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Review Braune, J.: Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope
Review Miri, S. J., Lake, R., and Kress, T. M. (Eds): Reclaiming the Sane Society: Essays on Erich Fromm's Thought

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“Review Braune, J.: Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future; Review Miri, S. J., Lake, R., and Kress, T. M. (Eds): Reclaiming the Sane Society: Essays on Erich Fromm's Thought,” was first published in: *Marx and Philosophy*. Review of Books 2014 (<http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2014/1397>). Reprint with kind permission of the editor of *Marx and Philosophy*, Sean Sayers, in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition – ISBN 1437-1189), 19 / 2015, Tübingen (Selbstverlag), pp. 70-72.

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The thought of Erich Fromm is experiencing a renaissance of sorts at present. Although always inspiring interest to a greater or lesser extent amongst the general population, the attention paid to Fromm has not always manifested in concerted mainstream scholarly attention. This, however, may be changing with the appearance in the last decade or so of a number of studies dedicated to Fromm's thought, and with what seems to be an increasing number of scholars turning to his thinking as a central aide to their research and writing. This attention, which is well overdue, centres largely on the various facets of Fromm's humanism and on his contribution to social and political thought—contributions which offer a strong grounding from which to transcend the malaises of late twentieth and early twenty-first century social theory and social and political practice more generally. These contributions of Fromm's, and the productive positions they provide, are central to these two recent works on Fromm. In each there is a concerted effort to deal with the prophetic nature of Fromm's thinking—'prophetic' understood in the sense of being prescient of the present moment but also of relating to the themes of the biblical prophets, i.e. universal peace, harmony, justice, and individual and

collective fulfilment. It is, in the case of Braune (who writes one and half of the chapters in Miri, Lake, and Kress's collection), also fundamentally related to the resurrection of prophetic messianism itself as a motivating force in revolutionary thinking and practice.

Through some brilliant scholarship, which comes on the heels of a general return to the respectable study of messianism: literally, the belief in a messiah, saviour, or redeemer, although also, and more importantly here, understood in secularised or metaphorical terms as referring to the prophetic *ideal* of the messianic time of universal peace and harmony. Braune shows messianism in this sense to be a central feature of German and German-Jewish thinking in *fin de siècle* Germany and in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In particular, Braune shows that the prophetic-humanistic messianism which Fromm was attracted to in his youth (Fromm was born in 1900 and moved in heavily Jewish circles in Frankfurt until his mid-20s), and which he returned to later in his career (Braune correctly notes that Fromm wrote about messianism in one form or another fairly persistently from 1955 onwards), was a messianism



which placed stress on the messianic event as the outcome of historical progress as opposed to a transcendental rupture with history, as is found in the apocalyptic-catastrophic form advocated by Franz Rozenweig and Gershom Scholem, amongst others. Unfortunately—and this helps explain Fromm's return to it in the 1950s—the second kind of messianism (i.e. the apocalyptic-catastrophic kind) came to predominate after World War I and in the aftermath of the failed revolts of 1918-9, finding its way into the influential thinking of Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, and those following in their wake, where it has had tended to lead to a quixotic and nihilistic form of pessimism and despair.

Braune's central contention is that messianism is not an aberration, but rather something which is central to Fromm's thinking, and, moreover, central to the progress of socialist thought and practice as a whole. Many within the Marxist tradition may find this claim peculiar, and may harbour hard-to-shift doubts over the desirability of resurrecting an apparently outmoded conceptual schema which makes use of what may seem unnecessarily theological language. What Braune has shown, I think, is that these doubts are misplaced. At the very least, she has shown the need to broaden our discussion of messianism to include Fromm's prophetic variety; but I think she has also shown the force Fromm's messianism contains as a means of breaking through contemporary theoretical and practical impasses—impasses rooted in particular debates extant in earlier twentieth century German culture but which have persisted, in more or less altered form, throughout the later twentieth century and up until the present day. In particular, Braune has shown that a focus on prophetic messianism can prove useful for revolutionary thinking, its concern with not 'forcing the messiah' and with a staunch opposition to nihilist despair playing a central role in any genuinely revolutionary socialist humanist position today.

