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## THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS

by Erich Fromm. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.,

1973, 521 pages, \$12.50, paper \$2.25

Reviewed by James A. Stegenga

A few people continue to regard violence in all forms as the principal threat to the penultimate goals of order and safety, and thus to such ultimate goals as human freedom, happiness and material well-being. Notwithstanding detente and cease-fire, naive overconfidence in nuclear deterrence, preoccupations with corruption, feminism, inflation or even wishful thinking, the central problem of our age remains that of understanding and dealing with human destructiveness. Frich Fromm's most recent book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, is an excellent contribution to the diagnosis, even if it is disappointing and discouraging in its prescriptions.

Fromm begins by examining and rejecting both instinctivist, hereditarian and environmentalist, behaviorist explanations; the first because they do not square well with the accumulating knowledge in the neurosciences, paleontology and anthropology, the second because they remain ignorant of or hostile to Freudian insights. His case against the instinctivists is much more persuasively documented than his impassioned argument against behaviorist theories. Such neoinstinctivists as Freud and Lorenz offer a sort of hydraulic model of man innately endowed with aggressive drives that build up until they erupt violently. But, Fromm says, neuroscientists can find no such force and generally agree that fighting behavior in the animals they study is nearly always a reaction (usually less popular than fleeing) to some threat to their vital interests. It is, therefore, best characterized as defensive and biologically adaptive. Likewise, whatever tendencies humans share with other species to defend

territory or to organize themselves hierarchically do not lead to destructiveness, but, according to Fromm, promote social order and the avoidance of conflict.

Moreover, paleontology reveals that early man was not, as some suppose, a carnivorous predator who lived entirely by hunting and attacking, thereby developing rapacious tendencies to pass along through generations. Early man was more often a foodgatherer who also ate whatever small animals he could catch easily. Early hunting presumably required so much cooperation between hunters that the little hunting done probably promoted cooperation and sharing rather than conflict among our ancestors.

Most convincing is Fromm's demonstration, based on anthropological evidence, that primitive people are and were less destructive and cruel than modern peoples. As he puts it, "the most primitive men are the least warlike and . . . warlikeness grows in proportion to civilization. If destructiveness were innate in man, the trend would have to be the opposite." Fromm shows that there have been too many peaceful societies for destructiveness to be explained as instinctive and thus common to all people and their communities.

Behaviorists or environmentalists who believe that behavior is entirely determined by environmental reinforcements, negative and positive, and who thus argue that aggression, "like all other behavior, is purely learned on the basis of seeking one's optimal advantage" are equally mistaken. They ignore man's passions, exaggerate the power of self interest calculations to determine actions, neglect Freud's fundamental findings about the power of unconscious

psychic forces influencing behavior and discount excessively the importance of personal habits and ethical norms in any given situation.

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Certainly, men will/employ what they have learned to promote their own interests, but not always. Behaviorism fails to explain the interesting exceptions, highlighting "the dilemma of behaviorism" because it has no method for examining un verbalized data, it has to restrict its investigation to those data that it can handle, which are usually too crude to lend themselves to subtle theoretical analysis." Fromm does not adequately apply this line of attack in his too-brief discussion of one variant of behavioral explanation of aggression, the frustration-aggression theory in which prior frustration causes aggression. Fromm could have developed more completely his sketchy suggestions that this theory neglects the psychological makeup of the frustrated as well as the ethical properties of the frustration among other important factors in a more complex situation than many proponents of the theory recognize.

Both the instinctivistic and behavioristic perspectives share what Fromm regards as a fatal flaw: "They both exclude the *person*, the behaving man, from their field of vision. Whether man is the product of conditioning, or the product of animal evolution, he is exclusively determined by conditions outside himself; he has no part in his own life, no responsibility, and not even a trace of freedom. Man is a puppet, controlled by strings—instinct or conditioning." And each perspective is popular partly because it provides a handy alibi for inaction or failure in the face of all manner of "natural" or "inevitable" outrages.

Psychoanalytic characterology is offered as a synthesis. "Psychoanalytic theory is at the same time instinctivistic in its general theoretical concepts and environmentalistic in its therapeutic orientation." Character -- a syndrome of traits, attitudes, values, passions, strivings -- is the "outcome of the interaction between instinct and environment." Amounting essentially to a *second* nature for man, it is the factor which differentiates one individual from another. Most importantly, *character determines behavior*.

