



Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

Remarks on the Policy of Détente

Erich Fromm
(1975a-e)

The paper “Remarks on the Policy of Détente” was Fromm’s answer to the invitation of Senator J. W. Fulbright, Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, for an analysis of the politics of détente. First publication in: *Détente. Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, Washington (US Government Printing Office) 1975, pp. 455-459.* - Numbers in {brackets} indicate the next page in the first English publication.

Copyright © 1975 by Erich Fromm; **Copyright © 2011** by The Literary Estate of Erich Fromm, c/o Dr. Rainer Funk, Ursraier Ring 24, D-72076 Tuebingen / Germany. – Fax: +49-(0)7071-600049; E-Mail: fromm-estate[at-symbol]fromm-online.com.

I

American-Soviet tension is not essentially based on serious conflicts about markets and raw materials but on two mutual fears.

The first fear stems from the nuclear arms race. Given the fact that each superpower can destroy the other in nuclear war, the ‘peace-by-deterrence’ principle is only valid as long as there is no acute situation of military confrontation.

But if a situation should get out of hand diplomatically, as it is possible in areas of conflicting interests such as the Middle East, and should either side find itself faced with a humiliating retreat or military defeat in the beginning of a conventional war, the two establishments would choose even the certainty of being destroyed to admitting humiliation or defeat. Whether this is a sound principle from the standpoint of responsible leadership or even from the standpoint of established military tradition, is not the question here. What matters is that as long as both superpowers have the capacity to destroy each other, confrontation can lead to atomic war, even though neither side wants it. I am not speaking here of the more remote possibility that by faulty intelligence or poor judgment, either side could at a given moment be tempted to assume that it has reached certain technical advantages--and that the other side may soon reach such advantages--which may make it worth risking a first strike. {456}

It follows from this consideration that political détente is of vital importance. It follows also that it remains a fragile security unless it is combined with nuclear disarmament. In fact without serious steps toward disarmament, the talk about détente may be even dangerous. It may lull people--political leaders and their countries--into the illusion that all decisive steps for peace are made and may deflect from the crucial importance of disarmament.

Apparently in the United States as well as in the Soviet Union there are conflicts about extent and speed of disarmament between the military and certain civilian leaders. These conflicts, as far as the United States are concerned, must not be hidden from public knowledge and excluded from debate. Even considering the technical character of the subject matter and a necessary amount of secrecy, Americans are entitled to know at



least as much about our defense problems as the Soviet leaders know about their through their intelligence apparatus. and must be able to express their choice among divergent possibilities. What remains of a democratic society if the majority of the population has no way of expressing its wishes in the most vital question there is:--the physical survival of the nation? Members of the executive and of Congress who see the danger of the continuation of the arms race, must be able to seek support from those who entrusted them with power.

II

The second fear is that of each side that the other wants to achieve world hegemony. This used to take the form of the American belief that the Russians wanted to revolutionize the world by force, and the Russian belief that the capitalist world wanted to undertake a crusade to liberate the world from communism. Indeed in the last decade the illusory character of the two assumptions has been recognized by most responsible politicians in the United States and in the Soviet Union. However, a large part of the population to whom this cliché has been preached for many decades, and even political leaders who have recognized that communism is not a monolithic bloc bent on revolutionizing the world still continue to harbor their original concept and go on believing that the present wish of the Soviet Union for coexistence is only a momentary retreat from the sill existing „ultimate“ aims. They still believe in the Soviet propaganda which claims that the Soviet Union is a socialist and a revolutionary society following the ideas of Marx and Lenin. The point that needs to be stressed is that this is an illusion.

It is important to recognize that since the beginning of Stalin's ascendancy to unrestricted power, Russia has ceased to be a revolutionary power; on the contrary it is aside from Spain, the most conservative power in Europe, with the ideals of „duty, patriotism and work“--rather than „freedom, equality and fraternity.“ Stalin liquidated the Russian revolution completely and what he called „to build socialism in one country“ was in fact the formula for a method which would achieve the industrial reconstruction of Russia in the shortest time. Had a nationalistic antisocialist leader taken over the country in 1917, Russia would probably be at the same point as it is now. But Stalin had to use Marxist-Leninist slogans and ideas because after the overthrow of Czarism and of religion there were no formulae which attracted the masses and no image like Lenin's which gave them faith and confidence. But Stalin needed the revolution ideology also in order to keep the allegiance of communist parties around the world, which were important pawns for the Soviet Union's foreign policy. These parties could be used as a threat or a bargaining point with other countries, and the orders from Moscow were hot or cold depending on what served the purposes of Moscow foreign policy.

