



## Political Strategies for Social Change according to Erich Fromm (Summary)

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### 1. Elements of an effective political strategy

When formulating a political strategy, the following points should be kept in mind:

- \* It should proceed from existing relative strengths.
- \* It should respect the interrelationships between various spheres of influence and bring about change all spheres (political, economic, intellectual, mental) simultaneously. „Undoubtedly one step of integrated progress in all spheres of life will have more far-reaching and more lasting results for the progress of the human race than a hundred steps ... in one isolated sphere.“ (E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 272)
- \* Addressing the controversial problem of reform vs. revolution, or radicalism vs. reform, Fromm remarked that the „true criterion of reform is not its tempo but its realism, its true ‘radicalism’,“ (E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 273). This means that the speed of a political strategy is not as important as getting to the heart of the matter; instead of formulating superficial statements and trying to patch up symptoms, we should touch upon actual causes.
- \* The political strategy should take an approach similar to that used for curing individual mental diseases. This involves three conditions:
  - 1)conflict: symptoms, (un)conscious distress, desire for change

- 2)perception: suffering, causes, repression
- 3)change of life style

### 2. Conditions for political strategies in capitalist society

Let us now apply the three conditions above to the Federal Republic of Germany:

1. Conflict: What conflict? The Federal Republic is a prosperous, competent and efficient society. Others come and demand assistance, money and advice. The Federal Republic is today a top- of-the-line social model. Yet it displays many symptoms of flawed development: dying forests, drug problems, mental disorders, people look unhappy, are alienated...
2. Perception: Affluence does not come cheap: its price is the destruction of nature and the lack of opportunities for full human development. Human life has been turned into a product, a machine. Emotions are repressed, resulting in anxiety, boredom, despair, senselessness, loneliness (cf. E. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 10). Emotions which promote human self- development are also repressed: love, reason, productive activity.
3. Change of lifestyle: The capitalist system - as well as the bureaucratic socialist system - must be overcome; politics, economics and culture must take on new forms.



„Our only alternative to the danger of robotism is humanistic communitarianism.“ (E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 361.) This is not primarily a legal or financial problem, but „that of sharing work, sharing experience“ (ibid.). It is extremely important for people to experience themselves in their active being as influential, meaningful and linked to others. This requires compact, decentralized units. Fromm idea of work communities is a model example.

### 3. The strategy's essential problem lies in its attainment, its realization...

Erich Fromm pointed out at an early date the flawed nature of both capitalist and Soviet-style socialist countries, produced accurate analyses, made a number of excellent suggestions, and issued a urgent plea for us to change our ways and implement change. How do (did) people react to this? How are be lagging behind? And most importantly, what are we to do about it?

I for my part have observed that most of mankind, including the members of the Erich Fromm Society, are lagging behind in hope, courage and deeds. This can be explained - indeed expected - by Fromm's theory: alienated people living in an alienated society cannot be expected to change their patterns of thought and behavior easily. In my view, Fromm's theory is more suited for explaining hopelessness than for instilling a sense of hope. Some of the many reasons for this are:

- It is difficult to persuade people to hope.
- Fromm's theory/strategy is too realistic, too elaborate and too demanding to excite people.
- Fromm's own analysis shows that such a task is all but impossible.
- Fromm failed politically (Socialist Party, McCarthy for President).
- Fromm gave his own proposals only half-hearted support (grass-roots organizations,

cultural council, Institute for the Science of Man)

- Since 1955, things have gotten worse instead of better.
- Fromm's thought lacks a clear revolutionary subject (proletariat, avant-garde, fringe groups)
- Fromm's theory demands too much: who can make one step of progress in all spheres of life simultaneously?

### 4. Erich Fromm's political strategy

Nevertheless: no matter how slim the chances of success are, we have no other alternative but to support radical humanistic reform. Erich Fromm has made a valuable contribution to this in his

- \* analysis of contemporary relative strengths (social character),
- \* vision of a humane society (communitarian socialism) and
- \* proposals for realizing this vision in society.
  - Of decisive importance is the ability to recognize the repression of emotions, and to improve oneself in this respect, especially in terms of hope(lessness), in one's love of life.
  - This requires a concerted effort of character aimed at strengthening the biophilic part of one's personality
  - This could take place in small groups at the grass- roots level - i.e. humanistic self-help groups.
  - This should also be coupled with ways to promote biophilic views, approaches and efforts in politics, economics and culture.

HUMANISTS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!

„We need to establish workshops of renewal where we can reforge the scattered pieces of our personality.“ (U. Schaffer)