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Between Marx and Freud: Erich Fromm revisited

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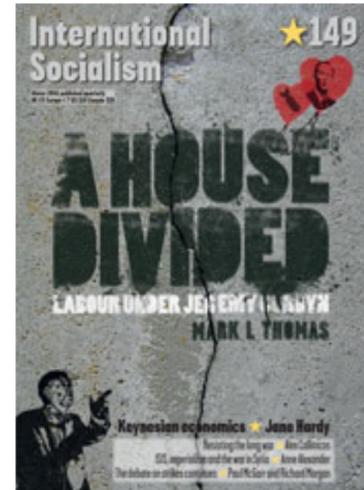
More than three decades after his death, the ideas of Erich Fromm are enjoying something of an intellectual renaissance. Fromm (1900-1980) was a German-Jewish psychoanalyst, writer, public intellectual and activist whose life-long concern was with developing an understanding of the relationship between capitalism and mental health, based on his attempt to integrate the ideas of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Recent years have seen the publication of no less than three new biographies of Fromm,¹ all of which challenge to a greater or lesser degree the very negative view of Fromm that has prevailed on much of the left for several decades, while 2014 saw the publication of two new collections of essays devoted to discussing his ideas.² His work has been cited approvingly both by popular psychologists such as Oliver James and also by Marxists such as Kevin B Anderson, Michael Löwy and long-standing Socialist Workers Party member Sabby Sagall, who draws heavily on Fromm's concept of social character in his recent study of genocides.³

Fromm's work merits our attention for several reasons. First, unusually for a psychoanalyst, he considered himself to be a Marxist right until the end of his life. While his main interest was in a critical - integration of the ideas of Marx and Freud, he was clear as to which thinker he saw as the more important. As he wrote in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*:

My concern in this book...is only with Marx and Freud. By putting their names together the impression might easily arise that I consider them as two men of equal stature and equal historical significance. I want to make it clear at the outset that this is not so. That Marx is a figure of world historical significance with whom Freud cannot even be compared in this respect hardly needs to be said.⁴

Secondly, he held at least some political positions in common with the traditions of this journal. For example, during the 1950s he viewed the Soviet Union as being state capitalist and, immediately following the statement quoted above, went on to "deeply regret the fact that a distorted and degraded 'Marxism' is preached in almost one third of the world". He deplored "the general habit of considering Stalinism...as identical with, or at least a continuation of revolutionary Marxism" and, remarkably, at the height of the Cold War in the late 1950s, he defended Lenin and Leon Trotsky. In a review of *Trotsky's Diary in Exile* in 1958, he wrote: "They were men with an uncompromising sense of truth, penetrating to the very essence of reality, and never taken in by the deceptive surface; of an unquestionable courage and integrity; of deep concern and devotion to man and his future; and with little vanity or lust for power".⁵

Thirdly, he was a key contributor to the socialist humanist movement that emerged in the mid to late-1950s from the wreckage of Stalinism and which has recently attracted renewed interest. His book *Marx's Concept of Man*, published in 1961, contained the first English translation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (and he opposed those who argued that there was a "break" between the young Marx of the manuscripts and the mature Marx). Although by his own admission, he was



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never primarily an activist, he did play an active role in the social movements of the 1960s—against nuclear weapons, around civil rights and in opposition to the Vietnam war, as well as being a lifelong opponent of Zionism and the Zionist state.

For reasons that will be discussed below, Fromm has been an unfashionable, even forgotten, figure on the political and academic left for several decades even though (or perhaps because) his books such as *The Fear of Freedom*, *The Sane Society* and his bestseller *The Art of Loving* attracted a huge popular readership (the latter having sold in the region of 25 million copies—in Germany second only to the Bible!). The current revival of interest in his work, however, suggests that a re-assessment of his legacy from the perspective of classical Marxism is overdue.

This article is an attempt to contribute to such a reassessment. To do so, I shall first provide a brief biographical overview. Secondly, I shall critically assess three key elements of Fromm’s thought: his view of human nature; his concept of social character; and his radical humanism. In my concluding comments, I shall consider some of the reasons for the renewed interest in Fromm’s work and the extent to which his ideas are useful for those seeking to build a saner society in the second decade of the 21st century.

Erich Fromm: his life and times

Fromm was born to Orthodox Jewish parents in Frankfurt am Main in 1900. His father was descended from a long line of rabbinical scholars and although Fromm the younger formally renounced Judaism in his late twenties, he was deeply influenced throughout his life by aspects of the Old Testament tradition, particularly the writings of the prophets Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. What attracted him to these figures was their “prophetic messianism”, their vision of the “end of days” when nations would “beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift sword against nation; nor shall they learn war any more”. He referred to these writings as “an inexhaustible source of vitality”.⁶

After initially studying jurisprudence at Frankfurt University, Fromm transferred to Heidelberg where he studied sociology under Alfred Weber, brother of the sociologist Max Weber—though in contrast to his more famous brother, Alfred was described by Fromm as “a humanist, not a nationalist, and a man of outstanding courage and integrity”.⁷ This was a highly significant period in Fromm’s life. It was at Heidelberg that he first systematically studied Marx’s writings. It was here also that he met his future wife Frieda Reichmann, a well-known psychoanalyst, with whom he underwent psychoanalysis; together they also developed a life-long interest in Buddhism.