What Moscow did not want, under any circumstances, however, was a revolution anywhere in the world. This is not surprising. In these matters the internal political structure of a society determines foreign policy. A state based on complete control over the workers by a party bureaucracy cannot tolerate a genuine revolution anywhere else, without great risks for its own system. Such revolutionary ideologies are useful purely if taken in a ritualistic sense, but they must not be applied practically. The Soviet Union can tolerate „communist“ regimes only in small countries over which she has total military control, which guarantees that their own reactionary practice is applied in the name



of „communism.“

The record of Soviet policy bears out what has just been stated. To mention only a few outstanding examples

- (1) the Soviet Union prevented a German revolution before 1933 which might have been the consequence of a common flight of the Socialist and Communist {451} parties against Hitler; in fact the Communist party made at one time an alliance with the Nazis against the common enemy: the Social Democrats. Stalin preferred Hitler to the risk of a German revolution.
- (2) the Soviet Union supported the Spanish Republicans just enough to save her own „revolutionary“ face, but not enough to win. She preferred the victory of Franco to a revolution and later exterminated almost all who had fought in Spain and might have been infected by the revolutionary bacillus.
- (3) after the liberation of France, Moscow averted the danger of a French revolution by ordering the French Communist party--then at the peak of popularity on account of its leading role in the Resistance--to surrender their arms and join the government.
- (4) the Soviet Union withdrew their help from the Greek communists as promised to England.
- (5) Stalin was against the Chinese revolution from the very beginning and the Soviet Union became extremely hostile to China when it could not control China's policy. In fact, the intense hostility against China in the last fifteen years, has the same reason as the Soviet hostility against all other communist or socialist theories which expose the conservative and anti-revolutionary character of the Soviet system. Fascist, reactionary systems are much more to Russia's liking; partly because they too have little respect for the individual and--more important--because they are a guarantee against revolutions.
- (6) The one apparent exception to this rule is Cuba. But because of the boycott by the United States the Cuban government was sufficiently controlled economically by the Soviet Union to put Castro on the leash as far as fomenting revolutions in Latin America is concerned. In the case of Allende, the Soviet Union made no attempt whatsoever to help his regime and by Moscow directives the communist parties in Latin America are the most moderate among the Socialist parties.

The second claim of the Soviet Union, that of being a socialist system in the sense of Marx, is equally false. It is based on the mistaken idea that the nationalization of industry and agriculture per se constitutes socialism. The Soviet ideologists say that they are a classless society, that they have achieved a true democracy, that they are moving toward the withering away of the state, that their aim is the fullest development of the individual personality, the self-determination of man. These are Marx's ideas; indeed, they are ideas that Marx shared with other socialist and anarchist thinkers, with enlightenment thought, and, in the last analysis, with the whole tradition of Western humanism. Yet the Russians have transformed these ideas into an ideology. A „state-managerialism,“ neither socialist in its spirit nor revolutionary in its intentions, uses these concepts to bolster up the power of its bureaucrats.

How can this phenomenon be understood? Are the Soviet leaders plain liars deceiving their people? Are they cynics who do not believe a word they say?

The answer is that Stalin or Khrushchev, using the words of Marx, use them ideo-



logically, just as many of us use the words of the Bible, of Jefferson, of Emerson, ideologically. We fail, however, to recognize the ideological and ritualistic character of Communist utterances, just as we overlook the ideological and ritualistic character of many of our own statements. Hence, when we hear the Russians talk about this hope for world revolution, we forget that it is not more realistic to them than our hope for the second coming of Christ.

That the Soviet Union is neither a revolutionary nor a socialist system has been recognized by nonsocialists such as the outstanding economist Joseph Schumpeter who stated that to understand Marx's thinking in terms of Soviet communism would be equivalent to understanding the Gospels according to the spirit of the Roman Catholic inquisition; the same view is held by virtually all socialists outside the various communist parties, from the far radical left such as the Chinese Communists to humanist socialists such as the Yugoslavian Marxists. Only the members of communist parties--and the American public--have fallen for and still believe in the Soviet claim to represent socialism and revolution.

