

Rainer Funk, Neil McLaughlin (Eds.)
Towards a Human Science

The series BIBLIOTHEK DER PSYCHOANALYSE (Library of Psychoanalysis) wishes to create a forum of discussion which stimulates the basic, human and cultural aspects of psychoanalysis as a science and as a clinical theory and practice. The different currents within psychoanalysis will be given space, and the critical dialogue with the neighbouring academic fields will be intensified. So far, the following thematic focuses have developed:

The rediscovery of psychoanalytic classics which have long been out of print – such as the works of Otto Fenichel, Karl Abraham, W. R. D. Fairbairn, Otto Rank and others – will strengthen the common roots of the psychoanalytic movement, which is threatening to split. Another component of the psychoanalytic identity is the treatment of both the person and the works of Sigmund Freud, and of the discussions and conflicts of the psychoanalytic movement's early days.

In the course of the process during which psychoanalysis established itself as a medical-psychological therapy, it neglected its multidisciplinary regarding the humanities, cultural analysis and politics. By resuming the dialogue with the neighbouring academic fields, the culture-critical and socio-critical heritage of psychoanalysis will be revitalised and advanced.

Psychoanalysis now competes with neighbouring psychotherapeutic methods and with biological psychiatry more than it used to. Being the most sophisticated among the psychotherapeutic methods, psychoanalysis should face an empirical-scientific verification of its procedures and its therapeutical success, but it should also develop its own criteria and concepts to control results. This context also includes the revival of the discussion about the particular scientific-theoretical status of psychoanalysis.

One hundred years after its creation by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis faces new challenges which it can only meet by focussing on its critical potential.

BIBLIOTHEK DER PSYCHOANALYSE

EDITED BY HANS-JÜRGEN WIRTH

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The Relevance of Erich Fromm for Today

With contributions by Kevin Anderson, Burkhard Bierhoff,
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Takeshi Deguchi, Jan Dietrich, Rainer Funk,
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Introduction

Rainer Funk and Neil McLaughlin

No theoretical system can be successful “unless we recognize that, and why, every system as it is developed and presented by its author *is necessarily erroneous*”. When Erich Fromm wrote these lines at the end of his life in his *Greatness and Limitations of Freud’s Thought* (1979a, p. 1) he had in mind the creative ideas of Sigmund Freud. Fromm was a great admirer of psychoanalytic insights, but he had the courage and insight in the 1930s to challenge Freud’s view that most of the psychic strivings and irrationality are the outcome of drives inherent in the biological constitution of man (Roazen 1996). Fromm replaced Freud’s libido theory by a theory based on the psychic need to be related – to other individuals, to reality, to social groups he belongs to and to oneself, and thus created his own unique and influential social criticism and theory of social character in such works of critical social science as *Escape from Freedom* (1941a), *Man for Himself* (1947a), *The Sane Society* (1955a), *The Heart of Man* (1964a) *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973a) and *To Have Or to Be?* (1976a). The goal of this edited book is to document the global reception, continuing influence and contemporary relevance of Erich Fromm’s theories while discussing some of his limitations in the spirit of Fromm’s own understanding of how theoretical systems work.

All thinkers have their personal limitations, of course, something Fromm documented in his writings about Sigmund Freud to the distress of the founder of psychoanalysis’ most uncritical followers; we aim to go deeper than this obvious point because Fromm’s insistence on the need to constantly revise and refine theoretical systems, was based on a more pro-

found philosophical, historical and sociological account of the nature of knowledge production than one based on critiquing individual thinkers. One important dynamic at play in the creation of theoretical systems is that when a creative and innovative author has something new to say that has not been thought or said before, he or she has no choice but to express this new thought in the spirit of the time in which they lived. Moreover, because different societies have different kinds of 'common sense,' different categories of thinking, and different systems of logic therefore every society has its own 'social filter' that makes it difficult to see, understand or experience some truths that will be obvious to later generations.

In *Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought* (1979a) Fromm also states that for the one who revises the idea of another thinker the same holds true:

The process of revision of an author, which distinguishes the essential and new from the contingent, time-conditioned elements, is in itself also the product of a certain historical period that influences the interpretation. In this creative interpretation, again creative and valid elements are mixed with time-bound and accidental ones. The revision is not simply true as the original was not simply false. (Fromm 1979a, p. 4)

Thirty five years after these lines were written we may ask which of Fromm's creative ideas are groundbreaking and in which way these ideas were expressed in a time-conditioned frame of reference? That is to say, we aim to build on Fromm insights all the time looking for new evidence and looking critically at the concepts that highlight what Fromm sensed and perceived but expressed in concepts that in our days are limited or even obsolete.

