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Erich Fromm on the Nation: 'I Am Not an Optimist'

By ALDEN WHITMAN

American society has turned sour for Dr. Erich Fromm, the social philosopher and psychoanalyst. He came to this country from Berlin in the early nineteen-thirties, an exile from Hitler's Germany and full of hope to live and work in a vibrant democratic nation.

Now, 40 years later America has lost its bright outlook for him. Its society has developed a necrophilous character and is dominated by a passion for destructiveness, he said this week in an interview. The trouble, he declared, is unrestrained industrialism, moral torpor and an absence of a shared ethical vision.

"The United States is not yet entirely in hell," the author of "The Sane Society" and "The Art of Living" remarked, striving to find a shred of hope. "There is a very small chance of avoiding it, but I am not an optimist."

For one so gloomy, the 73-year-old Dr. Fromm radiates good cheer. A man of medium height with a full head of iron-gray hair and twinkling eyes behind rimless spectacles, he smiles readily and laughs easily. That and his evident empathy reflect a personality at ease with itself but not his frame of mind about his adopted country.

'We Have Grown Soft'

Dr. Fromm, who is a citizen, has taught here and in Mexico and now divides his time between New York and Switzerland. He was in town for the holidays and for publication of "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness," a long analysis of man's condition—a book he considers his masterwork.

In his dour diagnosis, our rampant industrialism has created not only a superabundance of creature comforts, but the machine process has also tended "to minify man and make his life seem unimportant to him."

All this is the product of the post-World War II years, when the country's industrial machine began pouring forth a seemingly endless flow of motor cars, electric refrigerators, air-conditioners, pleasure boats, electric blankets and stoves, barbecue pits and heated swimming pools.

"An excess of material things way beyond the necessities of life has numbed most Americans to the point where they are indifferent to violence," he said. "There has been material expansion; we have grown soft from it at a sacrifice of, what shall I call it, well, the soul."

He went on: "And Americans on the whole have accepted the logic of machinery, which is to demonstrate how machinery works. The ultimate purpose of making a gun is to fire it."

The result is that America has become the world's most destructive society, Dr.

Fromm contended. "The United States bombed Vietnam if not back to the Stone Age, at least to the Bronze, slaughtering hundreds of thousands of hapless peasants in the Indochina war," he said, adding:

"Our society is also internally destructive. In the last decade or so a million people have been killed in highway accidents. We produce cars with built-in obsolescence. Knowing the possible dangers, we continue to pollute the environment. And we subsidize violence on the screen—movies in which human life is depicted as brutish and cheap."

Disputing the widely held Freudian view—he was once a full-fledged Freudian himself—that the urge to destroy is instinctive in man, Dr.

Fromm drew a distinction between aggression and destructiveness. "Aggression is a natural defense against a threat to a person's vital interests—to his young, to his food supply, to his territory," he said.

"But aggression can take the form of flight as well as of fight," he confirmed. "Aggression ends as soon as the threat ends; and in man, who has the gift of reason, aggression is at a markedly lower level than in other animals."

Destructiveness—lust in cruelty and killing—on the other hand is not biologic, Dr. Fromm maintained. "This is a specific added quality," he said. "It is not like aggression, which serves survival; but it is mediated by

social and cultural factors, and for this reason it can be diminished, if not eliminated."

"There is still a moral residue in America composed of our religious and humane tradition in which the proper goal of society is to serve its members," he continued. "It is a good society, a democratic society, which offers a religious or ethical vision of itself and sees itself also as a power for good in the world."

As things are, he summed up, America lives in a state of idolatry. "But what is urgent now if we are not to continue on the path of destructiveness and national suicide is a renewal of a sense of general religious values."

News Summary and Index

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1973

The Major Events of the Day

International

Secretary of State Kissinger conferred for 90 minutes in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, with King Faisal to inform him of American efforts to move the Middle East crisis to the peace table and to try to convince him that the oil embargo against the United States should now be lifted. [1:8.]

In Cairo, before leaving for Riyadh, Mr. Kissinger had a meeting with President Anwar el-Sadat and they agreed that "disengagement" between Egyptian and Israeli forces in the Suez area should be the principal subject discussed during the first phase of the Middle East peace conference. This appeared to be an important American concession to the Egyptian desire to get down as soon as possible to the issue of Israeli troop withdrawal from the west bank of the Suez Canal and the Sinai peninsula. [13:1-6.]

Four Arab foreign ministers arrived in Copenhagen unexpectedly and brought the European Common Market the message that before the oil embargo can be ended, Europe must do more to influence a Middle East political settlement favorable to the Arab cause. Their arrival brought confusion to the meeting of heads of government of the Common Market nations. [1:6-7.]

The nine Common Market nations issued their definition of the "European identity" in Copenhagen, noting "close ties" with the United States, but moving in the opposite direction from the "special relation" proposed in London this week by Secretary of State Kissinger. [1:6-7.]

The first blackouts of Britain's energy crisis darkened extensive parts of London and the rest of the nation last night. Thousands of households in southwestern, western and northern London suffered a loss of electrical current starting at about 10:30. The blackouts in some places lasted up to 90 minutes. One of the areas most affected by the blackouts was the Midlands in central England, where an estimated 100,000 homes had no power. [1:5-7.]

National

The House voted to ban shipment of petroleum for military use in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as it sought to move toward final action on an emergency bill. Minutes later, it rejected a similar ban on

oil shipments to Israel. Earlier, the House voted to allow Congress to override the President if he ordered gasoline rationing. [1:4.]

Federal energy planners disclosed that the alternatives to gasoline rationing under consideration included a mandatory one-day-a-week driving ban and the closing of filling stations on Saturdays as well as Sundays to limit long-distance driving. [18:5-8.]

Congress passed and sent to President Nixon emergency legislation he had sought to put the nation on year-round daylight saving time for the first time since World War II to help conserve energy. [17:1-2.]

The Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, saved from bankruptcy in 1971 by a Government guarantee of \$250-million in loans, sought urgent help to save itself from a new financial crisis. The company said it was in danger of running out of cash next year and that it might have to seek new short-term credits against already built trijets on which the airline's customers have obtained agreements to delay delivery. [1:2.]

Metropolitan

City and state officials announced agreement on a plan to save the 35-cent subway and bus fare until May 1, 1974, and after that date if Federal funds for mass-transit subsidies became available. A key element would be a state loan to the city of \$100-million. [1:1.] As the Metropolitan Transportation Authority prepared for the start tomorrow of its experiment in charging one-way fares for round trips on subways and buses on Sundays, a study urged that the special fares be extended to Saturdays and off-peak weekday hours. [6:3-2-4.]

Prospects of Congressional financing of Governor Rockefeller's \$20-million Commission on Critical Choices for America dimmed as critical opinion was expressed in the Senate that the commission was a Rockefeller vehicle for a 1976 Presidential campaign. The Senate Appropriations Committee quietly killed the commission's request for \$1-million for an energy study. [1:3.]

The Board of Regents directed the New York State Education Commissioner to move against the "small number" of institutions of higher learning in the state that, it said, permit minority-group students to segregate themselves in racially separate living quarters on campus. [1:2.]