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The Relevance of Erich Fromm

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Introduction

In their classical book, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) distinguish between drive and relational models in psychoanalysis. They place Erich Fromm firmly within the relational model and characterize his approach as “Humanistic Psychoanalysis”. On p. 106 they comment: “Fromm addressed many contemporary psychoanalytic issues decades before they were popularized by other theorists”. Among these issues they mention the notions of narcissism and symbiosis. “Yet Fromm’s contributions to the development of psychoanalytic thought have gone unrecognized in many quarters”. They ascribe this to Fromm’s prevailing role of “social philosopher”.

I could add two further examples of Fromm’s role as precursor. (1) In *Man for Himself* (Fromm, 1947) he writes of “the weakening of the self and the substitution of a *pseudo self*”. He thus antedates Winnicott’s paper on true and false self (Winnicott, 1960) by 13 years. (2) In a 1964 case supervised by Fromm, unpublished in his lifetime and edited by me (Fromm, 1991), he states: “The trauma is something which happens in the environment, which is a life experience, a real-life experience”. Here Fromm is using Bowlby’s expression “real-life experience” word for word, certainly without having read it in Bowlby, because this paper precedes *Attachment*, the first volume of Bowlby’s trilogy (Bowlby, 1969) by five years.

After having been a best-selling author (his 1956 book, *The Art of Loving*, sold more than twenty-five million copies), Fromm has become a somewhat forgotten figure, except for those institutions in which he was active—the William Alanson White Institute in New York, the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute, an Italian group, and, at an international level, the IEFS (International Erich Fromm Society) and the IFPS (International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies). This may be the result of the “wall of silence” (mentioned in the title of a book by Alice Miller, 1997) erected by mainstream psychoanalysis around heretics such as Fromm and Miller herself. This silence was broken very recently by a biography, *The Lives of Erich Fromm. Love’s Prophet*, by Lawrence Friedman (2013), the result of much careful research.

In what follows I wish to expand on what I said above about Fromm’s role as a precursor, and show his connections with three developments following on his death in 1980: the trauma literature, attachment theory and the evolution of altruism.

Trauma

In his remark on real-life experience, reported above, Fromm also antedates the vast literature on trauma which developed in the 1970s, following two strands: the stress of feminists on the abuse of women and children, and that of Vietnam war veterans on war trauma. This led to the definition of PTSD and to its incorporation into the DSM-



III in 1980—a development Fromm did not witness because it occurred the year he died. The trauma literature then continued to expand, for example with the book by Judith Herman (1992), which is an overview of the whole field. The relational school lacked an integration with the trauma literature. This was accomplished in the Nineties by two outstanding books: Davies & Frawley (1994), on the sexual abuse of girls, and Gartner (1999), on the sexual abuse of boys.

Fromm also anticipated Bowlby on the issue of trauma. Originally, Bowlby was concerned with real-life events such as the separation of the child from the mother due to hospitalization, because they lent themselves more readily to quantitative research (the age of the child, the length of the separation). These observations led to the description of the three phases of a child's reaction to separation: protest, despair and detachment. Bowlby only acknowledged the importance of traumatic events late in his life, in a paper on "Violence in the family" (Bowlby, 1984), in which he wrote: "as psychoanalysts and psychotherapists we have been appallingly slow to wake up to the prevalence and far-reaching consequences of violent behaviour between members of a family".

In that same paper Bowlby speaks of Freud's "disastrous volte-face in 1897", when, in a letter to Fliess of September 21, Freud decided that the traumatic events reported by his patients were only due to their fantasies. Freud then proceeded to impose this view in an authoritarian way to generations of psychoanalysts. When towards the end of his life Ferenczi re-discovered the importance of trauma and presented his views in 1932 (Ferenczi, 1933), he was strongly disapproved by Freud and all his loyal followers.

