

Adorno to Fromm

The Fetish-Character of “Woman”:
On a Letter From Theodor W. Adorno to Erich Fromm
Written in 1937

by
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Nearly 66 years ago, on the 16th of November in 1937, T.W. Adorno (1903-1969) wrote a letter to the Institute of Social Research (ISR)—the center of “critical theory”—with a proposal. Adorno was living in Oxford at the time. He had drifted from partial into permanent exile as hopes faded of a brief NS-interlude. Anticipating such a development, even before the National Socialists came to power, the German institute had begun work abroad in 1932 and it received new impetus after coming to New York in 1934. In his letter Adorno outlined his ideas for a project “on the feminine character.”

From an analysis of the bourgeois woman under capitalism, Adorno proposed a deduction of her gender-specific personality traits. As examples he cited “the completely irrational behavior of women in dealing with commodities,” their pleasure in shopping, or even the gesture of the girl, who, “while giving herself to her lover is dominated by anxiety that something will happen to her dress or her hair-do”—as if the woman had already fetishized herself in such a way “that she had placed her own commodity character between herself and her own sexual activity.” This, Adorno concluded, called for a “theory of female frigidity.”

I

The critique of “stereotypical thinking” and the study of prejudice in general were revolutionized by the American research projects of the ISR during the 1940s. These were guided by the central claim of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) by Adorno et al.: “that the political, economic, and social convictions of an individual often form a broad and coherent pattern, as if bound together by a “mentality” or “spirit,” and that this pattern is an

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expression of deep-lying trends in his personality.” The disposition to think in rigid categories (“stereotyping”) and the outward projection of unconscious emotional impulses (“projectivity”) were investigated as significant variables of prejudice. That is why the misogynous stereotypes used by Adorno in his letter sound so surprising. His “undeveloped expressions” were probably articulated because what Pierre Bourdieu termed the “structural censor” weakens during intimate communication. That should not occur in academic discourse. The question then is whether Adorno made similar references in his published work.

Even apart from its content, however, Adorno’s letter from 1937 presents an interesting document with regard to the history of the ISR in exile. Living in exile in different countries, its members had to communicate through letters. All were committed to sustaining the original interdisciplinary approach of the Institute. Every topic was analyzed from the most diverse disciplinary perspectives such as philosophy, literary studies, musicology and economics with the intent of “making society with its contradictions visible” (Horkheimer). All of this was based on linking Marx’s political economy with Freud’s psychoanalysis. The Institute had a three-pronged structure: a board of directors under the direction of Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) with Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Friedrich Pollock (1894-1970) as co-directors, and Leo Löwenthal (1900-1993) as editor of the institute’s *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. The second tier of the institute’s organization included collaborators such as Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) and Franz Neumann (1900-1954) while the third tier was composed of free lancers like Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) who had emigrated to France and Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1899-1990) who went to England. Adorno, who was still living in England, represented a notable exception in this hierarchy. He still had not found his niche. Nevertheless he was convinced that he—more than the others—should be in charge of the Institute’s conceptual work and that he should occupy the most important role alongside Horkheimer.

Adorno emphasized that his proposal, though part of an internal communication, was not intended as private correspondence. A copy of his outline was sent to Horkheimer. The letter itself, however, was addressed to Fromm whom Adorno also had in mind as the researcher of the “feminine character.” This is astonishing since hardly any communication had taken

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place between these two men. Adorno considered Fromm his rival. Only during the last two decades, however, has Fromm's impact on critical theory and the Institute in general been rediscovered. Nevertheless apart from Horkheimer, Erich Fromm was "arguably the most important theoretician during the early years of the Frankfurt School" (Bronner) and certainly its most important specialist on psychoanalysis. The history of the Institute for Social Research in exile developed in two phases which can virtually be personified in Fromm and Adorno—or rather, their relationship to Horkheimer who was at its centre. Until 1937 when Fromm's "divorce" from the institute began—it would be finalized in 1939—he was the most important intellectual confidant of Horkheimer. In 1938, however, Adorno replaced him after marrying Gretel Karplus in the late summer 1937 and moving to the United States during the spring of that year.

