
Erich Fromm

A Contemporary Introduction

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Brief Biography of Fromm's Life¹

When I meet a new patient, I generally ask them to tell me about “the situation you were born into.” This question is also a statement. Each of us was born into a situation we did not create. This context will have a significant impact on our lives.

If someone could choose where and when to be born so as to be sensitized to the imprint of society on the individual, the straddling of disparate worldviews, the influence of irrational forces, and the universality of the human predicament of needing both freedom and belonging, they might choose the circumstances of Fromm's birth.

Erich Seligmann Fromm was born in Frankfurt am Main on March 23, 1900, the only child of Jewish parents, Naphtali and Rosa. His adolescence was deeply affected by the brutality of the First World War, and his adult life was profoundly impacted by the unfathomable tragedy of the Second World War. I cannot imagine more impressive demonstrations of both the power of irrational forces and the imprint of the social world on individual development. Erich had minority status as a Jew in Germany and, in a sense, as an only child in a large family of adults. Naphtali hoped Erich would become a rabbi, but his own position was head of a chapter of the Hermann Cohen Society, a group devoted to the study of a Neo-Kantian philosopher. As a child, Erich studied with rabbinical scholars, but, eventually, his intellect ranged beyond any one field to encompass sociology, psychoanalysis, politics, history, anthropology, neurology, and Zen Buddhism. Fromm bridged a Marxist philosophy of values with a psychoanalytic study of the unconscious. He brought

together the teachings of Buddhists with the findings of psychological and sociological research. Integrating insights from multiple perspectives was a pursuit he raised to an art form. We might speculate about how his life circumstances facilitated having one foot in each of many fields, but, regardless of this, it is clear that part of Fromm's enormous contribution is his ability to be a profession's "insider" and "outsider" at one and the same time. In both sociology and psychoanalysis, he had an insider's profound understanding, an outsider's capacity to critique, and a truth-seeker's willingness to engage in controversy.

My way of thinking is that Fromm did something that many other great scholars are also able to accomplish: He turned what could be a handicap into an advantage. Just as Freud took a potentially negative experience (the abrupt departure of his patient, Dora) and *made it into an opportunity* to further his understanding of the treatment relationship, Fromm made his personal familiarity with being an "outsider" stand him in good stead in his professional life. Funk (2000) quotes Fromm as saying, "I felt quite at home neither in the world I lived in, nor in the old world of traditions" (p. 10). Erich, the Jew in Germany, became Dr. Erich Fromm, the sociologist/psychoanalyst. With his knowledge of sociology, he could approach psychoanalysis differently from other analysts, and with his background in psychoanalysis, he could forge a new sociological perspective. While he was "othered" by some in both fields, he found ways to use his multiple allegiances to enrich his work as a clinician and author. But, of course, his outsider status came at a price, as we will see shortly. What I want to emphasize here is this capacity to make *use* of his position, rather than allowing it to disqualify him, at least in his own eyes. Similarly, Funk quotes Fromm as saying that "having grown up in a very neurotic family" allowed him to become "more aware of what the irrationalities of human behavior really represent" (p. 16). Once again, a potential drawback is transformed into an asset. It reminds me of how science frequently advances by studying the experimental results that "fail" to conform to expectations. Serendipitous findings can be reframed into opportunities for further inquiry. I think this attitude embodies the curiosity and courage of the intrepid explorer.

Fromm's biography can be taken to exemplify another recurring feature of many psychoanalytic pioneers: using personal experience as a resource for discovering generalizable theoretical premises. From the crucible of his childhood with a father who anxiously restricted him, Fromm became a vigorous champion of psychological freedom (Funk, 2000). At a profound level, he understood what it meant to be hampered in the quest for full self-development. From a mother who sharply distinguished between "us" (her own family) and "them" (the Fromm's), he took lessons about the conflictual impact of "us vs. them" divisions. Fromm fought passionately for tolerance and against all forms of "group narcissism" (Funk, 2019, p. 121). While it would be reductionistic to interpret Fromm's theoretical positions as merely products of his own childhood, I think it can be argued that his personal experiences planted seeds and, perhaps, contributed to the passion of his convictions.