Thus, many of us may not have examined our traumas in our personal analysis. The remedy to this is self-analysis, which is the theme of a book by Karen Horney (Horney, 1942). In keeping with his remark on trauma reported above, Fromm also carried out self-analysis systematically, although his work in

this connection remained unpublished during his lifetime and only appeared posthumously (Fromm, 1993). He says: "Once a patient has learned enough to make use of the tools himself, he should begin analyzing himself. And that is a lifelong task that we carry on until the day we die" (Fromm, 1981).

In view of his many physical ailments, it is open to question how effective this practice was for Fromm. At an intellectual level he was well aware of his childhood traumas. He knew he had a depressed mother and an anxious father, both of whom wanted to keep him bound. However, as we know from modern neurobiology, a child's experience in the first year of life, when the left hemisphere is as yet undeveloped, is not encoded in words and is only retained in implicit memory. The adult part can only reach the child's experience through feelings. If this does not happen, the suffering child within can only express itself through the body. As Alice Miller says in the title of another of her books (Miller, 2006), "the body never lies". Whereas Ferenczi constantly addressed the suffering child, Fromm, at his peril, only stressed the later development of the child's potentialities.

Fromm's first wife, Frieda Reichmann, who was originally his first analyst, was eleven years older than he. He then had a liaison with Karen Horney, who was fifteen years older. He was obviously looking for a mother figure. When he separated from Frieda Reichmann before the war, Fromm had three bouts of tuberculosis. As reported by Rainer Funk, Fromm's literary executor and first biographer (Funk, 1983, p. 59), Georg Groddeck was very resolute in ascribing Fromm's illness to his difficulty in separating from Frieda Reichmann. His second wife, Henny Gurland, was his own age but was ill and eventually committed suicide. Fromm was very caregiving towards her—presumably, what his depressed mother implicitly asked him to be towards herself, in what Bowlby calls role reversal. When finally Fromm married his third wife, Annis Freeman, who was younger than he and with whom he was very much in love, it was too



late to have children—something for which Fromm suffered much, as reported by Friedman in his biography (Friedman, 2013, p. 23). Possibly as an expression of this pain, after the war, starting in 1966, Fromm had four infarctions, the last of which was fatal. This suffering may have been due to the frustration of a basic need described by Hamilton's (1964) kin-selection theory, whereby we are impelled to gain genetic representation in future generations and to bestow altruistic behaviors on kin.

Attachment theory

In a recent book (Bacciagaluppi, 2012) I discuss in detail the relationship between Fromm and Bowlby, viewed as two great, and complementary, representatives of the relational model on the two sides of the Atlantic. Here I give another example of Fromm's role as a precursor. In *Man for Himself* (Fromm, 1947, pp. 106-107 of the Fawcett edition) Fromm writes: "Motherly love does not depend on conditions which the child has to fulfill in order to be loved; it is unconditional, based only upon the child's request and the mother's response. (...) To love a person productively implies to care and to feel responsible for his life, not only for his physical existence but for the growth and development of all his human powers". Here Fromm is anticipating Bowlby's view of the attachment relationship as the satisfaction of two basic and successive inborn needs: the earlier need for attachment and the later need for autonomy. Bowlby synthesized these two needs with his definition of the attachment relationship as "a secure base from which to explore".

Fromm would thus have found attachment theory very congenial. In the Fromm Archive in Tübingen there is a copy of *Attachment*, the first volume of Bowlby's trilogy (Bowlby, 1969), with annotations in Fromm's handwriting. Fromm, however, did not live to witness the completion of the trilogy with *Loss* (Bowlby, 1980), which was published the same year in which Fromm died, nor, obviously, the extensive empirical research to which the theory gave rise. Mary Ainsworth devised an experimental setting called the

Strange Situation, in which a child is observed in different combinations: with its mother, with a stranger, and when the mother returns, which is the most significant moment. This enabled her to describe secure attachment and two types of anxious attachment: ambivalent, or resistant, and avoidant. Mary Main later described a third type of anxious attachment, the D-type (disorganized-disoriented), which is the severest type.

