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# THE FEAR OF FREEDOM

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The spread of fascism across Europe constitutes one of the most complex and also one of the most worrying problems of the first half of this century. It is certainly part of the general rise of totalitarianism, but it has developed in men so many irrational and chaotic forces, so much destructive rage, such a thirst for power and submission that all the progressive and rationalist ideas of the 19th century have been shaken. Purely economic and political analyses will never reach the roots of such an aberrant phenomenon. Psychoanalytic insight becomes indispensable here: as early as 1941, the American psychologist of German origin, Erich Fromm, devoted an essay to this collective delirium, *The Fear of Freedom*,<sup>1</sup> which has only just been translated into French.

This book has lost none of its relevance, and not only as a result of a few revisions. Indeed, it goes beyond the problem of Nazism to seek to detect "the morbid germs that led sick people to abdicate in fascist countries."

## AN ORIGINAL METHOD

In the East as in the West, these seeds have retained their virulence: the renunciation of personal life and the escape into irresponsible and anonymous agitation are becoming ever more widespread. Nostalgia for submission and the lust for power remain predominant trends. E. Fromm, in all these attempts, sees mechanisms of escape and abandonment driven by a feeling we hardly expected after centuries of struggle against opposition: the fear of freedom.

"Why does modern man seek to escape from freedom?" This is the question posed throughout a research that is as much sociological as it is psychological. Fromm's originality, in fact,<sup>2</sup> stems from a desire to coordinate Marxist-style sociological research with Freudian psychoanalysis. He thus developed a rich and flexible method that refuses to position the individual and society in opposing terms, considering society as a creative and not merely inhibiting reality. and constantly rediscovering the role of human initiative in historical development.

## THE INABILITY TO LIVE BY ONESELF

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<sup>1</sup> *Buchet-Chastel*, 245 pages, 15.10 F.

<sup>2</sup> See Roger Bastide, *Sociologie et Psychoanalyse* (P.U.F), pages 106-114.

Fascism, in particular, exacerbated the masochistic desire for submission, the nostalgia for fusion within a vast and powerful whole that removes the problems of personal choice and erases the feeling of powerlessness. At the same time, it pushed to its limits the sadistic aspiration for power, which expresses the same inability to exist individually.

“The aspiration for power is not the legitimate offspring of strength, but the bastard child of weakness. It is the admission of the individual's inability to live on his own, a desperate attempt to seize a backup force when his own fails” (p. 129). It is a feeling of fundamental weakness that inspires all authoritarian thought. "the conviction that life is determined by forces external to man, his interests, and his wishes" (p. 137).

Another consequence of this feeling of powerlessness: destructiveness, aggressiveness, the desire to harm. The degree of malevolence is proportional to the repression of the individual's expansiveness, to the constraint exerted on his entire life. “Destructiveness is the poisonous fruit of the impediment to living” (p. 146).

But the most common escape mechanism is the one that pushes the majority of people deemed normal to completely renounce their personality in order to entirely adopt the reactions and behavior of their environment. Social success remains the ultimate standard of value. The acquisition of a fabricated self, of ready-made thinking, of “wills” and “desires” suggested by the techniques of stupefaction: it is the flattening before the Anonymous that is a prelude in our “democracies” to the madness of fascist submission.

## **INCREASING PERSONAL STRENGTHS**

Education already seeks to curb all spontaneity in order to begin creating an immediately usable citizen. Psychoanalysis itself strives to curb “forbidden emotions,” such as the tragic feeling of death, which nevertheless has a profound stimulating value. Fromm's work, therefore, marks a clear opposition to a psychiatry that imposes on the individual the pitiful model of “normality,” which expresses above all the need to adapt to a given society, however unhealthy it may be. For Fromm, there are two types of normal human being: the first in relation to society, the second in relation to their own possibilities.

He thus moves toward the definition of a positive freedom, where individuation is achieved through the effective growth of the strength of the self. Everyone must find a new way of “connecting” with the world: not through slavish adaptation, but through a true coordinated activity where our potentialities are expressed in creative work, friendship and love. By becoming their own center of value, by uniting with the world in an activity that involves their full personality, the individual gives flavor and meaning to their existence. "Man must not be subject to imperatives other than his own" (p. 211).

## TOWARDS A LIBERTARIAN PSYCHOLOGY

But Fromm's individualism, since it recognizes that all human tendencies are reshaped, distorted, or fulfilled by society, leads to socialism. True independence without isolation is only possible in a balanced society, where the essential planning is compensated by the initiative and spontaneity of the individual in their work and relationships.

In his subsequent books, Fromm developed his social thinking extensively.<sup>3</sup> Here, he primarily provides us with rules for personal life and valuable educational advice. He has been criticized for remaining too theoretical, for not providing, as is customary in psychological research, analyses of individual cases and clinical records. It is true that this essay is primarily critical, but his critique focuses on the fundamental aberration of our century: the abdication of the concrete individual before power and anonymity.

In any case, and this is not the least of the merits of his work, he laid the foundations of a psychology of freedom, which undoubtedly does not exclude other methods, but focuses research on the essential, and prepares for a dynamic reconstruction of the disoriented individual. In the midst of general brainwashing, he gives us a solid method for reducing conformity and the spirit of submission, and above all, a reasoned confirmation of our morality of personal affirmation and our desire for social transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> See Mathilde Niel's interesting lecture on "The Thought of Erich Fromm," published in *Cahiers de l'humanisme libertaire*, nos. 91, 92, and 93-9.