

CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICE

THE RADICAL  
HUMANISM OF  
ERICH FROMM

Kieran Durkin



## CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICE

Mainstream political theory has been experiencing an identity crisis for as long as I can remember. From even a cursory glance at the major journals, it still seems preoccupied either with textual exegesis of a conservatively construed canon, fashionable postmodern forms of deconstruction, or the reduction of ideas to the context in which they were formulated and the prejudices of the author. Usually written in esoteric style and intended only for disciplinary experts, political theory has lost both its critical character and its concern for political practice. Behaviorist and positivist political “scientists” tend to view it as a branch of philosophical metaphysics or as akin to literary criticism. They are not completely wrong. There is currently no venue that highlights the practical implications of theory or its connections with the larger world. I was subsequently delighted when Palgrave Macmillan offered me the opportunity of editing *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice*.

When I was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, during the 1970s, critical theory was virtually unknown in the United States. The academic mainstream was late in catching up and, when it finally did during the late 1980s, it predictably embraced the more metaphysical and subjectivist trends of critical theory. Traditionalists had little use for an approach in which critique of a position or analysis of an event was predicated on positive ideals and practical political aims. In this vein, like liberalism, socialism was a dirty word and knowledge of its various tendencies and traditions was virtually nonexistent. Today, however, the situation is somewhat different. Strident right-wing politicians have openly condemned “critical thinking,” particularly as it pertains to cultural pluralism and American history. Such parochial validations of tradition have implications for practical politics. And, if only for this reason, it is necessary to confront them. A new generation of academics is becoming engaged with immanent critique, interdisciplinary work, actual political problems, and more broadly the link between theory and practice. *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice* offers them a new home for their intellectual labors.

The series introduces new authors, unorthodox themes, critical interpretations of the classics, and salient works by older and more established thinkers. Each after his or her fashion will explore the ways in which political theory can enrich our understanding of the arts and social sciences. Criminal justice, psychology, sociology, theater, and a host of other disciplines come into play for a critical political theory. The series also opens new avenues by engaging alternative traditions, animal rights, Islamic politics, mass movements, sovereignty, and the institutional problems of power. *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice* thus fills an important niche. Innovatively blending tradition and experimentation, this intellectual enterprise with a political intent will, I hope, help reinvigorate what is fast becoming a petrified field of study and perhaps provide a bit of inspiration for future scholars and activists.

STEPHEN ERIC BRONNER

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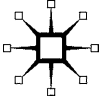
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# The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm

*Kieran Durkin*

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THE RADICAL HUMANISM OF ERICH FROMM

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Finally, and above all, I would like to thank my partner, Jodie, for her forbearance, love, and support during the writing process, and for sticking with me through the ups and downs of a small lifetime together. This book is dedicated—if it matters at all that I say this—to her, to our daughter, Heidi, and to my parents, Dermot and Linda, whose example to me as I was growing up led in no small way to my finding myself here and to the enduring pull of Erich Fromm.

## Introduction

Writing in 1986, John Rickert, an American philosopher, remarked of Erich Fromm that he had “long been out of fashion” (Rickert, 1986: 1). Almost three decades since Rickert’s observation—and with the publication of a number of book-length studies dedicated to Fromm’s thought<sup>1</sup>—it seems that this lack of fashionableness has not proved terminal. But while a terminality has failed to set in, Fromm remains a fairly anonymous figure in contemporary academia, his name generally absent from most mainstream social theory and his ideas markedly underutilized in social scientific and humanitarian thought. Caught between the “analytic” and “continental” philosophical traditions and their advocates in the human sciences, Fromm’s thought is generally neither wanted nor respected—its overt humanism a seemingly permanent embarrassment, its psychoanalytic genealogy a peculiar anathema, and its accessible style a more or less effective barrier to high regard. This is unfortunate, given the condition of contemporary social theory, and, in fact, symptomatic of this very condition. For despite signs that significant change may be possible, social theoretical thought seems largely to still be adversely affected by the anti-humanism and other excessively relativistic tropes characteristic of the linguistic turn and of structuralist and poststructuralist thought more generally. This anti-humanism centrally reduces to an overstated attack on the axiomatic precepts of humanism—namely, the idea of “man” (or the human being), “the subject,” “the self,” and of history as the realm in which human perfectibility (or flourishing) can manifest itself. As Roy Bhaskar has shown, the philosophical underpinning of most academic thought today is influenced either by the “empirical realism” of positivism (and the related idea that we can only know about what we can experience or test) or by the “super-idealism” of “postmodern” thought (and the related idea that we create or change the world with our theories), or of unintentional combinations

of the two (Bhaskar, 2011: 13). These positions, which are misrepresentations of the ontological and epistemological realities, have led to a peculiarly high-minded reductionism that is hard to displace, effective in all spheres up to and including the ethical and political.

