



THE GUARDIAN
LONDON, ENGLAND

OCT 26 1974

A deadly civilisation

Those who believe that man is innately destructive and that our defence against violence must always be further violence have one deceptive weapon: the word "realistic." As Isaiah Berlin once pointed out, when some one says, "Now let's be quite realistic about this," you can usually guess he is going to propose something very unpleasant. Conversely, writers like Fromm are generally assumed to be thinking wishfully when they write of a day when "visions that were utopian with the Buddha, the prophets, Jesus and the humanist utopians of the Renaissance will be recognised as rational and realistic solutions, serving... the preservation and growth of both the individual and the species."

However, Fromm here argues that the belief in man's innate destructiveness is itself without scientific basis. He proposes a much more complex account of its origins than evolutionary selection and heredity.

Hitler is perhaps to be understood not as a normally aggressive man but as a "necrophilic" like some 15 per cent of the population, a man disposed to a passionate interest in what is dead and decaying, and encouraged in this passion by the necrophilous strains in twentieth-century society and its class politics. In support of this thesis, Fromm assembles findings from animal psychology, anthropology and paleontology, as well as from his own psycho-analytic researches.

He argues against the view that

all aggression is either exclusively inherited or solely environmental. There is, he believes, one largely inherited form of aggression: a disposition to flee or fight when a man feels threatened; but even such "benign aggression" is to some extent shaped by society. Fromm argues against Lorenz's theory that men have "an aggressive instinct which they have to release periodically, and against the view that "savagery" is inherited from primitive men. Savages in fact hardly deserve the name. There is a wide spectrum of primitive societies, some tense, suspicious and perpetually quarrelling, some competitive, puritanical but not destructive, and others tolerant, sexually permissive, devoted to sharing and free from war.

Murder, warfare and even bargaining as opposed to sharing appear to Fromm rarer in the whole range of primitive societies than in urban civilisation; and he admires a stage of human history when he believes matriarchy and mother-goddess religions (stemming from a feminine discovery of agriculture) held sway for millennia over the near East. Slavery, class division, the hoarding of capital and large scale war would thus be comparatively recent inventions, products of the irrigation-based cities which, unlike his matriarchal settlements, all show signs of invasion, burning and flooding at the hands of conquerors. These were, for Fromm, the first sadists and necrophilics to rule mankind. So recent a development — about 7,000

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.

THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS, by Erich Fromm (Cape, £4.50).

years, albeit of deepening destructiveness — could conceivably be reversed in the not too distant future.

However, the containment even of "benign" aggression depends for Fromm on a new economic system — one that "guarantees the basic necessities for all" and leads to "The disappearance of dominant classes." This idea is dealt with in two earlier books and it is not a severe criticism to point out that it is very cursorily discussed here.

To contain sadism and necrophilia, however, requires not only change in society as a whole, but also individual diagnosis and understanding. Sadism, as with Stalin or Himmler, Fromm describes as a passion to control rather than to kill. Elaborating Freud, he sees it as a failure to develop towards loving "genital" adulthood; the sadism sticks at a tidy, punctilious and cruel stage of anal-eroticism.

Necrophilia, as with Hitler, is more mysterious still in its origin. Perhaps it stems from a close dependence on the mother which is not a warm attachment but rather a narcissistic expectation like the autistic child's, succeeded not by attachment to warm mother-substitutes but by cold devotion to impersonal representations of a destructive maternal principle: "The ocean in which (the necro-

philic) wants to drown; the ground in which he wants to be buried": thus to the familiar nationalistic symbols of blood and soil.

Unfortunately, in fitting his examples into this last picture Fromm has left the firm discipline of empirical studies and is in the looser world of psycho-analytic interpretation, where he must rely on data from dreams, accounts by friends of a mother's view of her child, and scattered records of odd expressions and gestures — evidence which can notoriously take shape like the moss on Leonardo's wall, to any picture the observer is predisposed to see.

He is admirably tentative in presenting his hypotheses. Nevertheless it is mainly on the basis of two reports of Hitler's ingratitude to his mother and to the fact that he played Indians till the abnormal age of 15, that Fromm ascribes to him as a boy the extreme narcissism and the flaws in his perception of reality characteristic of "intense necrophilia." Equally, Hitler's reluctance to witness murders and corpses is said to be evidence of a repression of conscious necrophilia, while his wish to see the film of one massacre is, on the other hand, evidence of his necrophilia also. Fromm is right to argue only tentatively from such premises, though it is fair to add that he is quite clear at all stages about where he has moved from solid evidence to these more speculative hypotheses.

There is however a danger of

logical confusion in the concept of necrophilia itself. When Fromm writes, "Love of life or love of the dead is the fundamental alternative that confronts every human being," it is clear — but only in context — that he means "love of dead things" and not love of dead predecessors, which has been a characteristic of many of the most life-loving of men. Again, when Fromm defines necrophilia as "the passion to destroy life and the attraction to all that is deadly, decaying and purely mechanical," he conflates destructiveness with a further idea. Like many inheritors of a German literary anti-mechanical bias (Carlyle, Ruskin and then, I think, Lawrence passed the tradition on in England), he identifies the mechanical with opposition to "life" thus condemning industrial society in advance. This is a fashionable view today, but it is too simple to deal with a real world in which there are also inventive engineers, generous mechanics, and people in automated factories relieved of life-long drudgery.

When these criticisms have been made the book remains a monumental work, one of the most valuable to have been written recently on this subject; and at all points it prompts lines of further investigation. The earlier part in particular shows very wide reading and clear argument: while even in the more speculative second half, Erich Fromm is a fair reasoner and his measured faith in human creativity and love shows through with a simplicity which is not naive.