

# A Psychological Inquiry into Totalitarianism: Erich Fromm's Escape from Freedom

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# A Psychological Inquiry into Totalitarianism: Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*

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## Abstract

Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941) charts the growth and decline of freedom and self-awareness in the West from the Middle Ages to modern times, when people sought refuge from insecurity and responsibility in totalitarian movements, such as Nazism and Fascism. In contrast to the thesis that *Escape from Freedom* is evidence of "The Americanization of a European Intellectual," Fromm wrote it because freedom, or the lack of it, was an acute problem in Nazi Germany, not America. His language and concepts were formed and fused during the crucial ideological and intellectual struggles of a specific, wretched moment in German history, the rise and triumph of Nazism; hence, he waged a *Kulturkampf* against Nazi barbarism to save Western humanist civilization.

**Keywords** Psychology · Totalitarian · Fascism · Nazism · Kulturkampf

... *scribere est agere* [to write is to act]

Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 1765-1769<sup>1</sup>

Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941) charts the growth and decline of freedom and self-awareness in the West from the Middle Ages to modern times, when people sought refuge from insecurity and responsibility in totalitarian movements, such as Nazism and Fascism. Breaking the traditional religious and class bonds of medieval society, Fromm believed, sparked a new independence as well as an anxious alienation that ultimately drove robotic conformity and submission to authority.

Fromm's book belongs to a well-defined grand *Kulturkampf* against Nazi and Fascist totalitarianism leveled by exiled intellectuals from Nazi Europe. The list is impressive: Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944, revised 1947) and Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947); Franz Leopold Neumann,

*Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (1944); Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945); Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (1946); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946); Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (1947); Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947); Erich Neumann, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic (Tiefenpsychologie und Neue Ethik)* (1949); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951); Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (1953); Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1966); and many others. The constant point of reference was Nazism; they all analyze and contest it with the disciplinary weapons they had sharpened over a lifetime. Fromm's goal was explicit: to address "the cultural and social crisis of our day," or Fascism and Nazism.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the thesis that *Escape from Freedom* is evidence of "The Americanization of a European Intellectual,"<sup>3</sup> Fromm wrote it because freedom, or the lack of it, was an acute problem in Nazi Germany, not America. Likewise, Popper's *The Open Society and Its*

<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Edition of Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England; Book 4: Of Public Wrongs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53.

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<sup>2</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1941), vii–viii. All references in the text are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Chap. 4 of Lawrence Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 97–118. Friedman's biography of Fromm is almost entirely devoid of the ideological context of *Escape from Freedom* as a grand *Kulturkampf* against Nazi barbarism.

*Enemies* was an uncompromising defense of liberal democracy, not because it was lacking in New Zealand or England or America, but rather as a powerful attack on the intellectual origins of totalitarianism in Germany. Cassirer did not write *The Myth of the State* because the political mode of historical thought it describes prevailed in America, but rather to show how primitive myths prepared the ground for the rise of the modern totalitarian state in Germany. Arendt did not write *The Origins of Totalitarianism* because it infected America, but rather to describe and analyze Nazism and Stalinism, the major political movements of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe. In short, this distinguished group of German-speaking intellectual exiles were, in Walt Whitman's words, "Language-shapers on other shores."<sup>4</sup> Their language and concepts were formed and fused during the crucial ideological and intellectual struggles of a specific, wretched moment in German history, the rise and triumph of Nazism; hence, they all waged *Kulturkampf* against Nazi barbarism to save Western humanist civilization.

## Fromm's Life and Works

Fromm helped to pave an alternative path for his day and for ours, one contoured by love and what he called humanism. The goal was to promote a joyous and caring community where the love of life and the realization of everybody's creative potentialities held hegemony over the forces of repression, conformity and destructiveness.

Friedman, *Lives of Erich Fromm*, xxxv

The Jew is a desert region, but underneath its thin layer of rock lies the molten lava of spirit and intellect. [Der Jude is ein wüste Gegend, unter deren dünner Gesteinschicht aber die feurig-flüssigen Massen des Geistigen liegen.]

Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1931<sup>5</sup>

Erich Fromm (1900–1980), was a German-born American psychoanalyst, social philosopher, sociologist, but above all social critic, who explored the interaction between psychology and society. By applying psychoanalytic principles to remedy cultural ills, he believed, mankind could develop a "sane society". In *Escape from Freedom*, he explores humanity's shifting

<sup>4</sup> *Leaves of Grass*, ed. W. Blodgett and S. Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 18.

<sup>5</sup> In *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Neiman (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977); *Culture and Value*, rev ed. Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 13.

relationship with freedom, especially the psychological conditions that facilitated the rise of Nazism and Fascism.<sup>6</sup>

Fromm was born in Frankfurt am Main, the only child of Orthodox Jewish parents.<sup>7</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, Frankfurt was the financial capital of Germany, attracting Jewish business and intellectual ventures as much as others. Fromm's father, Naphtali, was a wine merchant. Young Fromm was greatly influenced by the Frankfurt Jewish community with its "medieval atmosphere, in which everything is dedicated to traditional learning."<sup>8</sup> His great uncle Ludwig Krause, a prominent Talmudic scholar, introduced Erich to the treasures and marvels of the Talmud and deepened his appreciation of the contribution of his great-grandfather, Seligman Bär Bamberger, one of the most prominent and learned German rabbis in the nineteenth century. The Talmud, meaning *instruction, learning*, is a central text of Rabbinic Judaism. When Ludwig came to visit the family from Posen, which belonged to Prussia until 1919, then Poland, he and Erich spent whole days studying Talmudic passages together. Erich also became fascinated with "the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea and their visions of peace and harmony among nations."<sup>9</sup>

