

**»The greater the satisfaction,
the greater the disillusionment«**

Interview with Luciano Aleotti

Erich Fromm

(1975i-eng)

ALEOTTI: *Doctor Fromm, at the beginning of your career you belonged for some years to the Frankfurt School. What has been your contribution to the critical theory elaborated by the school, and how is it that you broke off your relations with it?*

FROMM: I was a member of the Institut fuer Sozialforschung in Frankfurt from 1928 to 1938 and my function was to represent psychoanalytic theory within the general sociological and economical approach of the school. Particularly I directed the study on the authoritarian character of German employees and workers. Around 1937 and 1938 the conflict between Horkheimer and myself on the attitude to Freud and his psychoanalytic theory developed increasingly.

ALEOTTI: *Which was your attitude to Freud?*

FROMM: In my view Freud was not a revolutionary thinker as on the contrary Horkheimer and later on Adorno and Marcuse claimed. Notwithstanding my great admiration and respect for Freud as the author of some of the most important discoveries for the understanding of man, I started to question his theories since the early thirties, particularly as far as their application to social phenomena was concerned, but I was then not so radical a critic of Freud's theory as I became later on. By 1937 I considered Freud deeply grounded in bourgeois thinking: He believed that bourgeois society, while not making man too happy, was still the best form of society, and most corresponding to the needs of man's nature. His criticism of society was that it was too strict in its sexual taboos, thus producing more neurosis than necessary. It was by no means a critique of bourgeois society, but a critique of all civilization. Freud put the question in form of a tragic alternative: The more civilization we have, the more, repression of sexuality, therefore the more neuroses, and we have really to choose between full happiness, by which he understood unrestricted sexual pleasure, or civilization. His choice was on the side of civilization.

ALEOTTI: *Freud was not a revolutionary in the field of sexuality?*

FROMM: Freud was personally a very prudish man and quite conservative in his views on sex. Also theoretically he cannot be said to be the representative of a hedonistic pleasure principle. Freud was really the representative of a principle which, in many ways, is closer to Epicurean thinking: The greatest pleasure man can have is not to have unpleasure. The whole idea that Freud was responsible for all the sexual liberation movement of the last decade is, as far as I can see, completely wrong. The sexual liberation was a result of the whole tendency for more consumption, and how can you have increasing consumerism without giving also sex free for consumption? Freud's insights were used as an ideology to support the consumer attitude towards sex. Freud might be called revolutionary only in one sense: he was the last step in Enlightenment thinking of the 18th century, namely that he extended rationalism to the point that by reason one can even analyze the irrational passions. But that was revolutionary in the 18th century was not revolutionary at the beginning of this century any longer.

ALEOTTI: *Which was Horkheimer's and Marcuse's and the Institute's position, in which sense they considered Freud a revolutionary?*

FROMM: They claimed Freud was a revolutionary thinker because he was a materialist. And why was he a materialist? Because he claimed that what man needs most is sexual satisfaction, and that is something material in contrast to idealism. It is very strange that men with a philosophical knowledge of a Horkheimer or Marcuse should take the bourgeois demand for material satisfaction as the criterion of revolutionary attitude when it was precisely the quintessence of bourgeois thinking, that material satisfaction, material consumptions should be the aim of life, in this sense the very opposite of socialist and Marxist ideas and values.

For Marx luxury was as much of a vice as poverty, and he was the first one to see how the ever increasing need for consumption enslave man. Freud's model of man was the isolated, egotistical, homo oeconomicus, motivated by egotism; for Marx the model of man was the self-active, productive man, who is rich because he has little, but is much.

ALEOTTI: *Marcuse claimed that you, giving importance to ethical qualities, are objectively speaking, the supporter of capitalism. What is your opinion about it?*

FROMM: This is sheer demagogic and I have reasons to believe that Marcuse knows better than that. But let us discuss the matter on a more serious level. For most philosophers, starting from Aristoteles, well-being is founded not only subjectively on the satisfaction of any wish, but also objectively by the satisfaction of those wishes and desires which are conducive to human growth, which correspond to the demands of human nature. Marcuse and Horkheimer fell

back to the hedonist position expressed by the French Enlightenment, namely that man's freedom consists in the satisfaction of every wish, especially any sexual wish. Marcuse claimed that sadism and coprophilia need to be realized and practiced as an expression of complete human freedom and happiness.

