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From Economic Alienation to Total Alienation: A Reconstruction of Marx's Theory of Human Liberation in Erich Fromm's Philosophy

Huong Nguyen Quynh
Thuongmai University
Duc Ho Cong
Hocongductriet@tmu.edu.vn

Thuongmai University

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Abstract

Human alienation and liberation are two central categories of humanistic Marxism, and continue to be reinterpreted in the context of the profound transformations of 20th-century modern society. Among the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm stands out for his efforts to combine Marxism and social psychoanalysis to explain new forms of human alienation in modern industrial society. However, existing studies mainly focus on individual aspects of his thought without fully clarifying the theoretical significance of the shift from economic alienation to comprehensive alienation. Based on the method of internal criticism, textual hermeneutics, and a comparative analysis of the ideas between Marx and Erich Fromm, this article analyzes the inheritance, modification, and development of alienation theory in Erich Fromm's philosophy. The research results show that Erich Fromm not only expanded the scope of the concept of alienation from the realm of labor and production relations to psychological, cultural, and existential dimensions, but also restructured Marx's theory of human liberation. While Marx focused on transforming production relations and overcoming alienated labor, Erich Fromm emphasized the formation of active freedom, love, creativity, responsibility, and humanistic education as essential conditions for liberation. On this basis, the article argues that Erich Fromm constructed a more comprehensive model of human liberation, simultaneously integrating the economic, social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of human existence. The research contributes to clarifying an important direction of development of humanistic Marxism in the 20th century, while also suggesting theoretical values for identifying new forms of alienation in contemporary society.

1. Problem Statement

In recent decades, along with the development of market economies, globalization, and digital technology, human life has undergone profound changes. Alongside material and scientific and technological achievements, modern society has also witnessed the rise of phenomena such as consumerism, social isolation, identity crisis, and a sense of meaninglessness. These phenomena raise questions about the alienation of individuals in contemporary society and the possibility of finding paths towards free and holistic human development.

Throughout the history of philosophy, the issue of alienation has been addressed from various perspectives, from Hegel and Feuerbach to Karl Marx. In particular, Marx elevated the concept of alienation to a central category in his critique of capitalist society and his analysis of the conditions for human liberation. However, the transformations of 20th-century society show that alienation manifests not only in the realm of labor and production relations but also in the spiritual, psychological, and cultural life of individuals. This necessitates broadening the approach to the issue of alienation beyond the traditional economic framework.

In this context, Erich Fromm is one of the thinkers who made significant contributions to the development of humanistic Marxism. By combining Marxist theory and social psychoanalysis, he approached alienation as a phenomenon that is both social and psychological, linked to the

characteristics of modern industrial society. This approach opened a new avenue of research into the relationship between social structure, human needs, and the capacity for realizing human nature.

The research findings show that Erich Fromm not only expanded Marx's theory of alienation from the economic sphere to psychological, cultural, and existential dimensions, but also restructured the very theory of human liberation. While Marx focused on transforming production relations and overcoming alienated labor, Erich Fromm emphasized the formation of positive freedom, love, creativity, responsibility, and humanistic education as essential conditions for liberation. On this basis, the article argues that Erich Fromm constructed a more comprehensive model of human liberation, contributing to the development of humanistic Marxism in the context of modern society.

2. History of research

Erich Fromm is one of the leading figures of humanistic Marxism and the Frankfurt School, notable for his efforts to combine Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis to explain the forms of human alienation in modern society. His ideas on alienation, freedom, and human liberation have attracted the attention of many scholars both domestically and internationally from philosophical, sociological, and psychological perspectives.

In the work *"Western Marxism (Frankfurt School)"* (Hieu.NC, Hop.Đ.M. 2013), Nguyen Chi Hieu and Do Minh Hop (2013) summarized the basic characteristics of critical theory, and pointed out that Frankfurt thinkers, including Erich Fromm, developed Marxism with a humanist orientation to criticize modern capitalist society and seek conditions for humanity to escape alienation. However, the analysis of Erich Fromm 's ideas in this work mainly stopped at introducing the basic arguments of freedom and humanism.

Continuing that research direction, Nguyen Chi Hieu (editor, 2018), in his monograph on *Social Philosophy of the Frankfurt School* (Hieu. N. C, 2018), further clarified Erich Fromm's theoretical basis through the combination of Marxist theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. The work shows that Erich Fromm expanded the scope of alienation research from the economic sphere to psychological and social life dimensions, while emphasizing the role of love, creativity, and responsibility as conditions for overcoming alienation. However, the issue of restructuring Marx's theory of human liberation in Erich Fromm's thought has yet to be systematically examined.

