

The Emancipative Potential of the Social Unconscious: Erich Fromm's Renewal of Freud's Approach as a Link between Ethico-Political and Psychoanalytical Forms of Social Critique

El potencial emancipador del inconsciente social: la renovación del planteamiento de Freud por Erich Fromm como vínculo entre las formas ético-políticas y psicoanalíticas de la crítica social

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Abstract

With his concept of the social unconscious, Erich Fromm showed that the reproduction of social ideologies depends on the suppression of specific social contradictions. Fromm's concept represents an extension of Freud's individual-based approach to the unconscious combined with a Marxist-influenced critique of society. In this paper, I will argue that Fromm's concept of the social unconscious is not only an indispensable component of an emancipative social critique. Furthermore, I will argue that it is through Fromm's concept that the productive relationship between philosophy, in the sense of an ethical-political social critique, and psychoanalysis becomes fully apparent.

Keywords: marxism, philosophy, unconscious, psychoanalysis, contradiction.

Resumen

Con su concepto del inconsciente social, Erich Fromm demostró que la reproducción de ideologías sociales específicas depende de la supresión de contradicciones sociales específicas. El concepto de Fromm representa una ampliación del enfoque del inconsciente basado en el individuo de Freud, combinado con una crítica de la sociedad influida por el marxismo. En este artículo, argumentaré que el concepto de inconsciente social de Fromm no sólo es un



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componente indispensable de una crítica social emancipadora. Además, argumentaré que es a través del concepto de Fromm que la relación productiva entre la filosofía, en el sentido de una crítica social ético-política, y el psicoanálisis se hace plenamente evidente.

Palabras clave: marxismo, filosofía, inconsciente, psicoanálisis, contradicción.

1. Introduction

How can one explain to an enlightened public that someone like Julian Assange faces 175 years of prison in the US for exposing US war crimes? (2022). How can one explain that Western politicians talk about values such as freedom and equality, but at the same time place themselves in economic dependencies on autocratic regimes? How can one explain that we teach children values like respect and solidarity in our schools, when it seems evident that they are born into a social system where these values are often undermined?

In the following, I would like to deal with Erich Fromm's concept of the social unconscious in order to demonstrate why the stability of societies depends on the repression of such contradictions.

The main thesis of this Monographic Section is, among other things, that

(p)hilosophy and psychoanalysis are not external to each other; they do not relate to each other as a universal worldview and a specific science and practice of mental disorders. But, as it became clear to Lacan and his followers, psychoanalysis compels us to redefine the very domain of philosophy [...]. And vice versa: only philosophy allows us to perceive the most radical dimension of the psychoanalytic discovery, how psychoanalysis shatters our most common view of reality and our place in it.¹

In the following, I would like to argue, using Erich Fromm's concept of the social unconscious, why philosophy and psychoanalysis are indeed dependent on each other. This can primarily be justified by the fact that a closer engagement with Fromm's concept of the social unconscious actually shows that certain areas of philosophy need to be redefined. The question of which form of society is most suited to the basic emancipative aspirations of human beings can ultimately only be answered if certain areas of repression that prevail in a specific society are brought to consciousness (Fromm, 2020). The concept of the social unconscious draws attention to the fact that many areas which are actually characteristic for the domain of philosophy are dependent on knowledge of psychoanalysis in order to be able to formulate a comprehensive critique of society. In this context, comprehensive means that any critique of society must already take into account that the subject formulating this very critique carries out mechanisms of social repression. Hence, any form of meaningful social critique presupposes that those areas of repression have been brought to consciousness (Fromm,

¹ The monographic section has been edited by Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo and Slavoj Žižek under the title *What is psychoanalysis today? A critique of psychoanalytic theory and clinic from the philosophical point of view.*

2020). Only then can it be recognized that it is not the individual, but rather the normality in which the individual lives, that is pathological and thus worthy of a comprehensive critique (Fromm, 2020a). On the other hand, Fromm's concept of the social unconscious shows in an incomparable way the extent to which psychoanalysis is also dependent on philosophy. Only the moment of questioning - or more precisely: the questioning of the social normality with which an individual is confronted - ensures that psychoanalysis can fully bring its emancipative potential to bear.

