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Review Durkin, K.: The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm

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There is a major revival of interest going on in the English speaking academic world regarding the work and ideas of Erich Fromm. Kieran Durkin's *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* could well end up being the most important contribution to this project. Fromm's work still sells, of course, and he retains a worldwide audience for his books. And the work of the International Erich Fromm Society, active particularly in Germany and throughout Europe, as well as the efforts of a number of prominent Mexican psychoanalysts have laid the foundation for a Fromm revival through decades of biographical, theoretical, clinical and empirical work. But the truth is the vicious and unfair attacks launched by orthodox Freudians, dogmatic Marxists and critical theorists, Cold War neo-conservatives, Freud bashers and proponents of “value free” scientific social science created a context whereby Fromm became a “forgotten intellectual” among elite intellectuals and academics in North America, Ireland, Great Britain and Australia.

Given the massive influence English language social science has come to have on global intellectual life, it is inevitable that Fromm's reputation would suffer internationally unless the mythologies about his ideas in English are undermined and a positive intellectual case is made for his theories. This is a job for a social theorist. Durkin is an extremely sophisticated sociological and political theorist, and he has taken the debate about Fromm's social theory to a new level.

Durkin's great strength is a combination of intellectual ambition and scholarly modesty and care; he has produced a comprehensive account of Fromm's ideas while dealing fairly with the existing literature. Durkin draws at length on the insights in Rainer Funk's *The Courage to be Human* (1982) and Daniel Burston's *The Legacy of Erich Fromm* (1991), two central texts in the recovery of Fromm's ideas in English. But he goes further than both authors did, producing a balanced account of Fromm's work that puts his ideas up against the best existing competing contemporary academic social theory. And one of the highlights of the book is a superb short biographical chapter, where he lays out the life and early experiences of Fromm, making the case that there is continuity to his radical humanist thought despite shifts in focus and language over several decades of writing. This engagement with biography is extremely important because, for better or worse, the agenda for the revival of Fromm's work in English is going to be set by the reception of Lawrence Friedman's *The Lives of Erich Fromm* (2013).

Always fair and judicious, Durkin draws generously from Friedman's knowledge of the history of the American left and social sciences and his archival digging, while moving beyond some of the limitations of the Friedman biography. Friedman is a major American biographer. (His book on Erik Erikson entitled *Identity's Architect* is a master work with impeccable writing that draws



on new information about Erikson that allowed him spell out the core motivating forces that led to his brilliant insight about identity crises.) From my perspective, Friedman's account of Fromm's efforts to secure release for his cousin from a Stalinist jail in East Germany after World War II, his funding of Amnesty International, the things we learned about his relationship with the famous African-American dancer Katherine Dunham, the connection between Fromm's love for his third wife and the making of *The Art of Loving* (1956) and the details he offers about Fromm's political involvement with the disarmament movement and the American political establishment including the Kennedy administration all make for an important contribution. Friedman's credibility and track record as a historian and the status of his Columbia University Press publisher means that *Love's Prophet* will set the tone for the reception of Fromm in English for the next decade. This practical reality makes Durkin's book even more important, because as a piece of scholarship it is far superior. Many Fromm scholars are critical of the psychological speculation in Friedman's book, a tendency towards gossip, and sloppiness when engaging with the secondary literature, but for me the core weakness in *Love's Prophet* is its lack of theoretical sophistication, precisely the strength of Durkin's *The Radical Human of Erich Fromm*.

The core three chapters of the book are indispensable for a discussion of Fromm's social theory: "The Roots of Radical Humanism," "Radical Humanist Psychoanalysis," and "Psychoanalytic Social Psychology." While some of the early defenses of Fromm against orthodox Freudians and his Frankfurt School critics (my work included) sometimes engaged in open polemics, Durkin is incredibly balanced and fair-minded as he examines the evidence for Fromm's revision of Freud, and the debates on this and other questions that divided Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse from their former colleague in the Frankfurt School circle. And while Friedman repeats the conventional wisdom in North America created by sociologist Lewis Coser that suggests Fromm was a

great scholar when he penned *Escape from Freedom* (1941) but descended into simplistic popularizing and quasi religious and unrealistic utopianism in his later years, Durkin deals with Fromm's later writings seriously. Durkin has produced the single best discussion in the English language literature about Fromm of how Fromm's writing on Nazism, his critique of modernity, his later work (with Michael Maccoby) *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970) and his ambitious *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973) holds up to contemporary scholarship in the empirical social sciences.

The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm could play a very important mediating role in the revival of Fromm's work in the social sciences, partly because he engages seriously with the organizational leadership research agenda pursued since Fromm's death by Michael Maccoby, Sonia Gojman Millán and Salvador Millán's important participatory action social character agenda among the Mexican poor and Mauricio Cortina's brilliant attempt to synthesize Fromm's theories with current attachment and evolutionary social psychology research. But unlike Fromm scholars who come to the theory of social character through clinical work, Durkin has the time and training to engage with mainstream academic sociology, philosophy, history and political theory. As a result, Durkin's work is indispensable for efforts to take Fromm back into mainstream academic work where he was discussed seriously in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Particularly important for sociologists, is Durkin's suggestion that social character theorists engage French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's influential concept of *habitus*, as Greek scholar Leonidas Cheliotis has done in various social science journals.

Ultimately, however, Fromm's work will be revised and developed in a variety of nations and languages outside of the English language academy in North America. The revival will be successful when practitioners in psychoanalytic, social work, education, theology and political activism and politics find ways to connect what they are doing with masses of dissidents in their own fields.



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Only so much will come out of the big picture critique of the anti humanist consensus in the social sciences and humanities that Durkin's chapter five provides, followed by his well written concluding case for "The Renaissance of Humanism." Read alongside Lawrence Wilde's important *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity* (2004) and Joan Braune's provocative and inspiring *Erich Fromm's Prophetic Messianism: Towards a Critical Theory of Hope* (2014), Durkin's *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* represents an important step in bringing Fromm's work back into academic discourse in the English speaking world and beyond. But we must remember that the original radical humanist Fromm did not emerge primarily from inside the academic establishment. There is thus no reason to think the powerful From-

mian inspired vision Durkin argues for will come from political science, sociology, psychology or philosophy disciplines as they are currently constituted. Nonetheless, Durkin's book is a terrific primer on Frommian radical humanism. It is a book worth reading, debating and returning to as people of good faith around the world attempt to deal with climate change, out of control consumerism, violence and war using the powerful analytic tools Fromm has left us.

- Kieran Durkin: *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; 250 p., ca. 90 Euro, hard cover, ISBN: 978-1-137-43639-9.