Fromm went on to train as a psychoanalyst in Berlin where he attended seminars for dissident young psychoanalysts organised by the left-leaning analyst Otto Fenichel. The main concern of these seminars was with Marxist-Freudian theoretical integration and with promoting social and economic reforms. Fromm’s evolution towards Marxism dates from this period and in 1928 he offered a lecture on “The Psychoanalysis of the Petty Bourgeoisie”.⁸

In 1929 Fromm was invited by Max Horkheimer, the director of the recently formed Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, to participate in the Institute’s research programme. A central concern of the Institute, amongst whose other early members were Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin, was to explain the failure of the German Revolution between 1918 and 1923 and the subsequent rise of National Socialism. Dissatisfied with the mechanistic Marxism of the Second International, which emphasised the role of “objective” economic factors, the Institute looked instead to the writings of Marxists such as Karl Korsch and George Lukács, who highlighted the central role of working class consciousness as a factor in the success or otherwise of the revolution. A key challenge for Korsch and others was to explain why the German working class had apparently failed to develop such a revolutionary consciousness:

In the fateful months after November 1918, when the organised political power of the bourgeoisie was smashed and outwardly there was nothing else in the way of the transition from capitalism to socialism, the great chance was never seized because the socio-psychological conditions were lacking.⁹

In seeking to understand why these conditions were lacking, Horkheimer and his colleagues looked to the new science of psychoanalysis being developed by Freud and his colleagues. The notion that Freudian concepts of the unconscious, of sexuality as the key driver of human behaviour, or of the

(<http://praxies.org/?p=3918>)

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Oedipus complex can contribute to an understanding of class consciousness may seem odd, if not downright bizarre, to many contemporary Marxists. This has not always been the case, however. While many Marxists in the early 20th century were hostile to Freud's ideas, not all were. Trotsky and other leading Bolsheviks such as Karl Radek defended, albeit critically, the use of psychoanalysis in Russia; Marxists such as Wilhelm Reich as well as those associated with the Frankfurt Institute emphasised what they saw as the revolutionary kernel in psychoanalysis and its compatibility with Marxism; and Freud's close colleague Sándor Ferenczi was the first ever professor of psychoanalysis in the short-lived communist government in Hungary in 1919.

The shift in attitude, as Andrew Collier argued in an earlier issue of this journal, came with the rise of Stalinism in Russia and its influence on the communist movement worldwide:

The great downturn in prospects of cooperation came with Stalin. The suppression of psychoanalysis in Russia was part of the same puritanical programme which led to prison sentences for homosexuals, the prohibition of abortion, the preaching of sexual abstinence to students, the awarding of state prizes to particularly prolific mothers and so on.¹⁰

Fromm's first task within the Institute was to undertake a comprehensive survey of the attitudes of the German working class (published after his death as *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study*). During this period Fromm also wrote a series of articles that saw him develop his own particular fusion of Marx and Freud at the core of which was what was to become his trademark concept of "social character", which will be considered in more depth below.

The rise of Nazism, however, forced Fromm to flee Germany and in 1934 he settled in the United States. During the 1930s he became increasingly critical of some of Freud's key concepts, above all the central role he gave to biologically-based drives in the formation of personality, and this brought him into conflict with leading figures in the Institute. Writing in 1936 he argued that "the problem within psychology and sociology is the dialectical intertwining of natural and historical factors. Freud has wrongly based psychology totally on natural factors".¹¹ For these views Fromm was to be fiercely attacked by Horkheimer, Adorno and later Marcuse. He left the Institute in 1939.

In 1941 Fromm published *Escape from Freedom* (published in the UK as *The Fear of Freedom*). Here he argued that while the transition from feudalism to capitalism meant that human beings were now "free" in the sense that they were no longer tied to the land or to a particular master, there was a downside to that freedom, namely unbearable feelings of isolation, powerlessness and anxiety: "Our aim will be to show that the structure of modern society affects man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more independent, self-reliant and critical and he becomes more isolated, alone and afraid".¹²

People could respond to that dilemma in two main ways: either through "automaton conformism", a form of escapism involving submersion of the self into the "mass", the most common response in the so-called "mass societies" of Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia or US consumerist capitalism; or through courageously facing up to and embracing freedom in a creative way.

The book struck a chord with many and its success turned Fromm into a public intellectual. He was a prolific writer and *Escape from Freedom* was followed by many more publications over the next 40 years including *The Sane Society*, *Man for Himself* and his most famous book, *The Art of Loving*.

While his popular reputation grew, his political and academic reputation was severely damaged, however, by a debate with Marcuse in the magazine *Dissent* in the mid-1950s.¹³ In essence, Marcuse argued that Fromm, in rejecting Freud's biologically-based libido theory as the key force in character formation and emphasising instead the role of social structures, had abandoned the radical kernel of Freud's thought. In place of Freud's instinct theory, Fromm had substituted an "idealistic ethics" of human productivity, love and sanity in a society that was alienated and driven by the market.

