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## Ourselves and the Other: The Role of Fear

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### Introduction

During the past year, two news items in particular have caused us alarm and indignation: the mass rape of tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslim women, carefully planned and used by the Serbs as a weapon in their war of ethnic cleansing; and the announcement by the German Home Office that extremist violence has increased by 54% since last year, and that 90% of the victims are foreigners. Unfortunately, these are not the only two episodes, but they are a clear and worrying sign of our times, of the crisis of moral and civilized values that humanity is experiencing. We were struck by the indignation expressed by Ralf Dahrendorf over the spread of racist violence in Europe, in an article in *La Repubblica* (13. 11. 1992):

„There are times when all free spirits, of every political belief must stand up and be counted. This is one of those times. Suddenly the violent hatred of foreigners, refugees seeking asylum and Jews, has taken on epidemic proportions. [...] Those who come from another country must fear for their lives. Not even cemeteries are safe from attack. This means that the fundamental values of free society are seriously threatened. Each one of us is called upon to defend these values and to defend them ac-

tively, if we do not want to see a return to the twenties and thirties.” [translation mine]

We do not want to be passive spectators of a destructive process with man at its centre, both as subject and object. We would like to take up this appeal to humanity and this paper is our answer.

### Who are the aliens?

We asked ourselves why human beings perceive their fellows as aliens. Taking as a premise that the concept of alien has threatening connotations and therefore implies fear and hostility, its perception can be explained biologically. Its roots lie in the primordial conditions of our species. Ever since life started on our planet, all living organisms have had to fight against others in order to satisfy their basic needs. They have had to face the fear of being killed, of the dark, of loneliness, of unforeseen and threatening natural events. The fact that the resources necessary for life have always been limited and that one organism can be food for another, has created antagonism among living beings. As Darwin has shown, the history of life on our planet has been determined by this rivalry.



## Reason as the compass of human behaviour

At some time in our history something truly astonishing happened: we found ourselves with a brain so well-developed that it allowed us to gradually set ourselves free from the yoke of nature, from behavioural compulsion imposed by instinct. This was probably due to successive stages of evolution, although we do not know for sure. However, the fact that we were able to respond to the surrounding environment, ever freer from instinct, allowed us to start to come to know nature and her laws, and to live by taking our distance from her, separating ourselves from her to a certain extent. We could elaborate rationally information from outside and from inside ourselves in order to act more freely in all directions. This is the moment in which we acquired reason, a necessary premise to free ourselves from our animal past and from our atavic and irrational threats and fears. Thus, unlike other species, we began to satisfy our needs through more or less complex processes, not directly. Culture was born.

Acquiring reason has had a similar role in human history to the discovery of fire. This discovery allowed us to defeat our fear of the dark, to realize that the absence of light is not populated by hostile ghosts. In the same way, reason illuminates human actions, giving them knowledge, strength and a direction which is no longer compulsory but which individuals choose as the best option each time, for themselves and for others. This is social and ethical action. Moral behaviour therefore imposes a revision of instinctive behaviour, of our „primary nature” (Fromm), or better still, of those ancient principles which are not only no longer functional to the development of the individual or the species - especially as far as our relationship with our fellows and with other living beings is concerned - but are a hindrance to that development when they conflict with it.

Is it not perhaps man's predatory instinct that has left nature in the state it is in today? And what about the instinct for preservation? The World Health Organisation has stated that the daily calorie intake of the inhabitants of the industrialized countries is 30% too high, with serious damage to health. As is well known, rich

countries are seriously threatened by an excess of nutrition, while in poor countries people die for lack of food. This means that instinct cannot be trusted. The premier Nobel Francois Jacob (1981, pp. 63-64) affirms that:

„Natural selection is the result of specific limits imposed on every living being. It is therefore a mechanism based on a particular level of complexity. At each level the rules of the game change. At each level, new principles must be found.” (1981:41) And he continues: „The development of human beings is characterized by extreme slowness which leads to late maturity. Perhaps this is the reason why the old biological structures have retained close connections with inferior autonomous centres and continue to coordinate such basic activities as the search for food, the hunt for a sexual partner and the reaction when faced with an enemy.” [translation mine]

