Escape from Reason: Labels as Arguments and Theories

SLAVA SADOVNIKOV   *York University*

I would like to thank Professor Neil McLaughlin for his critical comment and *Dialogue* for the opportunity to reply.

In my earlier article I argued that Erich Fromm's theories in his *Escape from Freedom* are thoroughly inconsistent, irrefutable (uncriticizable), and hence unempirical, and that his chief method consists in applying psychoanalytic terms to familiar things, adding nothing to social explanations.

McLaughlin's case for the theoretical relevance of either *Escape* or of Freudian social theory generally proves counter-productive. He offers very weak criteria for theory acceptance and often takes mere labels to be explanatory theories. He does so particularly in his promotion of the concept of ambivalence. I will engage the proposed case study and explain why the use of "ambivalence" in psychoanalysis (especially by Bleuler or Freud) and sociology (by Smelser and his followers) is untenable. I point to a notable conflict between McLaughlin's rationalist and other intentions, and will show how he shares the approach to social theories that makes for the state of affairs in the humanities which he deplores.

McLaughlin goes beyond the topic of my argument to raise important questions about current practices of social theorizing, criticism, and teaching. I disagree with most of what he says, and my reply will illustrate the spread and damage of the dogmatic approach, which consists in looking for "confirmations," or mere labelling, and the importance of critical checks.

To Begin

McLaughlin begins by stressing three points on which he says we agree: (1) the sway of empty talk in social knowledge and the urgent need for a rational debate in it; (2) the current relevance of Karl Popper's critical thought; and (3) the empirical inadequacy of Fromm's *Escape*. I am entirely content with McLaughlin's three points, but entirely disagree with his treatment of them. The first two points, rational debate and Popper's relevance, led me to reject *Escape* as a theoretical failure, whereas my critic seems to regard the book as a theoretical gold mine. Given the disparity of our conclusions, I shall discuss here certain problems I see in his handling of the two problems.

As to the third point, I must say that the inadequacy of Fromm as an historian was never discussed in my earlier article; methodologically and philosophically this would be of little interest. Together with McLaughlin, I defer to the professional historians who have shown that Fromm's account of the rise of Nazism is faulty.[1] Inasmuch as I appreciate McLaughlin's emphasis on the empirical flaws of *Escape*, the failings of Fromm's historical explanation has no bearing on my argument. I explicitly focused in my article on his methodological and theoretical flaws, which McLaughlin denies. Surprisingly, he does not discuss the content of Fromm's book—and my biggest fear was that I somehow misrepresented Fromm's convoluted arguments—but, instead, finds three external sources of the book's promise: Fromm's later study of Mexican peasants, McLaughlin's own understanding of the concept of "classic," and the alleged motives that drive my critique. After briefly responding to McLaughlin's three points, I shall address the more substantial questions he raises.

How Much Context Do We Need to Criticize?

I criticized *Escape* under the assumption that it was an independent theoretical work, and I even provided, in a separate section, a brief historical background. Still, McLaughlin complains that I fail to place *Escape* in its author's "larger academic agenda," thus missing "the core point of the book." Regrettably, he does not say what is wrong with my exposition or criticism; moreover, he never says what its "core point" is.

Even had I focused on *Escape* alone, this should not have been a problem by McLaughlin's own lights, for he begins by lamenting the frustrating current practice where adherents of fashionable theories appeal to some never-achievable "full context" to safeguard their ideas from critical scrutiny. It must be fine then to deal with *Escape* separately, especially since McLaughlin himself hails this book (but not all of Fromm's works) as a classic, and in the past praised and criticized it as an independent piece.[2] After all, if we consider it a self-contained analysis of, in Fromm's own words, "those dynamic factors in the character structure of modern

man, which made him want to give up freedom in Fascist countries" (1964, p. 6), we will only do justice to Fromm's own intentions.

McLaughlin goes to great length to explain *Escape*'s correct context, concluding that my scant awareness of biographical facts makes me misrepresent Fromm's view. What this view is McLaughlin does not say, and my claim that Fromm indeed has no consistent view on history, or even a well-articulated theory, remains unchallenged.

McLaughlin thinks it unfair of me to critique Fromm's untestable theories without discussing his later research. He himself turns to Fromm's and Michael Maccoby's 1970 *Social Character in a Mexican Village* for support and to help him disclose *Escape*'s true message. But McLaughlin is anything but specific. Just what is the social character of Mexican peasants, and what is its relevance? How did the authors formulate their hypotheses and predictions? What alternative suppositions were considered? In fact, the "larger agenda" that McLaughlin has recreated is of no help in shedding light on *Escape*.

