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Impacts for Therapeutic Practice

Rethinking Erich Fromm's Analysis of Power Relations in Socio-Psychological Research and Through the Social Third in the Clinical Encounter

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Abstract: This paper explores Fromm's dialectic analysis of power relations as it applies to the dynamics of change at the societal and personal levels. First, the paper discusses the use of empirical research—system justification theory—to test the impact of socio-psychological and structural resistances to change. Second, it looks at the concept of The Social Third to illustrate Fromm's clinical approach around connectedness, subjectivity, narcissism, internalization of normative structures and the centrality of the concept of social character in shaping the dynamics of change.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, power, social change, empirical research, The Social Third, clinical dynamics.

As a sociologist and psychoanalyst, I have for a long time felt a selective affinity to Fromm's ideas. They have guided my sociological research and clinical practice. In my presentation today I briefly examine Fromm's analysis of the socio-psychoanalytic ideas around power and power relations as they

apply to the study of social and psyche change through the relationship between sociology and psychoanalysis (Fromm 1929a, 1944a). I am not primarily focusing on the political dimensions of power and leadership with regards to authoritarianism and the rise of fascism. Many researchers have studied these issues brilliantly, starting with Fromm (1941a, 1963b, 1970a) and Adorno et al. (1950).[1] What I want to do today is to illustrate from a broader perspective how Fromm's interdisciplinary socio-psychoanalytic perspective has guided empirical research and my clinical practice.

Fromm's definition of power and power dynamics

»The word power has a twofold meaning. One is the possession of power over somebody, the ability to dominate him (the authoritarian personality); the other meaning is the possession of power to do something, to be able to be potent. The later meaning has nothing to do with domination; it expresses mastery in the sense of ability. If we speak of powerlessness […] we do not think of a person who is not able to dominate others, but of a person who is not able to do what he wants. *Thus power can mean one of two things, domination or potency.* […] Power in the sense of domination, is the perversion of potency, just as sexual sadism is the perversion of sexual love.« (Fromm 1941a, pp. 160 f.—Italics C.S.)

It is important to remember that it was on the issue of power and authority relations that a major split occurred between Sigmund Freud and Erich Fromm, the latter putting the dynamics of power and authority above sexual drives in analyzing psychic development (Fromm 1944a, 1955a). Let me illustrate the various dimensions of power relations in Fromm's conceptualization.

Power relations as »dominating« (negative) energy	Power relations as »potent«(positive) energy
The authoritarian personality / Authoritarian character structure	Freedom »From« / Freedom »To«
The submission to fate/religion/the market	Ability to make choices
Feeling of aloneness	A sense of aliveness
Alienation of the self	A basic need for connectedness
Sado-masochist relations	Being rather than having

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1   These questions have been further documented in great detail by Durkin 2014; Friedman 2013; McLaughlin 1998, 2000, 2006; Cortina and Maccoby /Eds.),1996; Funk 2018.

Power relations as »dominating« (negative) energy	Power relations as »potent«(positive) energy
Victimizer and victim dynamics	linking intellect and emotions
Malignant narcissism	The search for oneness
Consumerism (market orientation)	Affective knowledge
Necrophilia	Biophilia
etc.	etc.
Process of transformation between positive/productive and negative/unproductive energies ← (Dialectic Thinking) →	

I am not stressing pairs of opposites; rather I want to emphasize how Fromm moved away from binary thinking by focusing on the *oscillation* between complementarities and contradictions as part of a *process of transformation* toward a »radical humanism« (Durkin 2014). Today, I want to illustrate such processes by using empirical research and my own clinical work.

Empirical Illustrations

Erich Fromm used a socio-psychoanalytic model of inquiry around the following key dimensions:

- ▶ The contextualization of social action;
- ▶ The comparative method (comparing classes, communities, nations);
- ▶ The analysis of variation between groups;
- ▶ The interplay between social, economic, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the self;
- ▶ The impact of Social Character on individuals' mode of being;
- ▶ The creation of typologies;
- ▶ The internalization of normative and regulatory orders (socially patterned defect);
- ▶ Dialectic reasoning.

Fromm starts his work by asking questions and suggesting hypotheses that illustrate his sociological thinking:

»Which factors make for the greater or lesser awareness of the social unconscious? It would take a detailed analysis of many personal and

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social factors to determine why some members of *minorities* or *exploited majorities* react with increased criticism, and others with increased submission to the ruling patterns of thought.« (Fromm 1962a, p. 96.)

