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## Fromm's Concern With Feminine Values

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### Introduction

Our view of human nature has always oscillated between two extremes, one optimistic, the other pessimistic. The optimistic end is well represented by Rousseau, according to whom man is basically good, but corrupted by society. The opposite end is represented by Hobbes, who believed in man's innate aggressiveness („homo homini lupus“). Man's violent history seems to bear out the Hobbesian view. Until recently, Darwin's theory of evolution also seemed to confirm this view, with its emphasis on the struggle for survival. Freud, too, was basically pessimistic in his view of human nature. Fromm, instead, was committed to the alternative view. He acknowledged the widespread occurrence of destructive aggressiveness (Fromm, 1973), but saw it as the effect of an unnatural cultural environment. Bowlby (1984) held a similar position.

Riane Eisler (1987) pointed out that the two polarities have a gender connotation. She distinguishes between a dominator model of society, which is characterized by male dominance, and a partnership model, typical of gynocentric societies. In this paper I point out that Fromm, following Bachofen, was a pioneer in emphasizing the gender connotation of the two alternatives.

Fromm showed his interest in feminine culture with his 1934 paper on Bachofen's *Mother Right*. He went back to this theme in Chapter 7 of *The Forgotten Language* (1951) and in Chapter 6 of *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (1970). Finally, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) he discussed at length the excavations at Çatal Hüyük, which provide empirical support for the existence of a Neolithic culture characterized by feminine values. The existence of a female culture has been upheld by several feminist writers, notably by Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), in which, however, Fromm's contributions are not acknowledged.

### Bachofen

Fromm showed an early concern with feminine culture with his 1934 paper on Bachofen's *Mother Right*, which was originally published in German (Fromm, 1934). An



English translation appeared in 1970 in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (Fromm, 1970), and has recently been reprinted, together with other papers on kindred subjects, in *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy: About Gender* (Fromm, 1997). This second English edition does not incorporate the notes of the first.

Johann Jakob Bachofen was a Swiss author, whose main work, *Mutterrecht* (*Mother Right*) was published in 1861 (Bachofen 1861). The main point of his book was that a major change occurred in our cultural evolution with the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. Bachofen was an expert in law, and his object matter was mother right and its transformations in Greece, Egypt, India and Central Asia. He based much of his evidence on the examination of myths and literary work. Fromm found confirmation of Bachofen's ideas in the later work of the British anthropologist Robert Briffault, author of *The Mothers* (Briffault, 1927).

One of the most famous examples of Bachofen's use of literary work is his analysis of the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus, quoted by Fromm in *The Forgotten Language* (Fromm, 1951) – which, as you know, is based on lectures given at the White Institute. In the trilogy, Clytemnestra kills her husband Agamemnon to avenge the death of their daughter Iphigenia, who had ostensibly been sacrificed by Agamemnon in order to obtain success in the Trojan war. Their son Orestes, in turn, avenges his father's death by killing his mother and her lover, Aegisthus. As Fromm says (1951, p. 206), „The Erinyes, representatives of the old mother-goddesses and the matriarchal system, persecute Orestes, while Apollo and Athene ..., the representatives of the new patriarchal system, are on Orestes' side.” Fromm goes on to comment: „For the matriarchal world ... matricide is the ultimate and unforgivable crime. From the patriarchal point of view ... patricide is the paramount crime „ (ibid.).

It is odd that Fromm misquotes Bachofen on one point, when he says that Clytemnestra had killed her husband in order not to give up her lover (Fromm, 1951, p. 206). Bachofen, instead, clearly states Clytemnestra's matriarchal motivation: „Clytemnestra's crime is justified by the killing of Iphigenia” (Bachofen, 1861, p. 163 of the Italian translation). Fromm may have derived this mistake from Engels, who makes the same misinterpretation (Engels, 1884, p. 34 of the Italian translation).

