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**ERICH FROMM'S ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM RECONSIDERED**

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Unable to locate the copy of Escape from Freedom that I purchased over twenty years ago, I went off to the university library, and of the eight copies of this book I found, I brought home the latest marked-up edition. By marked-up I do not mean that the book had been defaced by the author's detractors, on the contrary, the scribbling and underlining - despite the disorder and violence - attest to the popularity it enjoyed in North America at one time. But it appeared that well over a decade had passed since many, if any, of these eight copies of Escape from Freedom had ventured from that library.

Thus the question arises as to the relevance of this once seemingly important work. Is this particular book and Fromm's writing in general merely representative of that vast body of once influential writing that arose in response to the appearance of fascism - especially the fascism of the Nazi variety? Is it merely representative of a moment in time, and therefore of no more than historical interest, or does it speak to us in the world as this century comes to a close?

For those concerned with psychology, social psychology, psychoanalysis or psychotherapy, Erich Fromm is most often considered to belong to group of so-called "neo-Freudians", consisting of such people as Harry S. Sullivan, Clara Thompson, Karen Horney, but also Erik Erikson and what later he was to develop into so-called psychohistory. But for Fromm, at least, this tag of neo-Freudian, obscures more than it reveals, for Fromm, never having known Freud personally was far from Freud's inner circle, so distant, actually, that it is impossible to situate Fromm and his work here. Moreover, except for scattered and rather detracting references that Fromm makes to Freud, the father of psychoanalysis is really of lesser influence than one would be led to think. Thus one must turn elsewhere in order to situate Fromm. This place happens to be Fromm's interest in the prejudices of the Enlightenment, to Kant, to the thought of Karl Marx, to the social sciences in general, to the "Frankfurt School" of Critical Theory, and to the philosophic literature of modernity that identifies and attempts to deal with the "problem" of alienation.

I

Of the many works left by Fromm none is more well situated in the genre of mid to late twentieth century social science or has had more influence on social scientists than Escape from Freedom. Moreover, the central theme of the book, alienation, homelessness, disenchantment, or what Fromm calls "loneliness", indeed, is the theme of modernity itself, and the self-conscious identification of this phenomenon, the location for its causes, and the prescriptions for its treatment, arose first with Rousseau, is the obsession of the likes of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Weber, and, thus far, has reached a climax in the thought of Heidegger, the latter, of course, a Nazi.

The argument of Escape from Freedom is as follows: we moderns, are no longer bound by the oppression of pre-individualistic hierarchy. Modern man is not beset with the weight of medieval Christianity and its enforcer, the church, and what later arose as the absolutist pre-modern state. However, the thinking and the conditions that arose in response to such men as Luther and Calvin (p. 79-111), and the attendant changes in the form of the Reformation and the rise of capitalism, while freeing us from the oppression of the group has left us lonely and powerless monads floating in a sea of meaningless. This is no new argument.

Unlike Freud, and more like Rousseau, Fromm finds the cause of alienation not in individual libidinal dynamics but in outside forces, conditions or circumstances - in what Rousseau identifies in his "Second Discourse" as accidents, in the formation of the group: the family, the society,

especially in “society”, properly speaking, in modernity. But where Fromm differs with Rousseau, who sees society in particular and rationality in general as the cause of all man’s ills, Fromm, falls into the camp of the Genevan’s enemies - those who embrace the Enlightenment and its bias for reason, rationalization, cosmopolitanism, democracy and, of course, freedom. So, for Fromm, unlike Rousseau, the medicine for alienation is not to be found in our escape from freedom into some Rousseauian enclave, but by embracing modernity, by avoiding the temptation of the enclaves of conformity, of “mechanization”, or when his “disorientation” becomes acute, by not submitting to “diabolical forces which we had believed to be non-existent.” Thus for Fromm, freedom is both the harbinger of our loneliness, and that which we abandon at our peril.

Fromm wanted to tread a path somewhere between the enlightenment of Kant and the socialism of Marx, the former embracing the “individual” endowed a “*guter Wille*” that follows a universal law - a law best for all men at all times and in all places - and the latter, investing his hopes in an enlightened group that lives by the dictum, “each according to his abilities, each according to his needs.” But by the time we reached mature capitalism during the last century, “... economic development went faster than our character development.” (p. 285). Thus: “This lag between economic and psychological evolution resulted in a situation in which the psychic needs could no longer be satisfied by the usual economic activities. These needs existed, however, and had to be satisfied in some other way.” (p. 285).

