



CONTEMPORARY
PSYCHOLOGY
WASHINGTON, D.C.
MONTHLY 9.000

JUL

MSW
1977

On the Hit Parade of Ideas

Erich Fromm

To Have or To Be? New York:
Harper & Row, 1976. Pp. xxiv +
215. \$8.95.

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Erich Fromm, who lives in Switzerland, is Honorary Professor of the National University of Mexico and Adjunct Professor of New York University. A PhD of the University of Heidelberg, he was previously Chairman of the Faculty at the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology in New York, Professor of Psychology at Michigan State University, Professor of Psychoanalysis at National University of Mexico, and Director of the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute. Fromm is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The most recent (prior to the one under review) of his 25 books is The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (1973).

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Kaplan is coauthor of *The Domesday Dictionary: An Inventory of the Artifacts and Conceits of a New Civilization with Armand Schwerner.*

The Education of Henry Adams leaves off in 1905 with a prophetic concern for The Nunc Age, as Adams termed it:

Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid. All New York was demanding new men, and all the new forces, condensed into corporations, were demanding a new type of man—a man with ten times the endurance, energy, will and mind of the old type. . . . The two-thousand-year failure of Christianity roared upward from Broadway, and no Constantine the Great was in sight. (p. 499)

In this plight of observation, Adams read Marx quite seriously but in the end could not assent to so radical a critique of a society toward which Adams felt, at worst, ambivalent. An Erich Fromm might have been more congenial to a mind more disappointed than despairing. In this sense, Adams is a prototype of Fromm's subsequent public. For the past 35 years, Fromm's appeal has been to those whose coming of age involves a realization, like Adams's, that there was something wrong in their education into the hopes and promises of industrial expansion and unbridled commerce. Fromm has also attracted many middle-aged who have been assimilated into The Nunc Age but who now want out through some modification of life style. From the burgeoning ranks of these disaffected, Fromm may well enjoy the largest public of any social critic.

Toward professional intellectuals, on the other hand, Fromm has been less commanding. He is beneath notice of the *New York Review of Books*; for many years now he has not stirred even a ripple in any psychoanalytic periodical; even social critics, whose blend of psychoanalysis and Marxism puts one in mind of Fromm, write him off—Herbert Marcuse and Russell Jacoby, for example, regard Fromm as a bourgeois in leftist clothing.

Fromm's current book, *To Have or To Be?*, will not regroup his public. In its announcements of the spiritual impoverishment of our corporate and bureaucratic society, this book will offer a hearty scare to those whose complacency is lapsing. But inasmuch as despair has never been a strong point with Fromm, it will refurbish hope in the idea that regardless of the inertia of the social structure causing the ills Fromm diagnoses, one can save one's skin by individual alterations of one's point of view on daily living. One needn't enter a social enclave of political discipline much less repair to a mountain ledge of social quarantine.

However, for those seeking a systematic and cunning analysis of The Nunc Age and a discriminating reconstruction of the spiritual heritage our present society immobilizes, *To Have or To Be?* will hold no interest. Early on Fromm tells us, for example, that he will treat the history of moral philosophy as a unified trust fund of ideas established by "the great Masters of Living in China, India, the Near East and Europe" (p. 2). Consistent with this easy-going attitude toward matters intellectual, Fromm provides a bibliography with asterisks distinguishing crucial and noncrucial items for "readers with limited time." (This is a curious consideration from someone who has been counselling us to slow down and luxuriate a bit more in the time dimension.)

The thesis of *To Have or To Be?* is reminiscent of Fromm's *Escape From Freedom* (1941) and *Man for Himself* (1947). In modern society, conformity has taken the form of mindless consumerism at the expense of those human values through which life affords greater meaning and pleasure. The marketing personality of Fromm's earlier books appears in his current one as the personality who lives in the "having" mode. To possess what one admires is to destroy it, and in this way the major thrust of living in our society is destructive and in the end discontented and futile.

FROMM defines the alternative this way:

By being I refer to the mode of existence



in which one neither *has* anything nor *craves to have* something, but is joyous, employs one's faculties productively, is *oned* to the world. (pp. 18-19)

This will be the style in which Fromm will go on to identify these modes of existence in poetry, language, and everyday life.

Fromm will also remind us of his longstanding distinction between rational and irrational authority, the former based on competence, the latter on power. And he will warn us how society has corrupted our judgment to distinguish the two. That he bandies labels like "authentic" and "fake" (authentic and fake religion, for example) without feeling *trained* to define these qualities demonstrates the intimacy he counts on between himself and his reader. Fromm's literary attitude is "You know what I'm talking about anyway, so let me simply indicate a bit more about it from observations and texts I have gathered in my commitment to these matters—and I won't even burden you too much with the scholarship of it all." Thus Fromm never feels the need to construct a complex argument for anything. His obvious good will entitles him to speak to the heart in a language his reader takes on faith as having originated in the mind.

Like Fromm's previous books, *To Have or To Be?* is not without practical recommendations at a governmental level. Here, again, we find solace in a solution that tinkers a bit, while depending almost exclusively on good faith. Since authentic knowledge is a powerful antidote to the problems that beset us, Fromm proposes:

A Supreme Cultural Council, charged with the task of advising the government, the politicians and the citizens in all matters in which knowledge is necessary, should be established. The cultural council members would be representative of the intellectual and artistic elite of the country, men and women whose integrity was beyond doubt. (p. 193)

THE limitations of Erich Fromm should not blind us to the immense service he has performed over the years in holding up a mirror to the incipient

Contemporary Psychology, 1977, Vol. 22, No.

challenges of large numbers of people to social structures that have produced and continue to produce massive stress and misery in mankind. In this, Fromm has fixed an image of discontent. If many of

us have outgrown him, which is no stupendous achievement, he has still been one of the great sires of the reformatory spirit that characterizes our age.