In his introduction to the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right, Marx draws attention to the fact that the demand to abandon illusions about one's own condition precisely consists in abandoning a condition whose reproduction itself depends on our own illusions (Marx & Engels, 1981). Although Marx is of course concerned with a critique of religion, Marx's call can be taken as a paradigmatic example of the emancipative potential of philosophical questioning: Only disillusionment with the wretched social conditions by which one sees oneself surrounded makes it possible to ask the really important questions by recognizing – in accordance with Fromm - that it is not man as an individual but society itself that is pathological (Fromm, 2020b).

In the following (paragraph 2.) I will take a closer look at Freud's concept of the unconscious. Afterwards (paragraph 3.) I will try to explain how Fromm's analytical-social psychological approach can be understood as a combination of elements taken from of Marx's social critique and Freud's psychoanalysis. I will then show (paragraph 4.) that Fromm's concept of the social unconscious can only be grasped in its entirety if one takes into account the extent to which Fromm subjected the focus on individual pathologies characteristic of Freudian psychoanalysis to a critique. In paragraph 5. I will provide a more detailed explanation of Fromm's concept of the social unconscious. In this regard I will also contextualize why Fromm's concept of the social unconscious is to be regarded as a necessary prerequisite for gaining a deeper understanding of Fromm's theory of social character. In the end, I will discuss (paragraph 6.) why (I) Fromm's concept of the social unconscious is a suitable instrument for a philosophical, i.e. ethico-political, critique of socio-political issues. (II) I will try to answer how Fromm's concept of the social unconscious serves as a suitable instrument for an emancipative critique of society precisely because it shows that the insights of philosophy and psychoanalysis are dependent on each other.

2. The unconscious as regression into bondage? Back to Freud

In his lectures on the general theory of neuroses, Freud points out that the discovery of the unconscious represents one of the three great mortifications in the history of mankind. The first mortification, with which science shook human self-understanding, was when Copernicus - or, according to Freud, already Alexandrian science - proclaimed that the earth, and thus also man, is not the centre of the universe. The second grievance can be traced

back to the fact that researchers such as Darwin, among others, have pointed out that man does not have the prerogative of creation and likewise represents no more than a further development from the animal kingdom (Freud, 2020a).

According to Freud, the third major insult comes from the discovery of the unconscious, “[...] which wants to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but remains dependent on meagre information about what is unconsciously going on in its soul life” (Freud 2020a, p. 273). The unconscious, roughly broken down, has ultimately led to an erosion of the notion which assumed that man, by virtue of his own use of reason, is able to restrain his own desires and consequently to act in the light of his own autonomy.

Of course, this can also lead to enormous political consequences, as Paul Roazen once aptly noted:

[...] one of the chief attractions in Freud's whole outlook is the challenge he continues to pose to how we think about things today, and the threat psychoanalysis poses for conventional political thought. Freud's concept of the unconscious does not readily suit the needs of [...] social science. There was a mystical side to him, a disdain for the provable [...] (Roazen, 2000, p. 37)

How radical can Freud's concept of the unconscious be from a philosophical, i.e. ethico-political, perspective? In other words, to what extent is the Freudian concept of the unconscious a suitable instrument for social critique?

To this end, it is first necessary to specify more precisely - even if not in a way that does justice to the Freudian oeuvre as a whole - what Freud understood by the concept of the unconscious and what implications (and above all restrictions!) this has for a philosophically formulated critique of society.

