

Fromm, Marx, and Humanism

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Abstract: Fromm's early work connecting Marx and Freud as part of the Frankfurt School has gotten inordinate attention, while his later work interpreting Marx as a humanist, democratic, and anti-totalitarian thinker has received short shrift in recent decades. This paper will examine works like *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961a) and *Socialist Humanism* (1965a) in terms of their context, their impact, and the controversies they stirred up with Cold War liberals like Sidney Hook and the young Richard Bernstein. Fromm's differences with Marcuse over humanism are also explored. In addition, this paper discusses Fromm's correspondence with the Marxist feminist and humanist Raya Dunayevskaya and his connections with Eastern European dissident Marxists. Fromm's persistent dialogue with Marx during the last two decades of his life had a wide impact on the 1960s generation and beyond. At a time when the crisis of capitalism has led to a new interest in Marx, this after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it also speaks to us today.

Erich Fromm is often underestimated by critical social theorists and philosophers, who characterize him as a liberal idealist, or as a popularizer who lacked rigor, in contrast to other members of the Frankfurt School like Theodor Adorno. None deny, however, that it was Fromm who first introduced the Frankfurt School to a form of Freudian Marxism that was at the root of all of their subsequent efforts to theorize "authoritarian personalities."

By the 1950s, with publications like *The Art of Loving* (1956a), Fromm

seemed to be entering the American mainstream, perhaps even moving from Marxism to Cold War liberalism as so many others were doing in that period. That was what Marcuse seemed to suggest in his *Eros and Civilization* (1955), which led to a sharp exchange with Fromm in the left-liberal journal *Dissent*. However, a closer look at Fromm's writings in this period shows a far different picture. That same year, in *The Sane Society*, Fromm began to put forward a humanist interpretation of Marx's thought, extolling Marx's humanism as one of the major "answers" to the "decay and dehumanization behind the glamour and wealth and political power of Western society" (Fromm 1955a, p. 205).

By 1961, in his *Marx's Concept of Man*, Fromm foregrounded his Marxist humanist position, writing that Marx's "theory does not assume that the main motive of man is one of material gain; (...) furthermore, the very aim of Marx is to liberate man from the pressure of economic needs, so that he can be fully human" (Fromm 1961b, pp. 4–5). Fromm rooted such notions firmly in the notion that Marx stood for the abolition of the capitalist mode of production, not its reform via higher wages and the like:

His criticism of capitalist society is directed not at its method of distribution of income, but its mode of production, its destruction of individuality and its enslavement of man, not by the capitalist, but the enslavement of man – worker and capitalist – by things and circumstances of their own making (Fromm 1961b, p. 49).

Fromm's (and Marx's) notion of human emancipation is predicated on a vision of a new society, not as a distant or imaginary utopia, but as a real possibility that exists as a tendency inside the very structures of capitalist society itself. For the first time since the Neolithic revolution subjected laboring populations to unremitting toil in order to achieve a surplus product that helped to create the first class societies, the vast productive apparatus created by capitalism makes possible – for the future – sharply reduced hours of labor alongside material abundance. This possibility is of course conditioned by the danger that the system might first annihilate humanity in nuclear war or irrevocably damage the global ecological system.

With *Marx's Concept of Man*, Fromm probably did more than any other writer to introduce Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* to

the English-speaking public, also bringing the notion of socialist humanism to the fore. *Marx's Concept of Man* consists of a ninety-page introductory essay by Fromm, Tom Bottomore's translation of 110 pages from Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, twenty-three pages from other texts by Marx (primarily *The German Ideology* and *The Critique of Political Economy*), and forty pages of reminiscences from Marx's contemporaries.

One point needs to be underlined here. Despite the widely repeated claim that Fromm expresses in his introduction a preference for the young Marx over the "mature" Marx of *Capital*, Fromm makes no such statement anywhere in the book, or later on for that matter either. This is one of the most persistent myths in the Marx scholarship, but in fact the most prominent radical thinker who saw the writings of the early Marx as far superior to his later ones was not Fromm but Jean-Paul Sartre, who extolls the *1844 Manuscripts*, noting that they were written before what the French existentialist philosopher terms the "unfortunate meeting with Engels" (Sartre 1949, p. 248).

In response to *Marx's Concept of Man*, some of those on the left who had chosen the Western camp in the Cold War now renewed their attacks upon Fromm, whom they already detested for his critiques of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. They resented and resisted as well the whole new view of Marx as a radical humanist that Fromm was presenting.

