

Dr Fromm's Attempt at a Cure

By Kenneth Minogue

IT IS NOW over thirty years since Erich Fromm began to interpret totalitarian movements as responses to neurotic symptoms. *The Fear of Freedom* when it first appeared in 1941 was an immensely exciting book. It clearly owed much to Freud and Marx, but managed to avoid the aridities of either persuasion. It assumed a generous breadth of liberal values while at the same time appearing objective and detached in its study of repulsive phenomena. Among the flood of literature devoted at that time to the crisis of modern man, Fromm's work stood out; and although later empirical work has not been kind to the thesis that it was the uprooted who flocked to support Hitler, his exploration of the link between the strains of modern individualism and the drift towards submissive massive movements has not ceased to provoke useful thought.

Since those days, Fromm has continued to write a string of admonitory books about the need for love, and about the shallow insincerities that take the place of real human relations in modern society, particularly in his adopted America. He became a kind of Dr Spock for the grown-ups; and like that much maligned paediatrician, he was never entirely convinced by the widely-held psychological dogma that early childhood is the time when we lay down the tracks along which we are doomed to puff for the rest of our lives. Fromm kept to his own course during the 1950s, when his particular sort of message was out of vogue, indeed even slightly seditious. He even retained his integrity during the '60s, when men of similar thoughts (such as Herbert Marcuse) became the mascots for one or other of the noisy sects of the time. It is out of the excitements of those days that his present synoptic work has come.¹

One way of describing the central project of Fromm's intellectual life is to say that he has tried to fuse Freud and Marx. In his early career, he was prominent among the younger Freudians who believed that Freud's preoccupation with parents led him to ignore the fact that parental behaviour was essentially social behaviour. This powerful principle enabled links to be forged between neurosis and the class struggle. The central idea of repression is common to both Freud and Marx, and any extended discussion of sadism tends among socially-conscious analysts to turn into a discussion of exploitation.

But full prophetic co-partnership was blocked by an important and widely explored divergence. Freud had always remained a pessimist, believing that civilisation necessarily imposed costs upon man's instincts, while Marx had attributed these costs to the social structure of capitalism. Once liberated from class fetters, men would enter into their true humanity in which head and heart could once more be united. So far as the needs of prophecy are concerned, Marx had to become the dominant partner; he was, after all, a professional prophet, whereas Freud had been a doctor first, his wider speculations being an amateur extension of his technical concerns. It is significant that the first and still the most influential vulgarisation of Freud has been to understand human ills as the result of "repression" (sexual or political, and often both). Given this Reichian transformation, Freud and Marx could appear on the same platform as exponents of the same message. Freud's pessimism could then be presented as a "failure to realise" that instinctual costs derived from the faults of Capitalism rather than from the discontents of civilisation.

IT IS IMPORTANT, however, to be clear about the kind of messages here being merged. By contrast with the more traditional kind of prophet who calls us to repentance, or to the realisation of the

¹ *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. By ERICH FROMM. Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc. \$10.95; Jonathan Cape, £4.50



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plight we are in, Freud and Marx took a typically 19th-century pride in the fact that they were scientific rather than moralistic thinkers. Each purported to produce an objective account of the forces determining our situation, more or less independently of our conscious thoughts. One has to say "more or less" independently, because both men hedged and trimmed on the question of just how far human thoughts and deliberations affected man's situation; and both promised that an understanding of the forces they revealed would lead to conscious self-determination.

This claim to the grandeurs of science, however, needs to be treated with circumspection. Scientists may indeed study the operations of mind, or those of society; but what Freud and Marx were doing is something significantly different. Marx's central subject of inquiry was the alienation caused by exploitation within something he called "capitalism." It was, in other words, something that had from the very beginning been identified as an evil, and this fact makes it very different from scientific inquiry in spite of its evident range and sophistication. It may be objected, of course, that a medical research worker studying cancer is in the same position; but the similarity is illusory. Cancer is a purely physiological process and its evil, if you will, may be located in the attitude of the inquirer. In the case of an idea like "capitalism" an element of moral revulsion has actually been built into the concept itself. Freud's concern with neurosis is, to a large extent, on the same footing. As he had himself to recognise, some forms of behaviour which he regarded as "neurotic" had been consolidated in religious or cultural rituals where they were widely regarded as ordinary human behaviour. But Freud did not have to face this problem directly because he worked within a medical world whose accepted aim was cure. It was only as his thought developed (and as the hints it provided were taken up by often errant disciples) that Freud's potential as a cultural diagnostician became evident. Given that these two powerful minds attracted a massive following of people worried about the plight of modern man, and given also that there can in logic only be one true diagnosis of a whole cultural tradition, it would obviously be tempting to exhibit both as contributors to a single comprehensive diagnosis.