Indeed, the second half Braune's work takes the form of an extended excursus on pro-

phetic messianism as a form of revolutionary hope. As Braune makes clear, the kind of prophetic messianism advocated by Fromm is fundamentally predicated on the importance of hope (hope understood in the paradoxical sense of not 'forcing the messiah' but also being permanently ready and expecting messianic change to occur). Hope, as Braune shows, is not something we come to adopt on the basis of stripped down rationalistic calculation, but is, rather, an affective state of readiness, grounded in a deep faith in the potential of human beings to reach towards the messianic ideal. As Fromm stresses again and again, the messianic event is seen in prophetic-humanistic messianism as the outcome of *human progress*, and therefore actively encourages productive and revolutionary action. Fromm lived such a messianism: he was actively involved in US politics, and his books during 1950s-70s called for a messianic reawakening manifested in active political engagement and in the individual and collective working out of practical steps to bridge the divide between the present and the future. Such a position contrasts with the apocalyptic-catastrophic form of messianism found in Benjamin, Marcuse—in *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization* at least—and in those who drew on them in the subsequent Leftist tradition. As such, it stands opposed to the call for the destructive and unnecessary violent action aimed at speeding up the coming of the apocalypse as found in forms of Fascism, Stalinism, and Blanquism, as well as the kind of passive waiting and nihilistic despair that is found in forms of esoteric aestheticism and semi-romanticism that have been more common since the mid-1970s.

If there are faults in Braune's piece, they relate to what is the slight downplaying of aspects she takes to be inimical to Marxian (and prophetic messianic) thinking—aspects such as Fromm's distinction between what he terms the 'existential and historical dichotomies' of life, and his bounded criticisms of Marx in *The Sane Society*. I would submit that both of these aspects endure as central in Fromm's thinking, and do so without cancelling out the Marxian influence, an influ-



ence which Braune is otherwise right to highlight.

* * *

Miri, Lake, and Kress's collection is also a valuable contribution to the renaissance of Frommian thought. The editors introduce the work by declaring that in an era of seemingly ever-deepening globalisation, where contemporary civilisation is threatened by increasing corporate greed, neo-liberalism, nihilism, and extreme fundamentalist beliefs, Fromm's thinking seems 'at least fifty years ahead of his time' (vii). The work itself, which is divided into three parts (a section on Fromm's social psychology, one on his relationship to religion, and a final section on the application and extension of his social theory), is naturally more diverse than Braune's still wide-ranging monograph. It contains a previously unpublished English-language essay by Fromm on Marx and religion, in which the reasons for his description of Marx as a secular messianist become clear. This is perhaps not the best discussion of this in Fromm, but it does contain a revealing comparison of Marx's account of communism in the third volume of *Capital* and the account of Messianic Time given by Maimonides, the twelfth century Jewish philosopher. Although it will not satisfy those who object strongly to reading of Marx as a secular messianist, the comparison nonetheless is striking and hard to ignore.

In addition to this, the collection contains a jointly authored split-chapter by Joan and Nick Braune, in which the latter mounts a perceptive defence of Fromm's messianism with particular relation to his 1961 pamphlet, *Let Man Prevail*. Arguing against Kevin Anderson's criticism of Fromm's messianism as a 'more eclectic form of humanism' than is necessary (Anderson, 2007), Braune argues that the pamphlet should in fact be seen as an attempt to shake up contemporary socialism with a direct appeal to what Fromm felt were its radical humanist roots. Through a contextualised discussion of *Let Man Prevail*—which was published as a pamphlet after being rejected as a prospective new manifesto for the American Socialist Party-Social Democratic Federation—

Braune convincingly shows how Fromm saw the socialist movement (and not just the Soviet Union) as infected with an emotional stagnation rooted in a reliance on bureaucracy and in a narrowly materialistic organisational practice. As Braune makes clear, Fromm's motivation in writing the pamphlet/manifesto (as in his wider work during the 1950s-70s) was clearly not the kind of 'conformism' or 'subjectivism' that he has been accused of, but a genuine revivification of Leftist politics as a whole.

This theme is taken up in a chapter by Rodolpho Leyva. The chapter contains a generally good discussion of Fromm and the kind of communitarian socialism he advocates in *The Sane Society*, but is marred slightly by Leyva's strange claim that Fromm's thinking was premised on a Kantian deontological ethics (this is not the case: Fromm's ethics was much more eudaimonistic, premised on a reading of Aristotle and Spinoza, and others following in the Aristotelian tradition). Despite this mistake, Leyva correctly stresses the central reference Fromm makes to the well-being of the worker and to genuinely democratic organisation as the primary political and practical objectives for social transformation. Making links to contemporary anarchist thinkers, Leyva uses Fromm to counter the orthodox Marxist stress on the takeover of the politico-economic base by a party vanguard which eventually gives way to usher in a democratic and free society. There is more to be said here, but this is clearly an important part of Fromm's distinctive radical humanist form of revolutionary theory that needs clearer amplification.

