



The Compatibility of Frommian and Feminist Theory: An Argument for Relevance and Revision

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Abstract: The work of Erich Fromm is often overlooked in contemporary feminist thought. Yet important areas of relevance—his critiques of symbiotic love and sadomasochism, advocacy of mutual recognition, and objections to patriarchal presumptions in Freud’s work—render Fromm’s thought useful for feminists. Disadvantages adhere in Fromm’s ideas too, including sexist language and biologically-tinged maternalism. However,

this paper reinterprets these problems to advocate for rediscovering both Fromm’s feminist and humanist aspirations.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, feminism, sadomasochism, mother right, romantic love, power.

In the late 2010s, a resurgence of authoritarianism marks late capitalist societies around the world while rendering more relevant—ironically enough—the work of Erich Fromm. Recent conferences have been organized by US and Canadian sociologists on the Frankfurt School and Fromm’s ideas; a new Fromm professorship was recently created in Berlin; new books and articles appearing: taken together, these events attest to renewed scholarly and social/political interest in what Scottish scholar Kieran Durkin calls the »radical humanism« of Erich Fromm. Yet the salience of Fromm’s work is much less apparent when it comes to feminism (and the diversity of feminisms that have unfolded from the 1960s onward) even though analogously with Fromm, this is a movement intent on furthering human happiness by deconstructing gender inequalities and widening options for experiencing intimate and sexual freedoms. Indeed few feminist theorists cite Fromm’s work as their inspiration. But why this particular brand of irrelevance since, as this paper strives to demonstrate,



Fromm's thought was compatible with feminist critiques of patriarchy and hopes of personal and political fulfillment?

Here I contend that, while not necessarily obvious or known, the work of Erich Fromm is more consonant with feminist theories and thought than is usually recognized. While until recently Fromm has been a relatively »forgotten intellectual,« as Neil McLaughlin has dubbed him, Fromm was nevertheless refreshingly ahead of his time—especially though not exclusively with regard to his critiques of patriarchy and sexism in and outside psychoanalytic establishments. Soon to be detailed is that Fromm's writings were compatible with, and perhaps even anticipatory of, several early and radical feminist ideas. On the other hand, I will argue that Fromm's usually exemplary ability to merge the psychoanalytic and the sociological may be contradicted by veering toward a biologically based notion of »mother right« and »feminine nature.« These associations in Fromm's work may have distanced feminisms from Fromm, and Fromm from feminisms, and would benefit from revision and re-interpretation.

In addition, I aim to show the importance of Fromm's contributions for overcoming still frequent assumptions that Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic theories are incompatible with feminist beliefs in the overwhelmingly social character and origins of gender inequalities. To explore Frommian and feminist thought today, I start by outlining four advantages of Fromm's thought applicable to and kindred with contemporary feminist theories. I then turn to three reasons why Fromm's thought could easily be perceived—past and present—as not so relevant to feminist thought before concluding, finally, that reconciling Fromm and feminism is important both for political change overall and for overcoming sexism in particular. Let me start, then, with the advantages of Frommian thought for feminist theories.

The Advantages of Fromm for Feminisms and Feminist Theories

First and foremost, feminists are not always aware that some of Fromm's analyses sound like they could have been written by radical feminists of the American second wave. Two important examples can be cited, the first relevant to the practice of psychoanalysis. Fromm wrote a critique of Freud's analysis of Dora that insightfully showed Freud's sexist use of power in that psychoanalytic situation. In Fromm's hands, Dora was not so much a »case study in hysteria« as an example of a therapist/patient reproduction of patriarchal inequalities of power and powerlessness. Fromm showed himself an astute social observer while never letting go of his belief in unconscious and psychoanalytically attuned processes; he perceived Dora's rebellion from the sexist psychoanalytic



situation in which she had been cast as unequal, and as though dependent on Freud to complete her, to finish her analysis whether or not the direction he was proceeding in made sense to and was resonant for her. Indeed, Fromm was able to perceive that Dora leaving her analysis with Freud could be an act of liberation—and perhaps that only leaving could express her desire to be an equal partner in therapy that itself can be a prefiguring of the mutual art of loving.