Another point on which Bowlby and Fromm converged was the importance of ethology, namely the study of animal behavior in natural conditions. The study of ethology led Bowlby to see that humans have attachment behavior in common with all other mammals and with many birds. The time dimension of this inter-species and inter-class connection is millions of years. Likewise, also Fromm, by training a sociologist, in his old age turned to the study of ethology in order to write *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm, 1973), in refutation of Freud's and Lorenz's view of innate aggression.

One later research in the field of attachment theory has special relevance to Fromm's interests. Before World War Two Fromm cooperated with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in developing a critical theory of society. In this connection, concerned by the rise of Nazism, in 1929 Fromm started a study of the character structure of German workers, in order to investigate their readiness to oppose a totalitarian regime (Fromm, 1936). In this work Fromm applied his concept of the social character, whereby society, acting through the family, creates in children the character structure most suitable for its own perpetuation. This concept—possibly, Fromm's most important contribution - was set forth in his first book, *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm, 1941).

In 1985, Grossmann and his co-workers (Grossman et al., 1985) carried out a research on the quality of attachment in children in North and South Germany. They found a much higher percentage of avoidant attachment in North German children. This was correlated with the quality of maternal holding. "The ideal is an (...) infant who does



not make demands on the parents but rather unquestioningly obeys their commands” (Grossmann et al., op. cit., p. 253). I suggest that in these avoidant children we see the early ontogeny of the authoritarian character.

Bowlby himself was not a social critic, but his concept of the EEA (Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness), namely, the environment to which humans were adapted in the course of biological evolution, provides an evolutionary basis for social critique. If cultural evolution leads to an environment that departs too widely from the original one, psychopathology at an individual level and social pathology such as war will be the result.

In his 1973 book, Fromm refers to a little-known pre-war book by Bowlby on war (Durbin and Bowlby, 1939), which reports on Solly Zuckerman’s observations on baboons living on Monkey Hill in London Zoo: the unnatural conditions of overcrowding led to aggressiveness and killing. This may be viewed as a model for the development of what Fromm in his 1973 book calls “malignant aggression” in humans. Through the population explosion and the pollution of the environment, also humans live in increasingly unnatural conditions of their own making. It was Fromm’s book that called my attention to Bowlby’s pre-war book, on which I later commented (Bacciagaluppi, 1989).

The evolution of altruism

In his pre-war work, Fromm made a most important contribution when he rediscovered Bachofen’s concept of matriarchy (Fromm, 1934). Bachofen was a Swiss author who in 1861 described matriarchy as a phase characterizing human evolution in prehistory, which was later superseded by patriarchy. These two phases followed entirely different values. In matriarchy, the maternal values of caregiving and sharing prevailed. Patriarchy, on the contrary, was based on male domination, was hierarchical and warlike. In his 1973 book Fromm went back to this early concern of his when he reported on the archaeological excavations carried out by James Mellaart in the prehis-

torical town of Çatal Hüyük in Turkey (ancient Anatolia), which provided evidence of the existence of a peace-loving community of the Early Neolithic, in which the Mother Goddess was worshiped. This was archaeological evidence of the existence of the matriarchal culture. Fromm was not aware of similar findings by Marija Gimbutas in the Danube region. She observed that towns were not surrounded by walls and were not built on hilltops for safety. According to Gimbutas, this peaceful civilization was brought to an end by repeated waves of invasion by warlike pastoralists from the steppes of Central Asia.

After Fromm’s death, these findings were discussed by Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade* (Eisler, 1987). She defines matriarchy as a partnership model and patriarchy as a dominator model. She points out that the maternal culture persisted into historic times on the island of Crete.

