



# ERICH fromm

shaper of: the human condition

ANNETTE THOMSON



Erich Fromm

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# fromm

Erich

**explorer of the human  
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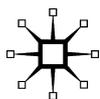
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Mind Shapers – Key Psychologists and their impact

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## Preface

In writing this book I have approached Erich Fromm's ideas for the third time.

My first encounter with his work was in Germany in the late 1970s, when my friends and I, then in the final years of secondary school, passed round *To Have or To Be?* in the context of a blossoming alternative movement. This book in particular seemed to us to spell out the dawn of a new era which would change fundamentally the way in which we think about society and our part in it.

The second time I came across Fromm was during my studies of psychology in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. While examining different approaches to counselling and relationships I read *The Art of Loving* and was once again inspired by Fromm's clarity and optimism.

My third encounter was prompted by explorations of contemporary social analysis in the UK in the late 1990s. Different writers' views of a society characterized by, for example, 'risk', 'information' or 'knowledge' made me formulate my own ideas, and I began to wonder to what extent long working hours and busy-ness had come to dominate Western societies. Had we become a 'To Do' society? This question made me return to *To Have or To Be?* where I found many ideas highly relevant to what I saw as key features of my contemporary society. Erich Fromm was definitely a writer worth revisiting, as wider and deeper investigation of his work made clear to me. While I had, in the intervening years, developed a more critical approach to some of his views, aided also by two decades of hindsight, I still found his ideas thought-provoking, inspirational and powerful.

This book aims to provide an overview of some key aspects of Fromm's life and his work. It begins with a biographical chapter which gives a sense of how his ideas developed in the context of historically, professionally and personally turbulent times. The following chapters then build up a

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picture of his analysis of the human situation, his examination and recommendations for personal relationships, his development of humanistic psychoanalysis in therapy, and his investigation and critique of society. The two concluding chapters examine his contributions in the intellectual landscape of related disciplines and in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century socio-cultural developments.

This structure means that the book can be read from beginning to end by those readers who would like to gain an overview of these aspects of Fromm's work. However, those who have an interest in a particular field such as therapy or relationships can 'dip into' the particular chapters which deal with their concerns.

Fromm was a writer, psychoanalyst, social critic and political activist of impressive breadth and depth. His attempt to bring together the many strands and contradictions of our existence within a humanistic message of individuality, love and solidarity was exceptional in its scope and applicability. His critique of the *status quo* was acerbic, yet he never seemed to lose a spirit of optimism. There is a strong personal appeal in his writing: if only we think, reflect and analyse, there is still time to change things for the better. This message is reinforced not just in his appeals for better personal relating but also in his calls for social change. Those readers who look for insight and wisdom will find much of this in Erich Fromm's writing. I hope this book will contribute to continued debate and discussion of his ideas, including an exploration of how his thoughts can be taken forward in the future.



# Personal Acknowledgements

Many people have provided help and advice with the creation of this book. My thanks go first and foremost to Dr Richard Stevens, editor of this series, for his invaluable insightful guidance, unstinting support and positive presence throughout the journey.

I would also like to thank Dr Rainer Funk, literary executor of the Erich Fromm Estate and Fromm Archive in Tübingen, Germany, for his time, resources and first-hand information about Erich Fromm as a person. Further thanks go to my Palgrave editors Anna van Boxel and Neha Sharma and copyeditor Shirley Tan for their support and advice, to my sister Susanne for practical support in Germany and to Alison, Christine, Janet, Ken and Marguerite for their perceptive comments on draft chapters. Many other friends have supported me in various ways – thank you.

Without the continued patience, encouragement and intellectual and practical support of my husband Norris and my daughters Rosanna and Clara, this project would not have been possible. This book is dedicated to them, and also to the memory of my mother whose lived humanism was an inspiration.