Indeed, and as a second example, one can interpret *The Art of Loving* (Fromm 1956a) as quite consistent with radical feminist critiques of unequal sexist relationships—and indeed of conventional cultural ideologies of marriage and romance as depending on a notion of women needing men to feel completed. Much romantic ideology suggests that women are »incomplete« unless »completed« by love, by a partner, by—historically—a »man.« As Simone de Beauvoir described in *The Second Sex* (1971), the stuff of young girls' day dreams and musical lyrics can praise »merging« for women, subordinating oneself within male-dominated relationships: »someday he'll come along—the man I love« is the kind of older lyric that accords with both older fairy tales of Cinderella and of Rapunzel and still with contemporary music lyrics across a wide range of music styles. Yet images of women incomplete without love and romance is quite at odds with Fromm's notion of love in *The Art of Loving*. And here, Frommian and feminist ideas appear parallel and kindred insofar as both show that the very idea of love needed to be revised in order to be consistent with gender equality. As I am arguing, for Fromm and many understandings of feminism, to love is impossible unless between two whole people, each of whom loves herself or himself, herself and herself, himself and himself.

If a first advantage of Fromm's thought for feminism has to do with grasping the subtleties and dynamics of unequal power—whether through day-to-day interactions (including psychoanalysis) and as played out in cultural discourses and ideologies of romance and love—a second compatibility involves Fromm's insistent humanism. For what I contend is that Fromm's categories of analysis were and remain radically humanistic and anti-essentialistic: discussions of character structure, of biophilia and necrophilia, of productive orientations, have nothing to do with biological determinism and everything to do with human capacities and possibilities across men and women, races, nationalities, and sexualities. These categories of thought are in no way intrinsically gendered or essentialistic at a time when deterministic thought—about women, about races, about particular groups such as immigrants—are still far too widespread and often are the basis of ongoing modes of dominance and subordination. Another example of this radically anti-essentialistic character of Fromm thoughts pertains to my own doctoral dissertation that later became the book *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (Chancer 1992). My own thought was



very much inspired by Fromm's, especially by Fromm's argument in *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a) that people need to defend themselves against the loneliness and anomie of modern societies—a need that can take the form of submitting oneself to a more powerful being (masochism) or exerting controls over a relatively powerless party (sadism). Masochism and sadism can be seen here as social defense mechanisms. Noteworthy for feminist »appropriation« of Fromm, though, is that nothing concerning Fromm's notions of sadism and masochism was »intrinsically« gendered. Rather than weaving links of biological causality between masochism and women, as unfortunately characterize the writings on masochism of Helene Deutsch with which Fromm would have been familiar, *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) provides no indication whatsoever that sadism is inherently the province of men nor masochism that of women. Rather, a »beauty« of this analysis is that it allows for seeing that society pushes people into skewed gendered directions (men toward sadism, women toward masochism) but not in such a way that is biologically based or essentialistic. For women can be sadistic or men masochistic depending on complex situations. And indeed I would argue that since both sadism and masochism can be present in the same individual, someone who is a woman may be socialized into (say) submissiveness toward a male partner or husband while enacting masochism toward a relatively less powerful person in her life. On the other hand, anyone familiar with both literary and popular cultural depictions of sadomasochism is likely to recall depictions of powerful men whose dominant sadism (during the day) may transpose (at night) into sexual desires to be beaten and dominated. Socialized patterns exist then, as Fromm indicates, but they are not biologically given and can reverse under certain existential circumstances and at differing historical moments. It is a non-essentialism extremely consonant with contemporary feminist insistence—not only in deBeauvoir but going all the way up through Judith Butler—on gender fluidity, and on cultural and social rather than biologically based interpretations of human dynamics including oppressive ones.

But I see a third and fourth advantage of Fromm for feminist theorizing as well. A third advantage is that unlike other progressive visions Fromm's thought insists on offering positive (one could say indeed productive) as well as alternative visions. Whether in *The Sane Society* (1955a) or going back again to *The Art of Loving* (1956a), Fromm suggests that both personal and political relationships premised on precisely the kind of interdependence between self and other that later feminist object relations theorists like Jessica Benjamin describe as »mutual recognition.« Both Fromm and Benjamin, the latter a feminist sociologist who received her PhD from New York University before becoming a full-time psychoanalyst, understood how mutual recognition differs



from master/slave or sadomasochistic dynamics in which one person takes away the freedom of another so as to render himself (or herself) more secure. For the philosophical underpinnings of mutual recognition—so consonant with Fromm's ideas—is that individuals are necessarily social beings while simultaneously endowed with individual, psychic, and psychoanalytic uniqueness. Consequently, in order to be a »person,« one both needs others and to be relatively independent in their own right. In other words, Fromm, like feminists, tried to offer prefigurative visions of what non-sexist relationships—at the individual level but also at the social level—would look like.