This is not a new man but the radical bourgeois à la Max Stirner. It is the philosophy of bourgeois materialism, which prepared the victory for total consumerism. It is the quintessence of bourgeois egotism, the craving for having. But it is in the opposite to Marx's materialism, who did not teach that man is by nature craving for possession but that the material conditions of production form man's passions, for greediness or selfishness as well as for solidarity and love.

ALEOTTI: In your last book, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, you dissent clearly both from Lorenz's ethological school and from Skinner neo-behavioristic school. Can you explain briefly your motivations?

FROMM: Lorenz and Skinner take opposite views on the question of human destructiveness. Lorenz bases his whole theory on observations made on animals, particularly birds and fish, and arrives at statements on human behavior essentially by analogy. Basically Lorenz claims that aggression has a defensive value, that it serves the survival of the individual and the species, and therefore, as he put it, is »nothing evil but only a so-called evil«. He explained aggression in a »hydraulic« sense, very close to Freud's picture of sexuality: he assumes that aggression is a constantly flowing impulse in the individual, that increases even if there are no outside stimuli to excite it, although man attempts to create circumstances which permit him to release his mounting aggression, from which he needs to be relieved.

This hydraulic model on aggression contradicts the findings and views of most neurophysiologists. But aside from this hydraulic concept, neurophysiological data show that animals and man have a »built in« genetically given defensive aggression.

ALEOTTI: On which grounds?

FROMM: According to most neurophysiologists, defensive aggression does not follow the hydraulic pattern of Lorenz, but it is a reaction to threats to vital interests of the animal and of man, such as a threat to life, freedom, access to females, the young, territory, etc. In as much as it is instinctive, built into the brain, human or animal aggression is reactive and defensive and only mobilized in order to ward off vital threats and disappears when these vital threats disappear. But the more important critique is that then Lorenz, by analogy, assumes that all forms of human aggression are defensive and biologically adaptive. He explains wars, quarrels, every phenomenon by which damage is inflicted to another person, as the result of the biologically given aggression.

Thus one calls aggression an act in response to a threat to one's life, or one calls aggression sadistic and destructive actions, as if they all had the same quality.

His logic is: If aggression is innate and if all killing and torturing is aggression, it follows that man's propensity to murder or torture is innate. This logical trick is possible because Lorenz and his adherents use the word aggression for many different things and do not bother to investigate the nature of the lust for killing or torturing. Lorenz does not see the truth of statement one of his foremost colleagues in the field of ethology made: »Man is the only species that is a mass murderer, the only misfit in his own society.« [N. Tinbergen 1968: »On War and Peace in Animals and Man,« in: *Science*, Washington (American Association for the Advancement of Science), 160 (1968) S. 1411–1418, p. 1412.] In other words, no other animal has the lust for killing as a pleasure without any biological reason. This kind of aggression which is specifically human I have called »malignant aggression«.

ALEOTTI: *What is the position of Skinner and of the neo-behaviorist school?*

FROMM: Skinner is not interested in what goes on inside a man, in his motivations; he is only interested in the results, in manifest behavior, because he assumes that, since it is the only thing you can measure, it is the only thing worth to know. According to Skinner, every form of human behavior, including the wish for dignity and freedom, is nothing but the result of proper conditioning, of proper methods of reward and punishment. The same is true for aggression and Skinner does not make the slightest distinction whether a man kills somebody else in order to save his life or for the lust of murdering. These motivations, since they are not scientifically treatable with his methods, are to him quite irrelevant.

ALEOTTI: *What is your critique to this position?*

FROMM: Skinner's theory is the theory of modern management, of modern industrial methods, it's a theory which says that by proper rewards you can condition a person totally to do what you want him to do. But Skinner does not answer why, despite the system of conditioning and punishment which existed throughout history people have rebelled again and again. (He does not take in account that there are strivings deeply rooted in man's nature such as the passion for freedom, for justice which are often stronger than all rewards and punishments – and I think this historical record shows that he is right.) In other words his basic conviction is that egotism and the wish for money and fame are the strongest motives in man. That in this belief he is conditioned by bourgeois ideology is indeed true, but not one of the questions he raises.

