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Sp. 1992, 12: 34-36.

Book Review

The Legacy of Erich Fromm

by Daniel R. Burston

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991

Dale Ortmeier, Ph.D.

Burston describes his recently published book, *The Legacy of Erich Fromm*, as an intellectual biography of Fromm. He asserts correctly that Fromm has been subject to misinformed criticism, and has been relegated to obscurity. I would make the proviso that Fromm has been in relative obscurity during the 1970s when he was in retirement, and for a few years after his death in 1980. Not so today. Burston has given himself the formidable task of rescuing Fromm (p.1): "...from the undeserved fate (obscurity) and to put his contributions into critical and historical perspective." He proposes to do this by demonstrating that Fromm was following in Freud's footsteps by maintaining a "piety" to Freud. Is Burston saying that bringing Fromm into the Freudian tradition will "save" Fromm? There is a non-Freudian literature on Fromm. He is not obscure today. Examples of this literature are Knapp (1989), Jacoby (1983), Fromm (1986), the *Journal of Contemporary Psychoanalysis* and publications from the International Erich Fromm Society. Burston is doing much more than he says. He convincingly demonstrates that Fromm was a profound thinker whose contributions belong in the mainstream of the history of ideas.

Burston at times veers away from writing simply (e.g., by substituting words such as piety for devotion, or homiletic for sermonizing or by resorting to abstract labels to "integrate" diverse points of view, e.g., crypto-revisionist, dissident fringe, neo-Freudian, and Freud-Marxist) as though word-substitution and labels explain. It seems more likely to turn away the informed, and to impress the uninitiated. At the very least, it distracts from the excellent substance of his reasoning and ideas.

Fromm made considerable effort to be clear, direct and user-friendly in his writings. Burston would have more closely exemplified Fromm if he had consistently done the same. W. James (Barzun, 1983) correctly maintained that great generalizations tend to obscure, rather than clarify, communication. For example, Burston labels Rank and Horney as "the dissident fringe." He thereby does little justice to their creativity, growth, or complexity of thought. Rank was the most stellar Freudian from 1907 until the mid-1920s. He enlarged upon and edited Freud's writings and clinical work, and Freud did not question his loyalty. About the time Rank published his ideas on the birth trauma, he was also moving to Paris, then New York and Philadelphia. During that time, Freud and Rank parted ways. Horney was one of six founders of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute in 1920, hailed by Abraham in 1911 as a follower of Freud. She was a member and then chair of the powerful Education Committee of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute from 1920-1932. As chair of the committee, she developed and instituted, in 1930, the tripartite model of psychoanalytic training still in use today: personal analysis, supervision, and courses. In Chicago, then New York, beginning in 1932, she separated from the Freudian tradition. Fromm followed a somewhat similar course in the progression of his thinking and clinical work.

Burston can occasionally dismiss by disparagement and belittling rather than by reasoning. For example, (p. ix): "...a simple capitulation to American cultural anthropology or as a descent into idealism, pragmatism, or mere 'positive thinking.'" Fromm could also dismiss and belittle in his writings, although he disapproved of it as a principle.

It is all too easy to forget that Freud revered William James. James, in turn, respected Mead's social philosophy and the thinking of the "Chicago school of sociologists." Their contributions have been largely unknown, disparaged, or dismissed by Freudian writers up to the present. Freudian thinkers also resort to disparagement and dismissal of Sullivan, Thompson and Fromm. Burston is doing much more than making a noble effort to make Fromm presentable to Freudians.

Much of Burston's reasoning about Fromm is insightful. He says (p. 4) that many ideas that originated with Fromm were incorrectly attributed to more respectable Freudians who espoused those ideas after Fromm had voiced them. Is this not often so with intellectuals with a "mission"? They can take over others' ideas, and place them in a different context with little or no historical reference. Burston goes on to say that Fromm's diatribes against medicalization and bureaucratization of psychoanalysis contributed to his being seen as a dissident and on the fringe of psychoanalysis. He is correct: Fromm's being an outspoken psychologist with no M.D. was a convenient fact used to bar him from medical psychoanalytic circles. It was also a convenient rationale for Horney to remove him from her group when more personal issues were at stake. But what about Fromm's own actions? After 1941, when Fromm's book *Escape From Freedom* brought him immediate acclaim, he was a world expert on social character and authoritarianism, and he was famous. He was not about to be second in command. He also had a strong conviction, which he repeatedly acted upon, that if the society or institution one lived in was pathological, one moved elsewhere. It was no accident that he did not remain at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute upon finishing training there. He was one of the founders of three different psychoanalytic institutes in Heidelberg, New York City and Mexico City, in that order, over some 40 years. I am much more inclined to see Fromm as the initiator of his outsider status. From that outside perspective, he had an inconsistent reverence for Freud, freely agreeing and disagreeing with him. It is clear that in New