Finally, a fourth compatibility between Frommian and feminist theories strikes me as particularly interesting and promising for concerns about »toxic« forms of masculinities about which contemporary feminists are deeply concerned. Whether or not Fromm intended this to be the case, I would argue that Fromm's ideas in effect break down gender binaries of precisely the kind that feminists from de Beauvoir to Judith Butler, Chodorow to Benjamin, have diagnosed. The fact that Fromm's thought has been accused sometimes of being »soft« (an obviously gendered term) or »touchy feely« is actually a strength insofar as it suggests that Frommian thought breaks down gendered dichotomies between reason and emotion, affect and instrumentality. With Fromm, one is constantly talking—as philosophers, as theorists, as psychoanalysts, and as people whether or not as men and women, men and men, women and women—about caring, about love, and about sanity and reason as well as love and existential joy. In other words, »macho« categories of thought become strikingly transcended in the very process of »doing« both Frommian and feminist theories-and-practices of gender.

By extension, Frommian ideas may be very consistent with contemporary feminist critiques of masculinity and masculinities as in the work of Raewynn Connell or C. J. Pascoe or Michael Kimmel. This is because arguably not only sexism but heterosexism presupposes a »hegemonic« masculinity that insists on maintaining rather than breaking down rigid emotional and sexual specifications of gender as well as sexualities.

From Thesis to Antithesis: Problems of Fromm's Analyses for Feminists

Moving along this argument, though, if there are so many relationships of compatibility, of intellectual and theoretical and philosophical affinity between Frommian and feminist thought, why do feminists rarely if ever associate themselves with the Frommian tradition? What are reasons that may help to explain why Fromm and feminism have not been perceived as consonant? With this, I



now turn to three disadvantages that feminists in contemporary context may associate with Fromm and his thought and ideas. Interestingly, these problems potentially contradict precisely some of the advantages just explained that have to do with Fromm's insights into the subtleties of sexist exertions of power and with the radical anti-essentialism of his thought (and the advantages of his profoundly humanistic, non-gendered conceptions).

A first problem, and possible contradiction, then—which may distance feminists from Fromm despite advantages—has to do with language and with contemporary interest in how power is often understood in contemporary theory in relation to language and discourse. For despite Fromm's penetrating critiques of sexist power and inequalities, Fromm continued to use »man«—take for example, the book title *Man for Himself* (1947a)—in many of his generic writings about the human condition. This is something I noted long ago when initially reading Fromm; it is an observation that can easily be passed over and ignored relative to the intellectual power of his ideas. On the other hand, and certainly in this context, the usage is arguably quietly, subliminally, even unconsciously sexist, especially in our contemporary context and in English usages (and much of Fromm was first published in English). Ought Fromm to have known better insofar as other of his contemporaries were not making quite so much use of »man« in their writings around the same period? Arguably so since Fromm lived until 1980, passing away when he was close to 80. He would have had time, by then, to have become familiar with early feminist classics from *The Second Sex* (published in the US in 1951) through well-known liberal and radical feminist books published by Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone among others in the 1960s and 70s. However he may have been long used to employing the species-oriented »man« and, likely, did not have feminist theorists close at hand as among his best friends to protest a linguistic habit he might have been reasonably persuaded to alter.

But a second disadvantage—and explanation of why Fromm is not often seen as relevant for feminist thought—involves why and how Fromm came, despite his overall social constructionist and anti-essentialistic leanings, to refer to something like »feminine nature.« In *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy: About Gender*, Fromm discusses the anthropological ideas of Bachofen; he wrote approvingly of Bachofen's »discovery of mother right« and the relevance of this notion for social psychology (see Fromm 1994a, Table of Contents). Interestingly, as Fromm also mentions, Bachofen's theory—to wit, matriarchies existed prior to their destruction with the rise of patriarchal societies—had also been cited by Friedrich Engels in postulating a historical progression whereby patriarchal societies were overturned and replaced by patriarchal (and also property-based capitalistic) rule. According to Bachofen, and then Engels and



later Fromm, patriarchy is relatively recent»[...] and was preceded by a state of culture in which the mother was the head of the family, the rules in society, and the Great Goddess« (Fromm 1994a, p. 4).

