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Fromm's revolutionary civics: Cultivating the virtue of disobedience

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In the 1950s, America was hardly a freely thinking society. There was McCarthyism in Washington, and every state legislature had a little McCarthy. There were witch-hunts in universities, and Hollywood had a red scare where many progressive artists, like Charlie Chaplin, left the country or quit the industry. There was an arms race, brinkmanship, and glorification of big bombers and big bombs. There was “ethnic cleansing” against Mexican Americans in 1954 (Eisenhower called it “Operation Wetback”), and southern states ferociously defended Jim Crow segregation. This was a chilling time for social critics generally, with social science being crafted as a tool for the Cold War and philosophers being discouraged from engaging in issues around them.

Fromm intervened into this period rather well, particularly with *Sane Society* (1954) and his pamphlet *Will Man Prevail?: a socialist manifesto and program*, written for, and reproduced by, the Socialist Party in 1960, attempted to expand the imagination of liberals and leftists to create better decades ahead. His writings reminded readers that democracy, considered the keystone of America, must be more than just a political mechanism. In the past, democracy had included a richer meaning than in the stultified 1950s. “Rooted in a spiritual tradition which came to us from prophetic messianism, the gospels, humanism and from the Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th Century,” these ideas of democracy inspired America's founders. “All of

these ideas and movements were centered on one hope: that man in the course of his history can liberate himself from poverty, ignorance and injustice, and that he can build a society of harmony, of peace, of union between man and man and between man and nature.” (*Disobedience* 63)

But look at our democracy now, he said. The empty rituals that the population and parties go through are far from that democratic hope for mankind. Today we have “empty plebiscites between two managed slates” where the fundamental issues of foreign policy – the issue Fromm was addressing was atomic brinkmanship endangering our lives – are left out of people's range of choices. Democracy, Fromm contends, has lost its rootedness in the longing of mankind. And even the vaunted concept of progress is “flat,” a simple vision of more and more production and controlling administration, far from the original dream of a fully alive, thoughtful, emotional, productive humanity.

As part of his intervention, Fromm joined the Socialist Party and perhaps more importantly cofounded (with Albert Schweitzer, Coretta Scott King, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and Norman Thomas) a national peace movement, SANE, partially named after Fromm's book, *The Sane Society*. SANE began openly opposing the bomb shelter scam (a mass delusion that after nuclear explosions, some of us could survive underground and emerge later to restart the world *de novo*). By 1960, SANE was an impor-



tant peace movement, able to call a 20,000-person rally. (1960 was *culturally* many years before the 1967 to 1973 peace movement.) SANE even had a Hollywood chapter, with Harry Belafonte, Steve Allen, Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Ozzie Davis and Henry Fonda, joining publicly. Fromm himself spoke before large campus audiences, including one at the University of Chicago, and one at Yale. Although it would be wrong to overemphasize SANE and Fromm's work, surely they helped awaken this country, making opposition to nuclear insanity become very visible, open. And Fromm, ever the organizer, began to formulate an important concept to support those in the movement for social change: the revolutionary character.

And although Fromm's 1960 "socialist manifesto and program" (*Will Man Prevail?*) was surely trying to win new people to the Socialist Party, it was also addressed to its membership and to others on the left, and can be seen as combating certain problems (bureaucratic rigidity, insularity, anti-intellectualism, perhaps), the problems which he felt were holding back the left. *Marx's Concept of Man* in 1961 and *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My encounter with Marx and Freud* were surely written to interest newcomers about Marx, but these books also were bringing Marx's humanism into the Marxists themselves, east and west, who had been discouraged from reading the "early" writings of Marx. And his book *Socialist Humanism* in 1964 was obviously addressed to the left.

Fromm felt some optimism in the air, a growing radicalism, and wanted socialists and other radicals to be able to embrace it. Fromm's essay, "The Revolutionary Character," written as a speech delivered in Mexico in 1961 during the period he was bringing Marx's "early, humanist" writings to the left, is one of his pointed statements to the left, both to the older layers and the new radicals. This paper will discuss the issue of the proper revolutionary character, but must detour slightly and develop what Fromm calls in his essay the "dialectical concept" of disobedience, where disobedience to the state, for instance, may be obedience to the laws of humanity. (*The Dogma of Christ and other essays on religion, psychology and culture* 150) This social

virtue (good habit) of disobedience is central to Fromm's concerns for activism and socialism: a true revolutionary does disobey, but must resist a mere rebelliousness or fanaticism.

