
REVIEW ESSAY/ ESSAI BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

ERICH FROMM'S CRITICAL THEORY: PROPHETIC, SCHOLARLY OR REVOLUTION- ARY?

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Lawrence Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's prophet*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 419 pp. \$19.95 paperback (978-0-2311-6259-3)

Kieran Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 260 pp. £62 hardcover (978-1-1374-3639-9)

Joan Braune, *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope. Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014, 222 pp. \$32.00 paperback (978-94-6209-810-7)

The German psychoanalyst, sociologist and public intellectual Erich Fromm has been a “forgotten” and an almost discredited intellectual in the North American academy for several decades now. However, there is growing interest again in his theoretical work and critical theory. The publication of Lawrence Friedman’s definitive biography, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (2013), and theoretical works by Kieran Durkin’s *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* (2014) and Joan Braune’s *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future* (2014) provide avenues into larger

debates about Fromm's critical theory, public sociology and psychoanalytic social theory.

Lawrence Friedman is a master biographer and his extensive account of Fromm's life, loves and work entitled *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (2013) will shape the discussion of the legacy of Erich Fromm in the coming decade. Friedman has published a number of important books, including *Identity's Architect: A Biography of Erik H. Erikson* (2000), a classic in the genre, establishing as it did links between Erikson's adoption, family life and immigration to the United States and the creation of the influential Harvard psychologist's powerful theory of identity crisis. Friedman worked for a decade on the Fromm biography, digging deeply into the available archives, interviewing people who knew Fromm and contextualizing his work against the background of his life.¹ Friedman's story-telling abilities and writing are exceptional.

A skillful biographer has much to work with while writing about Fromm. His life story is a drama, a romance and an adventure, full of great accomplishments and human frailties. Born in 1900 to Orthodox Jewish parents in Frankfurt (Main), Fromm witnessed the barbarity of the First World War as a teenager, and consequently became a lifelong anti-war socialist. He trained as a sociologist and psychoanalyst, and left religious orthodoxy to become a central figure in the 1920s and 1930s in the network of German interdisciplinary neo-Marxist revisionists we now know as the Frankfurt School. Both Rainer Funk and Daniel Burston have told the story of how the young Erich Fromm was formed and have highlighted how he broke from both Jewish and Freudian orthodoxy and developed an early version of the theory and method of the "Authoritarian Personality" research tradition. Fromm later became world famous with his classic analysis of Nazism in the best selling book *Escape from Freedom* (1941), mentored and influenced the well-known sociologist David Riesman. He was also active in socialist and anti-nuclear weapons movements (the well-known disarmament organization SANE bears the name of his book *The Sane Society* [1955]). Fromm died in Switzerland

1. Full disclosure here, I actually had begun work on this biography with Friedman after appearing at a conference panel with him and Paul Roazen on German intellectuals in North America at Bard College. Friedman and I started working together on the biography, but Rainer Funk, Fromm's literary executor, decided that my involvement in the project was not what he wished, and I was informed that I was not welcome to work on Fromm's biography in the archives he managed in Germany. All is well that ends well, for I focused on sociological theory and research over the past decade, leaving biography to biographers who provide the data for my sociology of ideas. Funk and I recently co-edited a book on Fromm and the debate continues as how to best interpret and, in my view, critically revise Fromm's work.

on the eve of his eightieth birthday after having influenced the emerging Green Movement in his native Germany with the book *To Have or to Be?* (1976) and participating in a series of highly influential radio interviews. Friedman fills in more details about Fromm's troubled family life, his religious training, his relationship with his first wife Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (an influential therapist of "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden" fame), and his time spent in Mexico creating the Psychoanalytic Institute at the National University of Mexico in Mexico City. *The Lives of Erich Fromm* is important, however, for three major new contributions to the historiography and debate about Fromm's ideas.

Firstly, *The Lives of Erich Fromm* illustrates Friedman's talent for careful archival research. While others have challenged the origin myths of the early Frankfurt School, telling the story of the writing of Fromm out of the history of the critical theory, Friedman's extensive archival research demonstrates the role played by Fromm's in limiting his interactions with his colleagues in the 1930s, and we also learn more about how Horkheimer financially supported Fromm's efforts to get family and friends out of Nazi Germany. The story of the break between Fromm and the Horkheimer circle is complex, and reading Friedman's book alongside Tom Wheatland's *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (2009) reminds us that Fromm was not blameless in the conflict, as he demanded and received a substantial amount of money from the group (he was a tenured faculty member with the Frankfurt School) in difficult times for everyone.

