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## A Reply to Erich Fromm

Herbert Marcuse

In trying to refute the argument of my article "The Social Implications of Freudian 'Revisionism'" (DISSENT, Summer 1955), Erich Fromm has constructed a thesis which I did not state.\* Although his misinterpretation may be to a great extent due to the fact that my book, *Eros and Civilization*, to which the article specifically referred, had not yet been published, I feel that a few corrections are in order.

1. Fromm attributes to Freud, or to my restatement of Freudian theory, the following notions:

- a) that happiness is satisfaction of the sexual instinct, "specifically of the wish for free access to all available females";
- b) that love is in its "essence" or is "identical with" sexual desire; and
- c) that man has an "inherent wish for unlimited sexual satisfaction," and that the "emancipation of man lies in the complete and unrestricted satisfaction of his sexual desire."

Far from identifying happiness with the "unrestricted satisfaction" of the sexual instinct, Freud held that "unrestricted sexual liberty from the beginning" results in lack of full satisfaction, and that the "value" of erotic needs "instantly sinks as satisfaction becomes readily obtainable." He considered the "strange possibility" that "something in the *nature* of the sexual instinct is unfavorable to the achievement of absolute satisfaction" (*Collected Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 213f; italics added).

Freud did not define the "essence" of love as sexual desire, but as the inhibition and sublimation of sexual desire by tenderness and affection, and he saw in this "fusion" one of the greatest achievements of civilization. Consequently, Freud could not have had the "idea" (and I did not) that "the emancipation of man lies in the complete and unrestricted satisfaction of his sexual desire" (although I do not agree with Fromm that this idea is part of the "cement which binds men together in the present phase of capitalism").

2. Freud did recognize, however, that even the highest values of civilization, in so far as they contain inhibited and aim-diverted sexuality, inevitably pre-suppose and perpetuate un-freedom and suppression. Fromm concludes that Freud leaves no hope for "any fundamental improvement of society" and that Freud's theory is not a "radical criticism of alienated society" because it regards "alienation" as necessary prerequisite of all civilization. Moreover,

\* "The Human Implications of Instinctivistic 'Radicalism'" by Erich Fromm, DISSENT, Fall 1955, pp. 342-349.

Fromm emphasizes that Freud did not offer a critique of the "socio-economic structure" of contemporary society. On this point, I agree, and I have not said it did. On the first page of my article, I stressed the degree to which psychoanalysis "was still committed to the society whose secrets it revealed." When I talked of the radical critical implications of Freudian theory, I referred to those of its aspects which elucidate the depth of the repressive controls over the "nature" of man—controls which contemporary society shares with the preceding historical forms of repressive civilization.

This might not be sufficient, but it seems to me far more critical than indicting some secondary features and "excesses" of "alienation" while preserving and even strengthening its roots. Fromm, who accuses Freud of not criticizing capitalism, writes:

The worker's alienation from his work "can be overcome only if he is not employed by capital, if he is not the object of command, but if he becomes a responsible *subject who employs capital*. The principal point here is not *ownership of the means of production*, but *participation in management and decision making*" (*The Sane Society*, p. 323, Fromm's italics).

He thinks that the principle of co-management means a "serious restriction" of property rights. The owner or owners are entitled to a reasonable rate of interest on their capital investment, but not to the "unrestricted command over men whom this capital can hire" (*ibid.*, p. 324). Has the entrepreneur, who employs free wage labor, ever *had* such "unrestricted command"?

Fromm sees in "workers' participation" a means for "humanizing" work, for establishing a "meaningful" relation between the worker and his labor and his fellowmen, and he quotes the case of "one of the seven largest watch factories" in France, where a sort of work community has been realized. The workers themselves elaborated a "declogue," which, in addition to some of the Ten Commandments, includes "thou shalt earn thy bread by the sweat of thy brow." If such are the elements that "contradict" alienation, then my argument against Fromm indeed collapses at a decisive point.

