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The Continuing Relevance of Erich Fromm

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Fromm's eminent topicality for us all shall be demonstrated by taking a look at six of his discoveries and insights concerning our contemporary dilemma:

- Marketing as a new structural principle,
- Having instead of being,
- A preference for enacted (artificial) reality,
- Collective narcissistic phantasies of grandeur and contempt for the weak,
- The fatal attraction of the lifeless and the reified, and
- Insight into the art of living.

Marketing as a new structural principle

In no known human era has marketing held such comprehensive sway over all walks of life. Marketing has indeed become the philosophy of the economy and, for many, the meaning of life itself. Everything is pitched to whether it can be marketed or not. Politics is almost exclusively driven by what „catches on“ with voters and pushes its own image; religion is true when it can be „gotten across“; culture is measured by box office success, by what draws in the mass audiences; what counts is not to actually be a personality, but to dangle the semblance and show of such (because one believes this will bestow charisma); in the face of distress, want and desire, the bottomline is to make a profit and to be successful; social services have to be customer-oriented; scientific perception must – above all else – be successful, and academic success is measured (so much is known) by the number of publications to one's name and how one is positioned in the pecking order. The magic word is everywhere the same: marketing orientation.

Things were completely different fifty years back. Then economic, social and



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cultural life was determined by the appeal to „authority“ (in the form of capital, knowledge, social standing or class, power, possession of truth, competence, etc.). Fromm was in the thirties the first psychologist to propagate the notion of an authoritarian character orientation, to assert that the appeal to authority dominated and structured all walks of human life at the time. What is generally referred to as the rebellion of the sixties can be seen in retrospect as a protest against this authoritarian character orientation, one that created a basis for the marketing orientation to win out and achieve pre-eminence.

With the help of Fromm’s notion of a marketing orientation, as already developed by him in the forties (above all in the book *Man for Himself*, 1947a) many „signs of the time“ can be understood. Conformism, flexibilization, mobility, individualization, egoism, sentimentalization, „coolness,“ etc., are therefore among the leading values of mankind at the present moment – this because they are essential requisites for achieving successful marketing at a time when marketing has become the most important structural principle in most arenas of life.

From the psychological viewpoint, the orientation to marketing invariably means that it is not one’s true self that counts – i.e. the true talents, qualities, needs, feelings, thoughts of a person – but rather what can be sold, what is „consumer-friendly,“ what is mouthwateringly packaged. Not one’s own true self is important or its authentic contents, but the show of appearances and the staging of a false self. Not what is authentic and real, but what is artificially produced or insinuated gets you ahead and makes you successful. And so marketing orientation leads de facto to a devaluation of being, to a downgrading of the genuine human experience of self.

The human psyche tries to compensate for this lack of being-oneself and experienced selfhood in different ways. Fromm has drawn attention to some of the most frequently encountered attempts at compensation, thus handing society a „mirror“ that can be used to reveal its getting and spending ways as a sham. One of the most favored modes of compensation in today’s world is a gravitation away from a being mode of existence towards a having mode of existence.

Having instead of being

If the alternative „having or being,“ misconstrued after the 1976 publication of the book *To Have Or to Be?* as essentially a summons to renunciation, to not-having and not-owning, then its real meaning is made apparent in the loss of self effected by the intensification of the marketing orientation. This loss of the self is manifested, for example, in a sense of inner emptiness, in a permanent



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desire to take possession of something; or in a state of agonized boredom, of not knowing what to do with oneself; or in an inability to generate activity from within; or in a depressive lack of initiative in which one experiences oneself as „switched off” in the absence of external stimulation; or in fears of loss experienced in part as panic attacks whenever one is left alone with oneself.

However the deficiency in selfhood is experienced, the easy compensation on call is no less prevalent today: the inability to produce something out of oneself is compensated for by going out and acquiring something. Nor does the having mode of existence simply mean replacement of missing immaterial goods by material goods. On the contrary, the having mode is applicable today to an increasing measure of immaterial goods such as creativity, health, activity, vivacity, spontaneity, innovativeness, etc. The having mode of existence always implies the substitutional and compensatory constituting of a sense of being by a sense of having – by the having of values, conviction, knowledge, respect, right, truth, beauty – or by the acquisitiveness and possessiveness associated with a specific personality profile. The logic is always the same: not what we generate from our own capability or can produce (from the Latin „pro-ducere”) from within is important, but what we can cram into ourselves, what we can acquire for ourselves. Possessions do not arise by actualizing authentic selfhood but by appropriation from the outside. And so an orientation to having comes to be regarded as more valuable than an orientation to being. The desire to have replaces the desire to be.