FROMM'S *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* is an exercise of just this kind. Its central subject is human aggression, and the discussion ranges widely over politics, sociology, psychology, ethnology, with psycho-analytic concepts predominating. Although Fromm does make obeisances to the human capacity for deliberation and self-control, his main concern is with the

unconscious forces supposed to determine human behaviour. His early concern in the book is with excluding two alternative theories about what these forces are.

One is found in the animal studies of ethologists like Konrad Lorenz, who tend to extrapolate from the animal to the human world, and are tempted to view human aggression as the inheritance of our animal nature. Fromm thinks that this suggestion is not entirely beside the mark, and concedes the existence of a sort of natural or (as he calls it) "benign" aggression which responds directly to a threat. But this kind of aggression clearly cannot explain war and the many kinds of domestic violence which arise in cases where the organism is not obviously threatened.

Nor is Fromm impressed by the Behaviourist view (particularly as represented by B. F. Skinner) that aggression is the result of bad conditioning, and may be dealt with by conditioning men in the future for peaceable behaviour. Fromm's rejection of neo-behaviourism is likely to command our sympathy. Although he is a powerful believer in "unconscious forces", his aim is the attainment of awareness and insight, whereas Skinner has a totally mechanistic view of human nature. None the less, Fromm indulges in some notably tendentious bludgeoning. "Skinner recommends", he tells us, "the hell of the isolated, manipulated man of the cybernetic age as the heaven of progress." And bursting, as he often does, for emphasis into italics: "In the last analysis, *neobehaviourism is based on the quintessence of bourgeois experience: the primacy of egotism and self-interest over all human passions.*" The significance of these remarks—and there are many of them—is that Skinner's views are morally unacceptable to Fromm; but it is a moral unacceptability which has been uncritically transposed into something parodying scientific terms.

INSTINCTIVISM AND BEHAVIOURISM, then, find the cause of aggression respectively in nature and nurture. Fromm seeks to avoid this dilemma by establishing a theory of character structures which play an independent role in human life, even though they clearly do arise from the interaction between inheritance and environment. Further (and here Fromm builds his bridge to Marx) the main feature of environment is the society in which we live.

Society, in this kind of diagnostic writing, involves history; and Fromm is entirely within its traditions by supplying us with an argued account of the human past (which is to say, for practical purposes, the European and Middle Eastern past), in which man falls from grace. A Fall from Grace in earlier time is necessary in this kind of



writing in order to make intelligible the Return to Grace hoped for in the future. Primitive man, living by hunting and gathering food, was not (in Fromm's view) the bloodthirsty creature constructed by imaginations cradled in the doctrine of progress. Fromm, however, reverts several times to the bones of Peking Man from which the brain had apparently been deliberately removed. The point here is that if the evidence of pre-history suggests that early man was violent and aggressive, Fromm's thesis about benign aggression would have to be abandoned. His conclusion is, therefore, that the removal of the brain may have been a ritual act, but that we know too little to be sure about it, and that we certainly can't be entirely confident that violence was involved. It is clear that pre-history, in which Marx's primitive communism was also located, is a useful screen on which to project ideological conceptions of this sort. The evidence is conveniently sparse. By the time the evidence does begin to appear, the Fall has occurred. Men have taken up their abode in cities, and consequential changes include the creation of authorities, hierarchies, commerce and patriarchalism, all things easily recognisable in this type of literature as the very blights of the modern world. The basis of culture moved (as Fromm puts it) from the womb to the mind. In effect, with the appearance of technology, the instincts became the psychological proletariat of the civilised mind.