What Fromm's thought can offer, in spite of its unfavorable reputation, is a vital and generally overlooked contribution to the rectification of this situation. His mixture of essentialist and constructionist aspects, which was the direct result of his policy of refined continuation in relation to classical humanist thought (particularly as he saw it as manifested in Judaism, Marxism, and Freudianism), is potentially greatly instructive in relation to the task of recovering the central categories of humanist thought that have been put out of use over the past 50 years or so. Writing in the middle part of the last century, and spurred on by the intellectual challenge of grappling with and accommodating the differing imperatives of a wide variety of thought systems, Fromm advances a qualified form of essentialism compatible with the central ideas of constructionist thought that have increasingly dominated large swathes of the academy. Based on an unfashionable old idea—namely, that there *is* such a thing as a “human nature,” which is, however, variously manifested in different social and cultural contexts—Fromm's thought seeks to account for, and raise to a central analytical status, the idea of a basic psychological dynamism that underlies human experience and that figures as a fundamental variable in the social process. Crucially, such a dynamic account is premised on the idea that the psychological is not only the refraction of aspects of social experience but also the interaction of these refracted aspects with basic human drives or “existential needs,” as Fromm terms them. As such, the dynamism that informs Fromm's thinking is based on a form of human universalism that leads to a productive concern with ethical normativism, objective values statements, and, ultimately, a realistic and achievable form of democratic socialism based on resolutely humanist criteria.

What ought to be stressed here is that Fromm's writings are *primarily* an expression of humanism. Although often framed in psychoanalytic language and generally set up as sociops psychoanalytical project, they are first and foremost the expression of his underlying religio-philosophical premise, while at the same time helping to define it. To say this is not to deny that psychoanalysis was an absolutely central feature of Fromm's thought: analyzing almost daily for 50 years, Fromm always approached issues with the dynamism of the psyche in mind. What I am saying is that Fromm's thinking, including the psychoanalytic framework he generally employed as central to it, is constituted by a prior and deeper humanism that characterizes his corpus *as a whole*. In making this contention I am explicitly

and self-consciously opposing the suggestion, proffered by Martin Birnbaum, and then by Don Hausdorff, that Fromm's humanism arrives unheralded in 1947 with the publication of *Man for Himself*. Based on what seems to me to be a failure to appreciate the subtlety of Fromm's qualified essentialism in *Escape from Freedom*, Birnbaum and Hausdorff suggest that there is a shift in Fromm's thought—brought about by the barbarity and destructiveness of the Second World War—from what they take to be the stringent cultural relativism of *Escape from Freedom* to the undeniable ethical and normative humanism of *Man for Himself* (Birnbaum, 1962: 81; Hausdorff, 1972: 38).<sup>2</sup> While it is almost certainly the case that the horrors of the Second World War affected Fromm's thinking, perhaps prompting him to place more direct and explicit stress on ethical and normative humanist aspects, it is surely not a consistent reading of Fromm to suggest that this was a rupture in his thinking. Fromm had talked of the "nature of man" as far back as 1932, in one of his programmatic articles for the Frankfurt *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research), returning to this idea in *Escape from Freedom* in a self-conscious and explicit attempt to tread the line between complete malleability and complete fixity. As such—and as I will argue in the subsequent chapters—Fromm's thought can legitimately, and in fact most adequately, be described as consistently humanist, and, in particular, as consistently *radical* humanist. Having said this, Fromm's usage of the phrase "radical humanism" dates, in fact, to the middle-to-end of his career, appearing as a description of his intellectual project for the first time in *You Shall Be as Gods*, in 1966 (prior to this point Fromm had spoken of "normative humanism," "socialist humanism," "Renaissance humanism," "Enlightenment humanism," "dialectic humanism," as well as plain "humanism"). Although Fromm was to adopt the description explicitly only at this point, it can nevertheless be legitimately seen as a retroactive descriptor that fits to his work, considered as a whole. To claim this is not to ignore the differences that obtain in Fromm's thought at different periods (although there are comparatively few consequential differences in what is a generally strikingly homogeneous body of work). It is, rather, to claim that "radical humanism" can be understood as the appropriate categorization of Fromm's entire intellectual edifice, irrespective of the differences that obtain between periods; indeed, part of the argument advanced in these pages is that radical humanism can be seen as the *hermeneutic center* or *nucleus* of Fromm's thought, the circumference of this thought encompassing the various evolutionary forms that his movements from the center take on.