From a different approach, Do Lai Thuy (2003), through her translation and research of Erich Fromm's *"The Art of Loving"* (Thuy. D. L. 2003), highlighted the role of love in his humanistic philosophy. According to this approach, love is not simply an emotional state but also an existential capacity that helps people overcome isolation, restore connections with others, and realize their human nature. Therefore, love is seen as a practical method of liberating people from forms of alienation in modern life.

In international academic circles, Asha Kaushik (1978) with his study * *The Neo-Marxist Framework of Erich Fromm** (Kaushik, Asha. 1978) is one of the first works to emphasize Erich Fromm's role in

reinterpreting Marx's concept of alienation. The author argues that Erich Fromm shifted the focus of his analysis from alienation in labor to psychological, cultural, and moral manifestations of alienation, thereby expanding the scope of Marxism's application in explaining modern social problems.

Continuing this line of research, Lawrence Wilde (2000), in his article *"The Ethical Marxism of Erich Fromm"* (Wildere, Lawrence, 2000), focused on clarifying the concept of "social character" *as* an intermediary category connecting economic conditions and the spiritual life of human beings. According to Wilde, Erich Fromm's outstanding contribution lies in adding a moral and psychological dimension to traditional Marxist theory, thereby highlighting the social nature of the process of human liberation.

From a humanist perspective, Kevin B. Anderson (2015), in his study "*Erich Fromm, Marx, and Humanism*" (Kevin B. Anderson. 2015), assesses Erich Fromm as one of the important thinkers who contributed to the restoration and development of humanistic content in Marx's legacy. Anderson argues that the combination of Marx and Freud in Erich Fromm's thought has created a theoretical framework capable of explaining characteristic phenomena of contemporary society such as consumerism, identity crisis, and the decline of community relations.

Kieran Durkin (2020), in his study *Erich Fromm's Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism, and the Future* (Durkin, Kieran. 2020), further deepens the content of human liberation in Erich Fromm's philosophy through the concept of "hope". According to Durkin, Erich Fromm not only criticizes mechanisms of alienation but also proposes a model of social transformation based on humanistic values such as love, creativity, responsibility, and the active participation of individuals in community life.

Most recently, Michael J. Thompson (2024), in his article *"The Ontological Structure of Erich Fromm's Critical Humanism"* (Thompson, M. J. 2024), approached Erich Fromm's thought from an ontological perspective. The author argues that the foundation of human liberation in Erich Fromm's philosophy lies in two fundamental capacities: relatedness *and* positionality. This approach contributes to clarifying the philosophical basis of critical humanism, while affirming the possibility of transcending alienation as an inherent attribute of human existence.

Overall, studies both domestically and internationally have shed light on many important aspects of Erich Fromm's thought, such as alienation, liberty, love, social character, hope, and humanism. However, most works focus on individual aspects or examine Erich Fromm within the broader context of the Frankfurt School. A systematic study of Erich Fromm's process of reconstructing Marx's theory of human liberation, particularly the shift from a critique of economic alienation to a comprehensive critique of alienation across psychological, cultural, and ethical dimensions, has not received adequate attention.

Based on that gap, the article defends the argument that Erich Fromm did not simply inherit or expand Marx's alienation theory, but rather constructed a new theoretical model of human liberation. In this model, alienation is no longer understood primarily as the loss of control over labor and the products of labor, but as the loss of the capacity to realize human nature in all aspects of psychological, cultural, and social life. From this, Erich Fromm shifted the focus of liberation theory from transforming production

relations to simultaneously reconstructing both the social structure and the personality structure of modern man.

3. Research approach and methods

Approach:

To contribute to solving the research problem, this paper employs an interdisciplinary approach, particularly from the perspectives of philosophy, social psychology, sociology, and the humanities, to analyze Erich Fromm's process of inheriting, interpreting, and restructuring Karl Marx's theory of alienation in a humanistic and psychological way. Through this approach, the paper clarifies the shift from viewing alienation primarily as a socio-economic phenomenon to recognizing alienation as a comprehensive state of human existence in modern society.

Furthermore, the article employs a logical and historical approach to clarify the context in which Karl Marx's ideas on human alienation and liberation were formed in the 19th century, while analyzing Erich Fromm's reception, development, and expansion of these arguments within the context of modern capitalist society in the 20th century. This approach allows for the identification of the continuity, innovation, and unique contributions of Erich Fromm to humanistic Marxism.

Furthermore, the article approaches the issue from a systems-structural perspective, examining the relationship between economic, social, cultural, and psychological factors in the formation of human alienation. This demonstrates that human liberation, according to Erich Fromm's concept, is not only liberation from economic oppression but also liberation from psychological constraints, consciousness, and the mechanisms of alienation in modern social life.