I think it is inevitable that the *story of our early lives coheres around beliefs constructed later*. Thus, Fromm remembered the teacher who voiced opinions contrary to prevailing prowar sentiments (Funk, 2000). Would he have recalled this moment if his later life had bent toward patriotic fervor? Of course, we can never know, but as it stood the experience at 14 of an independent-minded teacher was indelible.

Rather than patriotic fervor, the young Fromm developed strong feelings about the Old Testament prophets. It has been said about the prophets that they lived in accordance with what they preached and spoke the truth, even if it risked their imprisonment, ostracism, or death. I can think of no better template for some of the values Fromm held in later adulthood. In my own work (Buechler, 2004), I have thought of this quality as integrity and have considered it imperative for the clinician (as well, of course, as the rest of us).

Early influences on Fromm's intellectual and spiritual development included Rabbi Nobel, whose teaching brought together Hasidic and Enlightenment strands. Fromm took up the study of the Talmud with Dr. Salman Baruch Rabinkow. Interestingly, when still quite young, Fromm had to deal with a clash of values, as his opposition to nationalism crystallized. This motivated his

resignation from a Zionist youth organization in 1923. It would not be the last time Fromm's passionate beliefs had an interpersonal cost. His extraordinarily integrating mind brought differing perspectives together, but, sometimes, his belief in living what you preach necessitated choosing one over the other. What prevailed is Fromm's strong attachment to the humanistic vision of One Man, that is, the idea (developed in Fromm, 1962) that, while our customs differ, the human substance is the same throughout the world and throughout time. As we will see in other chapters, this fundamental idea informed Fromm's sociological, philosophical, and clinical work.

After taking courses in law, philosophy, history, and economics, Fromm pursued doctoral studies under the supervision of the sociologist Alfred Weber (brother of Max Weber). Eventually, Fromm earned his PhD with a study of the social functions of Jewish Law. I think it is noteworthy that Fromm's interest was in the way the law promoted social cohesion. I imagine this topic enabled Fromm to bring his prior interest in biblical scholarship together with his growing awareness of social and psychological issues. To integrate complicated bodies of work took a scholar able to be both an "insider" who understands fundamental premises and, at the same time, an "outsider" who can recognize gaps that could be filled by insights from another line of thought. Fromm's powerful mind and diligent pursuit of knowledge enabled him to be that scholar.

Fromm's early adult experiences also included friendship, professional projects, and eventual marriage to the psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichmann. But not long after their marriage, tuberculosis forced him to spend time on his own recuperating in Davos. Then came events in 1933, a fork in the road for his country and for Fromm personally. Hitler came to power, Fromm's father died, and, in 1934, Fromm moved to the US. He was unable to persuade his mother to leave Germany until Kristallnacht. After two years in England, she came to New York, living there until she died of cancer in 1959.

Fromm lost many relatives to the concentration camps. Roger Frie (2022), a psychoanalyst and historian, has made extensive study of the effect of the war on Fromm's life and work. Frie

(2019) and Funk (2000) tell the heart-rending story of family members of Fromm who perished. Some (such as Fromm's aunt, Sophie Englander) apparently held on to hope for future family reunions. Tragically, they were not to be.

I think of Fromm's intellectual development as a rich tapestry or musical composition. The theme of the life of the spirit took hold in early life, at first with an interest in the Jewish religion, much later in Buddhism, but always expressed in valuing nourishing the soul. Then came the theme of the intrinsically interpersonal nature of the human being and the imprint of society on the individual. Then psychoanalysis, and the life of the unconscious, added richness and depth to the design. As might be said of many lives, the overall pattern is much clearer in retrospect than it could have been at the time of its creation. Not everyone has the intellect to retain such diverse influences. Not everyone has the psychological strength to withstand being both an insider and outsider in several fields. Not everyone has the courage to stand up for what they believe in, when encountering severe criticism and, even worse, disregard. Fromm was one person who was equipped to do all of this.

