

Strategies of Social Change

This presentation was delivered on 24 March 1990 at the University of Heidelberg, being a contribution to the annual congress of the International Erich Fromm Society held in commemoration of Erich Fromm's 90th birthday on the topic of „Humanism and Society”.

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20 years ago, Fromm formulated all the measures which he believed to be necessary to lead us away from the destructive developments of our civilization. It is fascinating to take a closer look at some of these measures and to compare them with the actual developments.

- „Production shall be directed for the sake of ‘sane consumption’,” (E. Fromm, *To Have Or to Be?*, New York: Harper and Row, 1976, p. 176) - In reality, production has been ever increasing and has moved away from the real needs of man.
- „People are offered a type of consumption that is more attractive than the one they are used to... This will require a slow educational process, and in this the government must play an important role. The function of the state is to establish norms for healthy consumption, as against pathological and indifferent consumption.” (Ibid., pp. 176-177) - In reality, all governments without exception serve an economy whose only goal is to increase consumption at all costs.
- „The gap between the rich and the poor nations must be closed.” (Ibid., p. 188) - In reality, the rich nations became richer, the poor nations poorer.
- „A system of effective dissemination of effective information must also be established.” (Ibid., p. 194) - In reality, the greatest concentration has been, above all, in the information business! The individual is no longer able to check whether a given news is out to manipulate him or whether it is „objective”.
- „Maximum decentralization throughout industry and politics is required.” (Ibid., p. 184) - In reality, there is a centralization going on in politics and economics which is beyond earlier imagination.
- „Bureaucratic management must be replaced by humanistic management.” (Ibid., p. 185) - In reality, the managements are more brutal and inhuman than ever before. Because of fusion of big companies, the bureaucratic apparatus is ever increasing in size and strength. While the managements are no longer transparent, they become more and more dominating.
- „Sane consumption is possible only if we can drastically curb the right of the stockholders and management of big enterprises to determine their production solely on the basis of profit and expansion.” (Ibid., pp. 178-179) - In reality, all attempts of the public, the consumers, the working class or also delegates from environmental or third world organisations to obtain possibilities to influence the economy have completely failed.

- „Our liberation from the having mode of existence is possible only through the full realization of industrial and political participatory democracy.” (Ibid., p. 181) - In reality even the discussion about co-determination in the economy has not been realized. Models of co-determination as for instance the Montan Union have proven to be a farce.

The same happened to all other proposals Fromm made: In no field did the developments proceed as Fromm not only considered desirable, but absolutely necessary. We might soon reach that state of total centralization that Fromm feared, namely a „technocratic ‘fascism with a smiling face’,” as Fromm expressed himself (ibid., p. 11).

Was he indeed that naive 20 years ago? - He was not more naive than all of us who have been concerned with the development of our civilization. It was naive to believe that there could be a positive development within our system.

Initially the development of society took place in similar phases as an analysis of the individual. There was a first phase of suffering (as we realized how completely stuck we were) in the period after the world war. It was a phase of shock: we cannot continue in this manner, if we do not want to destroy everything pertaining to true life. We realized that „technique and irrational social forces and institutions threaten the survival of Western society, if not of the human race” (ibid., p. 175). We realized that to have much does not create „well-being”.

There followed a second phase during which we had to recognize the cause of our suffering. We had to realize that „the development of this economic system was no longer determined by the question: ‘What is good for Man?’ but by the question: ‘What is good for the growth of the system?’” (ibid., p. 7);

- that it is a general principle of our system that it is centered „on maximal production and consumption” instead of „the full development of man”;
- that what was going on in our society had to lead to a „standardization of man” to „uniformity” and hence to inhumanity;
- that this economical system can only be healthy when men are sick;
- that man living in an industrial nation where „the person exclusively is concerned with having and possession is a neurotic, mentally sick person; hence it would follow that the society in which most of the members are anal characters is a sick society” (ibid., p. 84).

These are some of the factors which Fromm considered as the causes for our suffering.

The third phase was the most fascinating one: Do we see possibilities of overcoming our suffering? It was this phase in which we could use all our imagination, in which we could dream. It was this phase in which new concepts for alternative energy sources were developed, new concepts for traffic, new forms of farming, a different relation to the third world, new forms to live and new forms of living together. It was this phase in which Fromm developed his proposals for changing our society of which I have mentioned a few. They were concerned with all areas beginning with the formation of „hundreds of thousands of face-to-face groups” (ibid. p. 182) to the radical liberation from patriarchal domination (cf. ibid. p. 191) to the guaranteed yearly income.