In his lecture on resistance and repression, Freud points out that the process of repressing specific thoughts which should not enter consciousness is the basic prerequisite for the formation of specific psychological pathologies - e.g. neurotic behaviour (Freud, 2020a). Freud goes on to introduce a differentiation between the *preconscious*, the *unconscious* and the *conscious*. Freud uses a metaphorical comparison to explain these concepts. In this context, according to Freud, the unconscious represents a kind of antechamber, while the conscious represents a kind of salon. Between the antechamber and the salon there is a guardian whose power it is to decide who may be allowed into the salon. However, it is not individual persons - hence the metaphor - whom the guardian examines to see whether they are allowed to enter the salon, but rather soul movements that are present in large numbers in the anteroom. If one of the soul movements is on the threshold of the salon (consciousness) and causes the guardian's displeasure, it can happen that the guardian either rejects these movements directly into the antechamber (i.e. the unconscious) or - depending on how well the guardian does his job - the movements have at least managed to enter the salon but have still not reached the

realm of consciousness - which is why Freud calls these movements *preconscious*. The guardian, which Freud cites as an example in this context, can of course be described - translated into psychoanalytic vocabulary - as the process of repression (Freud, 2020a). Freud then states:

But the fate of repression for an individual emotion is that it is not let in by the guardian from the system of the unconscious into that of the preconscious. It is the same guardian that we know as resistance when we try to lift the repression through analytical treatment. (Freud 2020a, pp. 283-284)

The guardian is therefore the resistance which creates the repression that ensures that specific emotions remain in the realm of the unconscious and is consequently also responsible for the formation of neurotic symptoms.

In his *Dream Interpretation*, Freud finally gets to the heart of the significance of the *realm* of the unconscious for human existence by pointing out that the *realm* of the unconscious

[...] is as unknown to us according to its inner nature as the real of the external world and is given to us as incompletely by the data of consciousness as the external world is given to us by the data of our sense organs. (Freud, 2020b, p. 637)

This description of Freud's already provides an apt starting point to return to the question I raised in this paper: To what extent is Freud's concept of the unconscious political and can serve as a suitable instrument for a philosophical critique of social/political conditions?

3. Marx and Freud: two radical thinkers

The extent to which philosophical theory and psychoanalysis are dependent on each other and - inextricably linked to this - the extent to which the phenomenon of the unconscious has an emancipative potential, has been addressed by Erich Fromm in various places. If one takes a closer look at Fromm's thinking, it becomes clear that Fromm managed - or even intended - to unite important teachings of Marx and Freud in his thinking. As already explained at the beginning, Marx expresses the philosophical aim oriented towards emancipation precisely when he calls on people to realize that they live in a condition that is dependent on their illusions for its own reproduction. Consequently, one can only work on a concrete improvement of social conditions if one goes through a process of disillusionment (Marx & Engels, 1981). But how does this process of disillusionment take place in concrete terms?

In his intellectual autobiography *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, Fromm precisely elaborates that Marx and Freud are to be understood as radical thinkers in many respects (radical in the sense that both pursue the goal - in keeping with the etymological origin of the concept of radicality - of getting to the root of social problems). In this context, Fromm writes that Freud attacked many values of the Victorian age by openly addressing human sexuality (Fromm, 2020a). But according to Fromm, Freud was to be considered a radical thinker in an even deeper sense. Through his discovery of the unconscious, Freud for the first time

challenged the prevailing consensus of psychiatric science and thus - even if Fromm does concede that Freud did not really go beyond the prevailing social order of the time - opened up the possibility of subjecting those ideas and prejudices that shaped the social relations prevailing during Freud's lifetime to a revolutionary criticism (Fromm, 2020a).

Through the goal of making the unconscious conscious Freud, like Marx, is concerned with freeing man from his illusions (Fromm, 2020a). The greatest similarity between Freud and Marx, according to Fromm, is ultimately to help people overcome the state of their own alienation in different ways, in that both found that both man and society are dominated by opposing forces (Fromm, 2020a). In Marxist theory, social antagonism exists – among other things - between the respective ruling minority of the bourgeoisie - i.e. the capitalists and those who have the means of production - and the proletariat, which is subject to increasing impoverishment as a result of capitalist development processes (Saroj & Dhanju, 2019). For Freud, the conflict that characterizes human existence is noticeable in that “[...] man as a spiritual-emotional entity is structured by forces that are of an opposing nature” (Fromm, 2020a, p. 31). However, the solutions that both thinkers have in mind to resolve these conflicting relationships are quite different in nature.