World War I left deep and indelible mark on Fromm. He wrote that it was "the most crucial experience in his life" and became the center of his thinking and feeling.<sup>10</sup> Some of his uncles, cousins, and older schoolmates were among the dead. At that time, Fromm came under the influence of Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, the leader of Frankfurt's Orthodox Jewish community, who had a strong Hasidic bent. They spent hours together on the outskirts of Frankfurt discussing Nobel's sermons. Through him, Fromm became a Zionist, and Fromm's friends soon joined these meetings: Leo Löwenthal, the sociologist usually associated with the Frankfurt School; Ernst Simon, Jewish educator and religious philosopher; and Franz Rosenzweig, philosopher of religion. The Nobel circle was instrumental in creating the Free Jewish Teaching Institute in Frankfurt, directed by Rosenzweig, in 1919.

In 1918, Fromm started his studies at the University of Frankfurt am Main but in 1919 moved to the University of Heidelberg, where he began studying sociology under Alfred Weber, brother of the famous sociologist Max Weber; the psychiatrist-philosopher Karl Jaspers; and the Neo-Kantian

<sup>6</sup> I use the concepts of Nazism and Fascism interchangeably, following Fromm, who wrote: "I use the term Fascism or authoritarianism to denote a dictatorial system of the type of German or Italian one. If I mean the German system in particular, I shall call it Nazism" (*Escape from Freedom*, 5n1).

<sup>7</sup> The following biography of Erich Fromm is based on several sources, including Friedman, *Lives of Erich Fromm*, and Guy Miron, "Judaism and Radical Thought – Erich Fromm and Leo Löwenthal during the Weimar Republic," MA Thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993 (in Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> Fromm, quoted in Friedman, *Lives of Erich Fromm*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

philosopher Heinrich Rickert. From Weber, Fromm learned that the individual is inextricably rooted in the social and political life of his times. As he states in the Foreword to *Escape from Freedom*,

The basic entity of the social process is the individual, his desires and fears, his passions and reason, his propensities for good and for evil. To understand the dynamics of the social process we must understand the dynamics of the psychological processes operating within the individual, just as to understand the individual we must see him in the context of the culture which molds him. (viii)

Weber understood very early that Fromm would be willing to write his dissertation only on a Jewish topic; hence, he let him work on Jewish law—*halacha*, *halakhah*, or *halocho*—the collective body of Jewish religious laws derived from the written and oral Torah. The resulting *Jewish Law: A Contribution to the Study of Diaspora Judaism* addresses the function of Jewish law in maintaining social cohesion and continuity in three communities: the Karaites, who adhere to the written Torah only; Reform Jews; and the Hasidim. During his years in Heidelberg, Fromm met almost daily with Salman Rabinkow, a Russian whose adherence to Habad Hasidism as well as Marxist and socialist protest politics made a strong impression on Fromm. Later, Fromm said that Rabinkow influenced his “life more than other man.”<sup>11</sup>

Fromm received his PhD in sociology from Heidelberg in 1922. He then trained in psychoanalysis at the University of Munich and the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and interned at Frieda Reichmann’s sanatorium in Heidelberg. They married in 1926, separated shortly thereafter, and divorced in 1942.

Fromm opened his own clinic in 1927 as a disciple of Sigmund Freud but soon came to think that Freud’s preoccupation with unconscious drives neglected the role of societal factors in human psychology. Based on Alfred Weber’s influence, he believed that an individual’s personality was the product of culture as well as biology.

At that time, he abandoned traditional Jewish religious life and Zionism and adopted a more secular orientation. From 1927 to 1928, he and his colleagues at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute began a systematic synthesis of the theories of Marx and Freud. When Max Horkheimer became director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung), later known as the Frankfurt School, in 1930, Fromm helped to initiate the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute. From 1929 to 1932, he taught here and at the University of Frankfurt and conducted research on the totalitarian disposition of the German workforce before Hitler’s ascent to power. This work was published

posthumously in 1984 as *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*.<sup>12</sup> He used its findings in the chapter on the “Psychology of Nazism” in *Escape from Freedom*.

Following the Nazi Revolution of 1933, Fromm moved first to Geneva and within a year to Columbia University in New York City. In America he belongs to a Neo-Freudian school of psychoanalytical thought. After leaving Columbia in 1941, he helped to form the New York branch of the Washington School of Psychiatry in 1943, and in 1946, he co-founded the city’s William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology. He was on the faculty of Bennington College in Vermont from 1941 to 1949 and taught courses at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan from 1941 to 1959. He developed a fruitful partnership with Karen Horney (1885–1952), a German psychoanalyst who practiced in the United States in her later career. She explicated psychoanalytical theories; he, various sociological models. More specifically, Horney was the first to recognize “the fundamental role of masochist strivings in the neurotic personality” (150–51), which informs the long chapter on “Mechanism of Escape” in *Escape from Freedom*. Horney’s theories questioned some traditional Freudian views, particularly theories of sexuality and instinct. She is credited with founding feminist psychology in response to Freud’s theory of penis envy. She disagreed with him about differences between the psychology of men and women, imputing them to society and culture rather than biology.

