Erich Fromm and His Criticism of Sigmund Freud

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Freud (1856-1939) and Fromm (1900-1980) are two great and very different masters of psycho-analysis, extraordinarily creative and radically original, who succeeded in opening new perspectives and alternatives to the history of thinking. Examination of the relationship between their theories raises considerable problems of method. When it is desired to relate one theoretical construction to another, as a first approach, one may proceed, in two ways: either an analytical-comparative approach, which prescinds of historical periods, establishing identity, correspondence, analogies, differences and contrasts, or a genetic approach, which grasps and illuminates the derivation of the second theoretical body from the first. Both approaches are legitimate and useful, but in our case, one without the other risks becoming a series of observations, useful enough, but insufficient to convey the sense of internal movement and exquisite-ness of the styles of the two structures of thought.

The Freud-Fromm relationship is of such complexity that it cannot be contained within a history of psychoanalysis seen as a history of techniques and the theories of these techniques. One reason for all this lies in the distance of nearly half a century between the two authors. Freud did not live to see the second world war nor to investigate Nazism, to which he had to pay such extremely painful human prices as well as that of scientific organization; nor did he live to see the tragic events of Soviet communism and the degeneration of the western democracies into societies of „conspicuous consumption“. Every age lives its risks and its tragedies. Fromm found himself face to face with thermo-nuclear warfare and environmental pollution pervading the entire planet.

Another complication of the examination of the Freud-Fromm relationship lies in the diversity of their relative cultural pictures as a refer-ence point. From this point of view, it cannot simply be said that Fromm is an author who came later, and hence more modernly equipped. This is not only true but obvious, and can be seen every time two authors who are not contemporaries are studied. The noticeable point is that the philosophical terrains in which Freud and Fromm are rooted represent perspec-tives of thought that are different enough from each other for connotations not entirely bound to historical periods. If they had their Judaism in common, Freud’s positivism and Fromm’s radi-cal humanism separate them. Freud’s formation was in the Viennese scientific and academic en-vironment at the end of the nineteenth century, where research in the natural sciences was shaping a methodology and an epistemology capa-ble of defining limits and capacities of science. Fromm brings to fruition a humanistic course, which in modern times grew out of Spinoza,
found themes in Feuerbach and in the Hegelian left, up to its taking form in the eminent pages of Karl Marx. The differences and the incompatibilities that we find between the two masters of psychoanalysis are quite often due to this assumption of two different lines of thought.

A further problem of method is that of how to proceed in detecting correspondences, distances, irreconcilabilities. One completely legitimate way could be the historical and biographical-cultural approach. From the mid-twenties to early thirties, the young Fromm was a student of Freud’s, accepted his theories, used the concept of libido in his scientific studies. His early creativity was not concerned with theoretical proposals¹, such as the one of „social character“, or of absolutely new methods in empirical research². It was a time when prestigious psychoanalysts was attempting a union between psychoanalysis and Marxism, giving rise to a specific body of literature, which had a revival in the 1970’s.³

In 1936 we find Fromm attacking Freud’s second topic. By now the line of divergence has been established, and will lead Fromm further and further away from the founder of psychoanalysis. The „Sozialpsychologischer Teil“ of the „Studien über Autorität und Familie“⁴ is aimed at demolishing the concept of superego to replace it with the theme of authoritarianism, expressed in sadomasochist psychodynamics. It is noted that the concept of superego allowed Freud to criticize historical materialism⁵, in that this theory, in explaining the genesis of ideologies, did not take into consideration the underground moral code, unconsciously transmitted from one generation to the next. Freud’s criticism seemed to have hit upon the question, however Fromm’s shifting the line of attack made it meaningless, still before his reflection on social „filters“ cast new light on the formation of ideologies.

Fromm was already in America, taking part in the great process of revising classical psychoanalysis started by a select team of scholars, among whom Sullivan, Horney, and Thompson. As concerns criticism of the theory of instincts, emphasis on the cultural factor, a new approach to child psychology, revision of the concept of transference: on these themes Fromm’s elaboration was autonomous, but in harmony with the work of this illustrious American colleagues. Starting from the early 1940’s we have a long series of his great books, in which he gives recognition to his cultural debts. He gives credit to Freud over and over again, even though he knows that he is an author who cannot be classified in any school⁶. Fromm presents the achievement of his own cultural identity, he is a master with his own teachings.