The thinking that informs Fromm's writings, and which I take to consistently do so, is radically humanist in the first instance by virtue of the fact that it seeks to go to the root. As a radical humanism, then, it is a

humanism that seeks for consistency and that is self-consciously grounded on a metaphysical realism/essentialism that recognizes the existence of the human being as an entity possessed of certain properties, the said properties constituting the ground upon which value for human beings exists and upon which the very idea of ethics makes sense. As such, it is a humanism that is centrally motivated by a commitment to the belief in the dignity and unity of humankind and in the possibility of the unfolding toward perfection of human nature. Having such a commitment, it is also a humanism that is centrally focused on the individual and on the development of the characteristically human powers of the individual that are compatible with flourishing and well-being. In particular, it is a humanism that places a marked stress on the goal of achieving authentic selfhood, the stripping away of illusions, achieving inner and outer harmony. In being such a humanism, then, Fromm's radical humanism is a humanism that tries to restore, in a manner similar to Ernst Bloch, Adam Schaff, Leszek Kolakowski, and the Yugoslav Praxis philosophers, the early Marx's focus on the individual and ethics to the forefront of socialist thought, focusing primarily on the experience of the subject as the pivotal factor in social change. It is characteristic of Fromm's radical humanism, over and above these proximate accounts, that it confronts the false individualism that reigns today, as well as the pathology of normalcy that sustains it—alienation and idolatry in all their secular forms—and that it does so by proceeding on the basis of a depth psychology concerned with the importance of value and ethical problems for the understanding of human psychic and social life. It is characteristic also in that Fromm's is not merely a philosophical humanism, but one related to the applied understanding of “actually existing real men,” both in the sense of being simultaneously personally and societally relevant (the creation of a New Man and New Society) and in the sense that it enables the reinstating of humanist analytical categories in social analysis. The overall concern, which encompasses these issues, is a concern with challenging the “forgetting of humanism” that dominates both the intellectual and wider culture today and which prevents the main goal of the renaissance of humanism.

### ***Reclaiming Humanism***

It is unfashionable in most respected intellectual circles today to talk of humanism. If not for what is taken as the irredeemably protean nature of the term itself—the contention, as Michel Foucault puts it, that “the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis

for reflection” (Foucault, 1984a: 44)—then the fact of its association with the acts of terror and barbarity committed in its name is enough for most to steer well clear of it. Beyond this, the influence of Martin Heidegger looms large here, his famous “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” with its argument for an antimetaphysical form of philosophy and the Nietzschean belief that there is no hope of establishing universal moral ethical standards of value. These aspects, added to the highly influential idea that “language is the house of being” (Heidegger, 1998: 239), are the bedrock for most anti-humanisms that followed in Heidegger’s wake. In light of such opposition, the desire to resurrect and advance a humanist scheme of thought will no doubt seem strange and ill-advised to many. It is my contention that this assumption is misplaced, and that there *is* a point in reclamation in relation to humanism. For rather than continually reinventing, moving farther and farther into tortured neological territory, we can (and should) seek to clarify, purify, and ultimately reclaim humanism, thereby preventing serious damage to our understanding by becoming lost in terminological muddles. In this process we need to denounce what is wrong in the idea as it has come to be expressed but remain resolute in praise of what was right in the idea all along, always seeking to ensure a consistent interpretation that can deal with the attacks brought against it on the basis of naïve or nefarious applications. The act of reclamation here seems especially apt, considering the intuitive conceptual link that exists between the label “humanism” and the kind of “humanistic” experience it is generally assumed to refer to. As such, maintaining the continued separation between the label and the experience, and thus the natural expressive power the notion possesses, will ensure that progressive social theory will remain all the poorer and all the more restricted for it.

The term “humanism” (*humanismus*) was most likely devised by Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, a nineteenth-century German educationalist, to describe the German high school and university curriculum based on what had been known since the Middle Ages as the “humanities”—the study of ancient Greek, Latin, and the literature, history, and culture of those who spoke these languages (Davies, 2008: 10). While this is so, the term has taken on much wider usage, most consistently seen as referring to certain central aspects of the humanistic thought systems of the predominant figures of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, particularly the passionate belief in the unity and “perfectibility of man” as realizable through commitment and effort. For Fromm, in fact, it was possible to read humanism back into human history, at least as far back as the turn to monotheism in what Jaspers (1951) has described as the “axial age”—something Fromm does through the imputation of a common ideational core that can be identified in this

history and that is perennially worth reclaiming. As Daniel Burston has eloquently put it:

Whatever form it takes and whenever it appears, humanism always emphasizes the fundamental unity of the human species, the singularity and worth of persons, and our duty to defend and promote human dignity and welfare in our time, rather than in kingdom come. Furthermore, humanism (in all its forms) emphasizes that human beings are not just the passive playthings of Fate—or of language, ideology, and so on. It allows for the existence of a degree of self-determination which is not trivial, and must never be overlooked. By the humanist account, people can (and must) take an active role in shaping their own destinies and their own identities, if they wish to be truly free. Freedom, by this account, is not the mere absence of external constraint, or something that someone else can bestow on you. It is something that is earned or achieved through reflection and diligent self-development. (2014: 916)

Though it may be “almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity” (Davies, 2008: 141), it should be similarly difficult to fail to recognize that the vast majority of these crimes were committed in direct contravention of the central principles of humanist thought interpreted in consistent and robust fashion. The fact that it can be said of all humanisms that “until now [they] have been imperial” (Davies, 2008: 141) is the very point in returning to Fromm’s *radical* humanism, and the point in reclamation more broadly.

