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The Americanization of Erich Fromm

Like some old witch's tale, the legend of George Grosz is often retold by painters as an example of the peculiar hazards of the New World. Grosz was the artist whose savage caricatures of Germany in the nineteen twenties brought him the world-wide admiration of connoisseurs. He was compared to Daumier. Then Hitler rose to power and Grosz left Germany for America, where his painting underwent a transformation. It was no longer animated by hate but by love; it turned from the frailty of man to the beauty of nature; it became not savage but gentle—and no one with critical taste admired it any more. It appealed to a peace-loving bourgeoisie. The artist himself said he felt better while doing it, but his fellow artists said it was not new or intense, as his earlier work had been, and its only value was a warning: "Don't be nice. Don't be Americanized. When you feel 'healthy' you can be sure of one thing—you're slipping!"

Erich Fromm came to America from Germany at about the same time. A great reputation did not precede him; he was younger than Grosz; but his first book to appear in English—*Escape from Freedom* (1941), which dealt largely with Nazi Germany—made him famous. And ever since certain highbrow critics have been suggesting either that he has slipped or *never was* any good anyway. The better quarterlies attack his "easy rationalistic optimism" and his "cheerier illusions." Yet he continues to reach a large and growing public with books that appear with some regularity, and his lectures are oversubscribed far in advance. Does his American popularity have anything in common with that of Grosz? Does it merely mean a

deceptive kind of "health"? The answer, I think, is not as simple as it might appear to either highbrows (his critics) or middlebrows (his supporters). There are, first of all, the questions: Does he attempt to popularize things that cannot be popularized? Does he suffer from a preacherish determination to say the morally correct thing? Does he sacrifice disagreeable truth to a desire to reach a big audience? I am afraid the answer must be "yes" to each of these questions. On the other hand, it would be unjust to lose sight of the educational task he has set himself, because it is a task that we must all face.

As a writer Fromm is a man with a distinct gift: the gift of simplifying complex subjects so that they may be understood by considerable numbers of men. (In the field of political journalism Walter Lippmann has a similar gift.) There is a constant need in our society for such a gift, which can be exercised honorably. No one could fairly accuse Fromm of dishonorably exercising his gift. For example, when he discusses religion he is often guilty of superficiality and lack of imagination, but, on the other hand, he never descends to the "peace of mind" or "peace of soul" level of Rabbi Liebman and Bishop Sheen. On the contrary, he brings into play his extensive experience as a psychoanalyst, and he is, by report, a very gifted one, to combat just such best-seller nostrums. During the fight he develops a useful distinction between authoritarian religion and humanistic religion that because of its homely psychiatric precision will illumine the subject for all honest readers, whether they are convinced churchgoers or agnostic intellectuals. His analysis of "authoritarian" rigidity of mind may well have provoked certain overemphatic highbrow attacks on him, since the well-worn path of a number of highbrows has gone from one authority to another.

Fromm gets his gift, as every writer does, from his own deepest self and his own deepest imagination. Fromm's imagination is semi-popular. It stops short of Rabbi Liebman and Bishop Sheen, and it also stops short of Freud and Jung. When it attempts mistakenly to match the latter two in theory, it cuts them down to its own size, a size that has not been unaffected by the hopes of reaching a large audience in America. Fromm's mind is above all practical; he has no use for Jung's sophisticated moral "relativities," or for the lonely perspective which caused an ageing Freud to withdraw his earlier claims for the effectiveness of his own therapy. On the contrary, Fromm sees psychoanalysis as a still potent weapon in the fight

against the authoritarian mind, and he also sees the fight as one that can be won. "While Freud assumes that the conflict arising from the child's incestuous strivings is rooted in his nature and thus unavoidable, we believe that in a cultural situation in which respect for the integrity of every individual—hence of every child—is realized, the Oedipus complex will belong to the past."

In short, he is interested in changing the "cultural situation" and thereby assuring the maturity and "integrity of every individual." He believes, moreover, that this can be done, though naturally not right away. Despite the qualifications, we are no longer in the gloom that encircled Freud and drove Jung to his Gnostic Alps. We are back with Alfred Adler. Hope has returned from her hidingplace and brought with her plans for a realizable future.

The highbrows who snicker at this merely reveal their own social ignorance. A man whose natural sympathies are with practical people has expressed the not too blatantly encouraging message they want to hear. Another disguised panacea may be on the way, and another disguised disillusionment may be sure to follow it, but meanwhile there has been another injection of hope vitamins from a recognized scientific authority, and the Organization Man shows up for work on Monday morning. What is more, he whistles while he works and does not feel all alone. When has the art of public healing ever done more? Instead of being jeered by our intellectuals, Fromm's services to our society should be recognized. His occasional pretentiousness should not be allowed to antagonize the critical mind, and he should be valued as one of those workaday artisans of public opinion who actually help to make democracy work.

