

Erich Fromm and Critical Theory in Post-War Japanese Social Theory

Its Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract: Erich Fromm has been one of the most influential social theorists in Japanese social sciences, especially in sociology and social psychology and the adoption of his theory reflects the socio-cultural structure of post-war Japan and its historical changes. In this paper, I will examine Fromm's social theory in relation to Japan's post-war swift rehabilitation and rapid economic growth and discuss the remarkable role that it played by the 1970s in critical analysis of Japanese society. I will discuss Fromm's popularity and influence in Japan, examining its theoretical features from the view point of Critical Theory, since in Japan Fromm's theory is considered to have its roots not only in American sociology and social psychology but also in German Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School). As a result of Japan's economic success and status as an affluent consumption society, however, postmodern relativism and cynicism prevailed in the world of thought through 1980s and 1990s and consequently Fromm was forgotten. This story of Fromm in Japan is not over, however, for we will discuss how neo-liberal reforms are breaking the fetters of an outdated Japanese-style management regime and giving people the freedom for self-realization. This "pseudo positive freedom," of course, creates again the social pathologies of escapes from freedom Fromm discussed in 1940s. Fromm's normative anthropology of human freedom is thus recovering its popularity and has a great theoretical potential for critiquing today's neo-liberal reforms.

Introduction

This study examines the role that Erich Fromm's social theory has played in Japanese sociology since the end of the Second World War and discusses its potential for criticizing contemporary neo-liberal capitalism. Nearly all theories applied by the social sciences in Japan, including sociology, originated overseas. Japanese social scientists appropriated Western social theories and explored their own society with the help of these theoretical frameworks. Erich Fromm's social theory was adopted enthusiastically by "critical sociologists" in Japan immediately after the end of the Second World War in order to identify sociocultural elements that facilitate the emergence of fascist dictatorships. By "critical sociologists", I refer here to those who have been strongly influenced by the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, although they did not use the term "critical sociology" or "critical sociologists" to refer to themselves (Hidaka 1958; Miyajima 1980; Shoji 1977; Tanaka 1972). Interestingly, Erich Fromm, though outside the mainstream of the Frankfurt School, was for some time more influential in Japan than Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), which is considered the *magnum opus* of Critical Theory (Deguchi 2013).

However, the situation changed drastically during Japanese capitalism's period of stable economic growth beginning in the early 1970s. Critical sociologists in Japan have paid less attention to Fromm's social theory since then, believing that it has lost its potential for criticism due to structural changes in the capitalist system. These sociologists have reached the conclusion that Fromm's theoretical resources have been completely exhausted. In contrast, my intention here is to re-examine their opinion and demonstrate the unexhausted theoretical richness of Fromm's work.

To introduce my discussion, I would like to describe briefly the present study's methodological approach in two ways. First, the purpose here is not restricted to *theoretical* or *philological* reconstruction of the influence of Fromm's theory on Japanese sociology; rather, I would like to focus on the *practical* and *sociological* backdrop against which his theory gained wide acceptance. Second, I will pay much attention to the concept of "reason" in order to contrast Fromm with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. So far, comparative research on the relationship between Fromm

and Horkheimer or Adorno has remained superficial in that it has been limited solely to investigating differences in their interpretation of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory – especially its biological element, libido. In contrast, I will review Fromm's place in the intellectual history of Critical Theory itself, encompassing theoretical developments from its first generation (Horkheimer and Adorno) through the second and third generations (Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth) (Deguchi 2010; 2011).

Having completed this methodological preface, I will now move on to my primary subject. First, I will elucidate the relationship between Fromm and post-war Japanese critical sociologists. Next, I will examine the concept of reason in Fromm and in the critical theorists in terms of how it addresses our relationships to others and to our inner nature (psychological drive), and I will demonstrate the uniqueness of Fromm's perspective. Then, I will put Fromm's views aside briefly and take a look at the changes in Japanese capitalism, in order to explain why Fromm has been unpopular among Japanese critical sociologists since the early 1970s. Finally, I will return to Fromm's original theory, and with the help of Honneth's critical analysis of neo-liberalism, reappraise its theoretical potential in the age of neo-liberal society.

Fromm and Post-War Critical Sociology in Japan

Dialectic of Freedom or Vestiges of Feudalism?

