



The Art of Living and the Dialectics of Social Transformation

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Abstract: In this paper I compare Fromm's account of social transformation with that of Alain Touraine. I argue that although there are many points of connection between Fromm's account of »the art of living« and Alain Touraine's account of the »Politics of the Subject,« Fromm ultimately goes beyond Touraine at many points, offering a more detailed explanatory account of how individual transformation is related to the larger, but

related, goal of social transformation. I conclude that Fromm's often overlooked account of the mechanics of individual change ought to be returned to in the process of reinvigorating social theory and practice.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, Alain Touraine, art of living, social transformation, politics of the subject.

Today, I want to explore the connections that exist between Fromm's account of the »art of living« and social transformation at large. In particular, I want to look, in a tentative and preliminary manner, at the role that *individual* transformation plays in Fromm's thought and at how this individual transformation may be seen to be both *pre-figurative of* and *conducive to* transformation on the societal level. In so doing, I want to look at Fromm's practical philosophy of the »art of living,« making clear its radical transformative potential by putting it into dialogue with the thought of other influential thinkers, particularly Alain Touraine, but also Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman. The central contention I want to make is that Fromm's program for the »art of living« can help counteract the adverse effects visited on individuals living under late modern consumer capitalism and, crucially, that it can also help point beyond this form of society towards another, more satisfactory one. As such, I will



argue that Fromm's writings offer an often overlooked critical-restorative and transformative resource which can fulfill the dual function of helping to unify the self and to revolutionize the subject—functions which I contend, along with Fromm, are central prerequisites to any sustainable form of social transformation. I want to start, however, with Alain Touraine.

A Politics of the Subject in a Fragmented World

In his 1997 *Can We Live Together?* (published in English in 2000, and henceforth referenced thusly) Alain Touraine speaks of the urgent need, in our current world, to develop what he terms »a Politics of the Subject.« Against the backdrop of the failure of the project of modernization—of ever increasing marketization and rampant nationalism, set amidst a globalized world of capital flows that push and pull individuals and societies as never before—Touraine calls for a politics that recognizes and puts at its heart the desire for *subjectivation*: the desire, that is, to become a *subject*, to become the actor of our own life as opposed to merely the stultified object of external forces. Touraine's evocation of this need for a »politics of the Subject«—which he also speaks of in terms of a double movement »from Politics to Ethics, and from Ethics back to Politics«—is centered round the notion of what he terms a »personal life project.« Taken from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, this notion of a personal life project, which for Touraine is the *only* answer to pathologies of our damaged social world, the only possible source of social movements that can oppose the masters of economic change or communitarian dictators, implies, in his own words:

»a refusal to allow our experience to be reduced to a kaleidoscopic existence or discontinuous set of responses to the stimuli of the social environment« (Touraine 2000, p. 13).

It also, and at the same time, concerns itself with:

»mobiliz[ing] an experience and a culture in our technology and economic activities in such a way that a series of lived situations becomes an *individual life story* and not an incoherent set of events« (ibid.; my emphasis).

Taking a step back, and elaborating on the notion of »the Subject« that provides the basis for such a personal life project, Touraine tells us that it is »an assertion of freedom in the face of the power of both strategists and their apparatuses



[as well as] communitarian dictators« (ibid.). Fighting on two fronts, then, he says, the Subject »resists all the ideologies that would make it conform to the order of the world or the order of the community« (ibid., pp. 13–14). Neither a consciousness, concrete actor nor a personality« (ibid., p. 94) but a *will to individuation*, the Subject, for Touraine, »has no content but its own productivity—it serves no cause, no values and no law other than its need and desire to resist its own dismemberment in a changing world which lacks order or equilibrium (ibid., p. 13).

Importantly, the Subject, for Touraine, is revealed by the presence of ethical values that come into conflict with the social order (Touraine 2000, p. 95). Touraine links this conflict to the greater acceptance of cultural diversity in the face of the rejection of societal norms and values, and thereby, to what he argues is an elementary change in the way we relate to others. But importantly, for Touraine, the way we relate to others is determined first and foremost by how we relate to *ourselves*: »In our experience,« he tells us, »ethics reminds the Subject of its own existence,« (ibid., p. 78) of its own basis as a process seeking realization in defiance of the social forces that impinge upon and constrain it. To quote Touraine at greater length:

»The reconstruction of the individual can come about only if that individual can recognize and assert himself [sic] as a Subject, as a creator of meaning and change, as well as [of] social relations and political institutions« (ibid., p. 58).

