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Fromm's Biophilia Insights from *Sigmund Freud's Mission*

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Sigmund Freud's *Mission* (SFM) is a beautiful, short (120 pages) book that praises Freud's commitment to an "undistorted and immediate grasp of reality." Placing Freud with Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Joyce and Picasso, Erich Fromm praises him and them as examples of "the passionate outburst of Western man's desire to relinquish false gods, to do away with illusions and to grasp him and the world as part of a total reality." (116) Freud is "one of the great men and pathfinders of the human race." (119)

Still there is another side of Freud revealed in SFM: note that the title of the book includes the ambivalent term "mission":

"[Freud] is not a man who loves; he is ego-centric, filled with the idea of his mission, expecting others to follow him, wait on him, to sacrifice their independence and intellectual freedom for him. This world is only the stage for the drama of the Movement and the mission...His ideal is the self-contained and self-controlled man, high above the rabble, renouncing the joys of life but enjoying the security of the feeling that nobody and nothing can hurt him." (119)

Although this paper accepts and presumes Fromm's portrayal that Freud has these conflicting sides, notably Freud's commitment to grasp-

ing an illusion-free reality and his alternate commitment adopting a "mission" which is far from illusion-free, this paper will not attempt to draw an adequate picture of the great founder of psychoanalysis, nor to summarize Fromm's attitude toward him. No such depth of scholarship into Freud is needed for the limited purposes of this paper.

The paper at hand will simply develop two insights that Fromm makes in SFM about the complex founder of psychoanalysis. In SFM written in 1959, in the concluding two paragraphs of his significant Chapter Four ("Freud's relationship to women; love"), Fromm makes two very crisp criticisms of Freud. First, Fromm says that

- A. Pleasure for Freud is simply relief from unpleasure and tension, instead of positive enjoyment. (35-6)
And secondly, in the final paragraph of the chapter, Fromm makes another criticism, that
- B. Freud lacked "a deep sense of human solidarity." (37)

Although Fromm does not explicitly connect these two criticisms, (A) and (B), as strongly as possible, this paper will show that Fromm sees them as closely related, and correctly so. Fromm's reading of Spinoza and Fromm's concept of biophilia will provide some basis for uniting these two points, and a secondary concern



will conclude the paper: does Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* exhibit the same two flaws in describing affective life that Fromm sees in Freud's work?

Although Fromm does not directly elaborate it, his description of the problem of the Victorian middle class does provide an important connection between Freud's claims about a lack of positive enjoyment and his claim about lack of solidarity. Freud is a "Victorian personality" (36) afraid of loss of possessions. The Victorian middle class was concerned with "having" and not with "being," and as Fromm insists in several works, the nineteenth century's psychological emphasis is on saving (keeping things from loss). And what is the "tension" which, when relieved, causes pleasure? -- It is essentially a fear of losing something. "[T]he deepest fears for him [Freud] are always the fear of losing something one 'has,' be it a love object, a feeling or the genital organ." (37) Fromm bolsters this fear/tension theme (cf. A) in other parts of the book, where we see Freud terrified of poverty, fearing to lose his coat, tense about the loss of his followers' loyalty and about losing his mother's attention. Freud also appropriately notes his own understanding of this Victorian middle class problem as one where the poor and the "common people" have more solidarity: they have "more feeling of community (cf. B) than we do." (35, 37)

While analyzing a letter Freud wrote as a relatively young man, 27, Fromm directly discusses the two criticisms of Freud, that human striving is "more concerned with avoiding pain than with creating enjoyment" and that the common man has "more feeling of community than we do." Freud's letter was written to his fiancée. One would suspect a young man engaged in studying medicine, preparing to marry, and belonging to the rising bourgeoisie, would have more positive perceptions about creating enjoyment and about mankind's cooperative future, and perhaps would feel that fundamental emotion of Spinoza: aliveness with a sense of participation in *natura naturans* (nature naturing forth). But Freud does not. It is "only they [the common people, *Das Volk*] who are alive to the way in which one life is the continuation of the next, whereas for each of us the world vanishes

with his death." What an odd meditation to share with his fiancée. Note the contrast: the alive (with expectation) common people vs. the death-haunted elite. It is interesting that for Freud's elite, enjoyment is almost reduced to (cf. A) avoidance of death, while hope and solidarity (cf. B) is excluded, assigned to the world of lesser people.

