

## CRITICAL REVIEWS OF RECENT BOOKS

*The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1957, 45, 125-134.

(Fromm, Erich. *The Sane Society*. New York: Rinehart, 1955. Pp. 370.)

REVIEWED BY HENRY WINTHROP

This volume by Fromm constitutes one of the better, well organized pleas for the good life, from among many which have recently been put forward. The post-war years have witnessed a rash of contributions along these lines, chiefly from theologians, social philosophers, a variety of critics of ideas and movements, and assorted independent thinkers of various professional callings. The importance of this book for professional psychologists lies in the fact that it is an essay on man's current estate in a sick society completely of his own making, an essay whose critical objective is *an interpreted social psychology* and whose critical focus is what Fromm calls *psychoanalytic humanism*.

Fromm is as much concerned with the social insanities of modern, Western man as he is with discussing a blueprint *in the large* of the mainsprings of motivation which can help to bring about a sane society. Although in Fromm's own terms modern, Western man is a victim of a marketing orientation run wild, a somewhat deeper and different perspective would see this as merely our secular manifestation of an inordinate quest for power and prestige, a transmogrification of the good life into a dedicated pursuit of externalia, and a decision to achieve spiritual suicide by denying the value inherent in achieving a multiplicity of awarenesses. Indeed, the sociological description of this psychologically, spiritual suicide has been given rather extensively in another recent volume by C. Wright Mills (5) who sees in the coöperation of the business man, the politician, and the military in government, a vast and conscious conspiracy to extend the social pathology which Fromm abhors. Since Fromm's own, particular value pattern has been influenced by a type of morally inspired socialism, if one were looking for a very brief statement of what this type of socialism would take to be the good life, it might aptly be given in the words of another socialist theoretician and social critic of Western society, Scott Nearing (9), who has said:

1. All human beings are members of one family,—the human family. They are cousins under the skin. Treat them accordingly.

2. Associate with fellow humans in terms of mutual aid on the principle of live and help live. Give as much as you can in the way which you believe will help the most. Neither ask nor expect a return. Whatever happens, continue to give and share, up to the point of yielding life itself.

3. Throughout the many ramifications of human association let one simple formula prevail: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. The responsibility and duty to give freely of one's best is the overshadowing factor in all successful human relations . . . (p. 79-80).

Those who would have a hand in this pioneering task must (a) expect to blaze trails and break new ground; (b) renounce old ties and establish new ones, even though such renunciation may be attended by uncertainty, hesitancy and heartburning, by the alienation of friends and the long and bitter opposition of neighbors and associates; (c) labor prodigiously and experiment incessantly. The search for truth is endless and timeless. Until eternity we go on living and learning and serving. (d) Prepare to face ridicule, persecution, exile. Such experiences we must look upon as an opportunity to gain broader knowledge and deeper understanding, for which no price is too high. (e) Dream of the promised land and dedicate our lives to bring it nearer, though, like Moses, we may never experience it (p. 86).

Fromm regards much of the socially approved and encouraged behavior of Western man as evidence of psychological ill health. The notion of behavior and spiritual abnormality which Fromm employs, departs considerably from those in current use by professional psychologists. Let us briefly recapitulate the major concepts of abnormality currently employed in psychology. First is the concept of normal behavior as that behavior which is like that of most individuals in the culture. This is clearly unsatisfying in a quest for the good life because it assumes, "anything goes" so long as everyone else is equally crazy. Fromm likewise rejects the notion of normal behavior as the pursuit and introjection of an unexamined and uncriticized culture-ideal because the attempt to adhere to it may do violence to certain essential needs of human nature or may overemphasize certain aspects of that nature at the expense of others. Finally Fromm would reject the most scientifically respectable of all current concepts of normality, namely, the notion of behavior as normal when it is "adaptive." This notion is capable of being rejected when man does not ask himself what, out of the total web of circumstance, is worth adapting to, and when he does not ask himself, even where choice is exercised, what may be the immediate and remote consequences of a "successful adaptation." Without a Benthamite bias, what

might pass for a successful adaptation might create more problems and dissatisfactions than it dissipated.

For Fromm these are not the criteria for determining sane behavior, at least not in the task of examining the insanities of a sick society. Instead the capacity to reduce the amount of alienation by which modern man is held prisoner, is the Archimedean lever of understanding for Fromm. One can best acquaint the reader with the meaning of *alienation*, using Fromm's own words:

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, are experienced as things are experienced; with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively . . . (p. 120-1).

But while the use of the word "alienation" in this general sense is a recent one, the concept is a much older one; it is the same to which the prophets of the Old Testament referred as *idolatry*. It will help us to a better understanding of "alienation" if we begin by considering the meaning of "idolatry" . . . (p. 121).