Furthermore, the article employs a practical approach to clarify the contemporary value and significance of Erich Fromm's thought in explaining current human issues such as consumerism, social isolation, the crisis of individual identity, and the need for holistic human development. This contributes to affirming the theoretical and practical significance of studying human liberation in the context of contemporary society.

Research methodology:

This study is built on a combination of Karl Marx's historical materialism and Erich Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis to clarify the process of restructuring the concept of alienation from the socio-economic plane to the psycho-existential plane. The analytical framework integrates Marx's theory of alienated labor with Erich Fromm's concept of *social character*, thereby identifying alienation not only as a phenomenon associated with capitalist production relations but also as a state of existence reflecting a person's alienation from themselves, from others, and from social life.

Methodologically, the study employs an immanent critique approach *combined* with textual hermeneutics *through* close reading *of* foundational texts by Marx and Erich Fromm, particularly *

*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844**, * Escape from Freedom *, *Man for Himself**, and *The Sane Society *. This approach is used to clarify the continuity and discontinuities in Erich Fromm's assimilation and modification of Marx's alienation theory, and to critically assess the extent to which the emphasis on psychological mechanisms may alter the explanatory role of socio-economic conditions in alienation theory.

Based on the above theoretical framework, this article focuses on verifying the argument that Erich Fromm's most important contribution lies not in adding psychological elements to Marx's alienation theory, but in restructuring the concept of alienation and the theory of human liberation in a more comprehensive way, simultaneously connecting the economic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of human existence.

4. Research content

The problem of alienation is often considered one of the central themes of modern philosophy. While in classical German philosophy, alienation was primarily explained on the spiritual and cognitive levels, in Marxist philosophy it is placed within the specific socio-economic conditions of capitalist society. However, the development of industrial society in the 20th century raises the question of whether attributing alienation to production relations is still sufficient to explain new manifestations of loneliness, identity crisis, consumerism, or dependence on the technocratic apparatus. It is in this context that Erich Fromm sought to restructure the concept of alienation by combining humanistic Marxism and social psychoanalysis.

Erich Fromm's most significant contribution lies not in rejecting Marx's approach, but in expanding the scope of alienation from the economic sphere to psychological, cultural, and existential life. However, this expansion also raises a crucial theoretical question: is alienation primarily a consequence of social structures or a psychological state of the subject? Answering this question is key to assessing the value and limitations of Erich Fromm's thought on human liberation.

4.1. From Economic Alienation to Total Alienation: Erich Fromm's Reconstruction of the Concept of Alienation

** Alienation: From economic issues to existential problems*

Alienation is a common phenomenon in many stages of social development up to the present day. The origins of the idea of alienation can be found in many philosophers: such as Rousseau, Hegel, and Feuerbach. According to Rousseau, alienation is the transformation of social relations and social phenomena into something opposite to their natural essence. According to Hegel, alienation is the process by which the absolute spirit separates itself into something else (nature, man, society), and then, through dialectics, returns to self-awareness and achieves absolute freedom (See: Minh, NT translation; Son, BVN editing). While Hegel speaks of the alienation of the absolute spirit, Feuerbach speaks of the

alienation of human nature into God. He argues: “The consciousness of God is the self-consciousness of man; the knowledge of God is the self-knowledge of man” (Feuerbach, L. 19 57, p. 12). According to Karl Marx, alienation is the state in which a person is separated from their essence through the process of labor and the products of labor. The essence of alienated labor is that the process and products of labor, instead of serving and developing humanity, are transformed into opposing forces, enslaving and dominating humanity (See: Marx, K. Engels, F. 1995, pp. 129–156). Workers only act as human beings when performing biological functions such as eating, sleeping, and procreation; but when working, that is, when performing the noble function of humanity, they are merely like animals. An alienated person is one who has lost themselves in labor, that is, in the characteristic and essential activity of humanity.

From the above perspectives, it can be understood that *alienation is a general concept referring to the process by which something (such as the product of labor, social relations, or even human nature itself) is transformed, becoming alien and independent from its original subject, even turning back to dominate or control that subject. Essentially, it is a distortion, a loss of what is inherent in humans and society, transforming them into something alien and opposed to themselves.*

The point to emphasize is not merely the difference between conceptions, but the shift in the object of analysis of the concept of alienation across different periods. While Hegel interpreted alienation as a process of mental movement, and Feuerbach viewed it as the alienation of human nature into religion, Marx realized this concept by placing it within specific relations of production. From that perspective, alienation is no longer a matter of cognition but a social phenomenon with a definite material basis.

However, Marx's explanation also leaves a certain gap. If private ownership is the primary cause of alienation, how can we explain the loneliness, the crisis of meaning in life, and the feelings of insecurity that persist even in societies with high living standards? This very question becomes the starting point for Erich Fromm's reinterpretation.