BUT BEFORE WE CAN properly consider Fromm's account of the deformations to which instincts became subject in historical society, we need to look again at the central problem he has posed. Terms like "aggression" and "destructiveness" (in common with their conceptual sibling "violence") are often used with sloppy indifference to at least one elementary ambiguity. They may refer to feelings, generally a rage of the mind; or they may refer to consequences. "Aggression" tends to be reserved for feelings, "destruction" for consequences. But because of the mediation of human judgment, there need be no single type of connection between them. Intellectuals in the grip of a conviction will suffer enormous passions with no more obvious consequence than the stabbing of a persuasive forefinger. A psychopath, by contrast, may well kill for what he experiences as a trifling resentment. There is a further difficulty. Should we count executioners as aggressive? The result of their work is death, but their behaviour is simply the carrying out of a professional task. Fromm does not really face up to this question. When it comes to supplying a definition, he tells us that aggression is "all acts that cause, and are

intended to cause, damage to another person, animal, or inanimate object. . . ." Taken literally, this would turn the making of omelettes into an aggressive act; but we must refrain from such pedantry. The important point is that the simple conjunction "and" is ambiguous here because we are not sure whether both conditions, namely the *intention* and the *damage*, are necessary to constitute the aggression.

The reason why Fromm hedges this question is that the case of American bombing of North Viet Nam lies disturbingly at the back of his mind. The destructive consequences of such bombing are clear enough, but where is the "aggression"? It is not convincingly to be found in the minds of the airmen who are merely obeying orders; nor even in the minds of policy-makers in Washington, for whom destruction is merely the means to bring about a political effect. Fromm's solution is to set up the confused category of "conformist aggression." But it is clear that the "conformism" and the "aggression" are different and largely unrelated phenomena. It seems equally clear that the case of Viet Nam is, in Fromm's mind, a superficial layer deposited over what are for him the far more striking horrors of the Second World War.

IT WOULD SEEM, THEN, that Fromm's treatment of aggression is such as to extend the concept as far as possible, and also to obliterate the important distinction between glorying in destructiveness (which is, no doubt, a possible state of mind) and the use of damage to attain an object. Here—and as we shall see, elsewhere—Fromm does not really take human conflicts, whether moral, social or political, entirely seriously. He reduces them, in a familiar psycho-analytic fashion, to symptoms. More generally, we may complain that this is a subject whose serious discussion involves a good number of philosophical preliminaries, and that Fromm has skimmed them.

THE EXPOSITORY ADVANTAGES Fromm gets from his conceptual vagueness is that he is able to insert a variety of moral judgments into a theory of human development which constitutes the spine of his argument. Men are presumed to have a variety of needs whose satisfaction constitutes happiness. These needs are a pretty miscellaneous collection, and their significance can best be grasped if we attend to some of the examples Fromm supplies. One need is said to be for a "Frame of Orientation and Devotion", in discussing which Fromm tells us:

"The objects of man's devotion vary. He can be devoted to an idol which requires him to kill his children or to an ideal that makes him protect his



children; he can be devoted to the growth of life or to its destruction. He can be devoted to the goal of amassing a fortune, of acquiring power, of destruction, or to that of loving and of being productive and courageous. He can be devoted to the most diverse goals and idols; yet while the difference in the objects of devotion are [sic] of immense importance, the need for devotion itself is a primary, existential need demanding fulfilment regardless of how this need is fulfilled."

Several things are immediately evident about this very typical passage. One is that Fromm is having things both ways—simultaneously admitting that the objects of devotion are "of immense importance" and yet reducing them to mere expression of the need.