## 1

## A Short Biography

At the height of Erich Fromm's popularity in the United States and Mexico in the 1960s, he received around 30 invitations per month to give lectures and talks.<sup>1</sup> These events attracted huge audiences – for example 2000 students at Chicago University and over 3000 in Mexico City. Some of Fromm's books became international bestsellers and were translated into most major languages. He was seen as a leading figure in a range of academic and therapeutic fields including psychology and psychoanalysis, and a respected spokesperson on a number of social and political issues, from education to nuclear disarmament.

Who was this man whose ideas struck a chord with the hearts and minds of millions of people around the globe and who achieved almost cult status at the peak of his fame?

The eight decades of Fromm's long and productive life (1900–1980) span some of the great political, economic and cultural upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his work we can trace the influences of a traditional Jewish upbringing in Germany, the First World War, Nazi Germany, and post-war and Cold War years in the USA and Mexico. In his final years in particular he re-developed links to Europe and settled in Switzerland. The strength of his legacy lies in the way in which he analysed the profound social changes of his time and linked them to his view of the human condition. His creative attempts to bring together important ideas from a range of different disciplines make him one of the key thinkers of the last century and also provide highly relevant and stimulating topics for discussion in the present one, as the following chapters will show.

This chapter will highlight several themes in Fromm's life and work. It also introduces briefly Fromm's connections to some of the key figures in psychoanalytic and sociological circles, showing how his theories fit into the rich fabric of ideas and developments in his time.

Fromm was an *enquirer into the human condition*. He addressed some fundamental questions about how we can achieve a meaningful existence,

such as how to develop loving relationships and how to build a society which allows us to fulfil our human potential. This led him to a uniquely broad analysis which included the study of religion, philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis and politics. His was an attempt to explore the diverse influences which shape our lives and to bring together different frameworks of thought in order to make sense of them. Finding answers to his questions was more important than keeping to the artificial boundaries of different disciplines.

He was strongly *committed to autonomy and individuality*. Although he explored and valued the humanistic messages of different traditions of thought in religion and philosophy, he was never a blind follower of any creed, custom or dogma. What mattered to him was the way in which he could grapple with ideas and traditions and then take them forward to new and creative ways of thinking. We can follow in his life the story of a 'stranger', a seeker of truth and meaning, who was never quite settled in any discipline or society. His questioning mind made him a man at home in his ideas and with those who shared them, but kept him at a critical distance from mainstream society and its structures. This is also reflected in his wish not to leave behind the symbols commonly afforded to those who are considered important in society: he was wary of biographies<sup>2</sup> and he did not want a grave; his ashes were scattered on Lago Maggiore.

On a personal level, he showed admiration for people with a genuine commitment to their beliefs. This comes across both in those who could be called his role models and also in his own way of life. It was that quality of personal focus, of integrity and of *congruence between belief and practice* which seemed to stand out in Fromm himself, particularly to those who knew him in his final years. His attempt to learn as much as possible about himself and also about the world around him is demonstrated in his practice of meditation, reflection and self-analysis on the one hand, and his wide interests in the societal concerns of the day on the other. His ability to connect with his audiences and deliver messages of personal meaning to him and to his listeners and readers no doubt contributed to making him such an influential and credible thinker whose ideas came across as deeply held convictions rather than dry erudition or empty slogans.

## Childhood and youth – a German Jew

Erich Fromm was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1900 into the intellectual Jewish community in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. His father, Naphtali Fromm,

came from several generations of scholars and tradesmen, going back to his well respected and well known great-grandfather, Seligmann Bär Bamberger (a Jewish scholar in southern Germany). A frequently narrated family anecdote about Bamberger was that he had to keep a small shop to ensure life's necessities but appeared impatient every time a customer entered because it distracted him from his Talmudic studies. The value attached to learning rather than financial gain and the division between study and paid work recur in Fromm's own adult life pattern. He tried to devote each morning to personal study, analysis and meditation and only did paid work in the afternoon. In an interview which he gave in 1974 he acknowledged the influence of his ancestors' values, stating that he found it difficult to accept a world in which the main – and in his view strange – goal appeared to be making money.<sup>3</sup>

