

Business Services Industry

0 Comments

Erich Fromm and Critical Criminology: Beyond the punitive society

Capital & Class, Spring 2002 by Hall, Steve

K Anderson and R Quinney Erich Fromm and Critical Criminology: Beyond the punitive society. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000, pp. 176 ISBN 0-252-02514-8 \$34.95 hardback ISBN 0-252-06380-0 \$15.95 paperback

If the genuine socialist alternative remains in the depths of unfashionability for too long, we might just have to get accustomed to the sight of criminology's radical liberal wing rummaging through its old drawers in search of some life-- sustaining inspiration that might help to hold postmodern pessimism at bay. It might be with such a purpose in mind that Richard Quinney and Kevin Anderson have selected a group of North American criminologists to dig out and dust down the bewilderingly eclectic ideas of the late Erich Fromm, and published the results recently in an edited collection.

In a very clear and concise introductory chapter, written by his final psychoanalytical assistant and current literary executor Rainer Funk, we are guided through Fromm's formative influences, such as radical Jewish and primitive Christian theology, revised Freudianism, diluted humanist-Marxism, existentialism and proto-feminism, to which he remained faithful whilst making his intellectual contributions to central themes that still persist in today's radical left-liberal culture. These intellectual contributions provide the inspiration and conceptual underpinnings for the authors in this collection, who apply them to core debates in criminology's analysis of crime and criminal justice, especially those concerning freedom, authority, social power and the relationship between the State and the individual.

We learn from Funk that in 1924 Fromm, at the tender age of 24, was appointed as the Frankfurt School's resident 'expert' in psychological and social-psychological affairs, and in the same year he became a practising psychoanalyst. Although the publishing career that developed from these two bases was long and quite prolific, he wrote only three articles on crime and criminal justice in the early stages, which have been reprinted in this collection. The first was a relatively short article on a specific murder case ('Oedipus in Innsbruck', 1930), followed rapidly by two more general essays on crime and criminal justice ('The State as Educator: On the psychology of criminal justice', 1930, and 'On the Psychology of the Criminal and Punitive Society', 1931). After this initial flurry, he went extremely quiet on all things criminological.

The first article was about the role of the Oedipal process in the generation of guilt and the repressive denial of the memory of murder. Shortly after, Sigmund Freud published an article on the same murder case, which, without referring to Fromm, warned of the dangers of the inappropriate application of the universal Oedipal condition in the explanation of singular cases, which of course described Fromm's approach with rather discouraging accuracy. Unkind cynics

might suspect that the possibility of rebuff by the 'master' himself, and the subsequent failure of his other two articles to make much impact, might have been influential in taking some of the wind out of the young Fromm's sails and nudging him in other directions. Indeed, a cursory glance at the titles of his subsequent work, listed conveniently at the beginning of Quinney and Anderson's well organised bibliography, could suggest that Fromm -sensing the possibility of singed fingers-rapidly abandoned the intellectual perils of the earthy empirical and analytical world to climb to the safer and more profitable ground of the universal, abstract and spiritual, rather than grappling with political economy, practical politics and the everyday experiences of the working class under market-capitalism.

Nevertheless, despite missing a number of similar opportunities for critical reflection on Fromm's 'spiritual' approach, all the featured writers have produced clearly written pieces. Judging by the crucial criteria of coherence, thematic continuity and the absence of either digression or duplication, this collection is exemplary in its gathering and organization of material. In chapter two, Richard Quinney outlines Fromm's enduring core themes: the critique of a materialist culture that places emphasis on having rather than being; the identification of the outsider and the non-assimilable minority as the true opposition to the oppressive majority; the promotion of the messianic message of universal love and peace from the old testament; and the existentialist and proto-feminist critiques that posit deference to 'paternal' authority as an escape from the burden of making free but difficult decisions.

The other contributors explore and apply these themes in the context of criminological theory. Lynn Chancer claims that the working-class' tendency to defer to the State's sadistic punishment of lower-class criminals is influenced by the existence of sadomasochistic principles and practices as 'common defence mechanisms' in Western cultures. John Wozniak explores the well-worn theme of alienation as the reduction of the victim to an object, and Polly Radosh furnishes us with yet another authentication of the loving and nurturing principles of matriarchal culture as the true opposition to the repressive violence at the heart of patriarchy. Kevin Anderson pursues one of Fromm's primary themes, perhaps promoted more famously by Weber, Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and others; the way the State educates not to enlighten but to legitimise its authority. Criminal justice is an integral part of this ideological-discursive project, bad at reducing crime and enhancing security but good at legitimising the existing social order.