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York City, Mexico City and Locarno, he was much at home with psychoanalysts who were not Freudians, such as Thompson, Sullivan, Horney, Maccoby, or Funk.

The assessment of this biography is discussed in answer to two questions: How does Burston organize his biography? How thorough is his presented knowledge of Fromm? He sets the stage in his first chapter with a statement of purpose, and overview of the chronological development of Fromm's thinking, and a short sketch of his personal life and family background. He then has several chapters on Fromm's major conceptual formulations, including a chapter on clinical contributions. These concepts involve Fromm's struggle with a rapprochement of Freud and Marx, matriarchy, existentialism, social character, the pathology of normalcy (alienation), and the Fromm-Marcuse debate. These chapters are not chronologically arranged as to the development of Fromm's thinking. Burston does spend considerable sound effort, however, in placing Fromm's contributions in the context of the history of ideas. This context is the major contribution of the book, in this reviewer's opinion, and fulfills the author's mission of an intellectual context for Fromm's thinking. He does little to examine the cultural context of Fromm's life. Knapp (1989) does better; but Burston's is an intellectual biography. Fromm, indeed, comes through as a more profound thinker than he is given credit for. Burston has an interesting, but sketchy, chapter on the appraisal of Fromm by psychologists and psychiatrists, and an excellent summary in that chapter of Fromm's ideas and how he was ignored by both professions. This summary could well have been an excellent part of his preface. His epilogue is a valid hope that Fromm's scholarship will enter more fully into Freudian thinking, and into humanistic and existential psychology.

How thorough is Burston's knowledge of Fromm? I prefer to organize this evaluation in the three areas I am writing about Fromm: religious, political-social-cultural, and psychoanalytic. Unlike Freud, Fromm was not an atheist who ignored religion. He came from a family of Talmudic scholars and rabbis, and studied the Talmud several years in rabbinical pursuit. Together

with Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, they turned away from orthodox Judaism, but he continued to study religion and the Bible. In 1925, he completed his Ph.D. thesis at the University of Heidelberg on "Jewish Law: A Contribution to the Sociology of Diaspora Judaism." In 1948-49, he and Ralph Linton gave the Terry lectures at Yale on psychoanalysis, ethics and religion. In 1957, he gave a seminar with Suzuki in Fromm's home in Cuernavaca on Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis. He was a devoted Buddhist in the latter part of his life, devout in his discipline of meditation and concentration exercises every morning. It is puzzling that Burston gives only passing recognition of this area of Fromm's thinking and spiritual side. Could it be that Burston felt it could only detract from Fromm's gaining recognition in the psychoanalytic mainstream?

The political-cultural-social arena of Fromm's thinking was formidable, ever-changing and remarkable in its breadth. Burston captures the content and importance of Fromm's thinking. He also carefully documents that Fromm's social and political thinking followed from his background in the European social thought (not American) of Marx, Weber, Bachofen, and Freud. This background has social character as an ideal, i.e., a process of continuing adaptation to culture through the life-cycle. In this view, social character in a pathological culture can be deadly, whereas neurosis may be the struggle against a dehumanizing environment. The individual is never independent of the culture in which he lives. Fromm's complexity of thinking comes to life here. Fromm, however, went much further than thinking. He was equally determined to give public expression to his view, and, as an activist, to produce change. In the mid-50s, for example, he wrote a party platform for the U.S. Socialist Party, along with Irving Howe, Murray Kempton, Upton Sinclair and others. He helped organize SANE (Society Against Nuclear Energy) in the 60s. He gave his view of a "new" Germany in a series of radio broadcasts over South German Radio in 1974 (Fromm, 1986).

