ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM: TOWARDS THE POLITICAL REALM

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> A political realm is a realm of action that can only be called
> into being by human beings, who feel themselves to be . . .
> free enough to bring about differences in the world.[1]

If we take Maxine Greene's words above to be true, then we must begin any discussion of the possibility of a political realm with the notion of freedom. The ability to create a political realm is dependent upon one's state of freedom. Greene is not the only scholar within critical pedagogy to recognize the significance of freedom. Paulo Freire and bell hooks write that education itself is the practice of freedom.[2] This idea of education as the practice of freedom will be returned to in the second half of the paper, but first we must have a clear understanding of the meaning of freedom.

It is here that I believe the German psychoanalyst and sociologist Erich Fromm can be most useful. Associated with the Frankfurt School for Social Research from the 1930s through the 1960s, Fromm's work focused on bringing together aspects of Freudian theory with Marxist critique. According to Neil McLaughlin, "Fromm was preoccupied with the human roots of destructiveness . . . He stressed the centrality of the human need for community and the emotional dynamics of mass political violence."[3] Many within the intellectual circles of psychoanalysis, sociology, and critical theory considered Fromm to be an important and innovative thinker, yet in the late 1960s his thinking became increasingly unfashionable, he lost favor in many of those same intellectual circles, and today he has become what some would term a "forgotten intellectual."[4] While a forgotten intellectual within his own fields, he is virtually unknown in education, much to our own detriment. Fromm's writings reveal a concern with themes similar to those found in the work of scholars, such as Greene and Freire, yet Fromm's analysis is unique. While looking at notions of freedom, liberation, humanization, and the role of the self, he offers an important analysis not found in critical pedagogy. In *Escape from*

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[1] Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 89.

[2] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) .

[3] Neil McLaughlin, "Nazism, Nationalism, and the Sociology of Emotions: Escape from Freedom Revisited," *Sociological Theory* 14, no. 3 (1996): 242.

[4] Neil McLaughlin, "How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual: Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm," *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 2 (1998): 214.

Freedom, considered one of his most important works, Fromm takes on the societal notions surrounding the understanding of freedom, providing a powerful and insightful discussion for those of us engaged in education today. This paper will use *Escape from Freedom* to consider the following questions: (1) What is freedom? (2) What is the relevance of Fromm's analysis for education? (3) How can Fromm's notion of freedom contribute to the creation of a space such as Greene's political realm?

WHAT IS FREEDOM?

Much like other critical theorists, Fromm questions the nature and reality of our freedom, problematizing the idea of a given freedom. He challenges notions of what it means to be free and takes to task the assumption that our definitions of these concepts are always good or beneficial. However, unlike the majority of other critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, Fromm's interest lies in the psychological and the emotional states of modern man and how these have manifested in a state of "negative freedom." In doing this, he looks at how humanity relates to the world and how we come together as a society. "Negative freedom" can be understood in terms of an idea of freedom where human beings in an isolated, powerless, and alienated state, free from traditional authorities, submit to other authorities that will relieve them of the overwhelming anxiety of aloneness and burden of freedom.[5] Through his conceptualization of negative freedom, Fromm offers a compelling explanation for why we haven't yet been able to create something like Greene's political realm. Yet, he is not without hope. Once we understand negative freedom, we can begin to create the space for positive freedom, which he defines as the freedom to fully realize one's self through the spontaneous act of love that allows one to authentically unite with others.[6] This is where Greene's political realm may become a possibility.

As Fromm analyzes freedom, he is critiquing both how we define humanity's states of being and the terminology we use to describe our existence or the ways in which we are in the world. In doing this, Fromm unveils the contradictory nature of our existence, showing that the reality in which we live is far from free. Through his analysis, he brings to light the oppressive mechanisms of what is commonly considered freedom and looks at what it is that makes modern men and women want to give up their freedom. He uses the contradictions to reveal new spaces for considering what it means to be authentically free.

An essential piece of Fromm's conceptualization of freedom begins with his understanding of humanity's primary motives and needs. For Fromm, our primary motive is self-preservation—"This need for self-preservation is

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[5] Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941; repr., New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1994), 268.

