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The Literary Scene

JOHN BARKHAM

THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS. By Erich Fromm. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 521 pp. \$10.95

Is man inherently aggressive, with destructiveness in his genes, as Nobel laureate Karl Lorenz would have us believe? Or is he conditioned to aggressiveness by his environment and by social influences as suggested by B. F. Skinner? Whatever the answer there's no gainsaying, the fact that man is the only species which destroys its own kind in mass killings unknown elsewhere in Nature.

So far the definitive answer to this crucial conundrum is and remains elusive. The scores of biologists, analysts, animal psychologists, anthropologists, and even paleontologists quoted by Erich Fromm in this, probably the most important of his books, give some notion of the complexity of a problem that goes to the heart of human nature and behavior.

It is not sufficient to admit that man is the only species that kills fellowman on a massive scale. Each century has witnessed the magnification of this destructiveness thanks to advancing technology. What remains unchanged is the impulse which drives man to commit these acts.

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Fromm takes a position somewhere between Lorenz and Skinner. To begin with, he refuses to regard man as inherently aggressive. Man, he concedes, possesses an "innate" but harmless aggressiveness directed to survival which he shares with his animal ancestors. Fromm calls this *benign* aggression, performed out of necessity. *Malignant* aggression is not or for biological reasons. It is an acquired human characteristic and not instinctive.

Here Fromm makes an intriguing point. Primitive societies were most likely not the "brutal, destructive and cruel" prototype of "man the killer" who evolved later. These early groups were matriarchal, whereas man's full measure of destructiveness was reached in patriarchal societies. One is tempted to believe that if woman had headed the governments involved in the two world wars they might have never occurred. Of course, it should be noted parenthetically that in the two most recent wars—India-Pakistan and the Middle East—women leaders were involved.)

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Fromm also parts company with Freud in his view that sexuality is the basis for most human passion. Instead he substitutes necrophilia (a love for the dead,

over them. By his word he could kill them, have them tortured, have them rescued again. He had the power of God over life and death."

As for Hitler, Fromm argues that his actions in ordering the killings of millions of Jews, Russians and his final order for the destruction of all Germans cannot be explained as justified by traditional reasons of state but as "the product of a deeply necrophilous man." Himmler is an example of the sadistic authoritarian who developed "a passion for unlimited control over others."

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In reaching his conclusion that man is not genetically aggressive but acquires a *malignant* aggression, Fromm has what seems to me a logical and persuasive answer to a problem which grows more perilous and insistent with each generation.

I am glad to report that "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness" is not only a landmark book but one written in standard English comprehensible to any intelligent reader.

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Fromm also parts company with Freud in his view that sexuality is the basis for most human passions. Instead he substitutes necrophilia (a love for the dead, for killing), and as exemplars gives us Stalin, Hitler, and Himmler, through whom Hitler had his mass killings performed. Fromm's detailed analyses of these three men are fascinating studies in psycho-history.

Stalin's behavior, Fromm argues, is a textbook example of physical, non-sexual sadism. Stalin's behavior demonstrated "the wish to show people that he had absolute power and control

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