(One reason for this receptiveness to Soviet propaganda may be found in the fact that the Soviet experts of the State Department, while very well informed on Soviet history and Soviet ideology, draw their knowledge of Marxist theory and the history of socialism from Soviet sources and not from a study of the original ideas. I believe that a well-founded knowledge in these subjects is necessary in order to judge the true character of Soviet ideology.) {458}

III

Aside from the lack of proper information about socialism there is another factor, a purely psychological one, which forms a serious obstacle to a realistic policy of détente: the paranoid mode in political thinking. As clinical evidence shows, there are two ways of acting; one is that after proper study of the reality one comes to the conclusion that an event is more or less likely to happen. The second way is to act on the premise that an event is possible. For an outcome to be possible only one premise is necessary: that the prediction does not contradict the laws of nature or of logic. But I do not have to enter into an analysis or evaluation of the facts which would show me whether something is likely to happen. In the normal thought processes by which we all conduct our lives, we act on the maxim to take things into account because they are more or less probable. If someone will not touch a doorknob because he might catch a dangerous bacillus, we call this person neurotic or irrational. But we cannot tell him that what he fears is not possible. His paranoid thinking does not violate the laws of logic, nor is it necessarily a distortion of reality. What is pathological about it is that it is a purely abstract logical possibility. Even a full-fledged paranoid thinking does not vitiate the laws of logic; paranoia demonstrates that one can be insane and yet that one's capacity for logical thinking is not impaired. The paranoid person is so removed from reality that he bases his beliefs on mere possibility. The normal person bases his beliefs on a greater or lesser degree of probability. The paranoid person wants to have absolute certainty that something could not happen even in the most remote circumstances. The healthy person makes his decisions on the basis that something is probable--or improbable. If we follow the principle of assuming that what is possible is also probable, our lives would be more crippled, or



even endangered, by defending ourselves against the „possible“ than it might be by events that could happen if we have thought only in terms of probabilities.

In foreign policy we find a good deal of the paranoid kind of thinking, in the assumption that what is possible must be considered to be a basis for decisions, rather than what is probable. This is not surprising. The less one knows about the full reality of a situation, the less one is able and willing to analyze it empirically and thoroughly, and the more one is willing to think of it in terms of abstract, paranoid thinking. This explains why people in the affairs of their personal lives usually think in a healthier realistic way in terms of probability than they do when they deal with matters of foreign policy.

Closely related to the problem of the made of paranoid thinking is the wish for absolute security. In individual life we know the irrationality of people who strive for absolute security--people such as hypochondriacs who spend most of their energy protecting their health, or overcautious people who avoid any risk, because it could interfere with their craving for absolute security. This craving is irrational (1) because there is no absolute security in life, (2) because once it is established as the dominant goal, there is no limit to the means sought for to reach this goal, (3) because in the search for this goal the person cripples himself and loses all pleasure in living. In fact, the chase after absolute security is a boomerang; it creates more insecurity than it avoids.

The same goal of absolute security is equally damaging when it dominates foreign policies. The nuclear armament on both sides has shown that already. economically it impoverishes us, politically it restricts freedom, psychologically it creates fear and apathy. The realization of our ideals for a rich human life requires that we change this for the rational goal of optimal security, thus accepting certain possible risks for the sake of avoiding the impoverishment brought about by the demand for the absolute.

Those who demand that political decisions must be made on the basis of excluding all dangerous possibilities „beyond the shadow of a doubt“ make a sane foreign policy virtually impossible, since one can never prove that certain things could not possibly occur. By this demand all constructive steps for détente and disarmament are made impossible. Hence the arms race, on the basis of this paranoid logic, must be continued by mutual fears based on technical and political „responsibilities“ rather than reasonable probabilities. As a result the alleged security gained by excluding all dangerous „possibilities“ leads, in fact, to the probability of mutual suicide. The only sane mode of thinking in matters of foreign policy is to distinguish between realistic probabilities and abstract possibilities and to be aware of the fact that our opponents are as {459} little suicidal as we are and have the same interest in survival and in the progress of their society.