The Promethean Social Virtue: Disobedience

"For centuries, kings, priests, feudal lords, industrial bosses and parents have insisted that obedience is a virtue and disobedience is a vice." (*Disobedience* 16) But Fromm was not sure those lords, bosses and parents had gotten it right. In Fromm's clinical assessment – he published the essay in 1963, the year following the "Cuban missile crisis" when the U.S. had a nuclear standoff with the Soviet Union – obedience can be a problem, a vice, one which could very possibly get the world blown up. Fromm's alert readers at the time could imagine immediately a drunken general demanding a straight-backed lieutenant to push a certain dangerous button.

Although we hear a drumbeat in our lives to obey the traffic signs, our parents, teachers, school rules, police, the doctor's orders, and the company directives, and although the beat is often fiercely reinforced by law, religion and convention, Fromm reminds us in the essay that there still are some important images of disobedience in Western culture. Take the case of the mythical Prometheus, the Greek god who defied the leading figure in the divine pantheon, Zeus, the powerful god of the thunderbolt. Zeus, as we know, controlled fire and did not want it to be under human control. But Prometheus defied Zeus' authority and brought fire to mankind; for his "crime," as we know, Prometheus was chained to a rock for decades, pecked at by a bird.

Prometheus disobeyed and lost, but he is an honored hero, a harbinger for what philosophers call the "emancipatory intent." Yes, fire is dangerous, but mankind needed fire to progress. Obviously mankind needed fire for cooking, warmth, and light at night, but mankind also needed fire (a symbol of spirit and reason, science) in order to leave the Stone Age. To reach the Bronze Age, to work with metal, mankind would need fire. Fire would begin a new leap in the productive forces. (Karl Marx, as Fromm reminds us in *Marx's Concept of Man*, embraces the Prometheus image. Fromm is implicitly



countering his Frankfurt School opponent, Herbert Marcuse, for offering a false radicalism. Marcuse told radicals that their heroes should be Orpheus and Narcissus and not Prometheus, whom Marcuse sees in *Eros and Civilization* as representing the “performance principle.” Although some, like Marcuse, were pessimistic during the late 1950s and the early 1960’s, Fromm was sensing ferment and openness everywhere. And Fromm in that period sought out and began communicating with philosopher/socialist Raya Dunayevskaya, who also was seeing ferment when others were not.)

Fromm says that mankind has only continued to evolve through acts of disobedience. Spiritual, material and intellectual development has only been possible because of those who have dared to say no to power and convention, have dared to disobey authorities who tried to muzzle new thoughts or use long-established opinions to mock change as unattainable fantasy.

Of course, Fromm does not mean that any kind of disobedience is virtuous and that all obedience is a vice. Perhaps speaking in contrast to Marcuse, who felt comfortable encouraging nihilism in *Eros and Civilization* as part of a “great refusal,” Fromm says there is a “dialectical relationship between disobedience and obedience.” Whenever the principles which are obeyed and those which are disobeyed are irreconcilable, an act of obedience to one principle is actually an act of disobedience to another. “Martyrs of religious faiths, of freedom, and of science have had to disobey those who wanted to muzzle them in order to obey their own consciences, the laws of humanity, of reason.” (*Disobedience* 18)

Although the Frankfurt School never properly credited him, Fromm was one of the early figures to identify the “authoritarian personality,” which internalizes the authority of others and the power of the establishment and current arrangements, and which feels deeply unsafe without external power around. In the authoritarian personality, the feeling of “unsafety” becomes unbearable and submission then becomes the characteristic response in life; consequently, the authoritarian personality often begins to

think, says Fromm, that institutions are protective, embracing, all-knowing and all-powerful beings. So why not obey them blindly?