Escape from Freedom was introduced relatively early in Japan and enjoyed wide readership among Japanese critical sociologists, providing guidance for their analysis of Japanese society (The Japanese translation was published in 1950, while that of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published in 1990). The first point to be noted is that there are significant differences between the results of sociological research on fascism conducted by Fromm and by Japanese critical sociologists. Before turning to a closer examination of this point, I would like to describe Fromm's original theoretical proposition of modern freedom in terms of a "dialectic of freedom", a concept introduced by Axel Honneth in characterizing Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* as contrasted with Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Hon-

neth 2006). The dialectic of freedom can be defined as a contradictory process in which the freedom made possible by modernization is undermined and destroyed by freedom itself. Fromm investigated the mechanisms of the rise of National Socialism (as an instance of escape from freedom) in terms of the dialectical contradiction of modernization itself. In his view, modern freedom was a negative freedom, emancipating people from bonds such as hierarchy of status, the traditional family system, guilds and village communities; however, that same emancipatory power also evoked in people's minds a sense of isolation, angst and powerlessness as the cost of independence. As a result, people eventually chose to give up their freedom and obey a new authoritarian dictator, or accepted traditional oppression because it promised them protection and security.

In contrast to this process, Japanese critical sociologists investigated Japanese fascism and found its causes in the traditional, pre-modern feudalism, which continued in Japanese society and which they referred to as “vestiges of feudalism”. In Fromm's view, however, the phenomenon of escape from freedom could never have occurred in such a “half-traditional” society as pre-war Japanese society, where a variety of old and feudal ties remained very strong and provided people with protection. Nevertheless, despite this great difference in the explanation of fascism's causes between Fromm and Japanese critical sociologists, Fromm's social theory was popular in Japan from the 1950s through the 1960s. To explain this fact, we must turn to the sociological context in which Fromm's social theory enjoyed wider readership among Japanese intellectuals.

Escape from Freedom after the Second World War in Japan

First, we must note the time lag between the German society that Fromm used as his primary object of research and the Japanese one to which his theory was applied by critical sociologists. Let us return to Fromm's analysis in *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a). According to Fromm, Germans enjoyed freedom just after the First World War ended, but it came as a result of the collapse of an imperial regime and the subsequent turbulence in the social order and traditional values that the former imperial authority had secured. This political and sociological situation, combined with the economic

depression that Germany suffered due to the post-war reparations required by victorious nations, made the nation a hotbed for National Socialism.

In Japan as well, freedom was given after the breakup of the imperial dictatorship. In this sense, the historical situation concerning freedom and democracy in the Weimar Republic is comparable to Japanese society. However, only after the Second World War did Japan begin to enjoy freedom and democracy. Therefore, the main proposition of escape from freedom is more applicable to *post-war* Japan, after its fascist period – not to a time period during which popular discomfort with freedom may have led to the emergence of authoritarianism, as in Fromm's theory. In addition, beginning in the late 1940s, as the Republic of China was founded, the Cold War intensified and the Korean War broke out, the Japanese government followed *gyaku-kosu* (reverse course) and implemented reactionary policies. These political circumstances after the war made the truths of *Escape from Freedom* more relevant to Japan than they had been under imperial fascism before and during the war. In this context, Fromm's message on the need to develop from negative freedom to positive freedom touched the heartstrings of liberal and critical intellectuals. In fact, the research on the Japanese social character conducted by Rokuro Hidaka, translator of *Escape from Freedom*, aimed not only at elucidating the causes of imperial fascism before and during the Second World War but also at foreseeing the possibilities of a *post-war* anti-democratic dictatorship (Hidaka 1958)¹.

Fromm and the Frankfurt School

Escape from Freedom and Dialectic of Enlightenment

As Axel Honneth demonstrates, *Escape from Freedom* shares a motif of dialectical self-erosion of modernity with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I will

1 His investigation is directed particularly towards possibilities that the democracy transplanted in Japan from the West might die out. He explained the current people's social character categorised into five cases: the social character of plebeian, the subordinated, citizen, the mass and revolutionary subject. Needless to say, the plebeian and subordinated subject, or pre-modern traditional subject, had been the main carrier of imperial dictatorship.

explore this point further in terms of the difference in the concept of reason between Fromm and the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Communicative Theory of Action* (Deguchi 2002).

