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Erich Fromm's Humanistic View of Man and Our Divided World

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1. We are living in a time where states and continents are growing together to become one world. This process of growing together has also been forced upon us by global problems such as the armaments race, the destruction of our environment, the population explosion and the energy crisis, thus presenting us with the choice between the planet's self-destruction or a One World for all. In light of the vast number of problems facing our world, a change in political thinking from the national to the global level is sorely needed if we are to save Mother Earth. Politics as practiced by individual states and their citizens demonstrates too little of the global approach typical of a world citizen. Yet a common effort aimed at preserving creation on Earth requires an awareness of the global problems facing us.

Long before the Club of Rome published its findings on the global problems facing mankind and long before the recent media spectacle "One World for All" with its more than 50 individual telecasts, Erich Fromm was already an active pioneer in developing an awareness of the need for "One World" and the "world citizen". As early as 1962 Fromm expressed concern for mankind in the One World. His description of the One World was first expressed negatively, owing to the fact "that missiles can carry death and destruction to almost any part of the world in a matter of hours. The one world is one, so far, inasmuch as it is one potential battlefield, rather than a new system of world citizenship. We live in one world, yet in his feelings and thoughts contemporary man still lives in the

nation state. His loyalties are still primarily to sovereign states and not to the human race. This anachronism can only lead to disaster." (E. Fromm, 1962a, p. 171.)

Although the danger of this battlefield has been reduced by recent successes in disarmament talks and by the resolution of major conflicts of interest between East and West, Fromm's fears of a catastrophe have not yet been overcome, for national and individual egotism still stands in the way of a supra-national solution to global problems.

For Fromm, the technological revolution which has "shrunk the globe to the proportions of one continent or, rather, one state as they existed one hundred years ago" (E. Fromm, 1962a, p. 171) and cooperation based on an awareness of the basic question of humanity's existence are not reason enough to justify true hopes for overcoming the national, social and ideological division of our world. Fromm claimed (and successfully showed) that the revolutionary power of hope as based on man's well-being, i.e. on the complete harmony between man and nature, has a theoretical basis as well. This theoretical basis is Fromm's concept of man and humanity, which also lies at the heart of his portrayal of man's character.

2. Fromm's theory of humanity attempts to uncover the reasons for our divided world, for the split between man and nature, individual and society, between self and others, between having and being, between authority and



freedom. On the other hand, his theory also searches for new ways to unite the individual with his environment, with his immediate inner and outer worlds. Drawing from his theoretical considerations as well as from his practical experiences in the field psychoanalysis, Fromm eventually arrived at existential contradictions of human existence which not only explain this split but also provide the progressive impetus for overcoming these dichotomies.

According to Fromm, the process of becoming human and human existence itself are bound up in these existential contradictions. He describes these contradictions as follows: "Self-awareness, reason and imagination have disrupted the 'harmony' which characterizes animal existence." For man "is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being apart; he is homeless, yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures... Being aware of himself, he realizes his powerlessness and the imitations of his existence. He visualizes his own end: death. Never is he free from the dichotomy of his existence." (E. Fromm, 1947a, p. 3.)

This frightening experience of powerlessness and isolation results in what Fromm calls the psychic - or sometimes existential - need for relatedness and oneness. Fromm regards this need as a fundamental drive for unity with one's fellow man and with the world at large. (Cf. E. Fromm, 1966b, GA VIII, p. 40.) All needs arising as a reaction to these existential dichotomies - such as the need to relate to others, for rootedness, for experiencing unity and for an object of one's devotion - are determined by one key question, one fundamental tone: "What can man do to find a harmony to liberate him from the torture of aloneness, and to permit him to be at home in the world, to find a sense of unity?" (E. Fromm, 1964a, p. 117.)

Fromm's writings are full of examples illustrating the many different ways in which an individual, depending on his character structure and society's influences, responds to existential dichotomies and needs. Ultimately, according to Fromm, man has only two possible choices: "to regress or to move forward. He can either return to an archaic, pathogenic solution, or he

can progress toward, and develop, his humanity" (E. Fromm, 1964a, p. 119). The regressive answer achieves unity in an incestuous manner. The individual resigns himself completely to a given frame of reference such as God, religion, nation, class, political party or an authoritative personality, thus sacrificing his freedom, personal integrity and effectiveness. In the process, he also separates himself from other peoples and communities.