Fromm’s virtue of disobedience, contrasted to a pathological inability to disobey, has recently led this author to very interesting classroom discussion about the servicemen and private contractors who carried out the torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Students spontaneously noted how the torturers must have shut down their genuine consciences in order to obey those orders. Private Lynndie England, we know, went to prison for following orders to sexually humiliate Iraqi prisoners, and, I contend, she deserved that stern penalty. (But I do also wish her supervisors were punished equally.) Ever since the Nuremberg trials after World War II, “I was just following orders” has not been an acceptable defense. And reflecting Nuremberg, the U.S. uniform military code of justice eventually outlawed that defense. England “knew, or should have known,” in Nuremberg language, that what she was doing was wrong, even as she posed gleefully pointing at the naked detainees; and England was explicitly punished for not disobeying.

Fromm Cautions the Emerging 1960s Revolutionaries

Fromm, the Marxist socialist philosopher, and activist, and careful scientific psychoanalyst, was not one to advocate just any kind of disobedience. The ideal he holds up to us is that of revolutionary disobedience. This revolutionary (humanist) disobedience differs from rebellious disobedience, its pale imitation. Following his frequent method, and perhaps repeating the logic of Hegel, Fromm begins his analysis in a wonderful essay, “The Revolutionary Character,” with a concept – not a proposition – in this case, the concept “revolutionary.” He tries to describe what a revolutionary is *not*.

He uses three negations: A revolutionary is not “someone who has participated in a revolution.” A revolutionary is *not* a rebel, and a revolutionary is not a fanatic.

Masquerading as a simple irony, Fromm’s first distinction is nonetheless subtle and important. His concern that a revolutionary is not



“someone who has participated in a revolution” reflects his basic commitment to get behind labels, credentials and *external action* – preferring to find the moral fabric and character of a real revolutionary. For instance, Fromm’s famous characterological study of the German workers thirty years earlier had raised the issue of the workers’ attitudes to historic figures and revolutionary traditions of the past. But Fromm wanted to find something other than an external confession of loyalty to some tradition or some credential: “I was there on the barricades. I am in the correct leftist party, so that proves I am a revolutionary.”

Let’s take two German workers in 1929. [I build here on a second footnote in “The Revolutionary Character.”] If Worker A, answering the question, “What famous people in history do you admire?” answered with a list like this: Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon, Marx and Lenin,” then Fromm would count that response as an indication of an authoritarian personality. On the other hand, if Worker B responding to the same question (“What famous people in history do you admire?”) answered this way: Socrates, Pasteur, Kant, Marx and Lenin, Fromm would interpret that response differently. He would list it on the side of a democratic character structure, because this second worker’s list placed Marx and Lenin with benefactors of mankind and not so much people with power. Obviously Fromm in his famous “interpretive questionnaire” study was trying to find out how many workers in Germany, unhappy with their economic situation, would identify with Marx and Lenin rather than with Hitler. But the “manifest answer” that Fromm was looking for – “I would stand with Marx and Lenin” – was of secondary importance in this study. (It was presumed for instance that many workers, asked to list people they admire, would list Marx and Lenin; after all, the German workers had been educated by the huge Social Democratic Party of Marx and Engels for forty years.) Both Worker A and Worker B, responding to the questionnaire, identified somehow with the tradition of Marx and Lenin. But far more important for Fromm and future social science was the “unintended, unconscious meaning” underlying the attachment to Marx and

Lenin. Where both Worker A and Worker B would say they are in a revolutionary tradition – and the German working class was indeed quite “radicalized” – Worker B was showing signs of not actually being a revolutionary. He would be the sort of worker (characterologically) who would “cut a deal” and tolerate or support Hitler, if Hitler reached power before the left did.

So a revolutionary is not primarily someone, for Fromm, who was or is a participant in a revolution. Standing with Marx and Lenin, being in the right Marxist-Leninist party, is not the decisive criteria for Fromm that it might be for others. There may also be a critique of “party building” in Fromm. Parties from the huge German Social Democracy (Engels and Bebel years) to the disoriented sects like the Socialist Workers Party in 1959, identified success with numbers, with the best recruiters being those who recruit the most, and the best members being those who stay the longest, participated in the old days, etc. Fromm would surely not think that membership in the “best” party, the one which has the most people, young and old, lining up with Marx and Lenin, “certifies” one as a revolutionary.