Fromm moved to Mexico City in 1949 and in 1951 was appointed professor of psychoanalysis at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). From 1957 to 1961, he held a concurrent professorship at Michigan State University and in 1962 had a similar arrangement as professor of psychiatry at New York University. In 1974, he moved from Mexico City to Muralto, Switzerland, and died there in 1980, five days before his eightieth birthday. Throughout his academic peregrinations, he maintained a clinical practice and published 8 books in German and 26 in English, 5 posthumously.

Fromm believed that an understanding of basic human needs is essential to understanding society and behavior. He argued that social systems impede or preclude the satisfaction of different needs at one time, creating both individual psychological and wider societal conflicts. His first major work, *Escape from Freedom* (1941), traces the history of self-conscious liberty in the West from its awakening in the Middle Ages to modern challenges. In *The Sane Society* (1955), he argues that consumer-oriented industrial society has alienated modern man from himself. Among his other books are *Man for Himself* (1947); *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950); the best-seller *The Art of Loving* (1956); *May Man Prevail?* (1961) with D.T. Suzuki and R. De Martino; *Beyond the*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman, *Lives of Erich Fromm*, 39–45.

*Chains of Illusion* (1962); *The Revolution of Hope* (1968); and *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (1970).

## Escape from Freedom: Ideological and Historical Context

*Escape from Freedom* is the first of many studies written by intellectuals exiled from Nazi Germany that attempt to expose, explain, and oppose the rise and triumph of Fascism in particular and the crisis of modern history in general. Eventually, these works transformed modern intellectual history. As a whole, both in form and content, they constitute *Kulturkampf* against Nazi barbarism, attempting to save Western society from its menace by bravura, ferocious, indeed martial, displays of its superior thinking and values.

Fromm declares in *Escape from Freedom* that “the understanding of the reasons for the totalitarian flight from freedom is a premise for any action which aims at the victory over the totalitarian forces.” He hopes that the book will “have a bearing on our course of action,” (viii) believing, with Sir William Blackstone in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England, 1765–1769*, that *scribere est agere* [to write is to act].

Although in exile, Fromm never escaped the nightmares of Fascism and Nazism, which constantly stirred his soul, as evidenced by the speed and haste with which he composed *Escape from Freedom*—only five years after his arrival in the New World and in little more than a year. As a psychologist, he wrote, he felt he must “contribute to the understanding of the present crisis without delay” (vii; emphasis added). By the mid-1930s, “he had come to articulate the theoretical contours” of the book.<sup>13</sup> In 1939, he gave a colleague at Columbia a detailed outline, and he finished it in 1940. Clearly, Fromm had a pressing idea that would elucidate the rise of Nazism and the atrocities of World War II. As he wrote, “the theme which is nearest to my heart and which is the leitmotif of the book is the problem of freedom and anxiety or the fear of freedom or the escape from freedom.”<sup>14</sup> His goal was to explore “the meaning of freedom for modern man,” which “is crucial for the cultural and social crisis of our day” (vii; emphasis added). Crisis must lead to action. No wonder *Escape from Freedom* is considered a pillar of political psychology.

Based on the essential and inextricable connection between an individual’s personality and the culture of his time, which he had learned from his teacher Alfred Weber, Fromm argued that the “basic entity of the social process is the individual, his desire and fears, his passions and reason, his propensities for good and evil.” To understand the social process, we must understand the psychological processes operating within individuals, and,

conversely, to understand individuals, we must analyze the culture that shapes them. Based on these assumptions, the central, overarching argument of *Escape from Freedom* is:

... that modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities. Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either escape from the burden of this freedom into a new dependence and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man. (viii)

Modern man’s isolation from society, becoming an “atom” (238) in infinitude, and the doubts and fears involved in this process explain how and why many seek the sanctuary and incentives of totalitarian societies.

Positive freedom means that man “can relate himself spontaneously to the world in love and work, in the genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities.” It “leads to happiness.” The other course open to man is “to give up his freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world.” This solution, argues Fromm, can be found “in all neurotic phenomena.” More specifically, negative freedom means “to give up the independence of one’s own individual self and to fuse one’s self with somebody or something outside of oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking” (140–41). Many were pulled toward Hitler and Nazism. While negative freedom symbolized “an inability to stand alone and to fully express” one’s “own individual potentialities,” positive freedom allows us to realize our “own spontaneous activity” (176–77).

In the last part of his book, “Freedom and Democracy,” Fromm makes clear that he is dealing only “with one aspect of freedom: the powerlessness and insecurity of the isolated individual in modern society who has become free from all bonds that once gave meaning and security to life.” The “individual cannot bear this isolation” because “he is utterly helpless in comparison with the world outside and deeply afraid of it.” The result is that “the unity of the world has broken down for him and he has lost any point of orientation.” Overcome by “doubts concerning himself, the meaning of life,” he eventually loses “any principle according to which he can direct his actions.” Paralyzed by his sense of helplessness, he is “driven to bondage.” This new bondage differs “from the primary bonds” from which “he was not entirely

<sup>13</sup> Friedman, *Lives of Erich Fromm*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

separated,” for the “*escape does not restore his lost security, but only helps him forget his self as a separate entity.*” He finds only a “*fragile security at the expense of sacrificing the integrity of his individual self.*” In sum, escape from freedom means that man “chooses to lose his self since he cannot bear to be alone. This freedom ... leads into new bondage.” (256–57; emphasis added).