Fromm then goes on to apply a similar analysis to the Oedipus trilogy by Sophocles. Instead of emphasizing *Oedipus Rex*, as Freud had done (Freud, 1913), Fromm extends his analysis to the entire Oedipal trilogy, including *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. Fromm shows that in all the trilogy a father-son conflict is a prominent feature. He concludes that „an analysis of the whole Oedipus trilogy will show that the struggle against paternal authority is its main theme” (op. cit., p. 204), and „is to be understood as an attack against the victorious patriarchal order [represented by Laius and Creon] by the ... defeated matriarchal system [represented by Oedipus, Haemon and Antigone],” (op. cit., p. 210). „The matriarchal system is that of blood relationship as fundamental and indestructible tie ... The patriarchal system is [that] of order and authority, of obedience and hierarchy” (op. cit., p. 222). Fromm thus „argued that the ambivalence towards the father that Freud universalized was a social artifact, not a biological given” (Burston, 1991, p. 99).

In his terminology, Fromm still follows Bachofen and uses the term „matriarchy”.



Modern anthropology rejects the concept of matriarchy. According to Marvin Harris (1980, p. 482), „the idea that matriarchies once existed often arises from a confusion between matrilineality and matriarchy”. Also a modern feminist author like Riane Eisler (1987) challenges the concept of matriarchy. In her view, patriarchy follows a „dominator” model, based on ranking. She prefers to describe what used to be called matriarchy as a „partnership” model, based on linking. This is also what Fromm means, despite his use of the antiquated and misleading term of matriarchy. Notwithstanding the obvious convergence of Eisler’s views with Fromm’s, Eisler only mentions Bachofen once in a footnote (Eisler, 1987, p. 221), and Fromm’s name never appears in her book. This neglect of Fromm is a familiar occurrence, not only in the psychoanalytic literature, and leads to a dispersal of forces in worth-while struggles.

### Recent Archaeological Evidence

Recent archaeological findings (already presented, in a slightly different form, in this journal: Bacciagaluppi 2000) seem to provide evidence for Bachofen’s views, namely for the existence of peaceful and cooperative communities in the early Neolithic, at the beginning of the agricultural revolution, characterized by the worship of a Mother Goddess, as testified by the so-called Venus images.

This culture seems to go back to the Upper Paleolithic. Egalitarianism, according to Boehm (quoted by Sober and Wilson, 1998, p. 179) characterizes the majority of surviving hunter-gatherer societies, and probably characterizes all human groups in the Upper Paleolithic (ibid., p. 186). The Upper Paleolithic, in which Venus images were also produced, was apparently also characterized by the cult of a Mother Goddess. The fact that this peaceful culture goes back to the Paleolithic indicates that it is the product of biological, not cultural, evolution.

The recent archaeological evidence is provided by the town of Çatal Hüyük, excavated in Turkey by the British archaeologist James Mellaart (1967). Fromm was quick to see the importance of these findings, and quoted them extensively in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm, 1973). The most striking finding is that Çatal Hüyük shows no signs of damage through warfare for over fifteen hundred years (Mellaart, quoted in Eisler, 1987, pp. 13-14).

Other excavations were taking place in the same years, of which Fromm was not aware, but which confirmed Mellaart’s results. The excavations carried out in the Danube region by the University of California archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (quoted by Eisler, 1987) show that these early Neolithic settlements had no defensive structures. They were not built on hill-tops and were not surrounded by fortifications.

A still more recent search of the archaeological record by Keeley (quoted by Boehm, 1999, p. 221) reveals no definite evidence of massacres before the Neolithic.

According to Riane Eisler (1987, Chapter 3), the highest stage reached by this peaceful culture was the civilization of Minoan Crete, which was discovered at the turn of the twentieth century by Sir Arthur Evans. This was a technologically advanced and socially complex culture, in which the economy prospered, the arts flourished, and, again, there were no signs of war. Four scripts were discovered in Crete, bringing this civilization, by archaeological definition, into the historic or literate period (Eisler, 1987, p. 30).



This peaceful and gynocentric culture was replaced by an androcentric culture through successive invasions by pastoral nomads from marginal areas. This androcentric culture was warlike, hierarchical and worshipped male gods. Although the first invasions took place in prehistorical times, this pattern continued in historical times. We are all familiar with the Aryan invasions of Greece and India, and, more recently, with the successive barbarian invasions which caused the fall of the Roman Empire.