Whatever the fairness or otherwise in Marcuse's description of Fromm as a moraliser and "sermonising social worker", there is no doubt that much of his work from the 1950s onwards did indeed verge on the self-help genre. As Friedman (a sympathetic if occasionally critical biographer) comments on Fromm's best-known publication:

The 'workers' government (Chris Harman 1977) (<http://isj.org.uk/the-workers-government>)

A critique of Nicos Poulantzas (Colin Barker 1979) (<http://isj.org.uk/a-critique-of-nicos-poulantzas/>)

Theories of Patriarchy (Lindsey German 1981) (<http://isj.org.uk/theories-of-patriarchy/>)

Mike Kidron on Marxist political economy (1974) (<http://isj.org.uk/marxist-political-economy-and-the-crisis/>)

The State and Capital (Chris Harman 1991) (<http://isj.org.uk/the-state-and-capitalism-today/>)

Gramsci versus Eurocommunism (Chris Harman 1977) (<http://isj.org.uk/gramsci-versus-eurocommunism/>)

Unlike *Escape from Freedom* or *Man for Himself*, *The Art of Loving* did not seem to come from the pen of a public intellectual. Earlier, millions of readers had turned to Carnegie for lessons in business success and to Peale for God's assistance in enhancing their social and economic mobility. Now, they embraced Fromm for concrete and upbeat guidelines for bringing love more amply into their lives. Fromm coupled his instructions on how the individual could garner love with the caution that it was extremely difficult to do under marketplace constraints. That warning was easy for readers to overlook amid the optimism of America's post-war economic boom. Fromm gave primacy to an upbeat message of self-enhancement in a "sunny-side up" post-war world and pushed the harsher themes of his social criticism to the periphery.¹⁴

The fact that, as Friedman notes, Fromm's standards of scholarship sometimes fell short of what would normally be expected within the academy, particularly in respect of historical matters, did not help either.

What is clear is that as Fromm's academic reputation diminished, his popular reputation grew through the 1960s and beyond. His books sold in millions globally (*To Have or to Be*, for example, published in 1976, was translated into 26 languages and sold more than 10 million copies worldwide), he became an adviser to leading American politicians, he was in high demand as a lecturer and he became a leading figure in psychoanalysis in Mexico where he had moved for health reasons in the 1950s. He remained there until the mid-1970s when he moved with his wife to Locarno in Switzerland where he died in 1980.

Fromm's concept of human nature

The notion of a shared, universal human nature is at the heart of Fromm's thought. It is the cornerstone of his "radical humanism" as well as providing the criterion for his assessment of particular societies as "sane" or otherwise. The concept of the "sane society", the title of one of his best-known books, provides a useful starting point for a discussion of his view of human nature. In what sense can whole societies be labelled as sane or not sane? Isn't this an example of Fromm falling into what the philosopher G E Moore called the naturalistic fallacy, inferring what "ought" to exist from what does exist? Or is there some criterion that allows us to make this judgement? Fromm believed that there was. As one recent commentator has argued:

Fromm's entire concept of critical theory, of ethics and of social and cultural critique is premised on the thesis that there exists, in some sense, normative statements about the nature of human beings that are objectively valid and that must serve as an anchor to any theory of society if it is to be understood as critical in any sense.¹⁵

What, then, was Fromm's theory of human nature? In *Man for Himself*, he began by dismissing what he saw as two erroneous views. The first is that put forward by conservative thinkers which sees human nature as fixed and unchanging, the idea, for example that people are "basically selfish". That assumption, he argues, is essentially an ideological one since it "served to prove that their ethical systems and social institutions were necessary and unchangeable, being built upon the alleged nature of man".¹⁶ It was a view that reflected their norms and interests but one which was not supported by any evidence.

However, in reacting against that view, Fromm argued, progressive thinkers had sometimes adopted an equally erroneous view of the infinite malleability of human nature, a view usually referred to as "sociological relativism". As he acknowledged, if this was the case and human beings were simply puppets to be shaped in any way whatsoever by the dominant social arrangements, then "no social order could be criticised or judged from the standpoint of man's welfare since there would be no concept of "man". This is not to say that human beings cannot adapt to the most extreme conditions. They can—but there is a price to be paid:

Man can adapt himself to slavery, but he reacts to it by lowering his intellectual and moral qualities; he can adapt himself to a culture permeated by mutual distrust and hostility, but he reacts to this adaptation by becoming weak and sterile. Man can adapt himself to cultural conditions which demand the repression of sexual strivings, but in achieving this adaptation he develops, as Freud has shown, neurotic symptoms. He can adapt himself to almost any culture pattern, but in so far as these are contradictory to his nature he develops mental and emotional disturbances which force him eventually to change these conditions since he cannot change his nature.¹⁷

In contrast, then, to these erroneous views, Fromm's own understanding of the nature of human beings, his "philosophical anthropology", drew selectively on the ideas of both Freud and Marx. To deal first with Freud, two aspects of Freud's thought scandalised early 20th century European society more than any others: first, his view that the source of much of our experience and of our actions is unconscious and secondly, his stress on the role of sexuality in the formation of personality and character.¹⁸ Fromm accepted the first proposition but rejected the second. As a practising psychoanalyst until the end of his life, he accepted and worked with Freud's concept of the "unconscious" (while making clear that the term is actually "a mystification... There is no such thing as *the* unconscious; there are only experiences of which we are aware, and others of which we are not aware, that is, *of which we are unconscious*"¹⁹). He also developed a theory of the "social unconscious" as referring to those areas of repression common to most members of society or of a particular class. However, by the end of the 1930s, he had rejected Freud's instinct theory and in particular its emphasis on sexuality. First, he argued, Freud's theory was reductionist in seeing human beings' need to relate to others as simply derived from, and an expression of, a biological instinct. Freud, he argued, had got things the wrong way round. Rather, sexuality was one expression of human beings' fundamental need for relatedness. Freud's over-emphasis on sexuality and his "mechanistic materialism" reflected the society and the period in which he had lived. Secondly, while humans were part of the animal world, through evolution they had developed an ability to reason that allowed them both to plan their environment in a way that other animals could not and also to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Or, as Marx put it in *Capital*:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.²⁰