Fromm's questions go back to Karl Marx's false consciousness: why do individuals vote against their own economic and social interests? A question that is still relevant today. Fromm gives us a partial answer by focusing on two socio-psychological processes: (1) The split between intellect and emotions; (2) The internalization of power relations, or what Foucault calls regulatory structures. Fromm illustrates this dynamic by showing the psychological vulnerability of the lower middle classes—positioned between the rich and the poor. His observations are insightful and timely in understanding Trump's loyal supporters who feel they don't belong anywhere and have been forgotten in a system that devalues their contributions as »true Americans« (see Fromm 1941a, pp. 181–183).[2]

Fromm uses historical and anthropological data creatively in his analyses (Frie 2014). He dislikes quantitative approaches, the use of professional jargon, symbols and statistical techniques (Fromm 1962a, p. 96). Yet, he did empirical research early in his career, studying the working class in Weimar Germany (Fromm 1980a) and later with Michael Maccoby (1970b) analyzing Mexican peasants' ability to adjust to socio-economic change. This complex and innovative research used a variety of methods to understand the outcomes of the challenges to social change. It led to defining different character types in terms of their modes of adaptation. But this focus on social outcomes and the creation of character types provided a limited analysis of the socio-psychological processes by which they were achieved on an individual basis. Combined with a lack of sophisticated methodologies at the time, the impact of this research stayed limited among psychoanalysts and sociologists alike. Writing in isolation, away from academic research and institutional support, Fromm was never in a position to empirically test his own hypotheses, something that is starting to happen today.

Looking to assess the spread of Fromm's ideas about power relations, I came across the work of a group of social psychologists that had been influenced by Marxist philosophy (Lukács), sociology (Habermas, Bourdieu), and socio-psy-

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2 A study by the Pew Research Center of Trump voters shows that the lower middle classes, defined by income level, are over–represented among Trump supporters (Annie Correal and Emily Cochrane, *The New York Times*, August 10th, 2018). Authoritarian tendencies among lower middle classes compared to other groups are questioned by McLaughlin (2006).

choanalytic formulations from The Frankfurt School and Fromm's work. I met with one of the researchers, John Jost, teaching at New York University. He and his collaborators worked with thousands of observations using a multiplicity of data points combined into one meta-analysis. They formulated their results in *The Justification System Theory* (Jost et al. 2017). Their analysis address issues of ideology, false consciousness, political conservatism, and right- and left-wing authoritarianism, using a socio-psychoanalytic perspective. Their questions overlap with Fromm's queries.

Among them are: »How do we explain conformity by minority groups to a regime that destroys human values? How do we explain groups and individuals who vote against their own socio-economic interests?« *Justification system theory* empirically shows the workings of *social character*. Disadvantaged and marginalized groups, for psychological and ideological reasons, want to believe that the existing social system is good, fair and legitimate despite contradictory evidence. Fromm's work is mentioned at several points in their research. When I read these studies I was excited to see that Fromm's hypotheses were verifiable and supported by »hard data,« thus more likely to be taken seriously and read widely in professional circles.

While there are similarities between these two models—*social character* and *justification system*—there are some differences too. Both report a tendency to accept and adapt to existing social demands. Both are interested in analyzing the mechanisms of disruption and opposition to unjust and inhumane socio-cultural systems and ways to counteract them. For Fromm, social change toward a socialist humanitarian society takes on additional active dimensions. It can only occur through individuals challenging the existing socio-economic structures of inequality and injustice. Questioning and rejecting tyranny/subjugation means that power relations have to be confronted institutionally as well as deconstructed within the self. Saying »NO« to power can lead to freedom only in contexts that provide social, economic and psychic support in a non-authoritarian environment, or, to use Fromm's words, »to support the expression of man's sensuous, emotional and intellectual capacities« (2010a, p. 182). Unlike other psychoanalytic models such a formulation requires taking into account the totality of an individual's needs. I was intrigued enough by the research of Jost and his colleagues that I raised the possibility of doing some joint work to test further Fromm's ideas of character structure, especially the existence of a »lag« that is a mismatch between individual character and social character. They were open to my suggestion. Let me now turn to how Fromm's thoughts on power and authority guided my clinical work.

