

Erich Fromm's Legacy

Rainer Funk

A value-oriented science

The longer I occupy myself with the thought and writings of Erich Fromm, the more undeniable it becomes to me that Fromm's scientific legacy is the concept of the social character, as already expounded on by Michael Maccoby. This concept, however, is invariably used by Fromm in a judgmental, evaluative context, that is to say: the social character orientations are distinguished from one another by whether or not they contribute to the person's psychic development. For Fromm, we must ask whether character orientations contribute to a productive effect which promotes human and psychic development, or to a non-productive impact on the self-fulfillment of the person and thus impede psychic growth or even thwart it.

This humanistic-ethical dimension is a central aspect of Fromm's *scientific* legacy. Since the mainstream of scientific thought advocates value-free research, instruction and for the most part application as well – and for good reason: one need only remember what happens when science is kept on a leash by a political party, by the Mullahs, or by the business world's interest in monetary return – Fromm's value-oriented understanding of science is regarded by many as obsolete.

But even when Fromm's thought does indeed enjoy a good reception, it can be observed that there is a strong temptation to distinguish between a "scientific" Fromm and a religious, humanistic or spiritual Fromm. An attempt is made in such cases to separate one from the other, as if Fromm had spoken with two voices (Maccoby 1995). In his biography of Fromm's

life and work, Lawrence Friedman (2013) is partly organized around trying to distinguish the “spiritual” or “prophetic” Fromm from in contrast to Fromm, the man of science.

Such interpretations (and mis-interpretations) of Fromm’s value-oriented scientific understanding become unnecessary when an attempt is made to perceive Fromm’s understanding of science as an independent scientific paradigm in which the value orientations of man and society are part and parcel of the object of scientific understanding. It is certain that the mainstream, still stamped today by altercations about freedom from value judgments in science, by relativism and constructivism in the behavioral sciences, and by an autocratic rule of the natural science paradigm, will not be convinced of this.

One indication that a value-oriented understanding of science in the social sciences in the meantime is no longer quite obsolete is the new discussion, however, has been set in motion above all by sociologists, concerning the issue of alienation and questions pertaining a “good life”, a “good society” or “good politics” (cf. e.g. Ehrenberg 1998; Rosa 2010). Worth reading in this context is Kieran Durkin’s book *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* (2014) where he compellingly makes the case that a value-oriented social science is still thoroughly relevant today.

Now I wish to show the individual reasons why Erich Fromm arrived at this value-oriented concept of the human and social sciences. In doing so, I am not addressing here the Jewish tradition of thought from which Fromm came – that is, Jewish orthodoxy and Hasidism, with its visions of man. The value orientations which formed part of his life are clearly reflected here in Fromm’s own dissertation “The Jewish Law” (Fromm 1989b), about which Jürgen Hardeck (1990; 2009) and – with great competence – Domagoj Akrap (2011) have already written (cf. also Funk 1987). Over and above this, Fromm’s sociological dissertation from the year 1922 clearly imparts the sense of a particular interest which guided his insights and which acted as a determinant of Fromm’s socio-psychological research throughout his life – that is, the question of what causes human beings who share in their practice of economic, social and cultural living to think, feel and act in a similar manner.

The socio-psychoanalytic approach

Shortly after he finished his dissertation, Fromm was introduced by Frieda Reichmann to Freudian psychoanalysis. The goal of psychoanalysis is to identify and make experiential the conscious and unconscious inner drives which cause the individual human being to think, feel and act in a certain manner.

Fromm's stroke of genius, which he conceptualized in the context of questions considered relevant at the Institute for Social Research in the early 1930s, was that he now brought together the sociological and psychoanalytical objects of understanding – i.e. society and the individual – by showing that the societal aspect, with its requirements regarding life, survival, and communal living must be represented in each individual human being in the form of a libidinal structure formation. Thus “every society has its own distinctive *libidinal structure*” (Fromm 1932a, p. 160), which can be studied by looking at the libidinal structure which causes large numbers of individuals to think, feel and act similarly. The study of this socially molded libidinal structure not only makes it possible to formulate statements about the impulses which are at work in a societal group but also explains why human beings passionately and gladly contribute whatever they *must* in the form of psychic and social acts of accommodation in order to bring about a successful communal life. Social requirements are thus internalized in this way and determine social drives in each of the many individuals. The problem caused by the insight that social drives, although socially caused on the one hand, stem from a libidinal structure formation on the other was not widely understood at that time.