A preference for enacted (artificial) reality

A third discovery of Fromm’s is directly associated with compensation for a lack of being by an orientation to having. The desire to have not only refers to goods, relationships, values, etc., but to a different way of experiencing reality. In place of perceiving and shaping a given reality, the name of the game is now to stage reality and to accord preference to this staged, this enacted, this artificial reality.

The loss of a sense of self in combination with a gravitation to the marketing orientation leads in turn to a weakening of the ego’s functions. An important function of our ego is reality control and negotiating our own needs, wishes and circumstances past the circumstances and requirements of the outside world. Integral to the facts of the outer world is that for all that they allow the satisfaction of our most important physical, psychological and mental needs, they can also be threatening, obstructive and frustrating. This ambivalent experiencing of reality can be the better endured and more positively overcome, the more we are able to delve into our own selves and to stand on our own feet. Those living



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out of their own inner resources have a steadier grasp of their egos („ego strength“), conduct themselves more in line with reality („sense of reality“), can bear deprivations easier („tolerance of frustration“), and can better come to terms with the finitude of life („capacity for suffering“).

The weakening of the self is accompanied by a weakening of the so-called ego functions, so that attempts to compensate for the lack of self are primarily concentrated on compensating for the weakening of the ego functions. The solution here is as follows: Instead of entering into an ambivalent perception of reality, a reality is created, construed and enacted, which is such that the ego functions (ego strength, sense of reality, tolerance of frustration, capability for suffering etc.) become more or less superfluous.

The choice – between perception and exploration or the concocting and enacting of reality – has always been there. (Cf. the enacting of illusory reality in religion in the era of absolutism). The possibility of enacting reality as opposed to experiencing it laboriously, painfully, self-denyingly, has acquired enormous seductive power thanks to the advent of modern technology and industrial production, with special reference to the electronic media and the media industry. The media society, the self-actualization society, the information society – whatever the trendy words are today – all have one thing in common: they are in the business of enacting reality. The artificial worlds of e.g. Disneyland and musicals are deemed more exciting and thrilling than experiencing nature or embarking on a relationship with the opposite sex; mediated communication is considered more authentic than experience which one has put oneself in the way of; in the man-made virtual world one feels more at home than within one's own four walls. The fascination exercised by drugs, including hallucinogenic and other substance-based manipulations of consciousness, is to be explained by a preference for self-generated reality and perception of reality – the „cyberworld“ is „in“ because self-generated reality is regarded as more real and perfect than reality itself. There is no question but that this development constitutes a serious menace to rational thought. And perhaps the tendency, especially noted in the human sciences, to only regard quantifiable knowledge as true scientific knowledge, must be regarded as a desperate attempt to cling to the bedrock of reality in opposition to the omnipresent lure of enacted reality. The bedrock of human reality is not, however, man's computational prowess, because in point of fact it is only things that can be quantified. Yet human beings are not things.

In his first book *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) Fromm recognized already that people whose self has been weakened compensate for this deficiency by resorting to the generation of „pseudo-realities.“ At the time he illustrated such gen-



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eration by reference to an hypnotic experiment and spoke of pseudo-thinking, pseudo-feeling, and pseudo-acting. Today one could say, provocatively, that the reality inculcated by advertising and the media leads to a collective hypnotic state, so much so that it can hardly be determined whether what the majority thinks and feels is the product of a mass hypnosis or derives from a genuine recognition of reality by many people. The upshot is that in the post-modern world the question of truth and the search for reality is dismissed as illusory and old-fashioned. In the seventies Fromm spoke of cybernetic man, of remotely-controlled man, and he recognized „a connection between schizophrenia and the character of cybernetic man” (*The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, 1973a, p 354). The expression „insane society” (loc.cit., p. 355) touches the nub of the problem, since a schizophrenic is known to prefer artificial illusory reality to actual reality. It is entirely due to this circumstance that manufactured illusory reality is today collective in kind, meaning that it is shared by many people; and as the many do not consider themselves crazy, they do not become psychotic in the clinical sense. Their suffering from a deranged relationship with reality is a „pathology of normalcy.”

