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# Necrophilous Nazis et al.

By DAVE KUSHMA

**The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness** by Erich Fromm. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 521 pp, \$10.95.

The theories of social psychologist Erich Fromm are significant, if for no other reason than that they have gained wide

## books

circulation and acceptance in both scholarly and popular circles, with the publication of such books as *Escape from Freedom* and *The Art of Loving*. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* is the attempt of a self-proclaimed "radical humanist" to explain the lust for violence and brutality as a seemingly inevitable aspect of the behavior of "civilized" man. In so doing, Fromm challenges the most basic assumptions of his professional contemporaries and delivers a blistering scientific indictment of progressive technical culture.

Fromm is critical of the instinctivist theory, as proposed by Konrad Lorenz in *On Aggression*, that all aggressive behavior, in man as well as in animals, is based upon an innate, propensity

higher, more complex ones. It also seems to lead to the rationalization that nothing can be done about destructiveness and cruelty, since they are inevitable products of "human nature." Essentially, the instinctivists' idolatry of Darwinism is nothing more than "romantic, nationalistic paganism."

He comes down equally hard on B. F. Skinner's neobehaviorist theory—that acts of aggression result strictly from social conditioning. Branding Skinner "a naive rationalist who ignores man's passions," Fromm submits that behaviorism places self-interest above all other values, and justifies human exploitation. Ultimately Fromm dismisses both instinctivism and behaviorism as "either-or" theories that refuse to admit the possibility of man's personal responsibility for his actions.

Believing that human destructiveness can be seen as the specific interaction between a given character structure and a given social structure, Fromm postulates the existence of two distinct types of aggression, benign and malignant. All animals share equally the potential for benign aggression, a biologically-adaptive defensive response to threats against vital interests. But human existence is more complex: man can perceive future threats to his well-being as well as present ones; he can be brainwashed into

sense of his life, to relate to the human and natural worlds around him, to act, to feel, to devote himself toward a goal. This is accomplished through the

modern man as more intent upon the acquisition and assimilation of things than upon the formation of relations with other people. This concern, when found in an

bourgeois respectability with his dismal failure in high school and as a commercial artist, and suggests that the Nazi ideology he formulated was a

Joseph Stalin, with two women admirers at a collective farm in Tadzhikistan.

use of the character-rooted passions, which largely take the place of instincts in man.

Malignant aggression is characteristic only of Homo sapiens, and consists of cruelty and destruction done to no purpose except the satisfaction gained from the performance itself. Contrary to common belief, the prehistoric society of hunters and food-gatherers was characterized by a minimum of destructive (or even defensive) aggression and a maximum of sharing and cooperation, according to the anthropological evidence Fromm presents. He suggests that violence and cruelty grew in direct proportion to the spread of "civilization" and the role of power.

Why should this be so? Fromm considers the question from two standpoints—the historical and the psychoanalytical. The increased productivity of modern society, the division of labor, the establishment of surplus product, the formation of patriarchal elites—these factors had detrimental as well as beneficial effects. War became a viable method of achieving economic growth. The dense crowding of urban industrial centers, resulting in poverty and reduction of living space, also fostered increased aggressiveness. As technical and cultural progress became more important than personal freedom, the destruction of an accommodating social structure caused individual isolation, depression, impotence, boredom.

Having described the social character which was conducive to the development of malignant aggression, Fromm uses the tools of psychoanalysis to determine the individual character structure which will manifest such behavior. He sees

individual whose character-rooted passions are irrational (i.e., which tend to weaken the adequate functioning; and growth of the character structure) may show itself in any of a number of mental illnesses related to malignant aggression, such as sadism, masochism, and narcissism.

Related to sadomasochism in Fromm's syndrome of character-related passions resulting in malignant aggression is necrophilia: the attraction to everything dead, decaying or purely mechanical, the will to destroy life for the sake of destruction. This is contrasted with biophilia, the passionate love of life, and this dichotomy suggests to Fromm the fundamental human alternative. The necrophilous character admires property over human interaction: the "love" he feels for his fast car is literally real. He worships technology as a substitute for life and regards his body as an instrument for economic success rather than self-actualization.

The most fascinating segment of Fromm's book is his extended psychobiographical treatment of Adolf Hitler—a clinical case of necrophilia. A similar technique was used in showing the presence of the nonsexual-sadistic character in Joseph Stalin, and anal-boarding sadism in Heinrich Himmler. Fromm demonstrates that Hitler's narcissism was fed by his doting mother and aggravated by his stern, authoritarian father. His laziness, boredom, a felt lack of freedom as a child could be overcome only through his engagement in war games with other boys—an activity he continued up to the age of sixteen. Fromm contrasts Hitler's fantasies of achieving wealth and

rationalization for the destructiveness of his necrophilous character. His choice of "defective" humans as fit objects for slaughter reflected his psychopathic passion to "tear apart living structures."

No attempt will be made here to refute or champion Fromm's major theories because the book is worth reading in any case; this is not solely due to the intrinsic significance of the book's subject, but also to the manner in which Fromm argues his case—a far more interesting presentation than the brief, selective recapitulation presented here.

The objections which may be raised to the book deal more with form than with content. Fromm's prose style has a tendency to become lumbering and repetitive, occasionally lapsing into jargon or the clichés of revolutionary rhetoric. At times, he will quote at excessive length from the works of other scientists who support his positions, and will dismiss or ignore—the existence of opinions to the contrary. The reader is thus left to wonder how many of the original conclusions drawn in some parts of the book are really Fromm's own.

Given the nature and scope of his undertaking, however, these are minor flaws, to be forgiven. What Fromm says—that destructive aggression is not inevitable and may be reduced significantly without going beyond freedom and dignity—means a great deal more than how he says it. This is scarcely a new concept, but one which has traditionally met with cynical indifference by students of "human nature." Fromm proposes a humanistic approach that is radical only in the sense that it demands changes that can and should be made.

An anal-boarding sadist (Heinrich Himmler) chats with a "clinical case of necrophilia" (Adolph Hitler).

to act violently. In other words, fighting is not primarily a reaction to environmental stimuli, but a manifestation of inner excitation seeking spontaneous release. Fromm refutes this hydraulic concept, as well as Lorenz's attempt to "prove" its validity by drawing analogies between simple life forms and

imagining dangers where none really are; and his range of vital interests are much wider. Specifically, he must satisfy existential needs as well as physiological, survival-oriented ones.

By "existential needs" Fromm means man's striving to make