This is the problem of method: either to follow Fromm’s line of growth, underlining the changing of his relationship to Freud’s thinking with chronological criteria, or to keep the high level of the peaks reached by the authors and to see them carry on a dialogue from here, or even, often, turn their back on each other. This second approach involves assuming some of the more significant tracts of Frommian thought, those which constitute the arches and hold up the other aspects, and comparing them with Freud’s theoretical nuclei, grasping derivations, contrasts, independencies. Both criteria being valid, the second one is chosen here as it is believed to lead to the center of some basic themes with greater immediacy.

2.

One of the themes dealt with by psychoanalysis is love. It may be considered non-scientific, but the scientific quality does not concern what is dealt with but rather, how it is done. Freud’s theories about love change over time: in his treatises on „Metapsychology“ (1915)7 love is an affect contained in the instinct theory. Earlier still Freud rarely resorted to the use of the word love, while he clarified the concept of libido as an energy charge associated with the sexual instinct8.

Freud adopted a typically dual technique of thinking, that is, proceeding by contrasts of two groups of antagonistic examples: sexual instincts and Ego instincts; narcissistic libido and object libido; life instinct and death instinct. This process is vigorous at the moment of attacking a theme, which is quickly proposed and investigated in its internal conflicts; but when subsequent investigations have to be composed in coherent group pictures, more arduous theoreti- cal problems arise. Here one must recognize Freud’s great intellectual honesty, which on several occasions explicitly admitted the changing of theoretical hypotheses, abandoning the old ones and assuming new ones to open a new path of enquiry. The concept of metapsychology helped him in this as a theoretical roof temporarily resting on load-bearing walls and on foundations established by facts, clinical results, and empirical data. It was a typically positivist way of thinking according to which only the facts could claim rights toward the theory, while the theory had nothing other than duties towards the facts, in a relationship between theories and facts that was more mechanical than dialectic, not without a certain rigor, however.

In his treatise Beyond the Pleasure Principle9 of 1920, the terms of internal contrast change in Freud’s thinking: a life instinct and a death instinct are hypothesized. No longer libido but the new concept, Eros is enhanced, warms up, gives the idea of love as the capacity of uniting, binding, integrating. Fromm, nearly eighty-years old, will pay homage10 to the early eighty-year-old Freud who decades earlier, in a letter to Einstein11, had spoken about Eros.

Fromm’s point of view is completely different. The Freudian Eros is a late construction which only at a distance can suggest something of the productive passion of Frommian love. Not even Freud’s deepest humanist feelings, which also go beyond hydraulic and mechanical visions of tanks full of libido drained to the outside or pumped inwards, are detached from the prevailing biologism of the epoch of his university studies. In essence, Freud’s instinctual vision does not change much with the distinction between „Instinkt“ and „Trieb“, an operation little more than a linguistic one, as it is clearly possible in German and in Italian, much less so in English.

Fromm detaches himself from biology, although accepting the evolutionist hypothesis of the human animal that finds himself in the world with an extremely developed neocortex and with his instincts gradually weakened12. It is here that he grafts his theory of the human character as a substitute for the instincts, as second nature. To give substance to character, to give it structure and direction, there are the passions. Here is Spinoza, here is Marx, inserted in the heart of a quite modern anthropological approach. Fromm’s accents of existentialism cut across radical humanism, along the passage of history, where one meets, at times almost like contemporaries, Socrates, Buddha, Christ, the mystics of negative theology, Spinoza, Marx, Albert Schweitzer, Rosa Luxemburg, Gandhi.

Unlike Freud, Fomm does not start from a biological theory, but from an idea of human situation - an incongruent one in that it is at the same time part of nature and transcends it.

Fromm sees the human essence as an interrogative that gives impassioned responses, energetically charged and tending towards complex formations organized in characters, both individual and collective. From the character of the people, from their social classes and societies in general, behaviour arises, directly manifest and observable.

It is important to note that Fromm borrows from Marx\(^{13}\) the concept of passion as energy of relating. The answers man gives to the fundamental questions of existence are passionate responses that are addressed to other men: love, hate, endearment, sense of justice, power, destructiveness, respect, etc. In his reflections on love, Fromm is not hampered by a model of closed, autarchic man, who turns to others only when he needs to and on the basis of schemes of relationship that academic economic science at the end of the last century formalized for business exchanges. Love for Fromm is an active disposition, genetically based, that is neither stored nor exchanged, but the more it is given, the more it is regenerated. Love is a possible answer to the tragic human question on the irreparable break between being in nature and transcending it in time. It is the response of wanting to live, of facing the risk of unpredictable developments, of walking without any definitive guarantees.