Therefore, through reason the human race can set off towards the development of that part of its potential which is purely human. On the one hand, this implies a succession of evolutionary stages of which it is perhaps impossible to foresee the full development. But on the other hand, it is certain that it is our actions which decide the direction this development will take. Unfortunately, not all human beings are capable of breaking with their animal past, and it still conditions them today. In it, among other fears, we find that of the „alien”, fear of that which is „different from us” and so „threatening and dangerous”. This attitude might have found a justification in the animal existential conditions of our ancestors, but it can only have an evil influence on the life of modern man who, like it or not, lives in the Global Village. Although the issue is currently under so much discussion (the Yugoslavian question is an example), frontiers are no longer conceivable in the Global Village, and those which already exist must be considered as false, anachronistic expressions of a tribal culture and of the ancient need for territorial defence which derives from the fear of being attacked and invaded.

Only if their relationships with their fellows



and with nature are based on the respect and love of life, on the humanist ethic, can human beings really contribute to their own development and to the protection of all other living beings. This goal requires an integral ego, characterized by a productive, creative orientation, free from the incestuous ties that limit self-realization.

### The projection of fears onto others

In spite of being more conscious of their own individuality and freedom, human beings today seem to be experiencing a new sense of insecurity and loneliness. Never before have they perceived so clearly their powerlessness when faced with political and social events. They feel like pawns in an individualistic and consumer-oriented society, in which the other is often an obstacle in their way, an adversary to be fought and feared. This is paradoxical if we think of the human need for security, the fear of being abandoned and rejected by one's fellows. Because of this, individuals are often willing to accept any compromise, even submit to violence, in order to have the protection and the proximity of the other. Examples of this can be seen in the authoritarian relationships, which are more or less accepted, between persecuted and persecutors, and at times, between parents and children.

To their real fears human beings add those created by their imagination. Never completely familiar, the same but „so different“, the other represents an unknown quantity, the reaction to which is attraction and rejection at all stages of life. Psychoanalysis has given particular emphasis to the ambivalence of affective states. All experiences provoke positive and negative reactions which are found in the deep layers of the personality, where structures and their contents tell us what we were. The external situations a person is afraid of are often expressions of experiences of danger felt in his or her inner world. It may be possible to avoid external stimuli, but it is impossible to escape from inner ones, which give continuous stimulation. In order to free themselves from these emotions and overcome insecurity and powerlessness, indi-

viduals can adopt various forms of behaviour. One possibility is aggression towards the object, the „source of danger“, to „face it and fight it“. In this case, the individual does not have the impression of dealing with an inner emotion, but of responding to an external enemy onto which anxieties are projected. This is so-called complementary projection, through which a person defends him or herself from situations felt to be threatening by finding an alibi for his or her feelings. Reality is thus modified on the basis of an individual's inner needs and this gives substance to the fear, which has to have a form, a content and a logical explanation. It is the vulnerability of human beings, both to natural events and to their fellows, which leads them to deny unpleasant emotions, to rationalize them and, where possible, to transfer them onto objects or people.

The concept of cognitive dissonance can explain this mechanism. Those who have not gone beyond a certain level of evolution need to have a congruent image of the world at all costs; for example, they need to find their own culture, somatic and character traits, their own religion, etc., everywhere they go. Thus, attributing negative connotations to those who do not have familiar characteristics is a mental operation, aimed at harmonizing the external environment to one's own way of feeling and acting. If, for example, individuals feel anxiety over the presence of coloured people in their city, they will not be able to justify their anxiety because there is no real danger. Therefore, they will experience a situation of cognitive dissonance and will rationalize it by projecting the elements of fear onto the external environment.