It is the contention of this book that the best way to affect this reclamation is by a deeper and fuller restatement of Fromm’s radical humanism alongside a sustained critique of the ideas that would seek to oppose it. To suggest “restating” here, however, is slightly disingenuous in that Fromm never really offers an account of radical humanism in a systematic form. As such, my intention is to offer a forensic investigation of the claims that underlie Fromm’s radical humanism in its fullest expression and to thereby provide conceptual clarity on radical humanism as a system of thought taken in itself—the importance of the latter point has been noted by Rainer Funk, who said of Fromm that “his own presentation frequently suffers from an imprecise and inconsistent use of concepts and too limited a systematic interest” (Funk, 1982: xiv). That there are clear pitfalls in such an undertaking is readily acknowledged. The syncretic nature of Fromm’s radical humanism is such that it unites various trends from different intellectual traditions, pulling together influences from the philosophic and hermeneutical traditions of Judaism and Christianity, Marxism and Freudianism, and aspects

of Enlightenment and Romantic thought, as well as from the disciplines of anthropology, neurobiology, and evolutionary biology. As Funk puts it:

To evaluate Fromm fairly, to arrive at a final judgement, one would need to be competent in all the various disciplines and sciences, for to Fromm's credit, he risked a global view of man and his history at a time when the sciences were becoming ever more specialized. His scientific work, its understanding and critique, propose a task one can never discharge in a wholly satisfactory manner. (1982: 6)

As much as this is true, the syncretic nature of Fromm's thought is where its real importance lies—and, therefore, where I have tried to go.

Others have gone before me, of course. The clearest precursor to the present study is Lawrence Wilde's excellent *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*.<sup>3</sup> Both the present book and Wilde's study put forward a positive assessment of Fromm's thought and make reference to the salience of his essentialism and ethical normativism. Both also contextualize it in relation to current issues/thinkers. The singular and concerted focus on "radical humanism" as an *explicit* social theory undertaken here, however, is unique, as is its distinctive contextualization via the thinkers of what I term the "anti-humanist paradigm" (in particular, Althusser, Adorno, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty). In addition to this, the present book gives greater space to a discussion of theological, psychological, and anthropological issues pertaining to radical humanism as a system of thought taken in itself, engaging in a generally more sustained level of argumentation in favor of humanism (and its related essentialism), whereas Wilde's focus is geared more toward the explication of Fromm's ideas in relation to political thought and practice. A further important difference between the two works is the greater stress in the present work on excavating Fromm's significant debates with Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno, showing his positions here to be highly relevant to contemporary understandings of these thinkers as well as Marx, Freud, and the theorization of social change more generally. All things considered, I hope that the present study might be capable of acting as a companion to Wilde's recent Fromm scholarship, complementing this work by helping to fill out radical humanism as a developed system of thought.

Perhaps the best studies of Fromm, apart from Wilde's more recent offering, are Rainer Funk's *Erich Fromm: The Courage to be Human* and Daniel Burston's *The Legacy of Erich Fromm*. Funk's book is, in many senses, the basic Fromm textbook.<sup>4</sup> Like the present book, it is a full-length attempt to explain Fromm's thought in its totality, placing particular stress on the



Judaic underpinnings of Fromm's thought. In so doing, Funk has shown deep and lasting similarities between the underlying form of his thought and that found in Hasidic thinking. I have sought to build on Funk's holistic account of Fromm, attempting also to map out the depth of the Judaic influence (especially in relation to Hermann Cohen and other aspects of biblical analysis, where I think I have unearthed some particularly strong explicit connections not stressed by Funk) and to make sustained linkages through Marx and Freud to radical humanism as a position in itself. Although both Funk's study and the present one offer a sympathetic account of Fromm's thought, I locate more tensions—and do so in different places—than Funk does, while seeking to contextualize his thought in relation to social theory more generally, which Funk does not.

Burston's impressive intellectual biography tackles Fromm's thought primarily from a psychoanalytic angle, although he does also make some important connections to the social and philosophical thought that Fromm was exposed to in his intellectual development. Stressing Fromm's position as one of what he terms Freud's "loyal opposition," having significant connection to, but remaining crucially distinct from, Adler, Jung, Rank, and Ferenczi, Burston shows Fromm to be a pivotal yet unrecognized figure in the development of interpersonal psychoanalysis. Partly because Burston has done this so well, and partly because my focus is less on Fromm's connection to the psychoanalytic tradition and more on Fromm as a humanist thinker, I have generally avoided detailed discussion of Fromm's similarities to his close psychoanalytic predecessors and colleagues. I have, however, sought to resurrect and flesh out Fromm's much underutilized critique of Freud's underlying mechanistic philosophy and bourgeois biases, contextualizing it in relation to his ultimately fractured relationship with Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. Aspects of this fractured relationship—and various points of comparison—recur throughout the book, hopefully to revealing effect.

