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Erich Fromm and Technology

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Man becomes conscious of the experience of living only through a system of concepts and categories. This system is a social product constructed of *'filters'* that select the contents of experience allowing only some of these to be consciously known. (*Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* 1960, *Gesamtausgabe* VI, Stuttgart p 328ff.) Even this partial and socially conditioned contact between concept and the underlying lived experience risks being lost at any moment. There is a psychic process at work which disengages the given lived and integral truth, *separating the concept from the experience that it expresses*. The concept, separated from lived experience, is devitalised and becomes a mere abstraction. From it one can deduce other concepts in such a way that an artificial production of the mind comes to substitute the full relationship with reality. In its place arises a fiction.

The processes of abstraction, that so profoundly connote the contemporary age, have to some extent always existed. In as much as strategies of thought they have permitted the development of philosophy and science. Human communication also needs abstraction. However, this creative aspect of abstraction is not unique. *Abstraction is ambiguous*. As long as it correlates as a polarity to the other polarity of concreteness, and it doesn't hide the specifics while explicating the general, then it promotes a

knowledge of the totality of that which is experienced. However, when it abandons the concrete, the qualities of things and persons and their uniqueness, in order to conserve only certain aspects and converting them into quantities, then abstraction becomes unilateral, one-sided, all the more disintegrating and expansive. A paradigm example of this process is to generally translate every use value into exchange value, into a relationship between not only objects but also people, which assume a profoundly emotive structure that renders them in many ways similar to merchandise, in such a way that in our age one can speak of a businesslike character as a common and socially normal character type. (*Man for himself*, 1947, *Gesamtausgabe* II p 47ff). Rather than any correlation between abstract/concrete we today witness their division, increasingly separating the practical results of these abstractive processes (with their astronomical dimensions) from any intuitive or sensitive meaning for mankind and the reality in which he lives. (*The Sane Society*, 1955, *Gesamtausgabe* IV, p 81ff). Impressive technological developments have produced a large number of things so large and complex that mankind, in the effort to govern them, has progressively developed a social machine that is equally large and complex, and ungovernable. The disassociation between abstraction and the



concrete has brought with it *alienation*. Having lost any sense of the relationship between mankind as creator, and things created, the objects of his making have come to assume their own overbearing, separated and hostile existence. Mankind not only doesn't recognise his own products as such, but also doesn't recognise its position as producer. People don't know who they are, nor do they recognise their fellow creatures. In order to grasp the explicative force of the concept of alienation, one should return to that of 'idolatry'. "Man employs his energies in order to construct an idol and then adores this idol, which is none other than the result of his own human efforts." (*The Sane Society* p. 88f.)

The modern idols are power, money, success etc. From our growing alienation follows the increasing passivity of man. His hyper-activity is revealed as a pseudo-activity which masks an interior emptiness. The loss of contact with oneself thwarts our true energies and obliges us to function as cogs in the social 'megamachine' (Mumford). External pressure is internalised. The passivity of the individual within the production process is carried over into one's 'free time,' which as such is only illusory. (*The Revolution of Hope*, 1968, *Gesamtausgabe* IV).

The two principles of the present technological system are:

1) *If a thing is technologically possible, then it MUST be made;*

2) *Efficiency and production must be maximalised.* (*The Revolution of Hope*, pp. 284-5). Both these principles are alienating, or in other words, they are both extraneous to human needs, and antihuman. A technological possibility which does not correspond to human interests can only be hostile. From a logical standpoint it is quite coherent, however, looking at it rationally things are quite different. Reason is the uniting of both thought and sentiment. Both the

principle of [34] maximum efficiency and that of maximum production are highly sectorial and this can explain a great many of our present-day ecological disasters.