The argument from incomplete context, a debate which McLaughlin claims to advance, if adopted can make rational debate impossible; it is all too easy to get rid of inconvenient objections in the name of the harmless idea of context. Sufficiently articulate and consistent ideas can be criticized on their own merits: insofar as McLaughlin has expressed his view clearly, I do not have to wait until he has said indefinitely more on the subject before concluding that his argument from, and for, full context is already unsound.

On Classics, or Whatever You Label Them

McLaughlin says that our differences regarding the value of Fromm's *Escape* have much to do with our disparate views of what it means for a book to be a "classic." At stake here, however, is not *Escape*'s status as a classic but its theoretical worth, something I feel is rather lacking.

Of greater importance, surely, than the label itself are the reasons for attaching it. McLaughlin brings in the examples of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* and Durkheim's *Suicide*, both of which have empirical flaws, yet are commonly regarded as classics—the implication being that *Escape* with its empirical blunders is just as classical a classic as those two books. A crucial difference between these two books and *Escape* is that the former have earned the title of classic not only for their rich theoretical contributions, but also for the meticulous empirical investigations Weber and Durkheim used as bases upon which they would build and revise their accounts. This is why the problems they raised were open to continuing debates, further development, and even correction or modification. *Escape*'s theories, on the other hand, are mostly *uncriticizable*, and where they allow criticism the theories prove false, as McLaughlin himself shows.

Are there better reasons for some to have referred to *Escape* as a classic? Surely Fromm raises important theoretical questions, but so do children in a classroom. We expect of a theorist fruitful answers, and the answers found in that book are unsatisfactory; it remains McLaughlin's burden to prove otherwise. Instead of showing exactly how Fromm's method may help us, McLaughlin keeps begging the question by repeating promises that have been heard for decades, and by claiming that psychoanalysis should be used in international politics. Insofar as I see why diplomats or the military might in principle find psychoanalysis useful in their practice, I find the because-it-is-a-classic reason inadequate.

Sociologically, McLaughlin gives a one-sided account of the ways texts become regarded as classics, focusing on and praising *Escape*'s content when it is only arbitrary and confusing. It makes one wonder why people praise it. I will not expand on a sociology of a book's reception, but what I can do is connect this issue with another concern of McLaughlin's, namely, the concept of ambivalence.

Intentions Reconsidered: Why Popper?

McLaughlin deplores the state of critical debate in the humanities and the flood of sloppy social theorizing, but his own efforts founder on conflicts between his aims. He professes his dedication to rationality, growth of empirical knowledge, and critical debate, prompting him to declare the relevance of Popper's thought and admire Alan Sokal's hoax. Yet, when it comes to evaluating theories, these intentions give way to others, in particular, to the aim of preserving favourite ideas no matter what. Starting with the importance of Popper's thought and insistence on falsifiability, McLaughlin ends up discarding it or labelling it as being narrow, dated, or dogmatic whenever it gets inconvenient.[3]

A word of clarification is required here. Popper's emphasis on consistency and refutability is by no means original. Still, the expression "the Popperian perspective" is appropriate. Even though Popper shares with logical positivists some significant views, e.g., about the aims of science, he demonstrates how their confirmationist (and inductivist) views of science belie these aims. More generally, confirmationism, i.e., attempts to assert one's pet views, naturally promotes any view and dooms fair debate, having profound implications both in knowledge and politics. It is the uncritical, dogmatic, or "inductive" attitude towards science that leads to the adoption of the confirmationist method criticized here: "The trouble about people—uncritical people—who hold a theory is that they are inclined to take everything as supporting or 'verifying' it, and nothing as refuting it" (Popper 1996b, p. 233).

McLaughlin speculates that I betray an "ideological bias by making the case for Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*." Perhaps he sees more deeply into my motives than I can, so I will try to elucidate my *point*: There is a

fundamental ideological and political agreement between Hayek and Fromm (just as there is between McLaughlin and myself). It is their anti-totalitarian stance that drives them also to try to *explain* the rise of Nazism, to get at its causes; likewise, my critic restates the relevance of this problem in his article. The crucial difference between Hayek and Fromm, then, is that one gives an explanation of the rise of Nazism through the growth of certain ideas—an explanation that makes much empirical sense (indeed, I did not claim more than this about Hayek)—whereas the other explains the same events through "character types," an account that spectacularly fails.

McLaughlin aptly, and very much in the Hayekian and Popperian spirit, said the same thing himself more than a decade ago: "Fromm puts far too little emphasis on the role of ideas in the emergence of Nazism" (1996, p. 259). Unlike McLaughlin, I do not find this kind of criticism dogmatic, biased, or dated.

