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About the Younger Generation

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Youth between Having and Being

The picture of the universality of the having mode of existence may strike many readers as too negative and one-sided; and indeed it is. I wanted to portray the socially prevalent attitude first in order to give as clear a picture as possible. But there is another element that can give this picture a degree of balance, and that is a growing attitude among the young generation that is quite different from the majority. Among these young people we find patterns of consumption that are not hidden forms of acquisition and having, but expressions of genuine joy in doing what one likes to do without expecting anything „lasting“ in return. These young people travel long distances, often with hardships, to hear music they like, to see a place they want to see, to meet people they want to meet. Whether their aims are as valuable as they think they are is not the question here; even if they are without sufficient seriousness, preparation, or concentration, these young people dare to *be*, and they are not interested in what they get in return or what they can keep. They also seem much more sincere than the older generation, although often philosophically and politically naive. They do not polish their egos all the time in order to be a desirable „object“ on the market. They do not protect their image by constantly lying, with or without knowing it; they do not expend their energy in repressing truth, as the majority does. And frequently, they impress their elders by their honesty--for their elders secretly admire people who can see or tell the truth. Among them are politically and religiously oriented groups of all shadings, but also many without any particular ideology or doctrine who may say of themselves that they are just „searching.“ While they may not have found themselves, or a goal that gives guidance to the practice of life, they are searching to be themselves instead of having and consuming.

This positive element in the picture needs to be qualified, however. Many of these same young people (and their number has been markedly decreasing since the late sixties) had not progressed from freedom *from* to freedom *to*; they simply rebelled without attempting to find a goal toward which to move, except that of freedom from restrictions and dependence. Like that of their bourgeois parents, their motto was „New is beautiful!“ and they developed an almost phobic disinterest in all tradition, including the thoughts that the greatest minds have produced. In a kind of naive narcissism they



believed that they could discover by themselves all that is worth discovering. Basically, their ideal was to become small children again, and such authors as Marcuse produced the convenient ideology that return to childhood--not development to maturity--is the ultimate goal of socialism and revolution. They were happy as long as they were young enough for this euphoria to last; but many of them have passed this period with severe disappointment, without having acquired well-founded convictions, without a center within themselves. They often end up as disappointed, apathetic persons--or as unhappy fanatics of destruction.

Not all who had started with great hopes ended up with disappointment, however, but it is unfortunately impossible to know what their number is. To my knowledge, no valid statistical data or sound estimates are available, and even if they were available, it is almost impossible to be sure how to qualify the individuals. Today, millions of people in America and Europe try to find contact with tradition and with teachers who can show them the way. But in large part the doctrines and teachers are either fraudulent, or vitiated by the spirit of public relations ballyhoo, or mixed up with the financial and prestige interests of the respective gurus. Some people may genuinely benefit from such methods in spite of the sham; others will apply them without any serious intention of inner change. But only a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the new believers could show how many belong to each group.

My personal estimate is that the young people (and some older ones) who are seriously concerned with changing from the having to the being mode number more than a few dispersed individuals. I believe that quite a large number of groups and individuals are moving in the direction of being, that they represent a new trend transcending the having orientation of the majority, and that they are of historical significance. It will not be the first time in history that a minority indicates the course that historical development will take. The existence of this minority gives hope for the general change in attitude from having to being. This hope is all the more real since some of the factors that made it possible for these new attitudes to emerge are historical changes that can hardly be reversed: the breakdown of patriarchal supremacy over women and of parents' domination of the young. While the political revolution of the twentieth century, the Russian revolution, has failed (it is too early to judge the final outcome of the Chinese revolution), the victorious revolutions of our century, even though they are only in their first stages, are the women's, the children's, and the sexual revolutions. Their principles have already been accepted by the consciousness of a great many individuals, and every day the old ideologies become more ridiculous.

(Erich Fromm, *To Have Or to Be?*, New York 1976, pp. 74-76.)

„It is not enough just to be young“ – About Beatniks and Hippies

The movements of the beatniks and hippies are not primarily political; they do not cling to any revolutionary tradition; theirs is a rather genuine protest against the insincerity, emptiness and lovelessness of their elders. They protest against the bourgeois form of existence more by their way of being than by any concerted action or ideologies. Many of them are probably more overtly neurotic than their conservative and adjusted contemporaries, and many of them are more a part of the consumer culture than they think.



