BOOK REVIEWS


An open society such as ours cannot exist without social criticism. It is significant today much more such criticism can be found in the writings of psychologists and philosophers such as Erich Fromm than in those of economists and social scientists. In The Sane Society he applies these ideas to capitalist society. Unlike other psychoanalytic therapists, who often identify deviance and neurosis, Fromm believes in an absolute concept of sanity. Human nature has certain existential characteristics which create certain needs. "A sane society," he writes, "is that which corresponds to the needs of man" (p. 20).

Human problems arise from the antinomic, dialectical human situation. Man is an animal but transcends nature through self-awareness, reason, and imagination. Thus man's life is determined by the inescapable alternatives of regression to his animal nature and individuation. In his individuation, however, man has to recover, on a higher human plane, the integrative security of natural existence. Any society which satisfies the human needs for "relatedness, transcendent creativity, rootedness, the need for a sense of identity and the need for a frame of orientation and devotion" (p. 67) is a sane society and will be conducive to mental health.

Mental health, thus defined in an objective, universally valid fashion, is not promoted by capitalism. In nineteenth-century capitalism "the human being, with his desires and woes, loses more and more his central place in the system, and this place is occupied by business and production" (p. 85). Psychologically, capitalism promotes a "hoarding orientation," a
“mania for saving and possession,” an “unsatisfiable greed for money” (pp. 89, 91). The solidarity ties of medieval society were destroyed. Labor, and through it the human being, became a commodity. Twentieth-century capitalism brought about considerable changes. However, in spite of the disappearance of feudal traits, of the increase in production, of the rise of the working class, and of new methods in factory and office, the alienation from human nature was intensified. Quantification of life in the business world and “abstractionification” of labor through increasing division and specialization removed all qualitative human elements. The dissolution of any concrete frame of reference exposed man to an abstract, incomprehensible environment of unmanageable dimensions, void of all meaningful interpretations. Man became “estranged from himself,” especially in his economic functions. Reason, aiming at the understanding of the essence of reality, has deteriorated, and intelligence, the ability to manipulate concepts for practical ends, has replaced it. The individual in modern capitalist society is alienated because he “cannot say ‘I’ any more” (p. 204); he feels guilty for not being like the rest and also for having lost himself.

Thus Fromm develops a formidable indictment of capitalist society. In my opinion his conclusions are correct, but the analysis which leads to them does not always go to the heart of the matter. He translates the criticism of Marx and of post-Marxian socialists into psychological terminology. The synthesis is not always harmonious. Sometimes he confuse the moral ideal of inner-directed nineteenth-century man, who emphasized efficiency, performance, accomplishment, and self-control, with universal human strivings. He ignores Riesman’s description of “other-directed man,” whom he identifies completely with conformity; he does not see that “other-directed man” may be merely a reaction against the obsessive, inhibiting, narrowly individualistic Victorian pattern of economic man and a step toward community and an emphasis on the non-economic goals of life. Fromm seems to attribute alienation mostly to capitalism and not to industrialization as such. True, he rejects Marx because of his pre-occupation with pure economics, his idea that “socialization is not only a necessary, but a sufficient condition” for a co-operative society, and his overvaluation of political and economic arrangements (pp. 262–69). Fromm’s own solution, however, is a romantic type of socialism, “a new form of life, a society of solidarity and faith, in which the individual has found himself and has emerged from the alienation inherent in the capitalistic system” (p. 780). This solution goes back to some ideas of the utopian socialists and to communitarianism. Fromm describes approvingly some experiments in communities of work in western Europe. His emphasis is on the participation of workers in management and decision-making, on decentralization, and on informing the worker about his own work and about the functions of the enterprise in the economy. Responsibility should be divided between central management and the rank and file.

It is extremely doubtful whether the alienating effects of modern technology and production organization can be overcome by what amounts to mere rational enlightenment. Any system—whether capitalism, socialism, or communism—with the same technology and mass organization will reduce man to a means and repress his creative, aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual potentialities. Piddling measures such as industrial democracy and participation can modify but not basically alter the distortion of human nature through industrialism. Practically, we can probably muddle through in this fashion for quite a while. But ideologically we have to make a decision about ultimate values. Do we want that fantastic degree of material splendor which—at least in the United States—industrial technology has provided? In this case we must put up with an “alienated” mode of life. Or shall we lower our material standards in favor of a more integrated existence which permits a realization of those human faculties and values which have to be repressed in industrial society?

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