A further family anecdote worth mentioning in this context is little Erich's question to an uncle about what he thought would become of him in later life. The uncle's reply was 'an old Jew'. According to Fromm the intention of this remark was to stifle any tendency to pride and ambition. However, this could also be seen as prophetic in the sense that Fromm's life-long striving for understanding, meaning and truth, and his search for integrity, honesty and genuineness may well have had their roots in the intellectual environment of his childhood. They became guiding principles throughout his life – albeit in novel and creative forms, which ultimately meant looking forward to new ways of living rather than back to Talmudic tradition. However, he never lost his fondness for his rich Jewish cultural heritage; its stories and music. Incidentally, Fromm's name means 'pious' in German.

Erich was an only child, in whom a lot of hopes and expectations were invested. His mother, Rosa, was closely attached to her own close-knit family and seemed keen to claim all of Erich's positive characteristics as originating from her side, while the less flattering ones were attributed to his father's. She tried to shape Erich's future according to her own plans. This included, for example, her attempts to make Erich a piano virtuoso à la Paderewski – the famous Polish pianist, politician and prime minister. Fromm described his relief when the detested piano lessons eventually came to an end. His own wish – to play the violin – was never realized. Perhaps the weight of these early expectations stimulated his striving for freedom and autonomy in his later life.

The general atmosphere in the Fromm household appears to have been emotionally charged. Fromm described his mother, a full time housewife,

as 'depressive, narcissistic, and possessive',<sup>4</sup> though there is also evidence that she was fond of celebrations and cheerful family gatherings.<sup>5</sup> His father, a wine merchant, seems to have been particularly neurotic and anxious about Erich's well-being. For example, he travelled to Heidelberg to be with Erich for his PhD viva in case it went badly and he might commit suicide. However, Fromm felt that his father was never truly interested in him as an individual in his own right, especially as he grew up. His parents' anxious over-protectiveness of their only child was also one of the reasons why Erich's wish to pursue Talmudic studies in faraway Lithuania never came to fruition.

An important influence on the young Erich's developing identity was Oswald Sussman, a Galician Jew, who was employed in the Fromms' wine business and lived in their household for two years: 'an extremely honest man, courageous, a man of great integrity'.<sup>6</sup> Fromm expresses gratitude and appreciation for the interest he showed in his education, awakening his curiosity about politics and introducing him to socialist ideas. To someone brought up in a close knit traditional community sharing a particular view of the world, these fresh ideas were like a window into a new and exciting one. When Sussman was conscripted at the outbreak of the First World War, the then 14-year-old Erich must have felt a deep sense of personal loss.

Fromm's search for identity is well illustrated in his own assessment of his adolescence:

I was exposed to the same influences as every other young German during this time. But I had to deal with them in my own way. Not only because one always had an exceptional – not necessarily unpleasant – position as a Jew in Germany but also because I felt quite at home neither in the world I lived in, nor in the old world of traditions.<sup>7</sup>

This indicates an awareness of different values and modes of living in his early years. The theme of the *stranger*, of not quite belonging and of alienation played an important part throughout his life.

The young Erich attended the Wöhlerschule in Frankfurt, a boys' school close to his home, with a fairly high proportion of Jewish pupils. He achieved a distinction in his final leaving exam in 1918. His memories of his school years were coloured by events connected to the First World War. He regarded this as a major influence on his personal development, describ-

ing his unease when witnessing the displays of overblown nationalism and his sadness over the tragic deaths of individual soldiers he had known personally. These emotions are encapsulated in an event during his English lessons: before the outbreak of the war, the boys had been instructed to learn the British national anthem. When their English teacher asked them to recite this after the war had started, they claimed that this task went against their consciences – motivated partly by naughtiness and partly by the incited hatred against Britain. The English teacher, smiling sardonically, reminded the boys that they should not nourish any illusions: Britain had never yet lost a war. Fromm was profoundly moved by the teacher's calm and rational assessment of the situation, which cut across the irrational wave of nationalistic, narcissistic emotion prevalent in mainstream German society at that time.