The dialectic of enlightenment is a paradoxical process by which enlightening reason, which controlled both the inner nature (our psychological drive) and outer nature (the environment) and built up rational civilization, also dialectically produces barbarism or violent domination. In this sense, it might be said that dialectics of freedom and the dialectic of enlightenment are referring to the same negative social phenomenon in which the emancipation process erodes itself and evolves into violence in the modern age. However, of the two, only Fromm's theory could have a positive and hopeful perspective on the future of reason and its emancipatory potential. One reason for this is that Fromm avoids a "categorical mistake", a term used by Habermas in criticizing the theoretical impasse that Horkheimer and Adorno reached. Specifically, Fromm distinguishes reason from "intelligence", which he describes as equivalent to the instrumental and enlightening reason of Horkheimer and Adorno. Intelligence, or instrumental reason, can be seen, in Fromm's view, as a pathological and alienated form of reason. On the contrary, reason in Fromm is not instrumental but serves a communicative and emancipatory function.

Reason, according to Fromm, relates the independent self to others by the capacity of comprehending or understanding, and consequently, enables one to build inter-subjective relationships between the self and others without losing one's independence. If reason fails in realizing inter-subjective relationships, its ability turns into the instrumental and unproductive power of domination or subordination between the subject and the object. In other words, Fromm finds the emancipatory ability of reason at the inter-subjective relational level just as Habermas does. In Fromm's theory, this philosophical consideration is built on a foundation of psychological observations on sadism and masochism, which are two different types of "alienated" attitudes of the self towards others that arise when one gives up one's independence and falls into symbiotic relationships.

Let us now attempt to extend the discussion into Fromm's sociological concepts of negative and positive freedom. *Negative* freedom is a state in which people have emancipated themselves spontaneously and gained independence from existing social bonds. This situation can be viewed

as an objective prerequisite for actively exercising one's ability of reason. However, people can enjoy *positive* freedom only when they develop reason fully and consequently attain individual independence and inter-subjective relatedness to others. This fact sheds light on the issue that I raised previously, namely why Fromm's social theory was popular in Japan despite the great difference in the causes identified for fascism between Fromm and Japanese critical sociologists, and why Fromm, though outside the mainstream of the school, was more influential than Horkheimer and Adorno. It appears that Fromm's dialectical thought of freedom enabled Japanese sociologists and intellectuals to think of Japanese society in the late 1940s as not only being in a critical state of emergency but also as being at the key moment when Japanese society satisfied at last the objective prerequisites for reason realizing itself. Negative freedom is a threat to freedom itself, but dialectically, it also promises hope at the point of hopelessness.

Communicative Reason or Natural Reason

I will now shift my focus away from Horkheimer and Adorno to Habermas. After Fromm's prominence faded in Japan, Habermas's writings, especially *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1992) and *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), attracted a growing interest among critical sociologists. Fromm and Habermas's writings have two things that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002) lacks: a relatively positive evaluation of the potential of reason and a perspective on reconstructing a democratic society on the basis of reason. *Escape from Freedom* goes beyond performing a psychological analysis of National Socialism to propose a psychological prerequisite for the rebirth of democracy, namely the simultaneous attainment of individual independence and inter-subjective relatedness to others. Habermas's two writings, in contrast, examine the formation of social evolution towards the modern civil society and formulate a historical and sociological prerequisite for democracy. Despite these differences both Fromm and Habermas conduct critical and thorough investigations of mass society and attempt to identify the normative potential of reason.

We cannot simply compare Habermas and Fromm as a whole, as Habermas's communicative theory covers a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, sociology, linguistics and psychology. Therefore, I will here focus solely on the difference in their concepts of reason: communicative reason in Habermas and "natural reason" in Fromm. Habermas assumes that reason demonstrates its ability exclusively in the "ideal speech situation", in which those involved aim at mutual understanding and agreement through verbal communication without compulsion. In this theoretical framework, one's inner nature or psychological drive is dissipated in the verbal communication process, and consequently, repressed inner psychology is treated only as a theme of "distorted communication". As a result, in Habermas' communicative theory, the motivational power of latent inner emotions matters little.

