

Noble purpose, but to what end?

THE REVOLUTION OF HOPE: Toward a Humanized Technology. By Erich Fromm. Harper & Row. 162 pp. \$5.95.

By Marshall McLuhan

God hath given them the spirit of slumber.

ROMANS, 11:8

It is natural that Erich Fromm should keep his eyes fixed on the 19th century. It was a period when people had a secure image of identity and of goals alike. Security and stability of image and goals were rooted in the vast new amplifications of human power to make and to move at greatly increased speeds. The making and moving were done by hardware. The hardware had been achieved by fragmentation and specialism possible only in advanced and literate cultures.

For the past fifty years and more, hardware has yielded to software or electric information as a total service environment which includes satellites. Nothing remains of 19th-century images or goals except in the minds of somnambulists. Fromm declares himself to be such a person when he states his book is "born out of the conviction that we are at the crossroads: one road leads to a completely mechanized society with man as a helpless cog in the machine — if not to destruction by thermonuclear war; the other to a renaissance of humanism and hope — to a society that puts technique in the service of man's well-being."

What Fromm calls "the second Industrial Revolution, the beginning of which we witness at the present time," he still sees as an extension of mechanization. He is unaware of the fact that the movement into the all-at-

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Erich Fromm

once world of electric information automatically creates a software or information environment of tribal communism. The full impact of this new environment of tribal communism hit Europe and America in the 1920s with radio. It is an environment that "scrubs" or eliminates all Western images of identity and of "goals." Fixed positions become as impossible as fixed targets when all information is instantaneous. Plain-

tively Fromm asks, "How did man, at the very height of his victory over nature, become a prisoner of his own creation and in serious danger of destroying himself?" Fromm appears to be ignorant of the principle, familiar to Aristotle, that any process when it reaches an extreme point of development reverses all of its characteristics. In the 1920s retribalization gave us the "black bottom" and the integration of all the cultures of the world by American Negro jazz. Retribalization in the Sixties, via television, gave us the "white bottom," or the miniskirt, the ancient tribal costume of both men and women. The new integration assimilates all cultures and also sexes.

With Sputnik, nature ended. The Darwinian environment of evolutionary biology went inside a man-made environment. The evolutionary process shifted from biology to technology. Ecological programming became the only possibility of continuance or navigation.

The loss of identity resulting from such technological leaps brings as a consequence the tragic agon, or the unremitting struggle to create a new identity. Violence, psychic and physical, is the only mode known to cultures that have lost their traditional image. In this knowledge there is hope. There is no hope in Fromm's 19th-century approach that is puzzled when confronting "the fact that our economy rests upon arms production . . . must we produce sick people in order to have a healthy economy. . . ." The old phrase "man makes himself" now has the added relevance that man must make his own identity. This is total. The old problem of adjusting ends to means is a fragmentary 19th-century problem beyond which Fromm is unable to go. We cannot do without the nobility of purpose of people like Fromm; but the utmost nobility and integrity no longer serves as means of human navigation or hope. ❧