Collective narcissistic phantasies of grandeur and contempt for the weak

A fourth discovery of Fromm’s, and one that has a continuing significance, is his concept of narcissism – in this connection this is primarily the acknowledgement that groups especially show a tendency to compensate for their experience of inferiority by resorting to collective narcissistic phantasies of grandeur.

The importance of collective narcissistic phantasies of grandeur – a discovery dating back to the beginning of the sixties – is only now achieving seminal recognition as more and more people are found to suffer from feelings of inner emptiness, of depression, boredom, and futility. If the lack of being and self-esteem is not compensated for by enactment of a less frustrating and painful reality, it transpires ever more often that weakened self-experience is compensated for by means of a sense of one’s own grandeur. One does not therefore generate so much a cybernetic reality at one’s beck and call, as a grandiose self which allows the inferior personal experience to be forgotten.

This narcissistic compensation leads not only to the experience of oneself as possessing grandeur, as being infallible and perfect and in every sense a winner; the presence of others, too, is always needed on whom to project one’s own failure, indeed all the qualities of fallibility, tawdriness, loathsomeness, imperfection that must in no way be experienced as attached to oneself. Narcissistic people simply sever their lack of being from their selves, shifting it onto their environment and fighting it there. They achieve this severance of ambivalent



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self-experience, on the one hand, by erecting a thick (invisible) wall around their own self which protects them from any kind of criticism or any undermining of their sense of grandeur; on the other hand, by an active slandering, „trashing,” of those on whom their own „trash” is projected, the better to keep it as far as possible from their own selves. Closeness to and ties with other people only feature in narcissistic compensation when someone or other participates in, or promotes, or reflects, or complements one’s own sense of grandeur. Other persons are only accepted as admirers or fans or vassals or as foils for one’s own grandiose phantasies. As long as they live up to this assigned role and are felt to enhance one’s bloated self-esteem, then their proximity is valued and they are allowed to bask in one’s own splendor. However if they turn out to be critics, fouling the nest or thinking, feeling or acting for themselves, they are sent to Coventry.

Fromm’s special contribution (even today it has hardly been more than dipped into) is that he went on to apply this narcissistic dynamics to the matter of social values (in *The Heart of Man*, 1964a). His thinking here not only sheds light on what motivates nationalistic, racial and fundamentalist movements, and why new forms of xenophobia have appeared after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe. Likewise in the microsocial field of man and wife, or of family relationships, this narcissistic elevation of the self, coupled with devaluation and stigmatization of the non-self, is no stranger. The intimate happiness within a partnership is often fed largely by a readiness to project all aggressive urges on to the wicked world; or the harmony and intimacy of family life is predicated on devaluation of all those not belonging to one’s own clan; or the unity of alternative groups is fostered by zeroing in on the chemical multinationals as environmental enemies; and of course there is the vital imperative felt by the winners of economic and political life to push aside the weak so as not to have to face their own inner failures.

Fromm’s topicality can doubtless best be gauged by regarding the interactive-social, group-specific collective narcissism so typical of groups that for the marketing industry are on the loser’s side or which have, from the outset, been declared losers and misfits by the system and accordingly banished from the sight of the successful by social and financial relegation (I am thinking of the disabled, the chronically sick, the psychically stressed, the drug addicts, the long-term unemployed).

The fatal attraction of the lifeless and the reified

Apart from the marketing orientation, in the sixties Fromm discovered another basic orientation: an ever-increasing fascination with death and things in the



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wider sense, i.e. whatever has been reified. As in the previously described compensations, the aim here too is to compensate for a lack of authentic being and selfhood. Those unable to tap into their own being and inner resources feel empty and are dependent on the availability of animating external stimulation. One escape route from this malaise encountered ever more often is to identify with the lifeless, to find attraction in each and every thing as long as it is reified and devoid of life (or else can be reduced to this condition).