He began to ask himself: how is this possible? – a question which he never tired of exploring.

How is it possible that men stand in the trenches for years and live like animals – and for what? The irrationality of human behavior impressed me in this way, and I became curious about the problem.<sup>8</sup>

This illustrates the adolescent Erich's yearning for understanding, rationality and autonomy, later to become guiding themes in the mature Fromm's thoughts and writings. He returned directly to the 'how is this possible?' question when he formulated his thoughts on and possible solutions to the nuclear threat half a century later. Fromm described the quest for understanding the political and psychological reasons why people go to war as a major thread in his thinking throughout his life.<sup>9</sup>

A further important theme in Erich's adolescent years was his developing interest in the Old Testament prophets, nourished by the Jewish mystic Rabbi Nehemia Anton Nobel, a charismatic preacher who became a central figure to a number of young men in Fromm's circle. Fromm was particularly interested in interpreting the key aspects of the messianic prophets. In his more mature writing he summarizes their main message thus:

Those who proclaim ideas and at the same time live them we may call prophets. The Old Testament prophets proclaimed the idea that man had to find an answer to his existence, and this answer was the

development of his reason, of his love. They taught that humility and justice were inseparably connected with love and reason.<sup>10</sup>

The prophets also depict visions of messianic time and peace proclaiming 'oneness' and healing, a new accord between people and between humans and nature. However, while the prophets preach of otherworldly harmony, Fromm sees their messages as highly relevant to our human experience. He claims that if we become aware of negative conditions and change our ways, such harmony can be achieved through our realization of human potential.<sup>11</sup>

The deep-seated humanist message which he took from Jewish intellectuals like Rabinkow – with whom he was later to study – began to conflict increasingly with more narrow, Zionist interpretations. After some involvement with Zionist youth organizations, Fromm renounced any Jewish nationalist aspirations. In fact, he became active in campaigning for Palestinian rights in later years.

In his background in the Jewish/German tradition and gradual exposure to different ideas, we can see the young Fromm's attempt to explore tradition yet formulate his own position. His respect for people who live according to their convictions is apparent from these early years and this later became his own quest for himself.

## **Searching deeper and wider: psychoanalysis and sociology**

Fromm's early adult years were characterized by a further searching for understanding and meaning both in traditional and more modern bodies of knowledge. He studied law at the University of Frankfurt and during this time was also involved with the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus (Free Jewish Teaching Institute), a Jewish educational centre for adults. A move to Heidelberg University in 1919 opened the door to many new influences yet he also continued with his Talmudic studies. His teacher was the highly respected Rabbi Rabinkow of whom Fromm said that he 'influenced my life more than any other man, perhaps. ... He was a man with whom one could never, even at the first meeting, feel oneself a stranger.'<sup>12</sup> Fromm also developed an initial interest in Buddhism and later became fascinated by this religion which does not rely on the notion of a personal God or on specific religious practices – so utterly different from the Orthodox Judaism of his early years.

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He changed his course of studies to sociology and economics and in 1922 completed his PhD thesis under the supervision of Alfred Weber, brother of the famous sociologist Max Weber. The topic of Fromm's thesis was 'the function of Jewish law in maintaining social cohesion in three Diaspora communities'.<sup>13</sup> He examined how a shared belief system operated in holding Jewish communities together, at the same time providing delineation from their wider non-Jewish environment. A beginning interest in the idea of a 'social character' – the notion of a reciprocal effect between social organization and individual psychological processes – is apparent here. These ideas are explored in more depth in Chapters 2 and 5 of this book.