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The Concept of Social Thirdness

In my clinical practice I have adopted and adapted Fromm's ideas based on cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. Even though Fromm wrote little about his own work with patients, we have the testimony of several of his colleagues and supervisees, as well as documentation put together by Rainer Funk (2009) about Fromm's clinical approach.

Before I continue it is important to keep in mind Fromm's distinction between *power* and *authority* (Fromm 1941a, pp. 163–164). As a sociologist and a follower of Max Weber's methodology, Fromm distinguishes between power and authority and introduces a distinction between two types of authority: legitimate and inhibiting authority. Legitimate authority, such as between students and teachers, or between analysts and patients, is a source of learning, not of exploitation. Inhibiting authority, such as between parents and children or between taskmasters and their employees, is a source of alienation.

In my clinical practice I use a shared learning process around the *concept of thirdness*. »The Third« has been part of psychoanalytic thinking going back to Freud's Oedipus Complex and Lacan's Law of the Father. The concept has further been used to explore a psychic space, created by the joint unconscious of the analyst and analysand, first explored by the Barangers and Steve Mitchell. It is a space of mutuality that goes beyond the complementarities of two selves, providing shared emotional experiences without merging. The concept of thirdness is part of an inter-subjective psychoanalytic model based on mutual recognition and shared identification (Dimen 2011, Benjamin 2018). It stresses our sense of connectedness and responsibility for one another starting with a rhythmic third, that co-creates a space mediating between »I and thou« (Benjamin 2018).

Fromm had already emphasized similar mechanisms in the clinical encounter (Fromm 1993b, Funk 2009), but his insights were rarely acknowledged in the psychoanalytic world. Among interpersonal psychoanalysts socio-cultural factors are sometimes included (Altman 1995, Aron 1996, Benjamin 2018). Yet, the stress is on the »here and now« rather than on integrating it with the »here and then« and the »here and beyond.« Their analysis of the social unconscious as it impacts individual consciousness and the trans-generational transmission of values is limited. Institutional structures and their regulatory controls are not addressed directly. Thus interpersonal and inter-subjective psychoanalysts, by focusing primarily on the interactive process of the »here and now,« limit their ability to take into account the socio-cultural context of power relations experienced through an analysis of a shared Social Thirdness.

A Frommian approach to the clinical encounter goes beyond inter-subjective and interpersonal concerns of Sullivanians by focusing on the internalization

of the normative order and the danger of the »pathology of normalcy« (Fromm 1947a, 1955a). These psychic processes are shaped by the social unconscious integrating individual, psychic and socio-cultural factors (Funk 2009; Layton 2006, 2015). In this context critical thinking and affective knowledge shape the interaction between two subjects both embedded in societal forces in and outside of treatment (Fromm 1962a). Most importantly, social thirdness minimizes power differentials through the clinical encounter (Gojman 1996). In Fromm's words: »It provides an instrument for self-understanding that is to say an instrument for self-liberation, an instrument in the art of living.« (1991a, p. 46).

How to access the Social Third in clinical practice?

My clinical work is shaped by my socio-psychoanalytic thinking around intersectionality of class, race, gender, sexuality and cultural differences in understanding the self. My approach is guided by Fromm's analysis of the interaction between the psyche and the social organized around his concepts of Character Structure and the social unconscious. In my work these central concepts take the form of contextualization that is a process by which socio-cultural factors like class culture have been internalized and shape self-identity. In that sense Fromm's understanding of power relations in therapy goes beyond the analyses of Ferenczi and Winnicott. Providing a holding environment and creating a partnership that minimizes power relations are important goals of treatment. Yet it should not obscure or prevent the difficult task of deconstructing the dynamics of power in the therapeutic encounter conceptualized by Layton as an »ethic of dis-illusionment (2018). For Fromm, escape / liberation from oppressive power relations can only occur within institutional / organizational changes that can provide for the economic, emotional and spiritual needs of individuals. To some extent, we all have internalized societal norms and organizational controls. In the therapeutic process an active awareness of having internalized such power relations can take place through the use of techniques / parameters such as interpellation, redefinition, and questioning of the status quo. In my practice, I try to bring about a shared awareness of the impact of racist, sexist and patriarchal normative structures on the therapeutic relationship.

