



Psychoanalysis, Persecution and the Holocaust: Erich Fromm's Life and Work during the 1930s

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Abstract: Erich Fromm's life during the 1930s, his confrontation with Nazism and his family's experience of the Holocaust is explored. The impact of this period on his writing, especially *Escape from Freedom* is considered. The current political situation, in which anti-Semitism has increased and minorities are persecuted makes the examination of Fromm's experience of persecution and exile especially relevant. The author uses his own German family history and his discovery of his grandfather's Nazi past to examine the importance of Fromm's analysis of authoritarian tendencies in Germany in the early 1930s.

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Contemporary psychoanalysis is increasingly concerned with the social and cultural contexts of experience. The so-called sociocultural turn is seen by many as an attempt to respond to the dramatic political events of our time. But as anyone versed in the writings of Erich Fromm knows, the intersection of the social and the psyche is hardly new. It was during his affiliation with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s that Fromm first studied the formative impact of society on human experience and bridged the gap between social research, sociopolitical commentary and psychoanalysis.

The period of the 1930s proved to be richly generative for Fromm, but it was also a time of political and personal trauma. After the Nazi regime was elected to power in March 1933, Fromm fled Germany for New York. In the following years, the rapid increase in anti-Jewish legislation and Germany's



belligerent actions towards its neighbors presaged the Second World War and the Holocaust. Fromm reached safety in 1934 but was consumed with worry about his family members. Given Fromm's emphasis on the formative role of social forces, I want to consider how his own life and scholarship reflects this turbulent and painful period. This seems to me an important, if underdeveloped area of inquiry. Indeed, I think it is worth reflecting on why relatively little has been written about this important chapter in Fromm's life.

Part of the difficulty for any of us who seek to write about Fromm, the man, is that he was by all accounts an intensely private person who kept his own experiences firmly in the background. My plan is not to engage in biography per se, but to examine the historical facts as we know them.¹ This essay is part of a larger, ongoing project and will necessarily be limited in scope (see also Frie 2014). My discussion will begin with Fromm's arrival in Berlin in 1928 and end with his publication of *Escape from Freedom* in 1941.

Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute to the Frankfurt School

It is easy to overlook just how central the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute was to the growth of the analytic profession during the 1920s. It was arguably the leading Institute of the time and strongly allied with left-wing thinking. Certain of its analysts identified as Marxists and believed that the revolutionary ideas of psychoanalysis went hand in hand with a socialist critique of bourgeois society. One might even describe the outlook of the Institute as a reflection of the city itself. By the late 1920s Berlin had become the center of Weimar Germany's progressive and experimental culture. It was a hotbed of learning and the arts and known for its heady mix of utopian and emancipatory ideals. It's no wonder that psychoanalysis thrived there! Fromm arrived in Berlin in 1928. This was Berlin before the onset of the Nazis, before Goebbels and his Brownshirts could impose their racist ideology at will. But the National Socialists were becoming more visible and pitched battles with the communists, together with the growth of a Nazi-inspired, virulent anti-Semitism portended an ominous future.

In the midst of these turbulent political forces, Fromm was deeply engaged in his psychoanalytic training. His academic background in sociology enabled him to comment on the events around him and in 1928 he presented a paper on »Psychoanalysis of the Petty Bourgeoisie.« Fromm completed his training analysis with Hans Sachs in 1929 and was certified by the German Psycho-

1 I want acknowledge my debt to Rainer Funk, who kindly shared two articles he wrote on the topic in the early 2000s.



analytic Association (DPG) in 1930 (Schröter 2015). In 1929 he also gave a lecture in Frankfurt on »Psychoanalysis and Sociology« (Fromm 1929a), which was a preliminary attempt to create a convergence between Freud and Marx. His work brought him to the attention of the director of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, Max Horkheimer, who invited to join the Institute. By the early 1930s Fromm was thus on his way to establishing a career that combined social analysis with psychoanalytic practice.