Why does this matter, though, so much to Fromm? Unlike Engels' theorization, which links the overthrow of »mother right« to forced monogamy and the beginnings of property, Fromm's concern is with the rise of cultural and gendered norms that led to psychosocial harms and alienated/alienating personalities and character structures within capitalistic and patriarchal societies. In Fromm's words,

»As a further consequence, the basic principles of the mother-centered culture are those of freedom and equality, of happiness and the unconditional affirmation of life. In contrast to the motherly principles the fatherly principle is that of law, order, reason, hierarchy; the father has his favorite son, the one who is most like him, the most suited to become the heir and successor to his property and worldly functions. Among the father-centered sons, equality has given way to hierarchy, harmony to strife.« (Fromm 1994a, p. 6)

Significant to underscore here is that a deterministic stance is thereby suggested going back to Bachofen; the »essence« of differences between motherly and fatherly love are biologically based insofar as they are linked with women's role in reproduction (Fromm 1994a, p. 5). Fromm quotes Bachofen to the effect that »Maternity pertains to the physical side of *man*« (my emphasis), concluding that

»Two traits, therefore, characterize the relationship of matriarchal society to nature: passive surrender to nature; and recognition of natural and biological values, as opposed to intellectual ones. Like the mother, nature is the center of matriarchal culture; and mankind ever remains a helpless child in the face of nature.« (Fromm 1994a, p. 23.)

With this, though, an explanatory clue emerges about the blatant »contradiction« between Fromm's typically social constructionist (and feminist) writings and the biologism evident from his endeavors to understand how the system socialist feminist Zillah Eisenstein dubbed »capitalist patriarchy« evolved. For perhaps, through Bachofen's allusions to a matriarchal past and the concept of »mother right,« Fromm attempted to reconcile the sadomasochistic, deeply oppressive inequalities of capitalism (and the pathological deviation he witnessed sprouting up in Germany through fascism) with his own anti-patriar-



chal sympathies. The »reconciliation« for Fromm might have been to posit a »feminine« principle through which the possibilities of a different society based on love, caring, compassion and mutually recognizing human beings could be envisioned as more than simply utopian, fantastical—think, perhaps, Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities?—given the anthropological documentation Bachofen proffered.

By way of evidence for this interpretation, note how Fromm complains in *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy* (1994a) that previous arguments for women’s equality in bourgeois society were based on presuming men and women to be (biologically) equal. Making a case resonant of critiques by radical and socialist feminists or liberal feminists who wanted nothing more than formal equality with men, Fromm writes:

»The theory that woman and man were identical formed the basis for demanding her political equality. But whether it was expressed or only implied, woman’s equality meant that she, in her very essence, was the same as man in bourgeois society. [...] The ›human‹ emancipation of woman really meant her emancipation to become a bourgeois male.«
(Fromm 1994a, p. 26.)

Does this justify Fromm’s essentialism? Not at all. But it may help to explain this biologism while also providing insight into why Fromm may have thought himself progressive—and even consistently feminist (if socialist/radical, not liberal feminist!)—when excavating an allegedly matriarchal history to ground imaginings of a humanistic future. But I would argue that Fromm did not need to theorize matriarchal roots, thereby veering into essentialistic territory, in order to comprehend the strength of gender differences that empirically separate men and women so that the former often becomes/became (say) more »aggressive« and the latter often becomes/became (say) more »nurturant.« Alternatively, Fromm could have stayed consistent with his usually admirable social constructionist leanings by attributing divergent characteristics to the deeply sociological enculturation that bequeaths and reproduces gendered patterns from generation to generation as well as from country to country. Clearly gender socialization differs not only according to class/national background but along racial, sexual and other intersectionally divergent lines—as Fromm was not known for noting, either—while still creating clusters of behaviors and practices *across* race and class through broad personality patterns of »masculinity« (and masculinities) and »femininity« (and femininities). From this, persistent patterns of gender-divided »habitus«—to tap Pierre Bourdieu’s own creative and solidly sociological concept—can be derived so as to render



biologicistic allusions superfluous. Moreover, it is literally impossible to know what is biological or culturally caused so long as the two are overdetermined. Ironically enough, social determinants of gender discrimination would have to »wither away« entirely for us to know, for sure, what was or was not biologically caused: nothing of the kind, i.e. elimination of gender's social concomitants, has yet happened in Fromm's time or our own.

However, where feminists arguably still need Fromm is that the »psychological / psychoanalytic« part of »psychosocially« caused gendered effects have been relatively less explored or expanded upon by movements from the second wave until now. Obviously, as Fromm understood even better than Freud given the former's far more explicit critiques of patriarchy and sexism, gendered patterns create terrible harms for both men and women. These are at once »objective« and »subjective,« social and psychological, through the defense mechanisms, inequitable and authoritarian (gender-skewed) dynamics, and sexual and psychic guilts and angers these patterns impose sometimes consciously and sometimes not. For this reason, in concluding, I turn to whether and how Fromm's ideas can be rediscovered not only in the present context of rising political authoritarianism but that of persistent sexist subordination also. How can Fromm's ideas regarding feminism be reconciled post facto even if this happened only partially (albeit significantly) in his own time, place and space?