### Prelogical thought as the origin of prejudices and stereotypes

Prelogical thought adapts well as a substitute for negative reality which is distorted by a non-objective judgement of the facts. Desires and fears condition thought, which is in this case based on mistaken ideas connected to a magical and symbolic world. This psychological ground easily gives rise to prejudices which are based on immediate and concrete images, on emotions



which must find an outlet outside every logical evaluation of reality. An example is the common phrase: „blacks are dirty, they don't wash”.

The uncertainties of today are causing a re-emergence of ancient fears and persecutory existential anxieties. As always, „the threat” comes from far away, from beyond the borders. It is something unknown and different which invades our collective and individual space. Just like the plague (which was spread by travellers), the „foreigner” represents possible contamination, which is not so much physical as cultural and social. It is not so much life itself which is threatened but the psychological existence of the group identity, in which individual identity can recognize itself. The unification of different peoples and cultures in the same territory, in Italy as in other European countries, has thrown doubt onto the norms of social life, norms on which wealth was developed, roles formed, privileges and presumed racial superiority accepted and shared. This situation of mobility makes the contact between „ourselves and the other” inevitable. It is no longer a question of contact through books, travel, documentaries etc., where everyone stays at home. On the contrary, there is a proximity which requires participation and involvement and could thus be experienced as invasive. Those who have different characteristics and are objects of interest at other times, become aliens to be held at bay; they cause upset and fear and the need not to be touched.

The differences become insurmountable barriers, irreconcilable realities and everything that does not coincide with a certain vision of the world is despised. Thus the local community withdraws into its own inviolable space, where meaning and value, far from being the result of positive human qualities, are maintained and fueled simply because the majority share the same norms and values. Since the individual and the group get security and a sense of belonging from this sharing, there is a tendency to represent one's own people as superior, to be defended at all costs. The „others” are arbitrarily attributed with all manner of stereotypes which contain a grain of truth so that characteristics which actually exist are emphasized and manipulated for other ends.

All this because different realities bring evil,

their presence is identified with every type of discomfort. Rivalry accentuates hostility and leads to even more unfavourable images of others. An example can be seen in the racist attitude of many unemployed Germans towards working immigrants and political refugees who are assisted by the State. An experiment by Avigdor (1953), reported in Doise et alii (1980, p. 15), shows that:

„Stereotypes are generally unfavourable when the relationship between the groups is conflictual. They are favourable when this relationship is friendly or cooperative. Stereotypes include those characteristics which are most likely to lead to behaviour which, according to the case, either increases conflict or improves relations between the two groups.” [translation mine]

#### **The alien, an easy target for compensatory violence**

The „available offenders” on which compensatory violence can be most easily acted out are those individuals or groups who are not integrated in a community, either because they have refused to accept its customs and religion (the Jews), or because they are forced to remain on its edges (drug addicts, vagrants, homosexuals, etc.), together with foreigners. Yet it must be said that from a humanistic and cosmopolitan point of view, those who leave their native lands to go and live in other parts of the world, carry with them and spread culture, ideas and experiences which represent alternative models of existence for a part of humanity. History teaches us that this is to the benefit of everybody, both emigrants and their hosts, even though they may not realize it. Emigration has been the main vehicle for the exchange of experiences and cultures, for overcoming racial divisions, and political and religious fanaticism. It was the meeting of diversities, even though often experienced as conflict, which created human civilization as a result of the efforts of all human beings. In spite of the indented path of their history, ever since human beings acquired reason they have constantly tried to fulfil the in-



alienable need to communicate with their fellows in order to extend the human community.

Unfortunately, in Italy too there are groups who are on the „hunt for the offender“. In the Veneto region, for example, there is a group of youngsters who have become well-known both at nationally and abroad for their „missions“ against those who are „not like them“. These youngsters are accused of murdering a drug addict, attacking non-Europeans and covering the walls of the city with racist slogans. They have founded a „cultural association“ and they print leaflets in order to spread what they call „the true ideal for which they are ready to sacrifice themselves“, and that is, „ the fight against the degeneration of the white race“. According to them, non-Europeans, Jews, drug addicts, homosexuals and those who are different, bring crime and drugs and lead to economic imbalances. These skinheads express a need to act which is not only their need, but is quite common amongst ordinary people too. It represents an attempt to compensate for the sense of powerlessness and insecurity which is the result of existential and social contradictions. The malaise, the sense of danger, of losing one’s identity, creates a desperate need to be dependent, passive, and a follower. Thus individuals give up self-criticism and responsibility; they cling to something or someone in order to be able to identify with the group and its leader in an attempt to find security. Fear leads to a return to infantile and primordial behaviour.