Labels as Arguments and Theories

Nor did I question the use of psychoanalysis in the social sciences, as McLaughlin suggests; rather, my target was Fromm's particular abortive attempt, and from his failure I did not make any generalizations. His case was but an illustration of the way we can and (if we are to be instrumentally rational) should treat theories. It is all about the critical attitude and method, not particular theories. The critical approach does not preclude the possibility that some testable, unambiguous, and well-corroborated psychoanalytical theories will at last help us better explain the social world. I argue not against such a possibility but against the way enthusiasts of these would-be theories advertise them.

The way McLaughlin shows the rosy prospects of psychoanalytical social theory boils down to this: there are people who labour at it. He reports on Neil Smelser's lifelong elaborations of psychoanalytical sociology, which prescribed the use of Freudian theories. Then he presents a "powerful" psychoanalytical theory of creativity of Michael Farrell, commenting on how the theorist "usefully utilizes psychoanalytic insights," though McLaughlin does not specify them. He correctly expects that I might not view his examples as scientific. Their problems begin well before that. First, due to their informative emptiness, or tautological character, all they amount to is rewordings of everyday assumptions. Second, due to their vagueness these accounts are compatible with any outcomes; in other words, they lack explanatory and predictive power. The proposed ideas are too inarticulate to subject to intersubjective criticism, and to call them empirical or scientific theories would be, no matter how comforting, a gross misuse of words.

On the constructive side, a psychoanalytic theorist may be challenged to unambiguously formulate her suppositions and specify conditions of

their disproof, to leave out what we already well know and smooth out internal inconsistencies, and revise the theories in view of easily available counter-examples and competing accounts. Only after having done this can one present candidate theories to public criticism and thus make them part of science, and fruitfully discuss their further refinements. Another suggestion is not to label them "powerful theories," "classics," or anything else before their real scrutiny begins.

That criticism and disagreement are indispensable for science is not a "Popperian orthodoxy," although Popper does champion this idea; it is the pivot of the tradition (which we owe to the Greeks) which identifies rationalism with criticism.[4] McLaughlin ostensibly bows to the critical tradition but does not put it to use. Instead of critical evaluation of the theories in question he writes of "compelling case," "powerful analytic model," and "useful conceptual tool."

On the methodological side of the issue, we should inquire into the mode of thinking common to Fromm and all adherents of confirmationism. The trick consists in mere replacement of familiar words with new, more peculiar ones; customary expressions are substituted by "instrumental intimacy," "collaborative circles," and "idealization of a self-object." Since the new, funnier, and pseudo-theoretical tag does the job of naming just as well, it "shows how" things work. The new labels in the cases criticized here do not add anything to our knowledge; nor do they explain. We have seen Fromm routinely abuse this technique. The vacuity of Fromm's explanations by character type was the central point in my analysis of *Escape*, yet McLaughlin conveniently ignores it and, like Fromm, uses the method of labelling as somehow supporting his cause.

The widely popular practice of mistaking new labels for explanations has been exposed by many methodologists in the history of philosophy, but probably the most famous example of such critique comes from Molière. In the now often-quoted passage, his character delivers a vacuous explanation of opium's property to induce sleep by renaming the property with an offhand Latinism, "virtus dormitiva." The satire acutely points not only at the impostor doctor's hiding his lack of knowledge behind foreign words, but also at the emptiness of his alleged explanation. (Pseudo-theoretical literature is boring precisely because of its "dormitive virtue," its shuffling of labels without rewarding inquiring minds.)

Let me review notable criticisms of this approach in the twentieth century by Hempel, Homans, and Weber leaving aside their forerunners. This problem was discussed in the famous debate between William Dray and Carl Hempel. Dray argues, *contra* the nomological account of explanation, that historians and social scientists often try to answer the question, "What is this phenomenon?" by giving an "explanation-by-concept" (Dray 1959, p. 403). A series of events may be better understood if we call it "a social revolution"; or the appropriate tag may be found in the expressions

"reform," "collaboration," "class struggle," "progress," etc.; or, to take Fromm's suggestions, we may call familiar motives and actions "sadomasochistic," and any political choice save the Marxist "escape from freedom."

Hempel agrees with Dray that such concepts may be explanatory, but they are so only if the chosen labels or classificatory tags refer to some uniformities, or are based on nomic analogies. In other words, our new label has explanatory force if it states or implies some established regularity (Hempel 1970, pp. 453-57). For example, you travel to a foreign country and, strolling along the street, see a boisterous crowd. Your guide may explain the crowd with one of several terms: that it is the local soccer team's fans celebrating its victory, or it is a local religious festival, or a teachers' strike, etc. The labels applied here—celebration, festival, strike— have explanatory value, because we know that things they refer to usually manifest themselves in noisy or unruly mass gatherings.