During this time his philosophical studies included the writings of Aristotle, Spinoza and Marx. He was drawn to them because of their pragmatic approach to ethics, viewing people as social beings whose actions have real consequences. Their philosophies address concrete issues: how to live a good life and how to organize society to make this possible. This moral dimension paved the way for Fromm's broad interest in and diverse analysis of the human condition and his role as a respected social commentator who was genuinely interested in the pressing issues of the day.

Encounters with psychoanalysis and sociology played decisive roles in Fromm's adult life. As we will see on the following pages, alliances and disagreements between members of different academic circles had a major influence on the direction of Fromm's life.

During his time in Heidelberg he was influenced intensely by Sigmund Freud's writings on psychoanalysis. Although Fromm never met Freud personally, Freud's approach had a profound effect on Fromm's thinking.

Freud's main concepts were seen as revolutionary in their time, challenging a belief in the self-determining rational individual. One aspect of the Freud's complex model of the person is that of a pleasure seeker whose instincts demand instant gratification. In children we see such calls for wanting things *now* particularly clearly. However, these demands clash with the pressures of social norms embodied in parental discipline. Freud claimed that any unresolved conflicts arising from these opposing pressures are pushed into our unconscious and have a determining effect on our thoughts, feelings and actions, and importantly also our well-being. Repressed conflicts can lead to physical and mental ill health. Healing is only possible through a trained psychoanalyst's interpretation and

interventions which allow us to become aware of such patterns and enable us to leave behind the damaging effects their repression may have had.<sup>14</sup>

Fromm's main initial influence in the area of psychoanalysis was Frieda Reichmann, a Jewish psychiatrist 11 years his senior. She became his first analyst, though Fromm moved on to other practitioners when their personal relationship developed. He met her through Golde Ginsburg who was his fiancée for a brief period (though eventually Golde married Leo Löwenthal, Fromm's friend). Frieda Reichmann and Erich Fromm established the *Therapeutikum* in Heidelberg in 1924. This residential institution was run along the rules of Orthodox Jewish life, reflecting the lifestyles (for example in terms of diet) which both followed. Their approach to treating patients was based on Freudian ideas of repression. Treatment was not limited to patients. Initially, in a kind of bartering arrangement, even the household staff were analysed in return for their work.

Fromm married Reichmann in 1926, though the couple only lived together for a few years. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, it might well be thought that Fromm's interest in Reichmann reflects unresolved issues in his rather fraught relationship with his mother, given that Reichmann was older than Fromm and initially held a position of authority as his analyst. However, it is also possible that they were brought together by the heady mixture of their initial analyst/patient relationship, their common fascination for Freud's views on the unconscious and their efforts to establish a new institution in the economically volatile climate of hyperinflation in Germany.

Around the time of their marriage, both Frieda and Erich turned their backs on Orthodox Judaism whose rituals they began to see as expressions of unconscious conflicts rather than in themselves meaningful. Striving for harmony in belief and action, they found that orthodox practices which had become empty rituals were no longer tenable: They began to eat leavened bread at Passover. The *Therapeutikum* project was abandoned in 1928.

An important psychoanalytically orientated influence on Erich Fromm was Georg Groddeck, a doctor and psychoanalyst who ran a sanatorium in Baden-Baden, Germany. Both Reichmann and Fromm had regular friendly contact with him. He was well respected for his astute insights into the relationship between physical symptoms and their psychological basis. Fromm valued him as a man of great kindness and integrity. He put to Fromm the challenging suggestion that the tuberculosis he contracted in 1931, and subsequent need to seek treatment at Davos in Switzerland,

was linked to his inability to admit that his marriage to Frieda had failed. Coincidentally, a psychoanalytic view of the causes of tuberculosis had also been the topic of one of Fromm's lectures in 1928. The couple separated but did not divorce till 1940 and maintained a lifelong friendship. Ultimately, Fromm's lung condition was cured by medical rather than psychological intervention.