Earlier in the same year, 1961, Fromm had stirred up the Cold War liberals with several searing attacks on nuclear weapons, in some of which he characterized U.S. Cold War attitudes toward the Soviet Union as an example of extreme paranoia. In response, Cold War liberals like the former leftist and academic Marx specialist Sidney Hook, a neoconservative *avant la lettre*, launched a series of savage attacks in the liberal journal *New Leader*, accusing Fromm of opposing Western "readiness to defend freedom against Communist aggression" in favor of appeasement. Not only was he an appeaser, Hook added, but Fromm should also "recognize that his position on defense makes the triumph of world Communism easier, and justif[ies] it as the lesser evil" (Hook 1961a, p. 13). In their exchange, Fromm wrote that Hook's response "is a good summary of the current clichés on the problem of disarmament" (Fromm 1961c, p. 10). Some months later, Fromm's book against nuclear weapons appeared, entitled *May Man Prevail?* (Fromm 1961a). At this point, *New Leader* ran another scurrilous attack, "Fromm's Logic of Surrender," written by a future neocon, Martin Peretz (1962).

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Fromm's was not the first attempt to launch a discussion of the *1844 Manuscripts* in the U.S. Marcuse had analyzed them with more philosophical depth in his *Reason and Revolution* (Marcuse 1941), although he did not make a category out of humanism. My intellectual mentor Raya Dunayevskaya continued the philosophically grounded discussion in her *Marxism and Freedom* (1958), a volume that did center on Marx's humanism, which she sharply differentiated not only from the oppressive social reality but also the reigning ideologies of Soviet Union and Maoist China. Dunayevskaya's was also the first book to include an English translation of two of the most important *1844 Manuscripts*, "Private Property and Communism" and "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic." A full but somewhat flawed English edition of the *Manuscripts* appeared in 1959 in a small edition from Progress Publishers in Moscow. These previous discussions and translations on the *1844 Manuscripts* had touched off some discussion within leftist or academic circles, where they had begun to make an impact.

Fromm's standing as a public intellectual and his popular form of presentation – honed in books like *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a) or *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1955a) – helped to spark a far wider discussion of the young Marx in the English-speaking world, not only among the broad intellectual public, but also in mass media outlets like *Newsweek* that rarely discussed Marx, let alone in positive terms. This made *Marx's Concept of Man* one of the most widely read collections of Marx's writings ever published.

An important and sadly still relevant part of Fromm's own contribution to *Marx's Concept of Man* is his critique what he terms "the falsification of Marx's concepts" in the mass media and even among most intellectuals. He adds pungently that "this ignorance and distortion of Marx are more to be found in the United States than in any other Western country" (Fromm 1961b, p. 1).

The first falsification, Fromm writes, involves portraying Marx as a crude materialist who "neglected the importance of the individual" (Fromm 1961b, p. 2). Fromm refutes this, holding, as mentioned above, that "the very aim of Marx is to liberate man from the pressure of economic needs, so that he can be fully human" (*ibid.*, p. 5).

What Fromm sees as a second "falsification" of Marx, one carried out by both Western intellectuals and Stalinist ideologues, is the erroneous identification of Marx's thought with the single-party totalitarianism of the

Soviet Union and Maoist China. During the Cold War, this led most leftist or liberal intellectuals to take sides with either the West (for example, Albert Camus or the U.S. Cold War liberals) or the Soviet Union and its sphere (for example, Jean-Paul Sartre or Georg Lukács) as the supposedly lesser evil.

Significantly, Fromm rejects and moves beyond this framework, as he sharply differentiates “Marxist humanist socialism,” on the one hand, from “totalitarian socialism,” on the other (Fromm 1961b, p. viii). He characterizes the latter as actually “a system of conservative state capitalism” (ibid., p. vii). Again, this critique on Fromm’s part has importance for today, in the light of the many attempts to tie the collapse of the Soviet Union to the “death” of Marxism.

While orthodox Marxists – and a bit later, of course, anti-humanist ones like Louis Althusser – surely had a lot of objections to Fromm’s book, they were not the first to take the field against it. Instead, Cold War liberals like Hook led the attack once more. Here again, if one judges the general thrust of *Marx’s Concept of Man* by the kind of opposition it stirred up, the book is an example of how far in relative terms Fromm had moved to the left, this was at a time when McCarthyism still retained a strong grip on U.S. intellectual life.