His psychology is geared to readers who would like to hope, after reading *The Lonely Crowd*, that the "other-directed" people described there with so much telling detail will be able to develop, as Riesman also hopes, "autonomy out of other-direction." In other words, that the multitudinous new conformists who now seek to cure their anxiety by gregariousness will "discover that their own thoughts and their own lives are quite as interesting as other people's, that, indeed, they can no more assuage their loneliness in a crowd of peers than one can assuage one's thirst by drinking sea water," and that when they have made this discovery "then we might expect them to become more attentive to their own feelings and aspirations." Fromm attacks this central problem of democracy on



a psychological level that goes deeper than Riesman's sociological approach, which indeed appears to owe a debt to him. He is the man who told us in *Escape From Freedom* that Germany was taken over by the Nazis because it feared the responsibility of freedom, and later in *The Sane Society* (1955) that life in our American "twentieth-century Democracy constitutes another escape from freedom" with a predominant note of "robotism." Thus our much-publicized conformity is his main target. He does not wash his hands of it, as so many of our once "socially conscious" intellectuals now do. On the contrary he attacks it with all the tools of a psychotherapy weighted with his own special studies in anthropology. He relates it also to his latest readings in sociology, philosophy, symbolism, and theology.

He has a faith in his tools that more complex psychiatrists have sometimes come to lack. For example, Rank would have considered naive his statement, "Indeed to help man to discern truth from falsehood in himself is the basic aim of psychoanalysis, a therapeutic method which is an empirical application of the statement, 'The truth shall make you free.'" Rank, as we have seen, had made the shattering discovery, "With the truth, one cannot live," because he believed reality was such a tough antagonist that the naked psychoanalytic truth about oneself, unaided by "illusion" or the artist's "mythical stuff," destroyed one's capacity to survive. Was it sheer perversity, or mere weakness, that led Rank to such unmanly admissions? Or was it a superior insight into the true nature of existence, forever denied to more thick-skinned idealists like Fromm? The answer, I think, lies in difference in temperament, difference in evolutionary development, difference in social function.

Fromm certainly does not share Rank's doubt. "Psychoanalysis has given the concept of truth a new dimension. In preanalytic thinking a person could be considered to speak the truth if he believed in what he was saying. Psychoanalysis has shown that subjective conviction is by no means a sufficient criterion of sincerity. A person can believe that he acts out of a sense of justice and yet be motivated by cruelty. He can believe that he is motivated by love and yet be driven by a craving for masochistic dependence. . . . In fact most rationalizations are held to be true by the person who uses them. . . . Furthermore in the psychoanalytic process a person learns to recognize which of his ideas have an emotional matrix and which are only conventional clichés without root in his character

structure and therefore without substance and weight. The psychoanalytic process . . . is based on the principle that mental health and happiness cannot be achieved unless we scrutinize our thinking and feeling to detect whether we rationalize and whether our beliefs are rooted in our feeling."

This kind of faith, which holds out so much hope to a growing number of people who feel confused about the world and themselves, would not have satisfied Rank. Rank would have found it elementary and misleading. He had tried the same method for many years, and believed it had let him down. Freud also, as we have seen, was finally only slightly more sanguine about his own invention.

Even Freud's later skepticism does not trouble Fromm. He finds Freud to be, when subjected to the psychoanalysis that he escaped during his lifetime, very neurotic indeed, so much so that his great contributions were compromised by his unloving egocentricity. In his book about the Founder (1959) Fromm shows little patience with Freud's self-deceptions, which he thinks left a bad legacy to us all. *Sigmund Freud's Mission* employs the enormous skill of an expert working analyst to present Freud's character as Fromm sees it and to draw some moral conclusions. It is a book which reveals much about both men.

When it first appeared it met with a chorus of resistance not unrelated to that which originally shouted down Richard Aldington's book on T. E. Lawrence. Now Lawrence is seen somewhat less heroically by everyone, even in England. Perhaps Fromm's work will finally have the same effect on Freud's reputation and serve to diminish his almost hypnotic appeal. Even if it should prove ultimately to be motivated by a misguided desire to replace Freud's image with Fromm's, it will have to be regarded as a closely documented account of serious personal limitations. Though they were concealed behind the impressive robes of scientific theory by a man of extraordinary talent, a talent not lacking in histrionic embellishments, these limitations have affected us all. Fromm has told us what happens to the patients when the physician fails to heal himself.