4. Fromm's critique of Freud: on the pathology of normality

With regard to the question of how man can be freed from his neuroses and suffering, there was ultimately only one possibility for Freud, according to Fromm: to free the patient by making him conscious of the unconscious:

As a therapist, Freud was fundamentally convinced that making the unconscious conscious is the way to cure mental illness. As a social philosopher, he believed in the same principle: only by becoming aware of reality and overcoming our illusions can we attain the optimal strength to take on life. (Fromm, 2020a, p. 121)

But how does such a suspension of illusions take concrete shape according to the Freudian reading? Elsewhere Fromm emphasizes:

Freud was mainly concerned with uncovering the individual unconscious. Although he assumed that society enforces repressions, for him it was the repression of libidinal forces and not social repressions that played the decisive role: the repression of social contradictions, the repression of the suffering caused by society, the failure of authority, the feeling of discomfort and dissatisfaction, etc. (Fromm, 2020a, p. 144)

This is probably one of Fromm's most important criticisms on Freud. While Freud only looks at the individual with regard to pathological phenomena, Fromm takes a broader view. Unlike Freud, who assumes that one only represses one's own drives in favour of adapting to social norms, Fromm assumes that the repression of social contradictions should also be taken into account, since one should always assume that the individual is a socially situated subject.

However, Fromm assumes that a genuine individualization of pathological phenomena, which disregards the social circumstances, will not lead to an abolition of repression:

If the uncovering of the unconscious means that one reaches the experience of one's own humanity, then it cannot, however, stop with the individual, but must progress to the uncovering of the social unconscious. But this presupposes an understanding of social dynamics and a critical assessment of one's own society from the standpoint of universal human values. However, it is precisely the insight into society conveyed by Marx that is a prerequisite for us to become aware of the social unconscious and thus become fully awakened individuals who have gotten rid of their repressions. (Fromm, 2020a, p. 145)

At this point, not only does the content of Fromm's concept of the social unconscious become clear, but it also becomes apparent that it is often not necessarily the individual himself who suffers from a pathology, but that society - or what is called normality by the majority of people - can itself be pathological.

If one wants to understand Fromm's conception of the pathology of normality, it is worthwhile to look a little more closely at his critique on Freud. This critique consists not only in the fact that Freud, in Fromm's view, reduces human beings to their sexuality (Brennen, 1997). Furthermore, on a more general level, Freud also stands for an error which to be considered characteristic of psychoanalytic research itself. In *Man for Himself*, Fromm points out that one of the main mistakes of psychoanalysis was to attempt to view the psychology of human beings only from a genuinely scientific perspective and, as a consequence, to detach it from philosophical and ethical questions (Fromm, 2017). According to Fromm, Freud stands paradigmatically for such a separation of psychoanalytical and ethico-political/philosophical questions, since Freud views human beings as a *homo psychologicus*, which makes it impossible to "[...] understand man with all his emotional and psychological disorders if one is not clear about the nature of values and moral conflicts" (Fromm, 2017, p. 18).

The aforementioned neurotic suffering that the Freudian unconscious is able to trigger can thus be explained by Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, according to which the child has murderous impulses that are directed against the parent of the same sex, since the latter is seen as a rival with regard to the other parent to whom the child feels sexually attracted. Any form of ethical principles and norms that contribute to the stabilization of social conditions and are expressed in the concept of the superego developed by Freud therefore only have an instrumental use in that they attempt to curb the libidinal and incestuous nature of human beings (Fromm, 2017). Therefore, Freud's theory ultimately assumes an individualization of pathological phenomena (Fromm, 2020a), in that the pathology is always shifted onto the individual, since the individual's drives come into fundamental conflict with the norms that underlie the structure of society.