In view of the current revival of nationalism in the once totalitarian nations of Eastern Europe, it is particularly instructive to keep in mind Fromm's criticism of nationalism as "our form of incest, our idolatry and our insanity" (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 58). Fromm wrote that "nationalism killed humanism" (E. Fromm, 1962a, p. 170) and blocked the path to a "humane universalism." By putting one's own nation above humanity, above the principles of truth and justice, nationalism divides our One World and the One Man. Fromm criticized the love for one's country "which is not part one's love for humanity", for it is "not love, but idolatrous worship" (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 59).

The positive and productive answer given in the attempt to overcome a sense of apartness and to achieve unity represented for Fromm a paradox of behavior. Such behavior enables a person to experience oneness with his fellow man and all life yet also lets him preserve and experience his uniqueness and individuality (cf. E. Fromm, 1947a, pp. 97f.). Here the question arises as to whether the individual, in view of his psychic makeup and the fact that he is an undivided entity, is capable of understanding the individuality of another person, of feeling and empathizing with others. Fromm's positive answer is that our shared human nature forms the basis of our ability to communicate with and understand each other. For Fromm, the uniform substance of human nature is a result of the same questions of existential contradictions and needs facing each person that we have already cited as the ontological source of man's striving for unity.

The human condition, with its existential dichotomies and unsatisfied needs, is what connects one individual to another. "Finitude, loneliness, need and dependency are shared by



all mankind." (R. Funk) Different individual answers explain the discontinuity of human nature and the separate wholeness of the individual. The unchanging substance of human nature led Fromm to the conviction "that within each person is not only his own individual self but all of humanity, with all of its possibilities". In this respect, Fromm considers each individual a potential One Man. Fromm's humanistic guiding principle, where "it is the question, not the answers, that are the essence of man" (E. Fromm, 1968g, p. 9), and where "there is nothing humane which is not unknown to man", is a methodological principle based on traditional humanistic thought. What is new in Fromm's humanistic concept is the role of the unconscious in the human experience. As he wrote in *The Heart of Man* (1964a, p. 93): "The broadening of self-awareness, transcending consciousness and illuminating the sphere of the social unconscious, will enable man to experience himself in all of humanity." Fromm equates experiencing one's own unconscious to the experience of the One Man and of one's own humanity, thus "making it possible for me to say to every human being, 'You and I are one and the same. I can understand you in all your fundamental qualities, in all your good and your bad points, even when you go off the deep end, precisely because I find that all this is in me too.'" (E. Fromm, 1963f, pp. 77f.) Fromm's humanistic view of man bolsters our hope in the New Man. This hope can be realized in a world which struggles against the notion of outsiders and hate of foreigners but which tolerates the right to be different and promotes multicultural diversity. This kind of a world allows one to be a complete person, at one with himself, with his fellow humans and with nature.

3. Instead of experiencing oneness and the reality of the Sane Society, Fromm was confronted by estrangement and alienation everywhere. In his diagnosis of contemporary phenomena and mental disturbances he came to the conclusion that because of this widespread alienation not only "God is dead", but "man is dead" (E. Fromm, 1955c, p. 74); for man leads a day-to-day existence deadened by the pressures

of conformity instead of experiencing himself as a productive being full of life and feelings. The attempt to overcome this split results in alienation, for one seeks "to be identified with one's social role; to feel little, to lose oneself by reducing oneself to a thing; the existential split is camouflaged because man becomes identified with his social organization and forgets that he is a person; he becomes ... a 'one', a nonperson". (E. Fromm, 1973a, p. 234.) This impersonal "one" is closely related to Fromm's description of the necrophilous character. Fromm describes this character structure as "a passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion to tear apart living structures". (E. Fromm, 1973a, p. 332.)

Fromm's description of necrophilia and other character patterns are based on the concept of the social character which results from the interaction between individual psychic structures and socio-economic ones. (Cf. E. Fromm, 1976a, pp. 133-135.) According to him it "is the function of the social character to shape the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behavior is not a matter of conscious decision as to whether or not to follow the social pattern, but one of *wanting to act as they have to act* and at the same time finding gratification in acting according to the requirements of the culture. In other words, it is the social character's function *to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society*." (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 79.)

Fromm considered the character structure of contemporary capitalist society to be one orientated toward markets and possessions. The interchangeability of this character's attitudes according to the prevailing demands of the labor market reflects the reversal of values in a market orientation: exchange value and having are more prestigious than use value and being. Individuality loses its intrinsic value when - as Fromm writes in *Having or Being* - "the subject is *not myself* but I am what I have" and when "my property constitutes myself and my identity" (E. Fromm, 1976a, p. 77). The unity of subject and object, of having and being, is



totally disrupted by the orientation of having.