Over the following years and under the auspices of the Institute, Fromm wrote a series of important papers outlining many of the ideas for which he is known today. Fromm sought to show how people are shaped by socio-economic class, religion and ideology and that these social forces result in »socially necessary character types.« He was particularly interested in demonstrating how society produces persons who are adapted to specific roles, with the result, as Fromm famously put it, that individuals want to act as they have to act.

Fromm's aim was to elucidate the specific historical, sociological and economic conditions of a person's life. Among his noteworthy early works is his study of the character structure of the German working class during the late Weimar Republic (Fromm 1980a), which revealed pro-Fascist tendencies among workers who were presumed to be solidly against authoritarianism. Based on a series of questionnaires, Fromm and his team concluded that only a small percentage of workers actually demonstrated clear anti-authoritarian beliefs. His study provided a means to understand the collapse of German workers' parties during the rise of Nazism, and foreshadowed Fromm's later work on the authoritarian character in *Escape from Freedom*. But it also became a thorn in Fromm's relationship with the Frankfurt School. In fact, Horkheimer refused to publish it, believing its conclusions lacked validity.

Fromm pressed on, regardless, and developed an interpersonal approach that took him far from his Freudian beginnings. By the late 1930s Fromm had come to believe that the person is a fundamentally social being, by which he meant that society was always at work in the individual. As he states in »Man's impulse structure and its relation to culture,« a little-known paper from 1937: »Society and the individual are not opposite to each other. Society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual exists only as a social human being« (Fromm 1992e, p. 58). Fromm challenged Freud's account of the social realm and took him to task for asserting the universality of his intrapsychic model. Needless to say, none of this sat well with Horkheimer or Fromm's growing nemesis, Theodore Adorno, who cast aspersions on Fromm, labelling him in private as a »sentimental social democrat« (Friedman 2013, p. 61). Among the German radical left, these were fighting words indeed.



Persecution, Exile and Terror

Even after so many decades, Fromm's short-lived tenure with the Frankfurt school has held our attention. Fromm's association with the Frankfurt school took place amidst a seemingly unending string of tumultuous events, from the rise of Nazism and election of Hitler, to the spread of anti-Semitic persecution and the hostile expansion of Nazi Germany into neighboring countries, all leading to the start of World War II in September 1939. To describe these years as turbulent and threatening is an understatement.

And yet, a cursory scan of Fromm's writings and major secondary works that cover this period suggests that Fromm's personal experience remains firmly in the background, unspoken and rarely articulated. This is no doubt a reflection of the fact that Fromm steadfastly separated his personal life from his scholarly work. This might also explain Lawrence Friedman's account of Fromm's departure from Germany in 1934, which is summed up in a few brief sentences:

»Perhaps because his immigration had not been particularly onerous Fromm never elected to characterize himself as a refugee from Hitler's Germany, even though his return was precluded at least until the end of Nazi rule. Even so, and despite having to leave behind many of his books and possessions, Fromm considered his move to America his own choice rather than the result of an immediate threat to his survival.«
(Friedman 2013, p. 68.)

These sentences give pause. It is hard to imagine Fromm would ever have »chosen« to leave his country, culture and language behind, were it not for the rise of the Nazis. Nor is there any mention of his separation from family, friends and colleagues. We know that immigration under any circumstance is difficult, even painful. Being forced to leave one's country for political reasons, going into exile or escaping with one's life, involves enormous loss. Immigration to another country may provide a sense of safety, but it is also accompanied by betrayal and grief; a life that was once taken for granted has been forcibly taken away by the country of one's birth.

