Erich Fromm’s masterplan for humanity


Reviewed by Alice Mayhew

THIS SLIM book sets forth once again the Frommian themes of humanism and freedom and hope, threads that do not weave closely enough to cloak the pessimism that darkens Erich Fromm’s earth and heavens. Things are closing in, there’s not much time left, the Western world is drowning in unconscious hopelessness (though it covers it over with optimism just as Fromm similarly covers over his pessimism about our passionate race) — and with this shattered hope come de-strangeness, revolutionary nihilism and the Big Bang. If we continue the way we are going, he predicts, we won’t be able to “redact the temptation to... do away with all life.” (Balzac quote)

We’re at a crossroad, Dr. Fromm avers. Well and I wish his crusade well. I do not, I think, have a "deep emotional attachment" to the B.B., but I find Dr. Fromm’s directives for new directions a tad sketchy. Skipping briefly to the last chapter of The Revolution of Hope, called “Can We Do It?” let’s see the plan. We’ll come back to the promises which are familiar Fromm, though he says in his introduction that there is much that is new, and I can’t find it.

Violent revolution is out of the question; not enough people are interested. Life is predictably precarious but that is all that is predictable about it, and the forms of democracy are not rescuing us from our death wish, though it is essential that we continue the path of democracy, and see some longing for new directions. In the United States he reckons that approximately 25 percent of us are longing for new directions, and the question would be, how do we keep these people together while we pick up another 25 percent?

This is familiar enough Fromm. The world is divided between those who are attracted to force, “law and order,” and those who are lessened, can’t dream — the alienated, passive robots — and on the other hand, the few, same doers who possess hope, inner harmony, the art of loving and a “reverence for life.” Fifty-one percent of the latter and it will be a piece of cake. But with even a little bit of thought in mind that those who profess religion formally are in the former category, having surrendered to an Idol, just as much as our familiar friend, the computerized marriage, man), there is much that they can and must do to bring about the millennium. The Frommian good men have, after all, successfully organized all the data available to them, debated the issues with seriousness and clarity, reached sane Frommian conclusions, and as well have humanized their consumption, eliminating any hold greed might have on them. They are ready to lead.

They have also, on a personal level, made themselves independent of irrational authority, learned to relate to one another and therefore to love, formed their consciences by finding the gods in their hearts and are earnestly following them. They are ready to inspire. They have the “power of ideas” — six positive thinkers — as against the majority who have only “outward ideologies,” and who are therefore, in spite of their numbers, hopelessly outmatched.

WITH ALL this, we now need a plan, a scheme that will join the saved. Dr. Fromm’s suggestion is a National Council, to be called the “Voices of American Conscience,” which will be composed of about 50 persons of differing religious and political convictions but who share humanitarian aims. (I’m a little puzzled about the religious’s inclusion, but let that go.) And if you think this Council sounds like another Presidential blue-ribbon committee to study hopelessness in the American psyche?, it won’t be like that. It will be very different. It’s hard to list why except that it will neither be elected nor appointed by one Big Wheel and will therefore avoid the pitfalls of either type of group, pitfalls of which we are all too aware. It will be neither too diverse and multi-faceted, nor will it be one-sided and monopolistic. Under it will be the Regional Councils, then the Clubs (100 to 300 members each) and then the core cells of the new religion, the Groups (about 25 members each).

Both the club members and the groups will be quite different from present-day club members and contemporary groups. Club members will engage themselves in clarifying and seriously discussing political issues, among other things, and groups will do the same and more. They will share a new philosophy of the "love of life," and speak a language “that expresses rather than obscures,” and “see, sense and read each other without curiosity and intrusion.” They will be the seed bed of the human religion. If you’re not satisfied with my explanation of how this is all to get done, I'll remind you that Dr. Fromm expects you to work with him. "Those who are serious about it will find out for themselves."

A caution to be found in each copy of The Revolution of Hope so that the reader can respond to Dr. Fromm’s suggestions by proposing three candidates for the national council (I thought of a bishop, a university president and an economist (I thought that would make a nice change) and volunteer for club or group duty.

This plan is the pluralist, non-bureaucratic form for a catholic religion. As Dr. Fromm wrote in Psychology, Religion, and Hope, we had "listened to what God says in the heart of man, there would have been but one religion upon earth." Fromm is, of course, a psycho-theist and his eschatology is one of utility; he looks for a humanistic and therefore universalistic religion. A nontheist transcendence means a leaving of the prison of one’s ego. Where is the dynamic focus to be located? Where does he will find such powers? How are the goals to be fastened on and then passed to others? As John H. Schaar points out in his brilliant critique of Fromm, Escape From Authority, “Fromm has given virtually no consideration to the problem of liberty on the social level. He is silent on the question of what happens when two omnipotent Fugs, rushing through the dark, bump into each other again.”

Schaar’s criticism is all the more telling because Fromm roots alienation and sin in the social order, the alienated and sick, or sinful person accurately reflecting the society he lives in. (That’s why the whole schtick will have to be changed, and not just the words."

Nor does the will just exist to assert that after all I am. Like the existentialists, Fromm accepts finitude and man’s loneliness and sense of separation from himself and others, but unlike them, he does not accept as necessary a connection between finitude and estrangement and this particular loneliness.

It’s true we would be more accurate to say that he can’t accept finitude because of its implications, so he makes of man a freakish creature — both in nature and out of it. Not a God in man’s heart, man’s heart a God in Itself. If we can’t see this, Fromm is warning us, we will only reach our destruction. For man, as man, can not survive; he can survive only, if he is really, and has been all along, God.

That’s why the preachiness and that is also, possibly why, as Schaar points out, Fromm’s optimism is increasingly serious, indeed almost frantic.