If, on the other hand, by way of explaining the boisterous crowd the guide had invoked some hidden social or psychological forces, or used expressions such as embodiment, mode of production, de-centring, simulacra, otherness, etc., its causes would remain obscure. If she had referred to psychoanalytic "character types" (say, Fromm's authoritarian, anal, or necrophiliac types), the explanation would not make much sense either. Nothing prevents us nevertheless from unconditionally attaching all these labels to any event. The mistake McLaughlin and confirmationists persistently make is in thinking that labelling social phenomena *alone* does theoretical and explanatory work.[5] George Homans observed the prevalence of this trick some decades ago:

> Much modern sociological theory seems to us to possess every virtue except that of explaining anything. . . . The theorist shoves various aspects of behavior into his pigeonholes, cries "Ah-ha!" and leaves it at that. Like magicians in all times and places, the theorist thinks he controls phenomena if he is able to give them names, particularly names of his own invention. (1974, pp. 10-11)

Homans repeatedly stresses in his works that mere naming of behavioural properties does not produce explanations or theories. *Our propositions have to state specifically what relations hold between the properties*, thus enabling us both to test and to explain them causally.

Many writers use labels as arguments, and "positivist" has become one of the pejorative epithets in the humanities debates.[6] Due to Homans's agreement with Hempel, one may classify him as a positivist and on this ground reject his views—as, e.g., McLaughlin does with Popper, and, by labelling my criticism Popperian, tends to dismiss my reasons too. Perhaps I should then use a kind of argument to which McLaughlin is more amenable. He considers Max Weber a classic worth permanent reconsid-

eration, and this thinker cannot be suspected of positivist liaisons. Weber contends against the view that

> the knowledge of *universal* propositions, the construction of abstract concepts, the knowledge of regularities and the attempt to formulate "*laws*" have no scientific justification in the cultural sciences. Quite the contrary, if the causal knowledge of the historians consists of the imputation of concrete effects to concrete causes, a *valid* imputation of any individual effect without the application of "*nomological*" *knowledge*—i.e., the knowledge of recurrent causal sequences—would in general be impossible. (Weber 1949, p. 79)

To illustrate the present spread and intellectual damage of labelling-as-theorizing, and of the dogmatic approach in general, I will consider now an instructive case directly relevant to this exchange.

Indulging in Ambivalence: "Escape from Critical Accountability"

McLaughlin believes that Freud is "dogmatic" but in contrast sees those social theorists as innovative who borrow his most controversial psychoanalytic insights, particularly Neil Smelser. True, Smelser has made much use of "ambivalence" in his social theorizing, attaching it to anything he happens to muse about. This delights McLaughlin and many other literati. Let us look more closely into why.

First, a very short background of the term is appropriate. The word "ambivalence" was abused at its very conception when it was coined in 1911 by Eugen Bleuler to describe one of the "fundamental symptoms" of a group of psychoses he called "schizophrenia" (1969, pp. 9, 53). He differentiates three forms of ambivalence, though they "are not easily distinguished from one another": *Affective*: e.g., "the husband both loves and hates his wife"; *Ambivalence of will*: "the patient wishes to eat and does not wish to eat"; *Intellectual*: "a patient says in the same breath: 'I am Dr. H.; I am not Dr. H'" (ibid., pp. 53-54).

Two problems are prominent in Bleuler's account of ambivalence. First, he indiscriminately applies the same symptom to all people (ibid., p. 13). Ambivalence is not a symptom of the mentally ill but our commonest feature, and Bleuler explicitly speaks of "normal ambivalence" (ibid., p. 376). Describing healthy and ill persons by the same terms does not make for better diagnostics or treatment; nor does it make theoretical terms accurate.

Second, in his applications of "ambivalence," he commits a double reduction: he picks a pair of seemingly conflicting aspects of a complex thing called attitude, and then focuses only on the two aspects' extremes. Otherwise, he chooses just one aspect and stresses its extremes. It is unlikely, however, that one can adequately describe in terms of ambivalence any attitude, maybe not even of a schizophrenic.[7]

The inadequacy of this construct is especially vivid in the example of attitudes towards people or things we know well. It is not the case that a person cannot love and hate another at the same time; equally it is not the case that this description may remotely describe even a small fraction of the richness of their feelings, volitions, or thoughts. Yet, in his analysis of attitudes, Bleuler has only two points on his measuring scales, whereas possible counter-examples are easily dissolved in confirmationist ad-hocs.[8] Binary descriptions such as "love–hate" better fit the working of computers but, unfortunately, since Bleuler, such false dilemmas have haunted the use of the term.