To illustrate what emigration could be like for many German Jews, I want to draw from the experience of the Israeli psychoanalyst, Chezzi Cohen (see Frie 2017, p. 121). Born in Germany in 1932, Cohen has shared with me his experience of his family's departure for Palestine in 1938. Cohen's parents had briefly visited Palestine in the knowledge they might one day have to leave. Yet like so many others, they did not think they would actually be forced to flee the country in which they had been born and for which they fought in the First



World War. When the time finally came Cohen was only six years old. He has a single, searing memory of their departure that is as painful now as when he first experienced it. The memory is of his father breaking down and crying on the train platform as they waited to board. An unknown future awaited, colored by the uncertainty of when they would next see their loved ones.

In 1934 Fromm could not know what the future would hold, but he clearly knew enough to understand that he should leave. Anti-Jewish legislation was increasing at an alarming rate. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws disenfranchised German Jews and prohibited them from participating in most sectors of society and government. The massive destruction of synagogues, business and homes throughout Germany and Austria during the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9, 1938, along with the degradation and deportation of 340 Jewish men to Buchenwald, was a final turning point (see Frie 2018). In the years that followed the Nazis' initial support for Jewish emigration was turned into a policy of mass deportation and murder. Most Germans greeted the legislated disappearance of their neighbors with a sense of disinterest, if not active support. Under the Nazis, the latent anti-Semitism of the 1920s had become a vicious, persecutory outlook that made life for German Jews precarious and threatening.

And what of Fromm's relatives?² Fromm's father, who came from a small family, died of a heart attack in late 1933, having witnessed Hitler's rise to power. His father's younger brother immigrated to the United States while Fromm's cousin and life-long friend, Gertrud Hunziker-Fromm left for Switzerland. His mother, Rosa, came from a large family of five children. She had initially chosen to stay behind in Frankfurt, but after Kristallnacht, Rosa recognized the urgency of her situation. Fromm obtained a monetary loan to pay the high fee required by the Nazis in order for Rosa to be able to leave Germany. She spent the next 18 months in England. Before Rosa was able to join her son in New York in 1941, Fromm was required to pay another hefty fee, this time to the US authorities; their policy for admitting German Jews had become harshly selective, particularly with the increase in American anti-Semitism.

Some of Rosa's family members managed to leave in time and settled in countries far and wide. However, two of her siblings remained in Germany, which sealed their fate. Fromm's aunt and her husband, Sophie and David Englaender, were deported and killed in Theresienstadt, while his uncle, Martin Krause and his wife, Johanna, were deported to a ghetto and then to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. Fromm's cousins and second-cousins who did not flee in time were persecuted or pursued. Some perished and others

2 I am drawing here chiefly on earlier work carried out by Friedman 2013, and on Funk 2005 and 2009.



committed suicide. One second cousin, Heinz Brandt, miraculously survived despite the odds. He was imprisoned in 1934 for his communist affiliation and subsequently endured two years at Auschwitz and the infamous death march to Buchenwald late in the war. His survival over ten years of imprisonment was a rare exception to the tragic norm.

Throughout the years leading up to, and especially after Kristallnacht, Fromm was involved in an intense and urgent campaign to save those whose lives were in peril. Fromm was one of the few emigres to have an established income, and was asked to come to the aid of family and friends. He also sought to rescue Jewish political activists, intellectuals and religious leaders in Germany and beyond.

Escape from Freedom and the Specter of anti-Semitism

Fromm carried out his scholarship and psychoanalytic practice against the background of these unfolding personal tragedies. It is hard to imagine how he was able to manage it. Much of his focus in the late 1930s was directed towards developing his book, *Escape from Freedom*, which had a long gestation period. It was written in the years directly after Kristallnacht, when fears about Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews and its threats toward European neighbors were turning into reality.

Working on *Escape from Freedom* became a means of responding to events in Germany by using the familiar intellectual medium of analysis and explanation. But when we reflect on Fromm's experiences at the time, it is hard to conceive of the book only as an intellectual exercise. And indeed, Fromm was one of very few, and perhaps the only European Jewish psychoanalyst to publicly confront the rise of Nazism in Germany while it was still unfolding.