Fromm scholars no doubt remember how often Fromm -- in almost every book -- praises Spinoza as the first great modern psychologist. Spinoza is a careful observer, a penetrating thinker and hopeful: "A free man scarcely thinks of death, because his wisdom is to contemplate life, not death" says Spinoza famously. And I suspect that Fromm, in the following passage where he is worried about Freud and solidarity, is contrasting Freud and Spinoza:

"Freud's

observation that the bourgeoisie has less of a feeling of solidarity than the working class is quite true, but one must not forget that there were many individuals in the middle and upper classes who had a deep sense of human solidarity, either socialists, anarchists or truly religious people. Freud had little or none of it. He was concerned with his person, his family, and his ideas in the fashion characteristic of the middle class. It is in the same vein, that seventeen years later [later than the letter to his fiancée], on the occasion of the New Year, 1900, Freud writes to Fliess: "The new century – *the most interesting thing about which for us is, I dare say, that it contains the date of our death* – has brought me nothing but a stupid review." Here again we find the same ego-centric concern with his own death and Freud's lack of feeling of universality and solidarity which he ascribes only to the lower classes." (37)

Fromm does not use the word "biophilia" in *SFM*, a term which assumes its greatest weight in *Heart of Man* five years later, but the concept is there, when he finds it lacking in Freud egocentric and pessimistic concerns. Remember that the letter quoted above speaks about the common people being "alive to the way in which one life is a continuation of the next." In the chapter



“Freud’s relationship to women; love,” Fromm studies one of Freud’s dreams: he finds his wife’s favorite flower pressed and dried inside one of his books. The dried specimen is a “symbol of love and joy” which he has smothered for his intellectual-scientific interests. (28) In *The Forgotten Language* where he also discusses Freud’s dried flower, Fromm describes it as symbolizing his sacrificing of “aliveness and beauty.” (*Forgotten Language*, 92) And so it could be said that Freud is unconsciously admitting that his theoretical framework itself also sacrifices love, true joy and aliveness. Such qualities are suppressed, sacrificed, for the good of civilization (science, progress). Emotional and sexual impulses and positive enjoyment (cf. A) are set aside by the elite for the benefit of civilization in Freud’s analysis. The “uncivilized mob” (33), however, is not capable of contributing, sublimating, this way. “*Das Volk* judges, believes, hopes and works quite otherwise than we do.” (cf. B) (36)

An interesting connection between claims (A) and (B) surfaces in Fromm’s discussion of how middle class thinkers at the time generally thought of man as “isolated and self-sufficient” but who needed periodically to meet with others for profitable exchange of goods and services in the market. Social coherence is reduced to occasional “mutually profitable exchange.” (98) Note in the following passage how Fromm connects Freud’s lack of positive enjoyment and his lack of solidarity:

“Freud expressed the same idea in psychological, rather than economic terms. [For Freud] man is basically a machine driven by libido and regulating itself by the need to reduce painful tension to a certain minimal threshold. This reduction of tension (cf. A) constitutes the nature of pleasure. In order to arrive at this satisfaction, men and women need each other. They become engaged in mutual satisfaction of their libidinous needs, and this constitutes their interest in each other. However, they remain basically isolated beings (cf. B), just as vendor and buyer on the market do; while they are drawn to each other by their need to satisfy their instinctual desires, they never transcend their fundamental separateness.

Man, for Freud, as for most other thinkers of this time, was a social animal only by the necessity for the mutual satisfaction of his needs, not by any primary need to be related to one another.” (98)

To Freud man is a complicated machine with a limited energy throughput capacity. There is a fixed economic/psychological quantity of libido, such that spending some on one thing will cut back the amount one can spend on something else. This mechanistic economics of libido (resource allocation) is what “lies behind Freud’s concept of the impossibility of brotherly love.” (99) Fromm quotes a disappointing passage from *Civilization and its Discontents* where Freud argues against the rule that you should love your neighbor as yourself. Freud is afraid that if you give a “small modicum of love” to each person you meet, you will be leaving little for yourself.