** Erich Fromm and the Reconstruction of the Concept of Alienation*

Most studies of Erich Fromm argue that his major contribution lies in extending Marx's concept of alienation from the economic sphere to the psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of human life. However, this interpretation does not fully capture the theoretical significance of his thought. Erich From this perspective, Erich Fromm did not merely broaden the scope of alienation; he fundamentally reconstructed the theoretical foundation of the concept itself.

While Marx regarded alienation primarily as a consequence of alienated labor and capitalist relations of production, Erich Fromm argued that such an approach was insufficient to explain characteristic phenomena of modern society, such as loneliness, anxiety, identity crises, consumerism, and the loss of meaning in life. According to him, alienation is not confined to the sphere of production but permeates the entire psychological and spiritual life of human beings.

The fundamental difference is that Marx focused on the alienation of labor, whereas Erich Fromm focused on the alienation of the subject. For Erich Fromm, the central problem is not merely the loss of control over labor and its products, but the loss of the capacity to live as a free, creative, and meaningful human being. Alienation, therefore, becomes a condition in which individuals grow increasingly estranged from themselves, from others, and from the products of their own activity.

In this sense, the forms of alienation identified by Erich Fromm should not be viewed as separate phenomena but as interconnected manifestations of a single process: the loss of humanity's capacity to realize its authentic human potential under modern social conditions. Consequently, Erich Fromm's most important contribution was not the addition of new forms of alienation but the transformation of alienation theory from a critique of alienated labor into a comprehensive critique of alienated human existence.

Nevertheless, this reconstruction also raises an important theoretical issue. By shifting the explanatory focus from economic structures to personality structures, Erich Fromm risks psychologizing a concept that is fundamentally historical and social in nature. This tension reveals both the originality and the limitation of his attempt to develop Marx's theory of alienation.

On this basis, five fundamental forms of alienation can be identified in Erich Fromm's thought, illustrating how he transformed alienation from an economic category into a broader theory of alienated human existence in modern society.

First, Alienation from the Self

For Erich Fromm, the deepest form of alienation is not the separation of workers from the products of their labor but the estrangement of human beings from themselves. Whereas Marx regarded alienated labor as the foundation of all other forms of alienation, Fromm argued that the root of the modern crisis lies in the loss of the capacity to exist as a free and creative subject. He writes: “He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person” (Fromm, 1955, pp. 120–121).

Erich From this perspective, alienation is not merely the loss of control over external conditions but also the loss of mastery over one's own inner life. This marks the transition from the alienation of labor to the alienation of the human subject in Erich Fromm's theory.

Second, Alienation in Social Relationships

According to Erich Fromm, modern society is increasingly dominated by market logic, transforming human relationships into relationships of exchange and utility rather than genuine human connection. He observes: “Everybody is to everyone else a commodity, always to be treated with a certain friendliness, because even if he is not of use now, he may be later. There is not much love or hate to be found in

human relations of our day. There is, rather, a superficial friendliness, and a more than superficial fairness, but behind that surface is distance and indifference" (Fromm, 1955, p. 139).

In *To Have or To Be?*, Fromm further describes this phenomenon through the concept of the "marketing character": "The 'marketing character' experiences himself as a commodity... His value is determined not by his human qualities, but by his success on the competitive market with its ever-changing conditions" (Fromm, 1976, p. 84). Unlike Marx, Erich Fromm did not limit commodification to the sphere of production but interpreted it as a cultural mechanism shaping social life as a whole.

Third, Alienation in Labor

Erich Fromm directly inherited Marx's view that alienated labor is a significant manifestation of humanity's loss of its essential nature. However, he placed particular emphasis on its psychological consequences. He writes: "Work has become alienated from the working person" (Fromm, 1955, p. 266).

For Erich Fromm, what workers lose is not only the product of their labor but also the ability to experience labor as a creative and self-realizing activity. At this point, the question of alienation shifts from ownership to meaning. The problem is not merely who possesses the product but whether labor continues to serve as an expression of human freedom and creativity.

Fourth, Alienation from Nature

One of Erich Fromm's distinctive contributions was extending the concept of alienation to the relationship between human beings and nature. He argued that modern civilization promotes an attitude of domination over nature rather than an awareness of humanity's unity with the natural world. As he states: "Man is part of nature, subject to its physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature" (Fromm, 1955, p. 23). Erich From this perspective, ecological crises are not merely environmental problems but manifestations of a deeper form of alienation within human existence itself.

Fifth, Alienation from Human Creations

Erich Fromm also argued that modern alienation appears when human creations gradually become forces that dominate their creators. He writes: "I alienate myself from my own human experience and project it into an object outside myself. Then I try to get in touch with myself by submitting to this object. This is true of idolatry and alienation; they are essentially one and the same phenomenon" (*Erich Fromm Glossary*, p. 90).

