs in which they result, makes possible two answers: either man can react non-productively and become increasingly alienated; or he can react productively, be mobilizing his forces of reason and love and by attempting to establish a new unity of himself, world, and nature.

The ecstatic-cathartic construct and Fromm's philosophical-anthropological observations also agree that a positive definition of man's nature or essence will be possible only when the „divinity of his own 'true self',” (E. Topitsch, *Seelenglaube und Selbstinterpretation*, p. 187) has been recognized, or when an optimal unfolding of his biophilic capacities has caused him to attain a new unity.

This parallel one can also observe in respect to Fromm's philosophy of history. Apocalypticism is a form of the messianic idea and significantly influenced gnostic cosmogony and theory of history. Fromm sees his view of history as a development of prophetic messianism, so the formal similarity between the ideas is not surprising. It is true, of course, that he applies the cosmogonic model of the original state, *próodos* and *epistrophé*, only to man as humanity and does not reflect on the development of the cosmos. It is different with the assessment of the present historical period as one of

necessary alienation and inescapable evil: in Fromm's theory of history, alienation is required, and the supposition of a necessary alienation is consonant with both a gnostic and a humanistic position that does not care to burden man with responsibility for alienation but does charge him with responsibility for overcoming it. In gnostic-kabbalistic cosmogonies, the „fall of the sparks” is the necessary precondition if their positive meaning is to be understood. In Fromm, the fall of man is the condition for the possibility of his discovering his productive capacities of reason and love. In view of Fromm's interpretation of socialism as a secularized messianism, the notion that his socialism has its home in the ecstatic-cathartic model requires no further proof.

The rootedness of Fromm's thought in the ecstatic-cathartic model also becomes apparent when one looks at questions and answers that persist throughout his work. The first fundamental problem, the relation between individual and society, reflects the profound problematics of the sociological autonomy of Jewish groups in society as a whole, and is related to Fromm's own background. The answer to this basic question comprises his entire sociopsychological work, especially the combination of sociology and psychoanalysis in an original sociopsychological method, the development of the concept „social character,” and the view of man as primarily a social being.

But Fromm's social psychology is more than an answer to the question regarding the relation between individual and society. It must be seen within the framework of the more encompassing question concerning unity in multiplicity and a principle of unity that can bring together the multiplicity of phenomena. It is here that Fromm's rootedness in an ecstatic-cathartic construct becomes apparent, for in such a construct, multiplicity is the emanation of the ONE, and the return to the ONE is salvation from exile, Diaspora, alienation, dispersal.

A second fundamental question that persists throughout Fromm's work concerns man's capacity for the moral as a capacity for unity in mankind. It was provoked by the brutality of two world wars,



the murder of millions of Jews, and the possibility of man's nuclear self-destruction. Fromm's humanistic ethics provides the answer to the fundamental question regarding man's capacity for the moral. It deals with the way, the halacha, and the preconditions for taking it. The preconditions lie in a humanism that sees itself as salvation through man's own efforts. Man's self-assertion in his potential goodness is part of his humanism. This self-assertion corresponds to man's potential divinity on the basis of gnostic knowledge or Hasidic self-sanctification. Therefore humanistic ethics has the task of grounding man's capacity for unity against all opposing theories of aggression, and of showing the way to unity. Its general principle of value is man's unfolding to *humanitas*, which, as humanity, represents man's unity, and, as humanness, defines the condition for the possibility of unity.

A third fundamental question that persists and most clearly points to the origin of this thought in the ecstatic-cathartic construct regards the experience of a meaning that encompasses man and his world. Fromm's answer to the fundamental question of an encompassing experience of meaning is humanistic religion as the mystical experience of the ONE. Just as humanistic ethics can name the way the ONE is experienced insofar as it means man's oneness with himself and with his human and natural environing world. The experience of the ONE is possible only when man renounces all heteronomous influences, negates his dependencies, and thereby becomes aware of his own true, inner self. Only in this self-limitation („emptiness,” „nothingness”) does the ecstatic quality of the experience of the ONE become possible: the mystic experiences his oneness with his human and natural world as an anticipation of his perfection.

Belief and faith in man and his future find support in this encompassing experience of meaning, so that humanistic religion as the mysticism of the ONE makes possible a humanistic ethos through this encompassing experience of meaning. For mysticism means the experience of the reconciliation of contradictions and the unity of difference and diversity, grounds the capacity for the moral in that

experience, and directs man's moral striving toward a goal. Similarly, salvation according to the ecstatic-cathartic construct cannot do without the mystical experience of the ONE in oneness.

III. Dialectics as Form of Thought by Erich Fromm

The words „dialectics” and „dialectical” occur infrequently in Fromm's work. He never commented on „dialectics” as a form of thought or a method. Yet dialectics as a form of thought plays an eminent role in his work, and it is precisely the understanding of dialectics that we find in Hegel and Marx and that has its home in the ecstatic-cathartic construct.