Outside of these studies, there are several other accounts that deserve mention. Annette Thompson's *Erich Fromm: Explorer of the Human Condition* is a good, short, critical introduction to Fromm, written primarily from a psychological and social-psychological angle. My account offers a more detailed and laudatory assessment of Fromm's humanism and has a greater concern to place his thought in the social theoretical canon. Svante Lundgren's *Fight against Idols: Erich Fromm on Religion, Judaism and the Bible* is a good account of Fromm's views on religion, but does not deal with social theory or humanism per se. Gerhard P. Knapp's *The Art of Living: Erich Fromm's Life and Works* is a weaker effort on Fromm, showing reliance on outmoded assumptions absorbed through what seems to be an overly strong affiliation to Marcuse and Adorno. Lawrence Friedman's *The Lives*

of *Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet*, the long-overdue first full-length biography of Fromm, manages to bring out certain aspects of Fromm's personality that illuminate the potential psychological basis of some of his theoretical proclivities. As important as Friedman's study is, it is of a quite different overall nature to the present study, with nothing in terms of content that pits Friedman's work against what I am arguing here.

Besides these studies, there are a few accounts of Fromm to be found in textbooks on the "Frankfurt School" and critical theory—Douglas Kellner in *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* and, particularly, Stephen Eric Bronner in *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, offering perceptive and balanced appraisals of Fromm's contribution. Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923–1950* and Rolf Wiggershaus's *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* touch on Fromm's thought, offering a mixture of astute analysis (particularly Jay) and pejorative misreadings (particularly Wiggershaus) of Fromm. Either way, the focus in these works is generally on the Frankfurt School, considered from the point of view of its eventual critical theory than from the point of view of Fromm's thought taken in itself, with the attendant limitations this entails. Neil McLaughlin, writing primarily from a sociological angle, has done much to argue for Fromm's contemporary relevance in relation to social scientific thinking. In a series of important articles (1996; 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2007), McLaughlin has helped to draw out many of the reasons as to why Fromm is an unfairly "forgotten intellectual" today (McLaughlin, 1998) while simultaneously helping to draw attention to the prescient and groundbreaking nature of much of Fromm's social-psychological thought. I echo much of McLaughlin's appraisal of Fromm, but seek to draw out even further the social theoretical importance of his social psychology, particularly in relation to stressing the potential for a social theoretical reappropriation of his idea of social character.

Over and above these accounts I have sought to present Fromm as a consistent and before-all-else *radical humanist* operating with a qualified form of essentialism. I have tried to show that his humanism is sensible, viable, and desirable, and that the essentialism that underlies it is crucial to its success—enabling him to avoid the excesses of extreme relativism or absolute essentialism. In addition to this, I have tried to show that he is a unique contribution within the streams of Marxian and psychoanalytic theory, that his attempt at fusing Marx and Freud into a radical humanist form of social psychology deserves to be returned to, offering as it does the opportunity of ensuring the retention of the analytical categories of humanist thought in relation to social analysis. I have also tried to resurrect his call

for a renaissance of humanism, for a New Man and a New Society in which we practice the “art of living” based on the theoretical “science of man,” confronting in the process the firmly held opposition to such apparently simplistic “objectivism.” Further to this, I have tried to portray his gradualist socialism and secular messianism as unique though crucial contributions to genuine and feasible revolutionary progress, and that a concern with the ethical well-being and commitment of the individual is the basis of this progress. Finally, I have tried to show that his normative humanism and mysticism are productive and, in the latter case, surprising aids to this progress; that a concern with ethics need not be moralism, and that the deeply ingrained opposition to theological thought in contemporary secular societies has pernicious effects wider than its intention (and wider than is good for critical thinking). If I have achieved any of the above to a significant degree, Fromm ought to be seen as eminently worth returning to, and radical humanism ought to be seen as an appealing social theoretical position from which to commence social analysis.

### ***Outline and Structure***

In what follows I have striven to ensure that as little complexity as possible is lost in the inevitably truncated discussions that are characteristic of any expositive account. There are undoubtedly some ultimate insufficiencies, some curtailed and unsettled arguments, etc.; but, while this is the case, I hope there is also definite progression in the task of trying to make more understandable and palatable the underappreciated salience of Fromm’s thought. As much as the point was to be faithful to Fromm, it was also to be faithful to the *spirit* of Fromm and to try to move his thought forward wherever possible so that it could more readily face the malaises of twenty-first-century social theory. Part of the intention, then, was to search for the strongest and most consistent account of Fromm’s thought (particularly his radical humanism as manifested in this thought), and thereby to recover something of its progressive and constructive power. Naturally, as a text-based study, my methodological deliberations were not massively complex—it was plain that the study would consist of the analysis of Fromm’s texts and the ideas contained within them. The only serious deliberation was *what* to study. From a fairly early stage it was decided that a focus on the length and breadth of Fromm’s writings would be the most appropriate and revealing approach. Despite the challenges this posed (voluminous as these writings are), this seemed the only way to really get close to the heart of what radical humanism is, in Fromm’s writings. The fact that Fromm’s writings present a fairly unitary front meant that the difficulty was lessened