He further emphasizes: "Language, logic, art, rituals, words themselves, become idols and become a temptation. We confuse life with things, experience with artifacts" (*Erich Fromm Glossary*, p. 45). Here, Fromm extends critique beyond the domination of capital to the domination of the entire artificial world created by human beings.

Taken together, these five forms of alienation reflect a central proposition in Erich Fromm's thought: alienation is not merely the loss of control over labor but the loss of the capacity to live as a free and creative subject. His most significant contribution, therefore, lies not in identifying new forms of alienation but in shifting the focus of alienation theory from alienated labor to the alienated subject. This theoretical shift provided the foundation for his subsequent reconstruction of the theory of human liberation.

4.2. Restructuring the theory of human liberation: from transforming production relations to rebuilding social personality.

While Marx sought the possibility of liberating humanity through the transformation of production relations and the elimination of economic conditions that give rise to alienated labor, Erich Fromm shifted the focus to the reconstruction of humanity as a free and self-assertive subject. This difference reflects two distinct approaches to the origins of alienation. While Marx emphasized the objective conditions of social life, Erich Fromm argued that modern alienation cannot be fully explained without considering the psychological and cultural mechanisms shaping human consciousness.

Based on this approach, Erich Fromm argued that human liberation is not merely a matter of changing economic institutions or redistributing social wealth. According to him, a society may achieve a higher level of material development, but its people may still continue to live in a state of loneliness, powerlessness, and disorientation. This shows that true liberation must occur simultaneously on two levels: liberation from social conditions that create alienation and liberation from psychological mechanisms that cause people to lose their self-mastery. Therefore, at the heart of Erich Fromm's liberation project is the concept *of* positive *freedom* .

Unlike negative freedom, which is understood merely as liberation from external constraints, positive freedom, as seen by Erich Fromm, is the ability of individuals to proactively realize their inherent capacities through creativity, love, meaningful work, and responsible participation in social life. In this sense, liberation is not only the process of "escaping" oppression but also the process of "becoming" a complete human being. This is the fundamental difference between Erich Fromm and many traditional political approaches that equate liberation with institutional change.

However, this shift in focus from social structure to spiritual life also raises a noteworthy theoretical problem. If alienation originates from objective economic, political, and cultural conditions, is the transformation of individual consciousness capable of creating true liberation? In other words, Erich Fromm convincingly demonstrated the psychological depth of alienation, but failed to fully explain the social mechanisms that could ensure the formation of the free individuals he envisioned. This is a point that needs to be considered when evaluating the value and limitations of Erich Fromm's theory of human liberation.

First, humanity needs to choose a humane ideal for social development.

For Erich Fromm, active freedom cannot be formed without a value system guiding one's actions. He argued that all genuine ideals stem from the need for human development and self-improvement. “ They express a yearning for something that has not yet been achieved but remains worthy of aspiration insofar as it promotes human flourishing and individual well-being” (Fromm, E. (2006). p. 293). Therefore, the ideal of a humanistic society not only plays a role in guiding consciousness but also serves as a condition for humans to overcome a state of existence dominated by utilitarianism and consumerism.

It is noteworthy that Erich Fromm did not consider all ideals to be equally valuable. He distinguished between ideals that promote human development and those that lead to submission or self-alienation. From this perspective, human liberation is primarily a process of liberation from value systems that cause people to lose themselves. However, Erich Fromm's argument also raises the question: by what criteria can we determine what constitutes a "correct" ideal in societies with pluralistic values? This is a point that Erich Fromm has not answered convincingly.

Secondly, building a people-centered society.

Unlike development models that place economic growth in the absolute priority, Erich Fromm argued that the ultimate goal of social life should be the holistic development of the human being. According to him, “Only when human beings master society and place the economic machinery under the goals of happiness, and only when actively participating in the social process, can human beings overcome what has driven them into despair – loneliness and helplessness” (Fromm, E. (2006). p. 304).

Here, Erich Fromm's crucial contribution is demonstrating that alienation cannot be overcome solely by economic growth. A wealthier society does not necessarily produce freer individuals. However, the "humanistic socialism" model he proposed is presented primarily in terms of moral norms. Compared to Marx, Erich Fromm analyzes less the specific social forces capable of realizing such transformation. Consequently, his emancipation project is often considered rich in humanistic values but lacking in practical basis and political feasibility.

Thirdly, create conditions to awaken and develop the potential and true nature of human beings.

While the two aforementioned aspects point to the social conditions of liberation, for Erich Fromm, the decisive condition still lies in the human capacity to realize their inherent potential. He argued that human nature is not an immutable entity but a continuous process of self-perfection. Therefore, human liberation is primarily the liberation of each individual's creative capacity, self-determination, and authentic capacity for life.