Escape from Freedom was published just before America's entry into the war in December 1941, and proceeds by way of a grand and sweeping historical narrative. The timely and accessible nature of the book helps explain its popularity. According to Fromm, modern European society created the conditions for the emergence of autonomous and rational individuals, but it also created a deep-rooted sense of alienation and isolation. This meant that individuals were faced with a choice: engage productively with other human beings and garner the benefits of society or escape a sense of fear and loneliness by submitting to a greater authority.

Turning his lens to Nazi Germany, Fromm located this tension within the German lower middle classes, which he felt were particularly susceptible to the appeal of Nazism. Fromm's overwhelming focus on social class, rather than on, say, the German national character, or racist ideology, reveals his grounding in



Marxist thought. But as it turns out, this was also a weakness because we know today that Nazism appealed to all social classes and support for Hitler was present throughout Germany. While Fromm's assessment of the German lower middle class may have been overly hasty, his broader conclusions are applicable.

At this point it seems appropriate, if admittedly unusual, to share some of my own family background related to this topic. My interest in Fromm began when I was a university student. *Escape from Freedom* had a personal resonance for me. Although I grew up in Canada, I am the son of Germans who were born in 1935, and the grandson of Germans who were active in World War II. I always struggled to make sense of the dark history that preceded me. Like many grandchildren of the generation of perpetrators and bystanders, I knew relatively few details about my grandparents' beliefs and actions. Fromm's analysis helped me to understand some of the social and psychological dynamics at work that spurred the rise of Nazism and the Third Reich. I often wondered how Fromm's arguments might apply to my own family members, but by the time I read *Escape from Freedom*, my grandparents had already died and I was unable to ask. In fact, in my family, as in many other post-war West German families, direct questions about the Third Reich were generally avoided. I lived with a half-known family history, in which knowledge about the past was governed by what was said and what remain unsaid, by what was known and what remained, crucially, unknown.

On a visit with family members in Germany some years ago I discovered an unfamiliar photograph of my young grandfather in uniform (see Frie 2017). The photograph revealed an unspoken family history that had been silenced by the inherited guilt and shame of my parents' generation. My grandfather, it turned out, had been a Nazi party member and joined the rank and file of the regime. While there is no evidence to suggest that he was ever involved in crimes of genocide, it is clear that he lent his support to Hitler. After further research, I learned that he applied to become a member of the Nazi party in 1936 and was accepted into the party in 1937. He was also a participant in the National Socialist Motor Corp (NSKK), a paramilitary organization concerned with the operation of cars and motorcycles. Though the NSKK was initially perceived in postwar West Germany as an apolitical organization that was devoted only to the maintenance of motorcycles and automobiles, subsequent historical research (Hochstetter 2005) has established that the apparently innocuous »car club« was in fact a paramilitary group whose members had to be »one-hundred percent a Nazi and one-hundred percent an anti-Semite« (p. 415). My grandfather, in other words, was a sympathetic enabler of the Nazi regime and a facilitator of the war effort. His complicity haunts me, and the silence in my family about this history shames me.



My grandfather was an artist and artisan who spent much of the 1920s and early 1930s living in Berlin. He would have lived there at the same time as Fromm. After visiting various German archives, I also learned that my grandfather had been involved in left-wing causes while in Berlin, something I also did not know, and that he evidently had a communist affiliation. After Hitler came to power, my grandfather changed his political allegiance, swinging from left to right, lending credence to Fromm's analysis of German workers (Fromm 1980a). Like so many others, my grandfather seems to have looked to authoritarianism to lessen economic and psychological uncertainties, especially after the devastating effect of the First World War on his own father and his family's livelihood.