These themes of the relevance of Fromm's creative ideas for today, the review of Fromm's reception and this kind of critical reappraisal of his work were topics of discussion for the first International Erich Fromm Research Conference that took place end of June 2014 at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin. Most papers presented in this volume have their origins in presentations given at this conference participated in by some fifty specialists from all over the world. A major focus of the conference consisted in providing a differentiated survey of the various and widespread fields and cultural contexts in which Fromm's ideas are being discussed. This is important not simply because of the global influence of

his work, but also because it is essential to understand the varied ways he was interpreted and used according to the different pressing social issues and existing social filters of the various cultural contexts his work was read in. This volume will thus document the continuing influence of Fromm in Germany and throughout Europe and Latin America, and a revival of interest in his work in North America and Japan and new space for his ideas in Russia and, most surprisingly in China. The interest in Fromm's ideas is remarkable in China, a nation leading along with European scholars what can only be called a world revival of interest in his work that is happening in the social scientists particularly sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, and the study of philosophy, theology and religious studies. But this volume does not simply document Fromm's continuing use and relevance, it centrally engages with his theoretical system directly and critically, suggesting ways that new research, theories and insights in neurosciences, evolutionary psychology, sociology, philosophy, religious studies and radical humanist public intellectual work can help us move beyond some of the limitations of his work so that we can better reformulate his insights in order to address the current crisis of inequality, violence, cultural crisis and environmental destruction and climate change in the 21st century.

What did Fromm mean by Science?

Before talking about Fromm's core concepts and his global and interdisciplinary reception, we must step back for a moment to clarify what Fromm meant by "science." Fromm's view on the time-limited nature of all theoretical systems was rooted in a broader philosophy of science, and for this reason this volume begins with the republication of a 1957 essay called "The Humanistic Science of Man" originally sketched under the title "Institute for the Science of Man".

According to Erich Fromm, science means

an attitude of objectivity. It is a human attitude (...) to have the courage (...) to examine whether the data that we gathered confirmed our idea or disproved it, and whether one had the courage to change a theory if the data showed that they had not proved it (Fromm 1991e, p. 64).

This attitude of objectivity was particularly important in the modern society of the 1950s where Fromm observed that

the average person has become the consumer of science and expects that the scientist knows it all (...) people are convinced that scientists are like priests, who have complete certainty about the world. (...) There is somebody at least who has certainty and conviction, and one feels a sense of security oneself (Fromm 1991e, p. 65).

Some twenty years later Horst-Eberhard Richter called this phenomenon “Gotteskomplex” (Richter 1979), and the public attitudes it describes still are widespread. In contemporary society, however, the unquestioned status of science has been eroded by the influence of various relativist philosophies of knowledge and the attacks on scientific reasoning lead by religious fanatics of various faiths and the influence of conservative and left-wing populism empowered by the failure of established elites to solve the growing social and economic problems facing the world at the beginning of the 21st century. Fromm’s open attitude toward existing theories and insistence on following the data where it leads is thus even more important today than it was in the 1950s, as reason itself is under siege in large parts of the world just as it was in Europe of the 1930s.

Yet science, for Fromm, is not “positivism” or “scientism” where the method of the natural science are aped by social thinkers in a simplistic way that distorts the insights of what must be a human science. Fromm made this criticism as early as 1957 when he pointed out that

the social sciences of today (with a number of notable exceptions), impressed by the success and prestige of the natural sciences, try to apply the methods of the natural sciences to the furthering of mankind. Not only do they not ask themselves whether the method which is valid for the study of things is also valid for the study of man, but they even fail to question whether this concept of the scientific method is not naive and outdated. They believe that only a method that counts and weighs can be called *scientific*, forgetting that the most advanced natural sciences today, such as theoretical physics, operate with bold hypotheses based on imaginative inferences. (...) There is a difference between ‘the objective’ approach, in which ‘the object’ is nothing but an object, and an approach in which the observer at the same time relates empathically to the persons he observes. (Fromm 1991e, pp. 102–3.)