The decisive point is the new determination of the relationship between the individual and society. In Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach, the two are no longer antipodes. Rather, society is present with its expectations in each individual in the form of libidinal impulses, and the individual cannot exist in any other way than as a social being. Fromm exemplified this approach for the first time in 1936 in his analysis of the authoritarian social character, published in the volume on *Authority and Family* of the Institute for Social Research, which has still not been translated into English down to the present day (Fromm 1936a).

There are numerous indications that Fromm was increasingly doubtful

about the Freudian libido theory that he had used to explain the passionate strivings as libidinal drives caused by societal requirements. To be named here among others are Fromm's interest in matricentric cultures, his criticism of Freud's appraisal of the Oedipus Complex, and his criticism of Freud's view of women; also important, however, are Fromm's new contacts in the United States: with Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict and their cross-cultural anthropological studies and with Harry Stack Sullivan, in whose view human beings are driven by an existential need for relatedness and not by the desire to satisfy libidinal wishes.

In the winter of 1936–1937 Fromm took time off for a few months to re-formulate his social psychoanalytic approach more accurately and to delve into the “basic principles” of Freud's libido theory, as he wrote in a letter to his Institute colleague Wittfogel: “I am trying to demonstrate that the urges which motivate social activities are not, as Freud supposes, sublimations of sexual instincts, rather products of social processes.” (Letter to Karl August Wittfogel on 18 December 1936 – Erich Fromm Archive – cf. Funk 2013.) In this eighty-five-page-long paper, Fromm (1992e) states in detail his reasons for saying that most psychic structures are not only formed by the object relations of man but are also independent of libidinal drives.

Sullivan's relational approach naturally played godfather to Fromm's revision of psychoanalytic theory in the sense that the individual's underlying *psychic* problem is not the satisfaction of drives but rather the satisfaction of his or her need for relatedness. For Fromm, however, every person must always stand in a relationship not only with reality and with other human beings, as Sullivan made clear with his interpersonal and intersubjective approach. The hunger to be related to oneself and to the social group one belongs to arises with the same existential urgency from this relational approach.

Before I go into the implications of this specifically Frommian aspect of the relational theory paradigm, however, I want to say something about the fate which this stance met with. Fromm's colleagues at the Institute for Social Research, namely Horkheimer, Loewenthal and Marcuse, rejected his approach because it opened up the Freudian theory of drives to questioning. A submission for publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* was rejected, thus initiating Fromm's ostracism from the so-called “Frankfurt School”. The fact that Fromm completed an English translation in addition

to the German text shows how important this essay was to Fromm himself. After its publication was turned down, it remained lying in a drawer of Fromm's desk. The upshot was that this essay, which was so central to the development of Fromm's theories, was never published by him and was in fact forgotten by Fromm himself as he worked on the book *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a) and on a summarized version of his new approach entitled "Character and the Social Process" in the appendix to that book.

In the end, the essay turned up in that part of his estate which contained his manuscripts and letters from the years 1935 to 1949 and which he donated to the New York Public Library in the 1950s. The librarian there believed the author to be unknown. I discovered the manuscript there in December 1990. It was published two years later as a posthumous German text in 1992, and shortly thereafter in Spanish and Italian translations as well. The English version of the manuscript did not become available in printed form until 2010 (Fromm 1992e).

Implications of Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach

Now I want to speak of the implications by postulating some theses which go hand-in-hand with the socio-psychoanalytic approach developed by Fromm.

(1) I have already mentioned Fromm's *new determination of the relationship between the individual and society*. Rather than standing opposite each other, they are structurally joined, and this is the reason why Fromm could say the following in his essay of 1937: "Society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual can live only as a social human being" (1992e, p. 58).

In writing this, Fromm no longer takes societal institutions as a starting point for defining the object of sociological studies, namely society, but rather the many individual persons (which was certainly one reason for the poor reception of Fromm's thought in sociology). More important in my view, however, is that from the very beginning Fromm understands the individual as a socialized being. This is also reflected in his expansion of Sullivan's relational approach and its postulate of the necessity for a relationship

with oneself; this led Fromm even at an early time to clearly formulate a “psychology of the self” (Fromm 1939b; cf. Fromm 1941a, pp. 115–120) in which the existential hunger for ties to a social group leads to the development of an individual psychic structure and thus makes every type of psychology a form of social psychology.

(2) Every person has an inevitable need for relationship with a social group. And the formation of every psychic structure must satisfy the genetically pre-programmed need for a relationship not only with persons of reference but also with the social group. It is my view that this *primary sociality of man* often receives too little attention in the reception of Fromm’s thought, even though his thesis of *Escape from Freedom* is based upon man’s existential fear at the thought of isolation.