Fromm took his studies of psychoanalysis further and was himself analysed by different analysts in Munich, Frankfurt, and later in 1928 at the Berlin Institute, where he started his own psychoanalytical practice in 1930. A broad range of seminars and lecture programmes was also on offer there to which a number of famous analysts contributed – including Karen Horney and Wilhelm Reich. This provided a forum for critical discussion of some of Freud's ideas.

Wilhelm Reich's attempts to bring together psychoanalysis and Marxism had a significant influence on Fromm. However, Fromm's ideas part company with Reich's in that the latter retained Freud's strong emphasis on the role of unconscious sexual urges, whose importance Fromm saw as secondary.

Fromm shared Horney's criticisms of Freud's claims about psychosexual development, namely the Oedipus conflict and the father's predominant influence on a child's emotional development.

Freud proposed that erotic drives are present in us from birth and shift in focus to different parts of the body as we mature. Initially, for babies, oral gratification is particularly important. Freud assumed that babies derive pleasure from sucking or biting. This phase is followed by a stage at which the anus is supposed to be the area of pleasure. The child learns that he or she has some control over when and where to defecate. Toilet training becomes a potential source of conflict between parental demands for potty training and the child's desire to 'let go' whenever he or she feels like it. For the next stage Freud proposes different developmental paths in boys and girls because the zone of pleasure shifts to their genitals. Freud claimed that the little boy experiences an 'Oedipus conflict'. He is assumed to have erotic feelings towards his mother and experiences his father as a rival. Seeing his father as more powerful and thus fearing him (in particular worrying that the father might castrate him if he found out), he resolves this by identifying with the father and trying to become like him. Freud was less specific about little girls' development but claimed that at the same stage, the girl notices the absence of a penis and fears that she has already

been castrated, developing a sense of 'penis envy'. Following a 'latency' phase in which erotic drives are less significant, psychosexual development is concluded in adolescence when the young person develops an erotic interest in members of the opposite sex. However, Freud suggested that the way in which conflicts during the early stages are dealt with can have a lasting effect on our personality, and we can become fixated at a particular stage. For example, the child undergoing strict toilet training may end up becoming a miserly adult intent on holding onto things.

Fromm believed that Freud's views – in particular on the Oedipus conflict – reflected his preoccupation with patriarchal society, omitting the important influence of the mother. The ideas of Johann Jakob Bachofen, a Swiss anthropologist, appeared to address this. Bachofen suggested that pre-historic matriarchal societies emphasizing natural bonds preceded the later development of patriarchal societies in which legal and national principles are particularly highly valued. Social structures of this kind are also reflected in individuals as maternal and paternal tendencies, with the maternal emphasizing family relations, the paternal focusing on duty. Fromm found Bachofen's ideas more helpful than Freud's in showing the importance of both maternal and paternal principles in societies and individuals. In view of his relationship with his parents, Fromm's interest in Bachofen's analysis may not be surprising.

A number of strands can be seen to come together in Fromm's links to a psychoanalytic branch of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Leo Löwenthal, friendly with both Fromm and Max Horkheimer, its director, introduced them to each other. Fromm's work at the institute gave him the opportunity to formulate in more depth his 'grand theory' of social psychology, touching on Marxist sociology on the one hand and Freudian psychoanalysis on the other. Eventually, Fromm received a lifelong contract as the head of the social psychology department. His major piece of work at this time was field research on the lifestyles, attitudes and political behaviour of workers in the Rhineland, exploring the psychological and cultural processes which act as the 'social cement' in these communities. Fromm's thoughts on the effect of the hierarchical structures of unions and political parties were a main impetus for the institute's study of the 'authoritarian character'. He was interested in the interdependent effect of social structure and personal character in an attempt to explain why a number of these workers were drawn towards authoritarianism and fascism.<sup>15</sup> This study will be explored in more depth in Chapter 5.