Fromm then, like Freud, argued for a theory of human nature, but it was a human nature rooted not in libido but in what he called "the conditions of existence":

Powerful as the sex drive and all its derivations are, they are by no means the most powerful forces within man and their frustration is not the cause of mental disturbance. The most powerful forces motivating man's behavior stem from the condition of his existence, the "human situation".²¹

By "human situation", Fromm is referring to a situation where, he argues, having lost his original unity with nature as a result of having developed the power of reason, "man cannot live statically because his inner contradictions drive him to seek for a new equilibrium, for a new harmony instead of the lost harmony with nature".²² It is clear that Fromm sees these "inner contradictions" as arising from the problem of the meaning of human existence rather than having their origins in social production:

After he has satisfied his animal needs, he is driven by his human needs... All passions and strivings of man are attempts to find an answer to his existence, or as we may also say, to avoid insanity... All cultures provide for a patterned system in which certain solutions are predominant, hence certain strivings and satisfactions. Whether we deal with primitive religions, with theistic or non-theistic religions, they are all attempts to give an answer to man's existential problem.²³

He then identifies five sets of "needs or passions" that stem from the "existence of man": the need for relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, the need for a sense of identity and the need for a frame of orientation and devotion: reason vs irrationality. Failure on society's part to meet these needs will lead to mental ill health.

What these arguments show is that Fromm's views on human nature had moved a long way from those of Freud. Assessing the strengths and limitations of Freud's mature thought is beyond the scope of this article.²⁴ However, we should be cautious in assuming that a shift from a biologically-based approach to one emphasising the role of culture and social structures is necessarily closer to a Marxist approach. Freud is concerned with the effects of the conflicts arising from the formation of human individuals with biologically-based drives within social structures, especially, but not only, in the family. This is a materialist position, even if not necessarily Marxist. Fromm, by contrast, despite his disavowals to the contrary, seems much closer to an idealist existentialist tradition which sees "man's search for meaning" as the primary drive.

How though do Fromm's views of human nature compare with those of Marx? In *Capital*, Marx distinguished between what he called "human nature in general" and "human nature as historically modified in each epoch". In respect of the first point, Terry Eagleton comments:

In his early writings, Marx speaks of what he calls human "species being", which is really a materialist version of human nature. Because of the nature of our material bodies, we are needy, labouring, sociable, sexual, communicative, self-expressive animals who need one another to survive, but who come to find a fulfilment in that companionship over and above its social usefulness... Because we are laboring, desiring, linguistic creatures, we are able to transform our conditions in the process we know as history. In doing so, we come to transform ourselves at the same time. Change in other words, is not the opposite of human nature; it is possible because of the creative, open-ended, unfinished beings we are.²⁵

In other words, it is precisely our potential for development, for what Aristotle referred to as "flourishing", that makes us human, is our "essence"; as Marx argued, "freedom is so much the essence of man that even its opponents realise it in that they fight its reality".²⁶ That essence is not realised in isolation. Rather, as Marx also argued in the sixth of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, it is inextricably bound up with, and shaped by, the social relationships in which people exist: "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations".²⁷

For that reason, Eagleton argues, the Marxist notion of social justice "does indeed possess an 'absolute' moral criterion: the unquestionable virtue of the rich, all-round expansion of capacities for each individual. It is from this standpoint that any social formation is to be assessed".²⁸ And similarly, Fromm argued, it was from that standpoint that we can assess the extent to which a society could be assessed as sane.

The great achievement of Marx and Engels over their utopian socialist predecessors, however, was not that they provided a more convincing moral critique of capitalism (although arguably they did) but that they analysed the economic and political workings of the system and, crucially, identified the force—the working-class—which could act as the gravedigger of the system through its own self-emancipation.

By contrast, while Fromm recognises that different types of society (or modes of production) modify that human nature considerably (reflected in his concept of social character), as we shall see there is no recognition in his writings of the dynamic role of class and class struggle in that process. The focus instead is on "Man" or "humanity". Here, as in his writings on religion, Fromm often seems closer to Feuerbach than to Marx.²⁹

Social character

The concept of social character is Fromm's alternative to Freud's drive theory and was seen by him (and by most contemporary commentators) as his most important theoretical contribution. *Individual* character structure, Fromm argues following Freud, is a persistent, enduring, relatively fixed entity. People frequently behave in specific, often predictable, almost automatic ways. By extension, *social* character refers to the "nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture, in contradistinction to the individual character in which people belonging to the same culture differ from each other".³⁰

While for Freud social behaviour had its roots in the interaction between the biological drives of individuals and their formation in social structures such as the family, Fromm argued that "the most important conditioning factor in the creation of social character, the context in which it is shaped, is the mode of production".³¹

What, then, are the key elements of Fromm's concept of social character? Firstly, it is a wider concept than ideology in that, while it includes conscious ideas, it also includes unconscious thoughts, feelings and behaviours (in this respect social character bears some resemblance to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, a point also noted by Kieran Durkin.³²)

Secondly, Fromm argued, psychoanalytic concepts that were employed in the analysis of individual behaviour were applicable, with some modification, to explanations of the social character of groups or classes. So, for example, the concept of sado-masochism played an important role in his explanation of the role of the German middle classes in the rise of Nazism. By this, however, Fromm meant not

neurosis or perversion but rather an attitude towards authority rooted in social character: "He [the petty-bourgeois] admired authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time he wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him".³³