Each of these threads has an interpersonal history in Fromm's life. His interest in the religious and non-religious life of the soul had its beginnings in his family but was greatly enhanced by teachers who provided inspiring ethical role models as well as intellectual input. Fromm's sociological studies were partially motivated by a profound need to understand better the meaning of cataclysmic world events and furthered by influential mentors, such as Alfred Weber. His study of psychoanalysis was nurtured by his friend, and later wife, Frieda Reichmann. It was through her that he met many other analysts who had a significant impact on his development as a clinician and theoretician. Each thread contributes to the power and lasting influence of his thinking. At least for me, I can say that without any one of these threads I would be less devoted to studying his work. I feel that it is their combination that makes Fromm so relevant to the present moment in history (see Chapter 9 for more about this). Today, technology challenges us to meet its advances without losing our connection to the spiritual values that have guided us in the past.

Polarizing group processes and political factions force us to examine the relationship between the individual and society. Incidences of horrendous violence demand that we examine human motivations and, especially, their destructive expressions, as well as the life forces that can prevail. Fromm addresses all of these issues in ways that make him both incredibly prescient and relevant.

After Fromm obtained his doctorate in 1925, his friendship with Frieda Reichmann, a psychiatrist 11 years his senior, led him to the study of Freudian psychoanalysis. Together, they created a “therapeuticum” where Jewish patients could gain awareness of unconscious experience. They married in 1926. Fromm pursued psychoanalytic insight through personal analysis with Wilhelm Wittenberg, by attending lectures, getting to know Georg Groddeck, Karen Horney, and Sándor Ferenczi, and, in 1928, completing his psychoanalytic training with Hanns Sachs at the Karl Abraham Institute in Berlin.

The early 1930s brought another significant change. Fromm fell ill with tuberculosis and moved to Switzerland to be treated. Then, having decided to separate from Frieda, Fromm accepted an invitation from Karen Horney to lecture in Chicago. Some of Fromm’s sociological and psychoanalytic ideas coalesced into an essay, “The Dogma of Christ,” in 1930. Fromm’s theoretical development and prolific output as an author is the subject of a separate chapter, but here I mention that his capacity to integrate ideas from religion, sociology, and psychology was already evident in this publication.

The bout with tuberculosis, and his recuperation in Switzerland, can be seen as another example of Fromm’s capacity to make productive use of unfortunate circumstances. He used the time to develop his sociopolitical ideas, studying (among others) the work of Johann Jacob Bachofen, who wrote about differences between matriarchal and patriarchal societies.

Fromm’s relationship with Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, and his development of the concept of the authoritarian personality, began in the 1930s. Both the Institute and Fromm himself made several geographical moves but ended up in New York.

Not for the first or last time the ideas of one thinker (Bachofen) led Fromm to critique the theories of another (Freud). During his recovery in Davos, he made contact with Ernst Schachtel, among many other influential thinkers, and was visited by Herbert Marcuse and Frieda. By then, Fromm was playing a significant role in the development of the Institute for Social Research. Both the Institute and Fromm relocated to New York in 1934. His relationship with Karen Horney grew closer, and he anticipated productive years of collaboration with Institute colleagues, who showed great interest in his thinking. However, repeated bouts of illness interfered in some of his work until 1939. Along with the hardships of ill health, Fromm had to bear disastrous political news from Germany, Spain, and Moscow.

Extreme tribulations tested Fromm in this period. In addition to the worsening political situation and his own ill health, Fromm had to deal with economic challenges, as he struggled to help his mother emigrate. In a telling letter to Horkheimer, Fromm reflects:

Sometimes, during these weeks, it has seemed more than doubtful to me, if under the circumstances, it was still worth holding on to one's life as it were "by force," through doctors, medicines-and the inner will to live. But the feeling "I can make it" stayed more prominent...we have a responsibility as individuals not to give in. Besides this there is satisfaction in knowing that, even though we might get physically crushed by the steamroller of historical events, we will stay intact spiritually and morally.

(Funk, 2000, p. 86)

As I hear it, Fromm once again forged a significant outlook on the human condition from his challenging circumstances. The strength of the will to live, the importance of *how we meet* life's tribulations, and the meaningfulness of spiritual and moral forces are succinctly expressed in this moving personal statement. To me, it is no wonder that his work inspired so many and continues to do so more than 40 years after his death.

It is with sorrow that I review the deterioration of Fromm's relationship with the Institute for Social Research. I am sad

because there have been so many schisms in the history of my field, psychoanalysis, with theoretical differences as at least part of their basis. If only we could look at our colleagues' beliefs with the same openness and curiosity that we expect of ourselves when we are with our patients!