Insofar as this is the case, the »ethics of subjectivation,« as Touraine calls it—an ethics without norms and order, but not without principles—this ethics reinforces the project of subjectivation and provides the basis for the reconstitution of social movements.

Underlining the logic of the double movement from politics to ethics and from ethics back to politics, Touraine stresses that we ought, in the first instance, to distance ourselves from the social and political goals of collective action. Touraine here is concerned that »[i]f we trap ourselves into an ethics of responsibility, we leave an unbounded and uncontrolled space for Max Weber's war between the gods (Touraine 2000, p. 95)—that is to say, a war between instrumental ideals and non-negotiable and unargued appeals to convictions and their meta-social foundations. At the same time, Touraine is adamant that he is not lionizing the Subject as a self-contemplative individual nor as an ideal self-image that the individual paints in private: the Subject, as he says, is *action* and *work* (ibid., p. 77). As the appeal to the Subject becomes more concrete, as it is grasped in terms of its social situation, its cultural heritage



and the history of its personality, so it leaves the realm of principles, and enters the public realm, becoming involved in political debate and collective action« (ibid., p. 96). And so, the process of subjectivation, consisting of the development of the personality via action upon ethical concerns and an awareness of the participation in a conflict with a social adversary, acts for Touraine as the basis of a societal movement.

There is much, I think, in this account of Touraine's politics of the Subject that is of value, and certainly much that resonates with Fromm's own writings; there are also distinct differences and points of tension that I have not remarked upon up until this point. What I would like to do now is to look at the extent to which Fromm's writings, and particularly his account of the »art of living,« can be seen to be consonant but also dissonant with Touraine's evocation of the politics of the Subject.

Fromm and the Art of Living

Fromm is united with Touraine, first of all, in the stress that he places on the idea of the potential Subject that desires and seeks out subjecthood. Fromm doesn't use the phrase »personal life project,« nor the term »subjectivation,« but his account of the »art of living« has obvious parallels with them. Building on the process of subjectivation, Fromm's account of the »art of living,« is centered upon the action of the individual in the process of its self-transformation. As the individual transforms itself through dedicated interior and exterior action, it experiences »an ever-increasing awareness of reality and the shedding of illusions« (Touraine 2000, p. 19). Whereas Touraine is quite formalistic, reluctant to discuss details beyond abstract references to the process of self-constitution and the need to accept cultural diversity, Fromm is fulsome in expounding upon what is involved in this process of self-transformation. Variouslly described as »awakening,« »coming to awareness,« developing »productive relatedness« (to self and other), developing a »being« as opposed to »having« orientation, or a »biophilous« as opposed to »necrophilous« orientation, Fromm fleshes out what constitutes subjectivation and the subjecthood that goes with it.

Practicing the art of living, for Fromm, is concerned with openness to experience, with overcoming narcissism and other illusions, and with realizing loving and productive relations with oneself and others. Here, critical, de-mystified thinking unites with loving, spontaneous practice—what Fromm otherwise terms »the art of loving.« The capacity to love—in the sense of »brotherly love,« or what we might prefer to call *agape*, but also the other types of love that Fromm discusses—is central to the realization of productive relations which



are instrumental in overcoming sexism, nationalism, racism, destructiveness, and so on. Love, on Fromm's account of the art of living, is essential in order to accept the Other, hidden within our own being as well as externally existent in wider society. This art of living, for Fromm, is essentially the choosing of life over death, growth over stagnation—the psychically healthy potentials that bring out the potentially for true Subjecthood.

Crucially for Fromm, unlike for Touraine, the ego is central to this process¹. Offering a psychodynamic as well as sociological account, the historically-evidenced weakening of the ego is accounted for in Fromm, but the goal of ego unity is not written-off as an illusion, as it is in Touraine. Ever the humanist, Fromm's account of the art of living—the process that forms the basis of the re-constitution of subjecthood—is premised on the notion of a relatively bounded self in a way that seems at odds with most post-structural theory. Fromm recognizes the processural nature of the achievement of Subjecthood, and the many ways in which that process can become waylaid, but he nevertheless holds true to the Freudian goal of the replacement of Id by Ego.

Further psychological depth is added to Fromm's account, relative to Touraine's, by virtue of his account of character and social character. Social character, as Fromm demonstrates, develops alongside socio-cultural influences: the relatively permanent structure that shapes our being-in-the-world in ways that enable us to adapt, in one form or another, to the demands of the socio-economic world. Character provides a third level of intransigence that must be reckoned with, in addition to the powers of the market and the communitarian pressures that Touraine outlines. Although Touraine gives a more recent account of the socio-political landscape, he gives no account of something approximating »the marketing character,« or what me might describe as the »neoliberal character,« for instance.² His failure to do so leaves his account with a central deficit, a relative inability, beyond mere reference to social processes, to explain the persistence of consumerist individualism, for instance, and with it the difficulties that a politics of the Subject might face from the point of view of the personal life project.