In his book *The Sane Society*, Fromm turns Freud's individual-based approach around by stating that it is not the individual but rather society itself that is pathological. In this context,

Fromm laments that far too many psychiatrists and psychologists still refuse to acknowledge this problem and claim that “[...] the problem of mental health in a society concerns only the number of “non-adapted” individuals and not a possible non-adapting of the culture itself” (Fromm, 2020a, p. 13). In this way, Fromm criticizes a trend that can also be clearly observed today, which can be seen in the fact that pathologies merely represent an anomaly that deviates from the prevailing social norms and can accordingly only be solved by therapeutic treatment methods geared towards the individual (Ratner, 2017).

From the aforementioned considerations, we can draw the - at first seemingly paradoxical - conclusion that precisely those individuals who develop pathological symptoms are healthy, in contrast to the majority society, because the social defects trigger a general unease in the corresponding individuals.

The question that naturally arises in this context is to what extent the previously mentioned considerations are related to Fromm's concept of the social unconscious.

5. Fromm's concept of the social unconscious

In order to understand how certain social defects - which are characteristic of the pathology of normality - are produced, it is first advisable to familiarize oneself with the concept of the social character developed by Fromm. The social character can be interpreted as an attempt on Fromm's part to overcome Freud's individual-based approach by methodologically bringing together psychoanalytical and ethico-political (strongly Marxist-oriented) questions concerning society (Funk, 2018). However, a closer explanation of Fromm's theory of social character is still tied to answering a very specific question: Referring to the previously discussed observation that Fromm subjects Freud's individual-based approach to a critique - what is Fromm's counter-model?

5.1 The human situation

In order to make certain pathologies of normality - specifically understood as pathologies on a societal level - explicable, a closer examination of Fromm's theory of social character is helpful (Funk, 2018).

Fromm's conception of social character can be understood, as already indicated, as an attempt to make the relationship between the economic basis and the cultural/political superstructure of a society - and thus ideologies - psychoanalytically explicable (Brennen, 1997). Translated into Fromm's terminology, this means that an attempt is made to make the interrelation between the character structure of individuals and the socio-economic structure of society theoretically comprehensible (Fromm, 2018).

Fromm elaborates on this in *To Have or to Be*:

The socio-economic structure of a society shapes the social character of its members in such a way that they want to do what they are supposed to do. At the same time, the social character influences the socio-economic structure of society: as a rule, it acts as a cement that gives the social order additional stability [...] (Fromm, 2018, p. 164)

Fromm's theory of social character - which is a formative concept for the analytical social psychology developed by Fromm (Maiwald, 2021) - is based on the assumption that a specific form of character type is created by the interaction between the psychological structures of the individual and the prevailing social conditions. While the individual character describes the totality of character attributes that constitute an individual personality, the social character is far less specific and rather describes only some of the many traits that distinguish the overall personality of an individual. However, these few traits are found in almost all members of a specific society (Fromm, 2019b).

Another important feature of the social character is that it is not static but dynamic in nature. In concrete terms, this means that a change in social structures also leads to a change in the social character. On the other hand, a change in the social character can also result in a change in the social structures (Fromm, 2018). However, Fromm does not develop the concept of social character simply in order to establish a concept that aims to describe psycho-social interaction processes of a specific social formation. Rather, Fromm assumes that the social character also fulfils a very specific function, which consists in contributing to the reproduction of the respective social conditions by internalizing specific necessities that are conducive to the stabilization of the prevailing social system (Fromm, 2019b). Or, to paraphrase Fromm's words from the passage quoted earlier: The social character makes the members of a society not only act as they are supposed to act. Rather, a successful reproduction of social relations also depends on people also *wanting to act in* such a way. In other words: *The ought* that has a stabilizing effect on social structures *is in complete congruence with the will of the individual members of society* (Fromm, 2018).

