

Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology

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By Neil McLaughlin (Bristol University Press, 2021)

As a champion of public sociology, McLaughlin seeks to resuscitate Fromm's reputation both as a leading public intellectual and public sociologist. Conceptually McLaughlin is indebted to Michael Burawoy's 2005 *ASR* call for public sociology with broad relevance instead of the trend toward a more esoteric discipline. *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology* is not only a vital step in reviving Fromm's reputation; it also examines reasons why some sociologists join the disciplinary canon of revered texts, and others just as worthy are forgotten.

The Introduction discusses the importance of public sociology and why Fromm belongs to its first rank of practitioners. There follow four chronological chapters starting in World War 2, then through the era of The Cold War, on to the activist era of the 1960s, leading to Fromm's later contributions into the 1970s. These chapters analytically describe the concrete contributions of Fromm's specific, widely selling books. Two chapters are more thematic, analyzing how his personal marginality actually proved an advantage to his public sociology, and why he lost much of his considerable reputation, ending up as a forgotten intellectual. The Conclusion summarizes McLaughlin's argument why Fromm's recognition as a global public sociologist is overdue.

Fromm clearly had sociological credentials. These included a Heidelberg sociology PhD under Alfred Weber (Max's brother), empirical work on the Weimar German working-class, status as a tenured member of the Frankfurt School dealing with Social Psychology, and acknowledgments of the need for understanding both psychological and sociological factors in his earliest popular works. Fromm enjoyed popularity as a best-selling author in the 1940s and 1950s, and ongoing respect from sociologists. This included his vital role as mentor to David Riesman, as an associate of Columbia's Robert Lynd, reviews in core sociology journals, and recognition from Robert Merton and C. Wright Mills. However, starting in the mid-1950s, his reputation plummeted among social scientists.

The reasons for this included his agonistic break with the Frankfurt School. As a result, he was written out of their numerous historical memoirs. Horkheimer,

Adorno, and Marcuse played key roles in diminishing Fromm's reputation. Fromm was criticized by Horkheimer as too avowedly Marxist when the School moved to New York and needed to mute its overt radicalism (p. 70); then by Adorno and Marcuse for daring to revise Freud as one of the neo-Freudians. Marcuse was a key mentor to the New Left in the 1960s including young sociologists. It hurt that Marcuse trashed Fromm in a 1955 *Dissent* article for Fromm's outlining Freud's deficiencies. McLaughlin states how Russell Jacoby, a younger New Left sociological chronicler of the Frankfurt School, "played a key role in diffusing the Marcuse critique of Fromm facilitating his status as a forgotten intellectual" (p. 140).

Also important was the rejection by intellectuals of Fromm's best-seller *The Art of Loving* (1956). It certainly had an intellectual framework. Yet, Fromm's critics pounced on its self-help aspects. They ridiculed him for channeling intellectual lightweight Norman Vincent Peale.

One might ask whether Fromm deserved this demotion. McLaughlin's book presents a defense of Fromm; not simply from antiquarian interests but because he considers Fromm as crucial today, when right-wing populism has spread across the world.

Fromm's first best-selling book *Escape from Freedom* was published in 1941 as World War 2 was underway. It emphasized the social, psychological, and emotional roots of Nazism which made an authoritarian instead of democratic politics palatable to millions of Germans. *Escape*, writes McLaughlin, is "central to creating a social science framework for thinking about populism as xenophobia" (p. 232).

However, it is not simply this one book that contains valuable insights. In *The Sane Society* (1955), Fromm examined Western capitalist democracies. He argued they were beset with anxiety and various forms of mental illness. To the self-satisfied 1950s and its reigning "structural functionalism," this was a challenge. Gwynn Nettler described it in a 1956 *AJS* review as "a reasoned and pitiless criticism of Western civilization" that might well have been titled, "The Sick Society."

In 1961, his *Marx's Concept of Man* resuscitated the early writings of Marx on alienation. Fromm saw them as providing understanding about the loss of authentic selfhood and the dehumanization and automatization "inherent in the development of Western industrialization" (p. 155). This was at a time when these writings were not widely known due to their late discovery and translation.

With Michael Maccoby as co-author, he examined, in a community study entitled *Social Character in a Mexican Village: A Socio-Psychoanalytic Study*, the roots leading to economic and social under-development. This was a topic vigorously debated among social scientists of that era. A few years later, in 1973, Fromm contributed to another much discussed topic in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. This may be worth rereading in light of Putin's bloody assault on Ukraine (given that Fromm provides case studies of Hitler and Stalin).

If Fromm was often not identified as a sociologist, it stemmed from his extensive experience as a psychoanalyst and as a key member of the Neo-Freudians. This term does not simply signify a newer expression of Freud's ideas, but also a revision. Freud

resisted such revisionism and his resistance was followed by the now fully professionalized Freudian orthodoxy.

Thus, over the years, Fromm was frequently identified by many as writing from a “quasi-psychoanalytic point of view” as Frank H. Knight wrote in a 1944 *AJS* review of *Escape*. In a Preface, Fromm pointed to Marx and Freud as “the two great theorists” of a dynamic social science. However, in an increasingly compartmentalized discipline, this emphasis on the psychological aspects became a hard sell.

It is here that we might ponder this book’s possible interest to interactionists. Chicago School exemplar Louis Wirth, in a 1942 *Psychiatry* book review, criticized *Escape* in its theory of self for ignoring the works of proto-interactionists Mead, Cooley, Dewey, Baldwin, and James. However, Fromm was aware of Georg Simmel, acknowledged as a precursor of the interactionist tradition. More broadly, Fromm’s insistence on meshing analysis of the social with the individual resonates well with the interactionist tradition.

Neil McLaughlin has made an impassioned defense of public sociology, Erich Fromm, and Fromm’s status as a public sociologist. His scholarship in these fields is exhaustive and covers decades. His style of writing is clear and lucid, and the core arguments never get submerged by the considerable detail and exegesis. He has done a great service in emphasizing the need to reclaim Fromm as numbered among eminent public sociologists.

A question that might be asked is: How far has interactionism contributed to public sociology? A 2017 article by Puddephatt and Price in the *Qualitative Sociology Review* suggests not enough. They write, “In symbolic interactionism, there have been surprisingly few reflections on public sociology” (p. 142) and “While these debates have raged on, symbolic interactionists have had very little to say about the public sociology debates” (p. 144).

With right-wing populism re-invigorated, it may be time for interactionists to change that. Fromm played his part in promoting an illuminated citizenry capable of mature participation in the public square. Perhaps interactionism can be inspired by his example.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

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