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## Freud's Heir Judges the Referendum Interview mit Giulio Nascimbeni

Erich Fromm  
(1974f-e)

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*Nascimbeni:* I have arrived here to talk about divorce and the referendum with Erich Fromm. The great psychoanalyst's house is called 'La Monda.' Fromm spends a good part of the year here. From his desk one can see the lake, that today follows all the rules of the seasonal scenery: some motor boats, some yachts, a little wind, to scattered remains of snow on the mountains. The room is unadorned: books also on his tea-trolley, and two blue posters that show a man and a woman in a strange design of skyscrapers and leaves. Perhaps they symbolise Adam and Eve as they would be today.

The choice of Fromm (heir and critic of Freud, participant in the lessons of the Frankfurt school with Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, considered by many to be the greatest living psychoanalyst), as the person to interview on divorce, is a homage to all that this man has written, in years and years of splendid cultural service, on the theme that excites and worries us more than any other: that of freedom. Perhaps never as in these last weeks has our country felt like talking, even in the ambiguous compulsion of slogans and electoral offers, about freedom of conscience, freedom in faith, and civil liberty. Without going back to the farthest roots of these human values and of their opposites, Fromm's works are available to those who wish to grasp above all the present day feeling; that feeling that the most recent massacres of history have tried to dim and confuse.

It was Fromm who said that if in the 19th century the problem was: God is dead, in the 20th the problem is: man is dead. Dead because he has fallen into frozen „mechanics of flight“ like authoritarianism, violence or 'robot' conformism, to which he succumbs in the name of irrational fears. The task of a society ought not to be to exploit anxiety and insecurity as limitations of freedom; the process of development of freedom cannot build a vicious circle, and man can be free yet not isolated, independent yet an integral and living part of humanity. A speech that holds true also for love, the most wonderful gift that we are given. It too, like man, is dead if it is considered present and alive only as far as codes seal it with stamps and signatures.

We know how all this is daily in front of our eyes, in the hopes and fears in head and in heart. They are not the ideas and judgments that Fromm will tell me before long, but the old yet very fresh, fruit of what he has been investigating for more than forty



years. Few like him have refused the consoling ‘varnish’ of the existence lived by committing to others (to demiurges, to prophets, to saviours or still more passively, to their symbols) the meaning and order of ourselves. One should not „live vicariously“ Fromm wrote a long time ago. The old master (he is 74) is still ready to clinch it here, on this calm afternoon on the lake, gazing smiling at the interviewer come from a country which is very near, a few kilometers beyond the water and the mountains, but which now, in the talk on freedom and love, seems to become far away.

You maintain that to oppose divorce is to return into that „fear of freedom“ which you have dealt with in a few of your works?

*Fromm:* As long as there is no divorce, people are forced to stay together and their relationship becomes a right of property of one over the other. One possesses the other, although one must admit that in a patriarchal country the man exercises the possession of the woman more than the woman exercises the possession of the man. The man and the woman can count on what they have and feel secure in this situation, but to love a human being one must feel free, one must win the love of the other every day. As an old French song says, ‘love is the child of freedom.’ But precisely because love needs freedom, people are afraid to love and prefer the certainty and stability of possessing the other. This is surely an aspect of the „fear of freedom.“

*Nascimbeni:* In your book „Escape from Freedom“ in which you have deeply analyzed in 1941 the phenomenon of fascism, you wrote: „the authoritarian character respects the past. What has been must be for ever.“ Do you think that if the Italians lost the right to divorce one could say it was a victory for authoritarianism?

*Fromm:* I believe that it would be appropriate to speak of it, and it is so in several situations. The fact that the State has the right to dictate the law with regard to the most personal and intimate of all relationships, constitutes in itself and for itself the survival of an authoritarian principle. Besides, another aspect of authoritarianism is involved. I refer to that principle mentioned by you, that one finds in all authoritarian systems: the past determines the present. In this case it is not only the historic past that is imposed, but it is also the personal past that assumes a form of supreme power. I will explain: where there is no divorce, a past decision (from whatever reason it was motivated, and we know how casual, silly and irrational these reasons often are) decides the present and the future of two people instead of allowing the present to express itself with one of its deciding voices.