Many seek a short-cut to „enlightenment“, a deeper and more real experience of life, by taking drugs. Yet they cultivate quite sincerely a greater freedom of feeling, of living in the here and now, of joy, including sexual pleasure. They are the avant-garde of an extremely widespread group among the young generation for whom the Beatles with their simple and often sentimental or senseless text of a song, the rhythm of music, have become the substitute for their elders more mechanized and lifeless pleasures in cars and freezers. Their enthusiasm is pathetic and touching. What would have sounded sentimental and trashy to the young generation of the twenties is for them an expression of life and spirituality. How empty of stimuli, of interest, of hope, must a youth be if it finds its solace in the Beatle culture, the very same Beatles who themselves are a product of a publicity-minded mass culture, showing their phoniness by becoming adherents of an Indian fake guru who sells personal mantras for a minimum of \$35 and prepares spiritual leaders in a four-months' cram course to be had for a trip to the foothills of the Himalayas and \$400. Probably the Maharishi needs their endorsement for his enterprise as much as they need a remodeled image which emphasizes their spirituality.

It is not enough just to be young, because youth has the drawback that it does not stay, and what may be exciting to the 'children of love' today will have become a bore to the same „children“ when they are 40. Beards hide more than they express, and carelessness in dress is not the expression of hope. Perhaps it can be said that they are freer and more spontaneous in their physical movement and in their sexual enjoyment. In this respect they are perhaps different from their suburban parents, who practice a kind of sexual freedom which only marks their inner emptiness. For them, the elders, sexual freedom is the one little thrill that relieves their profound boredom, but it is so barren of emotional intensity that it can hardly be classified as an enrichment of life. It should be said in passing that this was the mistake of a gifted psychoanalyst like Wilhelm Reich, and of a gifted philosopher like Herbert Marcuse, that they think in terms of the older conservatives for whom sexual repressiveness was part of their political and moral credo. This is not so any more. Just as the Nazis, in contrast to the Nationalist Conservatives favored sexual freedom the suburbanite sub-culture is not a bit more humanly or politically progressive because of its sexual licentiousness. Sex has become an article of consumption and as Aldous Huxley foresaw so perspicaciously in *The Brave New World*, it is used as a very important compensatory activity to relieve boredom, to create the illusion of adventurousness, and thus to strengthen the coherence of the bureaucratic industrial society. Freud's emphasis on the dangers of sexual repression were a legitimate protest against Victorian middle-class society, but he, like the new middle class, failed to analyze the nature of the sexual satisfaction of the alienated man.

(Erich Fromm, „Political Radicalism in the United States and Its Critique“ (1990i [1968]); this paper originally was written as part of chapter 3 („Where We Are Now?“) of *The Revolution of Hope* but never published.)

Protest against the deadening of life

Simultaneously with the increasing necrophilous development, the opposite trend, that of love of life, is also developing. It manifests itself in many forms: in the protest against the deadening of life, a protest by people among all social strata and age groups, but



particularly by the young. There is hope in the rising protest against pollution and war; in the growing concern for the *quality* of life; in the attitude of many young professionals who prefer meaningful and interesting), pork to high income and prestige; in the widespread search for spiritual values--misguided and naive though it often is. This protest is also to be understood in the attraction to drugs among the young, despite their mistaken attempt to attain greater aliveness by using the methods of the consumer society. The antinecrophilous tendencies have also manifested themselves in the many politico-human conversions that have taken place in connection with the Vietnam war, Such cases show that although the love for life can be deeply repressed, what is *repressed* is not *dead*. Love of life is so much a biologically given quality in man that one should assume that, aside from a small minority, it can always come to the fore, although usually only under special personal and historical circumstances. (It can happen in the psychoanalytic process, too.) Indeed, the presence and even the increase of anti-necrophilous tendencies is the one hope we have that the great experiment, *Homo sapiens*, will not fail. There is, I believe, no country where the chances for such reassertion of life are greater than in the technically most developed country, the United States, where the hope that more „progress“ will bring happiness has been proved to be an illusion for most of those who have already had a chance to get a taste of the new „paradise.“ Whether such a fundamental change will happen, nobody knows. The forces working against it are formidable and there is no reason for optimism. But I believe there is reason for hope.

(Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, New York 1973, pp. 397f.)

Youth in search of new principles of morality

The younger generation is playing a central role in the moral crisis we are currently experiencing. I'm thinking in particular of the radicals among our young adults, and when I say „radicals“ I don't mean the ones who call themselves radicals and seem to think they can justify any and all violence by calling it „radical.“ Many young people are simply childish, not radical. Lenin dealt with that subject in his essay on the childhood diseases of Communism.

But there are large numbers of young people who are radical not just in their political demands but in another respect that is closely linked to the subject of the last section, that is, to the rejection of authoritarian morality. The rebellion is directed not solely at authority (all revolutions voice a protest against authority) but at the patriarchal principle and the morality rooted in that principle, a morality that calls obedience a virtue and disobedience a sin. A phenomenon of great significance that follows from this morality is that people develop guilt feelings if they do not do what they are supposed to do. Instead of doing what their own hearts, their own feelings, their own humanity tells them to do, they submit to an authoritarian order that punishes them with guilt if they violate it.

What characterizes a large number of young people and what makes them so likable for so many of the rest of us, myself included, is, I think, that they have freed themselves from the guilt feelings imposed by authoritarian morality. They have, by and large, discarded the guilt that has been drilled into Western humankind in the Judeo-Christian



tradition for the last two thousand years and put aside the fear of acting outside the norms that have determined our behavior to such a great extent. But in doing so they have not become immoral themselves. On the contrary, they are in search of new principles of morality.

And here I have to mention another distinctive feature of this young generation: a new honesty. They do not feel the same compulsion that earlier generations did to make up excuses for themselves, to rationalize, to refuse to call a spade a spade. One result is that they sometimes use language that is of questionable taste and that puts off people raised in the old tradition. But the key point is that they give expression to an honesty that is completely at odds with the dishonesty prevalent in bourgeois, patriarchal society, where we always have to hide what we feel guilty about and where we always have to act as if we were the very incarnation of all good qualities. We cannot admit that „nothing human is alien to us,“ because such an admission would push us to the brink of disobedience. But at the moment when we understand and acknowledge that the reality of man includes both his best and his worst, at that moment we become fully human. Instead of feeling outraged over our negative potential, we have to experience that, too, as part of our humanity.

Sigmund Freud contributed a great deal to the new honesty. Indeed, he opened up a wholly new dimension of honesty. Before Freud we took it at face value when people assured us of their „good intentions.“ But now, after Freud’s discovery and systematic study of the unconscious, asseverations of good intentions won’t do any more. We want to know what the unconscious motives behind those good intentions are. And we have come to the realization that it makes little difference whether someone is aware of his bad intentions or whether he is simply clever enough to rationalize them and so hide them both from others and himself. Indeed, someone with truly evil intentions may have achieved greater honesty with himself than someone who has repressed his evil intentions from his conscious mind and is therefore in an even better position to carry them out because he can package them in the guise of good and virtuous ideas.

Ever since Freud, we have had to face the fact that we are responsible not only for our conscious minds and our „good intentions“ but also for our unconscious. Our actions and not our words alone speak for us. It’s even possible that our words mean nothing at all. However, Freud’s work is not the only reason we have for being suspicious of mere words. We have also had the experience of seeing human dishonesty lead us into wars in which hundreds of millions of people were killed or, for the sake of „honor,“ voluntarily marched off to their deaths. All those deaths can be traced back to lies and empty slogans. We have good reason today to be less impressed than ever by what people say. Words and ideas come cheap and can be done up in all kinds of packages. That’s why young people are less inclined to ask, „What did you think about all that?“ and ask instead, „What did you do? What were your motives?“

I think this effect of Freud’s work, the introduction of a new honesty into our lives, is of far more importance in the development of the Western world than the „sexual revolution“ whose beginnings are usually traced back to him. In a society that is as totally oriented to consumption as ours is, the sexual revolution, if that’s what you want to call it, probably would have come about without Freud. We cannot exhort people to obtain everything they need to satisfy their senses and at the same time urge sexual ab-



stinence on them. In a consumer society sex will inevitably become a consumer article. A number of industries depend on that fact, and a lot of money is spent to maintain the attractiveness of sexuality. That represents a change from earlier times but no revolution. And it would be difficult to lay that change at Freud's door.