Skinner's theory is so attractive because it corresponds to the practice of everyday life in our modern industrial system and therefore it seems right to people who think this system is »natural« and corresponds to the nature of man. Besides that, it combines a fascist element of the totally directed

state with an element which was progressive fifty years ago, that man can be changed by environment. In a good society man could become good.

ALEOTTI: *You spoke of malignant aggression. Where do you see its origin?*

FROMM: To answer this question adequately is not possible in a short interview. But I can at least indicate: Man is little determined by his instincts, less than any other animal, even less than his closest relatives, the chimpanzees. With this lack of a built in plan how to live man could hardly make any decisions which he has to make if he is to survive. Man developed as the only animal a substitute for the instincts, namely a second nature, which we call his character. The character is the relatively permanent of human passions such as love, avarice, desire for fame, etc. Which particular forms of character an individual and a whole group develop is dependent on their way of producing, consuming, their class differences etc., upon certain elements given in the very existence of man, in the human condition. This concept of character goes back to Spinoza and Marx; Freud's theory has contributed to enrich it clinically.

ALEOTTI: *But which are these particular conditions in the existence of man which lead him to kill and to torture getting a pleasure out of it?*

FROMM: The empirical evidence, tends to show that if man lives in conditions which are conducive to an optimum of well-being, namely conditions of stimulation, of material security, independence, lack of exploitation, guidance by those who have competence to guide, in a social climate the main principles of which are solidarity and love, critical thinking – then man will develop only a minimum of destructiveness. On the other hand, the more powerless, the more bored, the more frustrated he feels, the more he is oppressed, exploited, the more crippled he is, the more will he tend to either have lust in destruction as a kind of revenge of his un-lived life, as a kind of resentment against life which has eluded him; or he becomes sadistic, which means essentially to have the passion for uncontrolled power over weaker beings and therefore to compensate for his own powerlessness by the experience of being an omnipotent godlike figure, to have absolute power over a sentient being even it is only a dog, or his child or his wife.

ALEOTTI: *What is specific about your approach to the study of aggression?*

FROMM: My method consists in not isolating psychology from the other fields pertaining to man – and by that I have in mind particularly the social structures in which he lives, and the values according to which he lives his life. One cannot understand man if one's approach is only psychological. The Freudian school assumed that the life of a man was essentially determined by his family, that is to say by an individual constellation, but they forgot that the family itself is an agency of society, that the family itself is determined by the social character of the class to which it belongs, that it only transmits the

demands of society to the child. By the method of child upbringing, education, culture, society tends to form the character so that people like to do what they have to do in a class society, that they may feel satisfied by fulfilling the functions which are necessary from the standpoint of a given society.

ALEOTTI: *What importance have ethical values in psychology?*

FROMM: They are important in a twofold sense. First, because I cannot understand a person unless I know the real norms and aims, conscious, but more often unconscious, according to which he lives his life. Secondly, because there are norms and goals which are conducive to human well-being and norms and aims which are destructive to it, and therefore psychoanalysis must analyze them all critically. Psychology must always be a critical psychology. It must not only describe man as he is, it must not only describe man in comparison with others, but it must understand critically what individual and what social circumstances do to further or to hamper the optimal development of man as a being that has his own goals and aims, rooted in the very nature of his existence.

ALEOTTI: *Last month, Jean Paul Sartre, after having visited in prison Andreas Baader, exhausted by the hunger strike, has claimed that, although he does not share politically the ideology of the German anarchical group, considers their actions not blameworthy, in as much as their aim is to renew society. What is your opinion about this?*

FROMM: On the Baader-Meinhof group I differ from Sartre. To have good intentions is not enough. Political action must be understood in the whole context of social and political reality. They use means which are not conducive to any political progress, but in fact only mobilize state violence. It is »putschism,« a form of fighting which is quite in contrast to any revolutionary teaching of Marx, Engels or even Mao, because they have no basis in the broad masses of the population. They are not criminals but misguided and politically harmful individualistic anarchists.

I believe that these groups are partly motivated by a deep idealism, by the conviction that they are staking their life for the salvation of the Western world. But the overestimation of their own power, and the unrealistic misconception of the total political reality, using methods of despair which have no chance to succeed, suggests to me an element of irrationality. Just because a person has a good aim consciously, he is not necessarily motivated by it. Sometimes putschists and the advocates of violence were motivated primarily by the wish for destruction, and have used political aims as rationalizations. But even to the extent to which this may be true it in no way justifies certain judicial measures such as a brutal method, of forced feeding and the plans to restrict the number and the free access of the defense lawyers to their clients.

