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The Frommian Approach to Society

Erich Fromm: Bringing Psychoanalysis and Sociology Together

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Abstract: In my overview of the development of Fromm's theories, I show, first of all, how Fromm and his theory of relatedness and social character aimed to understand the individual and society in a different way from what was usual at that time. Secondly, I expound how relevant the often ignored social psychoanalytical approach is for current thinking in terms of relatedness, and how open his approach is to insights stemming from human biology.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, method of social psychology, social psychoanalysis, social character, revision of Freud, Fromm's theory of drives, existential needs.

On the question of what scientific value Fromm's work had, one can say in retrospect that he tried to think about man and society in different ways from what was usual at that time. He combined psychological and sociological thinking to form a socio-psychological method and theory.

This attempt, 80 years ago, mirrored the intellectual culture of that time, as is clear from the contrast to today's specialization of scientific thinking and



research but also given what sociology, evolutionary biology and neurobiology have taught us about man and society and their behavior and dynamics. It is just this dominance of biological approaches and scientific methods that leads to the premature conclusion that an interpretative view of science (as is typical of present-day dynamic psychology and critical approaches in sociology and psychology) is obsolete and should be rejected as unscientific.

From a purely scientific viewpoint, Fromm's scientific work on the connection between psychoanalytical and sociological thinking would presumably be regarded as of merely historical interest. But, as Michael Buchholz (2014) has shown in his article »Hermeneutics or scientism,« one must transcend the dichotomy between »explaining via causality« and »understanding via meaning« and expand it by adding a triadic epistemology in which the sociality aspect of new insights is taken into account. Catherine Silver (2017) argues similarly in connection with the therapeutic relationship, in that she speaks of the need to consider the presence of a »social third.«

If one takes these considerations seriously, then Fromm's scientific contributions appear highly relevant. At the heart of his social–psychoanalytic view of man and society was nothing less than the primary sociality of man and human modes of articulation. At least here, at the IPU and among those of us who are active in research on Fromm, his attempts at rethinking man and society should be of prime interest when the question of the relevance of his work is discussed.

Whether his *social* psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the unconscious irrational behavior of the masses, has a chance in today's scientific culture—this is a question that applies to psychoanalysis also. I am all the more grateful that research on Fromm's work is supported by the Karl Schlecht Foundation at the IPU, and that this second Erich Fromm research conference here at the IPU was made possible.

In my presentation I would like to review the development of Fromm's social–psychological theory, as I have come to view it through my almost 50 years of work on Fromm's thinking (see Funk 1999; 2018).

The questions in Fromm's 1922 dissertation

For most students of Fromm, his social–psychological theory originated in the research program on Marxist social science that was established at the Institute for Social Research. Fromm's essay »The method and function of an analytic social psychology: Notes on psychoanalysis and historical materialism,« from 1932, includes the first formulation of the idea that »every society has its own



distinctive *libidinal structure*, even as it has its own economic, social, political, and cultural structure« (Fromm 1932a, p. 132). In this way, Fromm states that the organization of the libido, derived from the sexual drives, reflects the socioeconomic requirements of coexistence, and that this libidinous energy causes man to willingly and urgently do what economic and societal factors constrain him to do.

What Fromm described in 1932 in terms of Freud's libido theory was actually the result of ten years of theoretical development that had begun in his dissertation of 1922. Since there is still no English translation of Fromm's thesis, it has generally received little attention, at least in the (predominantly Anglo-Saxon) world of Fromm studies. It is therefore too little recognized how far Fromm's thinking is colored by his Jewish socialization. This is apparent above all in a focus on the ethos and the ethical attitudes which are the basis for human life and coexistence. This interest also influences the questions addressed in his sociological thesis. Fromm asks there what factors lead Jewish people who live in the diaspora, and thus without the protection and stability of national and state institutions, to think, feel and act similarly.