It is natural for us to have *different* and *complex* feelings and views towards any object, and *some* of them may well be expressed best in conflicting terms. One may, for example, like a certain food's look but dislike its smell. One may also find here tri-valence, or quadri-valence, etc., just as easily as ambivalence: it will suffice to mention the food's taste, name, price, package, producer, and one's corresponding feelings to these properties. This way we will certainly diagnose tri-valence or quadri-valence, depending on which we see as a "fundamental symptom" of behaviour. To repeat the trivial, there are numberless aspects to any object, and about each we feel, will, and think differently.

Of special interest for this discussion is that the two said ploys, i.e., the indiscriminate (ab/normal) application of ambivalence and reduction of attitudes, are used as confirmationist tricks. Sometimes Bleuler combines the two: "Even for the healthy everything has its two sides. The rose has its thorns," etc. (1969, p. 374). Whatever psychological features you ascribe to the human psyche, they will be easily confirmed in any person by using this technique. Freud went farther and confirmed them in cultures.

Sigmund Freud borrows the neologism "ambivalence" and makes much out of it in his social theorizing. To Bleuler's reduction of attitudes and fusion of the ab/normal, he adds a third kind of abuse, the psychological identification of individuals and groups. This identification is stated in the subtitle of his *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics.* Freud believes that "savages" stand "very near" to our prehistoric ancestors, and,

> If that supposition is correct, a comparison between the psychology of primitive peoples . . . and the psychology of neurotics, as it has been revealed by psychoanalysis, will be bound to show numerous points of agreement. (1950, p. 1)

The conclusion is plainly unwarranted, but it is used by the theorist to make any desired comparisons and parallels.[9] Just as Bleuler did, Freud looks for, and surely finds, ambivalence everywhere. The term is crucial in

particular for his theory of the Oedipal complex and child-parent relations, which eventually account for the origin of basic human institutions.

Freud's psychoanalysis of culture in *Totem and Taboo* is rather contradictory and is supported by labelling, historical stretches, and, as he himself admits, allegories. Freud begins with the promise that his psychoanalytic reading of religion does not reduce it to a single source (1950, p. 100), and yet he ends up with a reductionist "hypothesis which may seem fantastic" (ibid., p. 141) but advantageous compared to other theories: "the beginning of religion, morals, society and art converges in the Oedipus complex" (ibid., p. 156).

His argument is roughly this. Totemism seems to be common to all known cultures as the initial form of their religious experience; Freud reviews existing explanations of its origin and finds them lacking. His own starts with Darwin's suggestion, made by an analogy between human beings and animals, that long ago humans lived in small groups, where the strongest male would own all females and control younger males. Freud also finds a parallel between children and "savages" in their treatment of animals "as their full equals"; in some cases, children develop an animal-phobia to certain animal species, and this fear is "in reality [a boy's] fear of his father displaced onto dogs." Children's attitudes towards parents in general are seen as, i.e., reduced to, an "ambivalent emotional attitude" (ibid., pp. 127-28).

Now, why is a dog "displacement" for a father? Words such as "displacement," "substitution," and "surrogate" are key for grasping the method of the author of *Totem and Taboo*; it is at bottom confirmationist and essentialist, as the argument usually has the form, "A is in reality (or in fact) B," where B is the needed label. Using this method, Freud classifies neurotic children's communication with animals as a reappearance of totemism (perhaps assuming its innate character). Then he finds random verbal similarities between child psychology and that of our ancient ancestors, the pivotal parallel being that both modern children's relations to animals and totemism "in the inconceivably remote past" are products of the Oedipal complex (ibid., p. 132). This common origin makes them ambivalent.[10]

Human civilization may be traced back to an event (or, more charitably toward Freud's story, a supposed past practice), which he calls "the elimination of the primal father" by his sons. Totem came to be a substitute for the killed father: "The dead father became stronger than the living one had been. . . . The animal struck the sons as a natural and obvious substitute for their father" (ibid., pp. 143-44). The killing of the father proved to be a cultural Big Bang, as the symbolic Father turned into human culture and its basic institutions (thus doubling the job of living fathers). Through the long historical chain—father (parents), totem, institutions—

ambivalence has been passed on as a defining trait of our psychological make-up, Freud thinks (ibid., pp. 141-55).