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**Character — social character, really — is a specifically human phenomenon, incorporating not only the basic physiological impulses (the famous four F's: feeding, fighting, fleeing and . . . sexual activities) common to all animals but also such psycho-social strivings as the need for a satisfactory life philosophy and the wish to "make a dent" which presume the presence of language, ideologies, traditions, societies, symbols and values that all go into the indoctrination of the youth by his parents and others.**

Most human aggression is easily explained as the same sort of reaction to threats to vital interests seen in other animals. This "benign" aggression is biologically adaptive, designed to insure survival. Man only differs from animals in this kind of aggression in that he can sometimes foresee future threats, can be persuaded to believe in nonexistent threats and defines his vital interests more broadly to include specifically human values, institutions and symbols.

But man's extra aggression—destructiveness and cruelty for enjoyment—is non-instinctive and biologically nonadaptive because it is socially disruptive. This "malignant" aggression is a passion, like love or greed, rooted especially in some neurotic character types.

The three most aggression-prone neurotic types are the sadistic character, the necrophilic character and the bored character. Sadists, typified in intriguing sketches of Stalin and Himmler, are neurotics whose own sense of impotence drives them to seek absolute control over others as a compensation. The necrophiliac seeks not to control, but to destroy life. He is attracted to all that is sick, dead or purely mechanical. Hitler is described in a long psychobiographic sketch as typically necrophilic. Fromm too briefly and unclearly hypothesizes that "one of the earliest roots, if not *the* root, of necrophilia [is] malignant incestuousness . . . that occurs when certain conditions inhibit the development of benign incestuous bonds" between the mother and son. (What of female necrophiliacs?)

The bored (or alienated; Fromm uses the terms synonymously) character may develop a passion for destructiveness as a way of "making a dent" in a society where he otherwise will feel insignificant. The causes of boredom are not found in the early childhood of the bored character, but rather in the nature of contemporary industrial society where manual labor is boringly repetitive and white collar work is boringly bureaucratic. Even leisure is boring, according to Fromm, amounting mostly to routine patterns of industry-manipulated consumption.

There are some problems with all this. Fromm strains too much to include war as the principal case of instrumental aggression in his chapter on benign forms. He cautions us to remember that sadists and necrophiliacs need not wear horns, and may, in fact, look like your neighbor in a business suit, but then damages this important point by focusing on such extremely evil examples as Stalin, Hitler and Himmler. Psychoanalytic characterology seems not to work as well as traditional neo-Marxist sociology in explaining the bored character who looms so large in Fromm's account of today's violence; so is it such a useful method or framework for diagnosing the present human condition after all?

Fromm's gloomy picture of society seems overdrawn and a trifle too patronizingly intellectual. Are today's workers really more bored with their work and leisure than their forefathers who plowed, sailed or hunted day after day under often miserable and usually monotonous conditions? And why is an interest in art, music, nature or politics necessarily superior to and indicative of less boredom than an interest in cars, pornography or boozing?

Most importantly, Fromm himself warns against explanations of specific phenomena (Hitler's character or an incident of destructiveness, say) that depend on a universal condition or factor (aggressive instincts or Oedipus complexes). If boredom is as widespread as Fromm alleges it to be, his connection between boredom and destructive-

ness is suspect: if we are all bored, why do only some of us destroy? Nonetheless, this diagnosis generally reveals a powerful and original mind at work.

When he moves to the prescriptive task, however, Fromm falters. To cut down on the destruction caused by defensive (benign) aggression, he can suggest no more than the reduction or elimination of real and imagined threats to vital interests. To cut down on noninnate, nonadaptive (malignant) destructiveness caused by the sadistic, necrophilic or bored character, we must develop, according to Fromm, a social and economic climate conducive to the nurturing of the creative, loving, biophilic character—worldwide and with few exceptions. In each case he recognizes that he is calling for drastic changes: such institutions as private property and the state will have to go; educational and religious systems will have to promote new and strange views; families and economic structures will have to be organized and run as they have not been for thousands of years. In short, people and groups of people will all have to change their ways fundamentally and soon. But Fromm glosses over the obstacles in a short epilogue full of faith, hope and wishful thinking. □

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