Thirdly, for Fromm social character plays an important role in the smooth functioning of the capitalist system. In the same way as individual character means that people behave in "characteristic" ways without having to deal with each new situation afresh, so too the social character of the working class means that its members tend to behave in fairly predictable ways, suited to the needs of capital:

Modern, industrial society, for instance, could not have attained its ends had it not harnessed the energy of free men in an unprecedented degree... It would not have sufficed if each individual had to make up his mind consciously every day that he wanted to work, to be on time, etc. since any such conscious deliberation would lead to many more exceptions than the smooth functioning of society can afford. Nor would threat and force have sufficed as a motive since the highly differentiated tasks in modern industrial society can, in the long run, only be the work of free men and not of forced labour. The social *necessity* for work, for punctuality, and orderliness had to be transformed into an inner *drive*. This means that society had to produce a social character in which these strivings were inherent.³⁴

The same example is fruitfully employed by E P Thompson in his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* in exploring the role of Methodism in imposing a new work discipline on the growing working class in the late 18th and early 19th century.³⁵ The issue of discipline, or rather the lack of discipline, of the semi-industrialised workforce, was a major challenge for the new factory owners. The extent of the problem was emphasised by Dr Andrew Ure (a popular target of Marx and Engels) in his *Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835):

Even at the present day, when the system is perfectly organised, and its labour lightened to the utmost, it is found nearly impossible to convert persons past the age of puberty, whether drawn from rural or from handicraft occupations, into useful factory hands. After struggling for a while to conquer their listless or restive habits, they either renounce the employment spontaneously, or are dismissed by the overlookers on account of inattention.³⁶

Methodism, Thompson argued, which attracted a huge following in working class districts in the late 1790s, provided one key ideological mechanism through which this "problem" could be addressed. Combining a "religion of the soul" that allowed for the expression of intense emotion within the church walls with a strict emphasis on discipline and respectability in daily life, Methodism:

weakened the poor from within, by adding to them the active ingredient of submission; and they [the Methodist leaders] fostered within the Methodist Church those elements most suited to make up the psychic component of the work-discipline of which the manufacturers stood most in need.

In language drawn from Fromm (whom he cites in a footnote but does not refer to directly), Thompson argues: "Men came to be driven to work not so much by external pressure but by an internal compulsion... The inner compulsion was more effective in harnessing all energies to work than any outer compulsion could ever be... man was turned into his own slave-driver".³⁷

Thompson presents a persuasive argument for the role of Methodism in shaping working class character but as he himself recognises, it is one which needs some contextualisation. First, the mid to late-1790s was a period of counter-revolution when England was at war with revolutionary France and the hopes that had been raised by the French Revolution had been crushed. It was precisely in this context of defeat and despair that Methodist ideas could take on the hold that they did. As he comments:

Methodism *may* have inhibited revolution; but we can affirm with certainty that its rapid growth during the wars was a component of the psychic processes of counter-revolution. There is a sense in which any religion which places great emphasis on the after-life is the chiasm of the defeated and the hopeless.³⁸

Secondly, this was also a period of enormous state repression, culminating in the Combination Acts banning trade unions introduced in 1799. Methodism, and its shaping of social character, was undoubtedly an element in the disciplining of the working class but only one among many others in the armoury of the ruling class during this period.

Thirdly, even if Methodism did help to contribute to a particular form of working class social character, it would be wrong to overestimate the role that that character played in inhibiting struggle. As Thompson admits:

Even in the darkest war years the democratic impulse can still be felt at work beneath the surface... The Combination Acts (1799-1800) served only to bring illegal Jacobin and trade union strands closer together. Even beneath the fever of the "invasion" years, new ideas and new forms of organisation continue to ferment. There is a radical alteration in the sub-political attitudes of the people to which the experiences of tens of thousands of unwilling soldiers contributed. By 1811 we can witness the simultaneous emergence of a new popular radicalism and of a newly-militant trade unionism.³⁹

A more problematic use of the concept of social character occurs in Sabby Sagall's ambitious and fascinating study of genocides and the roots of human destructiveness.⁴⁰ Space (and lack of knowledge on my part) precludes a discussion of three of the four genocides discussed by Sagall (the Rwandan, Native American and Armenian genocides) or of his main thesis that some types of genocide ("irrational" as opposed to "rational" genocides) require the use of psychoanalytic categories in order to explain them. Here I shall only address his argument that the classical Marxist analysis of the rise of Nazism developed by Trotsky, which emphasised the economic and political factors fuelling the growth of the Nazis, needs to be supplemented by a "theory of subjectivity", based on the social character of the German middle classes.

