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Erich Fromm's Hopeful Humanism

Kieran Durkin & Joan Braune (eds.) *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism, and the Future*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Pp. 248. £85.00, hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-3500-8701-9.

Kieran Durkin and Joan Braune, two prominent young Fromm scholars, have taken up a daring task: their aim is to show that Erich Fromm offers his own form of critical theory, comparable to but distinct from the critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School. It is certainly true that Fromm has been somewhat neglected as an intellectual figure. His work is often ignored in analyses of the Critical theory of the Frankfurt School, or at least given minimal attention. This historical omission needs to be corrected. After being consigned to the margins in recent decades, Fromm's work is enjoying something of a global renaissance in various fields of research. This trend is welcome, and offers the possibility of rethinking his contribution. During his own life, Fromm was considered not philosophical enough for philosophers, not sociological enough for sociologists, and not psychoanalytical enough for psychoanalysts. Now the situation has changed, and different disciplines gladly offer their own labels when categorizing Fromm's works. And they are quite right to do so – Fromm is a philosopher, a sociologist, and a psychoanalyst among other things, a wide ranging and cross-disciplinary thinker in the best sense.

The very title of the book, *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory*, makes a comment about the tradition of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, which is typically identified with such thinkers as Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, and Axel Honneth. Fromm's influence on this tradition is pivotal. As Durkin reminds us in the introduction, Fromm was a central figure in developing both the research program and the methodology of Critical Theory. During the early period of the Frankfurt School, Fromm was perhaps second only to Horkheimer in these regards. His work on the authoritarian personality made a

profound contribution to the work that led to the major study under that title under Adorno's name. Fromm made original contributions to Critical Theory's integration of psychoanalysis and sociology.

The critical nature of Fromm's thought is emphasized in many of the chapters of this volume. Most are comparative in nature. For example, there are illuminating discussions of Fromm and feminism (by Lynn Chancer), Fromm and Bourdieu (by Michael Maccoby and Neil McLaughlin), Fromm and Hilde Weiss (by David Norman Smith), and Fromm and Giddens (by Charles Thorpe). This is a helpful way to introduce Fromm's thinking to a new audience, and these texts encourage further engagement. For instance, Fromm's theory of social character merits comparison with Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics, and how there can be 'positive' and 'negative' ways to guide/control human beings. With regard to more recent discussions, Fromm's thoughts on relatedness compare interestingly with Sherry Turkle's views on technologically mediated ways to be alone while being together. With their volume, Durkin and Braune have opened an important path for future studies.

In another chapter, Michael Löwy considers the young Fromm's writings in German (1922-1930), texts that have mostly been ignored in the English-speaking world. Löwy's analysis is timely, and it parallels the recent translation of Fromm's early texts into English (see Fromm Forum 24/2020). This informative account provides a useful context for some of the more polemical chapters, including George Lundskow's account of Fromm on revolutionary humanism, Roger Foster's article on renewing Fromm in the neoliberal age, as well as Lauren Langman's and Lundskow's speculations regarding movement to a more humane future. The book ends with Braune's reflections on contemporary anti-fascism and the need to promote

Erich Fromm's thinking in the very turbulent and violent social reality that we face in many parts of the world today.

As the articles show, there are various ways to explore Fromm's legacy. Durkin and Braune have chosen to focus on his Marxist roots which is not unusual in the English-speaking countries, while in Germany, as illustrated by Rainer Funk's works, Fromm is first and foremost a social psychoanalyst. The psychoanalytical Fromm is not deeply explored in this book. Other Frommian themes are also treated lightly in the volume. For example, while the book does cover some of Fromm's religious interests (which were important for Fromm throughout his career), his work on Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism is left aside. This neglect is typical in current Fromm research, though Fromm was very much influenced by yoga and meditation throughout his life. Perhaps his more mystical writings are not of interest to scholars who tend to neglect such themes as non-academic or politically uninspiring. However, recently Mika Pekkolaⁱ has argued that in the light of Frommian critical thinking, yoga and meditation can actually be seen as contributors to resistance to capitalism. Maybe this intriguing aspect will garner more attention in the future studies.

This book is clearly targeted at academic circles. The introduction written by Durkin offers an informative overview of Fromm's critical social theory and its contemporary importance. In the first chapter of the collection Michael J. Thompson discusses Fromm's significance for social ontology. Thompson argues that Fromm's theoretical ideas both contribute to and challenge the evolving Hegelian paradigm which has taken an abstract turn by emphasizing theories of communication (e.g. Habermas) or recognition (e.g. Honneth) (Thompson 2016ⁱⁱ). Fromm's more concrete historical approach offers a fruitful contrast to this development in critical theory.

The articles in this book tend to be more technical and conceptual than Fromm was in his own writings. While this is understandable, there is a risk in approaching Fromm's work in this way. In Fromm's humanism, the use of accessible language is crucial. Here he stands with a long tradition of humanist philosophy. Since the Italian Renaissance, it has been important for humanistic thinkers to speak in a language that can be understood by the public at large. Humanism and approachable language go hand in hand. In this respect, the book is not as Frommian as it could be. This is not a matter of imitating Fromm's style of expression, yet the humane spirit of his thoughts is bound his approachable forms of expression. No doubt it is hard to reconcile value with modern academic style. Thompson makes the point this way: "[A]lthough his ideas are not taken seriously enough by the academic mandarins of our time, one thing is increasingly clear as their ideas become more technical, abstruse, and impotent: we dismiss him at our peril." (40) Unfortunately, Thompson and some of the other contributors are in danger of doing the very same thing to Fromm. In any case, the wider public who read Fromm in the 1960s and 1970s will (at times) struggle to get through the articles.

All in all, the book is compelling and an important addition to Frommian research, and the quality of its chapters is generally high. Nonetheless more work is needed to realize the volume's objective, that is, to associate a distinctive kind of Critical Theory with Fromm's name. Or, to be more precise, this may miss the nature of his actual contribution. Fromm's theory of human nature and social reality contributes more generally to the tradition of radical humanism. This is of course critical in spirit, but bears not so directly on the finer issues of what counts as 'Critical Theory.' Durkin suggests in his introduction that Fromm's radical humanism is its own kind of critical theory, one that is to be distinguished from

Horkheimer's and Adorno's writings. Such an attempt to differentiate among varieties of Critical Theory risks imposing an unhelpful vagueness to the idea: Might we not then need to speak of a different critical theory for Herbert Marcuse, and for Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Pollock, and so on? If every member of the Frankfurt School has a critical theory of his or her own, then the whole field experiences an unnecessary inflation.

Nevertheless, the provocative title does not diminish the value of this volume, and does invite fruitful debate. Fromm was one of the central figures of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, but perhaps he earns a title of his own to his thinking – even if 'Critical Theory' is just not the most Frommian way to put it. Fromm is a critical but humane thinker to whom the importance of vivid and sparkling language is pivotal. Through his style Fromm implicitly challenges some fundamental positions of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory for example, Adorno's negative criticism. For Fromm, critical thinking is a tool with which he offers hope, and in this process the meta-pedagogical nature of his style should be recognized.

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ⁱ ARTICLE: Pekkola, Mika, "Zen and Anti-Capitalism. Meditation as a Practice of Societal Liberation" (in Finnish). In Jarno Hietalahti and Mika Pekkola, *Therapy for the Insane World. Erich Fromm and the Promise of Radical Humanism* (in Finnish) (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2019).

ⁱⁱ BOOK: Michael S. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).