Adorno had often tried to move from the periphery to the centre before. His jealousy can be seen in his many letters expressing his own ideas, his harsh criticism of others closer to Horkheimer, and his proposals for a number of projects that he would lead. This competitiveness, whether Adorno subconsciously knew it or not, also pervades the letter of November 1937. That he did so may be deduced from his description of the situation in terms of a classic family conflict and his numerous long letters to Horkheimer where he "for years, again and again, had pressed for his incorporation into the ISR in the manner of a girlfriend intent on marriage" (Letter of Adorno to Horkheimer, November 2, 1934).

II

Adorno's letter suggested nothing less than a paradigm shift with regard to the conception of psychology and society for the Institute of Social Research. Three points seem to me of particular interest:

1. If the relationship between men and women until then was predominantly analyzed in sociological, sociological-psychological and historical terms, from the standpoint of today, Adorno can be seen as attempting to develop a radical "Gender"—perspective on capitalism. The proposal as such—research "on the feminine character"—derived fully from the logic of works that the Institute had already undertaken. "Gender" (*avant la lettre*) had been

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researched extensively with regard to various subjects: the social-psychological significance of the mother-right theory by Fromm, but also Horkheimer and Benjamin; comparative research on the sociology of the family by Jay Rumney, who directed the London branch of the Institute for Social Research, and literary criticism with regard to the emancipation of women in the 19th century by Leo Löwenthal. These works belonged in the tradition of the classical Marxist ideas on women formulated by Engels, Paul Lafargue, the son-in-law of Marx and a founder of French socialism, and August Bebel, the long-time leader of German Social Democracy. All of them belong to an Enlightenment tradition that saw women as symbols of capitalist exploitation. In dialectical terms, according to Löwenthal, women could thus “represent a glance towards a freer development of humanity” while, on the other hand, Adorno found precisely “Woman” to be the executor of capitalism who represented capitalist exploitation in an explicitly gender-specific manner. “Bourgeois woman,” to him, served as the agency of capitalist development.

2. Sociologically-speaking Adorno also suggested a shift from the macro- to the micro-structure in the analysis of gender relations. Instead of the concept of “authority,” which had until then been central to the Institute, Adorno wanted its members to provide their analysis with new specificity by using Marx’s idea concerning the “fetish character of commodities.” This was fully in accord with Horkheimer’s conviction that Marx’s analysis of commodification is “not one that is underwritten by so many equitable motives (which would make him a pluralistic sociologist), but rather that the category of commodity is one that sheds light on society as a whole” (Letter from Horkheimer to H. Mayer, March 32, 1939). If the fetish character of commodities was universal to capitalism, in this vein, it was obviously necessary to study the effects of the commodity form on sexual exchange. Did not sexuality assume analogous fetish forms that were postulated by Marx in the fetish chapter of the *Capital* for commodification? And did not “Woman” much more than “Man” represent the commodity character of capitalism, that is regression, irrationality and infantilism?

3. In light of all this, Adorno wanted to reexamine economic terms like the “fetish character of commodities” by using psychoanalytic concepts like “frigidity” or “castration anxiety.” In the technical use of “fetish,” indeed, two specialized discourses merged: the critique of political economy inherited

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from Marx and the psychoanalysis of Freud. Both had originated in the anthropological discourse of the 18th century. Only in 1932, however, would the important Marxist thinker, Karl Korsch, publish an edition of *Capital* in which he became the first to note the relevance of Marx's concept of the fetish character of commodities. This influential edition circulated in intellectual circles to which both Brecht and Benjamin belonged. This Marxist perspective was well known to Adorno, not least due to his extensive debate with Benjamin over the "diverse definition of the commodity in high capitalism" (Letter from Benjamin to Adorno from June 10, 1935). Both were also influenced by the 1936 manuscripts of the economist Alfred Sohn-Rethel dealing with the "commodity form" whereby commodities are valued not for their use-value, or for the ways they can concretely be employed, but rather for their exchange value that expresses itself more abstractly in money. Thus, insofar as the life-world of advanced capitalism is ever more surely realized in the categories of exchange, its use value can no longer be sensuously experienced. This inversion is what Marx expressed with his metaphor of the "fetish character of the commodity."