In contrast, Fromm adopts the Spinozist monistic concept of reason and nature, which is different from the Kantian dualistic concept typically seen in Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas. On the basis of the dynamism of potency and power, Fromm makes clear the close relationship of reason, emotions and inter-subjective relatedness to others. In Fromm's view, emotional experiences and the productive or unproductive use of reason are inseparably related to each other and motivate people to build relations with others. People who have a potency of actively using reason can simultaneously attain an independent and inter-subjective relatedness to others, but those who cannot productively use their ability of reason and fail in relating themselves to others suffer emotional experiences such as isolation and angst, and ultimately have a feeling of decrease in power, i.e. "powerlessness". They then have a psychological desire to compensate for this negative feeling of powerlessness by building dominating or subordinating relationships with others, that is, through sadistic or masochistic relationships.

We can conclude this discussion as follows. First, Horkheimer and Adorno pay attention to the dialectical bonding of reason and the inner nature or psychological drive, but do not consider the inter-subjective and emancipatory aspect of reason. Second, in contrast, Habermas develops the communicative concept of reason and finds an emancipating potential in the inter-subjectivity of verbal communication, but in his theory, emotion or inner nature takes a backseat because his reason is in-

ter-subjective, dualistic and separated from inner nature itself. Finally, in contrast, Fromm links the inner emotional nature with the motivational power of reason as partners in building inter-subjective relationships with others.

Fromm in Japanese Rapid Capitalist Modernization

Rapid Economic Growth and the Theory of Alienation

Let us leave our theoretical considerations for a moment and go back to the description of the sociological context in which Fromm was accepted in Japan. After the political crisis of military dictatorship in the early 1950s, Japan's swift rehabilitation and economic growth from the late 1950s through the 1960s demonstrated the usefulness of Fromm's well-known concept of alienation. During this period, Japan experienced an unprecedentedly rapid economic recovery, to the extent that, by 1968, its GNP ranked second in the world. This rapid capitalist modernization frees people from the traditional bonds of intermediate communities, atomizing people from co-existence into individual separate existence, and at the same time, changes human beings into depersonalized parts organized into a huge mechanical system. Those who fall victim to alienation experience themselves as parts of an abstract system and have a psychological sense of isolation and powerlessness, losing inter-subjective relationships with other people.

Extending this perspective from the psychological level to the micro-social level in its foreign economic policy, the Japanese government and its bureaucracy took the initiative in social and economic development and protected companies in "the convoy system" against economic threats coming from overseas; simultaneously, in its domestic economic policy, the same technocratic state bureaucracy improved and expanded the social capital and infrastructure needed for the development of a capitalist system and eliminated excessive competition inside Japan. This coalition of technocratic state bureaucracy and a capitalist system made possible Japan's remarkable economic growth. It is possible to describe this situation with Habermas' concept of "colonization of the life world by bureaucratic and capitalist systems". In other words, Fromm's concept of alienation was

referring to the subjective and emotional side of this objective capitalist reality.

Fromm's Decline in Affluent, Postmodern Society

Japan progressed into a period of stable growth of capitalism, in contrast to the Western capitalist countries' experience of a long economic recession. The 1973 oil crisis, triggered by the Yom Kippur War between Israel and Arab countries in the Middle East, however, struck a blow against Japan's economy and ended the post-war pattern of rapid growth. Through the 1970s and 1980s, in an affluent consumption-based society, the so-called *Nihon teki keiei* (Japanese-style management) or *Kaisha shakai* (company-oriented society) was established, drawing the majority of workers into a company system that guaranteed them secure lifetime employment, along with stable seniority, salary and advancement policies and substantial intra-company welfare. It is true that this Japanese-company-oriented society was established by the state technocratic bureaucratic and capitalist system, and that in this sense, Japan can be seen as a "totally administrated society" in terms of Critical Theory. Yet most workers enjoyed having their affluent and secure lives protected by the Japanese style of management and employment practices. Also, within the Japanese company system, people enjoyed "self-realization" through good teamwork. One typical example is the Japanese-style quality control circle, in which workers, particularly in the manufacturing industry, discuss quality control in the workplace and propose improvements, thereby becoming participants in bottom-up management. This method was a key to the strength of the Japanese manufacturing industry.

Generally speaking, critical discourses lost their popular support due to the notable successes of Japanese-style management and company-oriented systems in building an affluent and secure society. This situation continued until the end of the bubble economy in the early 1990s. During this period, in place of critical sociology, postmodernism arose with its heavy dose of relativism and cynicism. Against this backdrop, Fromm and his social theory based on his normative concept of freedom fell into oblivion even among sociologists.

