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To Have Or to Be? - That's the Question

Interview with Giovanna Maria Pace

Erich Fromm
(1977e-e)

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Giovanna Maria Pace: Locarno - In an apartment invaded by the clear light of the lake and by the noise of the railway below, Erich Fromm, the greatest exponent of post-Freudian thought, spends the latter part of his life writing one book after another. Seventy seven years old, he does not abandon the pen. In Italy he has just had printed „To Have or To Be?“ (Mondadori, 300 pages, 4000 lire), already sold out in the first edition, while he is about to finish a very long book on Freud. In the book Fromm proposes to separate that of the thought of the great master which is original and everlasting from that which is instead limited and transitory, that which is influenced by the bourgeois prejudices of Vienna at the beginning of the century and from the tabus of the patriarchale and male-dominated family from which the founder of psychoanalysis came.

After having explained in „The Art of Loving“ how love is not entirely that instinctive and elementary practice that one thinks, but an exercise in intelligence, patience and also faith, Fromm maintains in „To Have Or to Be?“ that capitalist society is reaching its end. The nuclear arms race, ecological ruin, terrorism, the economic collapse all spring, according to Fromm, from the cult of having and from the disregard of being. {02}

Fromm there is no substantial difference between the capitalist industrialism of the Western world and the bureaucratic industrialism of the socialist world: oth are built on the principle of possession, both believe that they make the citizen happy, making him an ever more insatiable consumer. The critique of the capitalist system that takes up the first part of „To Have Or to Be?“ brings to mind the 75-year-old Herbert Marcuse, another German fugitive from Nazi Germany now in the United States.

First Interview:

Giovanna Maria Pace: Professor Fromm, what influence has American culture had on your thought?



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Erich Fromm: I have learnt to appreciate the clarity of English language. Germans love the ambiguous word, verbal assonances as ends in themselves, vague concepts. Anglo-saxons are more clear...

Giovanna Maria Pace: If you had to give yourself an ideological label, what would you choose?

Erich Fromm: I would define myself as a Marxian, and that means of course also as a humanist.

Giovanna Maria Pace: But in „To Have Or to Be?“ you maintain that to reach the mode of being man needs religion. Marx said instead that religion is the opium of the people...

Erich Fromm: This Marxian sentence, repeated to the point of boredom, is misinterpreted. In reality Marx was a “religious” man.

Giovanna Maria Pace: How would you explain this sentence then?

Erich Fromm: In his condemnation Marx referred to institutionalized religion, that has precisely the function of anesthetizing men till they do not notice the injustice of which they are the perpetrators and the victims. Organized religion is in substance a mystification, a means of hiding the wickedness of the social system. If the Christian principles of love, equality, and freedom were really practiced instead of only preached, there would be no need for a special institution (the church) to take care of those principles. For Marx it is socialist society which realizes “concretely” the religious principles of equality, brotherly love, and freedom.

Giovanna Maria Pace: A religiosity without God?

Erich Fromm: Yes. For Marx what counts is man. He is the root of everything; while for capitalism, the aim are things, profit, and man is only a means to gain them. As an authentically religious individual, Marx could not be other than against “religion.”

Giovanna Maria Pace: Professor Fromm, during your life have you known people who have achieved the being mode of existence?

Erich Fromm: Yes.

Giovanna Maria Pace: Can you name someone?

Erich Fromm: I think of Marx, Pope John XXIII or Rosa Luxemburg.¹ But it would be useless to look at a list of illustrious names. For the most part, biophilic, lovers of life, are found among simple people, without pretensions.

¹ Fromm's first answer was: “Albert Schweitzer, for example. And then my Hebrew teachers in Heidelberg and Frankfurt, when I was twenty years old.”



Giovanna Maria Pace: And the intellectuals?

Erich Fromm: Intellectuals are hindered on the way to being, by their narcissism. Politics and religious leaders by their egotism. As you see, the list is soon exhausted. For the rest, a Jewish legend says that the world rests on 36 just men: only thirty six, but their moral strength is immense.

Giovanna Maria Pace: And you, Professor, have you reached the mode of being?

Erich Fromm: I am getting there. The journey is not finished, even it is coming to an end.

