

Erick Fromm's Critique of Industrial Society

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Abstract

This is a trite truth to state that the man in these times has grown rich in things and thought. But it is also a fact that a great number of individuals in our time suffers from some or other form of mental problem. In modern times no one appears to be completely sane. The mental disturbance of an individual, as Fromm viewed it, is not due to lack of skill and intelligence's use. The lack of sanity among people is rather basically the result of extreme extension of the influence of technology or cybernation or automation. Fromm believes that all these problems are the creation of our own from which we are completely alienated. This is a qualitative, descriptive, expository paper. In this paper the author tries to expose the Erick Fromm's thought about excessive automation and cybernation of modern times and its effect on humans especially on his sanity.

Key Words: Alienation, Automation, Cybernation, Erich Fromm, Industrial Society

Introduction:

The European countries and United State which also happen to be the most prosperous country in the world witness the most severe symptoms of mental illness or disturbance. But this is a problem for the whole human race. The various manifestations (like television, computer, automobile and different material things) make them alienated. Under the domineering power of these new machines, man has lost his originality and finds himself as a new machine type being. Even in his search of truth i.e. his scientific enterprise, he comes across knowledge that he could use for the domination of natural world. He has succeeded in his understanding of the world. But. On the other hand, being focused on technological invention and consumption, he had lost his human identity completely. He concentrates only on material and technological values and forgets his religious faith and human norms. The automation, which he builds, seems so powerful that it develops its own programme which now determines his thinking, feeling and acting.

Through all the progress and development man has achieved, he is still unable to find himself; he still does not know where he is. This question (where he is?) is not easy to explain. It can only be said that we are moving and moving fast. But in which direction we are moving is quite difficult to answer.

The most important thing that we can say about this new era is that we have finished with the first period of industrial revolution and have entered into what may be called its second phase.

In the first industrial revolution man had transformed his life through the invention of electricity, oil, atom, steam etc. But in the new or second industrial revolution new sources of energy like cybernation, automation have become the basis of further innovations and discoveries. Speaking of the first phase. Erich

Fromm believes that this new industrial potential was a certain type of industrial organization, that of a great number of what we would call today small- or medium-sized industrial enterprises, which were managed by their owners which competed with each other, and which exploited their workers and fought with them about the share of the profits. (Fromm, Erich 1971. p.26) The members of middle and upper class were the head of this enterprise. They thought themselves to be the master of their destiny and the master of their world. Cruel exploitation of nonwhite population went together with domestic reform. In the first half century there was manifest the pity attitude towards the poor and the rise of the working class from bottomless poverty to relatively comfortable life.

But in the present second industrial revolution, the living human energy has been exchanged by the mechanical energy. Not only that, the human thought is also replaced by the thinking of the automation. This (automation) works more quickly and rapidly than the human brain for answering the new industrial questions. Hence we see that the cybernation is creating the possibility of a new type of economic organization. Comparatively small numbers of a big enterprise, although legally the property of stock holders, is managed by selfish bureaucracy. The relation between government and private business is becoming very close.

The major population of America is well placed from the point of view of living standard. The undeveloped sector of Americans will probably join the majority in the foreseeable future. We regularly acknowledge freedom, individualism and faith in God. But the more stark reality of the organization man is his obsessional conformity guided by the law of hedonistic materialism. As

Fromm says: "If society could stand still - which it can do as little as an individual - things might not be as ominous as they are. But we are headed in the direction of a new kind of society and a new kind of human life, of which we now see only the beginning and which is rapidly accelerating." (Fromm, Erich 1971. p.27)

The great majority of Americans is not aware of where they are going. The difference of their present way of living from their life in the traditional industrial society is like that which separated the agricultural society from the food gatherer and hunters. They think that lack of direct political expression is a manifestation of achievement of personal freedom. In the present technological period, their vision is that of complete realization of the aspiration of man since the end of the middle ages. It is a time when man has stopped to be a human being and has transformed into a unfeeling and unthinking machine. At one place, Fromm quotes the opinion of Disraeli (a conservative man) who expressed his fear that how man would become weakened due to his strong greed for gain.