For quite some time we have been in phase 4, where it would have been necessary to change our way of living, the reality in economy and society, to overcome our suffering in other words: to eliminate the causes for our suffering. And that exactly has not taken place. Nothing at all has been changed in economy or society, at the most some symptoms have changed. On the whole, everything has become worse.

Why is nothing changing? Not long ago a journalist told me that basically Fromm had been a complete pessimist. As he developed his proposals, did he realize that they could never be realized because a system can never be changed by the same system? It really almost sounds as though he's resigned when Fromm remarks: „the chances for necessary human and social changes remain slim” (ibid., p. 201). In the long run, it is senseless to propose this or that form of change without changing the system from the very base. The difficulties in forming a new society are indeed nearly insurmountable.

Fromm's ideas on how the changes should occur are contradictory:

On one hand there is his belief in man to change, on the other hand he draws our attention to the total obedience to which we are being drilled in this society.

On one hand there is the conviction that it will be possible to create a social climate in which it will be easy to change from selfishness to altruism. On the other hand there is the knowledge about the destructive influences of the commercial and political methods, the „brainwashing” - to use one of his expressions.

On one hand there is hope for the militant consumers' organizations, on the other hand he admits that the consumer's needs are formed by the producers and that we shall degenerate to a society of fed up non-thinking robots, if we do not succeed in breaking the power of the multinational companies.

On one hand he believes in the possibility of making our system more human, on the other hand he notes that the entire „history of Europe is a history of conquest, exploitation, force, subjugation” (ibid., p. 142).

What can be done? What remains? - To resign? Was Fromm indeed a pessimist, quite rightfully? To convert? To cooperate? To give up one's own convictions? To hope for the great quantum's jump, the changes of paradigms as the New Age promises?

Fromm had already called the beginning of a New Age a „spiritual smoergasbroed”. Everything can be learnt easily and without real efforts, the success is promised to be immediate. „What is given is momentary improvement of symptoms or at best stimulation of energy and some relaxation. Basically, these methods are means to feel better without a basic change in character and while becoming better adjusted to society.” (E. Fromm, *From Having to Being*, Manuscripts p. 14.)

To wait for a new system? - But does not every system again have an ideology, dogmas, dependencies, hierarchies? Does not every system lead to that dependence of man which according to Fromm was the prime cause of all the problems?

If I can no longer identify myself with a particular system, if I know that a system cannot be changed by the system and that it would be nonsense to attempt to replace the present system by another system - what else can I do but to refuse my taking part in that system? It needs the „uncom-

promisingly critical refusal to play the game in a system of deception" (ibid., Manuscript p. 29).

Can there be anything else but an attempt to withdraw myself with all my forces from this system in order to be able to live my life according to my own conviction?

„I am what I am" - this is Fromm's decisive credo. It is his unconditional conviction on the uniqueness of the individual. „The only realistic aim is total liberation, a goal which may well be called radical (or revolutionary) humanism." (Ibid., Manuscript, p. 12) - „A free person owes an explanation only to himself, to his reason and his conscience and to the few who may have a justified claim for explanation." (Ibid., p. 36)

It is the belief in the independence, self determination, autonomy of man, in his willingness and capability to live consciously, to live his own life and to create for himself objective possibilities to withdraw from the constraints and standards of values of this system.

The difficulties are enormous. They begin with the willingness to be autonomous. „How can slaves change so that they feel the wish for freedom? ... The enslaved man has no concept of freedom - yet he cannot become free unless he has a concept of freedom." (E. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1966, p. 92)

Does freedom really begin with the capacity of man to suffer, as Fromm thinks? Does man suffer physically and spiritually when he is suppressed? When do I feel suppressed? Does not Fromm himself write: „Society, and the family as its psychosocial agent, has to solve a difficult problem: How to break a person's will without his being aware of it?" (*To Have Or to Be?*, p. 78)

And how about a man who does not want to be conspicuous, to be as the rest, to adapt and to conform? „Actually people want to conform to a much higher degree than they are forced to conform... Most people are not even aware of their need to conform." (E. Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, New York: Harper and Row 1956, pp. 13-14)

Questions after questions. The problem is even much more difficult when we deal with the potential of man to be independent. „Independence means the cutting of the umbilical cord and the ability to owe one's existence to oneself alone... The condition for human evolution is the cutting of the primary ties that bind man to his land, to his kindred, and to his father and mother. Freedom is based on the achievement of liberating oneself from the primary ties that give security, yet cripple man." (E. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 75 and p. 89)

These are tremendous challenges. The book *From Having to Being* is nothing else than a help in this attempt of man to find himself. Erich Fromm is a tremendous optimist.

Can we change society with this? Do you live in order to change society or do you live just in order to live? Don't you believe that by refusing to adjust to this system you eventually will change the system?