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Erich Fromm: Some Biographical Notes

Bernard Landis and Edward S. Tauber

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Dr. Bernard Landis received his Ph.D. in psychology from the New School for Social Research and his training in psychoanalysis from the Postdoctoral Program at New York University. Since 1963 he has been at Cornell University Medical College where he is an Associate Clinical Professor as well as Associate Attending Psychologist at New York Hospital (Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic). He is also engaged in private practice. His book *Ego Boundaries* was published in 1970.

Dr. Edward S. Tauber Tauber received his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University. He is a member of the American Psychoanalytic Association, and he is a Fellow and a supervising and training analyst of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology, and has previously served as the Institute's Chairman of Faculty. In addition, he is Adjunct Professor of Psychology at Yeshiva University. He has been actively engaged in conducting studies in perception and sleep research, and has coauthored a book on dreams—*Prelogical Experience: An Inquiry into Dreams and Other Creative Processes*. He maintains a private practice in New York City.

Erich Fromm comes from an orthodox German Jewish middle-class family with a long rabbinical background on his father's side. An only child, he was born on March 23, 1900, in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, where he received his education through high school. As he describes in a short autobiographical sketch in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, a decisive, early influence on his life were the writings of the Old Testament which, he states, "touched me and exhilarated me more than anything else," particularly the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea with their vision of universal peace and harmony, and their teachings that there are ethical aspects to history—that nations can do right and wrong, and that history has its moral laws.

But equally important was the spirit of traditional Judaism in which he was brought up. As he has mentioned occasionally in conversation, this mode of life made him somewhat of a stranger in the modern world. The point of view and the principles of the rabbinical world were in sharp contrast to those of contemporary capitalism. Learning and the application of the principles of love and justice in all one's relations, not wealth or power, were the guiding values of this traditional life. That was the way his rabbinical ancestors had lived and that was the style of life which deeply impressed him. To be sure there were men driven by the desire for wealth and luxury; but they were to be pitied for having missed the right way of living. In many respects Fromm grew up in a world



closer to the late middle ages than to the twentieth century—but he was also part of the latter—and the experience of the opposition between the two was one of the creative forces in his life.

It was the experience of the First World War that crystalized his concerns with peace and internationalism into passionate, lifelong interests. [xi] During the next four years of living through a hysteria of hate and nationalism, Fromm felt himself grow into a young man filled with protest against war, and obsessed by the question of how war was possible. Having become extremely skeptical of all official ideologies, his focus turned to the desire to understand the irrationality of mass behavior.

During his preadolescence, Fromm was equally stimulated to understand "the strange and mysterious reasons" for individual experiences and actions. A particular event stands out in his mind as one of those incidents that, like a lens, narrows attention on a critical area of interest. When he was twelve, a beautiful young woman, an artist friend of the family, committed suicide following the death of her father, an old and unattractive man, and left a will stating that she wanted to be buried with him. Fromm was struck by the question of how was it possible that a lovely young woman should be so in love with her father as to prefer his company in death to the joy of life and art. This was one of the early experiences that prepared the way for Fromm's subsequent interest in psychoanalysis.

Important influences shaping Fromm's life, since his adolescence, were first of all his Talmudic teachers. After Rabbi J. Horowitz, with whom he studied Talmud as an adolescent, the young student became the pupil of S. B. Rabinkov in Heidelberg, N. Nobel, and his mother's uncle, L. Krause, in Frankfurt. Fromm considered the teaching of these masters and the personal contact with them, as the most important influence in his life. While they were all strictly observant Rabbis, they were at the same time humanists of extraordinary tolerance and with a complete absence of authoritarianism. They were also

very different among themselves: Rabinkov was a socialist, Nobel a mystic, and Krause, over seventy when Fromm studied with him, liked operatic music; otherwise, he was typical of many other Rabbis who studied the Talmud almost without interruption from morning to evening, with no desire for position and fame—and without the ambition to write. While Fromm in his late twenties gave up religious practices completely, the principles and values of these teachers remained part of him, expressed in his humanist socialist convictions, and in his critique of capitalist society.

These political interests were awakened not only by the First World War, but also by his acquaintance with Karl Marx's work. He saw—and still sees—in Marx's work the key to the understanding of history and the manifestation, in secular terms, of the radical humanism which was expressed in the Messianic vision of the Old Testament prophets. The revolutionary and humanist spirit of Marx, corrupted by both the Stalinist and reformist misinterpretations of his teachings, became for Fromm the second source which deeply shaped his thinking. Only some years later came his encounter with Freud's work. He was as deeply impressed by Freud's [xii] point of view as he had been by Marx's. He spent all the years after 1928 in the attempt at a creative synthesis between the two systems.

To finish this sketch of an intellectual biography two more sources must be mentioned, which became an integral part of Fromm's thinking. When he became acquainted with Buddhism in 1926, he felt this as a kind of revelation. For the first time he saw a spiritual system, a way of life, based on pure rationality and without any irrational mystification or appeal to revelation or authority. This initial interest in Buddhism was followed up by his acquaintance with Dr. D. T. Suzuki's work on Zen Buddhism. Fromm and his wife had the opportunity to attend his seminars and they conversed at length.

