

Critic's corner

On Disobedience and Other Essays by Erich Fromm (\$9.95, 35pp. New York: The Seabury Press, 1981)

In "Values, Psychology and Human Existence," the first of nine acts in *On Disobedience and Other Essays*, Erich Fromm, best known for the development of his acid, provocative ideas on love, transcendence, and the psychology of being, tackles the monumental causes for humanity's alienation, its powerlessness and ignorance, the accidentalness of birth and the inevitability of death; and most importantly, the imperative need toward intimate human relationships.

Love is the one passion which will satisfy humanity's urgency to unite with the objective world and at the same time lend a personal sense of integrity and singularity.

It is the beautiful obligation of our nature to love something; to touch the heart of someone, something outside of ourselves. To be suddenly aware that we are shaped by those we love, in the manner one is first moved by the rising sound and warmth of a warm summer night's wind sweeping over the watery shoals of a quiet lake, without reason, without explanation, threading together in an instant, our love and our humanity in a world where distant stars and the implacable boundless geography expands like an unchained ghost.

Make no mistake, this is not a mere part of our existence but the whole, the very life-breath of human solidarity. It is the erotic love of man and woman, the love of the mother for her child, and the love for oneself as a human being which relates and armonizes us with other human beings. It raises us beyond passivity and the eventuality of time and space into the boundless, often roundless realm of human purpose and freedom.

Fromm's discourse "Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem" eloquently affirms the noblest aspirations of the rebellious human spirit, the heroically disobedient individual who can only continue to evolve by the very acts of his or her disobedience.

Just as the Hebrew myth of Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden

symbolizes the breaking of ties with nature, the individual, through a disobedient act, was able to take the first step into independence and freedom. We must take the risk to rely on our own powers to become fully human. We must dare to steal the fire from the gods like Prometheus to lay the foundation of humanity. If man can *only* obey and not disobey, he will continue to be a slave; or a bureaucrat in the worst, Kafkaesque sense.

The domination of the "system" will rest with whoever controls the apparatus of submission for the organization of human action. The result will be a society of living dead manipulated and dehumanized by a *Herrenvolk*, or "master race." Slowly but surely Fromm fears that the crisis of humanity is once again fast arriving with the metallic clash of engaged gears.

In "Prophets and Priests," Fromm tells us there is little, if any escape from the self-defeating ethos of exclusivism and intolerance, because our religious traditions insist upon a dichotomous division of humanity into the elect and reprobate.

Who are these "prophets" and "priests"? Those who announce ideas Fromm calls the "prophets": "They announced the idea that man had to find an answer to his existence, and that this answer was the development of his reason, of his love; and they taught that humility and justice were inseparably connected with love and reason."

The prophets do not seek power; they respond to their fellows because they feel responsible. Humanity is not outside, but within them. Such a prophet Fromm insists was Bertrand Russell. A human being who could easily say (with Terence): "I am a man, and whatever concerns humanity is of interest to me."

But what of those creatures who make use of the ideas of the prophets like sucker-fish. They declare that we are not capable of being awake and of directing our own lives. They instead isolate every phenomenon such as eating, drinking, dressing, working and making love. The priests use people like farmers use manure. Warm-hearted and always in the right, they are the so-called "friends" of mankind. Not mankind

as it is, but as it should be according to them. They are, as Czeslaw Milosz wrote of Soviet bureaucrats, not unlike the inquisitors of the middle ages. But whereas the latter tortured the flesh in the belief that they were saving the individual soul from damnation, the Priests of the New Faith work for the "salvation" of the human species in general. While a child could see this, the great mass of people are brainwashed effectively not to see. So, we become dreadful little hard eggs with no windows crashing against each other in isolation; without love's young dreams, a collective sad wound biting at the center of its own existence. Yet there is still something dense, united, seated in these depths repeating its number, its identical sign: it is the choice presented to us over and over between Eros or Thanatos, between the love of life or the love of death.

Erich Fromm formulated in the above essays, and others in this book such as "Let Man Prevail," "Humanistic Socialism," "The Psychological Problems of Aging," what it means to be obedient to human nature and to the goals of human society. And what it means as well, to be *disobedient* to all manners of idols, political ideologies and cultures of monolithic uniformity shaped by any Center. Fromm's psychological insights into social and political phenomena stimulated him to support for some time the American Socialist Party and to engage in the peace movement, as well as in steps toward disarmament. These facts might be bothersome to many, but his sane thinking and passion for peace and for mankind's survival forms a moving personal manifesto that summarizes the life work of one of the 20th century's great psychological and social thinkers. Fromm's "humanistic socialism" is much more than a matter of taste, or preference for one style of political and social reality rather than another. It is concerned with beliefs which lie at the foundation of human existence. A Polish writer wrote not too long ago: "Human sufferings are drowned in the trumpet-blare: the orchestra in the concentration camp; and I, as a poet, had my place already marked out for me among the first violins."

What Fromm is saying to us in *On Disobedience and Other Essays*, is that it can be the violins in divine concert that are destined one day to sound like children in prayer, both over the loud, inarticulate speeches of madman and the painful eagerness of unfed hopes.

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