His portrait of Freud goes further than Adler's in its depiction of the career of a "spoiled child" who saw the world too unquestioningly in terms of his own limitations. Freud's great courage and passion for truth were compromised, he implies, and at the same time made strangely palatable to other spoiled children who now

venerate him for neurotic reasons of their own, by his blind spots towards women, towards feeling, towards his own destructive and frequently dishonest competitiveness. Taking a cue from Karen Horney, Fromm says that Freud's theories about women were "Naïve rationalization of male prejudice, especially of the male who needs to dominate in order to hide his fear of women." Taking a cue from Helen Walker Puner, Fromm says that Freud treated his wife almost as coldly as if she were a child-bearing servant—with boredom and condescension. In disagreement with Bruno Bettelheim, who insists that Freud committed adultery with his wife's more intellectual sister, Minna, during their frequent holidays alone, Fromm believes with Ernest Jones that Freud's sex life dried up soon after his marriage, and that he was only too glad to be beyond the reach of unruly passions that might have conflicted with his icy, world-conquering concentration on the unconscious life of others. Any betrayal of feeling meant an embarrassing upthrust of the unconscious in the physician as well as a retardation of his progress toward supreme intellectual dominance; and it was Freud's ambition to stretch the whole world out on a horsehair couch and to have it at the mercy of his penetrating but self-vindictory diagnosis. Even his benefactors must be put in their place. The fatherly Breuer, who "gave Freud the most important suggestion he ever received in his life, a suggestion which formed the basis of the central idea of psychoanalysis," and also lent him money, finally was repudiated with such savagery that the official biographer (Jones) has suppressed some of the letters. The friendly Fliess, who gave him years of attentive comradeship, as well as an important idea about the bisexual constitution of the race, which Freud first rejected and then appropriated without thanks, met with similarly rough treatment as soon as he "criticized Freud's method by saying that Freud read his own thoughts into his patients."

Fromm finds in Freud a confused "dependence on men" which was not homosexual, as Freud himself thought it, but an unresolved inner conflict; "he desired to be independent; he hated to be a protégé—and at the same time he wanted to be protected, admired, cared for" to such an extent that he became for a while dependent, in a sense, even upon his disciple Jung, which was why he fainted when Jung disagreed with him in Munich. The break with Jung was inevitable, however, because Freud "was a rationalist and his concern with the understanding of the unconscious was based on

his wish to control and subdue it. Jung, on the other hand, belonged to the romantic, antirationalistic tradition. He is suspicious of reason and intellect, and the unconscious, representing the nonrational, to him is the deepest source of wisdom; for him, analytic therapy has the function of helping the patient to get in touch with this source of nonrational wisdom, and to benefit from this contact. Jung's interest in the unconscious was the admiring one of the romantic; Freud's, the critical one of the rationalist."

When Jung left the psychoanalytic movement, "Freud remarked: 'Does one know today with whom Columbus sailed when he discovered America?'" When Adler died, and Arnold Zweig "expressed how moved he was by Adler's death, Freud wrote: 'I don't understand your sympathy for Adler. For a Jew-boy out of a Viennese suburb a death in Aberdeen is an unheard-of career in itself, and a proof of how far he had got on. The world really rewarded him richly for his service in having contradicted psychoanalysis.'"

Fromm calls Freud a rebel, not a revolutionary, because he had not freed himself "from attachment to authority and from the wish to dominate others. . . . While he defied authorities and enjoyed this defiance, he was at the same time deeply impressed by the existing social order and its authorities. To receive the title of professor, and to find recognition from the existing authorities, were of utmost concern to him, although in a strange unawareness of his own desires he denied it."

The effect of his personality upon his movement was to burden it with a dogmatic attitude which would not even listen with patience to Ferenczi's timid—and subsequently validated—discovery that the patient needed love as a condition for a cure. Freud's "authoritarian" imprint also left unfortunate ritualisms and idolizations of himself that have turned his movement into an "entrenched bureaucracy which inherited Freud's mantle, without possessing his creativity, nor the radicalism of his original conception." His discovery of the unconscious "was applied to a small sector of reality, man's libidinal strivings and their repression, but little or not at all to the wider reality of human existence and to social and political phenomena."

Soon after this charge we come to Fromm's own point of view: "The understanding of the unconscious of the individual presupposes and necessitates the critical analysis of his society." He is finally dissatisfied with Freud, not only because of his defects of



character but because these defects led his movement to “stagnate” in a “liberal middle-class attitude toward society. . . . Freudians saw the individual unconscious, and were blind to the social unconscious; orthodox Marxists, on the contrary, were keenly aware of the unconscious factors in social behavior, but remarkably blind in their appreciation of individual motivation. This led to a deterioration of Marxist theory and practice, just as the reverse process has led to the deterioration of psychoanalytic theory and therapy.”

A final implication of the book is that Fromm could straighten out both the Freudians and the Marxists, if they would only let him, and then these two great progressive forces, reactivated, could lead mankind to a better life for everyone, far beyond the infantilism of the Oedipus complex and all neurotic doubts about the curative powers of reason. Of all the men discussed here he alone seems to have been unshaken in his self-confidence by the events of our day. In recent years his imperturbability has been increased by relative isolation in Mexico. It would be interesting to know how much of his confidence belongs to *him*, to some unreachable part of his own self-love, and how much can be attributed to his residence among the hope-demanding inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere.

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