somewhat, although it did mean that vigilance was required in noting conceptual changes (not always stressed by Fromm) and in always seeking to weigh up what Fromm meant at a particular point as well as what his position could be said to be overall. In the process of researching for the present book, I visited the Fromm Archives in Tübingen, where I was given the opportunity to peruse Fromm's often lengthy correspondences, as well as unpublished papers and visual and audio recordings. This exploration of Fromm's unpublished writings and old audio and visual recordings was a crucial supplement to the textual analysis. This—added to the pursuit of every possible publication of Fromm's—was borne of the belief that the breadth and depth of a writer's thought is not necessarily contained in full in his or her published works, that their often private and less formalized utterances provide glimpses of a revealing truth in relation to that writer, aiding the appreciation and adequate representation of the totality of their thought. I believe that this policy helped greatly in piecing together a clearer idea of Fromm and his thought.

In terms of structure, I decided to open the book with an intellectual biography of Fromm. Chapter 1, then, consists of a summative account of Fromm's thinking, focusing on his major publications and the central events in his life. This is apt not only because of the general lack of awareness with regard to Fromm and his contribution to twentieth-century thought, but also by virtue of what is a generally continuous development of a central nucleus of ideas throughout his various writings. An intellectual biographical sketch, therefore, reveals something of the subtle shifts that took place in the development of Fromm's thought and which contribute to the radical humanist position that emerges from his body of work, providing in the process the unifying basis for later more substantive chapters. As part of this discussion, I offer an account of the formative role of the Judaic tradition as Fromm experienced it in his family milieu and as part of the Jewish community of early twentieth-century Frankfurt, as well as his conversion to psychoanalysis and eventual move away from orthodox psychoanalysis toward the development of his own distinctive psychoanalytic position. In addition to this, I offer an account of Fromm's largely unrecognized role in the early period of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt (including an account of his fractured relationship with Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse), his rise to "public intellectual" status in America (including his influence on the American political scene—from activist to presidential level), and his return to Europe and influence on Green-alternative movement there.

Chapter 2 is concerned with outlining the trajectory of Fromm's radical humanism in inaugural form, seeking, in the process, to provide conceptual

clarity on what can be said to be the roots of radical humanism as a system of thought taken in itself. The discussion here centers on the development of Fromm's radical humanism from its beginnings in the philosophical and hermeneutic traditions of Judaic thought, through the philosophical and sociological thought of Karl Marx and the psychoanalytic theory and practice of Sigmund Freud. What I have sought to convey here is Fromm's radical humanist *inversion* of Judaic principles and their unfolding into materialist and psychological domains. As part of this discussion I focus on Fromm's reading of the Old Testament and its later tradition as a humanistic development in thought, as well as a discussion of the influence of the mysticism of Habad Hasidism, showing how the spiritual autonomy and self-sufficiency Fromm finds embedded in these traditions can be said to form the central injunction of his radical humanism: namely, the idea that man must "develop his own powers" and reach the goal of complete independence, "penetrating through fictions and illusions to full awareness of reality." This discussion is then supplemented with an account of how Marx's thought can be said to represent the inversion of these Judaic influences, his penetrating engagement with Hegel and Feuerbach leading to an anthropological, materialist humanism that in many senses, mirrors Fromm's own. The chapter ends with a discussion of Freud as representing, in certain crucial respects, a development of Marx's materialism, offering what Fromm saw as the basis of a "science of the irrational" and, thus, a radical humanist conceptual instrument for more fully understanding "really existing active men."

Chapter 3 consists of a discussion of Fromm's radical humanist understanding of psychoanalysis relative to that of Freud and to his colleagues at the *Institut für Sozialforschung*. It opens with an account of what Fromm takes to be Freud's insufficient picture of relatedness, before moving on to offer a discussion of his "existential" view of the human condition and an account of the delineation of what he contends are the central "existential needs" common to humanity (central to this discussion is the conveyance of the fact that Fromm views the characteristic human passions not as the result of frustrated or sublimated physiological needs but as the "attempt to make sense out of life and to experience the optimum of intensity and strength under the given circumstances"). This is followed by an account of Fromm's own "science of character," demonstrating how it is built on but crucially diverges from Freud's prior theory, i.e., as deriving from the specific kinds of relatedness to the world gained in the process of living as opposed to the relatively closed and instinctually determined forms of relatedness posited by Freud. In addition to this, I engage in a thorough discussion and analysis of Fromm's own complex character typology (or characterology), including his account of the "marketing character," as well as the "biophilia/

necrophilia” and “having/being” alternatives. The chapter finishes with a defense of Fromm’s overall psychoanalytic position against the criticisms of his ex-colleagues at the *Institut für Sozialforschung*.