Quick excursus on WWI

I would suspect that a tension-reduction model for enjoyment would tend to produce a calculating approach to other beings and maybe a wary approach. But a healthy sense of solidarity is surely an affect transcending calculation and measurement. It is disappointingly true that there can be a psychologically limited “trade union solidarity” (referenced in Rosa Luxemburg’s *What is Economics?*) where one worker will support some fellow worker’s strike so that the fellow worker will respond in kind some day. But the kind of solidarity which Fromm and socialism at its healthiest represents, surely transcends that mutually beneficial tension-reduction, trade-off model.

WWI, as frequent Fromm readers know, was a key event in Fromm’s early life (See, for instance, the first chapter of *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*), and he often portrays it as a watershed in history as well. (Fromm’s cousin, socialist trade union leader Heinz Brandt, in his autobiography, also has some powerful comments on the effect of the war on socialists and on German morale generally.) At the end of the Nineteenth Century, there was growing optimism about rationality, a confidence that war would very soon be a relic of a barbarous unthinking



past, and there was a wide optimism that rationally planned economies could and would cut the working day enormously, extending rights, brotherhood and prosperity to the multitude. We know that various conferences of socialist parties -- and Germany had the largest and most developed socialist party -- had pledged an end to war. And it was understood that if the capitalists went in the direction of war, the workers on all sides would rise to stop them and would transform the world economy into a more peace-loving model. Workers, embodying the productive orientation with strong horizontal messianic internationalism in their hearts, and embodying a hopeful biophilia in so many ways, would never slaughter fellow workers again in war. Fromm was also aware of the American Anti-Imperialist League, a pre-1914 organization of intellectuals, political leaders and ethical leaders such as Marx Twain, John Dewey, and Jane Addams, all committed to ending war. In America in the late 1800s, as Fromm knew well, there were at least 150 Bellamy Clubs popping up to discuss pacifist and socialist planning for the new century. [Fromm wrote a delightful and informed introduction to a republication of Bellamy's utopian novel, *Looking Backward*.]

But tragically the Anti-imperialist League collapsed and the world plunged, with a cynical and craven nod from many socialist "leaders," into perhaps the greatest betrayal of human potential in history to that point, with the workers in great numbers disregarding internationalism and falling into straight, military lines for meat-grinding. Fromm makes a point in *SFM* that not only was Freud's theoretical picture of man (in terms of mental "economy") not much different than that of his contemporaries but that his political attitude was also not very advanced beyond conventional thought. Freud's failure, says Fromm, is evident in his attitude "toward the First World War, that supreme test, not only for the heart, but also for the reason and realism of men at the time." (101) Freud actually praised the Austrian Foreign Minister's reckless actions beginning WWI as "a release of tension through a boldspirited deed" and felt proud to be an Austrian for the first time in thirty years. "All of my libido is given to Austro-Hungary," says

Freud.

Fromm finds ambivalence to war in Freud, even in Freud's statements of pacifism in the 1930s. (103) Freud's conflicted position rests, suggests Fromm, in his general political stance concerning the inequality of men. Fromm says Freud's view is far to the right of liberalism. (In a viewpoint which sounds like Nietzschean elitism to me, Freud believes that the vast majority need an authority to make decisions for them, "more or less unconditionally." (103) It would take more work than this paper can offer to connect Fromm's (A) and (B) concerns about Freudian theory to Freud's life-attitude toward war. However, Freud's strange admission at 57 years of age that his entire libido was given to Austro-Hungary is very revealing, especially if you agree with Fromm that Freud consequently -- right there -- landed on the wrong side of mankind's greatest test. (Fromm quotes favorably several times in other writing the proper "alternativism" presented in Luxemburg's call for "socialism or barbarism." 1914 to 1919 was surely one of those historic junctures: mankind must choose a barbaric past and the horrors of war or a humanist future. Remarkably, both Freud's machine-like conception of affective life (cf. A) and his lack of human solidarity (cf. B) show up succinctly in his "all of my libido...given to Austro-Hungary" statement.)