The skinheads’ anger is an example of this. It is the means by which their suffering and fear are allayed while powerlessness is transformed into aggressiveness and vented onto an object which is less dangerous and easier to reach (a scapegoat). Behaving like warriors, with looks, songs and clothes which excite, manipulate and fuel fear makes the skinheads feel good. Their behaviour recalls the necrophilous manifestations described by Fromm: ties to the past and law and order; the avoidance of emotions as a sign of weakness; strength as a way of life rather than a temporary expedient geared to circumstances.

These character traits lead to alienation, to the loss of contact with oneself and others, to the inability to use reason. Thus individuals re-

main entangled in irrational thought and the objective awareness of themselves and of others, without the distortions caused by desire and fear, is impossible.

### The inability to become fully human

The fear of being involved in a certain human reality and of identifying with it, leads to estrangement and the rejection of one’s fellows as different. This is alienation from one’s own humanity in every sense of the word. It is the repression of all feelings of sharing, solidarity and love towards human beings who have existential realities which are different to those considered normal, and are therefore to be feared. Without a doubt, if one person sees in another an alien, a being which is not human, then that person does not have a fully developed ego, able to control archaic impulses. Such beings identify themselves with a primordial, animal identity which is not human and can be inhuman. It is the case of those who follow racist ideologies, attack and kill other human beings just because they are „foreign“ or have a different colour skin or a different culture, ideas or religion. With their „professions of faith“ and their actions, these people place themselves outside humanity. They find themselves alone because they have become estranged from their own humanity and have lost all contact with others. They are stuck at the biological evolutionary stage and have never become fully human. For this reason they cannot feel that „ourselves and the other“, though separate entities, are of the same substance; that we feel and react in the same way; we suffer and we are happy basically for the same things; because the similarities between human beings are undoubtedly greater than the differences (Fromm).

### What can be done?

Fromm (1964a, pp. 117-118) has already answered this question and as we share his view we put it forward here:

„There is one condition which every an-



swer must fulfil: it must help man to overcome the sense of separateness and to gain a sense of union, of oneness, of belonging.[...] If man wants to find unity, if he wants to be freed from the fright of loneliness and uncertainty, he can try to return to where he came from - to nature, to animal life, or to his ancestors. He can try to do away with that which makes him human and yet tortures him: his reason and self-awareness. [...] The alternative to the regressive, archaic solution to the problem of human existence, to the burden of being man, is the progressive solution, that of

finding a new harmony not by regressing but by the full development of all human forces, of the humanity within oneself.”

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### Zusammenfassung: Die Rolle der Angst in der Beziehung zu uns selbst und zu anderen

Dieser Beitrag sucht zu zeigen, dass es nicht genügt, angesichts der Krise der moralischen und zivilisatorischen Werte, in der sich die Menschheit gegenwärtig befindet, in einer passiven Zuschauerrolle zu verharren. Die Krise hat zu destruktiven Prozessen geführt, in denen der moderne Mensch sowohl Subjekt, als auch Objekt ist. Es wird davon ausgegangen, dass die Wahrnehmung eines anderen menschlichen Wesens als fremd phylogenetisch erklärt werden kann. Das soll heißen, dass der Ursprung in der tierischen Vorgeschichte unserer Spezies zu suchen ist, in einer Zeit, als die menschlichen Lebewesen sich von anderen Lebewesen noch nicht sehr unterschieden und wie sie fürchten mussten, im Kampf ums Überleben von Fremden angegriffen und übermannt zu werden. Im Verlauf der Evolution erwarb der Mensch jedoch Vernunft, wodurch wir befähigt wurden, unsere „erste Natur“ zu überwinden. Wir konnten unser instinktives und archaisches Verhalten korrigieren, zumindest in den Aspekten, die für das menschliche Leben dysfunktional sind und die individuelle soziale Entwicklung behindern - dies gilt z. B. für die Furcht vor dem Fremden. Menschliche Wesen können nicht auf einen tierischen Status regredieren, deshalb können sie nicht anders, als sich ihrer menschlichen Eigenarten bewusst zu werden und in Harmonie mit ihren Artgenossen, die den Erdball bevölkern, zu leben. Menschliche Wesen müssen nicht nach Herrschaft streben; vielmehr sollen sich Humanität und Demut unter ihnen durchsetzen. Sie können nicht länger das Recht für sich in Anspruch nehmen, über Leben und Tod anderer Lebewesen zu entscheiden oder auch darüber, wer auf diesem Planeten als Fremder zu gelten hat.

