A Profile of Erich Fromm

Erich Pinchas Fromm was born on 23 March 1900 in Frankfurt am Main and died on 18 March 1980 in Locarno, Switzerland. By his own account he was the only offspring of a troubled marriage. In keeping with his name – Fromm means pious – young Erich received an intensive Jewish religious education and continued to observe the rituals of his faith until the age of twenty-six. Fromm's religious preceptors espoused ideas gleaned from philosophy, mysticism, socialism and psychoanalysis along with traditional rabbinic wisdom. They evidently had a decisive influence in molding Fromm's character and convictions. This seems to bear out Fromm's assertion (contra Freud) that character is not something that is crystallized before puberty, or patterned by family influences alone. According to Fromm, character can change throughout life and prevailing social character has a profound impact on the developing individual, irrespective of their family's idiosyncracies or misfortunes. This was certainly true in Fromm's case in which the typically Jewish synthesis of rationalism and mysticism and love of tradition, combined with a prophetic element of radical protest. These seemingly contradictory tendencies existed in Fromm's character in about the same proportion as they existed in his cultural surroundings and constituted the creative matrix from which his thought emerged.

While still in the midst of religious studies, Fromm received his doctorate in sociology at Heidelberg at the age of twenty-two with a dissertation on the role and function of halachic law in three Jewish religious communities: the Karaites, Hassidim, and Reform Jewry. Fromm's formal analytic training commenced with a year's study in Munich under Wilhelm Wittenberg when he was twenty-five. This was followed by another year of study under Karl Landauer in Frankfurt. Fromm finished his training with two more years under Hanns Sachs and Theodor Reik in Berlin.

In the late 1920s, Fromm was instrumental in organizing the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute and as a result of these efforts he came in contact with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research composed of a group of creative scholars and social scientists with Marxist leanings. Because of his background in sociology and clinical work, Fromm was soon appointed head of the Institute's section on social psychology. He held this position until 1938, when he parted angrily from his former associates who, like himself, had relocated in New York to escape the Nazi menace. Fromm went on to achieve fame and fortune with his work Escape from Freedom (1941) and many other best-sellers, but the lingering bitterness between him and his erstwhile colleagues of the Frankfurt School, resulted in fierce polemical exchanges in the years that followed.

Although Fromm received his analytic training from staunch Freud loyalists, his real sympathies lay with Freud's loyal opposition, or those independent analysts who tried to reconcile their intellectual loyalty
to Freud with other influences and ideas and still remain within the organizational framework of the analytic mainstream. When Fromm began writing in the 1930s, Freud's loyal opposition could be neatly divided into two camps: Marxists and non-Marxists. The non-Marxists were somewhat dispersed geographically and were such striking individualists that one hesitates to characterize them as a group. Their number included analysts such as Ludwig Binswanger, Georg Groddeck, Sandor Ferenczi, Karen Homey, Paul Schilder, and others.

The left-leaning analysts included Wilhelm Reich and his associates, the various participants in Otto Fenichel's celebrated Kinderseminar, and of course, Erich Fromm. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, their cultural center of gravity was Berlin. Despite their strong intellectual similarities, characterizing Freud's left opposition in the 1930s as a group is also somewhat problematic, because, despite various collaborative efforts that appeared to succeed temporarily, they ultimately fought among themselves and expressed their differences with a cold and furious pedantry rooted as much in left-wing sectarianism as in the jealous, fratricidal atmosphere Freud cultivated among his less independent followers.

Although Fromm supported Reich for a brief period when he was in his twenties, the relationship soon soured and, as far as is known, he never developed close affectional ties with any other left-wing analysts or their families. He did remain on excellent terms with Georg Groddeck, Sandor Ferenczi, and Karen Homey, three creative intellects who suffered public and private abuse for their theoretical differences from Freud's more zealous followers. Witnessing the vicious and demeaning things said to and about these people, whom he admired and respected, Fromm acquired a visceral distaste for the seamy, authoritarian side of psychoanalytic politics which he subsequently expressed in his writings with rare candor.

Though studiously neglected by the analytic mainstream, Fromm emerged from the turbulent thirties and forties to become one of the most popular and prolific psychoanalytic authors of the twentieth century. As any intellectual historian will attest, his impact and relevance to the humanities and social sciences in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s is second to none. This inference is abundantly borne out by the number of times he was being cited in scholarly journal articles. Only Erik Erikson, who stayed close to ego-psychology and the analytic mainstream, achieved comparable stature among non-clinicians. Fromm's book Man for Himself, published in 1947, occupies an interesting place in the trajectory of Fromm's thought. To begin with, Marx's influence, which was so prominent in the 1930s and which resurfaced again in the late 1950s and 1960s, is scarcely in evidence here. Cold War tensions, McCarthyism and its threat of political persecution may have had something to with this. Another salient factor of this book is that Fromm was apparently attempting to revive and incorporate philosophical leanings and interests from his late adolescence and early adulthood antedating his immersion in Marxism and psychoanalysis.

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Nowhere is Fromm's revival of older intellectual loyalties more in evidence than in connection with his psychology of ethics, which is best approached by way of contrast with Freud's writings in this area. Freud's persistent attempts to unmask the irrational or libidinous striving behind ethical and religious precepts prompted Paul Ricoeur to describe his interpretive strategy for these domains of human experience as a "hermeneutics of suspicion." The same could, of course, be said of Marx, for whom class interest was of paramount importance. Though it is seldom remarked upon, remembered by the educated public, the fact remains that in 1932, Fromm commended psychoanalysis to Marxists for its ability to reduce the loftiest ethical ideals "to their earthly, libidinal nucleus," disclosing thereby the covert political objectives behind the methodological manipulation of the masses's infantile attachment to their rulers. In short, the notion that ethical ideals are often smokescreens for hidden agendas, rather than true ends in themselves, or even real entities per se — an argument articulated by Max Stimer and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as Marx and Freud - seemed quite congenial to Fromm at the time.

Although he later insisted that he never intended to deny the reality or importance of ethical ideas, Fromm used a similar unmasking technique to expose the ideological underpinnings of the idea of analytic neutrality, albeit in the name of a more humane and liberating set of values. Whatever he may have thought or felt at the time, by 1947 he strenuously insisted that ethical ideals are not always, or inevitably, ideological subterfuges or elaborate self-deceptions. On some level, ethical ideals represent answers to the problem