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The Condition of the American Spirit

Erich Fromm
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Within one century America's power and her economic, political and military resources have reached undreamed-of heights, and there still seems no end in sight to this rise. Does the American spirit show an equally impressive and promising picture?

For those, and they are probably still the majority, for whom the 'spirit' is nothing more than the psychic attitude which makes such economic and military success possible--energy, discipline, responsibility, courage--the condition of the American spirit must, by the very logic of their premises, be highly satisfactory. But there are many others--and their number is increasing--who cannot quite forget the sentence of the Bible: „What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?“ They realize that the 'spirit' which serves material production is not the same as the 'soul'; that while the one gains the other may lose.

How will the future historian look upon our society of today? Will he confirm the comparison made by Professor W. K. C. Guthrie between Hellenistic society, three hundred years before Christ, and our own? „The growing sense“, writes Professor Guthrie, „of the unimportance and helplessness of the individual and even of the long-familiar social and political units, in the face of great and intractable powers which seemed to mould events with the impersonal inevitability of fate, had an effect on the minds of men not unlike that of our own age.“ Or will he agree with Professor Stringfellow Barr's statement about Roman society at its peak, that the Roman suffered from three afflictions: anxiety, loneliness, and boredom, and that like we, ourselves, he turned all three maladies into a drive for power? Needless to say such analogies with past historical periods prove nothing in themselves. Like every analogy, they only point to a problem and stimulate an analysis of the more recent phenomenon, in order to decide whether the analogy has more than accidental significance.

Let me begin by pointing to an analysis of a much more recent situation which I made many years ago in *Escape from Freedom*, concerning the intense anxiety which filled Western man after the breakdown of the Medieval order. Man had gained freedom *from* the shackles of a fixed, static, feudal society, but he found himself alone, anxious, isolated, and overcame his malaise by giving way to a frantic compulsion to work, and to be successful. All his energies were mobilized for work in an attempt to escape his loneliness and anxiety. He succeeded in building, in the centuries that followed, an industrial society in which he--at least the member of the middle and upper classes--



could gain a good deal of security in the new social order he had created. He was „the master of his own ship“, even though his success was based on the crude exploitation of the millions who remained outcasts of the system. What has been happening with increasing speed since the beginning of the 20th century is a process similar, and perhaps even more drastic, than that which occurred after the end of the Middle Ages.

A revolution has occurred, as far-reaching, perhaps, as the French or Russian revolutions, but slowly and without violence. Except for the name 'capitalism', or 'private enterprise system', little has remained the same. The small or medium-sized enterprise is either disappearing or losing in importance; giant enterprises, owned in a legal sense by hundreds of thousands, but managed by a small managerial class, dominate the American economy. ([In 1967] the 200 biggest enterprises produce over 60% of the total of America's industrial output). The age of the „mass man“ has arrived. There is no longer a starving working class, (although there is still a minority who by their poverty and lack of education are, in fact, outcasts, composed mainly--but not exclusively, by Negroes.) There are cars, radios, television set, washing machines, leisure time, sufficient food for all except the „underdeveloped“ minority. There is a centralized, well meaning bureaucracy into which the individual has to fit, in behavior, thought, and psychological make-up. And only those who fit get the better jobs and the promotions.

The world around man has also changed drastically. Jet planes, missiles, space travel, the conquest of the moon, the discovery of nuclear physics with their practical results of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons, the possibility of the complete destruction of all life, or at least of all Western civilization, have completely changed the view of the world.

The effect of these changes is similar to those which occurred at the beginning of the modern period. Man again is frightened, anxious, lonely. He cannot understand these changes, he does not know their causes, he has no idea where they will lead him, he has not yet gained a new frame of orientation and devotion which would fit his changing world. How does he react to this anxiety?

There are many different ways. One way is to repress anxiety and the sense of helplessness bewilderment by clinging stubbornly to the old customs of thought and behavior. Another is to look for a scapegoat that can be blamed for upsetting the old harmony by a fiendish design of its own. These scapegoats are fanatically hated as the one obstacle to security and peace. Another way to respond to anxiety is to escape into the herd; to seek shelter in the big organization, the state, mass opinion, etc. Like a child seeking comfort from a nightmare through mother, so the frightened man today seeks comfort in the Great Mother of today: the Organization.