### Riassunto: Noi e l'Altro: il ruolo della paura

Questo scritto soddisfa parzialmente l'esigenza da parte nostra di non essere spettatori passivi di fronte alla crisi di valori morali e civili che l'umanità sta attraversando, e che ha innescato processi distruttivi di cui l'uomo è contemporaneamente soggetto e oggetto. Si parte dal presupposto che la percezione di un altro essere umano come estraneo possa essere spiegata filogeneticamente, cioè originatasi durante le bestiali condizioni di vita della nostra specie, quando l'uomo non era ancora molto diverso dagli altri animali e come essi nella dura e quotidiana lotta per la vita sperimentava, fra le altre paure, quella di essere attaccato e invaso da estranei. Ma l'acquisizione della ragione nel corso della nostra evoluzione ci ha consentito di revisionare la nostra „prima natura“, il comportamento istintivo e arcaico, almeno in quegli aspetti, come nel caso della paura dell'estraneo, che sono disfunzionali alla vita dell'uomo e lo ostacolano nel suo sviluppo individuale e sociale. All'essere umano non è consentito regredire allo stato animale, perciò non gli rimane altro da fare che prendere coscienza delle proprie prerogative uma-



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ne, vivendo in armonia con i propri simili e con tutti gli esseri viventi che abitano il Villaggio Globale, su cui non dovrà dominare l'uomo, ma prevalere la sua umanità e la sua umiltà, senza arrogarsi più il diritto di vita o di morte sugli altri viventi o di decidere chi è estraneo su questo pianeta.

### **Resumen: El papel del miedo en la relación consigo mismo y con los demás**

Esta ponencia satisface parcialmente nuestra necesidad de no ser pasivos expectadores de la crisis de valores morales y de civilización que está experimentando actualmente la humanidad y que condujo a procesos destructivos en los que el individuo moderno es a la vez sujeto y objeto. El fundamento es que la percepción de otro ser humano como extraño puede ser explicado filogenéticamente. Con esto queremos decir que dicha premisa tiene su origen en las condiciones animales de nuestras especies, en el tiempo en que los seres humanos no eran tan diferentes de otros animales, y como éstos, sentían miedo de ser atacados e invadidos por extraños durante su lucha por la supervivencia. Pero, durante el curso de la evolución nuestras especies adquirieron razón, lo cual nos permitió revisar nuestra „naturaleza primaria”. Pudimos corregir nuestra conducta instintiva y arcaica, por lo menos en lo que se refiere a los aspectos que son disfuncionales a la vida humana y que obstaculizan el desarrollo individual y social, como por ejemplo el miedo al extraño. Los seres humanos no pueden retornar a su estado animal por lo que no tienen otra posibilidad que adquirir conciencia de sus prerrogativas humanas y vivir en armonía con sus semejantes y todos los seres vivientes que pueblan el planeta. Los seres humanos no deben dominar sino hacer prevalecer su humanidad y su humildad; no pueden seguir haciendo prevalecer el derecho a decidir sobre la vida o muerte de otros seres vivientes o decidir quién es el extraño en este planeta.