An important function of social thirdness is to keep in check narcissistic tendencies stemming from the structural features of the therapeutic »couple« (Chodorow 2010). Narcissism in the clinical setting encourages mutual idealization and hides the workings of power (Kirsner 2000). It stifles the imagination and the creativity of its members and trainees (Kernberg 1998). Furthermore, the isolation of psychoanalytic institutes from institutional structures like

universities and research centers strengthen their social isolation and supports defensive narcissism (McLaughlin 1998).

I will now share with you some vignettes of how I work.[3] A middle-aged professional woman from a poor, dysfunctional Italian family, »Lily,« came to see me because of generalized anxiety. Her father had committed suicide when she was a young teenager and she blamed the mother for the »accident« that she only discovered, as being a suicide, as an adult. The deep anger and rejection of her mother had been turned inward and was consuming her. During therapy she came to realize that she was displacing her anger and resentment unto her colleagues at work, and to some extent projecting it onto me. Furthermore she realized that her self-accusation and sado-masochistic tendencies were being re-enforced by the discriminatory and sexist nature of her workplace reviving her early feelings of having been exploited and lied to.

After years of work Lily recognized that organizational structures also helped shaped her self-identity as an adult. She became aware that she had internalized power relations in the traditional/patriarchal family that made her inclined to accept the status quo and conform to organizational expectations. This new awareness led to re-defining how the socio-economic deprivation that molded her family life growing up had impeded her mother's ability to take care of her and the family when she was a child. This realization lessened the intensity of her rage toward her mother and the self-punishing guilt that ensued. Lily succeeded in turning self-deprecation into a longing for justice, and the desire to fight for greater equality in the workplace. She started defining herself as a »feminist thinker.« Her awareness of the links between her childhood emotional needs and present socio-economic constraints led to a transformation of Lily's superego from a tyrannical negative internal power into a productive and embracing positive energy fighting for social responsibility around ethical considerations (Carveth 2015).

For example, class shame, as a reflection of power relations as mediated through »bodily emotions« to use Bourdieu's formulation, can illustrate the connection between the psyche and the social. Feelings of class shame go unanalyzed in most therapies and are not discussed during training. Several of my patients came to me with the feelings of being illegitimate, fake, and a burden to themselves, all of which create a sense of alienation from the »true self,« and a sense of powerlessness. Such feelings were the result of a variety of factors such as sexual frustration, parental disapproval, traumatic memories, etc. But in my experience these feelings are combined with unacknowl-

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3   All personal information has been changed to protect confidentiality. If you want to read about an example of a case see Silver 2017.

edged class shame (Sennett 1972, Layton 2018). There are many groups that feel socially or culturally unrecognized and economically marginalized. Class shame can be found among new immigrants and/or first-generation college students. Fromm paid special attention to the lower middle classes that felt vulnerable and powerless carrying around unrecognized class shame that was acted-out in its associated conservative and/or authoritarian tendencies (see Fromm 1963b, 1964a).

Let me illustrate class shame with two vignettes. One is the case of a young professional woman from a lower-middle class background, »Amy.« Despite her professional success she constantly felt inadequate, and a fake, unable to show herself fully to colleagues and friends. While there were several reasons for this state of affairs, her resentment toward her uneducated, unsophisticated immigrant family led to the rejection of her own class history making her feel vulnerable and wanting to disappear. Through therapy Amy came to recognize her suppressed feelings of class shame. She came to realize that her sense of being a failure combined with self-denigration went beyond internalized guilt, but reflected the trans-generational and unconscious burden she was carrying around her family's class culture and history. These insights helped Amy to feel freer, moving away from a sense of self-oppression and thoughts like »It is all my fault;« »I am not good enough;« »I am a failure;« etc. The broadening of her frame of reference minimized the shame of feeling ashamed of herself (Sedgwick 1995) and lead to a lessening of her guilt and feeling of loneliness.