Still another way, one which is of universal significance and usually blended with some or all of the others mentioned above, is the passion for consumption. There is an example for this connection between anxiety and greed which many people know from their own experience: they may suddenly feel an intense wish to eat, a wish that is not like ordinary appetite or hunger, but an almost irresistible passion which may occur quite regardless of the time which has elapsed since they ate before; if they have the energy to stop eating they will experience the anxiety which had been silenced by the eating. Other similar compensations are the passion to buy things, to drink, to smoke, and what is felt as a genuine sexual urge is frequently also an escape from and a compensation for anxiety. Thus man has become the „total consumer“. He „takes in“ drink, food,



cigarettes, lectures, sights, books, movies; all are consumed, swallowed. The world is one great object for his appetite: a big bottle, a big apple, a big breast. Man has become the suckler, the eternally expectant - and the eternally disappointed.

Needless to point out how this passion to consume is linked with our industrial system. A large part of our production serves this 'escape by consumption', and for economic reasons a certain sector of industry seduces the individual with all possible means of suggestion to increase his addiction to consumption. (It seems as if our hysterical war against a relatively harmless drug like marijuana is making this drug a scapegoat for the general consumption addiction, which is, as a whole, psychologically more harmful, than this one drug, which lacks the support of powerful interests like that enjoyed by cigarettes or liquor.)

Closely related to anxiety and bewilderment is another characteristic feature of modern man: his sense of powerlessness. I can hear many objections to this statement. Does contemporary man not feel that he has become the master of nature; that he has found the key to the energy of the atom; that he has stepped over the threshold of the traditional concept of space by moving into extra-terrestrial space? Does the American citizen today feel powerless, when he has extended his power over almost the whole world, with the exception of the Communist and a few neutralist countries? Is his power not the same as that of his Roman antecedent, whose proudest word was: „I am a Roman citizen?“

This may all be true; but we must not forget that power has two meanings. There is the power *over* something; the power over nature and over people. But there is also power *to*—the power, or potency, to think, to love, to feel deeply, to create, and, as Nietzsche once put it, the power to promise. Or, to put it differently, 'power to' results from the sense of self, of identity, of independence, in which I experience myself as the subject of my authentic experience, feeling, thought, action, and hence feel potent. On the other hand, 'power over' is experienced as the faculty which I have as being part of, or an extension of the machine, programmed to perform certain acts for which only intelligence and energy, but no activity of the „soul“ is required. The man at the wheel of the powerful sports car feels powerful, although in his relationship to his fellowmen and himself he may have a sense of utter impotence. But he easily confuses the power of the engine with the power of the man--himself.

Contemporary man feels powerless not only because he does not understand the revolutionary changes that have occurred, but most of all because he, as an individual, is dealing with giant bureaucracies--those of business, government, the armed forces, etc., which are impersonal, and for which the individual is merely a cipher to be used for the growth and smooth functioning of the whole. It is not that the individual is badly treated. On the contrary. He is treated as a valuable piece of the machinery, one in whose education society has made a considerable investment, and he is well fed, clothed and entertained in the way and to the degree that seems necessary in order to make him function adequately and without friction.

He is free. But his freedom is mainly that of choosing between the different brands of commodities and entertainments which vie for his favor. He is free to think and to say what he thinks. That is a great blessing, but not too many make use of it. They prefer to believe that the clichés they read express their own original thought, and that it is not worth while to think things which, if said, may be disadvantageous for one's ad-



vancement.

But more than anything else, people feel powerless because they know that they cannot influence decisions, not even those which deal with the life and death of themselves and their children. Citizens voting for a presidential candidate and members of Congress; stockholders voting at a stockholder's meeting; the union members voting for a slate of officers, all exercise a largely ritualistic function. The fact is that the issues are difficult and complex, that circumstances often change suddenly, makes active participation difficult enough. But while these difficulties could be solved, there are others which make a solution almost impossible.

The representatives of the people form a professional group, many--although not all of them--mainly concerned with their own professional advancement, and there is no machinery that permits the individual to express an opinion and to influence events by doing so. All this is the more grave because information is scanty and often distorted. But even this is not the worst. The worst is that the average citizen is not trained in critical thinking. He is easily led by a plausible argument, since he has not acquired the habit of concentrating on and penetrating to the core of an issue. There is, indeed, a two-way connection between thinking and acting. While it is true that in order to act right one must think right, it is also true that one's thinking about actions functions well only when it is geared to some action. When it is impotent to influence anything, it becomes weak and fuzzy.