Sagall's argument draws on Fromm's account of the rise of Nazism in *Escape from Freedom*, where he set out to analyse "those dynamic factors in the character structure of modern man, which made him want to give up freedom in fascist countries and which so widely prevail in millions of our own people".⁴¹ In similar fashion Sagall aims to "uncover the links between the objective development of German industrial capitalism and the subjective ideas and feelings of fear, hatred and destructive rage of the Nazi perpetrators".⁴² His general analysis closely follows that of Trotsky in emphasising the impact of the Great Depression on the middle classes, the role of Nazi ideology, and so on. Where it begins to diverge, however, is when he argues that "no analysis of the rise of Nazism can be complete without an understanding of the psychological dimension of the crisis of Germany's middle classes".⁴³

If by this was meant the frenzied rage of the middle classes and their search for scapegoats in the wake of their loss of savings and social position due to economic crisis, hyper-inflation, and so on, then that would be consistent with the general argument he is pursuing. But it is clear Sagall means more than this:

As a result of their historical experience as a social class in the development of German capitalism, the middle classes developed within the family a typical social character which some psychoanalysts have described as an authoritarian personality... This social character has been described as the simultaneous presence of sadistic and masochistic drives.⁴⁴

The authoritarian character of the German middle class, Sagall argues, was not simply one more contributory factor to the rise of Nazism; rather, it was a *necessary* pre-condition of the Holocaust, without which the Holocaust could not have happened:

Could the Holocaust have occurred elsewhere than in Germany? As we have seen, there needed to have been two sets of preconditions that together amounted to necessary and sufficient conditions: 1) the necessary predisposing conditions—an authoritarian or predisposing character and 2) the necessary precipitating conditions [economic collapse, the rise of Nazism, etc].⁴⁵

It is an argument that is open both to empirical and theoretical objections.⁴⁶ Thus, did the "social character" of the German middle classes make them all uniquely prone to genocidal murder? Were middle class female children prone, too, to extreme violence? Was it only the middle classes in Germany who harboured such murderous potential? And, if so, does this mean we need a different kind of analysis to explain fascism in other countries?

Theoretically, Sagall is open to the charge of reifying social character, of treating class consciousness (and presumably also the "social unconscious") as fixed and unchanging, unaffected by external factors. This is a problem not just with Sagall's argument but with the concept of social character more

generally. As Durkin comments on Fromm's typology of social characters, "at perhaps the most basic level it must be asked whether the character orientations do not in fact inflate and reify transient, conflicting personality aspects".⁴⁷

In fact Fromm himself was aware of this possibility. In a debate with R D Laing, for example, who argued that there was no "basic personality" or no "one internal system", he wrote:

I only want to say that the assumption of a basic character system in person A does not exclude the possibility that this system is constantly being affected by systems B, C and D...with which it communicates, and that in this interpersonal process various aspects of the character system in person A are energised and others lose in intensity.⁴⁸

As Durkin comments, "an almost endless number of combinatory possibilities exist. In light of this, it may be legitimately asked how useful for social analysis such designations can be?"⁴⁹

In fact, it was precisely this awareness of the transient and, above all, *contradictory* nature of the class consciousness of the German petty bourgeoisie that formed the basis for Trotsky's argument for a united working class response to the rise of Nazism:

The daily struggle of the proletariat sharpens the instability of bourgeois society. The strikes and the political disturbances aggravate the economic situation of the country. The petty bourgeoisie could reconcile itself temporarily to the growing privations, if it came through experience to the conviction that the proletariat is in a position to lead it onto a new road. But if the revolutionary party, in spite of a class struggle becoming incessantly more attenuated, proves time and time again to be incapable of uniting the working class behind it; if it vacillates, becomes confused, contradicts itself, then the petty bourgeoisie loses patience and begins to look upon the revolutionary workers as those responsible for its own misery... When the social crisis takes on an intolerable acuteness, a particular party appears on the scene with the direct aim of agitating the petty bourgeoisie to a white heat and directing its hatred and its despair against the proletariat. In Germany, this historical function is fulfilled by National Socialism, a broad current whose ideology is composed of all the putrid vapours of decomposing bourgeois society.⁵⁰

The key factor, in other words, in shaping the consciousness of the German middle class in the late 1920s and early 1930s was not a social character forged in infancy (though this may of course have played a role) but rather the state of the class struggle and above all, the extent to which the working class (and its political organisations) could point a way out of the crisis. Overstating the role of social character can lead to the conclusion that there was something uniquely German about Nazism and the Holocaust. Clearly fascism will take on particular characteristics at different times and in different societies but at its core, then and now it "is a mobilisation of large layers of the petty bourgeoisie in a violent mass movement that aims to destroy the working class's capacity to wage struggle".⁵¹ It was that understanding that underpinned Trotsky's observation that had the Whites won the civil war, the word for fascism would have been introduced to the world in the Russian language, not the Italian.

A final criticism of Fromm's concept of social character came from his contemporary and fellow Freudian Marxist, Wilhelm Reich. While Fromm argued that psychoanalytic categories could be applied to social phenomena as well as to individuals, Reich argued that the opposite was the case:

There are plenty of instances of human social behaviour in which the unconscious instinctual mechanisms interposed in human action, which psychoanalysis has described and which are of decisive importance in other phenomena, play virtually no part at all. The point I want to make is that, say, the behaviour of people with small savings after a bank failure or a peasants' uprising after a sudden drop in wheat prices cannot be explained by unconscious libidinous motives or as a case of rebellion against the father. It is important to realise that in such cases psychology can indeed have something to say about the effects of this behaviour but not about its causes or background.⁵²

Whatever Reich's later eccentricities, his position in the 1930s arguably provides revolutionaries with a better guide to the relationship between individual psychology and class struggle than that of Fromm.

The politics of socialist humanism

Fromm's main period of political activity began in the late 1950s when he played a leading role in the socialist humanist movement that developed in these years in the wake of Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech revealing the crimes of Stalin, and also the crushing of the Hungarian workers' uprising of 1956.