It is interesting to compare Fromm’s views on positive and negative freedom to the views of Martin Luther and Emanuel Kant with regard of the meaning and significance of freedom. According to Luther’s famous saying: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all.” See Luther, “On Christian Freedom” (1520). Kant too referred to freedom as essential to the human condition. In 1784 he coined the famous dictum: “Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another... *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] Have courage to use your own understanding! That is the motto of enlightenment.”<sup>15</sup> Luther’s context is the sacred drama of human salvation and redemption; Kant’s context is the growth and power of human ability with a disenchantment world. And Fromm’s context is that of the rise of fascism and Nazism.

Based on his training, Fromm psychoanalyzed contemporary fear of, and flight from, freedom by looking at, first, the emergence of the individual in Western culture and, second, the escape from freedom in his time. Clearly, his study did not peer down from an ivory tower; Fromm believed that knowing the causes of the flight from freedom was a prerequisite for any action against “*totalitarian forces*” (viii).

*Escape from Freedom* is a psychological description of the rise of individuation in Western culture and history. Its starting point is the Protestant Reformation: “The growing process of the emergence of the individual from its original ties, a process which we may call ‘individuation’ seems to have reached its peak in modern history in the centuries between the Reformation and the present.” (24). Thus Luther in his “On Christian Freedom” citing I Cor. ix. 19: “Though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself a servant unto all.”

Later Fromm claims that the Renaissance evidenced “the emergence of the individual in the modern sense” (45). The basis for his argument is the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (*Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 1860), which resembles that of Hans Baron in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, another diatribe against Nazi barbarism by an

exile from Nazi Germany. Baron argued that the Renaissance led to the rise of a “new civic philosophy” or a “new type of Humanism – Civic Humanism.”<sup>16</sup>

## Escape from Freedom: Content and Form

*Escape from Freedom* is a combative book: “If we want to fight Fascism we must understand it” (5). In direct response to the “[p]resent political developments and the dangers which they imply for the greatest achievements of modern culture—individuality and the uniqueness of personality,” Fromm writes, he chose “to interrupt the work on the larger study”; namely, “the character structure of modern man and the problems of the interaction between psychological and sociological factors.” Instead, the catastrophes threatening his beloved Western civilization drove him to “concentrate on one aspect of it which is crucial for the cultural and social crisis of our day: *the meaning of freedom for modern man*” (vii; emphasis added).

Among the various topics Fromm analyzes are “mechanisms of escape” and the psychological types of “the authoritarian character and the automaton,” or the conformity character, essential to understanding Nazism and Fascism (207). The present crisis must be addressed because World War I “was regarded by many as the final struggle and ... ultimate victory for freedom,” yet “only a few years elapsed before new systems emerged which denied everything that men believed they had won in centuries of struggle.” They “effectively took command of man’s entire social and personal life” and recruited “the submission of all but a handful of men to an authority over which they had no control” (4). *Escape from Freedom* seeks to explain why “millions in Germany were as eager to surrender their freedom as their fathers were to fight for it; that instead of wanting freedom, *they sought for ways of escape from it*; that other millions were indifferent and did not believe the defense of freedom to be worth fighting and dying for” (5; emphasis added).

Moreover, the crisis of democracy was not “a peculiar Italian or German problem, but one confronting every modern state” (5). Fromm quotes the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey (1859–1952), who wrote in *Freedom and Culture* (1939) that the “serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our personal attitudes and within our institutions of conditions which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity and

<sup>15</sup> See Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (1955; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 459. See also Weinstein and Zakai, *Jewish Exiles and European Thought in the Shadow of the Third Reich*, chap. 1: “Hans Baron: Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Tyranny” (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 20–70.

dependence upon The Leader.” In other words, the “battlefield” is “within ourselves and our institutions.”<sup>17</sup> However, Fromm had a very different agenda from the atavist one Dewey championed.

Fromm wanted “to analyze those dynamic factors in the character structure of modern man, which made him want to give up freedom in Fascist countries and which so widely prevail in millions of our own people.” Regrettably, he acknowledges, modern man conceives freedom in “the longing for submission, and the lust for power” (6). Political scientists and sociologists might look for rational motives for the rise of Nazism in certain well-defined theories, but the psychologist looks to irrational psychological factors: “we are dealing here with a political system which, essentially, does not appeal to rational forces of self-interest, but which arouses and mobilizes diabolic forces in man which we had believed to be nonexistent, or at least to have died out long ago” (6–7). Like Cassirer, Fromm uses the image of a volcano to describe the great upheavals of his time. Facing the grim consequence of Nazism’s rise and triumph, Cassirer writes:

In politics we are always living on *volcanic soil*. We must be prepared for abrupt convulsions and eruptions. In all critical moments of man’s social life, the rational forces that resist the rise of the old mythical conceptions are no longer sure of themselves. In this moment the time of myth has come again. For myth has not been really vanquished and subjugated. It is always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour of opportunity.<sup>18</sup>

Fromm argued that people looked upon the periods before Nazism as “a volcano which for a long time has ceased to be a menace,” but this complacency was shattered “when Fascism came into power” (8).