3. Fromm expresses "amazement" that I should commit the error of calling a theory (Freud's theory of instincts) radical which is "entirely of the same spirit as that of nineteenth-century bourgeois materialism." What have Eros (for which Freud refers—and not incidentally—to Plato) and the Death Instinct, what have the Nirvana Principle and the "common conservative nature of the instincts" to do with nineteenth-century bourgeois materialism? It is this ultimate depth dimension of Freudian theory on which my main argument was based, and it is this depth dimension which Fromm (with Horney and Sullivan) discards. This mutilation, together with the reduction of the libido theory, necessitated the regression of revisionist psychoanalysis toward pre-Freudian consciousness psychology. Fromm protests and asks for evidence. Practically every page of every book he wrote since *Escape From Freedom* is evidence. If I should mention specific issues: take his re-interpretation of the Oedipus complex, or his analysis of neuroses in terms of a "moral problem." The revisionist reduction also necessitates the shift in emphasis from the pre-individual psyche to the "mature personality." Again Fromm protests and points to the fact that Sullivan's work is almost entirely concerned with the "development of childhood," and that in his own psychol-

ogy "the character of a person is mainly determined by his childhood situation." But child development belongs to the domain of every consciousness psychology, of every human relations expert, and Sullivan's treatment of it is, in my view, not essentially different from its most ancient presentations at the surface level of "inter-personal relations." Fromm's own analysis of the early stages of character development has been increasingly purged of the explosive instinctual forces linked to the "archaic heritage" of man and to the deadly struggle against suppression. To reveal the implications of this struggle (and thereby the real conditions for the "emancipation of man") was the great concern of Freud's depth psychology. It is not preserved by paying attention to the "conflict between unconscious and conscious strivings" —it depends on the content and dynamic of the unconscious.

4. Fromm accuses me of neglect of the "human factor" and of "callousness towards moral qualities." He states as my "thesis" that "anybody who studies the conditions for happiness and love is betraying radical thought." My thesis is, on the contrary, that Fromm (and the other revisionists) do *not* really study the conditions for "happiness and love." I say explicitly in my article (p. 233) that not these values are spurious "but the context is in which they are defined and proclaimed." They are defined by Fromm in terms of positive thinking which leaves the negative where it is—predominant over the human existence. Fromm maintains that his concept of "productive love" rejects adjustment to an "alienated society." This is precisely what I question; I think that his concepts partake of alienation. The practical suggestions for the "road to sanity" which he makes in his new book (one of them was quoted above) are, in my view, a perfect example of how proposals for a smoother functioning of the established society can be confused with the notions that transcend this society. There is nothing wrong with more and better industrial psychology and scientific management, but there is a great deal wrong with presenting them as non-conformist humanism. Fromm reminds me that "the alienated society develops in itself the elements which contradict it." It does, but I disagree with Fromm on where and what these elements are: much of what he calls alienation is to me the force which overcomes alienation, and what he calls the positive is to me still the negative. "Nihilism," as the indictment of inhuman conditions, may be a truly humanist attitude—part of the Great Refusal to play the game, to compromise with the bad "positive." In this sense, I accept Fromm's designation of my position as "human nihilism."

### **A Counter-Rebuttal**

**Erich Fromm**

I would not think it necessary to impose upon the patience of the readers of *DISSENT* by a counter-rebuttal of Herbert Marcuse's reply to me, were it only in order to answer his argument, or his added interpreta-

tion of *The Sane Society*. As to the former, it does not add much to his original article. As to the latter, I must leave it to any reader of *The Sane Society* to judge whether it stands for "more and better industrial psychology and scientific management."

I do want to answer Marcuse, however, regarding his interpretation of Freud since the works of Freud, especially the article to which Marcuse refers, are not so easily accessible to most readers.