Fromm's studies of three Jewish groups come to the conclusions that it is the Torah, in other words what Fromm termed a religious »practice of life,« that leads to internalized ethical beliefs and causes these social groups to think, feel and act similarly. The essential idea, namely that a particular practice of life leads to internalized strivings and behavior patterns, colored Fromm's thinking even at a time when he was not yet aware of Freud's psychology.

Fromm's acquaintance with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis

Fromm became acquainted with psychoanalysis shortly after he had completed his dissertation, through Frieda Reichmann, a psychiatrist friend who had trained with Hanns Sachs in Berlin to become a psychoanalyst. The possibility that irrational and dysfunctional forces can affect broadly the thinking, feeling and acting of a human being, without the subject's being aware of these influences, was the long-sought answer to another question that determined Fromm's scientific thinking, namely, that of »How is it possible?« (Fromm 1962a, p. 4.) Why does a woman kill herself and wish to be buried at her father's side? Why did the Germans so enthusiastically fight the deadly war of 1914? What unconscious factors were responsible here, and where did they come from?

The answer that Freud gave, based on his theory of drive, fascinated Fromm: above all, the idea that the repression of wishes, strivings, fantasies



stemming from the libido is not complete; what is repressed can return in the form of irrational, inhibited, self-destructive strivings and disturbed behavioral patterns. Freud had believed that the energy behind such forces stems from innate drives that are searching for satisfaction and thereby come into conflict with societal and cultural norms, so that they have to be repressed. This disagreed with Fromm's idea that a particular practice of life leads to internalized strivings, but this was not to become a problem for him until the mid-1930s.

How can behavior of groups be studied by psychoanalysis?

The fascination with Freud's theory led Fromm to take a psychological training, which he finally completed between 1928 and 1930 in Berlin (see Schröter 2015). It also led him to the question of how the thinking, feeling and acting of many people can be explored psychoanalytically, in order to explain irrational reactions and behaviors of societal groups. Others at the Berlin institute pursued this question, e.g. Siegfried Bernfeld, Wilhelm Reich: not forgetting Theodor Reik (1927), whose paper »Dogma and Compulsion« (Reik 1951 [1927]) related neurotic phenomena in individuals directly to group phenomena.

For Fromm's theoretical development perhaps the most important publication appeared with the title »The Development of the Dogma of Christ« (Fromm 1930a, pp. 3–91) in 1930 in the same journal, *Imago*, in which Reik had published his essay. Fromm, as a trained sociologist, undoubtedly wanted to show that the psychoanalytical method in the case of societal phenomena must necessarily be different from that for explaining irrational phenomena in individuals—for which reason his study ended in disagreement with Reik.

While Reik concluded from the compulsive ritual behavior of individuals that religion was quite generally a compulsion, Fromm focused on the particular practice of life of numerous Christians, and showed in detail, and from the historical perspective, that changes in confessions of faith always had their roots in political and social changes in the individuals.

»The cause for the development lies in the change in the socio-economic situation or in the retrogression of economic forces and their social consequences.« (Fromm 1930a, p. 90)

The evolving commitment to Jesus and changes in religious behavior are therefore expression of changes in the inner motivation resulting from the changing economic, political and social living conditions of the Christians.



The first definition of analytical social psychology

In his article »The method and function of an analytical social psychology« (1932a) Fromm defined the goal of a psychoanalytical social psychology as follows:

»The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies—and their unconscious roots in particular—in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings.« (1932a, p. 121.)

The aims of social psychological method are defined as follows:

»The phenomena of social psychology are to be understood as processes involving the active and passive adaptation of the instinctual apparatus to the socioeconomic situation. In certain fundamental respects, the instinctual apparatus itself is a biological given; but it is highly modifiable. The role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions.« (1932a, p. 121.)

This concept of analytical social psychology defined the program of the Institute for Social Research at the start of the 1930s. With the link between (Marxist oriented) sociology and libido-based psychoanalysis, Fromm established the theoretical basis for the institute's research on authoritarianism (Horkheimer 1936) and for his own first major empirical study of the authoritarian character of German workers and employees with leftist leanings (Fromm 1980a).