There is also ethnological evidence for the existence of an original peaceful culture. The patriarchal invaders easily overcame the peaceful communities of the Early Neolithic and spread all over the world, except for the most inhospitable parts of our planet, such as the Arctic and the Kalahari desert, where there was nothing to predate. The inhabitants of these regions, the Eskimos and the Bushmen, were peaceful. If there was a shortage of supplies, such as water, the reaction of the Bushmen was to disperse, that of the patriarchal predators was to fight.

Still later, light was shed on these issues by evolutionary biology, which described the evolution of altruism in prehistory. An earlier contribution in this field was that by Hamilton (1964), mentioned above. In this connection, two important books appeared in the Nineties: *Unto Others* (Sober and Wilson, 1998) and *Hierarchy in the Forest* (Boehm, 1999). In particular, on p. 65 of his book, Boehm reports Knauff’s suggestion that human evolution has followed a U-shaped trajectory. The first vertical part, comprising the early hominids, was characterized by “strong degrees of despotism”. In the horizontal part, which lasted tens of thousands of years, egalitarian behavior evolved among the



hunter-gatherers. Finally, in the second vertical section of the U, “not too long after the domestication of plants and animals” (which took place around ten thousand years ago), a despotic male hierarchy was once more established, by which we are still afflicted. What needs to be emphasized is the different time dimension of the three parts of the U-shaped curve. Whereas the horizontal part is a product of biological evolution and is in our genes, the second vertical part—the establishment of patriarchy—is a product of cultural evolution in contrast to biological evolution. It has only lasted a few thousand years and is therefore not in our genes. Every child that is born is predisposed to live in the original maternal culture. Patriarchy has to assert itself at every generation by a violent and traumatizing socialization. An example is the corporal punishment of children, decried by Alice Miller in many of her books. This practice is outlawed in Sweden but is still prevalent elsewhere.

Thus, modern evolutionary biology vindicates Fromm’s optimism concerning human nature. Our biological makeup is in favor of developments such as pacifism and feminism that seek to modify our cultural evolution and re-establish the original innate maternal culture. The patriarchal culture, however, tends to react very aggressively to this re-emergence. Examples are given below in the field of psychoanalysis.

Discussion and Conclusion

In psychoanalysis, as Greenberg and Mitchell point out (1983, p. 182), Ferenczi may well be considered as the initiator of the relational model, which holds that the basic human need is that for relatedness, of which the primary example is the mother-child relation, rather than for the satisfaction of physiological needs, as the later Freud maintained. The distinction between the two needs is obvious in a naturalistic observation: chicks follow the hen for protection from predators and not in order to be fed, for they are quite capable of pecking food for themselves. The distinction is also evident in experimental observations. Harlow observed that rhesus baby monkeys, after having re-

ceived nourishment from a wire surrogate mother holding a bottle of milk, would turn to a surrogate mother covered with cloth for “contact comfort” (Bowlby, 1969, p. 213).

Soon after Ferenczi’s death in 1933, Fromm (1935) wrote a paper in which he defended Ferenczi and challenged Freud’s “patricentric” position. He viewed the disapproval of dissident followers such as Ferenczi as evidence of Freud’s basic identification with prevailing social norms. He stressed that one of the causes of the conflict with Freud was Ferenczi’s claim that one should “show love” to the patient.

In his contribution to the book on Zen Buddhism, Fromm (Suzuki, Fromm and De Martino, 1960, p. 111) claims that the “concept of the detached observer was modified (...) first by Ferenczi, who in the last years of his life postulated that (...) the analyst (...) had to be able to love the patient with the very love which the patient had needed as a child”.

Ferenczi, Fromm and Bowlby may thus be viewed as representing the re-emergence in psychoanalysis of the original loving maternal culture, which elicited strong disapproval from the patriarchal orthodox. They declared Ferenczi to be insane, and erected the wall of silence around Fromm. Bowlby, however, persisted in his research, and attachment theory is now widely accepted in the scientific community. As regards Fromm in particular, through his multiple contributions and the connections I have pointed out, he may be considered to be still centrally relevant to psychoanalysis.

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