. . . Idolatrous man bows down to the work of his own hands. *The idol represents his own life-forces in an alienated form* (p. 122).

We can speak of idolatry or alienation not only in relationship to other people, but also in relationship to oneself, when the person is subject to irrational passions. The person who is mainly motivated by his lust for power, does not experience himself any more in the richness and limitlessness of a human being, but he becomes a slave to one partial striving in him, which is projected into external aims, by which he is "possessed." The person who is given to the exclusive pursuit of his passion for money is possessed by his striving for it; money is the idol which he worships as the projection of one isolated power in himself, his greed for it. In this sense, the neurotic person is an alienated person. His actions are not his own while he is under the illusion of doing what *he* wants, he is driven by forces which are separated from his self, which work behind his back; he is a stranger to himself, just as his fellow man is a stranger to him. He experiences the other and himself not as what they really are, but distorted by the unconscious forces which operate in them. The insane person is the *absolutely alienated* person; he has completely lost himself as the center of his own experience; he has lost the sense of self.

What is common to all these phenomena—the worship of idols, the

idolatrour worship of God, the idolatrous love for a person, the worship of the externalization of irrational passions—is the process of alienation. It is the fact that *man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished "thing," dependent on powers outside of himself, unto whom he has projected his living substance* (pp. 123-4).

Fromm does not feel that the modern psychologist, clinical or experimental, contributes much towards the lessening of alienation. A good portion of his volume is devoted to a discussion of the shortcomings of psychological theory in this respect. Fromm is properly exercised over the *hubris* of modern psychologists, particularly those who have no awareness of the rôle of *agape*. The presumptuousness of men of small intellect, narrow vision, mediocre learning, and little wisdom, who assume that they can deal with the difficulties of individuals, groups, and nations, who have never had any conception of the good life and who seek no such conception now; can be somewhat appalling. Those psychologists who suffer from an unawareness of complexity in their efforts to help shape human destiny, might be reminded of the injunction of Whitehead to seek simplicity but to distrust it. Fromm's analysis is in a sense a judgment against the doctrinaire and ideologue in psychology who blandly faces the problem of understanding human behavior and alleviating human suffering from within the strait-jacket of some sectarian, psychological credo. Many psychologists seem unaware of the bristling complexities, complexities which are far more intricate than can be embraced even within the more eclectic formula of Morris (6) who feels that we can assess human behavior by assuming that its only four determinants are physique, environment, culture, and language. Fromm clearly recognizes and avoids the oversimplification of psychological theory both from the psychological right and the psychological left. One sectarian pole embraces advocates of one or another brand of learning theory approach, centrists of every sort, cyberneticians, brass instrument psychologists with a swollen viewpoint concerning the all-embracing features of their professional biases, brass instrument psychologists who escape their larger social, philosophical, and moral responsibilities by carefully choosing to work on small, comfortable problems, and all the antinomian tough-minded who refuse to see man in proper perspective as a creature with many dimensions, preferring instead to regard him as susceptible strictly and only to the values inherent solely in a cognitive and scientific approach. At the other pole of psychological activity we have the plunderbund of the naïve, those who hope to understand man in terms of words and jargon, who prefer their theories

literary and speculative even if out of focus, who mistake clinical echolalia and ideological logomachy for Delphic oracles, who insist on limiting our psychological perspectives to the molar level only and who are as guilty as the other group of being unaware of the existence of dimensional diversity in human nature and of the need to integrate this diversity, so ably discussed by Morris (7):

We should at various times and in various ways accept something from all other paths of life, but give no one our exclusive allegiance. At one moment one of them is the more appropriate; at another moment another is the more appropriate. Life should contain enjoyment and action and contemplation in about equal amounts. When either is carried to extremes we lose something important for our life. So we must cultivate flexibility, admit diversity in ourselves, accept the tension that diversity produces, find a place for detachment in the midst of enjoyment and activity. The goal of life is found in the dynamic integration of enjoyment, action, and contemplation, and so in the dynamic interaction of the various paths of life. One should use all of them in building a life, and no one alone (p. 160).

Fromm will have no traffic with these extremes. He is essentially interested in a humanist interpretation of freedom, an interpretation which if acted upon would help to reduce our major insanities and our bedevilment with alienation. "The Sane Society" is, in a sense, an exposition of the meaning of freedom and its development. Fromm's concept of freedom is moved by the spirit of Ralph Barton Perry's (10) pithy definition, "man's exercise of enlightened choice." Fromm's "Escape From Freedom" signaled man's refusal to be free. "The Sane Society" indicates on a broad canvas what that freedom may entail. Fromm is in a sense trying to clean the Augean stables of modern psychology. The malaise which besets Western man will be sloughed off only if man acts in the totality of his human nature, using the resources of religious, moral, aesthetic, philosophical, and social experience as well as those of modern psychology. Western man has to acquaint himself with the mainsprings of healthy values, a task which, in a sense, is similar to the type of concern studied by Wieman (12). In spite of the fact that Fromm calls his critique "humanistic psychoanalysis," it is fairly obvious that he has given up the conviction, if, indeed, he ever held it, that today's professional psychologist, *qua* psychologist, can help modern man to find his proper estate. The layman, confused and anxious, may think the psychologist can, since it is fashionable today to climb on the bandwagon of psychology. Fromm's critique is free of this *luftmenschliche* hope since he seems to recognize that psychologists, themselves, are the victims of our