Does religious faith help man, today, to overcome his loneliness and his sense of impotence? It should do so; in fact, the idea of faith is precisely that the individual rests on his own faith and convictions, and does not run higher and thither asking for the right answer, in order to adopt, finally, the most popular one. Buddhism as well as Judaism and Christianity were revolutionary religions; the Gospels, indeed, „a scandal to the Greeks“. But we, on the contrary, use symbols belonging to a genuinely religious tradition and transform them into formulas serving the purpose of alienated man. Religion has largely become an empty shell; it has been transformed into a self-help device to increase one's own powers for success. God becomes a partner in business. *The Power of Positive Thinking* is the successor of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

It is not different with love of man from what it is with love of God. Love of man is a rare phenomenon too. Automaton do not love; alienated men do not care. What is praised by love experts and marriage counselors is a team relationship between two people who manipulate each other with the right techniques and whose love is essentially an egotism à deux--a haven from an otherwise unbearable aloneness.

How could it be otherwise since our whole industrial civilization, in practice, discourages all those attitudes which our religious tradition demands--that of love for one's fellow-man, humility, the overcoming of narcissism, of greed, the coveting of anything. Is that what most people try to achieve? Obviously not. In fact, if they did they would not succeed in an environment which rewards exactly those qualities which in the eyes of the Old and the New Testament, as well as in the eyes of Buddhism and Taoism are vices. Our industrial civilization feeds man's egotism, his greed for things, for power, for prestige; it discourages selflessness and humility in all its practices, except, perhaps, in war. In fact, it leads to idolatry.

What are idols, and what is idolatry?

The idol is a thing made by man's hands, yet one before which he bows down as if



he were the slave and the work of his hands were the master. When he does so he is not fully alive, because he makes himself the worshipper of a thing, that which is 'not-life'. Instead of being an open system, with the possibility for an unforeseeable evolution, the idolater makes himself into a closed system, as closed as the image he worships.

Today we think of idols in terms of the idols of thousands of years ago. Baal, Asartate, Venus, Zeus, the image of a Roman Emperor. We think that because we „believe“ in God we cannot be idolaters. Yet we too worship the work of our hands and the circumstances made by us, except that we give them other names and we consciously do not think of them as being sacred. But we prove that they are sacred to us by our willingness to die for them--and what is worse, to live for them.

What are these idols? The organization, the state, power, the „future“, unlimited consumption, and even God has been transformed into an idol. Idolatry is the same as what has been called in more recent philosophical discussion 'alienation'. The alienated man sees himself confronted by things and circumstances which stand over and against him, although they are the product of his own hands. He has created a world of powerful instruments and of complicated circumstances, but he has lost control of them. He is controlled by his own creation. He makes his instruments more and more powerful, and he feels himself correspondingly more and more powerless. A profound American theologian, Harvey Cox, has expressed this phenomenon in religious language: „God has placed the tiller of history in man's hand, but man has gone to his hammock and let the winds and tides sweep his ship along.“ What more drastic example for alienation could exist than the nuclear bomb, the product of man's intellectual genius, and yet a menace to all; a menace which, in spite of all attempts, man has not yet been able to put under such control that it ceases to threaten him with extinction?

Man today feels not only impotent, lonely and anxious; he is also intensely bored. How could this be, many an incredulous or even indignant reader will ask, when it is precisely one of the most valued traits of our culture that we are never bored? We look at television by the hour, we take a drive, we travel, go to parties, etc. There is not a minute of unoccupied time from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep. Indeed, consciously we are not bored; but I should like to ask, how dreadfully bored must one be that even most of television's empty entertainment, meaningless social chatter, dishonest and sentimental movies, are a satisfactory 'relief'? Indeed, we spend much effort on saving time, but then we do not know what to do with it, except to „kill the time“ we have saved.

Boredom is related to the absence of inner aliveness, productive activity, genuine relatedness to the world, true interest in everything around us; most fundamentally, perhaps, to the absence of love of life. Boredom is the opposite of joy, but modern man little knows what joy is. He knows what pleasure is, what fun is, what thrill is; but joy, that deep, glowing experience which requires no stimulus, no gadget, which is serious and light at the same time, is a rare experience.