Fromm focuses on “what freedom means to modern man, and why and how he tries to escape from it.” His premise is that “freedom characterizes human existence,” but “its meaning changes according to the degree of man’s awareness and conception of himself as an independent and separate being” (24). He finds the psychological starting-point in the period that witnessed the process of “individuation,” or “the emergence of the individual from his original ties” (24), variously identified as the Reformation or the Renaissance. His analysis of “individuation” is based on the distinction between “positive” freedom, or “freedom to,” and “negative” freedom, or “freedom from instinctual determination of

his action” (32). Isaiah Berlin posits the same distinction; he follows the British tradition in defining “negative freedom” as freedom from interference, while “positive freedom,” or self-mastery, asks, not what we are free from, but what we are free to do. Berlin points out that these two conceptions can clash.<sup>19</sup> Well before both Fromm and Berlin, T.H. Green (1836–1882) formulated this important distinction in 1880. He is commonly considered the father of modern reform liberalism as the first major theorist to give a philosophical grounding to what became the Labour Party in England and the Democratic Party of the New Deal and the Great Society in the United States.

Throughout his study, Fromm emphasizes the negative sense of “freedom from.” In this context, he argues that the Protestant “Reformation is one root of the idea of human freedom and autonomy as it is represented in modern democracy” (38). In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Max Weber (1864–1920), the German sociologist, philosopher, jurist, and political economist who was the brother of Fromm’s dissertation advisor, proposed that ascetic Protestantism was one of the major “elective affinities” associated with the rise of market-driven capitalism and the rational-legal nation-state in the West. In clear contrast, Fromm argued that the Reformation stressed “the wickedness of human nature, the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual, and the necessity for the individual to subordinate himself to a power outside of himself.” As such, “probably no period since the sixteenth century ... resembles ours as closely in regard to the ambiguous meaning of freedom” (38; emphasis added).

Like Thomas Mann, who thought the Protestant Reformation signaled the beginning of the “secret union of the German spirit with the Demonic,”<sup>20</sup> Fromm read the course of German history in search of a singular turning-point toward the horrors of Nazism and Fascism and found that the Protestant Reformation’s idea of the “unworthiness of the individual, his fundamental inability to rely on himself and his need to submit, is also the main theme of Hitler’s ideology, which, however, lacks the emphasis on freedom and moral principles which was inherent in Protestantism” (38–39; emphasis added). Mann also rejected Weber’s thesis connecting the Protestant Reformation with the creation of the modern world, as can be seen in his novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947). According to Todd Kontje, “Mann’s apocalyptic reading of German history traces a path from Luther and the

<sup>19</sup> See “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958), in Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>20</sup> “Germany and the Germans”, in *Thomas Mann’s Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress, 1942–1949* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1963), 51.

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1939), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (1946; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 280; emphasis added.

Reformation to the smoking ruins of the German cities and the gates of the concentration camps.”<sup>21</sup> Different historical contexts led to radically different interpretations of the Protestant Reformation by Weber, Fromm, and Mann. Fromm found close ideological affinity between the Reformation and Nazism; hence, for him “the study of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries” served as “a particularly fruitful starting point for the understanding of the present scene” (39). What “characterized medieval in contrast to modern society is its lack of individual freedom” (41), yet the comparison is problematic because “medieval society did not deprive the individual of his freedom, because the ‘individual’ did not yet exist; man was still related to the world by primary ties” (43). Here, Fromm borrows Burckhardt’s argument that in the Middle Ages, “man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation—only through some general category.”<sup>22</sup>

The Renaissance, however, gave evidence of the “rise in Italy of a powerful moneyed class the members of which were filled with a spirit of initiative, power, ambition.” The result was nothing less than the “destruction of the medieval social structure” and “the emergence of the individual in the modern sense” (45). Again, this idea comes from Burckhardt, who claimed that, with the Renaissance, “man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.”<sup>23</sup> Fromm used Burckhardt’s contentions to advance his main thesis that “the destruction of the medieval world has taken four hundred years and is being completed in our era.” The process of “human individuation, of the destruction of all ‘primary bonds’” (237), led Fromm to conclude that man had “developed into being an ‘atom’” (238).

*Escape from Freedom* is based on a very simple, uncritical, and uninformed adoration of mediaeval feudal society, which, Fromm seems to believe, was a kind of Golden Age or Eden, where human beings lived in harmony before the Fall, or the rise of capitalism in the early modern period. Cutting ties with tradition, Fromm believed, psychologically disrupted man’s original sense of belonging and security in the world. Cast adrift and apparently blind to extraordinary accomplishments and improved quality of life, man became prey to anxiety and longed for submission.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Mann’s *World: Empire, Race, and the Jewish Question* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 153. See also Zakai, “Apocalypse and Eschatology in Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*: The ‘Secret Union of the German Spirit with the Demonic,’” in Zakai, *The Pen Confronts the Sword: Exiled German Scholars Challenge Nazism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 129.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

## Freedom and the Protestant Reformation

In Fromm’s psychological analysis of the emergence of individuality in history, the Renaissance was the starting-point. “We started with the discussion of the Renaissance because this period is the beginning of modern individualism,” or “the emergence of man from a pre-individualistic existence to one in which he has full awareness of himself as a separate entity” (49).<sup>24</sup> This new freedom also created “a deep feeling of insecurity, powerlessness, doubt, aloneness, and anxiety” (63).