At the start of the 1930s Fromm tried, in his publications, to reconcile his understanding of social psychology with Freud's. Freud, he wrote, »never assumed isolated man, devoid of all social ties, to be the object of psychology« (Fromm 1932a, p. 115), and he supported this with a quotation from Freud's *Group Analysis and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud 1921a, p. 73):

»In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first, individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well.« (Freud 1921c, S.E. XVIII, p. 69.)

Even though Fromm tries here to unite his approach with Freud's concept of social psychology, one should not overlook the serious differences, which were noted by Catherine Silver in her »Erich Fromm and the Making and Unmaking



of the Social-cultural« (Silver 2017, pp. 390–396). While Freud focused on the intersubjective and the family relationships, and assumes that the demands of society adapt themselves to an intrinsic drive dynamic, which in itself is only partly modifiable, Fromm (after writing his dissertation) started from the collective social aspect and from the socio-economic components of a particular practice of life. He thus viewed the libidinous structure as shaped by the demands of the practice of life and not just as modification of an inborn drive dynamic.

For Fromm, the biologically based »instinctual apparatus« is to a large extent modifiable, so that the economic factors have the role of »primary formative factors« (Fromm 1932a, p. 121). At the same time, Fromm sees no role for sociologisms, as though the requirements of a particular practice of life could directly be represented in the »libidinous structure.« Instead, psychological structures established by a particular practice of life constitute a complex sequence of reactions, which endow the requirements of society and culture with libido and thus form them into a passionate striving which a particular society and culture needs for its functioning.

Despite these theoretical questions, it remains clear that Fromm succeeded, using his first definition of analytical social psychology, in clarifying why many people think, feel and act similarly. In every single individual, a libidinous structure formation occurs, which causes people to strive passionately for things that are necessary for economic success, stability and cultural identity of a society, as a coordinated adaptation of all its members. This concept, moreover, allows the libidinous structure to be empirically studied in individuals.

Even in this first definition of social psychology as social psychoanalysis or psychoanalytical sociology, it is clear that the individual exists only as a social being, and that the society and changes in it can be studied in terms of the libidinous structure formation of its many members. This new understanding of the individual and society implies also that not only an individual unconscious must exist, but also a shared unconscious, of which most of them are unaware: in other words, a social repression.

Fromm's new approach, with its concept of the authoritarian character (which stemmed from Fromm, not von Adorno, see Fromm 1936a), passed its first test in Max Horkheimer's *Studies on Authority and Family* (Horkheimer 1936). This contribution of Fromm's has likewise not so far appeared in English.

Fromm's doubts regarding the drive theory as the basis of his social psychoanalytical approach

It was not long before Fromm realized that his social-psychoanalytical ap-



proach was not really reconcilable with the libido theory, favored by Freud, as an explanation of conscious and unconscious psychic strivings. As Roger Frie (2014) also showed in his excellent contribution »What is cultural psychoanalysis?« a whole set of findings led Fromm to doubt the validity of the libido theory: for example Bachofen’s research on matricentric cultures or Margaret Mead’s and Ruth Benedict’s cross-cultural studies. They supported Fromm’s criticism of patriarchal aspects of Freud’s psychoanalysis and therapeutic practice (see Fromm 1935a).

The decisive impulse that led Fromm to reformulate his own social psychoanalytical approach after his emigration in 1934 came undoubtedly from Harry Stack Sullivan and his criticism of Freud’s theory of drive. The mere fact that the most severe psychic disorders are psychotic distortions of relatedness (to reality, to other persons and to the patient himself) suggested that the basic problem of the human is the question of relatedness, rather than the satisfaction or denial of the sexual drive and its derivatives.