ALEOTTI: *As far as the members of the Baader-Meinhof group are concerned, Sartre stated that the isolation inflicted upon them in the German prisons is as bad as torture. What is your opinion about?*

FROMM: I find this remark unthinking and unfeeling. Anyone who does not simply utter empty words cannot possibly say that a man being in an isolation cell is in the same position as a man being tortured. I have read about and talked to people who have been in isolation: for some it was not worse than regular prison, for some it was terrible, but for nobody could it be compared to the application of torture. At a time when torture is used throughout the world as the ultimate means of force and degradation, when the attention of men who still have a remnant of humanity within themselves such identification of isolation and tortures in fact serves to weaken the full impact of the phenomenon of torture. Isolation in prison is bad enough, but to call it torture is an irresponsible rhetorical excursion in the spirit of abstraction. But I think that by making these demagogic analogies between isolation and torture one moves on the level of rhetoric which convinces nobody.

ALEOTTI: *Some of the present women liberation movements theorize an open, violent fight against the man. What do you think about?*

FROMM: One cannot understand the psychology of women, and for that matter the psychology of man, and one cannot understand the element of sadism, of hostility and destructiveness in men and women if one does not consider that there has been a war between the sexes going on in the last six thousand years. This war is a guerrilla war. Women have been defeated by patriarchy six thousand years ago and society has been built upon the domination of man. Women were possessions and had to be grateful for every new concessions that man made to them. But there is no domination of one part of mankind over another, of a social class, of a nation or of a sex over another, unless there is underneath rebellion, fury, hate and wish for revenge in those who are oppressed and exploited and fear and insecurity in those who do the exploiting and repressing.

ALEOTTI: *To be womanly means traditionally to be naive, coquette, always ready to smile. Which psychological foundations have such definitions?*

FROMM: Women have been so thoroughly oppressed that they have accepted unconsciously the role that the ruling sex, man, gave to them. They have even believed in the male propaganda, which is very much the same as the propaganda in other wars, for instance wars against colonial people, etc.

Women have been considered to be naive: Freud said that they were narcissistic, unrealistic, cowardly, inferior to man anatomically, intellectually, morally. The fact is that women are less narcissistic than men, for the simple reason that

there is almost nothing that man does which has not some purpose of making an impression. Women do many, many things without this motive and in fact what you might call women's vanity is only the necessity to please the victors.

ALEOTTI: *As far as the lack of realism in women is concerned, what should we say about male realism in an epoch in which all Western governments, consisting of men, are spending their money and energy building atomic bombs, instead of taking care of threatening famine, instead of avoiding the catastrophes which threaten the whole world?*

FROMM: About the cowardice of women, it is a well-known fact that when you take bloodtest the number of men who faint is much larger than the number of women who faint. It is a fact that men, when they get ill, make a tremendous fuss about themselves, while women take care of themselves in a much more independent way. These slogans are false, they serve to depreciate the enemy. What women have done as a most defeated group is to accept these slogans, even to believe them, even to act upon them, because when they do not act upon them, they are not considered feminine; they have to play the »uncle Tom« in order to please the men, because that is their only chance to get anywhere.

ALEOTTI: *What is man's psychological reaction to the guerrilla war that women have engaged against him?*

FROMM: This war cannot but create a good deal of hate and sadism in both sides. The exploited and the exploiters are both in the same boat as are the prisoner and his guard: they both threaten each other and hate each other, they both have to be afraid of the other's attacks. So men are afraid of women and they only pretend they are not.

ALEOTTI: *What is, in your opinion, the political nature and the prospects of the women liberation movement?*

FROMM: I think that the women liberation movement is one of the mildest and the most reformist revolutions that has ever been. Basically its aim is, as I can see it, that women achieve the role of the ruling sex: man. The present liberation movement does not in fact show a truly revolutionary aim, in which women become humanly emancipated, but it continues the principle of the patriarchal world except that then women will have the power which now belongs to men only.