Friedman's second major contribution is far more contentious, when he closely studies the connection between Fromm's ideas and his life. Friedman looks at Fromm's love life in order to help us understand the making of his best-selling book *The Art of Loving* (1955). Fromm's reputation as a simplistic popularizer was partly unfairly created by the publication of *The Art of Loving*, a best-selling Marxist inflected, self-help like book that is intellectually quite powerful. Fromm theorizes the social psychology of love in the context of capitalism and the 'marketing character' it creates. Friedman shows how the authenticity of the text was partly created by his love for his third and final wife in a relationship where Fromm finally found peace and security. Fromm was a truly popular writer with a gift for putting various theories together in creative dialogue, but Friedman makes the compelling case that the power of *The Art of Loving* as a book (indeed as major cultural phenomena that sold many millions of copies in several languages) was due, to a significant extent, to the authenticity behind the text, something itself rooted in the transformative effect of his relationship with Annis.

It is not often that scholars are able to effectively connect personal lives to intellectual work, and Friedman is a master of the craft. Friedman also brilliantly demonstrates how Fromm's intimate relationship and then life-long friendship with Katherine Dunham, the pioneering African-American dancer, helped him understand America in a deeper way, explaining his ability to write to Americans so successfully. Moreover, these personal networks and Dunham's intellectual influence, in particular, combined with the European philosophical texts he drew on, made it easier for him to focus on spontaneity, creativity and love of life as themes that shaped *Escape from Freedom* (which he was writing at the time), and his larger social theory expressed in such classics as *The Sane Society* (1955) and *To Have or To Be* (1976).

The final and most important contribution of *The Lives of Erich Fromm* is Friedman's unpacking of the details of Fromm's political activities, a story that undermines the conventional wisdom from the 1970s about Fromm being a politically naïve and sentimental thinker who Marcuse once called "the Norman Vincent Peale" of the left. Fromm was, in fact, highly skilled at political maneuvering and was successful in influencing numerous elites in the American government and, it turns out, was the major funder of Amnesty International in its early years. Fromm's impact on mainstream American politics largely comes from his anti-nuclear activism and his writing on the Berlin crisis and the German question during the Cold War. Fromm gained enormous influence and created many enemies when he challenged the ideas of the major American policy proponents of winnable nuclear war at various conferences, and published essays and a book entitled *May Man Prevail* (1961) that challenged the conventional wisdom on Russian and Chinese motives and capacities and controversially argued for a strategy of phased unilateral disarmament. Friedman spends far too little time on the specifics of Fromm's ideas but his archival digging leads him to conclude that Fromm had significant influence on the Kennedy administration's creation of the arms control regime, and he claims (based on indirect evidence) that President Kennedy called Fromm after the Cuban missile crisis for advice.

Even more interestingly, Friedman recounts the story of how Fromm managed to get his anti-Stalinist leftist cousin Heinz Brandt released from an East German political prison, where he has been kidnapped and jailed after surviving Auschwitz. The archives Friedman consulted show that Fromm exercised skilled political judgment, as he leveraged his connection to philosopher Bertrand Russell who in turn was connected to Khrushchev, eventually getting his cousin released. Even more importantly, his anti-Stalinist cousin was an early prisoner of conscience, and

Fromm, as Friedman has shown, gave millions of dollars to Amnesty International, helping it survive and grow in its formative years. Adorno and Marcuse accused Fromm of being a “conformist” thinker, but Friedman demonstrates that he was an extremely savvy and radical political actor when he put his mind to it (Fromm viewed himself as being temperamentally unsuited to politics, and there are examples when this was clearly the case). When you combine these activities with his influence on the New Left in the 1950s and 1960s and *To Have or To Be*’s (1976) role in shaping the emergence of the Green movement in Germany, one of Fromm’s most important and admirable “lives” turns out to have been as an activist, philanthropist and policy advisor, a third career alongside being a psychoanalytic working with patients in his practice and a public intellectual.

Love’s Prophet has been widely reviewed and well received among historians and intellectuals even while it has been highly controversial among Fromm scholars. A very positive review in the New York Review of Books by Alan Ryan and a glowing endorsement in the American Historical Review, suggests that Friedman biography will be successful in creating new interest in Fromm’s ideas among segments of the scholarly and intellectual elite. While the view of Friedman that emerges from the reviews suggests that he is scholarly, detached and balanced, the reaction from Fromm scholars and Rainer Funk’s International Erich Fromm Society has been less than enthusiastic. Some reactions from the followers of Fromm are overly defensive to criticism of their hero and intellectual icon, but some of the points Fromm partisans have made are worth serious consideration. One of the bombshells *Love’s Prophet* dropped is that Fromm had numerous affairs with his psychoanalytic patients, an ethical and professional flaw that can hardly be excused by the fact that this kind of thing was common among psychoanalysts of his generation. Fromm observed his former lover and older and well-known proto feminist psychoanalyst Karen Horney doing the same thing. This kind of behavior is a major ethical flaw in his legacy, and helps bring a new perspective to our understanding of the conflicts he was engaged in within psychoanalytic institutes. At the same time, the book is vague on some of these claims, and sometimes takes on a gossipy tone; it is most certainly problematic when Friedman makes unsubstantiated claims about Fromm’s mental health, something best left to psychoanalysts and psychiatrists based on careful clinical examination of the patients. This kind of psychobiography is one of the weaker aspects of the book, flowing as it does from Friedman’s close connection to the Erik Erikson, Robert Coles and Robert Jay Lifton network that runs the well-known Well-Fleet psychohistory gatherings.