Fromm hesitated for a long time before going public with this notion of a necrophilic (from *necros* = dead body, lifeless) orientation (in *The Heart of Man*, 1964a, and again in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, 1973a), which he felt to be at work in the highly developed industrial societies. The necrophilic urge always follows the logic of finding everything lifeless and dead more attractive than what is alive. Eyecatching expressions of necrophilia are, for example, the violent excesses of individual groups such as self-proclaimed „autonomous“ groups, hooligans, far-right extremists, terrorists, religious fundamentalists ready to resort to violence, and fanatical anti-abortionists. For such groups destructiveness has become the true *raison d'être*. They practice violence „without reason,“ meaning that the reason is the sheer fascination emanating from brutality. Many brutal excesses (in connection with xenophobia, at football matches, at black masses, in cases of collective suicide or of violence that is completely unprovoked, spawned either by sheer boredom or because there was nothing else „to get off on“) can be read as compensations for an inability to love life, for which one is primarily not to blame. In other words: if I cannot love and confer life because of deficient powers of self, then I at least want to experience myself through the act of destruction.

As much as necrophilia has its roots in an absence of authentic being and active self-experience, this deficit can be only to a limited extent be attributed to the contemporary ubiquity of the marketing orientation. The roots of necrophilic violence go much deeper and may be linked to the by now centuries-old growing lure of the calculable. Calculable of course are only those things or living processes that can be reified for purposes of the calculation. To find the lifeless and the calculable more attractive than the living is something that has today become generally prevalent – indeed it is very much the „spirit of the age“ and is passed off as no more than what common sense dictates.

That such a development has been possible is due to mainly two reasons: on the one hand, calculation and quantification have become the key to the breathtaking achievements witnessed by the theoretical and applied sciences in modern times. This leads to science in general, including the human sciences, being today mostly construed as synonymous with quantification. What cannot be



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measured or controlled by an independent third party is deemed unscientific and dismissed as largely valueless. Armies of psychologists and sociologists attempt to develop quantitative methods that will permit them to measure and calculate and so arrive at something called „objective“ understanding. That this can only happen when human beings are regarded as things, as objects, goes without saying.

A second reason is the fascination of the technologically possible. Man's own powers and potentialities have forfeited much of their attractiveness even as machines and automates have gained in theirs. We perceive at every turn that machines do everything more or less better than man. They work more precisely, more reliably, more cleanly; they do not tire or drag their heels; they have no need for praise or for cajoling. We also perceive that machine not only work better but can also do much more work than man. They set things in motion; they generate force; they invigorate reality. Energy in the form of steam, electricity, gas, coal, oil, radioactivity is capable of bringing dead things to life – machines, cars, aircraft, computers. Indeed, the upshot of this daily dangling before our eyes of the „fact“ that everything can be done better by machines and technology is that we prefer technology-driven solutions to problems to solutions effected by human energy and capability. The lure of reification in the form of the technologically possible interpenetrates our whole personal and social life. And precisely where the intellectual, spiritual, creative, communicative, understanding, and loving capabilities of man are most at stake – precisely there interest is focused on having the right technology, on deploying the apposite know-how. Thus we arrive at a reification and the „economic rationalization“ of human capabilities, mostly in the name of output-oriented quality assurance and bringing the social and cultural into line with the economic parameters.

These by no means spectacular forms of the necrophilic fascination for the lifeless and for the reified represent at least as great a threat to life and culture as the excesses of violence stemming from the „autonomous“ or neo-nazi organizations. In view of the fact of widespread bewilderment when it comes to understanding the lure of the lifeless and to finding ways and means of countering it, Fromm's thinking on the psychodynamics of necrophilia is of greater relevance today than ever.

Precisely this last affirmation of Fromm's continuing relevance in our time allows us now to proceed to the key question: what does Fromm have to offer as an alternative? Does he have an answer or answers and, if so, are they are still up to date? A sixth and last point therefore addresses the extent of his insight into how to live.