More than half a century after the publication of the first volume of *Das Kapital* (1867) it seemed plausible to consider how the fetish character of the commodity form was defining what had previously seemed to transcend capitalism. "Woman" as a prescribed "natural being," as a "product of history that denatures her" (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1947) serves as an example. The dialectics of the artificial and the natural, of use and exchange value, consequently made it plausible for Adorno to speak about the "fetish character of women." This however could only be a starting point for analysis. First the "objective" or "material" connection between Marx's theory of the commodity and Freud's psychoanalysis would have to be proven. Adorno was of, course, fully aware of this. His letter may have been "irresponsibly improvised," as he himself put it. Nevertheless, he was convinced that he had developed "key positions on the present situation" (Adorno to Fromm, November 16, 1937). The question revolves around whether this paradigm shift is plausible in Adorno's published work where he used Marx's theory of the commodity form as his theoretical frame of reference. Space constraints prevent my elaborating this point apart from the few following points. This theory was most consistently pursued by Adorno from 1934 to 1939 and applied in three published essays on the social functions of music: "On Jazz" (1936), "The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening" (1938) and "Fragments on Wagner" (1939/40),

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which were later published as a full-length monograph, *In Search of Wagner*. All these kinds of music, according to Adorno, were characteristic of the monopoly stage of capitalism. His theory explained the commodity character of Jazz through its stereotypical form. It relentlessly conformed to the norms or rules while seemingly breaking them. According to Adorno, this reflected an unconscious and paradoxical unity of fear and fulfillment, obedience and reward, as well as a form of gaining potency by emasculation (in German: “wenn ich mich entmannen lasse, bin ich erst potent”). Social and psychological ambivalence of this sort expresses a voluntary subjection to power and domination. In this vein, the listener of jazz or popular music would be characterized—like women—by regression, infantility, and irrationality.

III

Adorno’s studies on music were also works of social theory. Horkheimer said of “On Jazz”: “With this strict analysis of an apparently trivial phenomenon, you make society with all of its contradictions visible” (Letter from Horkheimer to Adorno, October 23, 1936). In these essays dating from 1936 to 1939-40 the theory of music, capitalist society, and “gender”—*avant la lettre*—formed a unity. Adorno was, however, sharply criticized by some members of the Institute: Pollock, an economist, accused him of flirting with Marxist terminology while Adorno’s use of psychoanalytic terms reminded others of “the mundane sexual babble of New York” (Letter from Adorno to Horkheimer, June 25, 1936). In other words, what he wrote was not economic enough for the economists and not analytic enough for the psychoanalysts (Letter from H. Mayer to Horkheimer, April 23, 1939).

Adorno’s assumptions on women also seem not to have been entirely convincing to Fromm. The addressee of Adorno’s letter replied coolly and politely. One has the impression of a subtle irony when Fromm seems to emulate Adorno’s dialectical mode of expression: “I believe that women simultaneously embody the qualities of commodities in the most and least pronounced ways” (Letter from Fromm to Adorno, January 4, 1938). The Institute never followed through on Adorno’s project “on the feminine character.” Promising beginnings were made in analyzing the social

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psychology and the social history of the sexes during the phase of the close collaboration between Horkheimer and Fromm. But they were 'forgotten' in the wake of Adorno's paradigm shift. With the explicit signification of "Woman" as a subject of social research, indeed, all further research on this topic by the Institute came to a halt.

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Adorno to Fromm
November 16, 1937

Dear Mr. Fromm:

I assume that you heard from Horkheimer or Leo about my idea for a journal article—first—on the feminine character. I have not heard from New York. Neither do I know whether this is feasible at this point or whether it fits into Horkheimer's or your work schedule. It has been on my mind a lot, however, so that I can't stop help indicating briefly what I am aiming at.