*Nascimbeni:* Always in your book „Escape from freedom“ one sees this sentence: „Love, duty, conscience, patriotism, have been and still are used as masks to destroy.“ Do you think also that indissoluble marriage can be used „as a mask?“

*Fromm:* I believe it can be used as in mask under many ways. The support of State authority in intimate events tends to make people submissive, takes out of their hands the ability to decide, to deprive them of initiative and responsibility. Indissolubility imposed by law masks the raising of the property system above that of a full life as the highest principle.“ Finally, and this is in a way more subtle, it hides the system of masculine su-



premarital and domination. Extramarital relations and prostitution are the historical results of marriage without divorce. But those who oppose divorce don't like to talk about this.

*Nascimbeni:* What does a psychoanalyst feel about the idea that more than thirty million people must, with a „yes“ or a „no“ decide on a problem of conscience like divorce?

*Fromm:* I believe that not only a psychoanalyst and not only a man who looks after publicity and public relations, but also other people with the slightest critical mind, knows that for the major part of the people, in general, it is easier to say 'yes' rather than 'no.' Therefore the same formulation of your referendum can influence people's vote.

*Nascimbeni:* What, for you, is conjugal love?

*Fromm:* Love in marriage and love between human beings, more specifically between a man and a woman and, still more precisely, the love of a couple who believe in the possibility of loving each other for life. Therefore the real question is: what is love? It is a vast argument. It is easier to say what love is not: It is not sexual attraction or satisfaction or the mutual pleasure of being together as long as it lasts. It is not a passive thing like „to be loved“ but something active. It implies being affectionately concerned one with the other, the real knowledge of the essence of the loved person. It implies the wish for complete affirmation of the other person and the renunciation of a good bit of our attachment to egoism. One does not start life with a fully developed capacity to love, but to arrive at even this half one must work all one's life. It is the same as the growth of a person. It is an art which needs to be practised every minute and without such practice, as in all the arts, one fails. Marriage offers the chance to two people to develop their capacity to love and to love each other in a growing way. If they do not succeed - and here let us turn to the problem of divorce - and are instead obliged to make a pretence of loving each other, then they will begin to hate each other in many subtle and ambiguous ways.

*Nascimbeni:* Can, according to you, the presence of a law that allows divorce lead to the destruction of love in marriage?

*Fromm:* I believe that there are not a few sincere people who are against divorce because they believe that it weakens or reduces the love in a marriage. These people probably think of the phenomenon which is confirmed in some western countries where people marry in haste and divorce in haste: in reality this happens because the nature of certain so-called love is a mixture of sexual attraction, narcissism and existential boredom. But if one is occupied, as I am, with the fundamental meaning of love, then one must consider the problem in a different way. The basic argument of those who take a side against divorce is mistaken. Many things in life, perhaps the biggest part of them, can be forced. Love is one of the very few things which refuses any forcing, any obligation. Therefore, to make divorce impossible does not lead to an increase of love but, as



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I have already said, to submission and insincerity. People are constrained to make a pretence of loving each other, repressing the real knowledge of the non-existence or of the end of love. But the repressed non-love is exactly the same as the conscious feeling of non-love, with the sole difference that the latter fills each person with a deep sense of dishonesty. Those who are concerned with love must begin to recognize that modern industrial society is a very poor climate for love to grow. In a society where the chief aim is „to have more“ instead of „to be more“, where greed, egoism and destruction rule, love is like a plant in poor earth, with too little water and too little sun. Nevertheless, love is such a fundamental impulse in man that miraculously it lives and grows even today, in not a few people. Those who speak of marriage as sacred must of love as sacred, and must fight against conditions in society that transform the act of love into an extremely difficult exercise, more so than to fight only against divorce. Frequent divorces are a symptom of a society without love: but the wish to cure only the symptom, prevents the cure of the true cause.