Burston extensively explores Fromm's dialectic with Freud and Marx. Fromm's early writings are in the *Journal of Social*

Research. This was Horkheimer's journal at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research where Fromm was active as a university professor. In these articles, he was already developing his concepts of social character, authoritarianism, matriarchy, and he was debating with Marcuse. His radio lectures in 1974 expressed hope for a new social character and a new Germany, committed to world order, reason and peace. As Burston points out, Fromm's activism coupled with his interest in research led him to conduct two major empirical social-psychological studies. Working with Schachtel, Herzog, and Lazarsfeld, he studied working-class people in Weimar, Germany, in 1929-1930. With Maccoby, he studied social character in a small Mexican village in the 1960s. The former study was not published in English until 1984 (1980 in German). The finding that the left-wing political orientation of German workers was neutralized by their continued underlying authoritarian personality traits may unfortunately have contributed to the suppression of the study at the very time its publication might have aroused opposition to the Nazis.

Fromm was a practicing, teaching, supervising psychoanalyst until his retirement in Locarno. Fromm was one of my teachers during my candidacy at the William Alanson White Institute. Fromm was one of the founders of the White Institute; he, Sullivan, and Thompson were the three major writers, thinkers and administrators who developed the cultural-interpersonal approach in psychoanalysis. I organized and chaired the memorial service for Fromm in 1980 at White. Fromm's ability as a clinician to treat and to teach was most remarkable. He left a profound clinical legacy to many of us, which he did not write about. His conviction was that clinical working is creative. To write of it is to stifle creativity, and to run the risk of having a group of "Frommian" analysts who imitate rather than create. He may have been wrong, but that was his position. It is not Burston's mission to explicate Fromm's clinical working. Indeed, it is most difficult to do so, even for those trained by him. Burston does, however, have a chapter on clinical contributions. Burston is surely correct that Fromm's major clinical interest

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was the necessity of change in a patient's social character. Fromm raised the therapeutic issue not only of awareness, but of therapeutic action. He asked, "What leads to change in the patient?" Burston is correct that Fromm saw personal growth as the necessity of the entire psychological being of the patient requiring change. There needed to be an authentic transformation of character coming from an authentic relationship with the analyst. Landis (1974) points out that Fromm maintained that the analyst must stimulate new discoveries and interests in the patient, just as much as the analyst brings pathological patterns into awareness. To pursue this goal, the patient must develop critical thinking. He did not require neutrality in the analyst, although he could be neutral. He could also be quite confronting of a patient's "cover story". He could be a mentor, teaching the patient and encouraging the pleasures of learning. He would urge patients, just as he disciplined himself, to pursue daily self-analysis, attention to a healthy body, concentration and meditation exercises, and knowledge of literature, other cultures, philosophy and mythology. He insisted that the patient think critically not only about himself and his history, but about the culture he inhabits and its history. He believed growth occurs as the patient applies this awareness of himself and his culture to the actuality of changing each. Passivity, procrastination, intellectual and obsessional verbiage, boredom, and an un-lived life were, to Fromm, the breeding ground of senseless aggression, human destruction and alienation from life. He listened intently to patients, but could be very abrupt with those who had difficulty engaging. With severely disturbed patients, he was quite different. Here he was relaxed, warmly helpful, giving, supportive and nurturing. He assessed the abilities of patients to change. Since Fromm did not insist on the analyst's neutrality, he could be impatient with defensiveness, and he could also be judgmental and critical. He did demand that patients become critical thinkers.

In summary, Burston presents an excellent intellectual biography of Fromm. It

was not his intent to focus primarily on Fromm's personal life, nor on extending knowledge of Fromm's clinical work. He carefully captures and documents Fromm's social and political thought in the European context of such theorists as Marx, Freud, Weber, Bachofen, and Kant. He further places Fromm's ideas in the larger context of the history of ideas. Fromm emerges as a more profound thinker and psychoanalyst than he is generally given credit for by followers of Freud. I remain convinced, however, that Fromm took the initiative to remain outside the Freudian mainstream. Outside, he could have the freedom of agreeing and disagreeing with Freud, and be on intimate terms with prominent non-Freudians. ■

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