Fromm however was not content with this "state of affairs" and sought a way to resolve this disruption. Using the strategic means of mankind's well-being, Fromm ascribes the most important role to the change in character, to the birth of a new biophilic man. "For the first time in history", he wrote - in complete accordance with the report of the Club of Rome - "the physical survival of the human race depends on a radical change of the human heart" (E. Fromm, 1976a, p. 10). Fromm believed "that the One World which is emerging can come into existence only if a New Man comes into being - a man who has emerged from the archaic ties of blood and soil, and who feels himself to be the son of man, a citizen of the world whose loyalty is to the human race and to life, rather than to any exclusive part of it." (E. Fromm, 1962a, p. 178.)

4. In view of the devastating effects of the plundering of our One World, Fromm - who was also inspired by Albert Schweitzer's plea for "Reverence for Life" - attached great importance to being and the biophile, to the love of life. Thus Fromm's humanistic concept of morals, social upbringing and mankind was infused with an even more powerful biophilic content. Fromm believed that respect for the world and protection of the environment could only be expected from a new type of character structure, namely a biophilic one. Thus Fromm's New Man is the biophile. This New Man exhibits "the willingness to give up all forms of having, in order to fully be" (E. Fromm, 1976a, p. 170). His sense of identity is based on faith in what one is, on one's need for relatedness and solidarity with the world around one. The New Man realizes that "not things, power, all that is dead, but life and everything that pertains to its growth are sacred" (l.c., p. 171). The biophile's main concern is "sensing one's closeness with all life, hence giving up the aim of conquering nature, subduing it, exploiting it, raping it, destroying it, but trying, rather, to understand and cooperate with nature" (l.c., p. 171). Fromm considered the supreme goal of human life to be the full development of one's own personality and that

of one's fellow man. A biophilic character includes such traits as openness, tolerance, a sense of reality, discipline, the capacity for love and for critical thought, and "being fully present where one is" (l.c., p. 171).

The New Man, having a biophilic character structure and a productive orientation, prefers to construct rather than to retain. "His approach to life is functional rather than mechanical. He sees the whole rather than only the parts... He wants to mold and to influence by love, reason, by his example; not by force ... He enjoys life and all its manifestations rather than mere excitement." (E. Fromm, 1964a, p. 47.) The biophilic person attains security, self-confidence and happiness by employing such human strengths as love and reason, for the more they are used the more they grow. (Cf. E. Fromm, 1976a, p. 110.)

In contrast to the biophile, a person orientated toward having lives in constant fear of losing his property, or that it can lose its value; he is always ready for aggression. The New Man is not orientated toward having, but toward giving and sharing. Fromm was correct in his hope that such an approach would bring more peace to a world divided between haves and have-nots, between the overfed and the needy. Fromm's description of the New Man's most important character traits also includes the striving for freedom which goes beyond the negative "freedom from..." to a positive freedom, "the possibility to be oneself" (E. Fromm, 1976a, p. 172). This freedom is not a "bundle of greedy desires, but a delicately balanced structure that at any moment is confronted with the alternative of growth or decay, life or death". In the face of this confrontation, the biophilic person can derive a added sense of being alive from the realization that "evil and destructiveness are necessary consequences of failure to grow" (l. c., p. 172). For Fromm, the chance for a peaceful world free of hate, envy and destructiveness also involved providing the individual and society with real possibilities for creative activity and living life to its full.

5. Today - ten years after Fromm's death -



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questions regarding the relevance and realization of the biophilic One Man and One World have found answers which are more positive than sceptical. Due to the large number of human conflicts on a regional and national level, the North-South conflict and global problems yet unresolved, our scepticism is quite justified. Yet the initial successes in the process of European integration and the results, however modest, of the ecological movement can be regarded as positive answers. Owing to these positive trends, we have moved away from the tense confrontation between East and West, between man and nature and are now on the road to cooperation in all areas. This road, however, is still paved with many difficulties; the new unity brings new problems, including ones on the international level. With its international outlook, the Erich Fromm Society - and perhaps even this conference - can play a small role in solving these problems.

In our efforts to establish a peaceful and healthy world full of people with a biophilic character structure, Fromm's active humanism can be a great source of encouragement. In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that Erich Fromm's humanism is not only the belief in man, in his ability to attain a higher stage of development, in the unity of the human race, in tolerance and peace, in reason and love (cf. E. Fromm, 1965e, p. VII), but that it is also a way of life and personal action, a strength of character which fights for the reconciliation between people having different ways of thinking and feeling.

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