modern, spiritual breakdown, and are, themselves, part of the tragic canvas portrayed in Mumford's (8) analysis of man's estate.

How does Fromm see the condition of man? We quote:

... Freud, searching for the basic force which motivates human passions and desires believed he had found it in the libido. But powerful as the sexual drive and all its derivations are, they are by no means the most powerful forces within man and their frustration is not the cause of mental disturbance. The most powerful forces motivating man's behavior stem from the condition of his existence, the "human situation" . . . (p. 28).

... There is only one passion which satisfies man's need to unite himself with the world, and to acquire at the same time a sense of integrity and individuality, and this is *love*. *Love is union with somebody, or something, outside oneself, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self*. It is an experience of sharing, of communion, which permits the full unfolding of one's own inner activity . . . (p. 31).

... Love is one aspect of what I have called the productive orientation: the active and creative relatedness of man to his fellow man, to himself and to nature. In the realm of *thought*, this productive orientation is expressed in the proper grasp of the world by reason. In the realm of *action*, the productive orientation is expressed in productive work, the prototype of which is art and craftsmanship. In the realm of *feeling*, the productive orientation is expressed in love, which is the experience of union with another person, with all men, and with nature, under the condition of retaining one's sense of integrity and independence . . . (p. 32).

... Productive love always implies a syndrome of attitudes; that of *care, responsibility, respect and knowledge*. If I love, I care—that is, I am actively concerned with the other person's growth and happiness; I am not a spectator. I am responsible, that is, I respond to his needs, to those he can express and more so to those he cannot or does not express. I respect him, that is (according to the original meaning of *re-spicere*) I look at him as he is, objectively and not distorted by my wishes and fears. I know him, I have penetrated through his surface to the core of his being and related myself to him from my core, from the center, as against the periphery, of my being (p. 33).

For Fromm, "productive love, when directed towards equals may be called *brotherly love*" (p. 33).

The voices to which Fromm wishes Western man to pay heed are the voices described so ably by another well-known psychologist, Allport (1). For Fromm Western man has alienated himself by casting a deaf ear towards these voices. "The Sane Society" discusses the character of Western man

in terms of the principle of alienation, its causes, effects, and cures. This discussion is passionate though restrained, humanistic and informed, reasoned though interpretive. Towards the end of his volume he examines some of the answers given by 19th and 20th century thinkers to the question of how man can extricate himself from the morass of socio-psychological "illth" created by a culture in which the marketing orientation has run amok. His own suggestion for a broadscale cure lies in a humanist socialism and a humanistic psychoanalysis and, if we are not afraid of appraisive and prescriptive labels, it can be said here and now that the content of meaning carried by these phrases is no different from the philosophical humanism of Perry (10), and the "integration in diversity" of Morris (6). Fromm's optimistic affirmation assumes that man can make his own fate and remake himself and his culture, that he would be willing to act if only governments would let him by permitting him access to the proper information. This fact has been most succinctly expressed by Norman Cousins (2) in a recent editorial:

. . . Certainly the individual is not helpless. The question for him is not whether he possesses any power but how to use the power he possesses. He will receive information if he demands it. He can appraise information if he will give time to it. He can think, he can talk, he can write, he can associate, he can make his opinions known. He need not wait to be asked for his views. He can free himself from the daily trivia that soaks up his time and energies and he can apply himself to what is important. Nor need he fear that this is an academic or futile undertaking. The act of informed dedication is a power by itself.

As the individual thinks about the power that is his—the power to think and act in behalf of history's great works and ideas of which he is now custodian—he may find that information and thought are not enough. It is one thing to know a fact, another to interpret it and relate it to other facts with order and balance. It is in this direction that he has the obligation to share his concern with his friends and neighbors. He will find that mutual concern and mutual consideration often produce ideas or approaches to problems far better balanced and valuable than are within the grasp of the individual alone.

. . . It should not be difficult for the individual to determine what the spiritual leaders would say in the present situation. They would say that it is not enough for man to profess oneness with other men; he must act it out. Not enough to wear the garment of religious identification; he must accept its ethical and moral obligations and glory. Not enough to lay claim to personal sacredness; he must bind himself to it through respect for it and sensitivity to it. Not enough to boast of the gift of a rational intelligence; he must nurture it, work it, apply it, defend it.