Earlier, the “medieval Church stressed the dignity of man, the freedom of his will, and the fact that his efforts were of avail; it stressed the likeness between God and man and also man’s right to be confident of God’s love” (73). However, following the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation was the harbinger of “new religious doctrines” that were “an answer to psychic needs which in themselves were brought about by *the collapse of the medieval system* and by the beginnings of capitalism” (103; emphasis added). This interpretation was greatly influenced by two classic works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which Max Weber posits that Calvinist ethics and ideas influenced the development of capitalism, and *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* by Richard Henry Tawney (1880–1962), the English economic historian, social critic, ethical and Christian socialist, who explored the relationship between Protestantism and economic development in the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>25</sup> Tawney bemoaned the division between commerce and social morality brought about by the

<sup>24</sup> Finding the origins and sources of the rise of individualism, or individuation, in western history is admittedly very hard. In contrast to Fromm, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) argued that the Homeric poems reveal “the free individuality of all the figures,” and that “we meet ... individuals” with a “wealth of particular traits” in “Homer’s epic heroes.” See Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 2: 1053, 1178; and *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (1821; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 321, where he writes that “the principle of individuality arises” with the Greeks. He also wrote that the harmony of the social order “makes the Greek character into *beautiful individuality*, which is brought forth from spirit,” quoted in Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociability of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 387n23; emphasis original. Elsewhere, Hegel inconsistently claims that “individuality emerges as the ‘higher principle of modern times’ in the way in which individuals ‘return back fully to themselves,’” which, as he noted, “contrasted modern life with ancient Greek.” See Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 196. For another view, the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, aesthetician, literary historian, and critic Georg Lukács (1885–1971) argued that the individual in Homer’s epic works, the “epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual” (*The Theory of the Novel: A Historic-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* [1920; London: Merlin, 1971], 66). Likewise, the German-Jewish philologist and comparatist literary critic Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) argued that Homeric characters lack a “distinct stamp of individuality” (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [1946; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003], 18).

<sup>25</sup> *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1905; London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1930); *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (London: John Murray, 1926).

Protestant Reformation, which subordinated Christian teaching to the pursuit of material wealth. Fromm drew from and criticized both.

According to Fromm's psychological reading, Luther's system assumed the existence of "an innate evilness in man's nature," and he cites Luther "'*naturaliter et inevitabiliter mala et vitiata natura.*'" From this "conviction of man's rottenness and powerlessness to do anything good on his own merits" followed the existential sense of insecurity with regard to salvation (74–75). Paradoxically, if "Luther freed people from the authority of the Church, he made them submit to a much more tyrannical authority, that of a God who insisted on complete submission of man and the annihilation of the individual self as the essential condition to his salvation." He cannot overlook the resemblance between Luther's teaching and Nazism: "*Luther's 'faith' was the conviction of being loved upon the condition of surrender, a solution which has much in common with the principle of complete submission of the individual to the state and the 'leader'*" (81; emphasis original). Fromm is constantly and eagerly reading history through the lens of the German crisis of his times.

Like Luther, Calvin contributed to human anxiety and doubt. His concept of predestination was also "rooted in the powerlessness of man; self-humiliation and the destruction of human pride are the *Leitmotiv* of his whole thinking. Only he who despises this world can devote himself to the preparation for the future world" (84; emphasis in original). It differed radically from the understandings of "Augustine, Aquinas and Luther" since he made predestination "the central doctrine" of "his whole system. He gives it a new version by assuming that God not only predestines some for grace, but decides that others are destined for eternal damnation" (87). With Calvin, God's love is replaced by God's enmity. Fromm was quick to point out the resemblance between Calvin's theory of predestination and Nazi thought, arguing that "one implication ... should be explicitly mentioned here, since *it has found its most vigorous revival in Nazi ideology*"; namely "the principle of the basic inequality of men" (89; emphasis added), which denied any possibility of human solidarity. The Genevan reformer saw only two kinds of people: "those who are saved and those who are destined to eternal damnation." With Nazism, the doctrine that men are basically "unequal according to their racial background is a confirmation of the same principle with a different rationalization" (89–90).

Luther and Calvin's teachings were based on "all-pervading hostility." Both belonged to "the ranks of the greatest haters among the leading figures in history, certainly among religious leaders." The marrow of their inherent hostility derives from their concept of God, especially Calvin's God, who is "arbitrary and merciless" and "destined part of mankind to

eternal damnation without any justification or reason except that this act was an expression of God's power" (95–96). In Marxist terms, argued Fromm, the middle class reflects this hostility and resentment in its "moral indignation, which has invariably been characteristic of the lower middle class from Luther's time to Hitler's." Simply put, the middle class was "envious of those who had wealth and power and could enjoy life" and "rationalized this resentment and envy of life in terms of moral indignation and in the conviction that these superior people would be punished by eternal suffering" (96).

