



Books Back on the hook

Erich Fromm

The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness
Cape £4.50

Anthony Clare

Contemporary man, so the experts never seem tired of telling us, is terrified of his deep springs of innate destructiveness; he is haunted by the pervasive fear of a final holocaust to which they may ultimately lead. A casual observer might, nonetheless, be forgiven for concluding that such terror manifests itself in curious ways. Since with the exceptions of sex, sport and, possibly, politics, no subject appears to possess quite the same degree of fascination and appeal as human aggression. Readers of Robert Ardrey, Konrad Lorenz and Desmond Morris have slavered over the appalling beastliness and ingenious cruelties perpetrated by their fellow-men; they have born witness to their own impulses with a breast-beating eloquence worthy of a testifier, confessing his sins at a revival meeting. And they have, as Lionel Tiger put it, readily accepted as aggressive "everything from writing a screenplay to finding a cancer cure to garrotting a blind Venetian."

The era of the collective response, still with us, I fear, has made these testing times for all concerned and sensitive liberals. Hardly have we recovered from the exhausting declarations of collective responsibility for atrocities committed halfway around the world; and hardly have we unpacked from rigorous self-exploratory journeys in search of our collective guilts, than we have to face up bravely to the grim reality of our collective instinctive bloodthirsty lusts. If these be truths, then they are painful ones and one might reasonably expect that anyone even dimly aware of their implications would put up some show of resistance before accepting their validity. In view of the almost indecent haste with which such "truths" have been seized and trumpeted aloud, one is forced to conclude that such collective declarations merely confer a

spurious feeling of honesty and resolution, whilst contributing to the formulation of an ideology which soothes our anger, and relieves our distress, by rationalising our feelings of helplessness and impotence.

No one has done more to let us off the hook than Konrad Lorenz. Justly famed and respected by an informed few, as a gentle and sagacious ethologist, he has become a spokesman for a frightened generation by virtue of his "scientific" discovery of man the instinctive killer—that organic pot, forever on the boil, and in periodic need of letting off steam. The arrival of Robert Ardrey, successfully concealing his meagre claims to be a scientist behind his immense talents as a writer of fiction, and bearing a bulky file testifying to the nasty habits and unspeakable behaviour of primitive man, saw the darkness of ignorance illuminated by dazzling flashes of insight, as the true "explanation" of phenomena as diverse as the Cistine Chapel ceiling, Pearl Harbour and the heavyweight boxing championship of the world, was dramatically unveiled. It was as if we could only cope with the destructive excesses of the 1960s by enthusiastically embracing the status of naked apes and acknowledging as a scientific truth the simple proposition that man is, by his nature, driven by profound passions to commit mayhem.

Such instinctivist explanations have not had the field to themselves. The behaviourists have insisted that aggressive behaviour, like any other behaviour, can be explained by analysing the social reinforcements which exist in society and which shape and determine its appearance. Whereas Lorenz has described man as a machine that can only produce inherited patterns of the past, Skinner has portrayed him as a machine which can be manipulated to produce the socially determined patterns of the present. From different vantage points, the instinctivists and the behaviourists see man as a programmed robot, rather than as a thinking, feeling, self-aware organism in possession of a psyche with its own structure and its own laws.

It seems to have taken an inordinately long time for such simplistic views to receive the critical drubbing they so obviously deserve. In the meantime, a veritable dictionary of spurious aphorisms has flowered,

spawned by Lorenz's naive social Darwinism and the behaviourists' facile reductiveness. Suburban intellectuals, whose only claim to violence rests on a somewhat vigorous spraying of summer greenfly, and the odd guilty kicking of the neighbour's cat, earnestly assure themselves of the truth of the proposition that there is no love without hate, sadism is a genuine and honest manifestation of human sexual freedom and the children who burned in the Vietnam war were set alight by them.