In one of the attacks on *Marx’s Concept of Man*, the young philosopher Richard Bernstein went so far as to dismiss Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* as “a series of jottings” (Fromm 1961b, p. 29). Such statements do not stand the test of time very well. More tellingly, Bernstein, who later achieved international recognition as a pragmatist philosopher with close ties to Habermas, prefigures, in his attack on Fromm, later Habermasian and post-structuralist critiques of Marx. For Bernstein also warns that Fromm’s talk of human “self-realization” in Marx is a “dangerous” form of “absolute humanism” that “as history has taught us... can by subtle gradations turn into an absolute totalitarianism” (ibid., p. 30). Thus, it was for the very reason that Marx might be a humanist that his thought was dangerous, even totalitarian! What was at issue here, of course, was Bernstein’s rejection of any attempt to transcend [*Aufheben*] the capitalist order. Any such attempt, it evidently seemed to Bernstein at this juncture, would lead straight to Stalin. The tone of that 1961 review – by a scholar who later moved somewhat to the left – also suggests the extent to which the stench of McCarthyism still wafted over even liberal and progressive sectors of American intellectual life.

Hook, an originator of the “Hegel and totalitarianism” school who had ignored Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* in his acclaimed *From Marx to Hegel* (Hook 1936), and who had launched violent attacks against Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution* when it appeared in 1941, pontificated in an even more hostile review of *Marx’s Concept of Man*: “To seek what was distinctive and characteristic about Marx in a period when he was still in Hegelian swaddling clothes (...) is to violate every accepted and tested canon of historical scholarship” (Hook 1961b, p. 16).

None of these attacks seriously dented the impact of *Marx’s Concept of Man*, however. For by now the ground was shifting toward a wider appreciation of the totality of Marx’s writings and toward the new type of radicalism of the 1960s that would attack not only economic exploitation, but also alienation and the oppressions of race, gender, and later, sexuality.

Fromm followed up *Marx’s Concept of Man* with an edited book, *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, published in 1965 with one of America’s largest publishing houses at the time, Doubleday (Fromm 1965a). For several years afterwards, this volume was the only widely circulated book on socialism in the U.S. It comprised essays by some thirty-five noted intellectuals, among them over a dozen from within Eastern Europe, most of them philosophical dissidents, but also a few who hewed more toward the party line. In most cases, these Eastern European philosophers were appearing in English for the first time. The more dissident Eastern European Marxist humanists included several who would become prominent in the upheavals of the 1960s in the Eastern bloc, most notably the Prague Spring of 1968. Among the intellectuals from what was then Czechoslovakia were the Marxist humanists Karel Kosík and Ivan Svitak, while Poland was represented by Bronislaw Baczko as well as the more pro-party Adam Schaff, the latter a personal friend of Fromm. What was then Yugoslavia had a particularly large representation, with a number of figures from the dissident philosophers of the Praxis group, among them Mihailo Markovic, Gajo Petrovic, and Rudi Supek. From Western Europe, North America, and Australia the volume drew upon Marxist philosophers like Marcuse, Dunayevskaya, Lucien Goldmann, Ernst Bloch, and Eugene Kamenka. As Fromm himself acknowledged in his introduction to the volume, it lacked very much representation from the Third World, although it did contain essays by the left-wing Gandhian Nirmal Kumar Bose and by Leopold

Senghor, the president of newly independent Senegal, who espoused a decidedly non-revolutionary form of socialist humanism.

Interestingly, Fromm rejected a contribution on the young Marx by Louis Althusser, whose attacks on humanism and characterization of the young Marx as not yet Marxist fell far outside the perspectives of the book. In this way, Fromm helped delay by several years the entrance of the French anti-humanist philosopher into the English-speaking world. The French Communist Party member Althusser replied quite aggressively to this affront, writing several letters of complaint to the Polish Communist Adam Schaff, who had recommended him to Fromm. Althusser also penned several private essay-length accounts of this episode, which were published posthumously under the title *The Humanist Controversy* (Althusser 2003). In another interesting turn, Fromm's old antagonist Hook's hostility to Marxist humanism was evidently so great that he crossed the Cold War divide to write an essay in praise of Althusser's interpretation of Marx, this at a time when Hook was supporting Richard Nixon (Hook 1973).