There is much that remains unknown about my grandfather's motivations, particularly the question of whether he may have endorsed the hateful policies and anti-Semitism espoused by the Nazis. As we know, the Nazi worldview was grounded in a pernicious racial ideology. While Fromm helps us to understand why someone like my grandfather may have joined the Nazi Party, he does not explain why anti-Semitism became such a powerful force in Germany. In fact, there is no explicit discussion of anti-Semitism in *Escape from Freedom* and the personal traumas out of which the book emerged remain hidden. The theme of anti-Semitism was similarly absent in the questionnaires that made up Fromm's study of German workers' attitudes in the early 1930s. Nor to my knowledge is the subject discussed in any of Fromm's other papers from this period. How might this be explained?

Looking back we find that it was not Fromm who tackled the subject, but arguably his closest professional colleague at the time, Harry Stack Sullivan. In 1938, Sullivan published an important paper on anti-Semitism. Is this coincidental? I don't think so. In fact, and at risk of engaging in speculation, I think Fromm's hesitancy to write about anti-Semitism, which he would have known and experienced growing up in Germany, was linked to two factors: first, to his tenuous personal relationship with Judaism, given that he embraced a secular identity when he was in his early twenties; and second, to his status as a recently arrived émigré in the United States, where anti-Semitism was powerfully ascendant throughout the 1930s. Above all, being identified as a Jewish writer who wrote about anti-Semitism could have meant becoming a target of prejudice, precisely the reason he left Germany.

We can justifiably ask whether it was because Sullivan was not Jewish that he could more easily engage the subject. To be sure, Sullivan struggled with societal prejudices in other ways. As a closeted gay man he was careful to hide his sexual orientation from public view at a time when homophobia was rampant. Thus, while Sullivan wrote papers on anti-Semitism and racism towards African-Americans, he never wrote explicitly about homophobia or its



pernicious effects. In a similar sense, Fromm engaged the nature of authoritarianism but he did not discuss the virulent anti-Semitic attitudes that led to his own exile or the murder of his family members.

Conclusion

Escape from Freedom was published in 1941 but the war would rage on for another four years, during which reports of the bloodshed and the unfolding horrors of the Holocaust were a daily reminder of human destructiveness and tragedy. During the deportations of the German Jewish community from 1941 to 1943, the letter writing campaign between Fromm and his far-flung family members increased exponentially. Yet beyond the rescue of his mother, and despite his efforts, Fromm was unable to help his aunt and or his uncle.

It may be tempting to conclude that *Escape from Freedom* is a kind of intellectualization of Fromm's own experiences in Germany. But this would surely be hubris. After all, how do we find words for that which so often defies expression and articulation? In fact, it would take many years before discussion of the Holocaust and its traumatic effects became an accepted topic of collective reflection and memorialization. I think it is more likely that Fromm's painful experiences strengthened his belief in the need for moral awareness and political activism, ideas that were already present in his work before the Nazi reign of terror, but that really took hold in the decades to come.

Looking back, what is remarkable to me is that Fromm actually confronted the Nazi past and the political realities in which he lived, rather than remain silent. *Escape from Freedom* remains relevant in other ways too. Fromm's account of the appeal of authoritarianism, especially in times of uncertainty, helps explain the current attraction of right-wing populism. The destructiveness that Fromm says can follow from deep-rooted anxiety evokes current political trends. The social isolation and powerlessness of many economic groups in the face of neoliberal policies and globalism has given rise to leaders and movements who are eager to harness anxiety and secure support for their right-wing and racist agendas.

Fromm has helped us to understand the extent to which we are inalterably shaped by our surroundings. But how do we respond, as individuals and as clinicians, to the politically and socially troubled times in which we live? What can we learn from the historical traumas that precede us? What role does our own history play in this process? As psychoanalysts we need to be socially and politically aware and sensitive to effects of overt prejudice and racism in this time of heightened uncertainty. Fromm, the writer, has much to teach us; and



Fromm's personal experience of persecution, exile and terror illustrates the extent to which each of us is prey to social and political upheavals. It seems to me that the feminist assertion, »the personal is political,« was never more pertinent than it is today.

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