The result, according to Fromm, was the unleashing of those above mentioned “diabolical forces”, in the form of our escape from freedom in its most extreme form, totalitarianism in general’s and Nazism in particular.

● One might judge, as some did, and did wrongly, that this puts Fromm in the camp of Marx. They somehow saw his solution to the escape from freedom to be in the manipulation of the modes of production which they saw in changing the relations of production, in turn altering our alienated selves, and thereby restoring us to “true individualism”. But this is not Fromm. Fromm makes it clear that his “social” approach to “true individuality” differs from Marx’s “economic”, Freud’s “psychological” and Weber’s “ideological” approaches (p. 297). The actual path Fromm wants to take is between Marx and Kant. Fromm, like others, was looking for that way that has come to be called by several names: the “third way”, “socialism with a human face”, “market socialism”, and in our time, variants of the neo-Kantian “justice as fairness” of John Rawls - all paths that have lead to nowhere, yet are ways still sought.

Fromm began on his way with his revision of Freud and the development of his “oral”, “anal” and “genital” character types, explored in Escape from Freedom (p. 291). Here, following Ernest Jones and Karl Abraham, Fromm associates the “genital” type with freedom and democracy and the other types with dark and hostile forces. He, unlike Wilhelm Reich, who in his Mass Psychology of Fascism (1933), came to champion the matriarchal family, began what some today call matriarchal theory. Especially in North America, Matriarchy has usually been associated with, if not directly linked to some brand of Marxism, and is, in itself, thought to be a “third way”. However, Matriarchy - now “Patriarchal Theory” - is but one of our vast array of ideological mutations - a bit of Freud, a bit of Marx, a bit of Weber, a bit of whatever one sees fit.

## II

During and after the horror of the Second World War, perhaps the readiness to entertain, and in some circles to embrace perceptions, prejudices and explanations of what we term “Continental Philosophy” was due to the fact that this voice was fresh to the English-speaking part of the West, and certainly had more appeal than the sound of number crunching positivism or the language games of Anglo-American philosophy. The diaspora brought to North America a variation of thinkers unafraid to reflect on what they had fled, and their scattered seeds have produced a

plethora of views that have shaped English-speaking and Western consciousness since that time. As a group, those loosely identified as the Frankfurt School, at least for a time, held sway. Their appeal to the West during the years just after the war, but especially during the sixties, was precisely their preoccupation with this “third way”. I speak of men such as Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno, men with whom Fromm is associated both directly in his work and indirectly in spirit. Despite the fact that there is a direct connection between Fromm and the preoccupation of this school in their studies on the “authoritarian personality”, the Frankfurt School’s further probing into the depths of the Western soul reached to far greater depths than did those of Fromm. But this precisely was the appeal of Fromm and others such as Herbert Marcuse - in that Marcuse’s theory of “polymorphous perversity”, although differing greatly from Fromm’s typologies, spoke more directly to the American spirit of common sense. Fromm’s freedom seemed to sing the tune of American liberty and the music seemed to ring true. Fromm’s appeal to the virtues of Thomas Jefferson indeed rests on Jefferson being a champion of freedom, at least as Fromm saw it. However, one also might say that the Virginian is an apt description of Marcuse’s “one-dimensional man”, who, in his lack of awareness of his own internal self-contradictions could proclaim “that all men are created equal” and that all men have the inalienable rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” and, at the same time, own numerous slaves. Freedom seems to have more dimensions than Mister Jefferson had realized, and Jefferson seems a poor example of Fromm’s “fully integrated personality.” Thus just as Jefferson’s notion of freedom is one-dimensional, so is Fromm’s idea of democracy.

Generally speaking, the inner circle of Critical Theory had as its central project the “saving” of Karl Marx. This was done through arranged marriages: first there was the Marx-Hegel nuptial, and when that marriage failed there was an arrangement between Marx and Freud and clandestine affairs with rabbinical mysticism. But these sometimes noble attempts to save the Enlightenment from the stomping boot of “diabolic forces” have failed. Some members associated with the Frankfurt circle - Fromm and Marcuse among them - have unwittingly made it rather easy for their “third way” to degenerate into all manner of arranged marriages, the most astounding among them, Marx and Nietzsche, and who would have ever thought it, Marx and Heidegger.