A further point of difference between Fromm and Touraine can be found in their account of ethics. Whilst for both thinkers ethics is concerned with the

1 Touraine claims that »the idea of unity of the ego was nothing more than the projection of the unity and authority of the social system, or a prince who had been a father and was internalized as social norms« (Touraine 2000, p. 52).

2 Given the pre-eminence of Pierre Bourdieu in social theory, particularly in France, it is surprising that Touraine doesn't attempt something like this via the concept of *habitus*, which has many parallels with Fromm's concept of social character.



individual and the process of subjectivation that is central to the politics of the subject, Fromm's account of this ethics is more substantive than that offered by Touraine. The art of living, for Fromm, follows from the applied art of what he calls the »science of man,«³ which imparts what he calls »objective norms.« These norms, it must be stressed, are not authoritarian norms. The ethics that Fromm envisages is a *humanistic* ethics, an ethics that is practically concerned with subjectivation and the spontaneity of the individual as opposed to duty, order, sacrifice, etc. Unlike Touraine, Fromm's humanist ethics are based, drawing on Spinoza, on what he terms »a model of human nature.« Rather than restrictive and theologically ordained, Fromm's account of the model of human nature is explicitly provisional, derived from the account of social and psychic functioning discovered by the science of (hu)man(ity). It is in this sense that Fromm's account is normative: offering a scientific and heuristic account of human flourishing that, whilst never absolute, can be used to appraise social relations and to better encourage the process of subjectivation that is central to the practice of the art of living.

So, I think it is clear that Fromm's account of the art of living, as with Touraine's account of the »politics of the Subject,« is constructed in the belief that social transformation is possible only through a direct appeal to the individual. Both Fromm and Touraine are at pains, however, to stress that they are not advancing a cult of subjectivity but, rather, a form of individual praxis that is also a form of group praxis. So, what I would like to finish on, then, is a discussion of the connections between individual and social transformation, what I suggest ought to be called the »dialectics of social transformation.«

The Dialectics of Social Transformation

In a world of heightened consumerism, pushed and pulled by the impersonal forces of the market and threatened with rising authoritarianism and fear of the Other, we are confronted with two mutually reinforcing imperatives: namely, to *resist* and to *transform*. Just as Touraine argues that the process of subjectivation (the process of »becoming a subject«) can begin only when individuals attempt to resist their dismemberment and their loss of identity,

3 I agree with Lynn Chancer, in her paper at this conference, that we ought to avoid usage of the noun »man« when describing the whole human race. We should rephrase Fromm here as referring to »the science of humanity.« We lose very little in so doing, it seems to me, whilst gaining a considerable amount, not only the readier acceptance of those fighting androcentrism in all its guises who might otherwise be turned off.



Fromm too argues that individuation and Subjecthood are dependent upon the critically-induced recognition of the alternatives that stand before us. Starting the process of becoming an actor in one's own life, practicing the art of living is, for Fromm, the beginning of a revolutionary standpoint. Unlike Zygmunt Bauman, the late great Polish sociologist and social theorist who also spoke of what he called »the art of life, « the art of living outlined by Fromm is not something that we all practice de facto, simply by the fact of our very existence as individuals in contemporary society.⁴ Fromm's conception of the art of living also differs from that of Michel Foucault, who suggests at an *aesthetics of existence* and a groundless reactivation of attitude, not to mention an anti-humanism that exists at some definite remove from Fromm.⁵

There is, however a more direct connection with Foucault that I think is helpful to our present discussion. In our heavily marketized societies, in which, as Foucault (2010) notes we experience ourselves as »entrepreneurs of the self«⁶—the process of the art of living, of becoming a subject, is central in initiating and completing the difficult process of transforming ourselves from consumers to citizens, or at least to productive, related individuals. As Fromm says, the art of living is central in »breaking through the property structure of our own existence« (Fromm 1989a, p. 117), helping to change our characteristic way of living from that of pleasure-seeking, alienated monads or