Class shame can affect patients differently depending on their own family history. »Kim« was raised in the »hood« (a term used to describe poor and violent urban ghetto communities in the US). She first experienced class shame through the clash of two cultures: the ghetto culture and the middle class culture that she had, however, successfully entered. She dealt with the clash by splitting the two worlds. Kim referred to herself as an »oreo cookie« black on the outside white on the inside. Gradually, unlike the previous example, she stayed emotionally attached to her roots in the ghetto culture. She learned to move back and forth between them without a sense of ethnic shame, yet with an awareness of class differences that she nonetheless experienced with sense of despair. Her ability to identify with middle class white culture without having to reject her own, protected Kim from a loss of identity, providing some emotional continuity and a sense of security. When feelings of class shame are shared in therapy patients undergo a »lightness of being,« to use Kundera's formulation, enabling them to take on greater emotional and professional risks in expressing their needs for connectedness and a quest for freedom.

Another arena where social thirdness can provide a psychic space to integrate the psychic with the social is the exploration of the victim / victimizer dy-

namics around sado-masochistic relationships of dependency (Chancer 1992). In my clinical work I try to go beyond the duality in order to break off repetition compulsion tendencies. My goal is to create the possibility of a vision of shared responsibility (Benjamin 2011) despite ethnic and cultural differences.

For example, Gloria is a successful African American professional woman who was sexually abused as a child and grew up in an economically deprived community and experienced violent outburst in the family. She came to treatment because of bad relationships with her adult children. Her professional success had given her a sense of power over others, including family members whom she controlled financially and emotionally. However, she felt guilty about having left the Black community behind.

In therapy we could not address the issue of victim/victimizer relations directly. We first had to detour into history and religion to provide an emotional and intellectual Social Thirdness, transitional space, where she could explore her emotions through the discourse of others' narratives of victimization and victimizing such as Memmi, Fanon, and Baldwin. We talked about slavery, racism and colonialism. With my active listening as a witness Gloria could experience her own hurt and shame. Gradually, she realized that in some ways she had been reproducing the dynamics of a slave/master relationship with her own children. That realization led her to search for connectedness to a collective history through the spirituality and emotional support of Black churches. Recognizing the role of mysticism in creating connectedness and a sense of oneness (Fromm 1960a), I encouraged her to become more active in these domains. Later in the treatment she became involved in organizations for social justice and engaged in what Jessica Benjamin called »restorative action.« The nature of Gloria's relationships with her children changed. Their relationship no longer reflected a sado-masochistic dynamic of power but led to greater connectedness between them. After years of therapy Gloria came to define our work as a »partnership.« At that point, when the chains and illusions of social power and dependency had weakened, I knew that she was ready to be on her own.

These vignettes illustrate how social power can be part of the therapeutic discourse and how power relations can be analyzed and lessened. Using a Frommian interpretation of traditional tools of the trade—transference, counter-transference, resistance, and projective identification—combined with Freudian radical insights, I incorporated theoretical ideas about social character, the social unconscious, the role of emotions, ethical concerns and critical thinking.[4] Without Fromm's clinical model of radical and existential humanism

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4   I should mention that there are differences with Fromm in the way I work with patients

with deep Jewish roots, I could not have become the analyst I am now. I am grateful for his legacy and thankful for its impact on my personal vision of trying to be a psychoanalyst with a social conscience.

Conclusion: »Truth« versus »Power«

Fromm's legacy has become increasingly relevant under the weight of history—authoritarian tendencies, right wing governments, dictatorships, neo-liberalism—combined with the spread of New Age philosophies, Far Eastern spiritualties and ethical/environmental concerns among younger generations. The impact of globalization and the changing needs of ethnically and sexually diverse groups are challenging therapeutic institutes and academic communities that are becoming more inclusive. Fromm provides models that are cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary and ethically/politically engaged. It is important that Frommian ideas become once again recognized, part of the larger intellectual discourse especially among psychoanalysts[5] and that they recapture the attention of journalists (Golberg 2018), public intellectuals and policy makers. I want to thank the organizers Dr. Rainer Funk and Dr. Thomas Kühn and their assistants, as well as Dr. Martin Teising and Prof. Karl Schlecht for their support in bringing together this exciting and timely second international Fromm conference at the IPU in Berlin that contributes greatly to the vibrant interest in Fromm's legacy.

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around timing of interpretation, degree of interaction and length of treatment, differences that I will elaborate in another paper.

5   I am offering a seminar on Fromm's legacy in the spring semester of 2019 at a psychoanalytic institute in New York City (NPAP). This seminar may be one of the few courses on Fromm's ideas since Fromm's involvement at the White Institute.

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