Fromm's reading of the Reformation is clearly based on the German middle class's role in the rise and triumph of Nazism. His model was based on the findings of an unpublished sociological study, "The Character of German Workers and Employees in 1929/30," conducted with three colleagues (212). He argued that the reason "why the Nazi ideology was so appealing to the lower middle class has to be sought in the social character of the lower middle class." It was "the lower strata of the middle class, composed of small shopkeepers, artisans, and white-collar workers," whose "outlook on life was narrow" and they "suspected and hated the stranger" (211–12). Hitler was "the typical representative of the lower middle class, a nobody with no chances or future" who "felt very intensely the role of being an outcast," as clearly revealed in his autobiographical rant *Mein Kampf* (217).

More than anything else, Fromm emphasized, "the breakdown of the medieval system of society had one main significance for all classes of society: the individual was left alone and isolated." Indeed, he was "free," but this freedom was a double-edge sword:

Man was deprived of security he had enjoyed, of the unquestionable feeling of belonging, and he was torn loose from the world which had satisfied his quest for security both economically and spiritually. He felt alone and anxious. But he was free to act and to think independently, to become his own master and to do with his life as he could—not as he was told to do. (99)

Faithful to his Marxist historical materialism, Fromm argued that only the rich could "enjoy the fruits of the new freedom" and "the positive meaning of freedom was dominant for the new capitalist" (99). However, for the middle class, freedom "brought isolation and personal insignificance more than strength and confidence" (100). In German society, this process had horrible consequences: the middle class supported the rise of Nazism after defeat in World War I. At that time, the "vast majority of the population was seized with the feeling of individual insignificance and powerlessness" (217), a psychological dynamic "Nazism resurrected" (221). The

Reformation led in a straight line to the rise of Nazism, a thesis Thomas Mann constructed in *Doktor Faustus* for very different reasons.

Fromm's psychological reading and explanation of history is based on his traumatic experience during the rise of Nazism and Fascism. Evidently, the middle class experience in democratic republics like the United States and England was radically different from that in modern Germany. Fromm was a prisoner in the citadel of his own Marxist ideology and interpretation and saw the crucial role of the rise or the frustrations of the middle class, or the bourgeoisie, during the early modern period in supporting the Nazi Revolution. As the French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist Bruno Latour writes, "we are always prisoners of language"<sup>26</sup>; that is, we are always prisoners of our culture, our ideologies, our discourse.

Fromm wrote: "for great parts of the lower middle class in Germany and other European countries, the sado-masochistic is typical"; it was "this kind of character structure to which Nazi ideology had its strongest appeal" (163–64). Moreover, the "destructiveness in the lower middle class" is responsible for "the isolation of the individual and the suppression of individual expansiveness" (184–85). Instead of basing his life on positive freedom, the individual is directed by negative freedom: he "ceases to be himself" and rather "he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns." In sum, his "automaton conformity" threw up the stiff-armed salute to Nazi and Fascist regimes (185–86).

## Freedom and Modern Man

Our aim [is] to show that the structure of modern society affected man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more isolated, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid.

Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 1941

The overarching thesis of *Escape from Freedom* is that from the time of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the beginnings of capitalism, "freedom from traditional bonds of medieval society, though giving the individual a new feeling of independence, at the same time made him feel alone and isolated, filled him with doubt and anxiety, and drove him into new submission and into a compulsive and irrational activity" (103; emphasis original). Later, the development of capitalist society "affected personality in the same direction" and "in two ways simultaneously: [man] becomes more independent, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid" (104).

<sup>26</sup> Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (Winter 2004): 227.

Fromm's criticism of modern capitalist society resembles that of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He speaks of "the negative side of freedom, the burden which it puts on man." Paradoxically, he argues, "although man has rid himself from old enemies of freedom, new enemies of a different nature have arisen: enemies which are not essentially external restraints, but *internal factors blocking full realization of the freedom of personality*" (104; emphasis added). Likewise, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argue that originally, the "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters." Its "program was the disenchantment of the world" and its charge to "dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge." However, with the rise of Fascism and National Socialism, reason seemed to collapse; discourse regressed into superstition and myth. Hence, their aim was "to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism" or the "reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism in reality."<sup>27</sup> Exiled representatives of the Frankfurt School of social theory and philosophy reached the same conclusions regarding the decline of freedom and reason in contemporary history.

If, according to Fromm, capitalist society impeded "full realization of the freedom of personality," Horkheimer and Adorno saw class struggle in modern capitalist society as Hobbes's war of all against all or the law of the jungle. Self-preservation became the source and thrust of all human action: "Spinoza's proposition: 'the endeavor of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue,' contains the true maxim of all Western civilization." Inextricably connected to the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment, capitalism institutionalizes "the process of self-preservation" in "the bourgeois division of labor."<sup>28</sup> Fromm focuses on the inner abysses of the human soul and spirit; Horkheimer and Adorno on the horrifying consequences of capitalist society.