What is both new and positive, however, is that for young people sexuality is no longer burdened with guilt feelings. I'd like to take a minute here to examine the link between sexuality and guilt feelings more closely. If authoritarian ethics declares sexual drives „sinful,“ the result for all of us is an inexhaustible source of guilt, and we could say that from our third year on every one of us has a massive bank account of guilt feelings saved up. Because human beings, constituted as they are, cannot help having sexual desires, they also cannot help feeling guilt if those feelings have a stigma attached to them. Restrictions placed on sexuality lead to guilt feelings that are then generally exploited to create and maintain an authoritarian ethic.

The younger generation (and the older one, too, to some extent) finally seems to have rid itself of that kind of guilt. That is no small advance. But if you'll forgive me for belaboring the obvious, I have to add here that all is not gold that glitters. Because of our consumer orientation, sex is exploited increasingly to disguise a lack of intimacy. We use physical closeness to gloss over the human alienation we feel. Physical intimacy alone cannot create emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy, a genuine harmony between two people, may well be linked with physical intimacy, may even begin with it, and can be confirmed again and again by it, but those two kinds of intimacy are not identical. At those moments when we lack emotional intimacy we are most likely to substitute physical intimacy for it. And if we are normally constituted both physically and mentally, that is quite easy to do.

The younger generation, as I have said, rejects the patriarchal order and consumer society as well. But it is given to another kind of consumerism, which is exemplified in young people's use of drugs. Their parents buy cars, clothes, jewelry; the children take drugs. There are many reasons why they reach for drugs and tend to develop an ever greater dependency on them, reasons that demand our careful consideration; but whatever else drug dependency is, it is also an expression of that same lazy, passive *Homo consumens* that the children criticize in their parents but that they themselves also represent in a different guise. The young people, too, are always waiting for something to come to them from the outside, waiting for the high of drugs, the high of sex, the high of the rock rhythms that hypnotize them, carry them off, sweep them away. Those rhythms do not encourage activity. They transport the young into an orgiastic state, into a state like a drug high, in which they forget themselves and so are profoundly passive. An active human being does not forget himself; he is himself and is constantly becoming himself. He becomes more mature, he becomes more adult, he grows. A passive person is, as I suggested before, an eternal suckling babe. What he consumes is ultimately of little consequence to him. He simply waits with open mouth, as it were, for whatever the bottle offers. Then he is gradually sated without having to do anything himself. None of his psychic powers is called into play, and finally he grows tired and sleepy. The sleep he experiences is often a narcosis, an exhaustion induced by boredom, more than a sleep of healthy regeneration. Once again you may feel that I am exaggerating here, but estimates suggest that more people than we would imagine are having that kind of experi-



ence. And the media involved in producing our false needs keep reassuring us that it is our level of consumption that demonstrates the high level of our culture.

The question we have to ask in our society of bad, superfluous affluence that no one can possibly digest and that contributes nothing to our vitality--the question we have to ask is whether we can still manage, in principle at least, to create a good affluence. Can we somehow make good, truly productive use of the overabundant production we are technologically capable of, a use that serves human beings and their growth? That should be possible if we will understand that what we have to do is encourage and satisfy only *those* needs that make people more active, livelier, freer, so that they will not be driven by their feelings or simply react to stimuli but will be open and attentive and determined to realize their own potential, to enliven, enrich, and inspire themselves and others. One prerequisite for accomplishing that is, of course, to reorganize not only our work but also our so-called leisure. Our free time is, for the most part, nothing but lazy time. It provides us with an illusion of power because we can bring the world into our living rooms by pressing a button on the TV set or because we can get behind the wheel of a car and fool ourselves into thinking the engine's 100 horsepower is our own. We have truly „free time“ only to the extent that we cultivate needs that are rooted in man and that move him to become active. That is why work has to stop being monotonous and boring. And the central problem we face in organizing our work is: How can we make work interesting, exciting, lively?

(Erich Fromm, „Affluence and Ennui in Our Society“ (1983b [1971]), in: E. Fromm, *For the Love of Life*, ed. by Hans Jürgen Schultz, New York: The Free Press, 1986, pp. 32-36.)