In the Frommian vision of living, interior self-activation and the productive links are specifications of the biophilia, the experiencing that everything is moving, that everything is in the act of being born, of coming to life. And while one sees that everything is being born, he too is born. This coming out, detaching oneself from the incestuous embrace and its surrogates, from possessing and being possessed, he emerging of a feeling, trying “self”, is the being mode, the overturning of the alienated view. Paradoxically, letting go of things is to unite with them. Living beings love each other by uniting. Love is the knowledge of unity\(^{14}\).

Freud’s life instinct presents points of contact, analogies, with Fromm’s biophilia. However, on the whole, the life instinct does not have a wide field in Freudian works. There are theoretical difficulties, labourious relationships with the concept of libido, restrictions imposed by the categorical primacy of sexuality. But there is also the vision of Freud’s life: at times it seems almost as if the life instinct lies in a wasting of time of the death instinct\(^{15}\), in complicating and prolonging its way, which will nevertheless be trodden, as the organic tends to transform into inorganic, and sooner or later a living thing will die.

A parallel between the life instinct and the death instinct in Freud and biophilia and necrophilia in Fromm cannot be drawn. In Freud we are dealing with two instincts, in Fromm only biophilia has a biological basis, while necrophilia is distorted from life, from the life not-lived, except for the decidedly interesting hypothesis of cold incest\(^{16}\). This hypothesis merits the attention of scholars and clinicians. Fromm notes how incestuous attachment is usually hot, erotically tinged. But they give extreme cases, in which the maternal ties are cold, hostile, and defer the embrace to the tomb, to mother earth. It is those in love with death who consummate individual and collective tragedies, driving themselves and the others into the viscera of the earth, in a final union in death.

But apart from this hypothesis, which expresses the Frommian problematic in tracing general theories, in necrophilia Fromm does not see instinct but rather, passion. It is true, as he repeatedly affirms, that the passions can be stronger than the instincts. The constitutional basis, the first nature, does not determine man’s destiny; in fact, if we wish to use the word destiny, it is more on the side of second nature: character is man’s destiny.

3.

Fromm gives Freud credit for having founded a characterology not classificatory, but rather psy-

\(^{13}\) Marx, K. (1941), Manoscritti economico filosofici del 1844, Einaudi Torino 1979, p. 123.


In 1908 Freud writes *Character and Anal Eroticism*\(^{18}\), which gives rise to the psychoanalytic theories of character. The anal fixation is, however, not seen in all its potential perniciousness, in that it is not concerned with the most archaic stage, the oral one, but with the subsequent one. Freud holds that, at equal intensity, the more a fixation is related to the early stages of development all the more pathologic it is. Fromm does not agree on this point, and considers the anal character traits a dangerous potential that can be expressed in other people’s regard only in destructive sadomasochist terms. For Fromm, the oral traits would be much less adverse, even if intense.

To construct a psychodynamic characterology, one starts with observation, hypotheses are formulated on the latent forces that move the observed phenomena, such hypotheses are developed into typologies, which will then be verified with new observations. The fruitfulness of the inductive method depends in large part on the use to which it is put. The positivistic sovereignty of the “facts” can impoverish theories, or can favour one imaginative component, conceded like licence, illation. Freud often declares the datum of fantasy of certain of his hypotheses where, among other things, he reveals, beside his ingeniousness, his limits of approach. Certainly, he knows how to question the facts and, with great creativity and mastery, from the manifest content goes back to the latent content, basing himself, however, on the only terrain he knows well: the clinical one. On the other hand, from the beginning Frommian induction doubles the field: clinical observation and socio-historical observation are both present. His first empirical investigation was masterly, veracious and presagious\(^{19}\). His subsequent theoretical reflection on social character\(^{20}\) marked firm points for the developments of his psychoanalytic thinking.


\[^{19}\] Fromm, E. (1980a), Arbeiter und Angestellte am Vorabend des Dritten Reiches, GA III.


The crowning experience as a filed researcher was the investigation conducted together with Michael Maccoby on social character in a Mexican village in 1970.