Two disadvantages: using sexist language (and thus ignoring power inequalities even though Fromm usually acknowledges them); and veering into essentialism via Bachofen (and Bachofen interpreted too biologically) even where Fromm is arguably admirably and radically anti-essentialistic. A third disadvantage that may have contributed to Fromm being a »forgotten intellectual not just in general but for feminists« may have to do with precisely the analysis Rainer Funk gives us of Fromm having moved away from libido theory. In so doing, did he stop analyzing sexuality in the ways that contemporary feminist theorists—influenced by Butler among others—are now very concerned about, and which involves talking about pleasure, desire, and taking on the socially constructed and imposed, and often discriminated against character of diverse sexuality and sexualities? Here, as with the advantages, it seems possible to *revise* Fromm back toward a reconciliation between his ideas and feminisms. It is no longer necessary to use »man« when writing about Fromm unless when (of course and reasonably) when quoting him directly. It is possible to use Bachofen in a way that refers to how patriarchal societies mandated divisions between matriarchal and patriarchal parts of ourselves so that they are perceived as biologically based when they are actually deeply cultural. (In other words, one can revise Fromm's interest in Bachofen so that it is interpreted culturally and sociologically rather than biologically and essen-



tialistically—since to smack of »essentialism« seems overall anti-Frommian.) And finally, because Fromm shifted away from libido, that does not have to mean—and I do not think it would mean—that Fromm did not understand the joys of sex as well as the joys of love and creativity and productivity in all other spheres of life. Nor do contemporary discussions of Fromm and feminism have to focus only on sexism rather than also—and importantly in feminist theories of the present—on heterosexism as well. There is nothing that ought make us think that Fromm would not understand and be willing to embrace these levels of complexity—especially as Fromm did not rule out physicality (and may have also been ahead of his time in understanding the limits of social constructionism when taken to an extreme).

Coming Full Circle Then: Why Does Fromm and Feminism Matter?

Perhaps the greatest value of Fromm's thought for contemporary feminism is its centrality in any body of work purporting to demonstrate the compatibility—rather than incommensurability—of sociological and Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic ideas. As Rainer Funk has underscored, Fromm maintains notions of unconscious defense mechanisms but saw human beings as inherently social; anxiety at aloneness, from Fromm, was a »psychosocial« correlate of what Durkheim called anomie. Moreover, reflecting the influence of Karen Horney within psychoanalytic (if not more anti-Freudian feminist) circles, Fromm's concerns about anxiety and relatedness led him to anticipate object relations theory of precisely the kind further developed within psychoanalysis by Melanie Klein and within sociology (and psychoanalysis) by Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow.

But is it possible to see beyond the essentialism that nonetheless appears in some, though by no means all, of Fromm's writings on gender and sexuality? By now, Fromm's essentialistic view of maternalism seems historically obsolesced as men as well as women more commonly parent and co-parent as single parents, in different types of couples, or in group settings from kibbutzim to other communes. And, by now, it seems obvious that nurturance is and can be provided to babies such that non-patriarchal modes of relating empathetically, with oneself as well as others (as, in *The Art of Loving* [1956a], Fromm so clearly and well understood) can result: apparent at this point is that what matters most is not gender but the presence of absence of compassion, love, and respect in parent/children as well as adult relationships. But yet, one wonders if biological as well as psychological differences between people is a matter that extreme social constructionism has rendered as though



unbroachable. Without resorting to gender essentialism, are there realms of biological differences (of, say, weight or height as pertains to—perhaps—what one person or another can carry, or a space that can be fitted into) that can be referred to without judgment, but with detachment? Is biology still something that can be discussed (even if theories of biological origins are not at all close to being easily ascertained) insofar as even conceivably a dimension of life—and death—not reducible to the social? While this was not what Fromm had in mind, sociologists and feminists may still find his work interesting insofar as it allows complexity and multi-dimensionality to be debated, examined, investigated and explored without fear of sadomasochistic repercussions and punishments—and in the spirit of mutual recognition, at once potentially intellectual and psychic and cultural, that Fromm advocated so brilliantly and so ahead of his time.

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