Abraham, for instance, preparing to sacrifice Isaac at Jehovah's command, actually believed in what he did, and it is obviously reductionist of Fromm to see him as satisfying a need for "orientation and devotion." Fromm's kind of theory by-passes the question of the truth of Abraham's belief, in favour of a functional view of human nature. Fromm is not prepared to say that most human devotions are actually false; he is not interested in truth. But he does have a clear line about what devotions ought to be rejected, and what ought to be accepted. This is clear from the moralistic pairing of the examples he gives. Abraham's "idol" is compared to love of children, while "amassing a fortune" is clearly a sinister form of devotion in contrast with "being productive", even though it might well, in many circumstances, amount to exactly the same thing. Here, as throughout the argument, loaded disjunctions explode before the eyes with an effect that cannot always be attributed to the rather more austere central argument. Later, for example, as we discover that sadism and necrophilia are the two extremes of bad character-structure, the latter being worse than the former, we find that sadism is exemplified in terms of Himmler (a Nazi subordinate) and Stalin (a corrupt inheritor of Marx), while necrophilia is exemplified in terms of the arch-villain, Hitler himself. Exemplification takes up a good part of the book, and is part of a discursive connection between a more or less technical argument on the one hand, and the message of salvation on the other.

IT WILL BE CLEAR from the detail already given that Fromm is to a large extent still preoccupied with the images of his youthful thought, and that the contemporary world is but a pale shadow of those fundamentals which were revealed in the totalitarian crisis of the Second World War. It is in such passages that Fromm's remoteness from real life appears, as when he breathtakingly remarks that the lower middle classes "suffer

from scarcity in all material and cultural areas and lead a life of unmitigated boredom." Prophecy of the kind Fromm is writing is almost invariably a middle-class creation, and often casts as heroes remote people with the abstract name of "proletariat." It is remarkable how often this seems to require in compensation a tone of lordly contempt for a collection of people specified as "lower middle class" or *petit-bourgeois*. Marx, writing about Fourier in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, exhibits the same curious passion. It is as if the bourgeois intellectual, puffed up with his pride in cultivation, having created an ideal out of the sons of toil, must none the less express the full force of his contempt for uncultivated humanity by setting up a new abstract category to despise.

The fact that Fromm's apparatus of needs includes one for a "character-structure" reveals just how loosely the idea sits to his material. The concept of needs has the additional advantage of straddling the operations of describing and prescribing. It has an empirical base in the things people actually do; and it has a moral superstructure in virtue of the usage by which a need is something that *ought* to be satisfied. The circularity which is the price to be paid for these useful persuasive advantages is clear if we consider the various "characters" that people are described as having:

"The miser does not ponder whether he should save or spend; he is driven to save and to hoard; the exploitative-sadistic character is driven by the passion to exploit; the sadistic character, by the passion to control; the loving-productive character cannot help striving for love and sharing."

And, of course, *opium facit dormire quia est in eo virtus dormativa* (opium produces sleep because it has a soporific power).

In spite of its circularity, the idea of a character-structure proves very useful to Fromm in other respects. It allows him to glue together aggression as motive, and destruction as consequence, at times when they might otherwise fall apart. And it facilitates the bridge between Society and the Mind which is necessary in any fusion of Freud and Marx.

THE CLIMAX of Fromm's study of aggression is to be found in the two corrupt character-structures described in the second half of the book.

The sadistic character as here described retains many of the features found in Freud's account: he is an anal personality much given to hoarding and "exaggerated punctuality." (How, one



sometimes wonders, *can* punctuality be exaggerated? What is more on the dot than on the dot?) Fromm's account of sadism, however, makes it clear that he is also talking about exploitation and capitalist society. He seeks to exhibit sadism as more than a mere perversion, and therefore generalises it as "*the passion to have absolute and unrestricted control over a human being.*" (The emphasis is, of course, Fromm's.) Stalin's sadistic character is exhibited in many stories of his cat-and-mouse treatment of subordinates during the 1936-38 purges. Himmler's sadistic traits are also examined in detail and include the fact that on one occasion he talked to a fellow railway passenger relentlessly for six hours: "The intrusiveness with which Himmler forces another person to listen to his endless chatter, thus trying to dominate him, is typical of the sadistic character." Fromm thinks there are many sadists around, and if this is the test, I've met quite a few of them.

The character-structure in which man's natural human instincts really meet their Waterloo, however, is that which Fromm calls "necrophilous." Necrophilia is a perversion that tends to be regarded as a bit of a joke in popular folklore—witness the limerick about the young fellow called Dave who kept a dead whore in a cave. Some of the actual case-studies Fromm presents warrant this hilarity, but all have horrifying undertones. Here again, however, he is concerned not with the perversion, but with a character-structure and social tendency. Necrophilia is defined as "*the passionate attachment to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical.*" (Again, this is Fromm's definition and emphasis.) It will be observed again that the language here does not allow any too literal interpretation of this passage. Does it mean that nurses, lovers of Gorgonzola, and civil engineers are necrophilous? Presumably not, but the actual formula leaves this and a few other questions open.

