

# Reflections on the Conference

*Anne Müller-Hermann and Adrian Kind*

## Report of the observer Anne Müller-Hermann

First of all, I would like to thank the International Psychoanalytic University of Berlin and the Erich Fromm Foundation for organizing this conference and to express my gratitude to Dr. Rainer Funk for inviting me as student observer and to all the speakers and participants, who made this a truly remarkable event.

The lectures, which covered a variety of topics, were very interesting and inspired me for conducting further research on Erich Fromm's work. I was particularly interested in the social appliance of his theory in the work of Michael Maccoby "Los pequeños hermanos" and Sonja Gojman de Millán's projects in Mexico, which show what a tremendous impact a loving and supporting environment can have on the life of human beings and indicate the value of Fromm's concept of the social character and how it can be used fruitfully today.

Another positive outcome of this conference was that I learned more about Erich Fromm as a person. This helped me understand the interconnectedness between his life and his work. He was a social thinker and an activist with humanistic ideals, a man who lived his life according to his beliefs and who had the courage to speak about them. In times of growing indifference and passivity, Fromm can be recognized as a role model for the productive human being. The integrity of his life and work, his authenticity, directedness, his productive art of being and loving, his need for constant self-improvement, his courage and love of life, are all necessary characteristics for the development of the human being.

Moreover, Fromm believed that opinions, science, society etc. have their foundations in values and that the relevant question to consider is whether they are conscious or not, and whether they are life enhancing (good) or life denying (bad). So two questions I take with me from this conference are: What are my values? What is my purpose in this life and do I live according to that?

But of course, Erich Fromm did not only apply these things to his personal life. He was concerned with the future of this world. He was a political man with a vision of hope for humanity. Despite the terror of WWII, the Cold War, and the threat posed by the development of nuclear weapons, he did not lose his faith in the immense potential of humankind.

His books, although written some fifty years ago, are today more accurate than ever.

I believe this is due to a universal truth he speaks, which resonates strongly with his readers. We cannot continue to be on the path we are today. We need a new humanistic paradigm, based on love and reason, realizing our interconnectedness and our responsibilities towards this planet earth and the future generations.

Lastly, I would like to congratulate my university for enabling us to have a seminar on Erich Fromm taught by his closest assistant Dr. Rainer Funk. It is a great honor for us to be able to learn from such a connoisseur of Fromm and classes taught by Dr. Funk have been inspiring and thought provoking. It surely is time for a rediscovery of Fromm.

Thank you for listening.

## **Report of the observer Adrian Kind**

First of all I want to thank you for the opportunity to contribute this conference and reflect on what we have heard.

I, as a person who is personally invested in Freudian psychoanalysis and Critical Theory, had a special interest in this congress. As someone, who is mainly familiar with the works of Fromm before his separation from the Institute of Social Research, I am happy to hear about his later work and, what Frommian analysis means today, but also to have a look at a different line of theory that once arisen from the same lap, the ideas of Freud and Marx.

Among the plenty of interesting and important lectures, I can just pick up a few topics that seem important, at least to me and my work.

The first important discussion I would like to point out, was on the topic of the problematization of the growing importance of neo-positive thinking on the one hand and post-structural thinking on the other hand in social science. This matter is interesting for those of us who want psychoanalysis to be considered a science. A science that can, in its Freudian or Frommian way, explain the suffering of individuals *in* society, based on a theory of subject, group, and society. We do not need more psychology of numbers, statistics and experiments, or postmodern speculation as an alternative and I hope that the meaning of the question “What can I know?”, as one of Kant’s fundamental questions of philosophy, will be recognized as deserving more of our attention, in our reflection on psychoanalysis as science. I do not mean the discussion about qualitative and quantitative methods which is prevalent in today’s scientific discourse, but I mean, expanding the discussion to talk about the premises of *any* method and epistemology. This could show us that the understanding of what a scientific finding is, in its state of the art in social science, is partially wrong. This is a problem that becomes more and more evident in the philosophy of the last decades, for example in the works of authors associated with Critical Realism or Materialistic-Dialectical philosophy.

Another topic that I was very interested in was covered in the lectures on the social character and the theoretical or practical work done in relation to it. For me the idea of social character, proposed by Erich Fromm and by critical theory, is one of the most important concepts in psychoanalytic social psychology, with the theoretical potential to provide a strong counter balance to situationism theory in academic personality psychology, which is not able to tell us anything about the inner structures of an individual and the reasons they have to resist or adapt to changing social circumstances. For me, as one of two tutors of a Student Seminar for psychoanalytic authoritarianism research, here at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin, it is an exciting idea to link the works of Fromm and the works of Critical Theory in order to see the connections and differences. I would be very much interested in expanding this dialogue further, here at the IPU.

It was also interesting for me to see that the reading of Freud’s drive concept, his concept of narcissism and his idea of abstinence, here was quite

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different from other readings in contemporary Freudian psychoanalyst that I am familiar with. For many psychoanalytic theorists Freud's was understood right from the beginning as an inter-subjective theory. As I feel invited to re-read Fromm, I would like to invite you to a second reading of Freud, or if you like, of the works of Freudian authors like Alfred Lorenzer, André Green, Heinz Müller-Pozzi and our dear Professors Lilli Gast and Christiane Kirchhoff, all covering discussed topics. It would be interesting to see what the discussion would look like, after such re-reading on both sides.

Last but not least I will mention Marxism. I do not know how relevant the reading of Marx is for many of you. I heard his name during the conference in a few contexts, and, of course, in the impressive lecture of Prof. Anderson and the audience discussion. If we want to do justice to Fromm and the other Freudo-Marxists, we have to take seriously the Marxist element in their theories. Also we must not forget about the importance of a fundamental critique of power relations and its connections to political economy. This critique leads to the need to overcome capitalism, and introduce an alternative organization of society that allows humans to avoid all unnecessary suffering. To work towards this project Freudo-Marxists should develop their theoretical psychoanalysis and integrate the advanced Marxian theories that developed in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The value of a critical engagement with Marx, promoted by Moishe Postone and Ingo Elbe just to name two outstanding authors, could be very productive in the future work. In the end, the only political and social goal of theory and practice of psychoanalysis can be, to follow all three categorical imperatives of Kant, Marx and Adorno, in use of their knowledge about the unconscious mind.

Thank you very much for your visit at the International Psychoanalytic University and your attention to my remarks.