According to Fromm, freedom of speech, for example, once meant "freedom from external authorities," but now, it is suppressed by "inner restraints, compulsions, and fears, which tend to undermine the meaning of the victories freedom has won against its traditional enemies" (105). Instead, we should strive toward "*a new kind of freedom, one which enables us to realize our own individual self, to have faith in this self and in life*"; he called this freedom positive, or "freedom to" (106; emphasis added). In contrast to the inner,

<sup>27</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), i, xiv, xix. An analysis of the content and form of this study can be found in my book, *The Pen Confronts the Sword*, chap. 4, "Enlightenment and Its Enemies: The Dialectic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*."

<sup>28</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 22–23.

psychological dimension, the “peak in the evolution of freedom” was “the modern democratic state based on the principle of equality of all men and the equal right of everybody to share in the government by representatives of his choice” (107). Ernst Cassirer shared this view, arguing in Hegelian terms in *The Myth of the State* that concepts determine the structure of reality; hence, during the Age of Enlightenment, “reason had first declared its power and its claim to rule the social life of man. It had emancipated itself from the guardianship of theological thought; it could stand on its own.”<sup>29</sup> Cassirer found evidence in the US Declaration of Independence and, later, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (*Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*, 1789).

Eventually, while capitalism “contributed tremendously to the increasing of positive freedom, to the growth of an active, critical, responsible self,” it made “the individual more alone and isolated and imbued him with a feeling of insignificance and powerlessness” (108). The theology of Luther and Calvin had psychologically prepared man for the role which he had to assume in modern society: “of feeling his own self to be insignificant and of being ready to *subordinate his life exclusively for purposes which were not his own.*” The outcome of this psychological willingness “to become nothing but the means for the glory of a God who represented neither justice nor love” was a readiness “*to accept the role of a servant to the economic machine*” of capitalism “*and eventually a ‘Führer’*” in Nazi Germany (111; emphasis added). Fromm turned Weber’s and Tawney’s thesis upside down.

## Freedom and Democracy

Beyond the role of capitalism in ensuring human servitude, Fromm emphasizes that the “principal social avenues of escape in our times are the submission to a leader, as has happened in Fascist countries, and the compulsive conforming as is prevalent in our own democracy” (134). In the last chapter, “Freedom and Democracy,” he combines sociological and psychological approaches.

In discussing the two aspects of freedom for modern man, we have pointed out the economic conditions that make for increasing isolation and powerlessness of the individual in our era; in discussing the psychological results we have shown that this powerlessness leads either to the kind of escape that we find in the authoritarian character, or else to a compulsive conforming in the process of

which the isolated individual becomes an automaton, loses his self, and yet at the same time consciously conceives of himself as free and subject only to himself. (241)

Modern capitalist society projects “the illusion of individuality.”<sup>30</sup> Its power to foster conformity can be found, for example, in education, which too often leads to “elimination of spontaneity” and “the substitution of original psychic acts by superimposed feelings, thoughts, and wishes” (242). Horkheimer and Adorno lodge the very same criticism, asserting that “modern capitalist mass culture, the entertainment industry, especially cinema, radio, jazz, and magazines,” as well as advertising, provide clear evidence of the inherent “rationality of domination.”<sup>31</sup>

Likewise with regard to spontaneity: negative freedom, “freedom from”, brings a new bondage. The escape from freedom “only helps” man “to forget his self as a separate entity. He finds new and fragile security at the expense of sacrificing the integrity of his individual self. He chooses to lose his self since he cannot bear to be alone. Thus freedom—as freedom from—leads into new bondage” (256–57). Somehow, the possibility of “a state of positive freedom in which the individual exists as an independent self and yet is not isolated but united with the world, with other men, and nature” persists. Man can achieve it “by realization of his self, by being himself” (257).

In contrast to idealist philosophers like Kant, who believed that self-realization can be achieved by intellectual insight alone, Fromm declares:

We believe that the realization of the self is accomplished not only by an act of thinking but also by the realization of man’s total personality, by an active expression of his emotional and intellectual potentialities. These potentialities are present in everybody; they become real only to the extent to which they are expressed. In other words, *positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality.* (258; emphasis original)

Spontaneous activity means that man cannot live compulsively or automatically. Above all, it means that he is “aware of himself as an active and creative individual and recognizes that *there is only one meaning of life: the act of living itself*” (263; emphasis original).

<sup>29</sup> Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 167.

<sup>30</sup> Compare “free and subject only to himself” to Martin Luther: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none,” in “On Christian Freedom” (1520).

<sup>31</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 95.

Fromm's constant emphasis on the psychological side of freedom did not hinder him from seeing that "psychological problems cannot be separated from the material basis of human existence," or the economic, social, and political structure of society. Realizing positive freedom and individualism is "also bound up with economic and social changes that will permit the individual to become free in terms of the realization of his self" (271). In this broad context, he stresses the difference between democracy and Fascism, thus returning full circle to the beginning of his book. Now, he contends, "Democracy is a system that creates the economic, political, and cultural conditions for the full development of the individual. Fascism is a system that, regardless under which name, *makes the individual subordinate to extraneous purposes and weakens the development of*

*genuine individuality*" (274; emphasis added). Thus, he concludes his highly popular defense of liberal democracy from the psychological and Marxist points of view. *Escape from Freedom* is a timeless classic because it examines, not only the roots of Nazism and Fascism in Europe, but how economic and social restraint can lead to authoritarianism anywhere.

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