What Sullivan called his »relational« approach in psychoanalysis was closely related to Fromm’s Jewish socialization and to Fromm’s particular interest in sociology, where everything centers on relatedness. This appears to me to be a major reason why Fromm hesitated for so long to revise the Freudian psychoanalysis and to look at the question of relatedness or (as one would now say) attachment as the basic psychological problem of mankind (see Funk 2013; 2017).

In the winter of 1936/7, Fromm took a leave of absence in order to complete the paradigm shift from a libido-theoretical to a relatedness-theoretical explanatory system. In a letter to August Wittfogel (December 18, 1936—in the Fromm Archive) Fromm wrote:

»I am trying to show that the urges which motivate social activities are not, as Freud supposes, sublimations of sexual instincts, but rather products of social processes.«

Fromm justified in detail his new concept of psychoanalysis in an 85-page essay in which he showed why most psychic structures arise from relatedness to objects, independently of libidinous drives.

This essay was central to the development of Fromm’s theories (see Funk 2015). It contained a detailed justification as to why and by what complicated routes the socially typical character is formed in many individuals, and so directly depends on a particular practice of life. It was intended for publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, but it was sharply criticized by Horkheimer, Marcuse and Löwenthal. Fromm was considered to be explaining the psychic phenomena no longer in terms of the biologically anchored sexual drive, which



was an essential pillar of the materialistic social science of the Frankfurt school. Fromm's paper on his second social–psychoanalytical approach was rejected (with written support from Adorno), which led to the end of Fromm's work at the Institute for Social Research.

The essay was found by me in 1990, in a German and an English version in Fromm's papers in the New York Public Library. It was published in 1992 in German; the English version can be found in the posthumously published book *Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychoanalysis* (Fromm 2010).

The second definition of analytical social psychology

The conclusions which Fromm drew in the long–lost essay regarding psychoanalysis as social psychoanalysis were, however, summarized by him in 1941 in the appendix to his book *Escape from Freedom* (1941a). A second summary, from the viewpoint of cultural psychoanalysis, was published by Fromm in 1949 in »Psychoanalytic characterology and its application to the understanding of culture« (Fromm 1949c).

The decisive point in Fromm's second definition of analytical social psychology is the justification for his alternative view of man and society:

»We believe that man is *primarily* a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self–sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his instinctual needs. [...] The key problem of psychology is that of the particular kind of relatedness of the individual toward the world, not that of satisfaction or frustration of single instinctual desires.« (Fromm 1941a, p. 288.)

Fromm's surmounting of the split between individual and society, which had been accepted since Descartes (see Frie 2015), and between psychology as the science of the individual and sociology as the science of society, is simultaneously a decisive enlargement of the relational approach:

»Society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual can live only as a social human being.« (Fromm 1992e [1937], p. 58.)

According to Fromm, the primary sociality of man is reflected in a particular dimension of the psychic structure formation, namely the »social–typical character« (Fromm 1992e [1937]) or »social character« (see Fromm 1962a, pp. 71–88). It is only natural that Fromm uses a dynamic character concept



to describe the attitudes and urges characteristic of a particular social group, since character formation explains not only the uniform behavior of a social group but also the Ego–syntonic quality which allows the manner in which many people think, feel and act to be seen as »normal.«

Since my aim here is to trace the development of Fromm’s theories, I will not describe in detail the various social character orientations which Fromm recognized and studied in the course of his life: the authoritarian, hoarding, marketing, narcissistic, necrophilous and the productive social character orientations. (See Funk 1995; 2019, pp. 89-143.)

Fromm felt that the methodological question of the relationship between sociology and psychoanalysis was answered in essence with the publication of *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a). The resulting new social psychoanalytical approach was, for him, adequately described also. He therefore concentrated, in the second half of his life, above all on his »theory of drives,« namely the theory of the necessary relatedness as the source and driving force of the majority of psychic phenomena. He reformulated this theory of drives, and applied it to central psychoanalytical concepts such as self–regulation, narcissism, and aggression, but also to clinical and non–clinical areas. Because of time limitations, I will only briefly mention Fromm’s theory of the existential need for relatedness and its causes.