For man the only certainty is that there are no certainties. Life moves structurally but not predictably. Human instinct, compared with animals, is very weak and under the burden of continually making decisions, every certainty as to behaviour is lost. Either one has the strength to run risks or else is crushed by the need for certainty and predictability. To this need the machine and every technology based upon logical-formal coherence responds. Such a response is, however, as partial as ever in comparison to the totality of the human question. This remains unheard by the citizens of the industrial and post-industrial society, who separate their humanity, renouncing a large part of it, remaining conscious only of that which is left and which feeds the predictability of the machine's functioning, of a bureaucracy. The idol of the machine and the idol of the calculative accompany formalised logic in the emotional investment in the fear of living that is oriented towards death. Even though the child of human creativity, the machine assumes a part of death. The machine, controllable internally because coherent, is not controllable in its comprehensive effects on human life. Even if it is made in order to resolve a concrete problem, the machine separates itself from that instrumental function to *benefit* life, it is alienated, because invested with another task, that as guarantor of profit. The sums realised by technology do not contain the most significant human facts; they are disorientating and distancing from a realistic vision that can only be suggested to man by listening to his interior self. The death of man travels down a road that ends with extreme formal-logical consequences; to the technical possibilities that are actualised only because possible, to the maximalisa-



tion of quantity that is unrelated to human well-being. This death already exists within the military machine that takes us by the hand and drags us towards war, and ecological pollution which has already reached global proportions. But perhaps more dangerous still it is within symbols. The repetitiveness of the movements of the machine, the reproducibility of its products, the unfeelingness it needs from its users, kill the heart of man. It is already certified that the daily 'pathology of normality' consists in a low level chronic schizophrenia.

The cult of the machine, which already assumes the form of a 'cybernetic religion', is the unconscious religion of those with an 'emotional underdevelopment' and a 'pre-eminence of [35] cerebralisation'. The human faculty that dominates is an instrumental and manipulatory intelligence, able to understand how machines, calculators and the great business organisations work, but unable to understand humans. Human sentiment is impoverished and the profound philosophical and religious interests labour to come into consciousness. (*To Have or to Be?*, *Gesamtausgabe II*, pp. 374-8). Even if a thermonuclear conflict can be avoided, the destructive effects of modern technology already run through the human mind.

The arms race and the imminent danger of a thermonuclear war constitute the most visible and tragic aspects of a process which leads to the objects and the situations produced by man to dominate him. The internal logic of armament technology, increasingly sophisticated and destructive, of the diplomatic and political bureaucracies and of the quantifying evaluations, guarantees at best an equilibrium of terror. We have adopted an intelligence as great as it is *without wisdom*. We need to introduce other evaluations, consider with realism the enemy in all its aspects, also moral and spiritual. Now is the moment to discuss the possibility of unilateral disarmament. (See

The Case for Unilateral disarmament, 1960, *Gesamtausgabe V*, pp. 213ff.) A strategy of peace should in the first place be proposed to *impede the defeat of the enemy*, inverting the logic of war strategy; secondly it should mobilise the great masses (*Zur Theorie und Strategie des Friedens*, 1970 *Gesamtausgabe V*, p. 252).

The proof of the theory which claims that human destructiveness is not distinctive, is given by man's possible salvation from the catastrophes to which his products push him. It is a question of waking man from his passivity, from the hypnotic state that induces the consumerist society, from behavioural automatism. Only the active exercise of his own energies can break man from his own alienation and reintegrate him. It is question of introducing the real human dimension into the abstractive and technologising processes, until technology's destructive face is renounced and placed at the service of man. The humanisation of a modern technological society should not however be maximalistic, otherwise any possibility of change would be illusory. Radical humanism is based upon a realistic standpoint, as long as one does only what is really possible to do. Freedom of choice only exists if the alternatives are concrete, true, non-illusory. It requires a critical and exact analysis of every situation. It is of great importance not to have faith in sectorial changes, which history has shown to lead to disaster, but to invest actively in every aspect of human life, both the subjective and interior and the social. A humanistic programme does not neglect the economic, social and political transformations; it looks at educative method, cultural production in general, the means of its diffusion, together with the psychological and spiritual development of man. (*The Present Human Condition*, 1955. *Gesamtausgabe V*, p. 271)