In his introduction to *Socialist Humanism*, Fromm also spelled out more of his notion of socialist humanism, going to great lengths to show its identity with earlier forms of humanism:

Humanism has always emerged as a reaction to a threat to mankind: in the Renaissance, to the threat of religious fanaticism; in the Enlightenment, to extreme nationalism and the enslavement of man by the machine and economic interests. The revival of Humanism today is a new reaction to this latter threat in a more intensified form – the fear that man may become the slave of things, the prisoner of circumstances he himself has created – and the wholly new threat to mankind's physical existence posed by nuclear weapons (Fromm 1965a, p. viii).

But where there was identity, there was also difference.

In the latter sense, Fromm also stressed the core differences between socialist humanism and earlier forms of humanism:

Socialist Humanism differs in an important respect from other branches. Renaissance and Enlightenment Humanism believed that the task of transforming man into a fully human being could be achieved exclusively or largely by education. Although Renaissance Utopians touched upon the need for social

changes, the socialist Humanism of Karl Marx was the first to declare that theory cannot be separated from practice, knowledge from action, spiritual aims from the social system. Marx held that free and independent man could exist only in a social and economic system that, by its rationality and abundance, brought to an end the epoch of “prehistory” and opened the epoch of “human history,” which would make the full development of the individual the condition for the full development of society, and vice versa. Hence he devoted the greater part of his life to the study of capitalist economics and the organization of the working class in the hopes of instituting a socialist society that would be the basis for the development of a new Humanism (Fromm 1965a, p. viii).

This was not the whole story, however.

Marxism also had to be differentiated along a humanist versus crude materialist axis, with the latter not really Marxist in Fromm’s eyes:

Marx was misinterpreted both by those who felt threatened by his program, and by many socialists. The former accused him of caring only for the physical, not the spiritual, needs of man. The latter believed that his goal was exclusively material affluence for all, and that Marxism differed from capitalism only in its methods, which were economically more efficient and could be initiated by the working class. In actuality, Marx’s ideal was a man productively related to other men and to nature, who would respond to the world in an alive manner, and who would be rich not because he had much but because he was much (Fromm 1965a, p. ix).

To many, then and since, such lofty goals, articulated in such a ringing fashion, were at best utopian and at worst, completely outdated or even dangerous.

Some of these kinds of criticisms of socialist humanism found their way into the book *Socialist Humanism* itself. For example, Marcuse’s essay expressed considerable doubt about the socialist humanist project in terms of the emancipation of real human beings from alienation and exploitation:

Marxian theory retains an idea of man which now appears as too optimistic and idealistic. Marx underrated the extent of the conquest of nature and of man, of the technological management of freedom and self-realization. He did not foresee the great achievement of technological society: the assimilation of freedom and necessity, of satisfaction and repression, of the

aspirations of politics, business, and the individual. In view of these achievements, socialist humanism can no longer be defined in terms of the individual, the all-round personality, and self-determination (Marcuse 1965, p. 101).

Thus, the success of twentieth century capitalism, of the ever deeper penetration of its commodity fetishism into popular consciousness, of its Fordist high wages, etc., meant that the old revolutionary humanist ideal that underpinned Marx's thought had been superseded by the historical development of capitalism into so subtle a form of domination that even conceptualizing humanism in Marxian terms had become impossible. While he did not go the full distance of someone like Adorno and his notion of the totally administered society, Marcuse in this essay exhibited more than a flavor of that kind of thinking, as also seen in his book published the year before, *One-Dimensional Man*. (An unpublished Marcuse essay from this period on humanism, expressing a similar ambivalence, has recently turned up [Marcuse 1962]).

It was while putting together *Marx's Concept of Man* in 1959 that Fromm began his thirty-year correspondence with Dunayevskaya, which contains an interesting Marxist humanist discussion of gender. In 1976, while working on her *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, Dunayevskaya writes to Fromm concerning the "lack of camaraderie between Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky." Referring to Luxemburg, she asks: "Could there have been, if not outright male chauvinism, at least some looking down on her theoretical work, because she was a woman?" Fromm responds:

I feel that the male Social Democrats never could understand Rosa Luxemburg, nor could she acquire the influence for which she had the potential because she was a woman; and the men could not become full revolutionaries because they did not emancipate themselves from their male, patriarchal, and hence dominating, character structure. (Fromm's letter appears in Dunayevskaya 1985, p. 242; Dunayevskaya's letters to Fromm from this period appear in Anderson and Rockwell 2012, pp. 208–10.)

Fromm's life and work centered on how human beings could realize their full humanity, not only in psychological terms, but also politically and phil-

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osophically. Always searching for a pathway out of the alienated world of capitalism, he played a major role in the discussions of Marx and of socialist humanism in the U.S. and internationally.

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