[6] Ibid., 259–260 and 268.

that part of human nature which needs satisfaction under all circumstances and therefore forms the primary motive of human behavior."[7] Secondary to our need for self-preservation, but just as compelling, is our drive to avoid isolation. He argues that we have a basic need to be related to the world outside of ourselves. This relatedness does not refer just to a physical nature, but to a sense of "communion" or "belonging."[8] Ultimately, our compulsion to avoid this isolation reveals our deep need for belonging and significance. As Fromm writes, "Unless he belonged somewhere, unless his life had some meaning and direction, he would feel like a particle of dust and be overcome by his individual insignificance. He would not be able to relate himself to any system which would give meaning and direction to his life, he would be filled with doubt, and this doubt eventually would paralyze his ability to act—that is, to live."[9]

A significant part of this analysis involves looking at how these motives and needs manifest themselves in the historically changing roles and identities of men and women. Fromm believes that at one point humanity occupied a state of oneness with nature, but as time passed, individuals emerged from these ties through the process of individuation. He sees this connection echoed in the life history of every individual.[10] While I am not convinced by his premise of this primordial connectedness with nature, and feel he idealizes the historical reality of the medieval or feudal periods, I think his broader discussion around the process of individuation and its ramifications important and persuasive. This individuation places humanity in a state of crisis—while we are now aware of ourselves as individuals, we are also cognizant of our smallness, our helplessness, and most importantly for Fromm, our separateness. To be separate is to be cut off, or "to be helpless, unable to grasp the world—things and people—actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react."[11] Thus our separateness is the source of such great anxiety that it leads us to forfeit the possibility for genuine or positive freedom for negative freedom. When faced with the knowledge of our individuality we have two choices: submission through negative freedom or a relationship to the world expressed in spontaneous love and work through positive freedom.[12] Unable to deal with the seeming insignificance of one's individuality in light of the larger world, individuals respond with a fear that creates feelings of powerlessness and anxiety. The only way out then appears to be to sacrifice one's individuality or self, resulting in a state of negative

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[7] Ibid., 15.

[8] Ibid., 17.

[9] Ibid., 20.

[10] Ibid., 24.

[11] Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (1956; repr., New York: Open Road Media, 2013), 8, Kindle edition.

[12] Ibid., 21.

freedom.[13] The very structures of modern society provide the context that enables this negative freedom to flourish.

For Fromm, modern freedom has been concerned with the idea of freedom from external forms of authority and restraint, such as the Church or State.[14] The more these external forms of repression were eliminated, the more freedom we believe ourselves to have gained. Yet, we remained blinded to the internal forces that inhibit or destroy freedom. For Fromm, we have become so captivated by fighting for freedom from external authorities or powers outside of ourselves, that we have completely ignored the internal mechanisms that limit or undo the external freedoms we have gained. These internal mechanisms act as anonymous authorities that pressure us to conform to societal expectations of normativity. Fromm describes how these operate in the following passage:

> Most people are not even aware of their need to conform. They live under the illusion that they follow their own ideas and inclinations, that they are individualists, that they have arrived at their opinions as the result of their own thinking— and that it just happens that their ideas are the same as those of the majority. The consensus of all serves as a proof for the correctness of "their" ideas.[15]

Things like public opinion and common sense can be misused to induce feelings of fear, alienation, and isolation, pushing us to conform to societal expectations out of fear of being different or othered.[16] Enacted as compulsion and fear, these internal restraints have a profound effect on the psychology of the self, as they hinder "the full realization of the freedom of personality" thus limiting any possibility of development of an individual self and the creation of positive freedom.[17]

What is left is a broken or fragmented self, made up of a real self and a social self. Modern human beings act on behalf of the social self, which is created, based on societal expectations for the role of human beings. Not surprisingly, this affects the way in which people create and carry out relationships. These relationships become dominated by manipulation and instrumentality that only exacerbate the feelings of aloneness that we so fear.[18]

While we often espouse notions of individualized and autonomous freedom, the reality is that we are controlled by a negative freedom characterized by paralyzing isolation, alienation, and fear. As the weight of this

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[13] Ibid., 28–29.

[14] Ibid., 104.

[15] Ibid., 13.

[16] Ibid., 105.

[17] Ibid., 105–106.

[18] Ibid., 118.

negative freedom becomes too much to bear, we are left with two choices: we can either attempt to escape from freedom altogether, or move beyond negative freedom to positive freedom. Given the pervasiveness of negative freedom, few consider any possibility but escape. Yet, this escape is nothing more than further submersion into negative freedom, and an annihilation of the self. It is "the complete surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self . . . it is, in principle a solution which is to be found in all neurotic phenomena. It assuages an unbearable anxiety and makes life possible by avoiding panic; yet it does not solve the underlying problem."[19] Fromm identifies three main mechanisms we use to escape: authoritarianism, destructiveness, and automaton conformity. These function as neuroses that have been normalized in society.

Authoritarianism is what Fromm describes as sado-masochism.[20] Unlike Freud's original theory, which proposed that sado-masochism was an entirely sexual phenomenon, for Fromm it is primarily non-sexual. It is a way to analyze the means by which people relate to each other across multiple contexts of relationships. The fear, alienation, and isolation we feel push us to enter into such symbiotic relationships.[21] While some people may display traits that are strongly masochistic or sadistic, Fromm argues a combination of both sadistic and masochistic traits are found in most people because both stem from the same need.[22] The majority of our relationships therefore demonstrate a blending of the two. The masochist renounces the self entirely, wholly submitting through giving ownership of oneself to someone outside of him or her.[23] The sadist wants complete domination through the incorporation of another into him or herself.[24] Ultimately both masochism and sadism stem from the need to destroy the self as a means to relieve oneself from the weight of freedom.