The major fault with Erich Fromm's latest book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, is that it has come so late. Would that it had arrived a decade ago, just think what orgies of self-indulgent breast-beating we might have been spared. His perceptive dissection of the shambles that currently constitutes philosophising about aggression is provocative and original. He relentlessly exposes the logical flaws inherent in assertions such as that because wars have occurred frequently, man enjoys them; and he reviews in impressive depth the evidence against the popular view that primitive man was robustly aggressive and, in essence, a destroyer of his own kind.

At the heart of Fromm's thesis is a careful distinction between what he calls "benign" aggression—a programmed kinship impulse to fight or flee when the organism is threatened; a biologically adaptive aggression which dies with the removal of the threat; and "malignant" aggression, by which he means that cruelty and destructiveness, specific to the human race, which is not biologically adaptive and which has no purpose other than the provision of a lustful satisfaction. An even more important difference is that which he perceives between those drives, such as hunger or sex, which appear rooted in man's physiological needs (so-called organic drives or "instincts"), and those specifically human passions, such as love of life (or death), which he believes are firmly rooted in man's character. It is a crucial weakness of the book that Fromm does not clearly establish quite what he means by character; but he applies it in practice to describe certain psychic needs which are the product of man's existential conflict. Man is forced to overcome the horror of separateness, of powerlessness and of being lost and has to

find new forms of relating himself to the world, to enable him to survive.

In Fromm's schema, man is driven by love, or by the passion to destroy. In either case, he satisfies one of his character or existential needs—namely the need to matter, to make an impact, to have an effect, to move something. The football hooligan wrecking a train, the skin-head kicking a drunk, are not acting out instinctive or programmed responses, but are seeking, albeit in a perverted fashion, some existential meaning for the lives they live and the world they inhabit. Cruelty and violence represent, with love and tenderness, a desperate striving to make sense of life itself; but in the case of the former tendencies, life is turned against itself in the course of the search. Fromm accepts, as a biological necessity, man's need to move forward; to overcome obstacles; and to achieve a capacity for love and tenderness. It is the interaction of such biological needs with the socio-political realities which constitute our civilisation, that determines the final outcome. Failure to grow and develop (and Fromm, being a psychoanalyst, seeks the causes of such failure in the early life experiences of the individual), results in the development of that negative passion which manifests itself in the need to control life absolutely, or to destroy it.

Fromm illustrates his thesis with a number of absorbing character studies. For example, he explores Himmler's sadistic and authoritarian personality and notes how the combination of physical weakness: a close dependence on a domineering mother: a bitter jealousy of an older brother, possessing all the qualities which Himmler lacked; together with the moral bankruptcy and intellectual sterility which characterised the Himmler family's social class; produced the potential for ruthlessness and sadism which was to meet admirably the needs of Nazism's obsession with absolute power and total control. It is an effective piece of psycho-history; although it still fails (and Fromm acknowledges its failure) to explain why, of the many potential Himmlers in our midst, this one appeared in this particular way and at this particular time.

But Fromm's purpose is not to explain the nature of aggression, if by explanation one means providing the final answer, so much as to correct the picture painted by the instinctivists and behaviourists. He acknowledges the information which is emerging from neurophysiological and neuropsychological studies, without conceding that it in any way establishes the instinctiveness of man's aggression. And he draws attention to the way in which western civilisation, with its emphasis on power, competition and control, encourages the growth of sadism and cruelty, without deducing that aggression is merely a behavioural response to external stimuli.

It is not an easy book to read, least of all for those who have learned all they know of aggression from Ardrey's racy journalism and Morris's superficial sketches. Fromm writes in a rather heavy, humourless fashion; and he tends to pile argument

upon argument in a way which may cause some readers to accept (or reject) the logic of his case out of sheer exhaustion, rather than intellectual conviction. Yet it is a stunningly erudite book, ranging from a trenchant description of a variety of primitive tribes, each of which manifests a different degree of aggressive behaviour, to a stimulating discussion of Freud's conception of the life and death instincts. Whereas Freud tended to rank both tendencies equally and considered them both to be biologically determined, Fromm argues that whereas love of life is indeed a biologically normal instinct, the death instinct and necrophilia are psychopathological phenomena which are not parallel to, but *alternative* to, the life instinct. "Love of life or love of death," Fromm insists, "is the fundamental alternative that confronts every human being."