Chapter 4 is concerned with outlining Fromm’s psychoanalytic social psychology, including his concepts of “social character” and “the social unconscious” and his various social psychoanalytic case studies. Here I explain the genesis of Fromm’s whole sociopsychanalytical enterprise as found in his attempt to produce a functioning synthesis of Marx and Freud and how this effective melding of historical materialism and psychology seeks to deal with the problem of the extent to which the personality structure of the individual is determined by social factors and, conversely, with the extent to which psychological factors themselves influence and alter the social process. As part of this discussion I explain how the goal of psychoanalytic social psychology is centered on discerning the psychic traits common to the members of a group and to explaining their unconscious roots in terms of shared life experiences (to “investigate how certain psychic attitudes common to members of a group are related to their common life experiences”). I also discuss Fromm’s introduction of the idea of the “socially conditioned filters” of *language, logic, and taboos*. The chapter finishes with a qualified defense of Fromm’s psychoanalytic social psychology, praising it as a radical humanist, Marxian attempt to improve upon the sexual reductionism of the early psychoanalytic researchers and to extend Weber’s analyses into regions where he had not ventured (and thus as pointing out the right path for a Marxian social psychology, despite the fact that his analyses may have sometimes fallen short of fulfilling the demands that he set for them).

Chapter 5 essentially consists of a defense of (Fromm’s radical) humanism against what can be called the “anti-humanist paradigm” that is prevalent in many sectors of the social sciences and humanities today. As part of this paradigm, I discuss the anti-humanism of Louis Althusser, Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Jean François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, showing how their thought is constructed in opposition to the axiomatic precepts of humanism (namely, the idea of “man,” of “the subject,” and of “the self,” etc.). What I then try to show is how the positions of these thinkers—which are concerned at base with the problematization of the naïve ethnocentricity of the classical humanist constructs—have a tendency to get caught up in this very problematization, in excessive attributions of linguistic and cultural determination or one-sided stresses on fragmentation and discontinuity, and which consequently tends to lack any significant reference to the human being and, thereby, a convincing account of subjectivity. I finish the chapter with a defense of the idea of the subject and the self (citing Margaret Archer,

Antonio Damasio, Clifford Geertz, Melford Spiro, Nancy Chodorow, and Gananath Obeyesekere) against the idea that the self is wholly a product of socialization and against the idea of multiple selves, which implies that there can be no dominant and “authentic self,” and, therefore, no sovereign subject.

Chapter 6 seeks to resurrect Fromm’s call for a “renaissance of humanism” as manifested in the creation of a New Man and a New Society. It begins with an account and defense of Fromm’s reading of humanism back into Western history (based on the identification of what Fromm took to be its central idea and experience namely, man as an end) as well as a defense of this account from potential accusations of “historical solecism” or “teleological thinking.” From this discussion, it moves on to an account of what can be said to be Fromm’s narrative of the “forgetting of humanism” that has taken place over the past three centuries or more, including his account of the loss of the religio-philosophical worldview, with its characteristic questioning of existence, of our ability to connect with our existence and to recognize the norms and values which follow from it (his normative humanist or naturalistic ethical position is stressed). After this, it deals with Fromm’s account of what he takes to be the profound *indifference* to the human individual which predominates in our age, cloaked by an illusory individualism that conceals a “pathology of normalcy.” Central to this discussion is what Fromm identifies as our idolatrous worship of things, and the greed, narcissism, and destructiveness that goes with it, as well as his descriptive account of alienation in various spheres of life, including detachment from real, meaningful participation in work and politics and the triumph of reified ethics. The chapter finishes with a defense of the pertinence and salience of Fromm’s call for inner and outer transformation and for the normative humanist philosophy that underpins it, warding off criticisms of outmodedness, conformity, utopianism, and authoritarianism, and lauding his idea of the “paradox of hope.”

In the conclusion, I stress the underlying sophistication of Fromm’s radical humanist thought and its potential to act as the basis upon which the reclamation of the central analytical and normative categories and schemas of traditional humanism is possible. In particular, I stress Fromm’s policy of refined continuation in relation to the classical humanist tradition and how this policy allows a fruitful mixture of essentialism and constructionism that can accommodate concerns over naïveté and ethnocentrism. In addition to this, I stress the distinctness of Fromm’s radical humanism as well as showing how it relates to previous forms of humanism, and how it can facilitate a renaissance of humanism that is stronger than was found in these previous forms. As part of this discussion, I describe Fromm as primarily a

beginning, as opposed to a terminus, but a fertile beginning who calls us on to further development. I end the piece with a discussion of the idea of a contemporary “science of man” filled with the humanistic spirit, and capable of helping social theory progressing toward its historical role of realizing a more effective and enlightened praxis.