Destructiveness, Fromm's second mechanism of escape, is fed by the feelings of hostility and rage that are the result of the unlived life. While sado-masochism aims for symbiosis, destructiveness wants the total elimination of the object.[25] Like authoritarianism, destructiveness is a response to overwhelming powerlessness and isolation, yet the solution here is to escape by destroying the world that creates these feelings.[26] For Fromm, destructiveness is in many ways the antithesis to his understanding of positive freedom. While positive freedom is the "spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality,"[27] destructiveness is the result of what Fromm terms the thwarted

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[19] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 140.

[20] Ibid., 141.

[21] Ibid., 159.

[22] Ibid., 161.

[23] Ibid., 142.

[24] Ibid., 143.

[25] Ibid., 177.

[26] Ibid., 177.

[27] Ibid., 257.

life, or the "blockage of spontaneity of the growth and expression of man's sensuous, emotional, and intellectual capacities."[28] The more these capacities are repressed, the stronger the drive for destruction.

In automaton conformity, Fromm's last mechanism of escape, fear, and isolation are dealt with through the complete cessation of being oneself. One's personality or identity becomes entirely dependent upon the cultural patterns provided by society.[29] One becomes a pseudo self, sacrificing identity and individuality in the search for security.[30] The sad irony, of course, is that while all three of these mechanisms of escape stem from the need to alleviate one's fear, anxiety, or isolation, in reality they only exacerbate these feelings.

With a basic understanding of Fromm's theory of negative freedom, we can now move on to look at its relevance for education. While not a scholar of education himself, Fromm's roots in critical theory provide a shared knowledge and purpose with those in the field of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy has two main aims. First, it begins with the language of critique that enables us to expose the contradictions of social life and the reality of oppression. Then, it moves into the language of transcendence that offers the sense of hope that liberation is possible.[31] Fromm's analysis of negative freedom serves as a language of critique. His conceptualization of negative freedom unveils the alienation, anxiety, and fear that have come to represent the false freedom of human existence. His mechanisms of escape are a different way of naming Freire's dehumanization. Much work has been done on the dehumanizing nature of the schools, but for the purposes of this paper, let us look briefly and generally at the experience of schooling in light of Fromm's theory.

Simply stated, Fromm's thesis is that through eliminating the self we can also eliminate the burden of freedom. The mechanisms of escape are the means through which to do this. I would argue that the school is an essential piece to the perpetuation of negative freedom, and in fact, schools model and encourage behavior of escape. An entire paper likely could be devoted to the complexity of the sado-masochistic nature of the school experience, but that kind of depth is outside the bounds of this work. On a basic level, I believe it is easy to see the ways in which the teacher is cast in the role of the sadist, while the student is taught to take on the role of the masochist. Too often we can describe the role of teachers in the same way that Fromm describes sadistic tendencies: "to make others dependent on oneself and to have absolute and unrestricted power over them, so as to make them nothing but instruments,

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[28] Ibid., 182.

[29] Ibid., 184–185.

[30] Ibid., 202–203.

[31] Zeus Leonardo "Critical Social Theory and Transformative Knowledge: The Functions of Criticism in Quality Education," *Education Researcher* 33 no. 6 (2004), 11–18.

'clay in the potter's hand.'"[32] Are we not training our students to be masochists—to "show a marked dependence on powers outside of themselves . . . not to assert themselves, not to do what they want, but to submit to the factual or alleged orders of these outside forces"?[33] In teaching students and teachers to silence their own desires, we are merely providing the beginnings for the fragmentation of the self that feeds both a desire for destructiveness and the total elimination of the self through automaton conformity.

While Fromm's language of critique, when applied to education, reveals the pivotal role of schools in the perpetuation of negative freedom, this isn't where his work ends. His critique provides the means to understand his language of transcendence, or his belief in the potential for positive freedom. Re-conceptualized, positive freedom becomes a means for unveiling dehumanization rather than mystifying it. It is the reclaiming of oneself that occurs "not only by an act of thinking but also by the realization of man's total personality, by the active expression of his emotional and intellectual potentialities . . . In other words, positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality."[34] It is important to be very clear in what Fromm means by spontaneous activity. Here, spontaneous is not synonymous with compulsive; instead, it is free activity as in the notion of free will. Activity signifies "one's emotional, intellectual, and sensuous experiences."[35] Spontaneous activity provides the means to transcend negative freedom because it allows one to retain a true, unfragmented self, while overcoming isolation to unite with the world. Key to spontaneous activity is love, there is no positive freedom without love:

> Mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality. Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity. In love the paradox occurs that two being become one and yet remain two.[36]

Love is the essential component of Fromm's positive freedom because it provides the way in which man can affirm his own self and his connection to the world. It becomes a different way of considering what it means to be an individual. No longer defined solely in terms of self, the realization of the self is dependent upon one's ability to connect with others, to be a part of

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[32] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 143.