The need for relatedness as the basis of Fromm’s theory of drives

The theory that every individual has to have a relationship to reality, to other humans, to a social group, to himself, to an understanding of the world and to sensory content, had been formulated in detail in Fromm’s book *The Sane Society* in 1955. The needs which Fromm described there (Fromm 1955a, pp. 22–66), and later in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973a, pp. 230–237), have in common that they are specific forms of the need for relatedness. The need for a sense of identity, for example, is the concrete form of the need for relatedness to oneself.

Fromm’s theory differs from other relational and inter–subjective drive theories in an important respect: for Fromm, every individual, in order to feel that he belongs to a society group, has a need for social rootedness, and thus a sense of societal identity. (See here Fromm 1962a, p. 126; Funk 2015.)

One reason for Fromm’s insistence on the »existential« quality of the psychic need for relatedness was given in 1947 in his book *Man for Himself* (Fromm 1947a, pp. 38–50). For Fromm, it was important to base his doctrines on human biology.



In the lost essay of 1937, Fromm explained the psychic, in contrast to Freud's libido theory, as largely as »products of social processes« (cf. the cited letter to Karl August Wittfogel) and emphasized the importance of the historical compared to the natural. In his book *Man for Himself*, which appeared in 1947, Fromm described his theory of drives as reflecting the original biological situation of man, which was characterized by a strong anthropocentrism and a sharp distinction between man and animal.

Man is characterized by a reduction in instinct, on the one hand, and by an enhanced and more differentiated brain on the other. This permits a vastly greater neural plasticity and, more importantly, leads to specifically human abilities such as the consciousness of oneself and the capacity for imagination.

As a result of these self-reflective powers, man is not only *able* but also *required* (for survival reasons) to structure his relatedness to the environment and to himself in specifically human ways. Thus, man must develop individual emotionally regulated neuronal networks or, psychologically formulated, individual psychic motivational structures, with which he satisfies his needs for relatedness.

The significance of character formations

Among the psychic structure formations that perform this task, the *character* formations have special significance: they can be understood as the result of the internalization of relatedness-based experiences and habituated forms of satisfaction. They therefore play a special role in Fromm's theory of drive.

Even though a psychodynamic interpretation of character is difficult today, given that the term has been hijacked by reactionary interests, character formation is from a psychoanalytical viewpoint an important part of psychic structure formation. Precisely when it is a matter of habituated satisfaction forms and internalizations of repeated positive and negative experiences of relatedness, character formations explain why an individual or even several individuals behave in a constant and consistent manner and have strivings from within themselves. Character formations provide specifically human motivational forces, and replace the instinct-regulated behavior of living organisms that do not possess the faculty of self-reflection.

According to Fromm, the character formation is not dependent on the destiny of a particular drive, but rather is the result of internalized experiences of relatedness. Therefore, individual and societal relatedness can be distinguished. Individual character formations are the result of very personal circumstances and modes of satisfying the need for relatedness, while in the



social character formations the requirements, value systems and forms of satisfaction of the society's practice of life return in the form of the individual's own motivational forces—as, for example, the expectation (and thus also the desire) for self-optimization.

Individual and societal character formations can pursue different goals and be characterized by different strivings. Conflicts with the environment can therefore result—but internal psychic conflicts also. In a leadership position, a character that, due to individual experiences of relatedness, is strongly narcissistic, will not satisfy society's expectations of teamwork, or will at least be internally conflicted.

Since the cause for the character formation is not an inborn drive, but rather the individual's need for and experience of relatedness, the internalized experience of relatedness can be either functional or dysfunctional, rational or irrational, mentally constructive or destructive (pathogenic). Therefore, character formations must always be assessed as to whether, mentally and socially speaking, they are productive or non-productive. One also could speak of alienating or pathogenic effects of individual and social character formations.