Sometimes ambivalence would turn into univalency: "their bitterness against their father . . . grew less, and their longing for him increased; and it became possible for an ideal to emerge which embodied the unlimited power of the primal father" (ibid., p. 148). Freud is fine with occasional pitfalls in his grand scheme: "It would be foolish to aim at exactitude in such questions as it would be unfair to insist upon certainty" (ibid., p. 143). Historical and cultural psychoanalysis, he seems to imply, has the same deficiency as any respectable science, i.e., lack of ultimate precision and certainty. The traditional objections, however, are directed not against the uncertainty of his theories but rather against their arbitrariness and his all-confirmatory methodology in supporting them.

We see now that Smelser's "sociological manifesto," as McLaughlin put it, was in fact outlined long ago, as was his methodology. Smelser's chief target is rational-choice theory, and he sees his mission in "liberating ourselves to a degree from the worldview implied in the enduring distinctions among the rational, the nonrational, and the irrational" (1998, p. 171). Inspired by Freud, he sees ambivalence as a "psychological foundation of behavior," and, *contra* rationalists, he puts forward "the postulate of ambivalence, the combination of attraction and repulsion, of love and hate. Ambivalence is inclusive in that it can focus on people, objects, and symbols. Experience alone demonstrates the importance of this phenomenon" (ibid., p. 174).

Thus, Smelser faithfully follows Bleuler's and Freud's handling of "ambivalence," i.e., finding it wherever he looks for it. To present his approach as more respectable, he makes Robert Merton his confirmationist ally (ibid., p. 175). To be fair to Merton, however, the reader should not be led to believe that Merton shares with Smelser anything more than the use of "ambivalence."[11] Surprisingly, Smelser himself seems to follow his own "postulate of ambivalence," thinking that we should not take Freud's theories and method too seriously (1998, p. 246). It is not good to do ambivalence of everything, he says, but he does it nonetheless. In Bleuler's classification, Smelser's thinking would fall under "intellectual ambivalence," something perhaps more commonly known as inconsistency.

A quick illustration will help us better appreciate how much this contradictory thinking permeates today's pseudo-theoretical work. Alexander, Marx, and Williams, the editors of a recent *Festschrift* (2004) for Smelser, celebrate their teacher as a man and scholar, and eagerly promote his notion of ambivalence. Even in spite of Smelser's above methodological warning, the editors of the *Festschrift* are more receptive to his label-building grand message: "There is almost no facet of our existence as sociologists about which we do not show ambivalence" (2004, p. 5). The authors fail to see the tension between Smelser's (self-)criticism of the any-

thing-of-everything approach and his using it, and go on to make theoretical virtue of his "penchant for combining opposites" (ibid., pp. 4-5).

The real issues we face are determinate enough, and social theory does not have to be sillier than common-sense explanations. True, some of our beliefs and attitudes are complex and may be described by different and even contradictory terms—still it is not in any way illuminating to proclaim, "I told you, it is all ambivalent!" every time we observe complex behaviour. The utter emptiness of "ambivalence" is aggravated by a popular superstition that the complexity of our attitudes is a sure sign of their irrational character. This is supposed to prop up another misconception that sociology should be blended with if not replaced by psychoanalysis.

Alexander, Marx, and Williams say that parts of the book "demonstrate that accepting ambivalence as an indelible part of the human condition is key to achieving a deeper and richer understanding of social life" (2004, p. 20). The theorists seem unaware that cherry-picking cases of behaviour to fit our pet labels does not add a bit to our understanding, but only impedes it. The damaging effect of labelling-as-theorizing, this caricature of responsible research, is not only in the spread of ideas about which we cannot rationally argue: as harmful is the spreading ethic of uncritical scholarship.[12] As Adolf Grünbaum wrote in a recent essay about the "hermeneutic" (as opposed to empirical) reconstruction of psychoanalysis, its adherents "see it as buying absolution for their theory and therapy from the criteria of validation mandatory for causal hypotheses in the empirical sciences"; pursuing this policy, they "want to escape from *critical* accountability"; they do not produce explanatory theories but tend to "foster *ideological hostility* to scientific thought in the social sciences and in psychology" (Grünbaum 2004, pp. 146-58).

As concerns the side matter of classics, one may be tempted to characterize as ambivalent the position of those who hail criticism but at the same time canonize theories for intellectually irrelevant reasons. Using the term "ambivalence," however, one will commit Bleuler's original sin of reduction. It is better to say that this practical inconsistency results from getting too many irrelevant aims and agendas involved in theoretical questions and from the failure to use critical thinking.

To Conclude

Religious people who tend to see holy faces in unexpected places, say on a piece of toast or on walls, are often mocked, maybe because this inclination is seen as revealing their irrational beliefs and prejudices. Still, such people have at least something like an empirical criterion, however vague, for their insights, namely, visual similarity. Yet, compared to the practice of labelling something with funny words and proclaiming these words "powerful theories," finding visual resemblance in odd places is a relatively harmless business.