As I understand it, at the heart of the break between Fromm and the Institute was Fromm's development of a theoretical framework that emphasized social conditions, and not just libidinal instincts. Funk (2000) quotes a letter Fromm wrote as saying that "The task seems to me to be to understand the structure of character and instincts as a result of adaptation to the given social conditions and not as a product of the erogenous zones" (p. 93).

I will not try to adjudicate the many aspects of the conflict between Fromm and the Institute, except to say that whatever part Fromm's position played means that, not for the first or last time, Fromm suffered ostracism for his passionate convictions. I hope we can take from this episode a strengthened determination to embrace differences of all kinds, in colleagues and in the wider world, and treat the "other" with respect, as providing an opportunity for learning and growth.

Even though plagued with repeated episodes of tuberculosis, Fromm's thinking evolved in the 1930s, and in 1941 he published the widely influential book *Escape from Freedom* (a later chapter will discuss this further). Fromm was refining his view of a *dialectic* relationship between our biological necessities and the societally determined conditions in which they must be satisfied. Essentially, Fromm would not back down from this conviction. Studying the effects of the culture, Fromm developed his view of social character types (further discussed in subsequent chapters), eventually including not just the authoritarian character but also the marketing character and other categories. In other words, if we grow up in a society that places a premium on success in the marketplace, we are likely to internalize this value, and it will help shape how we live our lives. This fundamental position informed his extensive research efforts and prolific writing from the 1930s on. Sadly, the rift between Fromm and the Institute only widened and resulted in a final break in 1939.

According to an old saying, when one door closes, another opens. That certainly was true for Fromm. As his relationship

with the Institute for Social Research deteriorated, he was invited by H. S. Sullivan to join in the activities of the Washington School of Psychiatry. Like Fromm, Sullivan believed that humans are inherently social beings and that treatment should center on the way the patient relates interpersonally. My take on this is that, in the long run, it was bound to be more fruitful for Fromm to bring his background in sociology to Interpersonal psychoanalysis than it was for him to try to bring his version of psychoanalysis to the sociologists at the Institute for Social Research. In the 1930s an interdisciplinary spirit reigned in the new Interpersonal school of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. For example, in the first four issues (1938) of the journal *Psychiatry*, articles on sociology, anthropology, philosophy, political science, law, economics, biology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis were published side by side. Sullivan invited Fromm to an enterprise heartily welcoming what he could contribute. Along with Sullivan, Clara Thompson, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, and others, Fromm was able to put his stamp on both the Washington School of Psychiatry and its New York branch, the William Alanson White Institute. My cohort of candidates in psychoanalytic training at the W. A. White Institute between 1979 and 1983 thought of Sullivan and Fromm as our two most important forbears. While not without its own conflicts, in this newly emerging field Fromm found an intellectual home base, and in *Psychiatry* he found a new venue for publications.

It was in this context that Fromm more fully developed his clinical approach, which is the subject of two later chapters in this volume. Fromm was a substantial influence in my own analytic training at the W. A. White Institute. My Training Analyst, Rose Spiegel, MD, and my first Analytic Supervisor, Ralph Crowley, MD, frequently referenced Fromm. From them and from many others who knew Fromm, I got the impression that he was remarkably inspiring. His unusually strong effect on a generation of clinicians deserves its own chapter, so I discuss it separately. There I speculate about how he evoked a loyalty that is still evident in the many activities of the International Erich Fromm Society, which was founded in 1985 and is presently a growing and thriving organization.

In his extremely popular book *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm found a wide audience for his thinking about the authoritarian characters who lead and follow in fascist regimes. In many chapters I note how, sadly, these issues are still timely.

Besides this career success, Fromm also established a new marriage, to Henny Gurland, who, together with her son, had fled from the Nazis. In the 1940s Fromm's busy career included teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York, Bennington College in Vermont, and as a lecturer at Yale. Along with his many lectures, Fromm wrote several books in this period, as mentioned in the chapter on his contributions as an author.

The end of the 1940s brought Fromm the sorrow of Henny's severe arthritic pain, their move to Mexico in the hope that the climate would ease her suffering, and Henny's death in 1950. Fromm remained in Mexico until 1973, where he played an important part in the development of psychoanalytic training in that country.