Such an assertion puts us back on the hook: for it does not allow us to seek refuge in platitudinous statements about instinctual urges and in-built behavioural circuits, but demands that we confront our own, and our civilisation's "*character*," if we are to understand the nature of our violence.

Down beat

Gordon Honeycombe

Adam's Tale

Hutchinson £3.25

Laurie Taylor

Gordon Honeycombe must have thought he was in luck. There he was, sitting around in Battersea looking for a good idea for his next book, when he heard that his neighbour down the road—Detective Constable Ackworth—was up at the Old Bailey with other members of the Drug Squad on charges of perjury and conspiracy. He promptly took him for a meal

"What a story," I said. "Why don't you write it down?"

"I can't," he answered, saying he didn't have the ability.

"Do you want *me* to write it?" I asked.

"Yes, if you like," he said."

Child's play. Almost as easy as reading the 10 o'clock news. The facts almost spoke for themselves. Ackworth had joined the police force after leaving Gordonstoun with three o levels, and after a short time he made it into the metropolitan drug squad where he spent most of his time wandering around the country dressed in hippie gear, catching big-time cannabis dealers. He was pretty successful. In one mission alone he helped trap a gang who'd just shipped £200,000 of the stuff into the country. But then came tragedy. All the hard work and success was to be for nothing, because as a result of suspicions about perjury in a case involving a Pakistani family, Adam was, first, moved out of drugs and into obscene publications (the so-called Dirty Squad) and then finally, in 1973, to the Old Bailey; where, after a long and well-publicised trial, he was eventually acquitted on charges of perjury and conspiracy.

Unfortunately, Honeycombe never seems

to have decided how to make use of all this material. At first, his decision to write in the first person as Adam Ackworth, leads us to expect a novel, perhaps some fictional elaboration upon the events, some imaginative introspection into Adam's life and loves. But the book remains resolutely earthbound, tied to facts, dates, names, courtroom transcripts.

But if it fares badly as a novel, it does even less well as a sociological document. There's some passing interest to be found in the glimpses which Honeycombe provides of the incestuous world of drug-prevention—a world where at times it would seem to make little difference if everyone changed roles—policeman, dealer, informant, smuggler, customs officer: hundreds of people chasing each other around in diminishing circles, buying, selling and confiscating. (What would they all do with their time if cannabis was legalised?) There are also one or two pleasant insights into daily life at central headquarters; the cannabis plants growing on the window sill in the Drug Squad room; the special evening shows of dirty films for members of the Obscene Publications Squad. But it's all chatty innocuous stuff. Crawfie's guide to Scotland Yard. A long way from living up to the dustjacket's claim to be "the most revealing account of contemporary police work yet written." Not that one can expect much more, for Honeycombe has already driven himself into a corner with his decision to write in the first person: if the whole point of the story is Ackworth's innocence in a wicked world, then he can hardly be allowed to have very detailed knowledge of the dirty tricks practised by his colleagues. So although Honeycombe (or Ackworth—who can tell?) declares that "if Mark was going to deal with police corruption in London, he would have to get rid of half the CID and uniformed police he had," we hear absolutely nothing about the nature of this corruption which could not be gathered from existing texts.

We can try one more perspective in the attempt to do justice to the book. Perhaps it should be read not as a novel, or a sociological document, but rather as a moral treatise on the lousy ways our society treats an honest cop—with Ackworth as a sort of homely Serpico figure. However, it's no easier to sustain this reading than any of the others. Hunting for cannabis is hardly a moral crusade and, anyway, even if acquitted Ackworth just doesn't come over as a particularly righteous figure. With Honeycombe's help, he is allowed to record his anxieties about the way other officers consistently cheat and lie in their jobs, but there's nothing in his own police record which shows him standing out against such abuses.

The dull fact that several of the men who were charged with him for related offences, connected to the same case, were found guilty, leaves an ugly moral gap in the later sections of the book. Were they actually guilty? Honeycombe appears to duck the question, perhaps recognising the uncomfortable implications of either position.



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