Regrettably, labelling-as-theorizing, and the dogmatic approach in general, has established itself as respectable academic practice. We discourage name-calling among children, but hail as theoretical ingenuity academic labelling-as-theorizing, a practice that is not harmless, but which impairs our attempts to grasp, sensibly discuss, and handle actual problems.[13]

I am glad the subject of this exchange has gone beyond Popper and Fromm in order to highlight some persistent delusions current in social theorizing and remind us of the relevance of the old rationalist (critical) tradition. Ideas must prove their worth by undergoing critical scrutiny. Disregard of the critical tradition, and closing down discussion by applying labels to things, has ruinous consequences for understanding.[14]

Notes

1 See, for instance, Kagan, Ozment, and Turner: "His [Hitler's] support appears to have come from across the social spectrum and not simply from the lower middle class, as was once thought to be the case" (2001, pp. 975-76). Fromm errs in his emphasis of the role of big capital too: "German big business once received much of the credit for the rise of Hitler. There is little evidence, however, that business contributions made any crucial difference to the Nazis' success or failure" (ibid.). These two empirical correctives of old interpretations undermine the emphases of certain theories on either psychological or economic factors in the development of fascism, but I will not develop this point in detail.

2 See especially McLaughlin 1996 for his specific and explicit criticism of Fromm's book (pp. 242-59).

3 Aggravating this inconsistency is McLauchlin's perseverance in matters he knows from secondary sources at best: his exposition of Popper's ideas is unreliable, and the reader should not be misled by the title of McLaughlin's article. Eventually, McLaughlin simply calls Popper dogmatic in the tradition of Freud and Marx, but fails to explain how.

4 On the continuity between the tradition of ancient criticism and that of the modern one, see, e.g., Peter Gay (1973), esp. Vol. 1's Preface and Book 1.

5 As a quick illustration of the spread of the method of labelling, one may mention dozens of characterizations of the society we live in: modern, postmodern, industrial, post-industrial, informational, oppressive, insane, digital, affluent, global, etc. These labels, which highlight one of countless aspects of group or even individual behaviour, are often presented as "theories of society," yet few of them have explanatory force. See also William Outhwaite's observation, "The latest diagnoses of postmodernity and postindustrialism look remarkably like early accounts of modernity and industrialism" (2002, p. xvi). Another characteristic example of this method is the currently popular "theoretical" question among political scientists, Is America a new Empire?

6 See, e.g., Loïc Wacquant: " 'positivism' has become a term of polemical indictment, if not abuse, in contemporary social science—few sociologists today would claim or welcome the label" (2002, p. 507). Cf. Anthony Giddens:

" 'Positivism' over recent years has become more a term of abuse than a technical term of philosophy" (1995, p. 136).

7 Eric Hobsbawm witnesses the tendency to commit similar reductions in political and ideological debates: "Playing the game of binary opposites is equally tempting and equally misleading in politics. Nothing seems simpler than to contrast tyranny and freedom" (1992, p. 60).

8 "The healthy, too, feels something like 'two souls in his breast'; and he, too, would be less inclined to speak so much of sin if it did not also have some pleasant connotations. The double evaluation rests not so much in the experience itself as in the double attitude toward that experience" (Bleuler 1969, p. 375; cf. Bleuler's 1924, esp. p. 125). That his analysis is thoroughly confirmationist is seen in observations such as this: "In the normals hate and love often transform themselves into each other" (1969, p. 375).

9 See Robert Paul: "In Freud's own thinking, the parallels he drew between obsession and civilization rested on the assumption that the history of civilization could be compared to a human lifetime, and that the customs of people closer to the childhood of the race could be understood on the analogy of the fantasies, conflicts, and phase-appropriate neuroses of individual childhood. These views are no longer tenable; nonetheless we must take them as the basis for reading Freud's work" (1991, p. 271).

10 "Psycho-analysis has revealed that the totem animal is in reality [*sic*] a substitute for the father. . . . The ambivalent emotional attitude, which to this day characterizes the father-complex in our children and which often persists into adult life, seems to extend to the totem animal in its capacity as substitute for the father" (Freud 1950, p. 141).

11 Importantly, Merton is *not* guilty of his forerunners' methodological sins, as one might infer from Smelser. He does not reduce attitudes *à la* Bleuler to two aspects or their extremes, and he is careful enough to characterize individual ambivalence not as mere oppositions but as "mingled feelings, mingled beliefs, and mingled actions" (1976, p. 3). He does not universalize ambivalence as our psychological basic trait, and constantly uses qualifiers such as "some," "often," and "may." Finally, unlike Smelser, he does not use the method of labelling to find ambivalence (i.e., mingled attitudes) everywhere.