As to the last major influence on Fromm's intellectual development, one of



great importance must be added, the work of J. J. Bachofen on Mother right and on Symbolism. Bachofen, in his study of the concepts of matriarchal and patriarchal principles, had discovered an entirely new aspect of historical as well as of individual development. This opened Fromm's eyes to many phenomena hitherto overlooked, and helped him to recognize the extreme patriarchal bias of Freud's theories as well as to understand the fundamental role of the relationship to the mother figure in the individual life, as well as in an historical context. In short, the writings of the prophets, of the Buddha, of Marx, Bachofen, and Freud, were the most fundamental influences on Fromm, until the age of twenty-six; from then on, the development of his own thinking can be seen as an attempt at a creative synthesis of these ideas, none of which he abandoned, even though he differed in their interpretation, sometimes quite radically, from their respective orthodox followers.

In his academic career, Fromm took up his studies on psychology, philosophy, and sociology at the University of Heidelberg, where he was awarded his Ph.D. at the age of twenty-two, with a thesis on the sociopsychological structure of three Jewish sects (the Karaim, the Chassidim, and the Reform Judaism). In 1925 and 1926, he pursued additional studies in psychiatry and psychology at the University of München. He began his psychoanalytic training with Drs. Landauer and Wittenberg, from 1926 to 1928, and then trained at the famous Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. Upon graduating in 1931, he became a member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and practiced psychoanalysis in Berlin. During this period, he founded, together with Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and others, the Psychoanalytic Institute in Frankfurt and lectured there on fortnightly trips from Berlin. He also taught at, and was a member of, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt (and later at Columbia University in New York) from 1928 to 1938.

Fromm came to the United States for the first time in 1933 at the [xiii] invitation of

the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute to give a series of lectures. In 1934, he moved to New York where he continued his private practice and became active in professional affairs. In 1946, he became one of the founders and trustees of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology, and served both as Chairman of the Faculty and Chairman of the Training Committee from 1946 to 1950.

Earl G. Wittenberg, Director of the White Institute, writes that Erich Fromm "participated fully in the first seven years of the Institute as mentor, teacher, and friend, and since 1951, he has continued as trustee, colleague, supervisor, and seminar leader. He introduced a legacy of humanism, an unsurpassed understanding of the socioeconomic situation with its character types and unconscious origins, and a vigor and directness about the analytic situation which have pervaded the Institute since. He is a vital and guiding force. His emphasis on the liveliness, the creativity, and the productive resources of the patient enhances the potential of psychoanalysis as therapy."

For the first ten years of his analytic work, Fromm practiced in the orthodox Freudian vein. What led him to develop his own approach to psychoanalysis was first, a growing awareness that some of his observations were at variance with what he would expect to have found according to Freudian theory and, second, an ever-increasing boredom with a technique that so constricted the analyst-patient relationship. (The nature of Fromm's approach to psychoanalysis is described in the first essay.)

In addition to his practice of psychoanalysis, Erich Fromm was a member of the faculty of Bennington College (1941-1949) and Guest Professor at Yale University (1948-1949) where he gave, together with Professor Ralph Linton, a seminar on social character and anthropology. In 1949, for reasons of his wife's health, he went to Mexico. At that time, he accepted a professorship at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and started the Department of Psychoanalysis at the Graduate Department of the University's



Medical School where he taught until he retired in 1965. He is now Honorary Professor at the University. Fromm also founded the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute and was its director until 1965.

Since the move to Mexico, Fromm has commuted regularly—for his teaching duties at the William Alanson White Institute, at Michigan State University where he was Professor of Psychology (1957—1961) and, since 1962, at New York University where he is Adjunct Professor of Psychology in the Graduate Division of Arts and Sciences. During this time, he has also lectured at Columbia University, the New School for Social Research, and other universities. During these years, and to the present time, Fromm also has been active in the peace movement and in the humanist [xiv] socialist movement. He has always been a socialist though unaffiliated with any particular party until he joined the Socialist Party, U.S.A. in the fifties. Particularly close were his relations to the Yugoslav humanist socialists, but his orientation has always been an international one, a fact that found its expression in the symposium on *Socialist Humanism*, which he edited and which contains contributions of an international scope. No psychoanalyst has been more outspoken and incisive than Fromm in working for a better society.

Fromm, while under the intellectual influences sketched above, worked as a practicing psychoanalyst for more than forty years—examining in fine detail the experiences, behavior, and dreams of the people whom he has psychoanalyzed; he notes that every one of his theoretical conclusions about man's psychic structure has been based

on critical observations of human behavior during the course of his psychoanalytic work.

In recent years, Dr. Fromm has been concentrating on the problem of human aggression. Going beyond the instinctual drive theories of Freud and Lorenz, Fromm has been studying various modes of aggression using data from neurophysiology, ethology, and psychoanalysis, in the context of man's biological nature and development of character. The first volume on the sources of aggression *From Instinct to Character*, will soon be published; a second volume, focussing on findings from the fields of ethology, anthropology, and social psychology, will follow and deal with other empirical evidence against the instinctual, drive-reduction theories of aggression. It will, in its main part, analyze the essential sources of human aggression, manifested in "reactive aggression," "sadism" (absolute control), "necrophilic destructiveness," and trancelike states of hate and blood thirst. His basic principle in this work is to show that the amount of aggression expressed by man is not and cannot be caused by the inheritance from the less aggressive animals, especially from mammals (primates in particular), but must be understood via the conditions of existence specific to man due to his biological situation. His work attempts to show that in man the problem is not that of instincts but one of character, and that human aggression must be understood in terms of social conditions that interact with man's biological needs (by no means only of a physiological nature). The two volumes constitute the beginning of a series of works on humanistic psychoanalysis. [001]