Generally, affected individuals are not aware of the pathogenic effects of their character orientation because of the Ego-syntonic quality of any character formation. This holds true for all non-productive social character orientations lived by a majority of a population or social group. The »pathology of normalcy« protects the individual additionally against becoming aware of the »socially patterned defect« and his false way of life. (See Fromm 1944a; 1955a, pp. 12–21.)

Fromm's concept of needs and character constitutes his social psychoanalytical drive theory. In it, he formulated a concept of psychoanalysis which, as Neil McLaughlin (2017; 2017a) has convincingly argued, transcends the social amnesia of psychoanalysis. Fromm expanded on his theory in the mid-1950s, but in one respect only: from the early 1960s on, Fromm's theoretical development started to take a further step in the direction of biology.

Fromm's sociobiological view of man and society

The trigger for this was the escalating Cold War and the threat of a nuclear world war through the Cuba crisis in 1962. Fromm interpreted this escalation as a result of the fact that people were increasingly drawn towards what is morbid and destructive, and less to what is alive. In a situation in which the death instinct (in Freud's sense) threatened to become stronger than the life instinct, Fromm began to see the survival fitness of the human race as anchored



in the »love of life« (»biophilia«), characteristic not only of human life, but of all other life as well. As Richard Runge (2012) showed in his bachelor thesis, Fromm's concept of biophilia transcends the anthropocentrism that so far had been so typical of him.

Fromm traced the individual's ability to love to a »biophilia« that is intrinsic to all life forms (see Fromm 1964a), and he believed that the wish to destroy did not appear until the human stage of evolution. This reflects his new interest in the biological basis of human life, as became even clearer in his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* which he published, in old age, in 1973. For Fromm, unlike Freud, many biological, sociobiological and neurobiological findings in his time suggested that forms of destructiveness in human nature reflect a thwarted biophilia and are the outcome of an unlived life, rather than a biologically rooted death wish. Peter Rudnytsky (2018) discussed this in his contribution to this conference.

Fromm's interest in findings from human biology and in the biological basis of his social–psychoanalytical approach was, in the 1970s, unusual for a psychoanalyst. And it went only so far. For example, in his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973a, p. 235) he mentioned, in addition to the needs for relatedness, also a need for effectiveness. But Fromm did not take the logical step of connecting his need–based theory of drives with the theories of affects and systems of motivations of that time (see Cortina 2015a).

Fromm's interest in findings from biology and others branches of sciences was guided by the wish to justify his social psychoanalytical approach even more completely. His enthusiasm for the attachment research of John Bowlby (cf. Bacciagaluppi 1989), for the cultural–anthropological and evolutionary–biological findings on cooperative and prosocial behavior of humans (cf. Cortina 2015), and for neurobiological findings which reveal man as an organism that actively seeks its own optimal development (cf. Fromm 1973a, p. 255)—all these things would, in his view, mean that the biological situation of mankind lies behind the *need* and the *ability* to develop specific forms of relatedness. Fromm continued to emphasize the concept of mankind's biological situation (he termed it »existential«), even when further advances seemed to downplay the difference between animal and human, between nature and history, between biology and psychology.

Fromm's goal was always to clarify the constructive and destructive possibilities in mankind that set him apart from his animal ancestors, even if there are no watertight differences but rather gradual transitions. This particularly held true for those attachment theories which apply attachment patterns observed in primates directly to humans (see Cortina 1996, p. 103 f.) or which reflect only the primary attachment person, but not the primary sociality. It



therefore makes sense to distinguish between attachment research and relatedness research, as Sonja Gojman and Salvador Millán (2001) have tried to do.

By basing his theory of relatedness on human biology, Fromm counters the objection that he attaches too great significance to society and culture. Fromm saw himself not as the representative of a »culturalist« school but as »a psychoanalyst who has attempted to further Freud's theory by making certain revisions;« he described his interpretation of psychoanalysis as a »sociobiological« one (Fromm 1990d [1969], p. 9).

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