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- 4 Bauman contends that life, in what he terms »liquid modernity,« is characterized by the relative absence of the old trustworthy sources of authority. As a result, for Bauman, »our lives, whether we know it or not and whether we relish the news or bewail it, are works of art« (Bauman 2008, p. 20). For Fromm, such an assertion overplays the degree of agency exercised in most examples of daily living. Although Fromm agrees that modernity brings with it greater and greater individual freedom, and thereby greater uncertainty over ethical action, etc., the practice of life as an art on his reading requires a greater sense of conscious engagement and willed action than might be said to be the case in most cases that would fall under Bauman's rubric.
- 5 In his reflections on Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?* Foucault (1984) lauds Baudelaire's »heroizing« of the present moment« and proffers his account of living life an »arts of existence.« Foucault's conception of this arts of existence, whilst more substantial than a mere dandification of existence—his account of an art of existence is, of course, connected to his wider account of »the critical ontology of ourselves,« not to mention his related discussion of the »care of the self«—is nevertheless conceived along the lines of »aesthetic elaboration of the self« and in terms of »poetic beauty,« both of which are more Nietzschean inflections than otherwise tend to abound in Fromm. Like Bauman, Foucault's account also disavows the notion of »liberating man [sic] in his own being« in favor of the task of producing oneself anew, something that, on Fromm's reading, confuses the genealogical process somewhat.
- 6 It is interesting to note the direct parallels with Fromm's notion of the marketing character here, incidentally.



automatons, to related, engaged members of the world. But, as something that shouldn't be forgotten in a conference on Fromm, a figure who was central to the humanist recovery of Marx, this individual action on its own is not enough. It doesn't happen in a vacuum, nor by the reflection of thought upon itself alone. It takes place through *acts of resistance*, through building movements in our communities and workplaces, through becoming active in the dual but reinforcing sense of individual and social transformation. And it is here that we might want to probe a little further into the relationship between Touraine and Fromm.

Whilst Touraine wants to talk of the Subject as a social movement, and while he suggests, in abstract, that collective action is central to the process of subjectivation, there is a somewhat *prima facie* separation between the Subject and the realm of public action in his writings, one that approximates Theodor Adorno's downplaying of outwardly social action in his writings. The account of the unspecified period of growth that for Touraine seems would be necessary for the individual qua individual to even approach Subjecthood, all the while supposedly refraining from social action and certainly pulling away from community, is concerning. Fromm, on the other hand, speaks clearly of the need for individuals to engage in groups and clubs at different levels of community and interest association, this form of interpersonal development playing an essential role alongside workplace cooperation, in the process of developing towards true Subjecthood and to the new form of society is inseparable from it. This kind of detail appears to be lacking in Touraine, who seems to place too much faith in the Subject's transformation into a social movement *ex nihilo*, without detailing the means by which this process will occur. Alongside proclaiming the (premature) death of »social man,« his statements concerning the lack of a clear adversary risks ceding the initiative in anti-capitalist struggles that are already existent.

And here, it seems to me, there is a connection to work alienation and exploitation that we need to revisit alongside the struggles for mutual recognition and equality that are also so important today. That word »class,« a word that is relatively missing from Touraine, but also to a certain extent from Fromm, needs to be uttered again today, and with greater urgency. We need to return to the exploitative nature of the capitalist system, to strike at the basis of its capacity for self-reproduction in what seems like perpetuity, but which cannot be. We need to look with greater urgency at the ways in which capitalist production, as well as consumption, disfigures, de-humanizes, and does so for members of *all* identity groupings (often, of course, more so to those of the more oppressed identity groupings), and to integrate our identity struggles with the broader class struggle. The consequences of not doing so sufficiently



are staring us in the face at the present moment, whether that be in Germany, Austria, Poland, the UK, Brazil or the USA.

But returning to the central topic of my talk, it is important to note that common to all progressive struggles—struggles against dismemberment by the economy, against the cleavages caused by toxic masculinities and nationalism—is the central position today of the *individual as the revolutionary agent*: an agent that looks to itself but at the same time beyond itself to others in the act of transforming the world. As is clear from Fromm's writings, what is necessary for individual freedom is ultimately social freedom, but what is necessary for sustainable social freedom is individual freedom, cultivated through the art of living: i.e. through a personal life project given over to developing productive relatedness with oneself and others. It is in this sense that I think Fromm offers a deeply dialectical account of social transformation. In the spirit of this dialectical but also radical engagement, I would like to finish by quoting Fromm on the importance of what he terms »total liberation:«

»Any attempt to overcome the possibly fatal crisis of the industrialized part of the world, and perhaps of the human race, must begin with the understanding of the nature of both outer and inner chains; it must be based on the liberation of man in the classic, humanist sense as well as in the modern, political and social sense. [...] The only realistic aim is *total* liberation, a goal that may well be called *radical (or revolutionary) humanism*.« (Fromm 1989a, p. 8.)

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