Developing this idea further, that one is not a revolutionary simply because one is in or was in a revolution, Fromm writes his classic book, *May Man Prevail: An Inquiry into the Facts and Fictions of Foreign Policy*, published the same year, 1961, as *Marx’s Concept of Man*. Fromm speaks of the Soviet “catechism.” In Russia, the adherence to the correct ideology became a test of loyalty. Even Khrushchev, although a critic of the Stalinist tradition, carefully uses formulae which establish the “legitimacy of his succession to an idolized Marx-Lenin image, insisting on the ‘unbroken continuity of the ideology from Marx to Khrushchev.’” (*May Man Prevail* 135) As a result there is endless repetition of the “correct” formulae; all new ideas can be expressed only by slight changes of words or emphasis *within* the framework of the ideology. (Fromm playfully says that this method is well known to those studying religion...changes which have made great differences “have been expressed only in small alterations within the doctrine, hardly noticeable to the outsider.”) (135)



So obviously Fromm is not going to identify someone as a revolutionary simply because he or she has participated in a revolution or speaks words attached to such a tradition. Such an attachment can have the quality of ideology, and as Fromm the psychoanalyst states so simply, in one of his nuggets: “It is the very nature of ideology that it deceives not only others, but those that use it.” (“Psychoanalysis: Science or Party Line?” 130)

The second distinction Fromm offers in his quest to find out what constitutes a revolutionary: a revolutionary is not a rebel. A rebel is disobedient to external authority and may sound like a revolutionary and act like one, but a rebel is “someone who is deeply resentful of authority for not being appreciated, not being loved, not being accepted.” (“The Revolutionary Character” 140) Obviously we can see the authoritarian personality discussion which Fromm first analyzed coming into play. It appears that the person who is fixated on external authority, whether attached to it in a very conservative way or in rebellious disobedience toward it, has the same deep character flaw. And Fromm brilliantly drives this issue home when he says that the person who wants to overthrow authority out of resentment wants to make himself the authority, and consequently “when he reaches his aim he will make friends with the very authorities that he was fighting so bitterly before.” (140)

Fromm references Pierre Laval of France who started out as a socialist and ended serving the Nazi-installed Vichy regime. And he points to Ramsay MacDonald of England who came from a poor Scottish heritage and socialist circles but who used his connections in the emerging Labor Party to become the darling of London’s duchesses. Each used rebellion against authority to gain an authority they would have deeply hated. “[T]wentieth Century political life is a cemetery containing the moral graves of people who started out as alleged revolutionaries and who turned out to be nothing but opportunistic rebels.” (140)

The third characteristic is that a revolutionary is *not* a fanatic. But what is a fanatic? Fromm is careful to not use the term in a con-

ventional sense, meaning a person who has strong convictions. Although some people believe that those who have convictions are fanatics and those who have none are “realists,” Fromm disagrees, of course, honoring those with strong convictions.

The difference between a revolutionary and a fanatic is hard to distinguish sometimes, especially because a fanatic will often say just what a revolutionary will say. We all know that is true. But the fanatic is still identifiable – again we are looking to character structure (moral fabric), not behavior – as someone who has a cold passion, or stated the other way around, is “burning ice.” He or she has made their cause an idol, says Fromm. A lack of human relatedness mixed with an intense relationship to a cause, be it political, religious or other, characterizes the fanatic. Because their causes have become idols, fanatics are often close to psychosis. They have two sides: on the one hand, extremely narcissistic and proud, but on the other hand, depressed (often blended with paranoid tendencies) and unable to relate. (142) The fanatics find a “cure,” saving themselves from manifest psychosis, however, according to Fromm, by taking up their cause, submitting themselves to it, and inflating the idol-cause into an absolute, thereby finding a passionate sense for life, a “meaning” for their lives. (142)

The preceding was the sort of discussion Fromm was bringing to the left in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Philosophers will notice that Fromm almost always uses this dialectical approach, starting with a concept and saying what it is *not*. Each definiendum is subjected to an ironic, closely rubbing negation, as in these cases: What is a revolutionary? A revolutionary is *not* “someone who participates in a revolution and is saying revolutionary things.” (Participation in a revolution does not constitute a sufficient condition to be a revolutionary, nor perhaps is it a necessary condition.) What is a fanatic? A fanatic is *not* “someone who holds a conviction.” What is the Sane Society? Sanity is *not* “appearing to be sane by being normal.” What is Hope? Hope is *not* “wishing.” Hope is *not* “waiting.” However, hope is also *not* “forcing the un-forcible.” His