The major and central flaw in *The Lives of Erich Fromm*, however, concerns the author's relative lack of sophistication in social theory. This missing piece is something that is most certainly addressed in two recent books that look at Fromm from the perspective of sociological-political theory and philosophy, respectively: Kieran Durkin's *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* (2014) and Joan Braune's *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future* (2014).

The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm may well end up being the book that has the largest long-term impact on the reception of Fromm's ideas. Durkin's great strength is a combination of intellectual ambition and scholarly modesty and care; he has produced a comprehensive account of Fromm's ideas while dealing fairly with the existing literature. Durkin draws at length on the insights in Rainer Funk's *The Courage to be Human* (1982) and Daniel Burston's *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (1991), two central texts in the recovery of Fromm's ideas in English. But he goes further than both authors did, producing a balanced account of Fromm's work that puts his ideas up against the best existing competing contemporary academic social theory. One of the highlights of the book is a superb short biographical chapter, where he lays out the life and early experiences of Fromm, making the case that there is continuity to his radical humanist thought despite shifts in focus and language over several decades of writing. Always fair and judicious, Durkin draws carefully from Friedman's knowledge of the history of the American left and social sciences and his archival digging while moving beyond some of the limitations of Friedman's biography.

The core three chapters of the book are indispensable for a discussion of Fromm's social theory: "The Roots of Radical Humanism," "Radical Humanist Psychoanalysis," and "Psychoanalytic Social Psychology." While some of the early defenses of Fromm against orthodox Freudians and his Frankfurt School critics (my work on Fromm as a forgotten intellectual and the "origins" myths of critical theory included) sometimes engaged in open polemics, Durkin is balanced and fair-minded as he examines the evidence for Fromm's revision of Freud, and the debates on this and other questions that divided Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse from their former colleague in the Frankfurt School circle. Friedman largely defends a modified version of Freudian orthodoxy, but with little depth and detail and offering little theoretical justification instead often simply quoting or referencing high status scholars who buttress his position. In contrast, Durkin employs a much wider theoretical lens and digs deep into the conceptual and empirical questions as did the earlier work of American psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell. Fromm believed that

Freud's genius was wrapped up in an outdated 19th century mechanistic materialism that required revision, and Durkin lays out the core issues and adjudicates the theoretical questions at stake with care and nuance.

Just as importantly, Durkin deals with Fromm's later writings seriously, avoiding the conventional wisdom that suggests Fromm descended into simplistic popularizing and quasi-religious and unrealistic utopianism after *Escape from Freedom* (1941). Fromm's most academically rigorous works were actually written at the end not the beginning of his career. Durkin has produced the single best discussion in the English language literature on how Fromm's later work (with Michael Maccoby) *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970) and his ambitious *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) holds up to contemporary scholarship in the empirical social sciences. In contrast, Friedman offers a few minor critiques of each of these books but largely ignores the vision and the ambition behind these two remarkable volumes and says little about the actual method and conclusions of *Social Character in a Mexican Village's* remarkable multi-method research design.

Durkin is far more rigorous when he examines the theory and research tradition on social character central to Fromm's social science. *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* could thus play a very important mediating role in the revival of Fromm's work in the social sciences. It is partly because it engages seriously with the organizational leadership research agenda pursued since Fromm's death by Michael Maccoby, Sonia Gojman Millán and Salvador Millán's important participatory research action on social character among the Mexican poor and Mauricio Cortina's brilliant attempt to synthesize Fromm's theories with current attachment and evolutionary social psychology research. Durkin's work is indispensable for efforts to take Fromm back into mainstream academic debates that he influenced in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Particularly important for sociologists is Durkin's suggestion that social character theorists engage French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's influential concept of habitus, as Greek scholar Leonidas Cheliotis has done in various social science journals, including the CJS.