I have discussed in a paper presented at the XI World Congress of Psychiatry in Hamburg (Bacciagaluppi, 2000), the nature of this transformation, whether biological or cultural. In any case, Fromm was fully aware of its implications. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm, 1973) he makes use of the famous model of Monkey Hill in London Zoo. It is a model of the adverse effects of an unnatural environment. The community of baboons on Monkey Hill was observed by Zuckermann in the late Twenties and discussed at length in the pre-war book on aggressiveness co-authored by Bowlby (Durbin and Bowlby, 1939). In the unnatural conditions of captivity, fierce fights broke out, which were „carried much further ... than they would be in nature” (op. cit., p. 55n) and ended in the killing of many animals. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm (1973) commented bitterly: „‘Civilized’ man has always lived in the ‘Zoo’”

This gloomy conclusion may be offset by the hypothesis I put forth in Hamburg, according to which the androcentric culture, however entrenched, is not a result of biological evolution but a successful cultural variant. The inborn opposite tendency towards a peaceful culture may be seen both in its periodical tendency to re-emerge in history, and in the innate strivings towards health which we may observe in our patients and which Fromm (Bacciagaluppi, 1989) emphasized together with Sullivan (1940) and Fromm-Reichmann (1960).

### The Androcentric Nature of Traditional Psychoanalysis

The interplay between a dominant androcentric and a defeated gynocentric culture may also be observed in the development of psychoanalysis. In his first clinical observations Freud described the pathological effects of a violent androcentric culture on its subordinate and weaker members. After what Bowlby (1984) called Freud’s „disastrous volte-face” of 1897, psychoanalysis took on the typical authoritarian and hierarchical features of the androcentric culture. The inborn gynocentric tendencies tried to re-emerge with Ferenczi, but the authoritarian establishment quickly reasserted itself.

Shortly after Ferenczi’s death, Fromm (1935) published a sociological critique of Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Fromm – who at that time expressed the outlook of the Freudo-Marxists and of the Frankfurt School in particular – Freud actually presents the „capitalistic character” as the norm. Later in the paper, Fromm makes explicit reference to Ferenczi and to Freud’s authoritarian disapproval of dissident followers.

In his book on Zen (Suzuki et al., 1960), Fromm goes back to Ferenczi, „who in the last years of his life postulated that it was not enough for the analyst to observe and to interpret; that he had to be able to love the patient with the very love which the patient had needed as a child” (op. cit., p. 111).

It is odd that in his 1935 paper Fromm criticizes the Freudian establishment as typi-





cal of the capitalistic character structure, namely in terms of a comparatively recent form of alienation, although he already had at his disposal the much more radical critique of Bachofen, rooted in prehistory, and in his 1934 paper he had already quoted Engels' great appreciation of Bachofen.

In terms of this much more radical perspective, we may view Ferenczi's loving approach, Fromm's challenge of Freudian authoritarianism, and Bowlby's establishment of the biological basis of love, as the re-emergence of our inborn gynocentric culture within the androcentric domain of psychoanalysis.

### Clinical Vignette

I can quote a very recent vignette from the Second World Congress for Psychotherapy which was held in Vienna in July 1999. At a meeting I had an exchange with an elderly and prominent member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. For one thing, he told me that he considers Adler's and Jung's splits as psychoanalytic, but not Fromm's: i.e., he does not consider Fromm a psychoanalyst. Aside from the personal rudeness, since I had presented myself as an admirer of Fromm's, this is a good example, more than sixty years later, of the arrogant disapproval of dissident followers which Fromm himself had emphasized in his 1935 paper in reference to Ferenczi. Another memorable statement of this distinguished colleague was that he considers the therapy of psychotics as an exercise in masochism. This can be compared with what Ann-Louise Silver, a representative of the Chestnut Lodge tradition, has to say: „Whether one specializes in working with these challenging patients or not, such experience will inform every aspect of one's career. I believe patients suffering from psychosis are best able to help us get in touch with our own primitive aspects, and to shape our own therapeutic potential. These patients are perhaps our best teachers” (Silver, 1999).

I consider the elderly Viennese as a good example of the androcentric culture in psychoanalysis, and Ann-Louise Silver as a representative of the gynocentric culture.

### Conclusion

At the least, the existence of innate prosocial tendencies, as exemplified by the gynocentric culture of the Upper Paleolithic and Early Neolithic, can justify a belief in innate strivings towards health and thus a basic therapeutic optimism. This approach on the part of psychoanalysis could merge with similar movements at a social level, such as feminism, which tend to bring about the re-emergence of these innate tendencies, and could thus provide psychoanalysis with a wider social aim in addition to its more narrowly professional ones.

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