As Fromm's thinking developed, he focused on the universality of our fundamental humanness, which is represented in the unconscious. Over the years, an interest in Zen Buddhism added to Fromm's personal meditative practice and his psychoanalytic perspective. The 1950s brought love center stage, with the publication of his extremely popular book, *The Art of Loving* (1956), and with his marriage to Annis Freeman in 1953. All accounts (Funk, 2000) suggest that Fromm's theoretical belief in an active, center-to-center form of loving guided his personal relationship with Annis.

Fromm's views about love have been extremely meaningful to me. In *The Art of Loving*, he describes its challenges, including the need to actively practice loving and enter into it fully. I devoted the first chapter of *Psychoanalytic Approaches to Problems in Living* (Buechler, 2019) to the idea that the relatively secure person has a capacity for bearing aloneness as well as a capacity to invest in relationships. I expressed this by saying that I think "...the capacities for solitude and relationship are twins, conceived in the benign environment created by our first love" (p. 18). I credited Fromm with inspiring many of the ideas in this book, calling him the most influential of the voices of analysts I have internalized in my own "internal chorus" of wise clinicians.

Another of Fromm's accomplishments had a direct effect on my career. He played a major role in the establishment of the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies in 1962. The IFPS is a vibrant group of analytic societies that meets every two years in different member countries. Its theoretical and cultural diversity and warm collegial atmosphere have been a source of wonderful professional opportunities and personal friendships for me.

Fromm's direct involvement in politics took several forms, including cofounding SANE ("National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy"), raising the issue of disarmament in letters to religious leaders and politicians and actively campaigning for Eugene McCarthy in his bid to become the president of the US.

In Mexico, aside from his involvement in psychoanalytic training, Fromm also devoted time to field research, and, with Michael Maccoby, published *Social Character in a Mexican Village: A Sociopschoanalytic Study* (1970). This evolved into a line of research, carried out in several countries, on the relationship between economic and social structure and character patterns.

In the last decade of his life, Fromm continued to refine his perspective on human motivation, publishing *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* in 1973. In a sense, Fromm searched his whole life for a greater understanding of the causes of destructiveness. The theory he developed is that the primary tendency in human beings is biophilic. Destructive tendencies are an outgrowth of failed or blocked life forces. I take up the vast clinical implications of this viewpoint separately, but here I want to mention how closely it resembles a thread in my own work. Coming from a background in emotion theory (Izard, 1972, 1977), I (Buechler, 2008) focused on the balance of the positive and negative emotions as pivotal to the texture of human experience and as key to therapeutic approaches. The significance of a balance is prominent in Fromm's thinking and emotion theory, and, retrospectively, I see my own framework as partially derived from both.

Fromm had his first heart attack in 1966, which interrupted all his activities. In 1974 Erich and Annis moved to Locarno, Switzerland. That was also the time when Rainer Funk became his

assistant and began decades of devotion to Fromm scholarship. In his later years, Fromm worked on a statement of two ways of life, which became his book *To Have or To Be?* (1976). The continuing relevance of this distinction will be explored in the last chapter of this volume.

In his last years, Fromm continued political activities, symposia, lectures, and varied professional and personal contacts, although he suffered from gallstones and three more heart attacks. The last of them, on March 18, 1980, was fatal.

Fromm often mentioned the phrase from Deuteronomy (30:15–20): “Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.” I would select these words to express the central message he conveyed in his writing but, perhaps even more tellingly, in how he connected with others, stood up for his beliefs, and cultivated his own inner life.

Rainer Funk, the literary executor of the Erich Fromm Estate and the editor of the multivolume publication of Fromm’s complete works, is the most comprehensive and authoritative source of information about Fromm’s life and writing. In English, aside from his book, *Erich Fromm: His Life and Ideas* (Continuum, 2000), Funk also contributed a volume that integrates Fromm’s life experience with his conceptual output, *Life Itself Is an Art: The Life and Work of Erich Fromm* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). For additional information, see the valuable study by Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives, and Antisemitism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Note

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical information is from Burston (1991), Cortina and Maccoby (1996), and Funk (2000, 2019).

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