While there has been much written on the sociological factors that lead Fromm to become a forgotten intellectual, Durkin stresses the intellectual climate of anti-humanism that came to dominate our intellectual. His chapter "Anti-Humanism: A Radical Humanist Defense," contains an excellent discussion of debates about human nature and makes the case for Fromm's relevance and value in opposition to the anti-humanist dismissal of his perspective represented by Adorno, Althusser, Foucault, Rorty and Derrida. This leads to the final chapter on the "Renaissance of Humanism" where he outlines and carefully discusses the case Fromm

made for a revival of humanism, addressing some of the most serious critiques made of psychological utopianism particularly by Petteri Pietikäinen. And what is most important about Durkin is he addresses both Fromm's political proposals and theoretical ideas, and weighs them carefully. One of the highlights of the book is an excellent discussion of the "critical realism" of Margaret Archer and Roy Bhaskar, outlining how Fromm was a precursor to these thinkers, arguing that moving forward Fromm's work can contribute to an "adequate theorization of the biological and psychological aspects of the social process." (Durkin 2014: 228). Particularly valuable is Durkin's engagement with the neurobiological perspective of Antonio Damasio, an important corrective to the extreme social construction of the self-views of various contemporary post-structuralists.

Joan Braune's *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future* is also worth reading alongside both the Friedman's and Durkin's volumes. While Friedman hides some of his own biases behind the pose of the objective historian, and Durkin attempts to be balanced all the way through, Braune's intellectual and political commitments are merged and she seamlessly links historical, philosophical and political arguments, each of them worth considering in turn.

Scholars interested in the early history of the Frankfurt School will find Braune's *Fromm's Revolutionary Hope* indispensable. Friedman says almost nothing critical about Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse and the various historians of the Frankfurt School. Braune, in contrast, provides the single best available account of the intellectual, political, financial and professional differences that divided Fromm from his former colleagues. Braune adds an original and important element to the story, however, arguing that Fromm's messianic utopianism was in fundamental conflict with what she calls the catastrophic messianism that shaped the ideas of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. While Friedman soft-pedals a discussion of the obvious distortions and inconsistencies that a close reading of the Frankfurt School reception in North American historiography reveals, Braune provides a brilliant and detailed critique of the influential work of David Held, Martin Jay and Rolf Wiggershaus.

Even more importantly, there are philosophical stakes in the debates from the 1930s that created both Fromm and the Frankfurt School. Braune does an impressive job of tracing the roots of Fromm's messianic thinking back to his own orthodox Jewish education as a young man, and his engagement with Jewish radical thinkers and Marxism over his lifetime. Braune is devastatingly sharp in undermining the myth of Fromm as an overly optimistic and naive thinker and adds an important

depth to discussing the content of Fromm's thought. Braune provides an insightful and scholarly overview of various messianic traditions in religious and philosophical thought, distinguishing between Fromm's version of revolutionary radical humanism and the cataclysmic messianism that runs through the work of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse and leads to a dead-end choice between accepting the status quo and arguing for a break with existing societies in some revolutionary event. Braune spells out the practical implications of these philosophical questions in a brilliant and useful chapter-long exploration of the concept of "hope" in Fromm's work.

Braune's radical political commitments help create both the great strengths and some of the limitations of her work, as was also the case with Fromm himself. There is a certain political sectarianism in Braune's analysis, something one can detect in her published review of Friedman's biography where she claims that what she sees as Friedman's unfairness to Fromm is rooted in him being "a liberal, not a leftist" a judgment that is both untrue and unfair. Friedman has a long history of civil rights and civil liberties activism and is a person of the left. It is true that Friedman does have a preference for political insiders (he worked prominently for Obama), and his own politics are likely reflected in the stress he places in his biography on the question of whether John Kennedy called Fromm on the phone in the early 1960s to get advice on the Berlin crisis (some have suggested Friedman is speculating too much here). So this specific criticism is fair but there are times when Braune's political editorializing gets in the way of her generally insightful analysis.

This quibble aside, there are real intellectual and political stakes in the philosophical questions Braune addresses. Far too much of contemporary radicalism is shaped by the kind of cataclysmic messianism that Fromm rejected, and Braune's historical reconstruction of earlier 20th century debates on these questions is illuminating. A serious attempt to create fundamental social change cannot be rooted in total rejection of the status quo (what Marcuse once called the "great refusal" in the context a 1950s era debate with Fromm) but must draw on the kinds of visionary radicalism at the root of Fromm's radical humanist philosophy. Contemporary critical sociologists would benefit from Fromm's philosophical approach, and Braune's book is the best guide available for engaging Fromm's messianic philosophical project. For sociologists, the powerful (but flawed) analytic tools Fromm has left us and Friedman, Durkin and Braune have reexamined, will help address some of the limitations of a sociological imagination that does not leave enough room for emotions, the unconscious and what Nancy Chodorow once called the "power of feelings."

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