[The following end of the interview was not foreseen by Fromm to be published in the Italian journal *L'Espresso*]

ALEOTTI: *Doctor Fromm, can you anticipate the thesis of your forthcoming book, *To Have Or to Be*?*

FROMM: The polarity between having and being is a central polarity, which goes through various religious systems, and revolutionary thinkers like Marx, as against those systems which are based on private property, like capitalism. The

two different attitudes can be expressed in two ways. One is »I am what I have« and the other is, »I am what I do,« or if you like »I am who I am«, and that is the original definition of God in the Old Testament. Now, capitalism was based on the first formula; it is the system in which having property, making profits, selfish interest and not love, not altruism, not human solidarity are the principles, the norms of life. And this was the great promise of capitalism, that happiness consists in constant pleasure, in the satisfaction of all greed, in the freedom to do anything one liked, in the miracle of producing, like God himself, of making a new world, even of making man himself in a synthetic chemical process.

Like a religion, capitalism has created a tremendous energy which inspired man in the Western Europe for the last four hundred years to one of the most dramatic and greatest achievements of human race: to create a new science to penetrate the secrets of nature intellectually, to fulfill dreams which had been pure dreams, to give a feeling that anybody, if he made the effort, could do what he wanted. The great promise is now failing.

ALEOTTI: *In which sense it »is failing« and why?*

FROMM: Partly for economic reasons: we exploit our resources to an extent that, in a foreseeable future, human race cannot live, and meanwhile we poison the earth, and might make it inhabitable. The great promise of the freedom of the individual has been replaced by the insight that the individual has become a well-oiled cog in a vast machine and has almost nothing to say and that this process is going on and on. And as far as happiness is concerned, the awareness has emerged that the satisfaction of greed and cupidity does not make anybody happy. In no other country as the United States, where the hopes in capitalism reached their climax, are people so sad, disappointed, aimless.

ALEOTTI: *Is there another vision of the world which might overcome this contradiction?*

FROMM: We must go back to the teaching of Marx, who, in contrast to the hedonists and utilitarians of the 18th and 19th century, said that the aim of life is not happiness in a purely subjective sense – namely I am happy if I fulfill any wish which I have, or which is suggested to me by industry – but that happiness has a normative objective criterion, namely it can be understood only in terms of the nature of man, and in terms that a certain form of activity is conducive to well-being or to depression and to ill-being. That is why Marx could say that luxury is as much a vice as poverty, and that the true objective in the life of man is to get free from alienation.

But we can also show today, with the help of depth psychology, more concretely what this process of having and being is psychologically – that is two really different psychological orientations, which make the main differences between individuals and cultures.

ALEOTTI: *Can the experience of the Soviet Union represent an alternative to the capitalistic system?*

FROMM: I believe that soviet society, in its essence, has the same psychological basis as Western capitalism. Khrushchev was honest when he spoke of »gulash socialism«. The assumption is exactly the same: people are happy by more consumption. The whole difference is only which method is more conducive to maximum production and maximum consumption.

ALEOTTI: *What is the psychological basis of the Chinese experience?*

FROMM: As far as I can see, China has not so far participated in this ideology of consumption. On the contrary it has taken a stand against maximum consumption and has introduced an ethical system which is based on objective values – as serving the people, serving each other which in many ways is closer to Christian thinking than to Soviet socialism. But the Chinese had to arrive at these tremendously impressive results by the still existing »monodictatorship« over the mind, through intellectual conditioning, that is people have to think the same. But maybe this was the only possible solution.

ALEOTTI: *To what extent could the Chinese experience operate in Europe?*

FROMM: The degree of no-individualist thinking which the Chinese have so far held to be necessary would be an almost unbearable narrowing in Europe, even considering the fact that the mind control in the Western world is by no means small through advertising, press, etc. So I believe that the greatest hope for the future lies in the United States, because there is probably no country in which people have been that disillusioned with the happiness which consumption promised. That is why in the United States the most radical criticism of the system comes from the middle classes, from the sector of society which knows abundance, feeling unsatisfied. In the Soviet Union, when they reach the same degree of consumption as the Americans, the reaction of the people will be at least the same: the greater the satisfaction has been, the greater is already the disillusionment, because people see that, with all this satisfactions, they have not become happier.

Transcription of an interview Erich Fromm gave to Luciano Aleotti (in 1975). The interview so far was published only in an Italian translation under the title: »In fondo, l'uomo e un buon uomo«, in: *L'Espresso*, Roma, Vol. 21 (16.2.1975), pp. 56–59 and 94.

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