Fromm reproaches Ernest Jones' biography of Freud (published in the 1950s) for having an "idolizing and unanalytic approach." (13) [Those who are interested in Herbert Marcuse's 1950s attack on Fromm and defense of Freudian orthodoxy will notice Marcuse's uncritical use of Jones' biography, which caters to 1950s conservatism. [See, passim, the work of sociologist Neil McLaughlin for the proper context.] Fromm reports that Jones misses the significance of several related facts: Freud's childhood attachment to Hannibal, Freud's later strangely geopolitical "international" and "mission", his support for WWI, and his conflicted actions before WWII. We know that Fromm, unlike Jones and possibly Marcuse, cannot miss looking at the alternativism of the WWI issue. Unlike Jones, Fromm would naturally focus on where Freud stood at 57, because he knows mankind at the 1914-1919 juncture was forced to choose, on the one hand,



an internationalism of cooperation, political pacifism, enjoyment and love of neighbor or, on the other hand, a horror show of nationalism, war and machine-like responses and counter-responses with humans acting at their tension-reduction worst. (See the short “how could it happen?” discussion on WWI in the first chapter of *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*. Heinrich Brandt, Fromm’s cousin, also has incisive comments on the war in his autobiography, which I will be discussing in a later paper.)

Concluding Reflective Notes: On Marcuse

First I will make some comments on Herbert Marcuse’s pessimism and on his later partial growth away from that perspective, then I will shift briefly to *Eros and Civilization* specifically, the book where he so unfairly attacked Fromm in the 1950s. Herbert Marcuse in the 1970s was heralded by many aspiring academics as a leader of the New Left in the previous decade, the 1960s. Douglas Kellner, for instance, who has done the most “gatekeeping” on the Marcuse legacy, repeats over and over how much sway Marcuse had in the 1960s, but I was also in left circles in the 1960s and do not really share that recollection. Most of the New Leftists I was familiar with found Marcuse obscurantist, a criticism which Fromm made several times, and found him pessimistic about revolution: hardly the force we were looking for back then. While much of the radical New Left that I encountered personally or read about in the late 1960s was reaching out to workers, and often “working in” to reach industrial workers who were increasingly dissatisfied with the Vietnam War and who were being affected and changed by the civil rights movement and other vectors in the 1960s, Marcuse was still considered a figure (along with the “end of ideology” crowd) who had written workers off as vehicles for change. Most of the young radicals I knew were steering clear of Marcuse as they were discovering Marxism. The Weathermen faction of SDS, on the other hand, was an extremely small minority, and they claimed Marcuse as an inspiration, as I understand. But few other tendencies paid attention to him. When Angela Davis in the very late 1960s was a famous Communist Party member, everyone knew she had once associated with

Marcuse; but it was assumed in my circles that she had broken with him, and was embarrassed by the connection.

In the late 1960s, however, Marcuse did become less pessimistic. Fromm himself points this out in discussing Marcuse’s *Essay on Liberation* written in 1969. (The change began developing in 1966, I believe, when Marcuse wrote a new preface to *Eros and Civilization*.) The height of his depression (if I may use this term to express what I think was more than just pessimism, but a disconnection with political reality) had been in 1964, when he published *One Dimensional Man*. Ironically it was written during a period when others were seeing hope and momentum beginning everywhere; figures like Mario Savio, Erich Fromm and Raya Dunayevskaya come to mind. (Dunayevskaya began communicating with Fromm and Savio, but she had in frustration stopped her communication with Marcuse because of his pessimism. Even Marcuse’s essay in Fromm’s upbeat *Socialist Humanism: an International Symposium* in 1964, seemed pessimistic, while Dunayevskaya, who always saw the working class in the widest terms and in motion, contributed an optimistic piece of her own and provided two translations of Eastern European socialists for the book.) To Marcuse’s credit, however, he does grow more optimistic about social change in the last part of the 1960s; this is a major theme in Thomas Wheatland’s new book, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, 2009. Wheatland has a chapter explaining how the “guru” himself had a “mentor”: “Marcuse’s relationship to the “Movement” [his mentor] grew closer as the decade [1960s] grew to a close.” (324)

One Dimensional Man (1964) was pessimistic: desublimation itself is repressive now; the culture and the culture machine is so flat and controlling that opposition is impossible (*Herbert Marcuse*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, 76); the working class is not willing to lead, nor to wait for a party, but is simply domesticated (*Herbert Marcuse*, 77). For Marcuse, repression is everywhere (although usually hidden), but appeals to liberalism are self-defeating since liberalism leads to totalitarianism and the establishment “toleration” of dissidents has become a mantra and weapon confirming the power and omniscience



of the establishment itself. (*Herbert Marcuse*, 76) The people will not change. They are led by elite and will have to be led by a Marcusean counter-elite later. (Most of this characterization of *One Dimensional Man*, is borrowed from Alasdair MacIntyre, who published his short book on Marcuse in 1970 and, I think, expresses a widely held view of Marcuse in the left at that time.)