By dialectics is meant a form of thought, „a three-phase rhythm of original state, alienation and return, of negation and negation of the negation, etc.” (E. Topitsch, *Marxismus und Gnosis*, p. 258). The distinctiveness of dialectics lies in its concept of negation, which means that dialectics proceeds by the negation of the given. It thus implies a particular kind of criticism. The detailed demonstration of the presence of dialectical thought in Fromm's work will be focused here to his critique of religion.

In his grounding of humanistic religion, Fromm's point of departure is that humanistic religion is the negation of authoritarian religion. Therefore only a revolutionary character - the dialectical counter-concept of the authoritarian character - can do justice to the concern of humanistic religion. The dialectical conjunction of humanistic religion and revolutionary character, and of authoritarian religion and authoritarian character, means that the antithetical entities contradict each other and are therefore incompatible. This dialectical conjunction also means that humanistic religion and revolutionary character are possible only in the process that negates authoritarian religion and the authoritarian character. Understanding dialectics as a process implies a historico-theoretical aspect that, in Fromm, takes the form of a theory of the history of the concept of God.

Within the dialectical process, the epithets



„humanistic” and „revolutionary” have an antiauthoritarian function, for it is only the principle of disobedience that can break the dominance of obedience to irrational authorities in the long run. This dialectical view of man’s dependence on authority results from an investigation of irrational authority relations and has its justifications insofar as such irrational relations can in fact be dissolved only by opposition (or contradiction). Dialectics as a form of thought is thus perfectly valid where irrational authority can be diagnosed.

A second line is the application of dialectics to the understanding of the history of the concept of God. For Fromm, the history of that concept is a history in which man increasingly learns to understand himself as ultimate reality and highest value. Man’s progressive self-knowledge goes along with a process of negation: to the extent that every statement about God is negated, man understands that he himself is God insofar as he is a genuinely human being.

This idea has its origin in the ban on images in Judaism; it is given greater depth in the Jewish philosophy of religion and especially in the doctrine of negative attributes by Maimonides. Fromm uses it in a religio-critical sense: the recognition that statements about God are impossible, and the critique of any idea about God that transcends man ground the humanistic view of man and his world as a reality that exists wholly through and of itself. The relation between God and man must therefore be expressed dialectically. The goal is the freedom and independence of man from a God whose a priori meaning is unfreedom and dependence. In the case of free and independent man, this process of negation does away with the contradiction.

The humanistic view of man and world in history is grounded in a critique of religion that can be inferred from the history of the concept of God. The line Fromm traces in the history of the concept of God is the development of a negative theology. Fromm makes visible a process by which the concept of God becomes increasingly less meaningful. An interpretation of this religio-critical development as a process of negation within a dialectical

triad seems plausible and is judged correct and valid by Fromm, for he interprets this line of development in religion as the development of religion generally. The religio-critical and humanistic interpretation of the history of negative theology therefore becomes legitimate only if the general course of religion is understood as a dialectical process and the development of negative theology up to nontheistic mysticism is seen as a process of negation within the dialectical triad.

IV. Conclusions

I wanted to show that Erich Fromm’s thought is rooted in a certain tradition of thinking, a dialectical thinking which can be characterized by a ecstatic-cathartic conceptual model. The most interesting point of this type of dialectics one can study in the understanding of the dialectical process as a process of negation which leads to consequences in Fromm’s concept of man, history and society.

Negation ultimately always means the negation of a negation. When a process and development is understood dialectically, what exists is always and necessarily alienated and to be seen as the negation of an original condition. Interpreting a development dialectically as a process of negation means negating what existed before and exists now as a negation of an original state, and to abolish with this negation of the negation the negation of the original state.

In Fromm’s work, dialectics not only has the task of interpreting, ordering, and evaluating empirically discoverable data. His primary object in setting forth his critique of religion was to ground an encompassing theory of man, society and history. This is especially true of the interpretation of the history of the concept of God as a dialectical process of negation. When dialectics is turned into an universally valid principle of all being and becoming, the questions and problems of man are given an answer that man could not provide on his own - that is, in the absence of dialectics as a theory that encompasses all reality.



But because dialectics grasps all that exists as the negation of an original state, and because what exists, being the negation of an original state, can only be sublated and brought to a new identity if this negation is negated in turn, there is posited a theory that is universal because it encompasses all reality, in which an entity that transcends this reality does not exist, and where such an entity is not required for a solution. Universalizing dialectics as a

form of thought thus satisfies the concern in Gnosticism from which it derives and which wishes to allow man to become aware of his divine nature as a task that he sets and must accomplish himself. Understood as a universal theory, dialectics grounds a humanism that is religio-critical a priori. Fromm's humanism is essentially tied to dialectical thought.