In order to establish a brief reference back to the previous considerations, it can be stated at this point: If one wants to understand at all whether and when a specific society is pathological, it is necessary to analyse the prevailing character of the society. Put differently (to return to Marx): Through the dynamic interaction between the psychology of the individual and the general socio-economic social structure, Fromm provides an explanation to how the emergence of a social ideology can be explained psychoanalytically (Brennen, 1997).

If one recalls Marx's previously mentioned statement according to which the ability to give up illusions about one's own condition - in other words, to see through the prevailing ideology in a specific society - presupposes that one should come to the realization that the stability of the previous state of society was dependent on our own illusions (Marx & Engels, 1981), then the question remains to be asked at this point how people can be enabled to give up illusions about their own condition in the first place.

Or - once again - put differently: How can the social unconscious be brought to consciousness?

5.2 The social unconscious

Fromm's concept of the social unconscious is initially based on a similar assumption as Freud's concept of the unconscious.

While Freud assumes that the individual develops neuroses because the sexual-oedipal tendencies that are in conflict with society must be repressed (Freud, 2020a), Fromm assumes that it is often rather the social structures that are pathological and therefore cause the individual to develop pathologies. This can be explained primarily by the aforementioned concept of social character, as the individuals can suddenly feel that the character of a society itself is at odds with their own needs. It is undeniably true that the primary function of social character is to contribute to the stabilization of social conditions. However, if social structures change in such a way that they suddenly stand in blatant contradiction to the social character, the social character can also become an element of destabilization and disintegration (Brennen, 1997). Most of the time, however, the social character has, as said, a stabilizing function, in that people internalize the necessities that contribute to a reproduction of social relations (Fromm, 2019b).

However, in a similar way as the Freudian individual depends on suppressing his unconscious sexual-oedipal inclinations, the stability of the social character, according to Fromm, also depends on the existence of a social unconscious (Fromm, 2020a).

Fromm states in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*:

I would like to call the "social unconscious" those areas of repression that are found in most members of a society. These elements repressed by the general public are contents that the members of the respective society must not become aware of if this society with its specific contradictions is to function smoothly. (Fromm 2020a, p. 98)

Just as the individual, according to Freud, is dependent on individual mechanisms of repression, societies are also dependent on repressions so that the social character can continue to contribute to a reproduction of social conditions regardless of the social contradictions that may prevail (Fromm, 2020a).

Fromm explains what can be understood as social contradictions, especially with reference to Greek societies. According to Fromm, the process of repressing the socially unconscious is only necessary when a society is pathological, i.e. irrational, and requires rationalization - or ideologies - so that the individual members of society do not become aware of the contradictions that arise from these pathologies. While in ancient Greece it was obvious that the rulers did not even intend to serve the interests of the people and openly held the view that slaves were not to be regarded as people in their own right, there was not much for both

citizens and slaves to suppress, since the publicly postulated statements of the ruling class did not stand in contradiction to the real prevailing socio-political realities (Fromm, 2020a). However, if - and for Fromm this is to be seen as a contradiction characteristic of the social structures of Capitalism - there is suddenly a discrepancy between the publicly postulated social ideals and the real conditions by which a specific society is characterized, then society is dependent on specific forms of repression. An example for Fromm is the circumstance when a society claims to provide for the prosperity of all, but at the same time rampant social inequalities prevail (Fromm, 2020a).

Other contradictions that are relegated to the realm of the unconscious in modern Western societies include the fact that children are taught Christian virtues, but at the same time they are prepared for a life that stands in contradiction to precisely these virtues. Or, another interesting point Fromm makes: Does it make sense to be outraged about repressive systems, but at the same time remain silent about repressive mechanisms among one's own allies? (Fromm, 2020a).