So where does this leave Fromm and his “third way”? Well, the path is still there, and it is quite accessible. It has turned out to be the easy way of pop psychology, the twelve-step method to the “New Age”.

### III

But perhaps the new age is not really so new, and the freedom that Fromm proffers for us as the new elixir is not really so new either. Fromm, together with, Kant, Marx and Rousseau, all made perverse deals with the Enlightenment. However, the Enlightenment is not correct when it identifies itself as giving birth to freedom ex nihilo, and then proclaiming this freedom to be the salvation of man.

I am arguing that the main error that Fromm makes is the same one that modernity itself made in presuming that freedom was invented by and appeared only during modernity. Thus even the profound Hobbes was wrong when he reduced freedom to “the absence of external impediments.” (Leviathan, Ch. 21), and Fromm also is wrong when, in the entire last chapter of Escape from Freedom, he argues that freedom pertains to “doing and thinking what [man] sees fit.”

This arbitrariness comes from dissociating the “negative freedom” of Hobbes from the “positive freedom” of romanticism. Thus Fromm belongs to that Romanticism hidden at the heart of the spirit of the Enlightenment itself that had, by the sixties, degenerated into the vulgar prescription: “Do your own thing.” Fromm, like others of far greater stature, has endeavoured to bestow the accolades of freedom on modernity, but the romantic impulse hidden in the cosmopolitan heart -

a faith in some mystical good will - is itself that "Dark Side of the Enlightenment", recognized by Critical Theory itself. Fromm's appeal is to what Nietzsche named as "values"- abstract expressions of desire, born of the separation of our desires from the experience in which they were rooted. If freedom is "Doing and thinking what [man] sees fit" then this leaves man with an inability to make sense of his experience, yet gives him the illusion that his arbitrarily chosen values are actually rational choices. To state it clearly, Fromm is a utopian, and the way to utopia for Fromm and for all moderns is the way called ideology.

## CONCLUSION

But the truth of the matter is that despite the conceits of Fromm and the modern prejudice he exhibits, freedom is not some invention of the modern West. While I will not comment on the increasingly vanishing parts of the planet yet to be transformed by the modern West, I will refer to Plato and to the Bible, in that both teach that freedom together with alienation are rooted in the human condition; that freedom and alienation are among the greatest mysteries of human life, and are, indeed, the part of that condition that keeps our humanity. We who live in this technological world at the end of this second millennium, we who have the freedom to deface, erode, abolish - literally to redraw the boundaries of what constitutes human beings - find no new medicine to stay, much less cure our longings. But thank goodness that the medicine of the likes of Fromm does not work, for if his elixir of modern freedom and the travelling medicine shows that continue to sell it did, perhaps we might be cured - cured from our humanity itself.

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jeho svojvoľne zvolené hodnoty sú vlastne racionálnou voľbou. Jednoducho povedané, Fromm je utopista a cesta k utópii sa preňho i pre všetkých moderných mysliteľov nazýva ideológia.

## ZÁVER

Pravdou však zostáva, že napriek Frommovej vysokej mienke i jeho modernému predsudku, slobodu nevyňašiel moderný Západ. Nebudem tu hovoriť o rapídne miznúcich častiach našej planéty, ktoré by mal moderný Západ ešte premeniť; chcem však spomenúť Platóna a bibliu: Platón i biblia nás učia, že sloboda i odcudzenie sú zakorenené v ľudskej existencii, že patria k najväčším mysteriám ľudského života a že sú vlastne súčasťou toho, čo tvorí našu ľudskosť. My, ktorí žijeme v tomto technickom svete na konci druhého tisícročia, my, čo môžeme slobodne znetvorovať, deštruovať a ničiť - doslova znovu vytvárať hranice toho, čo konštituuje ľudskú bytosť - nemáme žiadny nový liek na prežitie a máme len málo prostriedkov na uskutočnenie svojich túžob. No chvalabohu, že Frommova lieky a lieky jemu podobných nezaberajú, lebo keby sa ukázalo, že jeho zázračný nápoj modernej slobody, tento púťový všeliek je účinný, možno by sme sa vyliečili aj z našej ľudskosti.

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