Such is the detail of what is fundamentally a dualistic scheme distinguishing biophiles from necrophiles; and like most dualistic schemata in the social sciences, it has a clear moral ring about it, so clear as to defeat its analytic purpose. The problem it poses appears clearly from the account Fromm gives of the celebrated episode in the Spanish Civil War from which he derives his extended use of the term "necrophilous." It is the occasion when the nationalist General Millan Astray uttered his slogan of *Viva la Muerte!*—and was rebuked by Unamuno in his capacity as rector of the University of Salamanca. "Just now",

Unamuno said, "I heard a necrophilous and senseless cry," and he proceeded to utter a graceful apologia for the rational life which, far from leaving the general abashed, provoked him to the further slogan of *Abajo la Inteligencia!* Now it is true that Unamuno, taking much the same line as Fromm, diagnosed General Astray as "a cripple, a war invalid"; but it is certainly not the case that we need to take these very local remarks at their face value. Whatever the actual character of General Astray, the slogan he shouted was clearly meant to be an espousal of heroic Spanish virtues, of a military life lived in indifference to the risks of death. As a moral position, this cannot be met by the reduction of diagnosis, but only by argument in its own moral terms. To take it merely as an instance of the arrest of psychological development by socially conditioned factors is merely a dogmatic evasion of the issue it raises.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM here is, of course, a persistent difficulty for any kind of psychotherapy, as Dr Thomas Szasz has recently been reminding us. The moralistic element of psychoanalysis can usually be concealed behind the distinction between illness and health, and human beings seem to prefer health to illness with such constancy that it may seem pedantic to make too much of the evaluative character of the distinction. But only a little reflection is needed to observe that disease need not always be seen as bad. A 17th-century divine like Richard Baxter who welcomed pain because it was a God-given aid to the remembrance of his pride may these days seem eccentric; but he is taking up a moral and theological position which no scientific proposition can refute. A neurotic who is rendered miserable and incapable by his tendency towards a perversion may well be a suitable case for treatment. But, as the recent history of homosexuality has shown, the situation is different where the person refuses to treat the inclination as a disease, and instead sets up an ethic in terms of which it is permissible or even admirable. Hence the therapist who tries to insist that the homosexual is psychologically ill, without knowing it, is on difficult intellectual ground.

FREUD RECOGNISED these difficulties in trying to prevent psychoanalysis from becoming a moral theory, or indeed passing moral judgments at all. He regarded ethics as in part "a therapeutic effort," but went on to observe that "in our therapy we often find ourselves obliged to do battle with the super-ego and work to moderate its demands." It is obvious that no analysis can proceed if the analyst keeps making remarks like "What! You dreamed you slept with your



mother? What filthy immoral dreams you have!" Indeed, psychoanalytically, there is no intellectual ground for taking any moral line at all. It is clear, no doubt, that analysts do; and that the man who, at the end of an analysis paid up, thanked his analyst, and announced that he was off on an affair with his mother would not be regarded as cured. But the Freudian position would clearly not be condemnatory. It would have to hedge the moral question by talking in terms of a "lack of insight."

Fromm attempts to get over this difficulty by remarking that "a shared pathology is not experienced as a pathology at all." But then the question becomes: how do we recognise *anything* as a pathology? Examples of such a shared pathology given by Fromm are drug-taking, excessive drinking, violence, and a general craving for strong sensations which Fromm wraps together as a syndrome he calls the "chronic boredom" of man in "technetronic society." But these things are in the first place *morally* disapproved of, and only secondarily construed as *pathological*. When individuals are miserable and come for help, there may be a case for construing their sufferings as illness. But the last thing General Astray or Adolf Hitler, or many other people, happy or unhappy, want to do is go and get cured. Some of them indeed would regard this type of behaviour as itself corrupt. If the matter is pressed really hard, political parties and economic groups may begin to look like the sharing of pathologies. The argument is irreducibly moral.