"spontaneous *activity* " is the foundation of positive freedom, reflecting the ability to act stemming from the genuine needs, capabilities, and values of the individual, rather than from the imposition of social institutions. According to Erich Fromm, it is the spontaneous activity of a complete and integrated personality that is the condition for human self-realization and the attainment of true freedom. He

asserts that: “Positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality” (Fromm, E. (2006). p. 285).

From this perspective, Erich Fromm strongly criticizes the tendency to homogenize and standardize human beings in modern industrial society. According to him, under the influence of the market, mass media, and the technocratic administrative apparatus, individuals are increasingly transformed into adaptive entities rather than creative subjects. Therefore, he describes modern man as a “machine,” no longer capable of living spontaneously and authentically: “…as a machine, he cannot experience life in the sense of voluntary action which he sees as the living expression of all vibrations and excitement” (Fromm, E. (2006). p. 281).

However, Erich Fromm argues that the capacity for authentic living has never completely disappeared. It still exists in the naturalness of childhood, in the creative activity of artists, and in individuals who have not been completely dominated by social norms. He writes: “ Nothing is more convincing than spontaneity, whether it is found in a child, an artist, or in those persons who, for one reason or another, have not been standardized according to age and occupation” (Fromm, E. (2006). p. 287). According to him, this capacity for spontaneous action is the source of genuine joy and happiness: “We can see that in certain moments, spontaneity is also the moment that brings us true happiness” (Fromm, E. (2006). p. 287).

Here, Erich Fromm's contribution is to show that alienation occurs not only in the economic sphere but also manifests in the decline of people's capacity for authentic living. However, this argument also reveals a certain limitation. While emphasizing individual awareness and self-awareness, Erich Fromm has not fully shown how economic conditions and social power are shaping that very capacity for self-awareness. Therefore, his emancipation project is sometimes seen as a moral program rather than a comprehensive theory of social transformation.

Another central tenet in Erich Fromm's thought is the harmony between the individual and the community. Unlike extreme individualistic views, Erich Fromm believed that human beings can only fully develop within humane social relationships. Therefore, he did not view liberation as separation from the community, but rather as the ability to establish relationships based on mutual respect and recognition. This is clearly demonstrated in his conception of love. According to Erich Fromm, love is not possessiveness but a form of existence that allows a person to simultaneously affirm themselves and connect with others: “not the kind of love that takes possession of others, but genuine love, in harmony with the other on the basis of not losing one's individual self” (Fromm, E. (2006), p. 288).

From a contemporary sociological perspective, this argument holds considerable value in explaining the phenomenon of loneliness and the breakdown of social relationships in the context of consumerism and the rise of digital media. However, like many of Erich Fromm's other arguments, love is seen primarily as a solution on a moral and psychological level, while the social conditions that give rise to human isolation are not fully explained by him.

Similarly, Erich Fromm paid particular attention to education as a tool for de-alienation. He criticized educational models that focused on obedience and the reproduction of pre-existing social patterns. According to him, such educational methods cause individuals to lose their critical thinking and independent thought abilities, thus increasing alienation. He warned that education could cause people to “give up resistance” (Fromm, E. (2006), p. 267) and become “mechanical responders who can be switched on and off like an electric switch” (Fromm, E. (2006), p. 268).

Therefore, Erich Fromm advocated for a humanistic education that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and a sense of social responsibility in individuals. This concept is particularly significant in the context of modern education, where economic and career goals increasingly overshadow human development. However, Erich Fromm did not clearly identify the institutional mechanisms that could guarantee the existence of such an education in a society heavily influenced by the market and political power.

Besides education, Erich Fromm also emphasized the role of personal responsibility in the process of liberation. According to him, freedom only truly has meaning when it is linked to responsibility towards oneself, towards others, and towards society. This requires individuals to be capable of confronting loneliness, overcoming dependence, and daring to take responsibility for their choices. Creative work is considered by Erich Fromm as an important method for people to overcome isolation and affirm their self-worth. Labor is not only an economic activity but also a process of realizing human potential.

Overall, Erich Fromm's theory of liberation significantly expanded the scope of the concept of human emancipation. While Marx focused on the objective conditions of social life, Erich Fromm highlighted the subjective, psychological, and moral dimensions of the liberation process. He pointed out that even if forms of economic oppression are overcome, people can continue to live in a state of alienation if they do not resolve issues of identity, meaning, love, and freedom.