The initial interest is connected with the discussions that led to the studies on authority and family [Max Horkheimer/Erich Fromm/Herbert Marcuse (eds.): *Studien über Autorität und Familie*, Paris 1936] some time ago; it is about the glue that holds current society together even while it creates increased suffering and the threat of catastrophe for its members. Back then the state, religion and family authority were considered the foundations of this bond. But for some time now it has appeared to me that these explications are no longer appropriate. In fascist ideology the state plays the main role: perhaps that is true in backward Italy but not at all in highly industrialized Germany. On the contrary: in Nazi ideology any etatism is disdained for the sake of the "people." It is clear to me that, even in England, the vast majority is indifferent towards religion. Regarding authority, much can be said: in the current phase the crucial authority is not that of the family, however, but that of fetishized collective groups. In view of these insights, I think it necessary to pose the question regarding the glue that binds society together anew. And I am inclined—to tell the most important first—to see this glue in the economic principle even as it affects both the conscious and the unconscious of the people, the development of which defines the law of movement of society, and drives it towards catastrophe: namely the commodity.

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More and more I am convinced that the actual coincidence of Marxist theory and psychoanalysis lies not only in analogies of superstructure and base with ego and id etc., but rather in the connection between the fetish character of the commodities and the fetishized character of human beings. I believe that the methodological difference between Marxism and psychoanalysis becomes can be overcome only at the moment, in which it becomes possible to show successfully how the economic fetishism turns into psychic fetishism; this is something that—in a side note—also suggests tracing back the economic fetish character beyond capitalist society potentially to prehistoric times, in which the original facts of economic fetishism found their first mental sources. But for now I will leave aside this point that is probably connected to certain tendencies of your interest in Bachofen and your going back to the Oedipus complex.

The immediate stimulus for the idea of analyzing the feminine character was a passage in Leo's [Löwenthal: "Das Individuum in der individualistischen Gesellschaft." In *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* vol. 5 (1936), 321-363] essay on Ibsen, in which he attributes a lesser degree of reification and mutilated sexuality and a lesser degree of repression to woman than to man. Immediately, Leo's remark appeared to me to be somewhat romantic, and the more I thought about it, and the more consciously I observed things, the more it seemed to me that woman today is to a certain extent dominated more by the commodity character than man and that she is—now I am varying an old and nice formula of yours—functioning as the agency of the commodity in society. Very closely related to this, it appears to me that women and their specific consumer consciousness must be regarded as the social glue to a far greater extent than, say, family authority with its ascetic sexual morality, which is already crumbling without having any significant effect on the character of the middle-class.

(As you see, I strongly oppose Reich, as I do in other pieces, who regressed to the pre-Marxist, Feuerbachian point-of-view of "wholesome sensuousness" in, what is for a talented psychologist, unbelievable naiveté and who via his detour through anarchism will undoubtedly end up with reformism. Any observation could teach him that even sexually uninhibited, or at least in the primitive sense, completely uninhibited women bear the worst features of the bourgeois character.)

One could certainly object that we find here—and also with the political-

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reactionary behaviour of the majority of women—a new attitude, which was evoked directly out of fear in a catastrophic situation. But I am inclined to doubt that. The history of the unconscious has to deal with incomparably longer periods of time; I rather suspect that Ibsen's *Hedda* and *Nora* are the illusions of a desperate individual, and that he assumed the female childishness produced by capitalist society for an immediate and natural trait. If this were the case, then from a Marxist point of view, Strindberg would be right against Ibsen in a sense in which I was not aware at all of in New York, namely insofar as he destroys Ibsen's anthropological illusion and shows that in modern society there is hardly any refuge of "nature" left. My view was reinforced by my work on my almost completed piece on Wagner. In his work, through characters like *Isolde* and *Brunnhilde*, woman has all those accents of romantic directness, and they seem to be unharmed by the evil world forces, ready to sacrifice, even ready for their death. On the other hand the characters of *Fricka* or *Gudrune* or even *Elsa* show that Wagner unconsciously perceived specifically bourgeois traits in women, and it was quite revealing to me that *Siegfried* in the *Twilight of the Gods* misses the last chance to get rid of the bewitched ring uttering: "If I wasted my property on you, my wife would be angry with me!"