Fromm expressed his ideas even more clearly in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (1962a, p. 126), where he wrote the following:

For man as *human being* [that is to say, inasmuch as he transcends nature and is aware of himself and of death] the sense of complete aloneness and separateness is close to insanity. Man as man is afraid of insanity, just as man as animal is afraid of death. Man must enter into relationships with others, he *must* find union with others, in order to remain sane. This need to be at one with others is his strongest passion, stronger than sex and often even stronger than his wish to live.

The Fromm who speaks here is not only the sociologically trained psychoanalyst but also the Jew who was born in Frankfurt almost exactly thirty-six years after the Ghettoization law was finally lifted. Fromm had to be isolated in 1931 due to his tuberculosis illness, and he was forced to emigrate and experienced the stigmatization, the segregation, and the annihilation of some of his family’s relatives by the Nazis.

Fromm’s socio-psychoanalytic approach is based on a view of man that highlights his need for social attachment – an approach confirmed in turn by Bowlby, whose studies of attachment behavior were highly prized by Fromm. And this view undergoes further development in the socio-biological studies of which Mauricio Cortina will write about in one of the following chapters. These theories are developed in present-day research into relationships, the topic of Sonia Gojman’s chapter.

(3) If we view Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach against the backdrop of our deep-rooted fear of social isolation and the psychic structures whose formation it makes necessary, a number of other implications with theoretical impact come into view. Freud's concept of "*primary narcissism*", for example, and the notion that man is "primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his/her instinctual needs" was emphatically rejected by Fromm (1941a, p. 290) and was criticized by him point by point in one of his later writings (Fromm 1979a, pp. 43–54). The concept has also been quite clearly disproven by the studies of infants and attachment.

From the very beginning, every human person is a being in relation to reality, one who requires a bond with other individuals, to a social group, and to him- or herself for his or her interactional behavior, his or her group behavior, and his or her self-regulation. In this regard, the latter, that is, the relationship with oneself, has in my view and in that of Fromm himself nothing to do with narcissism (Fromm 1964a, pp. 62–94).

(4) However, this attachment behavior, which is guided by inherent affective reactions and attachment patterns, is subject to a process of development and – as it takes shape – is dependent for long periods on relational experiences which take root via internalization processes in the *formation of psychic structures*.

It is precisely here that Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach takes effect, since it becomes important here to make a basic distinction between two different types of psychic structure formation, using their functions as criteria, namely:

- those types which help to lay the foundation for the *formation of individual character* on the basis of quite individual circumstances and experiences in the first years of life (for example parental divorce, the birth of a sibling, an unusually empathic motherly reference person, etc.)
- and those types which help to lay the foundation for the *formation of social character* on the basis of circumstances and experiences which are shared with the social group (for example being forced to assume a position of either rivalry or cooperation)

In designating these types of psychic structure formation, Fromm built on and developed the Freudian concept of character in the sense understood by Karl Abraham and taught at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin, where Fromm concluded his psychoanalytic training. After abandoning libido theory, Fromm appears to use the term “character structure” by and large as a synonym for the term “psychic structure”.

(5) The formation of psychic structure or character goes hand-in-hand with a decisive change in the dynamics of relatedness: relational behavior becomes more and more independent of both real reference persons and of identification with the social group, since it is now guided by the internalized images of experiences and character orientations. That which we generally call “*autonomy development*” and “*the process of individuation*” always presuppose the development of a corresponding inner structural formation.

Fromm’s primary interest consisted in measuring man’s being related in everyday life in light of the question of individuation; he did so in two directions:

- firstly, it is necessary to identify the *progress* of the individuation process within a societal group and to determine how perception of the self and its convictions and values are basically *defined pre-individually* by the “We” of the collective, that is, by the tradition, by the bonds of the family, etc.
- secondly, it is necessary to find out whether the step from the pre-modern to the modern – that is, from the collective to the individual sensing of one’s self – *can* be done or actually *is* done, but is counteracted *secondarily* by a social character formation by which the individual *prefer to be dependent on authorities or technical acquirements which lie outside himself and herself* and which – with regard to the psychic processes of development and individuation – have a *non-productive effect* and *alienate* the person from his own individual powers and possibilities

It is therefore not enough to focus attention only on the necessity for relatedness. Rather, one must also always keep the *type of relatedness* and the *quality of being related* in view. This is all the more true inasmuch as one can also develop relational qualities and character orientations on the basis of one’s abil-

ity to imagine and the ability to be conscious of oneself – qualities and orientations unknown as such to his animal predecessors but which enable human beings to express their love for nature in a lyrical poem or also to develop a permanent readiness for cruelty and destructiveness – and to take pleasure in it. (The psychodynamics of cruelty and necrophilous destructiveness is the subject of Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* – 1973a.)