FROMM'S *Anatomy of Destructiveness*, then, attempts to catch the complex problems of the modern world in a net of abstractions about human development, with the distinction between normal and abnormal development casting a pseudo-scientific light on the moral aims that most concern him. What he has produced is a piece of intellectual technology designed to show us how to Solve the Problems we Face; and like most such endeavours, it brings together many

other such messages of hope. Women's Liberation is accommodated in the praise of a matriarchal harmony located in prehistory; and "malign" aggression is closely tied to the oppression of modern women. There is even a remarkable passage of "Children's Liberation" material, in which children appear as an oppressed class waging guerrilla warfare against the oppression of their parents. The real significance of such ideologies is that they seek to do away with the conditions which make *politics* necessary.

What is unsatisfactory about politics is that its solutions are never more than temporary accommodations between the plural moralities of which a modern society is composed. The temptation to resort to a utilitarian ethics in which this plurality of values appears as a collection of varying means to satisfy the same fundamental needs of human nature has always been strong. Who doesn't tend to think of society in terms of a life-affirming centre and a pathological periphery? Disagreement about what actually *is* that life-affirming centre (which disagreement is, in effect, the defining characteristic of what many sects call "capitalism") is the essence of the human predicament. How can such disagreement possibly be solved by the pseudo-scientific wand of ideology? But it is particularly tempting to indulge this hope at a time when conflicts between governments are waged with weapons that may well blow us all up. And the best place to prosecute this reductionist programme is within the field of medicine, where the distinction between the desirable and the undesirable seems most unarguably to be drawn.

But there remains one very practical difficulty. The conflicting parties will not allow themselves to be interpreted as merely "pathological." The intellectual difficulty is that ethics will not go into medicine without remainder. This is why no one—including Dr Fromm—has yet come within whistling distance of exhibiting all human striving as a merely technical confusion about the One True Satisfaction.



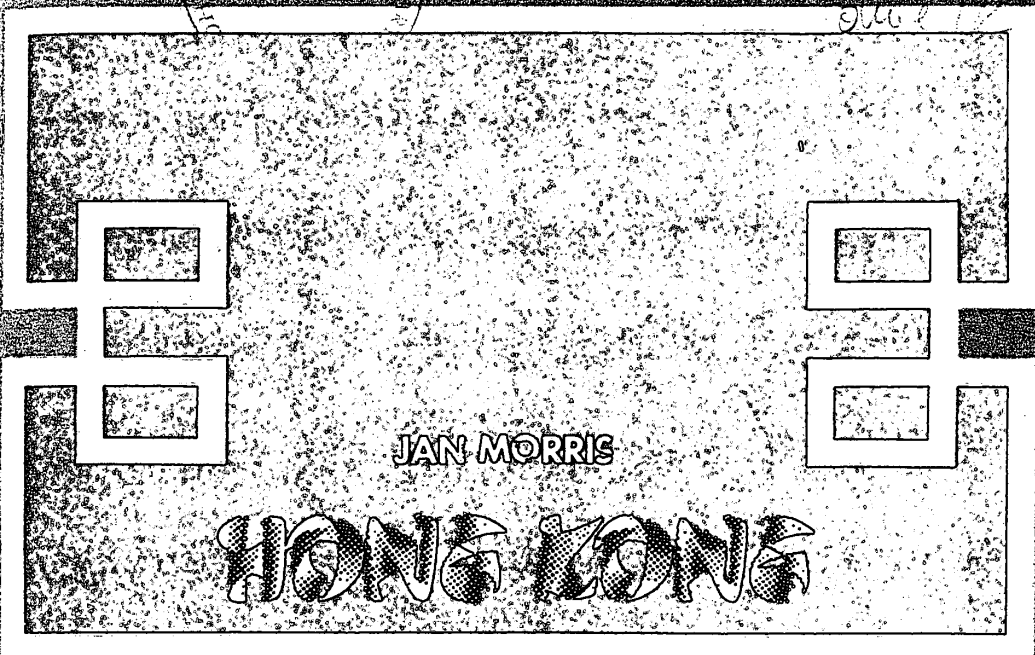


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