And not only joy. Any deep feeling which is not connected with „doing something“ but which requires concentration and quiet has become alien to most people. They want to be „happy“ and they understand by happiness the satisfaction of all desires and the absence of pain. But this happiness is by its very nature superficial and not joyous; it excludes sadness--and we do everything to exclude sadness, from avoiding conflicts for children to the elegant appearance of an embalmed body. But anyone who has not lost



the capacity for genuine deep feeling cannot help feeling sad many times. In fact, the problem of living is if not that of being happy, but that of being very alive; whether one experiences joy or sadness is secondary to experiencing aliveness.

Much more could be added to this picture. Our inability to be still and to concentrate, and instead our compulsion to be „doing something“ all the time. Our confusing of information with knowledge, shallow intellectualism with penetrating thought. Our irresponsibility toward ourselves and future generations by letting our cities go to seed, allowing our rivers and air to be polluted, our streets to be congested.

Eventually, we must consider the fact that we are always concerned with means and instrumentalities, not with ends; that we do not ask *where* we are going, as long as we have found the way, *how* to get 'there'. We are like a man who drives a car and dimly senses that he has lost the way. Instead of stopping and taking account of himself and his situation to see whether he is headed in the right direction, he is concerned only with driving faster and tinkering with his motor to effect greater speed. We seem to be driving 'nowhere' but with ever-increasing speed. This nowhere may in reality be the self-destruction of the human race. We find ever more efficient weapons of destruction--without realizing that eventually we are headed for extinction.

Is there no hope left? Are we witnessing the final act of a Greek tragedy, with the chorus warning of the impending disaster, but helpless to act? Maybe we are. But as long as there is life, as long as human creativity finds such beautiful expression as it does in contemporary science, art, literature, there is hope. The condition for change is to see the facts objectively without indulging in rationalizations. To recognize and to do away with the contradictions between what we do and what we profess, to make up our minds whether we are willing to consider that love is superior to hate, that spiritual strength is superior to success on the market, that to *be* is more important than to *have*.

There are millions of Americans today, particularly among the young generation but by no means exclusively so, who are in a questioning mood and in search for a more meaningful way to live. They are spiritually hungry, and are groping for answers to satisfy their quest. Neither violence nor L.S.D. nor sexual promiscuity will offer satisfactory answers, even though they contain a kernel of truth, each in its own distorted way. In my opinion this questioning mood and the readiness for change are more widespread and more profound in the United States today than in any other country, and for this reason America is perhaps the potentially most promising country for a spiritual and social renewal.

We are already within reach of the 'consumer's paradise', and many may feel that even if they can have more of the same, this will not make them feel more alive and joyous. Many young people are ready to change, but they are unsure of the direction they should take. They distrust all traditional, philosophical, religious and political formulations because they rightly feel that the traditional ideals have been misused for the defense of selfish interests and of aggression, and that their own idealism has been exploited. Yet, if the connection with our tradition is severed, wither will the young generation go? There is no substitute for the achievements of the human mind in the last five thousand years. The task before us is to bring the tradition to life, to rescue it from a position in which it has become a sterile and alienated part of „education“, and to apply it to the problems of today.

If this renaissance of our humanist tradition does not occur, fanaticism will grow on



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all sides. Man without rational faith is so deeply frightened that he has to hate, and the only affirmation of his own values then lies in the accusation that his enemies lack these values, thus projecting one's own lack upon the „enemy“. We try to affirm our values by accusing the Communists of being materialistic, etc., forgetting that we are just as materialistic and that we do not become less so by inventing a devil who is the incarnation of evil. The use of this mechanism may make one feel better, and protect one from self-doubts, but it is destructive of any possibility of change within oneself. In this sense the anti-Communist crusade, aside from its political dangers, does a great deal of harm to the possibilities of our own human development.

To find a new faith--be it conceptualized in theistic or in non-theistic terms--is no easy task. It cannot be found by violence or common hate. It can be done only if we have the courage to face ourselves without accusing either others or ourselves. But this is not enough. We must build a life which truly can attract our love of life, rather than one which appeals to our love of death. The process of living must become intensely interesting to the individual, rather than only that of making a living. This requires fundamental changes not only in our effective values, but also in our socio-economic structure. Economic ends, profit, the 'organization', must cease to be man's rulers, and become his servants.