[33] Ibid., 141.

[34] Ibid., 106 and 257.

[35] Ibid., 257.

[36] Fromm, *The Art of Loving,* 19.

community. So then, what does it mean to say education is the practice of positive freedom?

Education as the Practice of Freedom and the Political Realm

Schools are one of the most important sites for the dissemination of a dehumanizing negative freedom. The official discourse in schools rarely challenges students to question the given interpretations of reality. In fact, more often than not, schools ask our students to behave as Fromm's automatons, to uncritically accept the knowledge presented in text books as truth and to accept normative means of assessment of intelligence. We see severe inequalities and disparities in academic success based upon race, class, and gender. We find alienation, anxiety, fear, and isolation. The destruction of the self occurs over and over. Schools have become structures in which negative freedom is naturalized. It is this naturalization of experiences of oppression that allows for the separation of knowledge and experience that make the schooling experience so contrary to positive freedom. In divorcing knowledge from lived experience, education loses its ability to counter the fragmentation of the self created by negative freedom. There is no possibility for the integrated personality, and thus no chance for the emergence of positive freedom. This is quite the opposite of what we would see were schooling to take seriously the goal of education as the practice of freedom.

When bell hooks writes of education as the practice of freedom she describes a school experience that is revolutionary and counter-hegemonic, where learning is liberating.[37] Education as the practice of positive freedom would be all these things, and more. It would require a radical rethinking of the classroom space. When I was teaching, I often described my job as ensuring that each of my students left my classroom at the end of the year prepared to be successful, but if we believe education to be the practice of positive freedom, what does success mean? For Fromm, it would mean unveiling the ways in which negative freedom dehumanizes us. It would require an education that teaches both students and teachers how to love, when we define love as "an action, the practice of a human power, which can be practiced only in freedom and never as a result of compulsion. Love is an activity, not a passive affect; it is a 'standing in,' not a 'falling for.'"[38]

To educate as the practice of freedom is to return to where this paper first began with Greene's notion of the political realm. For Greene, this realm requires the freedom to practice agency, the knowledge of the concrete social reality in which one is located, an awareness of the oppressive structures or mechanisms that have become normalized, and the ability to envision the

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[37] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 1-12.

[38] Fromm, *The Art of Loving, 21*.

possibility of something different.[39] With this understanding of the political realm, it is not difficult to see the ways in which Fromm's analysis provides the means to begin working toward such a realm.

If we are to create spaces like Greene's political realm, the agency of both the teacher and the student must be reclaimed. For positive freedom to be addressed in the classrooms it must come from educators. It is our responsibility to bring these ideas into the content of classroom practice. When a teacher is authentically seeking out his or her freedom, they enable their students to do the same.[40] Yet, one cannot forget that dehumanization is a state that affects us all, rendering us all in need of empowerment. Educators, like their students, have internalized in some form or another oppressive paradigms of society. As hooks writes, "When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teacher grow, and are empowered by the process."[41] Teachers must be self-reflective and self-critiquing in order to understand how they have internalized notions of negative freedom, so as not to reproduce those onto their students.

To educate as the practice of freedom is not a responsibility that can be taken lightly. Even teachers committed to critical understandings of liberation and freedom must be very careful lest they also contribute further to their students' dehumanization. As Freire warns, "Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into a populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated." [42] Real freedom cannot be given, it must be achieved, and it must be searched for. But this leads to the question, can such freedom be taught? As educators, we cannot give our students freedom, we can only prepare them to make that life choice of being free. To name one's oppression is both to unveil the reality of one's incompletion and to acknowledge a desire for authentic freedom. Once realizing the contradiction of their oppressed existence, they will only be liberated when they commit to struggle to free themselves.[43] Education can plant seeds that will encourage praxis, but educators cannot struggle for their students, students must do this for themselves, alongside their teachers. While freedom may never be fully achieved, educating for freedom is our only hope for change. It is the only way in which "we may be able to empower the young to create and re-create a

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[39] Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* , 89.

[40] Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 14.

[41] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.

[42] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 52.

[43] Ibid., 34.

common world—and in cherishing it, in renewing it, discover what it signifies to be free."[44]

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[44] Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 23.