However, this is also the fundamental limitation of the liberation project he proposed. By focusing on the transformation of individual consciousness, Erich Fromm failed to clarify the real social mechanisms capable of creating the free individuals he envisioned. While Marx risked reducing humanity to mere products of production relations, Erich Fromm risked reducing liberation to a matter of individual consciousness and morality. Therefore, the most important value of his thought lies not in replacing Marx's liberation theory, but in adding a new analytical dimension. If Marx helped identify the socio-economic causes of alienation, Erich Fromm helped explain the psychological, cultural, and existential consequences of that process. It is the combination of these two approaches that can create a more comprehensive theoretical framework for studying the problem of alienation and human liberation in modern society.

4.3. Did Erich Fromm truly create a new model for human liberation?

One of the most important debates surrounding Erich Fromm's thought is whether he truly constructed a new theoretical model of human liberation or merely extended humanistic Marxism to the field of

psychology. This question is not only about understanding Erich Fromm himself, but also about the very potential for the development of liberation theory in the context of modern society. If Erich Fromm's arguments are merely a psychological addition to Marx's alienation theory, then his position essentially remains within the orbit of traditional humanistic Marxism. Conversely, if Erich Fromm changed the understanding of the origins of alienation, the subject of liberation, and the conditions of human freedom, then he can be seen as the person who fundamentally restructured the foundations of liberation theory.

From this perspective, the common interpretation that Erich Fromm merely "expanded" Marx's theory of alienation is incomplete. In fact, what Erich Fromm did was not just broaden the scope of his research, but shift the focus of the entire issue of human liberation. In Marxist philosophy, alienation is primarily understood as a phenomenon originating from the material conditions of social life (*Marx & Engels, MECW vol. 3*). Alienated labor, private ownership, and capitalist relations of production form objective mechanisms that deprive people of control over their own lives. Therefore, human liberation is fundamentally linked to transforming the social structure that produced this alienation.

Erich Fromm did not deny this argument, but in works such as *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *The Sane Society* (1955), he argued that it was insufficient to explain all the characteristic forms of alienation in modern society. If alienation is merely a consequence of economic exploitation, why do loneliness, anxiety, identity crises, and a sense of meaninglessness persist even in societies with high levels of material development? If changing production relations is the decisive condition for liberation, why can people continue to live in a state of powerlessness and dependence even when traditional forms of economic oppression have declined? These questions were the starting point for Erich Fromm's restructuring of theory.

Unlike Marx, Erich Fromm argued that alienation lies not only in the relationship between man and labor or the products of labor, but also in the relationship between man and himself. In his approach, alienation manifests primarily as the loss of the capacity for authentic living, the capacity for love, the capacity for creativity, and the ability to establish meaningful relationships with others. This leads to an important theoretical consequence: if the origin of alienation lies not only in the social structure but also deeply ingrained in the structure of personality, then human liberation cannot be understood solely as a process of economic and political transformation. It must simultaneously be a process of reconstructing the human subject himself.

It is at this point that Erich Fromm made a fundamental difference from Marx. While Marx focused on liberating labor from the control of capital, Erich Fromm focused on liberating the capacity to realize human nature. Active freedom, love, responsibility, creativity, humanistic education, and "social character" *are* not merely supplementary categories to existing liberation theories. They form a new theoretical logic in which liberation is determined by the capacity to live as a free subject rather than solely by the individual's position in production relations.

However, this very innovation also gives rise to a theoretical paradox. If Marx faced the risk of over-socializing the problem of alienation by reducing it to production relations, Erich Fromm faced the risk of "psycho-izing" alienation by placing the focus of liberation on conscious life and personality. Similar to the criticism that Herbert Marcuse (*1898–1979)* leveled against Erich Fromm, overemphasizing individual spiritual and moral values easily strips liberation theory of its power to radically negate existing economic and power structures. While Marx was criticized for downplaying the autonomy of the psychological subject, Erich Fromm was criticized by mainstream Marxists for underestimating the coercive nature of objective economic structures.

This raises a crucial question: can the transformation of individual consciousness and personality become a solid foundation for liberation when the social conditions that breed alienation continue to exist? This is a point where Erich Fromm has not offered a truly convincing answer. His proposed model of "humanistic socialism" is built primarily on moral premises and humanistic norms rather than on an analysis of the specific social forces capable of realizing such transformation. Therefore, his theory is often strong in its critique of modern civilization but weaker in its strategic approach to practical social change.

However, pointing out this limitation does not negate Erich Fromm's theoretical contribution. On the contrary, it is precisely this limitation that shows he broke free from the framework of economic determinism to build an independent approach to the problem of human liberation. Erich Fromm made a fundamental theoretical shift: from the liberation of labor to the liberation of human existence; from the transformation of production relations to the simultaneous reconstruction of social and personal structures; from the critique of political economy to the critique of all forms of alienation in modern life. This shift creates the relative independence of the model of liberation that Erich Fromm proposed and is his most important theoretical contribution to the development of humanistic Marxism in the 20th century.