Marcuse says that it is erroneous to attribute to Freud the view:

- a) that happiness is satisfaction of the sexual instinct,
- b) that love is in its essence sexual desire, and
- c) that man has an inherent wish for unlimited sexual satisfaction.

So far Marcuse. Now Freud:

*ad a):* "Man, having found by experience that sexual (genital) love afforded him his greatest satisfaction, so that it *became in effect a prototype of all happiness to him*, must have been thereby impelled to seek his happiness further along the path of sexual relations, *to make genital erotism the central point of his life.*" (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Hogarth Press, London, page 69, my italics.) Cf. also Freud's statement that primitive man "knew nothing of any restrictions on his instincts," could enjoy his happiness more than civilized man, but due to mutual aggression, not for any length of time. (*Civilization and its Discontents*, pages 91-2.)

*ad b):* "Love with an inhibited aim was originally full sensual love and *in men's unconscious minds is so still.*" (*Civilization and its Discontents*, page 71, my italics.)

*ad c):* "Suppose that personal rights to material goods are done away with, there still remain prerogatives in sexual relationships, which must arouse the strongest rancour and most violent enmity among men and women who are otherwise equal." (*Civilization and its Discontents*, page 89.)

All these quotes are taken from that work of Freud's, first published in 1930, which deals most comprehensively and directly with the problem of sex, happiness and society. Marcuse, in his answer, ignores this book completely, and quotes from Freud's paper "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Love," first published in 1912. It is true that Freud writes in this article that the "importance of an instinctual desire is mentally increased by frustration of it" and "I think the possibility must be considered that something of the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavorable to the achievement of absolute gratification." Unfortunately Marcuse fails to mention two things: first, that in the ending paragraph of the same paper, Freud states his thesis of the basic incompatibility between the sexual instinct and the demands of culture, just as I described it in my reply to Marcuse. Freud states that because culture prevents man from obtaining fully satisfying sexual pleasure, he puts his energy to other, that is, to cultural uses. As to Freud's statement that there is something in the nature of the sexual instinct which is unfavorable to the achievement of sexual satisfaction, Marcuse omits to say what Freud meant by this, and yet Freud makes this very clear in the paper of 1912, and especially in *Civilization and its Discontents*, in a footnote on

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page 78. Freud's idea is that the full satisfaction of the sexual instinct is possible only if its sadistic and coprophilic components are satisfied. This is not possible in marital love, because a man who respects his wife necessarily has to frustrate these desires; but, says Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, the frustration of these desires is even necessary in the very beginnings of culture "consequent upon man's adoption of the erect posture and the lowering of the sense of smell." In this view, repression of full sexual satisfaction, and hence frustration of happiness, is already necessitated by the most rudimentary beginnings of human civilization. It can be seen that this view of Freud's points in the same direction that I had indicated. Freud's thesis is that primitive man enjoys a greater amount of happiness than civilized man because he is not yet susceptible to as much sexual repression as the latter, but that even in the earliest beginning of human existence, there was already a necessity for a certain amount of sexual repression which prevented man from the attainment of full happiness. Freud's point is *not* to doubt that genital satisfaction is the source of happiness, but that man can never be quite happy because any kind of civilization forces him to frustrate the full satisfaction of his genital desires, especially the sadistic and coprophilic components.

#### **Discussion Group Meets in Chicago**

On the initiative of Sidney Lens, who is a Contributing Editor of *DISSENT*, and one or two others, a Sunday Discussion Group has been organized among pacifists, liberals and independent socialists in Chicago. The group is ~~deliberately limited in size so that~~ discussion can be orderly and productive. At the first session this fall one of the members introduced the subject of Communitarian Societies and the other 19 present took it on from there. The next meeting was devoted to "The Worker and His Work Relationship," and the following one to the question of non-violence.

Meetings are held on alternate Sunday evenings, with the discussion leader limited to 30 minutes and the others to five minutes each. Chicago readers interested in attending these discussions should write to Sidney Lens, c/o *DISSENT*.