### ***Note on Terminology***

From the early stages of writing I was confronted with the terminological problem of rendering consistent, but also appropriate, my discussion of the central proposition of humanist thought: namely, “the human,” or, in the older language of Fromm and his influences, “man.” This was an issue that proved difficult to resolve satisfactorily, considering my reliance at certain points on quoted material (and paraphrased discussion next to this quoted material), and which ultimately led to my use of the gender-biased noun “man” at times when I would otherwise not have done so. Wherever possible—that is, when not connected to a discussion of an older author for whom “man” was a regular feature of their discussion, or when a change in terminology did not disrupt the conceptual flow of the discussion—I have tried to speak of “humans,” “human beings,” “Homo sapiens,” “human-kind,” “us,” “our,” etc. I was partly encouraged to adopt this approach of accommodation in light of Fromm’s explanation as to why he persisted in using the gender-biased “man” despite awareness of, and sympathy with, the argument against this usage. Citing the lack of a common gender third-person singular noun in English (his adopted language) and his prior usage of the generic, sexless *Mensch* in his native German, Fromm explains that, though aware of the issue of sexism in language, he wanted to retain the term “man” as “a term of reference for the species *Homo sapiens*.” “The use of “man” in this context,” he states, “without differentiation of sex, has a long tradition in humanist thinking, and I do not believe we can do without a word that denotes clearly the human species character. No such difficulty exists in the German language; one uses the word *Mensch* to refer to the non-sex-differentiated being. But even in English the word ‘man’ is used in the same sex-undifferentiated way as the German *Mensch*, meaning human being or the human race. I think it is advisable to restore its nonsexual meaning to the word ‘man’ rather than substituting awkward sounding words” (2008 [1976]: xx). While not in full agreement with Fromm here, I was somewhat reassured by his explicit discussion of the issue, and have therefore sought to follow his practice where it seemed most appropriate to do so.



## CHAPTER 1

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# The Life and Writings of a Radical Humanist

Considering the comparative disregard of Fromm's thought with that of other thinkers from the same period—particularly his Frankfurt School associates and contemporaries, Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin,<sup>1</sup> and also slightly later thinkers such as R. D. Laing, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, etc.—there is particular benefit in engaging in an intellectual biographical account of Fromm at the outset. This is apt not only because of the general lack of awareness with regard to Fromm and his contribution to twentieth-century thought, but also by virtue of the impressive degree of continuity that characterizes his writings. An intellectual biographical sketch can therefore reveal something of the subtle shifts that took place in the development of Fromm's thought and that contribute to the radical humanist position that emerges from his body of work. Inclusion of a biographical sketch is of particular importance in the case of Fromm in that, as someone for whom human worth was measured by actions and deeds as much as by words, it will reveal something of the extent to which he attempted to enact his philosophy in his personal life, or at least reveal something of his preoccupation with humanism in both theoretical *and* practical terms. There is also a more utilitarian reason for opening with such a sketch: outlining Fromm's intellectual biographical details, including a broadly chronological listing of his major publications, will help to situate the discussion of the later chapters in relation to his life, thereby freeing up these chapters for more substantive and unencumbered discussion.

Most of what is written in this chapter has been drawn from Rainer Funk's *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas—An Illustrated Biography*. Lawrence Friedman's recent full-length biography—*The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's*

*Prophet*—and some unpublished correspondence sourced from the Fromm archives provided some important and illuminating additions. Other than Funk’s and Friedman’s biographies, there has been relatively little written about Fromm’s life. Although it is true that there are bits and pieces of biography to be found in certain publications, they are generally found in studies of Fromm that are rarely read, or in studies of the Frankfurt School that generally tend to consider Fromm from the point of view of the School itself, and particularly as part of the narrative of his departure from it. I have sought to ensure that Fromm’s role in the early period of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* features as an important part of the present discussion, but that it does so from the point of view, and as part, of the story of Fromm’s life taken in and of itself.

### ***Beginnings***

Fromm was born to Orthodox Jewish parents in Frankfurt am Main on March 23, 1900. His father, Naphtali, a wine merchant, was the son of a rabbi and descended, as did his mother Rosa, from a distinguished line of rabbinical scholars, notable among who was Rabbi Seligmann Bär Bamberger, author of numerous halakhic works and a central figure in the nineteenth-century Orthodox Jewish movement. Crucially, while Fromm was still a child, his great-uncle, Ludwig Krause, a renowned Talmudist from Posen, came to stay in the family home, during which time he gave Fromm his first scriptural lessons. As Fromm makes clear in a rare autobiographical sketch, what interested him in these lessons were the prophetic writings of the Old Testament and, in particular, their vision of “the End of Days” or “Messianic Time”:

I was brought up in a religious Jewish family, and the writings of the Old Testament touched me and exhilarated me more than anything else I was exposed to. Not all of them to the same degree; I was bored by or even disliked the history of the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews; I had no use for the stories of Mordecai or Esther; nor did I—at that time—appreciate the Song of Songs. But the story of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, of Adam’s pleading with God for the salvation of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, of Jonah’s mission to Nineveh, and many other parts of the bible impressed me deeply. But more than anything else, I was moved by the prophetic writings, by Isaiah, Amos, Hosea; not so much by their warnings and their announcements of disaster, but by their promise of the “end of days,” when nations “shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift sword