I now imagine one could attempt to show that woman, due to her exclusion from production, developed special traits of the bourgeois which, though different from those of man, do not transcend bourgeois society as Leo seems to assume in the Ibsen essay—although I don't think he would insist on this anymore. Yes, I'll even go as far as to blindly assume that Horkheimer agrees with me when I claim that especially the traits with which woman seems to maintain her "directness" in reality are the stigmata that the bourgeoisie inflicted on her; traits, that conceal in a veritable context of bedazzlement what will be possible in terms of her actual nature. Put analytically it is obviously the case, that with most women, precisely due to their economic position, the formation of the ego has remained incomplete. The higher amount of infantilism they bear in comparison to men, however, does not make them more progressive in comparison to men. The task now would be, though I wouldn't dare to engage it as someone who is neither an economist nor an analyst, to identify first a couple of specifically female traits as a way of analyzing women's position in the economy; then showing exactly how these traits work for the preservation of society, and finally how these traits in particular lead into the fascist reproduction of stupidity.

These traits seem to be closely connected to the relationship between the

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consumer and the commodity that I cannot prejudge. One should analyze thoroughly the completely irrational behavior of women in dealing with commodities—shopping, clothes, hairdressing etc.—and it will probably become evident that all those moments that seem to serve sex appeal are in reality desexualized. The gesture of the girl who, while giving herself to her lover, is dominated by the anxiety that something will happen to her dress or her hair-do that might ruin dress and haircut appears crucial to me. And I assume that even the sexuality of the woman is largely desexualized, as if her fetish of herself? Her character being a commodity, for example, in the form of the often occurring sentiment of being-too-good-for-it had constantly interjected itself between the women and her own sexual activity, even in total promiscuity. Here a social theory of female frigidity could be developed. This in my view does not stem from the amount of sexual limitations to which women are subjected, or from the fact that they do not find the right partner, but that they even during coitus in their own perception continue to see themselves in terms of exchange value for a naturally non-existent purpose and that they will not be able to reach orgasm due to this displacement. Even in sexuality, use value has been smothered by exchange value. It would certainly be a dialectical point if one could show that lust could only be reconstituted through the complete implementation of exchange value; in other words: that the only remedy against the fetishizing of sexuality is sexual fetishism. Perhaps you could discuss this with Horkheimer with whom I often discussed this issue—in any case from the standpoint of male and not female psychology.

I imagine that this work will culminate in a critique of the “feminine” in the way this term is affirmatively used today society. After it has been reduced to the mechanism of its production one could show what kind of ideological function this term actually exerts and, by this, demonstrate even in psychology, the system converts its real victims into a source for its protection; thus, one could demonstrate the inescapable context of bedazzlement that dominate the contemporary processes of society. I could imagine the critique of Goethe’s “eternal feminine” as a blasphemous ending. Needless to say that this work should not be seen as an “attack” on women but as their defense against a patriarchal society that made them what they are today and that they can employ for its own ends just because they are what they are.

The most useful approach to this project is perhaps to study Freud’s remarks on female psychology i.e. the inner analytical discourse, as to whether female

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psychology is biologically characteristic of woman or conditioned through her identification with man. I tend to believe that the actual biological aspects are at least covered and distorted within bourgeois female psychology; on the other hand, I think, one can do without a substructure or a mechanism of identification, which anyway would probably be hard to prove, if one succeeds in reducing female psychology directly to the position of women in the process of production and consumption. Probably the identification with man occurs only via detours—via the commodities whose worship seems the key to me. Whether commodities are being identified in a very deep-seated way with male genitals I cannot say, but it appears to me that there are many reasons to believe so. I would also like to point out that certain phenomena in the Anglo-Saxon world like “flirting” and “having a good time,” running around from one party to the next etc. seem to elucidate what I have in mind much more effectively than how we know these things in backward Germany or in France.

I would be glad if these preliminary and undeveloped annotations were of use to you and if you could pursue this complex of issues. I am certainly convinced that they contains key insights into the current situation. Since this suggestion of mine is not a private matter I took for granted your consent and sent a copy of this to Horkheimer.

I hope to see you soon.

With kind regards

Yours,
Teddi Wiesengrund

(Typescript; Erich Fromm Papers, The New York Public Library) Translated by Kai Artur Diers