approach is negative in this manner, exploding the self-evident, somewhat like Hegel did in the *Phenomenology*, or somewhat the way Meister Eckhart did – Fromm honored both, and quotes Eckhart in the essay. Fromm, the psychoanalyst and Marxist, was a man very suspicious of easy responses and naïve common sense, hence his work on definitions as essential for new beginnings. As Marx says on definitions in his *Grundrisse*, “The concrete concept is concrete because it is the synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning, as a summing up, a result, and not as the starting point of origin, although it is the real point of origin...” (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 206) (I have met a number of leftists who have made fun of *The Art of Loving*, and I have found they have not read it. But those tempted to mock Fromm for using terms like faith, hope and love would do well to watch how brilliantly, dialectically, he works at the level of concepts: his definitional work alone justifies reading his books.)

Conceding all that it is not, then what *is* a revolutionary? Fromm, in his Socratic manner, is not going to blurt out an answer to the question and would prefer to occasion the reader (emerging society) to discover the answer; on the other hand, Fromm does offer clear hints at what a revolutionary character is. Here are six characterological distinguishing marks:

1. revolutionary is free and independent. For Fromm, a Marxist, this concept has to be nuanced carefully, however, because the revolutionary character began to be fostered at the time of the English revolution, when “independent” and “free” could have a simplistic bourgeois edge, freedom as being left alone by authorities. This is a theme Fromm explains in many of his works from *Escape from Freedom* (in 1940) onward: “freedom from” is not fully “freedom for.” In “The Revolutionary Character” essay, he praises the sense of freedom and independence in the writings of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who has a positive sense of self-awareness and of freedom as expressing and realizing what we are: “Life is that which is moved from within by itself.” And Fromm

shows how this is similar to Marx’s concept in the *1844 Manuscripts* that my life should not be determined and structured by others (heteronomy) but it should flourish by being “my own creation.” (“The Revolutionary Character” 145)

2. A revolutionary is life-loving. (The example he gives is Albert Schweitzer.) (147)
3. A revolutionary is not parochial, but rather identifies with humanity, unrestrained by time and geography. (146) (Like one of his heroes, Rosa Luxemburg, Fromm is startlingly anti-nationalistic – whether German, Russian, American, or whatever. For instance, since his earliest Marxist years, in the mid-1920s, when Zionism surely seemed to be progressive to many Jewish intellectuals like Martin Buber, he clearly steered clear of it.)¹ He thinks a revolutionary must resist the myriad temptations of nationalism, “tribalism” and “blood and soil” sentiments.
4. A revolutionary has a “critical mood.” (147) Fromm in his writings often points to Socrates, Jesus, Marx, Spinoza and Bertrand Russell as examples.
5. A revolutionary must have a thought-out (demystified, non-idolatrous, and self-aware) relationship to power. Not afraid to look at it, but not bent to it. (149)

¹ Fromm’s writings on Judaism and messianism are profound and loving – he sang Hassidic songs until old age and wrote a marvelous book on the Old Testament, *You Shall be as Gods*; however, like one of the thinkers he admired in the 1920s, Herman Cohen, he saw Zionism as limiting. Joan Braune at the University of Kentucky is writing a philosophy dissertation on Fromm’s messianism, with attention to intellectual circles in the 1920s, and I am indebted to some insights on this that she made at the Radical Philosophy Association conference in November, 2008 in San Francisco. Joan Braune and I have authored a two-part article scheduled for publication by Radical Philosophy in 2010. My part of the article focuses on how Fromm’s “messianism” fits with his “organizing” effort in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and his attitude toward the left. Another writer who has explored Fromm’s concept of non-nationalist, “one world” solidarity and messianism is Lawrence Wilde. See his excellent book, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.



6. And lastly, of course, the revolutionary must be able to disobey. Fromm interestingly notes that it is harder for people in the twentieth century to disobey because of our bureaucratized society, because people are so manipulated that they are unaware that they are obeying. This whole discussion leads to his odd concept, a subject worthy of a follow-up paper, that the disobedient person with a revolutionary character is simply the “fully awake” person in a half-asleep society. (149-54) What more important civic virtue could there be than disobedience understood this way?

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