The double observatory leads to a different characterology than that of Freud, not so much in the typological configurations as in their psychogenesis. The two authors are divided on evaluating in what way and to what extent society enters into the life of the individual. The concept of social character is really discriminant, when it is seen through the family, „the psychological agency of the society”\(^{21}\), operating on the infantile psyche and on its development. Frommian psychology conceives the individual as crossed by innumerable threads of the social fabric and participates in the socio-economic and cultural dynamics owing to the character formation in which he lives and moves, still prior to the concrete external events that may involve him.

As well the case with the theory of the libido, neither is the theory of infantile psychosexual development believed in Fromm. We see the mercantile character and the receptive one come out and blend with an economic dynamic that chokes the paleocapitalist formations of the last century, sweeping them away in the cortical processes of the affluent economies where everything is goods and market. The devouring dimension must be at work inside the individual consumer, so that the demand for goods absorbs the enormous quantities produced. Exchange becomes every-day routine, which enters the homes and informs the person’s deepest feelings, their thoughts, their fantasies, they themselves, by now goods to buy and sell, where the appearance, the packaging, the play of images mark the lines of division from the interior human content.

Adam Schaff believes that Fromm gradually moved away from Freud to approach Marx. It should be said that Marx’s distinction between the value of use and the value of exchange acquires truth. The ruinous divarication can be seen with one’s own eyes, not only in the macroeconomic connection, but also inside the person who, in order to respond to the require-
ments of functioning in everyday society, becomes schizoid, alienated in his image, in his value of exchange and forgets his value of use, that is, of his feelings, of his human qualities that are not-exercised because they have no market. If for Freud the normal bourgeois man of his time was the healthy man, for Fromm normality, as it is historically determined at present, is pathology.

If we enquire further into the consideration of social aspects and problems, it is easy for us to discern the Freudian anal character dilated to the planetary scale in the difficulty of managing the enormous wastes of the processes of production, exchange and consumption, in pollution, in economic catalepsia. The excrements of the industrial and post-industrial societies are poisoning the entire earth. The fascination of the feces directly becomes the fascination of death on a worldwide scale. Necrophilia is present as a social character component. Fromm, who had already delineated four types of non-productive character orientation (the receptive, the exploitative, the hoarding and the marketing), has to add a fifth one: the necrophilic.

4.

The emphasis on the social aspect is in agreement with the concept of passion as energy of relating. Fromm has no difficulty in passing from individual psychology to social psychology and vice versa, because inside the individual, according to him, the relationship is already pressing. Freud moves from a completely different basic approach. The relationship with the others is imposed to reduce a tension, to reduce a displeasure. A theoretical machine is needed to explain why a subject places himself in a relationship. Thus, an ingenious intuition such as that of narcissism22 is employed by Freud in the distinction between object libido and narcissistic libido and between primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. The Id is the storage tank of the libido and in so much as it retains it, it is narcissistic (primary narcissism). On the other hand, to the extent it pours it out on „objects”, persons, parts of persons or things, it is the object libido. Its withdrawal from the objects returns it to the Id as secondary narcissism. On this important point of psychoanalysis, Freud’s vision is mechanical, hydraulic.

Fromm grasps the importance of the concept introduced by Freud23 and gives him credit for it, regretting, however, that this concept does not find developments and adequate employment in the theoretical body of Freudian works. Fromm considers narcissism as an accent24, an emotive accent in the relationship between a person and his world. A very narcissistic person feels only himself and the things belonging to him or closely concerning him: his body, his properties, his intellectual powers, what is said about him. Even if he knows well that all the rest exists, all the surrounding world, the other persons, he only knows so, without any emotional involvement, without any interest. Reality is grasped in an altered mode, deformed. The person does not give adequate weight to the things that do not touch him so closely or personally. Realism contrasts and mitigates narcissism, redistributing involvements and weights, restoring an adequate vision of the relationship between an individual and the others, between his humanity and the humanity of the others.

It might seem as if Fromm’s vision presents analogies with Freud’s: instead of shifting libido, he shifts accents and weights. This is not so. Narcissism lies in the having mode. The reduction of narcissism, the restoration of the right weight to every thing, the feeling that we are all humans overturns the experience of living: one is, one is and everyone else is and things are. Where narcissism is lacking there is freedom and there is love. One does not pass mechanically or hydraulically from the having mode to the being mode, but by dialectic leap, or better, by paradoxical leap. The being mode is not contrasted with the having mode, it transcends it.

5.