Although *One Dimensional Man* (1964) is often considered to be as pessimistic as MacIntyre and I have portrayed it, many young scholars have returned with interest to *Eros and Civilization* over the last decades and have found it liberating. But I think it is profoundly pessimistic as well, even though the theme of the book is that Freud's pessimism about civilization can be reversed by welcoming Eros (the passion for pleasure, the release from tension, more fully. Sublimation is not needed for civilization to grow, at least not to the degree that Freud thought.

Also of note: Marcuse may seem to be optimistic in his assertion that the libidinal drive is libidinal, biologically based, unstoppable. But still he has an odd emphasis, linking Eros to an equally biologically rooted drive in his schema, Thanatos. And he makes it clear in the 1961 Preface to *Eros* that non-repressive civilization is not much of a real possibility at this stage. He offers nothing short of the Great Refusal (a general – it will come with a bang sometime later -- refusal to accept separation from the libidinous object, or subject). This Great Refusal, defined in "sexual revolution" terms and not political terms in *Eros*, is placed in the context of Marcuse's two new heroes, Orpheus and Narcissus. But interestingly Marcuse explicitly counterposes these two heroes to Prometheus, the mythic hero esteemed in the American Revolution, who was also esteemed by Marx. A cog-like conformity and complicity or a Great Refusal -- these are the options for modern civilization, but there seem to be no steps to be taken to prepare for the leap, no revolutionary tradition or social class or program to be affirmed.

A Final Note:

Marcuse in the Greatly Reactionary 1950s

"Sociology of knowledge" expert Neil McLaugh-

lin says that Fromm and the "revisionists" have surely proved themselves to be right over the recent decades. But Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* in the 1950s defended Freud's old biologicistic and mechanistic model explicitly against Fromm. (The revisionists have surely been vindicated from the standpoint of the emerging current psychoanalytic community, since few present day practitioners have major qualms about jettisoning Thanatos, Freud's patriarchal concepts like penis envy, and mechanistic sexual tension-release models; but oh, there was quite a fight about it waged by the psychoanalytic old guard, Ernest Jones, etc., in the 1950s. McLaughlin says they were "sect-like.")

Marcuse's major intent is to attack the revising of Freud's biologically based, tension-release, drive model. And the earlier sections of this paper showed a connection between Freud's economic tension-reduction model (A) and his denial of solidarity (B), his rejection of the possibility of loving one's neighbor as oneself. So not surprisingly, when Marcuse adopts Freud's model, attacking Fromm for revising Freud on the libido, he also evidences Freud's lack of solidarity.

Marcuse was offering something supposedly "left-wing" -- Fromm will later refer to the "alleged" radicalism of Herbert Marcuse -- however, his *Eros* offers no real solidarity during those repressive years in America, the 1950s. Marcuse outlined and envisioned no steps possibly leading to his heralded "Great Refusal." He sees no working class resistance, never mentions the word "Marx" in the book, attacks one of the leading socialist psychoanalysts of the century (Fromm), unfairly groups Fromm's politics with the conformist theories of Sullivan, scandalously (according to MacIntyre, 50-51) dismisses the most important left Freudian ever to work on sexual repression questions, Wilhelm Reich, caters to a period of reaction and conformity in psychoanalytic circles in the 1950s (passim, Neil McLaughlin), and substitutes Narcissus for the left's Prometheus. "Freedom is not within but outside the struggle for existence" (*Eros and Civilization*, 178) says Marcuse. (If Marcuse means that there will not be complete freedom until socialism, then Fromm would agree. But if he means that freedom does not



arise in the conscious day by day struggle against the insane society, then Fromm would have to take exception. After all, Fromm wrote a fine little socialist program in 1959 or 60, which the Socialist Party reprinted several times. But in Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, there is little room for human solidarity, love, or revolutionary struggle.

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