4.4. From Expansion to Reconstruction: A New Theoretical Architecture of Human Liberation

A central point of contention in Frommian scholarship is whether Erich Fromm merely expanded Marx’s doctrine of alienation or genuinely constructed a new theoretical paradigm of human liberation. Based on the foregoing analysis, this study argues that describing Erich Fromm simply as an thinker who extended the scope of alienation from the economic realm to psychological and cultural spheres is insufficient. Crucially, Erich Fromm fundamentally reconfigured the theoretical architecture of liberation itself.

In the Marxian framework, the genesis of alienation lies in capitalist relations of production, particularly alienated labor and private property. Consequently, human emancipation is fundamentally conceptualized as the transformation of the objective socio-economic conditions that produce alienation. The architectural logic of Marxian liberation thus moves through a clear sequence: from the

critique of relations of production to social revolution, ultimately achieving human liberation from economic domination.

While not repudiating this materialist foundation, Erich Fromm contended that this framework remains inadequate for explaining alienation in modern industrial and consumer societies. According to Fromm, even under conditions of material abundance, individuals continue to suffer from social isolation, existential disorientation, loss of identity, and pervasive meaninglessness. This demonstrates that the roots of alienation extend beyond objective economic structures into the very structure of human personality formed under specific social conditions.

Accordingly, Erich Fromm executed a foundational shift in liberation theory. Whereas Marx prioritized liberating human beings from objective mechanisms of economic coercion, Erich Fromm focused on liberating the intrinsic human capacities of the subject. In the Frommian paradigm, freedom is not merely the passive byproduct of institutional transformation; it is the active accomplishment of cultivating humanistic qualities, including love, creativity, personal responsibility, critical reflection, and authentic living.

In this sense, the divergence between Marx and Erich Fromm lies not merely in their proposed remedies, but in the underlying architecture of their theories. If the Marxian paradigm can be schematized as

$$\begin{aligned}&\text{Alienated Relations of Production} \longrightarrow \text{Alienated Labor} \longrightarrow \text{Social Struggle}\\ &\qquad\qquad \longrightarrow \text{Human Liberation}\end{aligned}$$

then the Frommian model operates according to a distinct theoretical logic:

$$\begin{aligned}&\text{AlienatedSocialCharacterStructures} \longrightarrow \text{TotalHumanAlienation}\\ &\longrightarrow \text{DevelopmentofPositiveFreedomProductiveCharacter}\\ &\longrightarrow \text{HumanLiberation}\end{aligned}$$

This structural evolution demonstrates that Erich Fromm expanded the subject of liberation from the working class (*proletariat*) to the total human being across economic, cultural, psychological, and social dimensions. Simultaneously, he shifted the analytical focus from altering external conditions to restoring the subject's internal capacities.

However, this theoretical innovation also accounts for the fundamental limitation of Fromm’s thought. By overemphasizing consciousness and personality transformation, Erich Fromm failed to fully elaborate the concrete institutional mechanisms capable of realizing the structural conditions for free individuality. While Marx risked overemphasizing the determinative power of economic structures, Erich Fromm leaned toward over-idealizing the psychological and ethical capacities of the subject. Consequently, Erich Fromm's model of liberation serves both as a crucial complement to Marx and as a catalyst for ongoing debates regarding the dialectic between social transformation and personal emancipation.

Nevertheless, Erich Fromm inaugurated a pivotal theoretical shift within humanistic Marxism. Rather than reducing liberation to the eradication of the economic premises of alienation, he reformulated emancipation as the holistic restoration of human subjecthood across all spheres of existence. This movement from the *liberation of labor* to the *liberation of human existence* constitutes Erich Fromm's most distinctive theoretical contribution to twentieth-century emancipation theory.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Erich Fromm's ideas on alienation and human liberation made a significant contribution to the development of humanistic Marxism by expanding the scope of alienation research from the economic sphere to the psychological, cultural, and existential dimensions of human life. Through emphasizing the role of active freedom, love, creative labor, and humanistic education, Erich Fromm provided a profoundly humanistic approach to the issue of human liberation in modern society.

However, by focusing on the transformation of consciousness and spiritual life, his theory tends to downplay the role of socio-economic conditions and structural contradictions that are fundamental to Marx's doctrine. Therefore, while Erich Fromm's proposed solutions are significant for addressing alienation at the individual and cultural levels, they do not fully reveal the real mechanisms for resolving the deep-seated social causes of alienation. Despite its limitations, Erich Fromm's ideas remain an important contribution to contemporary human studies, particularly in identifying new forms of alienation emerging in consumer societies and the digital age.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate:

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