12 A colleague, Igor Gontcharov, suggests that this sort of "theorizing" is a gruesome reality in the humanities today; in particular, psychoanalytic concepts are used outside the analytic situation (e.g., in sociology, literary theory, or support therapy), and this effectively destroys the foundation of their critical use.

13 One could witness the damaging effect of this kind of thinking on debates of high practical import in a panel on border security (sponsored by the Munk Centre for International Studies, Toronto; also aired live as Diplomatic Immunity on TVO, May 5, 2006). One of the panelists, representing academia, kept branding Canadian policies on immigration as "racist," the country as a "police state," and its legal regulations as "apartheid." The only meaningful objection one of her fellow panelists could make was that with the use of such labels, it was

"impossible to have a rational discussion." See also Edward Thompson's observation of some of his fellow Marxists' anti-rational polemical practice: "If one offered to argue, one was answered, not with arguments but with labels ('moralism,' 'empiricism,' 'liberal' illusions), or, commonly, with a biological dismissal (the 'generation game') which foreclosed further argument" (1978, p. ii).

14 I am grateful to Prof. Ian C. Jarvie and to *Dialogue*'s referees for their suggestions. I also benefited from discussions with Igor Gontcharov, even though he much disagreed with me, and with Richard Frieman. My thanks also go to David McKim at York University's Centre for Academic Writing for assistance, and to Roberta Gerwing of *Dialogue* for her helpful editing of my text. I dedicate this article to my daughter Maria, who was born on September 5, 2007.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C., Gary T. Marx, and Christine L. Williams, eds.
   2004   *Self, Social Structure, and Beliefs: Explorations in Sociology.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bleuler, Eugen
   1924   *Textbook of Psychiatry.* Translated and edited by A. A. Brill. New York: Macmillan.
   1969   *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias.* Translated by Joseph Zinkin. New York: International University Press.

Dray, William
   1959   "'Explaining What' in History." In *Theories of History.* Edited by Patrick Gardiner. New York: Free Press, pp. 403-408.

Freud, Sigmund
   1950   *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Fromm, Erich
   1964   Escape from Freedom. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Fromm, Erich, and Michael Maccoby
   1996   *Social Character in a Mexican Village.* Edison, NJ: Transaction. Originally published in 1970.

Gay, Peter
   1973   *Enlightenment: An Interpretation.* Vol. 1, *The Rise of Modern Paganism.* London: Wildwood House.

Giddens, Anthony
   1995   *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory: Encounters with Classical and Contemporary Social Thought.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Grünbaum, Adolf
   2004   "The Hermeneutic Versus the Scientific Conception of Psychoanalysis." In *Psychoanalysis at the Limit: Epistemology, Mind, and the Question of Science.* Edited by Jon Mills. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 139-60.

Hempel, Carl G.
>   1970   *Aspects of Scientific Explanation, and Other Essays in the Philos-ophy of Science.* New York: Free Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric
>   1992   "The Crisis of Today's Ideologies." *New Left Review*, 1, 192: 55-64.

Homans, George
>   1974   *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms.* Rev. ed. New York: Har-court Brace Jovanovich.

Kagan, Donald, Steven Ozment, and Frank Turner
>   2001   *The Western Heritage.* 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

McLaughlin, Neil
>   1996   "Nazism, Nationalism, and the Sociology of Emotions: *Escape from Freedom* Revisited." *Sociological Theory*, 14, 3: 241-61.

Merton, Robert K.
>   1976   "Sociological Ambivalence." In his *Sociological Ambivalence and Other Essays.* New York: Free Press.

Outhwaite, William
>   2002   "Introduction." In *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*. Edited by William Outhwaite. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. xv-xvi.

Paul, Robert A.
>   1991   "Freud's Anthropology: A Reading of the 'Cultural Books.'" In *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*. Edited by Jerome Neu. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 267-86.

Popper, Karl R.
>   1996a   "Reason or Revolution?" In his *The Myth of the Framework*. Edited by Mark Notturno. New York: Routledge, pp. 65-81.
>   1996b   *Realism and the Aim of Science.* New York: Routledge.

Smelser, Neil
>   1998   *The Social Edges of Psychoanalysis.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Thompson, Edward P.
>   1978   *The Poverty of Theory, and Other Essays.* New York and London: Monthly Review Press.

Wacquant, Loïc J. D.
>   2002   "Positivism." In *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*. Edited by William Outhwaite. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 507-10.

Weber, Max
>   1949   *The Methodology of the Social Sciences.* Translated and edited by E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.