Second Interview: *The following text seems to have been part of the interview with Giovanna Maria Pace and is delivered in the file together with the one just presented. The original text seems to be a written paper by Fromm which was secondarily brought into the fashion of an interview.*

Giovanna Maria Pace: One of the points on which the thought of Erich Fromm differs most profoundly from that of Sigmund Freud is the theory of dreams. What does the divergence consist in?

Erich Fromm: Freud assumes that every dream represents the satisfaction of a desire and in the last analysis, of a sexual desire that has its roots in infancy. That makes the interpretation of dreams extremely simple: it deals in substance with discovering what unconscious desires, distorted but recognizable, are hidden in the dream. Instead, for me the dream is a mixture of thoughts and sensations that man has when he is asleep, a mental state relatively protected from the constant noise that society makes.

The state of sleep is a state of freedom in which man is not occupied with the manipulation of the outside world. When an individual is awake, almost all he does and says is inspired by the model of behavior that the society imposes, even without his being aware of it. In the sleeping state, instead, one is much more oneself, even if society never ceases to intervene.

At this point a question arises. If one admits that the influence of the outside world is essentially beneficial, the lack of such influence during sleep would tend to diminish the value of our dream activity so as to render it inferior to the mental activity that takes place when we are awake, when we are exposed to these beneficial influences of surrounding reality. But how can one say that the influence of reality is exclusively beneficial. Could it not also be damaging, and could its absence not give access to qualities superior to those that we have when awake?

Many students of dreams, from Plato to Freud, hold that the sleeping person, deprived of contact with the outside world, regresses temporarily to an irrational primitive mental state. And this regression would then be the essential feature of the state of sleep and thus of unconscious activity. In this view the dream would have to be the expres-



sion of our most irrational and primitive impulses; and it is almost too easy to explain our disregard of dreams by the shame that we experience for these irrational and criminal impulses that we express when we avoid the control of society.

The important question is to see if such an interpretation is entirely right and true, or if instead the negative elements of society's influence do not explain the paradoxical fact that in our dreams we are certainly less rational and less fair than when awake but at the same time we are more intelligent, wiser, more able to judge than when we are awake. The fact is that the culture does not have only positive effects on our intellectual and moral functions but also negative effects. Modern man is assailed on every side and almost without interruption by noise--of the radio, of television, of headlines, of advertising and of the cinema--of which the greatest part, far from enlightening the mind, blunts and stultifies it.

Finally one arrives at this: the state of sleep has an ambiguous function; in sleep, the lack of contact with the culture brings out the worst and also the best in us. {03} I believe that it is not possible to state it in the abstract, but case by case. In fifty years activity as an analyst I have witnessed again and again that a dreamer after having met a personage regarded by all as influential and good, saw him again in a dream with a different face. The dreamer saw him for instance with a cruel mouth and a hard face. The person was telling someone that he has succeeded in robbing a widow, and he was laughing about it. And the dreamer had a sense of horror.

How does one interpret this dream? Perhaps the subject was jealous of the fame and reputation of the person? Or instead, in the dream he has been able to discern the true identity? In successive sessions and with the help of other testimonies the dreamer Fpm succeeded in determining that this last was the true interpretation. Awake the noise of public opinion that insisted on the fame of the person had prevented my patient from announcing his true feelings regarding the person who stood before him. Only later, after having had the dream, had the subject remembered the fleeting sense of distrust experienced during the meeting. In the dream, sheltered from the noise, the subject expressed a judgment much more on the mark than that manifested in wakefulness.

For Freud, the manifest dream, that is that which we remember after waking, is like a code message, that can be interpreted, provided the right key is available, for example the method of free association. According to me Freud did not notice that {04} the dream expresses the inner experiences in a symbolic form, resembling in that, poetry or other art forms. Consequently, Freud did not understand that the dream is a highly creative act, written in the universal language of symbolism, and only secondarily does censorship distort those parts that the subject refuses to accept even in sleep.

Jung was not right when he said that the unconscious message is always written clearly and so there is no need to seek to discover the distortions, because one must recognize that many dreams are more or less distortions. From my personal experience I can conclude that many dreams are clearly written but there are some in which one meets distortions to decipher. And it is really in knowing when one must prefer the one or the other approach, or a combination of the two, that remains one of the important elements of the art of dream interpretation."