Fromm in the Future

Globalization and Neo-Liberal Reform in Japan

After the collapse of the bubble economy, neo-liberal reforms ensued in Japan, about fifteen years delayed relative to their implementation by Western capitalist countries. In 2001, principles of competition and privatization were proposed in the fields such as medical services, nursing care, welfare and education. In addition, with globalization affecting Japanese companies, opportunities for regular employment have been decreasing, while the number of non-regular positions has been rapidly increasing, and non-regular workers are vulnerable to layoffs. In this changing context, marked by great economic pressure from global markets, various neo-liberal reforms have aimed to restructure the aspects of Japanese-style management and employment practices that impede free competition. In conjunction with the spread of neo-liberal ideology, discourses concerning self-realization and personal responsibility are permeating not only the ruling class but also the general populace. Through internalizing belief in self-realization and personal responsibility, people have begun to experience themselves as entrepreneurs marketing themselves. Here we could comment on the relevance of Fromm's concept of "marketing orientation" or "personality market" in his *Man for Himself* (Fromm 1947a). However, I would like to turn to the theoretical connection between Fromm and the critical theorists, especially Axel Honneth (Honneth 2004; Honneth & Hartmann 2006).

Honneth, part of the third generation of Critical Theory, argues that the self-realization that emancipated individuals from traditional bonds experience is changing into dialectically institutionalized expectancy, which functions as an ideology for reproducing the economic system itself. Within the loop of self-realization and institutionalized expectancy, people experience increasing inner emptiness. As a result, compelling self-realization, referred to as "organized self-realization" in Honneth's discussion, destroys emotional relatedness or social solidarity, and consequently, the prevalence of crime, deviant behavior, mental illness and harmful addictions, including dysfunctional behaviors in intimate relationships such as domestic violence or child abuse, will greatly increase. We can refer to this neo-liberal ide-

ology of organized self-realization as “pseudo-positive freedom”, because people can enjoy truly *positive* freedom only when they develop reason fully and consequently attain individual independence and inter-subjective relatedness to others. Neo-liberal ideology is a seemingly *positive* freedom, but in reality, it functions as a *negative* freedom and destroys intersubjective relatedness or social solidarity among people.

Criticizing Organized Self-Realization as Pseudo-Positive Freedom

In order to reappraise Fromm, we must go back to the proposition of escape from freedom. Both economic regression (due to the global price competition) and neo-liberal reforms (whose purpose is to restructure the secure employment system) have destroyed the social safeguards maintained in the post-war era. As a result, new social pathologies, such as intimate partner violence and motiveless murders of apparently random victims that were previously seldom if ever observed in Japanese society have attracted great interest. Fromm divided the mechanisms of escaping from freedom into three patterns: authoritarianism (sadism and masochism), destructiveness and automaton conformity. The first two patterns are applicable to the social pathologies that have become more common in contemporary Japanese society. In the process of individualization and expanding gender equality, domestic violence has become an increasingly serious issue. As psychological diagnosis says, the perpetrator and the victim of violence are in many instances co-dependent. This violent addiction can be explained by Fromm’s inquiry into the symbiotic relationship between sadistic and masochistic personalities. As for motiveless murders, it is often said that these criminals have lost any recognizable relationship with others and are isolated from every social bond, with the result that their last hope is for the death of those around them as well as themselves. This interpretation is consistent with Fromm’s theory of destructiveness in that the perpetrators want to destroy not only the victims but also themselves.

The growth of such social pathologies in everyday life and the present political climate are causes for despair about the future of peace and democracy in Japan. My pessimism is reinforced whenever I hear the Japanese Prime Minister, associated with the conservative right-wing, claim

loudly that we must break away from the post-war regime, namely the regime under Japan's "no-war" Constitution. However, on the other hand, I am encouraged to note that, this year, *The Art of Loving* (Fromm 1956a) was discussed in a series of four lectures on a nationwide educational TV program, and that many Japanese are still being moved by Fromm's words. There was space for Fromm's insights and focus on freedom in Japan in the 1950s, and a need to return to his theories today in a nation facing political and cultural crisis.

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