Not enough to prate about justice; he must create a basis for it in the world itself.

In summing up it can be said that Fromm is looking for a value pluriverse, a Jamesian open society of open selves, in which the several answers as to what are thought to be the good life, are all given a place in the scheme of things, in which the objective realism of Mead (4) which pleads for the coexistence and integration of multiple perspectives is guaranteed. In short Fromm feels that an interpretive social psychology may make its contribution to man's quest for the good life but that much of modern psychology has thus far given answers as unhealthy, as biased, as uninformed and as lacking in wisdom, as those given at any period of warring creeds and conflicting beliefs.

Fromm's central concept of alienation is quite sound, in this writer's estimation, although it is certainly not the whole story. To act on it would require a mass renaissance in self-awareness, a highly unlikely prospect, and one which is dimmed considerably by reading F. Lundberg's (3) bill of particulars concerning the sins of alienation of modern man in our own democracy. To disalienate himself man must not only experience a rebirth of self-awareness but of awareness of many other varieties, and the awarenesses which have been accumulated in almost 3,000 years of Western history and which retranslated for the technological civilization we are now achieving would be exemplary guideposts, are today conspicuous in psychology by their very absence. Were the whole Western community able to achieve a rebirth of spiritual awareness through Zen Buddhism or kindred regimes of spiritual discipline, accompanied by the acquisition of all those cognitive skills and essential information so necessary for a happy marriage of the humanist faith to the values of a secular and technological civilization, this might constitute a sufficient counter-revolution to the value pathology of the insane society. There are, however, forces arrayed against this eventuality to which Fromm pays insufficient attention.

The first of these are those social forces in our midst which now work against the good life as he conceives it. What these forces do, as Riesman (11), Mills (5) and other interpretive sociologists have shown, is to prevent adequate communication with respect to values, ideas, and facts. The average man is generally of insufficient stature to break out of the prison of his own culture's specialized habits, customs, values, and beliefs. Second, most men are without the qualities which would draw them to either meditation concerning the good life or activities devoted to its construction. For the salvageable, spiritual minority to whom such matters would be important,





there is the tragic fact that most of them fall by the wayside spiritually and intellectually long before they have reached the middle years. In effect then, Fromm's prospective audience will read him and cluck sympathetically, but their spiritual inertia is a guarantee that they will never follow him either into the wilderness or the promised land. The third great block which Fromm must confront is the socially approved schizofrenia to be found in many cultures but perhaps most intensively in our own, in which men live and are expected to live one way while talking interminably of other and presumably better ways of life. He who sets himself the task of closing this schizofrenic gap must expect the suffering, isolation, and final failure which attend the efforts of Ibsen's protestants. Lastly Fromm (and this is of direct concern to professional psychologists) has failed to recognize, I think, that psychologists are too narrowly educated, too limited in spiritual vision, themselves, and too much the product of an age which stresses status, prestige, power, success, and comfort as the ultimate goals, to be among the vanguard that shall help to dissipate our current insanities and construct a healthier pattern of values in their place. The task of spiritual reconstruction and the achievement of the good life is much too important to be left in the hands of those who are not less spiritually and culturally myopic than members of other callings. The task of reconstruction, if it is ever undertaken self-consciously, will probably be the product of an operational research team approach. The members of such a team will be both specialists in skill and broad gauge in spirit. It is my belief that when history finally delivers the judgment that the task of reconstruction has been successful and when men begin to assign rewards for this achievement, the place of psychologists on this team will have been found to be conspicuous by their scarcity.

## REFERENCES

1. ALLPORT, G. A. *The Individual and His Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1951. Pp. 147.
2. COUSINS, N. Think of a man. *Saturday Review*, 1956, 9-14.
3. LUNDBERG, F. *The Treason of the People*. New York: Harper, 1954. Pp. 370
4. MEAD, G. H. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1934. Pp. 401.
5. MILLS, C. W. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956. Pp. 423.
6. MORRIS, C. W. *The Open Self*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948. Pp. 179.
7. ———. Varieties of human value. *The Humanist*, 1956, 16, 153-161.
8. MUMFORD, L. *The Condition of Man*. New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1944. Pp. 467.
9. NEARING, S. *Man's Search for the Good Life*. Harborside, Maine: Social Science Institute, 1954. Pp. 146.



10. PERRY, R. B. *The Humanity of Man*. New York: George Braziller, 1956. Pp. 181.
11. RIESMAN, D. *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1950. Pp. 386.
12. WIEMAN, H. N. *The Source of Human Good*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1946. Pp. 312.

*Department of Psychology*  
*Hollins College*  
*Hollins, Virginia*

