

Erich Fromm: Lives and Voices, or Life and Voice?

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Abstract: Two sources, Lawrence Friedman’s recent biography and Michael Maccoby’s important 1994 essay on the “two voices” of Erich Fromm, present Fromm as torn between his roles as scholarly “scientist” and as revolutionary “prophet.” Contra Friedman and Maccoby, who see the “prophetic” as impinging on Fromm’s scholarly objectivity and rigor, I argue that Fromm’s prophetic and scientific sides must be understood as fundamentally linked. Fromm’s ethical-prophetic orientation and his theory of “prophetic messianism” are intellectually sophisticated. Fromm draws on philosophical traditions that privilege human flourishing (Aristotle, Spinoza, Marx) as the basis for ethical decision-making. Like Marxist Georg Lukács’s “totality,” Fromm’s prophetic messianism not only doesn’t limit his theoretical work – it opens up new vistas, through an encounter with reality that is both theoretical and practical.

Because the papers in this volume reflect Fromm’s “expansive humanism” (Anderson 2007) in several ways, the theme of human agency or of putting humanity “back in the saddle,” will be my focus. I believe Fromm’s concept of getting “back in the saddle” should be explored with a focus on the meaning of Fromm’s own way of exercising agency, as an activist and a public intellectual, in light of his work as a whole. Fromm’s commitment to inter-subjectivity, social cooperation, and Marxist humanism (topics addressed in various ways by the some of the papers in this volume) is inseparable from his broad social-scientific, philosophical, and psychoanalytic

project. By contrast with this holistic view, others have suggested a tension between Fromm's work as a scholar or a psychoanalyst on the one hand and as outspoken advocate of social change on the other. Lawrence Friedman's 2013 biography, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet*, frequently contrasts Fromm as evidence-based, data-gathering researcher and Fromm as "prophet" (Friedman 2013), Michael Maccoby makes a similar point in an earlier essay "The Two Voices of Erich Fromm: The Prophetic and the Analytic" (1994), arguing that Fromm's work is characterized by a tension between the analyst and the prophet, and that Fromm's work is weakest when the prophetic predominates. Possibly Friedman and Maccoby define science in the contemporary, narrow sense of the term, wanting to reign in Fromm's philosophizing and get him to focus on gathering and analyzing empirical data. (Maccoby assisted on one of Fromm's most important empirical studies, his study of "social character" in a Mexican village, and he knows and appreciates Fromm's empirical and psychoanalytic work from the inside.) But more to the point and regardless of the question of the proper relationship between data and theory, Friedman and Maccoby show wariness towards Fromm's prophetic (inherently political) impulse and seem to conclude that Fromm's scholarly objectivity is threatened by his outspoken advocacy; it is this latter wariness that is of concern and interest to me here.

It is particularly important to address this matter at the present time, because as the first full-length English language biography of Fromm, Friedman's book has been highly influential and has been received at times too uncritically. Followers of Fromm's work easily get excited when a major new publication explores Fromm's work, and Friedman's biography is an important contribution to scholarship on Fromm. Some Fromm scholars have neglected to notice, however, that Friedman's biography is hostile to Fromm's project in many ways and generally dismissive (with limited explanation and argument) of nearly all of Fromm's key ideas, including his humanistic socialism, his interpretation of psychoanalysis, his reading of Jewish thought, and his strategy for social change. *The Lives of Erich Fromm* also tends to psychologize Fromm's radical socialist organizing as neurotic, while seeing it as encroaching on Fromm's scholarly objectivity.

Are we to understand Erich Fromm as a thinker of two "voices" (Maccoby) or many "lives" (Friedman), or can we understand Fromm's life and

work as a coherent unity, both the public intellectual and socialist organizer on the one hand, and the scholar and therapist on the other? I argue that understanding Fromm's work requires taking it seriously as a whole and not discounting his work as a public intellectual and socialist (Marxist) organizer.