Chris Harman described socialist humanism as “an intellectual staging post for those recoiling from Stalinism in 1956”.⁵³ Drawing heavily on Marx’s early writings, it was an attempt to rescue the humanist kernel of Marxism from its brutal Stalinist caricature and to develop a “third road” alternative to the “managerial free enterprise system” of the west and the “managerial communist system” of the Soviets and their allies. Its theoretical underpinning was provided by a radical humanism, the essence of which (in Fromm’s own words) was “in simplest terms, the belief in the unity of the human race and man’s potential to perfect himself by his own efforts”.⁵⁴

The first point to make is that in important respects Marxism is indeed a humanism. As Harman observed:

It is an account of how, in its efforts to maintain itself against the rigours of nature a certain animal—*homo sapiens*—cooperates with others of its kind, creating societies which then come to dominate the lives of the species. In this way there arise different forms of economic and social organisations—and beyond a certain point in history—classes and states.⁵⁵

Marxism is also a humanism in a second sense. Its end goal is not the dictatorship of a particular class but rather the abolition of class society per se; only then, in Marx’s words, will the “prehistory” of humanity come to an end and real human history begin.

That said, as a political and theoretical tradition, socialist humanism is very different in key respects from classical Marxism. First, to emphasise only the *unity* of the human race is to ignore what Marx and Engels identified as the overriding feature of human history for at least the past 10,000 years: namely the division of society into antagonistic classes and the fact that since then, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle”. By contrast, in Fromm’s writings class scarcely figures, other than as a sociological category, and class struggle even less so.

Secondly, linked to his neglect of class was a tendency to substitute sweeping generalisations and moral assertions for any concrete analysis of what was actually happening to the working class or to global capitalism in the post-war period. In this he was not alone; similar criticisms have also been levelled at Marcuse and at the tradition of Western Marxism more generally.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, as Friedman notes, Fromm was particularly prone to making generalisations based on very little empirical evidence, often leading to extremely superficial and politically erroneous conclusions. Here, for example, is his description of the situation of the US working class in the mid-1950s:

Speaking of the economically most progressive country, the United States, the economic exploitation of the masses has disappeared to a degree which would have sounded fantastic in Marx’s time. The working class, instead of falling behind in the economic development of the whole society, has an increasing share in the national wealth, and it is a perfectly valid assumption that provided no major catastrophe occurs, there will, in about one or two generations, be no more marked poverty in the United States.⁵⁷

In fact, as Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, published just a few years later was to show, the reality was very different indeed.⁵⁸ Based on dozens of interviews and visits to working class areas across the country, Harrington found that some 40 million Americans in a nation of 176 million were poor, including half of all American senior citizens. In addition he found that 16 million Americans in a labour force totalling 69.6 million were excluded from the federal minimum wage law.

Thirdly, socialist humanism’s emphasis on a common humanity led in practice to a particular type of popular front politics in which class differences and antagonisms were downplayed or consciously discouraged, usually at the expense of working class interests. In a discussion of the work and politics of E P Thompson, for example, Alex Callinicos observed:

A Marxist approach naturally focuses on the classes formed within definite relations of production, and on the struggle between them that is generated by the form of exploitation implicated in these relations. It is this, the most distinctive element of historical materialism which tends to become lost in humanist versions of Marxism... Thompson’s populism is a logical consequence of a humanist Marxism which moves directly from a conception of human nature to immediate historical and political questions without passing through the necessary stage of an analysis of the forces and relations of production which structure social formations.⁵⁹

Similar criticisms can be made of Fromm. On the one hand, as Friedman shows, he spent a good deal of time trying to persuade world leaders (including John F Kennedy) to change their ways; on the other, he was in favour of downplaying specifically working class demands so as not to alienate respectable middle class opinion:

In order to gain power, the social democratic parties need to win the votes of many members of the middle class, and in order to achieve this goal, the socialist parties have had to cut back their programme from one with a socialist vision to one offering liberal reforms. On the other hand, by identifying the working class as the lever of humanistic change, socialism necessarily antagonised the members of all other classes, who felt that their properties and privileges were going to be taken away by the workers.

Socialism, Fromm reassured his readers, “does not threaten to take anybody’s property, and as far as income is concerned, it would raise the standard of living of those who are poor. High salaries for top executives would not have to be lowered, but if the system worked, they would not want to be symbols of time past”.⁶⁰

The danger of such an approach for organisations such as SANE (The National Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy) of which Fromm was a founder-member was that it risked sowing illusions in “progressive” Democratic politicians to end war rather than building a movement from below, not least through linking the struggle against both nuclear war and the war in Vietnam to working class concerns around poverty, welfare and conscription. The problem for Fromm was that such a movement, if it were to be effective, would precisely involve threatening the wealth and property of the rich.

Conclusion

The renewal of interest in the ideas of Erich Fromm reflects two key aspects of politics in the 21st century. First, there is the widespread and deeply-felt desire for an alternative to neoliberal capitalism, a desire which found its initial political expression in the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999 and in the subsequent development of the anti-capitalist movement. Slogans such as “the world is not for sale” and “another world is possible” mirror almost exactly the core elements of Fromm’s thought: first, his ethical critique of materialism and consumerism, responsible for the “marketing” social character that he saw as the dominant social character of our time; secondly, his “prophetic messianism”, which expressed a utopian longing for a different, more just society.

Fromm’s ideas also fit, however, with another, more negative, feature of much of the current political left: namely, its abandonment of class politics and any notion that the working class can change the world. Missing from his work is a conception of the working class as a collective actor that can emancipate itself and in so doing emancipate humanity. In this sense, Fromm is indeed closer to the utopian socialists of the early 19th century than to Marx himself.