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Insight into the art of living

Fromm invariably attempted to elaborate solution strategies in order to overcome the developments he recognized as being so wrong. This does not, of course, mean that he trotted out patent recipes or behavioral norms whose use would automatically lead to a solution. By „solution strategies” he meant the orientation, objectives, and paramount values of human striving that had the power to bend concrete normal behavior in a positive direction and give it a new quality. Here are some examples:

If a certain path of behavior follows an orientation to having, Fromm might offer an alternative solution strategy, namely that of so shaping the specific path of behavior that it now expresses being and exhibits self-resilience. If as a concrete behavioral reaction the ability to endure failure is evaded by fleeing into an illusionary reality or by seeking refuge in phantasies of grandeur, then Fromm would suggest an alternative solution: namely that of facing one’s failure and disappointment for the sake of strengthening one’s inner resources, which include the ability to tolerate frustration. This has nothing to do with any ideal of renunciation; rather it is a plea for reinforcing the experience of selfhood. Or again: if a certain conduct is pitched at subjecting someone to the authority of another person, in this case Fromm offers non-compliance as an alternative solution, since it avoids having that someone lose his or her autonomy through compliance. Here too such a summons to non-compliance has nothing to do with agitation or rebellion; on the contrary, it has everything to do with helping to underpin independence as an expression of self-resilience, of the inner power of self.

Fromm never tired of articulating such solution strategies. His knowledge of alternatives and his talent in making such alternatives plausible is surely an paramount reason why Fromm’s way of thinking has had such a lasting influence. But there is also a deeper reason: Fromm strove throughout his whole life to work on himself and to free his experienced self from repressions and projections, the better to expand and fortify his sense of self. Of course what Fromm came to recognize as alienation and deficiencies of selfhood, was for him not simply the result of an analysis of society out there, but also (and always) insight gained into his own limitations. For he saw himself as a manifestation of society, so that his efforts to change society had to start with eliminating felt deficits within his own being. In this Fromm differs from many other scholars and social critics, who try merely to determine the deficits in the object of their critique, who try to shore up the impartiality of their inquiry by excluding all subjective factors and deficits.



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In this respect Fromm is „conservative,” indeed to the point where his links with what is today considered „science” are tenuous. He stands much closer in this regard to the artists and the men and women of letters, who in their creative output recognize from within the fact of their suffering on society’s account and who creatively try to work through this by activating their artistic impulses. Precisely this is the common denominator of Fromm’s solution strategies: first to sense an incapacity to tap into one’s own self and mobilize one’s own resources, then to suffer from this insight and finally, by actualizing the capabilities slumbering in every one of us, to creatively – or as Fromm says, productively – come up with an answer.

Such „solution strategies” or „productive orientations” always mean that man’s own mental, psychological or physical powers and possibilities, are actualized and expanded – very much in line with the ideals of art. Pursuing further the comparison with the artistic response: what comes from actualizing one’s own powers – or as Fromm would say, that which is their „product” – is the art of living. And this is characterized by:

- The capacity to relate to others in a loving way, to be interested in their being different, and to respect this autonomy of being in the other (= the capacity to love);
- The capacity, in spite of being reliant (but not dependent) on others, to stand on one’s own feet, and also to insist on one’s right to autonomy (but not autarky) – meaning accepting that one may have to disappoint others (= capacity for autonomy);
- The capacity to perceive oneself even in the repressed and repudiated aspects of one’s personality (= self-knowledge);
- The capacity to experience one’s being in its ambivalence as empowered yet fallible, as creative yet transient (= ambivalent experience of identity);
- The capacity to experience reality alike in its satisfying and disappointing, its pleasing and menacing aspects (= ambivalent experience of reality);
- The capacity to perceive reality as it is, without distortion from wishful thinking and without denial born of fear (= sense of reality, common sense).

There is no doubting that Fromm has supplied viable models and sure direction with this guideline to the art of living. With its help a humanistic ethic can be founded, one capable of enunciating the driving values for a humanistic – a humane – reorganizing and restructuring of the economy, society, politics, science, and culture. Of course his answers mostly swim against the mainstream of the economy, society and science, oriented as these are to marketing and necro-



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philic calculation. This is why the jury is still out on Fromm and his significance. Some consider him a blue-eyed dreamer; others deem him a pessimist because of his social critique; others again are drawn to him by his firm belief in life and the living in man as reflected in his insights and in his books. „That which is living attracts us, not because it is big and powerful but because it is living.” („Do We Still Love Life?,” 1967). This belief in the living is felt still today by many readers, and gives them courage in their own quest for the art of living. Thus the continuing relevance of Fromm has its true foundation in the continuing relevance of the art of living.

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