With the help of the previous explanation, I hope I have been able to sufficiently illustrate what Fromm understands by the concept of the social unconscious and what function it fulfils in Fromm's theoretical model.

In the following final section, I attempt to answer (I) the question of the extent to which Fromm's concept of the social unconscious has an emancipative potential and (II) the extent to which this emancipative potential can be concretely explained by the fact that Fromm's concept of the social unconscious can be seen as paradigmatic for a productive interaction between philosophy and psychoanalysis.

6. The emancipative potential of the social unconscious

With regard to the emancipative potential of the unconscious, Fromm states:

To become conscious of one's unconscious is to come into contact with one's full humanity and to remove the barriers which society erects in every human being and consequently between every human being and his fellow human beings. It is difficult to achieve this goal, and it is rarely successful. However, everyone can come closer to it, because it means nothing other than the emancipation of man from the socially conditioned alienation from himself and from humanity. (Fromm, 2020a, p. 141)

Becoming aware of one's own unconscious could also be translated - in line with Marx - into the realization that life in a specific society is dependent on the illusions of some of its members. According to Fromm, the only way to escape this state of alienation is to bring the social unconscious to consciousness. With his concept of the social unconscious, Fromm manages to combine Freud's dictum that the unconscious is the real psychic (Freud, 2020b) with the Marxist approach that being - i.e. the social structure - determines consciousness (Brennen, 1997).

In order to understand the extent to which Fromm's theory of the social unconscious has an emancipative potential from an ethico-political point of view, it is worth returning to the narcissistic mortification discussed at the beginning, which Freud attributes to the discovery of the unconscious. According to Freud, the scientific discovery of the unconscious is inevitably accompanied by the realization that the ego cannot really be considered the "[...] master in its own house [...]" (Fromm, 2020a, p. 273). In other words, the discovery of the unconscious destroys the image of human beings as being capable of autonomous action, since they – specifically: their ego - are in constant conflict with their enslaving drives and the demands of society and consequently develop neuroses. Nevertheless, Fromm quite correctly admits that Freud can be regarded as a thinker of human emancipation in a similar way to Marx, in that he helped the individual to become conscious and thus to change, at least on an individual level (Fromm, 2020a). Fromm's extension of Freud's thesis to a social unconscious, however, has a far more emancipative character: the realization that it is not the individual but society that is possibly pathological leads to the conclusion that it is not the individual that has to be changed in order to adapt to the existing social structures, but rather the social structures in order to adapt to the individual.

It is precisely for this reason that making the unconscious conscious is linked to the abolition of alienation and thus also to the emancipation of human beings (Fromm, 2020a).

The question that naturally arises in this context is to what extent Fromm's concept of the social unconscious can also be used today as a suitable instrument for a social critique based on emancipative ideas. In the following, I would like to cite two current political examples that refer to two of the contradictions mentioned above:

- 1) The fact that the ideals - such as respect for others, etc. - that usually underlie the education of adolescents are often in glaring discrepancy with the practices that prevail in many social contexts. I will especially focus on the ethos of meritocratic societies.
- 2) This point concerns the fact that many of the ideals postulated by so-called Western societies - freedom, equality, etc. - are often undermined in the concretion of political action.

1) In his book *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael J. Sandel aptly points out that the ethos of meritocracy is based on a contradiction which, read through the lens of Fromm, should be relegated to the realm of the social unconscious. According to Sandel, the ethos characteristic of Western meritocracies, which leads people who have achieved great professional success to believe that this is their sole merit, can be seen as an attitude that undermines the solidarity of society as a whole (Sandel, 2020).

By adopting such an attitude - or, to use Fromm's terminology: by adopting such a social character - it is disregarded that the meritocratic principle implies that the advancement of a few can only work if others do not have the opportunity for social advancement. Sandel, however, consistently continues this argumentation by elaborating that the right-wing

populism that has emerged in the US in recent years can be seen as a direct consequence of this social ethos. Populists like Trump use the frustration of those who have been dependent on the system and do not have the same prerequisites - a good upbringing, etc. - as those who now see themselves as winners of a fair competition for achievement (Sandel, 2020). What would it mean, to use Fromm's words, to bring the socially unconscious to consciousness in this context?