23 Freud, S. (1979a), Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalyse - Größe und Grenzen, cit., p. 294-301.
The having mode concerns those who hold onto things and want to possess them because they feel incapable of producing them by themselves. Wanting to possess and being possessed, at any price, to have the perception of being bound to others, of not being alone. The person does not wish to be born but to remain encapsulated in the world from which he originated or in its surrogates. He lingers in incestuous ties, remains fixated on his mother and maternal symbols: his country, his city, his family, his clan, his professional group. Solitude is felt like a terrifying abyss. Fear inhabits the pass of individuation and detachment from the womb and its substitutes. Anxiety is placated only in the reaffirmation of incestuous embrace, whatever form it manifestly assumes.

Freud discovered infantile sexuality and opened the way for understanding of the child, up to then neither understood nor respected, considered little more than a thing. Once infantile sexuality was discovered and the attachment of the child to his mother was seen, Freud thought that this attachment was of a sexual nature, be it in a very ample conception of sexuality, animated by partial instincts and depicting the child as a small „polymorphous pervert“ 25. Fromm agrees that on the manifest level the child’s desire for its mother is observed, but he believes that this desire expresses the need for protection and security of an individual still defenceless and completely dependent on everyone, primarily the mother or who acts as the mother figure 26. For Fromm, the same infantile pre-genital organization is not due to libidinous investments in the various parts of the body which would thus become erogenous zones, but to maternal care which affectively invests and esteems this or that zone of the body, propagating meanings, symbols social norms and customs as well.

Freud believes that psychosexual development passes through the Oedipus complex, a nuclear complex for every person. If Freud considers the triangular structure of the Oedipus complex to be biological, and thus universal, Fromm sees there an intellectual operation of sewing together of the two distinct mother-son and father-son relationship with the thread of infantile sexuality. Fromm’s criticism is supported by the reading of Sophocles proposed by Bachofen 27.

Maternal love allows the mother „to make two from one“ 28. If two are made not only physically but also psychologically, she gives birth twice. Often the second delivery is unsuccessful and the child remains fixed to the mother. This incestuous tie is very difficult to break, more difficult than the one with the father, who in patriarchal societies awards and punishes the children according to their merits and their obedience 29. Disobedience is the first step of freedom 30, but to rebel against an affectionate but ensnaring mother is much more difficult than to rebel against a father as severe and hard as he is clear in his rules.

6.

The unreleased deep ties with the parental figures are continually relived, by referring them to other persons and other situations. Freud was the first to realize this phenomenon, which he called transference and studied in relationship to what happens between the patient and the analyst. In this case too, Fromm fully recognizes Freud’s discovery, but then inserts the concept of transference in his vision of human relationships. One point is to be strongly underlined: Fromm is extremely sensitive to every manifestation, both direct and indirect, of authoritarianism, to which he dedicates a large part of his work, and hence he realizes at once how transference may be used to dominate others. He notes how it is diffused in all aspects of social life 31 and not only circumscribed to the psycho-

31 Fromm, E. (1979a), Sigmund Freuds Psychoanalyse -
analyst relationship. As a psychoanalyst, Fromm thinks that the transference plane exists not only in the patient-analyst relationship, but also in the real one between two persons who confront each other. This latter relationship is the healthy plane of adult existence; the other is the regressive plane, deformed, which is treated for the purpose of reducing it or resolving it.

Also counter-transference is an expression of immaturity and pathology, this time charged to the psychoanalyst, for whom, in fact, it constitutes a counter-attitude. Fromm thinks that counter-transference is a professional illness of the psychoanalyst, inflated in his narcissism by feelings of devotion manifested by his patients.

So long as there is transference there is no freedom, but interior coaction, in any human relationship whatsoever. The sentimental transference lens distorts the vision of reality and induces submission and domination. To a great extent transference is made of hate and reactive formations, where positive feelings hide the underlying aggressiveness. Love is not within the reality of transference, since only in freedom is love born. In transference there is a boundless request, the primary demand of archaic love inevitably frustrated\(^2\), with consequent hate.

For Freud love and hate have the same root, they come from the same instinct. For Fromm the origins of these two feelings are clearly distinct. Love is born with the reducing of narcissism, with the breaking of incestuous ties and with the joy of wonder of living. Hate comes from wounded narcissism. Interior un-freedom is permanent vulnerability.

With Fromm psychoanalysis reassumes the task of human liberation which, in itself, already had Freud’s great lesson. Freud was the inventor of psychoanalysis, and introduced an irreversible change in human knowledge, which he did not bring to its extreme consequences owing to the limits of the cultural approach and deep feeling of his times and of the social class to which he belonged.

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