(6) The study of character formation processes thus always goes hand-in-hand with an evaluative question, namely the question of what *impact* character formation has upon a human being and his or her potential for the development and the individuation as well as on the human living with others: is it *humanly productive or non-productive*?

We are quite familiar with such value-oriented scientific questions which focus on the individual. Most branches of psychology are guided by the concepts of what is healthy and what is pathological, and what allows the person to succeed or fail as a human being. Value-oriented science becomes far more complicated in the socio-psychoanalytic approach developed by Fromm, however, inasmuch as it takes two different structure formation processes as its point of departure.

(7) While it is true that the impact of the individual and of the social character should be humanly productive, the task of the social character consists first and foremost in contributing to stability and to the *successful outcome of a specific society*. This functional determinant has the result that the social character often does not contribute to the individual's psychic success but is rather directed towards a financial and social success which can often be achieved only *at the cost of a successful outcome on the part of the individual* – one need only think of the subservient authoritarian character type who is plagued by inhibitions and anxieties, or of those persons today who are ill from “burnout”.

Thus productive or non-productive quality can differ between the individual and the social character, so that an inner psychic conflict arises between the orientations of the two character formation processes and can bring about *illness* as a result. Thus the conflict which Freud discussed between libidinous wishes and a culturally required renunciation of instincts is no longer present as such in Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach; its

place is taken by the potential conflict between the orientations of the individual and the social characters and their respective productive or non-productive quality.

(8) Finally, it remains to be mentioned that Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach also has *consequences for character study*:

The major challenge for empirical social character research consists in the fact that the persons involved are aware of social character orientations inasmuch as they are ego-syntonic. That is to say that most orientations are accessible to such persons only in their rationalizations. No test person will admit to an affinity for beating children or of being attracted by what is lifeless and inanimate. The persons involved are not allowed to be aware of their true character orientation. Likewise a society built upon rivalry must suppress the awareness of how destructive it is, if there are to be only winners and losers.

The challenge therefore is as follows:

- to develop methods with which the *socially unconscious and suppressed* aspects of test persons can be studied empirically, and
- to ensure that the *researchers* are aware of their own social character orientation and its respective influence on evaluation

(9) An important prerequisite for this, in my opinion, is to make a *strict distinction* between the basic striving which is at work in a character and which Fromm called character *orientation* and the character *traits* which yield information only after recognition of the conscious or unconscious character *orientation* which is at work in them.

The instrumentalism of research must therefore be directed first and foremost to character orientation, since it is only this *orientation* which makes it possible to recognize the basic striving which is psychically at work. Work with behavioral observations, attitudinal studies and character traits, becomes socio-*psychoanalytic* in nature only when it focuses on character *orientation*. I believe that it is only in this way that one can do justice to the term *psychodynamic character study*.

(10) The term "*orientation of character*" is important in a socio-psychoanalytic approach in yet another sense: it is used by Fromm not only to

designate individual, non-productive social character orientations (the authoritarian character, the hoarding character, the marketing character, the narcissistic character, the necrophilic character, etc.) but also to designate the productive or non-productive quality of character orientation. What is decisive in both uses of the term “orientation” is that it designates both the direction and the directedness of striving – that is something which attracts me rather than a place where I am.

The above-named implications of Fromm's socio-psychoanalytic approach make it clear why Fromm advocates a value-oriented understanding of science – like that, by the way, which is fully a matter of course in medicine and in therapeutic psychoanalysis. To sum it up in a single sentence: if society, with its demands that every individual contributes to the successful outcome of society, is represented in the social character of the many individuals, then the conflict between what makes society successful and what make the person successful will be avoidable only if the conditions for living together in a society are also oriented toward the successful outcome of human beings. For Fromm (1955a, p. 72), it was the case “that mental health cannot be defined in terms of the ‘adjustment’ of the individual to his society, but, on the contrary, *that it must be defined in terms of the adjustment of society to the needs of man*”.

For me, Fromm speaks only with *one* voice which goes against the mainstream of today's understanding of science, a voice which says: the successful outcome of man as man must be the value which science takes as its point of orientation.

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