It would first mean that those who have achieved socio-economic advancement in life should first realize that - in addition to their own achievements - luck and favourable circumstances were also partly responsible for their success (Sandel, 2020). Only the recognition of this fact can ensure that social divisions are overcome by making it clear to many people that fates such as poverty should not always be attributed to individual failure.

2) Not least because of the horrific war of aggression on Ukraine or the terrible repression that the courageously rebellious Iranian population has to endure, many Western politicians see it as a matter of defending our Western values against autocratic regimes. But can politicians really live up to the ideals they postulate if they constantly run counter to these ideals in their own actions? Take, for example, the ideal of freedom, which the culturally (so called) Westernized world now supposedly intends to defend against autocratic regimes. The question that remains to be asked at this point is to what extent one can really credibly represent such ideals if one constantly acts against them?

An apt example in this context is the case of Julian Assange. As I noted in a recent opinion piece, Assange's merit lies primarily in having brought to consciousness what is, to use Fromm's term, the social unconscious (Maiwald, 2022a).

A brief background to the case: a few years ago, Julian Assange published a video via the Wikileaks disclosure platform in which the killing of unarmed Iraqi civilians from a US military helicopter can be observed. As a consequence - after the Ecuadorian embassy in London no longer granted Assange refuge - Assange has been incarcerated to the high-security Belmarsh prison for some time now, where he is waiting for extradition to the US. The sentence awaiting Assange in the US is 175 years in prison (Maiwald, 2022b). What the Assange case shows is that the threat to democratic ways of life does not only come from outside, but can also come from within. In this context, Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly and correctly pointed out that it is to Assange's credit that he has drawn attention to the illusory character of the freedom that Western states declare for themselves (Žižek, 2014).

Returning to Fromm, it could be argued - and this is Assange's merit - that Assange has enabled us to become aware of the unconscious contradictions that underlie our postulated values. Assange has made us realize that liberal democracies can only authentically condemn the treatment of dissidents in autocratic regimes if they do not do the same (Maiwald, 2022a).

The two examples mentioned above should make it clear to what extent Fromm's concept of the social unconscious can serve as a suitable instrument for a social critique that is committed to the ideal of human emancipation.

Now, finally, to answer the second question: To what extent can the emancipative potential of Fromm's concept of the social unconscious be concretely explained by the fact that it is paradigmatic for a productive interaction between philosophy and psychoanalysis?

In a sense, it can be argued that Fromm shows with the concept of the social unconscious that an ethico-political critique of society cannot do without knowledge of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Fromm also shows that it is not enough for psychoanalysis to stop at individual pathologies. Rather, the individual - and thus also his or her neuroses - must always be seen as a product of social structures - which is what makes a critique of social conditions possible in the first place.

Marx correctly stated that the stability of social relations always depends on people's illusions - in the form of ideologies (Marx & Engels, 1981). Fromm recognized that only psychoanalysis, however, can contribute to an ethico-political critique of the respective prevailing ideologies that shape a society. By expanding Freud's concept of the individual unconscious, Fromm has in a sense succeeded in showing why ideologies are so powerful in the first place and contribute to the stability of rigid social structures.

7. Final considerations

By uniting the currents of thought shaped by Marx and Freud, Fromm simultaneously demonstrates why philosophy is dependent on knowledge of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Fromm also shows why psychoanalysis can only unfold its full potential when its insights are considered in an ethical-political, i.e. philosophical, framework. Using Erich Fromm's concept of the social unconscious, I have attempted to demonstrate that the truly emancipative potential of both philosophy and psychoanalysis can only be fully developed when both sciences - or better: worldviews - are seen as not separate from each other, but in a productive interrelation with each other.

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