There is also an important related chapter by Vicki Diagostino and Robert Lake which centres on the relatively unique stress that Fromm places on personal transformation and on its role in lasting genuine progressive social change. Drawing on the clearly compatible thinking of Jiddu Krishnamurti in this connection, Diagostino and Lake make much of Fromm's stress on the need for creating the *internal* as well as external conditions for a sane society. Despite generally being lost in misplaced diatribes over 'sub-



jectivism', 'individualism', 'conformism', etc., which wholly miss the qualitative point that Fromm seeks to make, Fromm's thinking here proffers a necessary counter to the orthodox Marxist stress on sufficiency of a concern with purely structural factors. In so doing, they point to the overwrought and myopic criticisms of Fromm's words of praise for aspects of Buddhism, such as meditation, mindfulness, and the stress on letting go of narcissism and greed. Fromm's experience as a psychoanalyst inclined him towards a position of caution in relation to the belief that a change of government and in ownership of the means production would usher in a true revolution in forms human relationship. To achieve such a revolution, Fromm stresses, we need a complimentary (and simultaneous) revolution in our values and in our outlook. The idea that if we want to change external conditions we must also change ourselves rings particularly true in today's climate of alienation, where structural change still seems remote and where participatory democratic forms, even at a nascent stage of development, are generally absent.

Perhaps the standout contribution to the volume is Michael J. Thompson's chapter on the strength of Fromm's distinctive normative humanist approach to social criticism. In this chapter, which is built on the scaffolding of Fromm's own steadfast belief in the validity of drawing objectively valid normative statements from a philosophical anthropological and empirical account of the human condition, Thompson skilfully demonstrates how the dynamics of Fromm's social theory allows for a more robust understanding of what it means to articulate an emancipatory interest within the context of the empirical social sciences. In particular, Thompson notes how Fromm's thinking maintains the crucial dialectical connection between descriptive, factual statements of modern subjectivity and culture with the evaluative, ethical judgement of those forms of life—a connection which has largely been lost from critical theory in the excessive stress on the pragmatic, inter-subjectivist, and communicative forms of social theory found in thinkers such as Arendt, Habermas, and Hon-

neth. In contrast to such thinkers, Fromm's normative humanism enables him not only to make judgements in relation to value, but also empirical hypotheses about descriptive and causal claims. In short, Fromm's normative humanist position is 'a model and exemplar of the kind of dialectical thinking that has been lost in contemporary critical theory and to which critical thought must return if it will be able to remain a means of making critical value judgements in the face of the pathological effects of modern capitalism on human individuality and freedom' (38). In the aftermath of decades of 'postmodern' theories in which the connection between these two realms of inquiry were increasingly obscured and wished away, it is a relief to see them being returned to.

Two further contributions worth highlighting are Gregory R. Smulewicz-Zucker's chapter on Fromm's concept of the distorted personality and Panayta Gounari's Frommian account of post-bailout neoliberal Greece. In his contribution, which complements Thompson's earlier effort, Smulewicz-Zucker spiritedly defends Fromm against the misplaced criticisms of Adorno and Marcuse over Fromm's 'conformism' and supposed capitulation to the established order. By recounting Fromm's account of (social) character in some detail, showing how it follows the Hegelian-Marxian insight of seeing the dialectic of individual and society as part of the very fabric of personality, Smulewicz-Zucker shows that Fromm's revised Freudian position is superior to the quasi-orthodox position that Adorno and Marcuse take, enabling Fromm to engage with the variety of ways in which pathological personalities can develop based on the distinct ways their needs for relatedness to the world are distorted. Gounari's chapter, on the other hand utilises Fromm's concept of necrophilia to conceptualise the rise of fascism and the shocking increase in illness, suicide, addiction, and spread of infectious diseases which have accompanied the implementation of market fundamentalist policies in Greece (she talks of the neoliberal experiment there as a form of 'social necrophilia' concerned with the symbolic and physical destruction of the existing civilisation and the



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most vulnerable strata of the population). In this rather rare direct application of Fromm's descriptive-evaluative categories—as in the other contributions discussed, and in Braune's monograph also—we can clearly

see the particularly enduring relevance of Fromm's thinking for contemporary social and political theory and practice. Hopefully these two works will act to stimulate further such applications.