Marx, like Fromm, has frequently been accused of allowing the prophetic orientation of his work to overrun the scientific. Like the term "idealist" (an accusation Fromm has also suffered – Hansen 1956) or the more plainly derogative term "fanatic" (a charge not frequently made against Fromm, but also layered in political and religious purposes – Toscano 2010), the term "prophet" has multiple meanings and social functions, adapting itself to an array of contexts. Fromm's synthesis of the organizer and scholar stands in the same tradition as Karl Marx's own commitment to the unity of theory and practice. In the case of Marx, some use the term to approve or criticize Marx's "predictions" about the future development of capitalism (consolidation of wealth, globalization of markets, increasing impoverishment of workers, cyclically recurring economic crises). Others charge that Marx was too "prophetic" in the sense of an overheated hoary-headed moralist making uninformed condemnations of the exploitation of the poor by the rich, without a scientific understanding of how capitalism functions. Each depiction of Marx is problematic. Although Marx had an ethical critique of capitalism, his ethical critique need not be assumed to have weakened his scientific judgment. And although Marx did make statements about the future operation of capitalism (as well as hopeful or agitational assertions of its demise), Marx's critique of market fetishism and his nuanced, nonlinear philosophical understanding of causality from the time of his early doctoral dissertation, make Marx far less deterministic than today's capitalist economists, who are apt to ardently profess their objectivity.

Lawrence Friedman's recent biography of Fromm misunderstands Fromm's "prophetic" orientation in the very way that Marx is often misunderstood. Friedman sometimes interprets the prophet as one who makes predictions, and at other times as an overwrought moral critic issuing "jeremiads." Contrary to Friedman's sneering, Fromm has a careful and technical definition of the "prophet," according to which the prophet is neither an esoteric seer nor a nagging moralizer. The prophet does not make "predictions" and rejects determinism (cf. for example Fromm 1967b). Fromm

considers Spinoza, Marx, and Rosa Luxemburg “prophets” and “alternativists” who rejected determinism. As a public educator and agitator, the prophet warns people about the likely results of particular courses of action, beginning from an informed understanding of present possibilities and an ethical commitment to social change, not mystical foresight.

The prophet’s ethical commitment is a humanistic one. Fromm’s humanistic ethics is neither voluntarism nor raw emotionalism, and he has no set of rules that descend from above, whether from God’s will or from human institutions. Rather, Fromm’s humanistic ethics is based upon a commitment to human flourishing. Like Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, and Hegel, and others, Fromm believes – and he argues that Marx also believes – that human nature is in some degree knowable. Human nature is sufficiently knowable to outline basic human needs and desires, such as our sometimes competing needs for both love and autonomy. The individual is not simply subject to her human nature, however, but has agency and stands within a matrix of at least four different forces. Firstly, Fromm holds that we have a certain baseline, unchanging human nature, which includes such things as our fundamentally social orientation and our need to embrace “activeness” (perhaps a reference to Fichte’s *Tätigkeit*, another concept linking the theoretical and the practical). Secondly, distinguished from this baseline human nature, there is the “social character” predominant in one’s particular epoch (making our era one in which the “marketing personality” is becoming more prominent, for example, in contrast to the mindset of the early capitalist focused on saving of money and sexual Puritanism). Thirdly, in addition to the universal, unchanging human nature, and the particular modifications of human nature in each historical epoch, each person has a specific character and uniqueness, partly as a result of her past choices. Fourthly, most individuals retain free will to make certain crucial choices that will shape their future possibilities for thought, feeling, and action. Thus, the individual stands within a complex matrix of forces: human history and present social context, her own past (shaped by her environment, her genetics, and her own choices), and her present decision-making power. What is ethically required for Fromm is what leads to human flourishing, and the study of the human thus constitutes a crucial feature of political and ethical action.

Fromm’s commitment to human flourishing is more than a negative re-

straint upon his research. One might argue in defense of Fromm's "prophetic" side, that instead of worrying that an outspoken thinker's value commitments will bias their results, we should worry about the danger of operating science without such ethical commitments. We might then turn to Max Weber's warnings about the rise of instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) or Hannah Arendt's concerns about Nazi bureaucrats who were so unconcerned about ethical ends that genocide became just another day's work. However, an argument in defense of Fromm needs to go further. Fromm's humanistic commitment does not merely constrain him, preventing his work from going awry; it opens him to new realizations. Value commitments do more than set boundaries to scientific research. Indeed, when impelled by hope and faith, values (and the real-world action they imply) *open up truths* hidden to the detached observer.

In Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (which Fromm praises in *Marx's Concept of Man* [Fromm 1961b, p. 57]), Marxism is presented as "the standpoint of totality," a standpoint uniting theory and practice. Marxism according to Lukács is not encapsulated by any formulae or creeds but is the beholding of reality as a single process, an ongoing human making, in which all that is (including humanity itself) is a human product. Even apparently untouched nature (to whatever extent such a thing exists) is always perceived by human beings through the lenses of human history and of human understanding as shaped by that history. In his Paris Manuscripts, Marx can be seen to be making roughly the same point: "Since, however, for socialist man, the *whole of what is called world history* is nothing but the creation of man by human labor, and the emergence of nature for man, he, therefore, has the evident and irrefutable proof of his *self-creation*, of his own origins" (Marx 2004, p. 112).

Lukács' class-conscious worker understands herself and reality through self-creative revolutionary action, and paradoxically also acts as a result of her understanding of herself and reality. She unites herself with the universe and participates in moving the course of world history. She experiences unity with the whole and transcends the limits of individual existence. By attaining the standpoint of totality, the subject becomes the object (of her own knowledge and activity), and the object (subjugated humanity and nature) becomes the subject (agent of change). The non-committed, so-called neutral observer is blinded by the external viewpoint she adopts and

cannot see the way in which social facts are connected in a larger whole, in which a change to any part of social reality results in a change to the totality.

Lukács' vision of the working class subject-object of world history belongs to a subterranean philosophical tradition with predecessors including Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, and Benedict Spinoza. For such thinkers, the infinity of God or of nature would be the basis for a new humanism, in which limitless possibilities were open to those who could unite themselves by contemplation and activity with the boundless. This idea arises again in German idealism, including Hegel, and carries over into Marx. Fromm is keenly aware of this trajectory and himself stands within it, especially with regard to the credit he gives to Spinoza and also to an extent in his interest in Meister Eckhart, D.T. Suzuki's Zen Buddhism, and Walt Whitman's friend, Maurice Bucke, the author of *Cosmic Consciousness*.

Fromm's "prophetic messianism," which of course is related to his conception of the prophetic, is an even more specific emancipatory commitment and a way of understanding and talking about humanity's relationship to its past, present, and future. Messianism is an enduring intellectual commitment evident throughout Fromm's mature work from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the roots of its influence are even earlier, in 1920s Germany. Fromm's turn to Marx's early writings in the late 1950s and 1960s enabled him to see that this commitment was not peripheral to Marxism but lay at the heart of Marx's philosophy. Among the thinkers Fromm praises as prophetic-messianic are Meister Eckhart, Spinoza, Lessing, Fichte, Hegel, Goethe, utopian socialist Saint-Simon, Young Hegelians Moses Hess and Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, and early socialist and anarchist thinkers after Marx, including Rosa Luxemburg and Gustav Landauer (Fromm 1961b, p. 54; 1992b, pp. 144–145; 1955a, p. 236).

As I argue in a contribution to a recently published book, *Reclaiming the Sane Society: Essays on Erich Fromm's Thought* (Braune 2014), Fromm's interpretation of socialism as the contemporary heir of prophetic messianism situates him within one camp of thinkers and distinguishes him from another. Fromm was aligning himself with a particular camp of thinkers, offering allegiance to the messianism of Hermann Cohen, Ernst Bloch, and others, while differentiating himself from others, including Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse (Fromm 1976a, p. 126). Cohen held that humanity could make a choice for an ethical socialism by

rational consideration of the alternatives. Fromm, although he had a deeper understanding of the unconscious through Freud, shared Cohen's view that this commitment was itself ethically obligated and that the person who wished to work for a better future for humanity was bound by an obligation of openness to hope and cultivation of hope. Fromm contrasted prophetic messianism with catastrophic (or apocalyptic) messianism. Catastrophic messianism envisioned the messianic age occurring as a result of a destructive rupture, arriving deterministically (at an appointed time) or voluntarily (with a small group instigating a catastrophe to force change). Fromm saw catastrophic messianism evidenced in the pessimistic mood that swept over Germany after World War One and in the work of various thinkers including Gershom Scholem and Herbert Marcuse. The prophetic element to Fromm's thought is central to his most important intellectual contributions and is not a flaw as Friedman suggests or a different voice as Maccoby asserts. Messianism sits at the center of his work and anchors Fromm's insights, writings and actions in the world.

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