A third factor which may also contribute to Fromm’s current popularity is the desire for a social psychology which is more critical than currently dominant “surface” approaches such as cognitive-behavioural psychology, approaches which are increasingly tarnished by their deployment within welfare to work programmes.⁶¹ While in itself this is a positive development, whether Fromm’s “trademark” concept of social character is capable of providing that critical alternative is open to question. As I have argued above, it risks reifying working class consciousness and becoming a substitute for a concrete analysis of the factors shaping people’s thoughts and feelings.

Yet working class consciousness is not fixed or static. As we have seen in recent years from the revolutions of the Arab Spring to the great movements against austerity in Greece, Spain and Scotland, people’s ideas (as well as their deepest feelings) can change on a mass scale, especially when the level of struggle is high. Despite 30 years of neoliberalism in Britain, the electoral successes of the Scottish National Party on a broadly social democratic platform and the election of veteran left-winger Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party show the extent to which Margaret Thatcher’s dream of changing “the heart and soul” of British workers has failed.⁶² And the defeats or setbacks that some of these movements have recently experienced are not the inevitable product of the early individual life experiences of those involved but rather of a current lack of confidence in their ability to change the world and a failure fully to appreciate what is required for a successful revolution. Nevertheless, it is above all through participation in such mass struggles that change, both social and personal can take place; in the words of the young Marx: “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of

human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice”⁶³—something seldom recognised by Fromm, despite his often incisive critiques of life under capitalism. Let the last word, then, go to a Metro worker in Paris involved in the magnificent (and successful) strikes in 1995 against the Juppe Plan to slash the public sector:

Strikes completely change a man. People live in their own little corner. They come first, never mind the neighbour. During the strikes individualism was completely broken up. Completely! The chains were broken. Spontaneously. Because we were discussing things all the time, we learned to get to know each other. We were at the firm 24 hours a day. In our job we're very isolated and we only see each other during the 10 minute breaks. Here we learned to live together.⁶⁴

Notes

- 1: Thomson, 2009; Friedman, 2013; Durkin, 2014.
- 2: Miri, Lake and Kress, 2014; Braune, 2014.
- 3: James, 2008; Anderson, 2007a; Anderson, 2007b; Löwy, 2013; Sagall, 2013.
- 4: Fromm, 1962, p11.
- 5: Cited in Anderson, 2007b.
- 6: Durkin, 2014, pp18-19.
- 7: Durkin, 2014, p20.
- 8: Friedman, 2014, p26.
- 9: Korsch, cited in Sagall, 2013, p7.
- 10: Collier, 1980, p51.
- 11: Cited in Funk, 2000, p94.
- 12: Fromm, 2013, p104.
- 13: The debate and its context is described in detail in Friedman, 2014, pp191-198.
- 14: Friedman, 2014, p182.
- 15: Thompson, 2014, p44.
- 16: Fromm, 1949, p21.
- 17: Fromm, 1949, pp22-23.
- 18: Collier, 1980; Mitchell, 1974.
- 19: Fromm, 1962, p93, emphasis in original.
- 20: Marx, 1976, p284.
- 21: Fromm, 1991, p27.
- 22: Fromm, 1991, p27.
- 23: Fromm, 1956, pp27-28.
- 24: For a fuller discussion of the issues involved see Frosh, 1999.
- 25: Eagleton, 2011, p81.
- 26: Cited in Blackledge, 2012, p56.
- 27: Marx, 1947.
- 28: Eagleton, 1990, p23.
- 29: Friedman, 2014, p154.
- 30: Fromm, 1962, p74.
- 31: Sagall, 2013, p69.

- 32: Durkin, 2014, p124.
- 33: Cited in Friedman, 2014, p112.
- 34: Fromm, 1962, p75.
- 35: Thompson, 1968; also discussed by Sagall, 2013, p83.
- 36: Cited in Thompson, 1968, p360.
- 37: Cited in Sagall, 2013, p83. One is reminded of the joke about the Arab sheik who came to Britain to buy guns to keep his workers in line but who, having witnessed the way in which thousands of workers arrived and left their factory promptly in response to the factory hooter, ordered a hundred hooters instead.
- 38: Thompson, 1968, pp381-382.
- 39: Thompson, 1968, pp181-182.
- 40: Sagall, 2013.
- 41: Fromm, 2013, p4.
- 42: Sagall, 2013, p181.
- 43: Sagall, 2013, p200.
- 44: Sagall, 2013, pp200-201.
- 45: Sagall, 2013, p221.
- 46: Ridley, 2014; see also the reply by Sagall, 2014.
- 47: Durkin, 2014, pp125-126.
- 48: Fromm, 1992.
- 49: Durkin, 2014, p126.
- 50: Trotsky, 1975, pp272-273.
- 51: Alexander and Cero, 2015, p186.
- 52: Reich, 2012, pp66-67.
- 53: Harman, 1983.
- 54: Fromm, 1965, p.ix.
- 55: Harman, 1983.
- 56: McIntyre, 1970; Anderson, 1976.
- 57: Fromm, 1991, p98.
- 58: Harrington, 1997.
- 59: Callinicos, 1983.
- 60: Fromm, 1978, pp200-201.
- 61: Friedli and Stearn, 2015.
- 62: "Economics are the Method: The Object is to Change the Soul". Interview, *Sunday Times*, 3rd May 1981.
- 63: Marx, 1947.
- 64: Cited in Wolfreys, 1999, pp36-37.

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