Marx, a sociologist, expressed these sentiments when he said that "a highly industrialized society could be transformed into humane one, in which man and not material goods were the goal of all social efforts." (Fromm, Erich 1971. p.28)

Another thinker whom Fromm quotes in this context is Brzezinski who too described the technological society in similar terms as he said: The largely humanist-oriented, occasionally ideologically-minded intellectual-dissenter...is rapidly being displaced either by experts and by specialists or by the generalists-integrators, who become in effect house- ideologues for those in power, providing overall intellectual integration for disparate actions. (Fromm, Erich 1971. p.29)

A historian and humanist of the recent times Lewis Mumford has similarly described the new society in terms of "Mega machine". The new society, according to him, in being a mega machine, is a totally organized and homogenized social system in which society functions like a machine and men like its parts. This type of social system is characterized by the constant increase of order, power, predictability and above all its control. This has achieved almost miraculous technical result. It will find its fullest expression with the help of modern technology in the future of technological society.

There have been societies in earlier times which functioned as mega machine, like the Egyptian society of Pharaoh's times which used Jews as servile tools for its productive functioning. But the difference between the older Egyptian model and the mega machine of new age is that, in the first, the labour was the forced labour while now it is more or less voluntary. Earlier, the workers lived a hard life, even the elementary amenities being denied to them. Whereas now the workers live a comfortable life style of their masters. They smoke the same brand of cigarette, watch the same programme on T.V and drive car. The labour class is not in the chains as Marx said. He participates in the productive process and is also a beneficiary of it. The capitalist society was unequal but still not oppressive or unjust as it was before. Like the bureaucratic class, the managerial class also shares the problems and difficulties of life with the workers. Just as a worker is no more than an appendage of the system, the manager of the factory too has almost same status even though he may be getting a higher salary or receiving more perks than the worker. They are not the masters but the workers themselves.

They are even more anxious, alienated and bored. So, they used the same antidote against these syndromes. They are very different from the elites of older times who were supposed to be cultured people as against the plebians who were considered as uncultured. They spent a good deal of money to further science and art. They, however, did not create this culture but were rather its consumers and recipients. "They are creative scientists and artists, but it seems that, thus far, the most beautiful blossom of 20th century society grows on the tree of science and not on the tree of art." (Fromm, Erich 1971. p.32)

The present technological society has two important principles to guide it. First is the maxim that something ought to be done because it is technologically possible to do it. For example, if it is possible to travel on planet, or to make a nuclear weapon which can destroy the whole world, these must be brought into reality. This maxim shows us that the cultural tradition develops on the basis of negation of all human values and norms. It means that something should be done, not because it is necessary for man, for his happiness and for his rationality. The inventions are made not keeping in view the considerations of goodness, truthfulness and beautifulness. In sum, in the present technological culture all values, norms and ideals are dethroned. The technological criteria becomes the foundation of all ethical values.

The next principle is that of maximal efficiency and output. Fromm says that the thrust towards

increasing efficiency results into the minimisation of man's individuality. The machine obviously works more efficiently than the man. So, in order to extract maximum result, man himself is turned into a machine.

Man is de-individualized or dehumanized. He begins to define himself in terms of his usefulness for the corporation that he works for. He becomes a countable number and ceases to be a self.

The idea of economic efficiency should also be carefully analysed. Generally, it is taken to mean the deployment of minimal resources to obtain maximum result. But this general meaning should be subjected to scrutiny specially because in our time the material resources are in short supply and therefore dependence on efficiency has increased. Fromm's contention is that efficiency is not a fixed idea. What may appear to be efficient in the immediate perspective may turn out to be less productive from a long term point of view. A particular industrial project, for example, may outwardly seem to be very profitable but its side effects (like, for example, the waste that it generates, the costs involved in its disposal and its harmful effects on society) may not be immediately clear although they are equally important.

There is also an obvious connection between efficiency and the dehumanization in the modern systems where a very highly sophisticated technique is used to monitor and evaluate workers' performance, attitude, behavior etc. In all this the aim is always to instill efficiency among the employees and to make them productive tools in the machine. But, in this process, the same employees are made into docile, servile beings. In the name of workers efficiency the effect that is produced is the rise in feeling of anxiety, inadequacy and frustration. And this becomes at some point counter-productive as it leads to either indifference or hostility.

In the end, the company, and society at large, pays a heavy price for these practices. Fromm writes: "efficiency is desirable in any kind of purposeful activity. But it should be examined in terms of the large systems, of which the system under study is only a part; it should take account of the human factor within the system. Eventually, efficiency as such should not be a dominant norm in any kind of enterprise." (Fromm, Erich 1971. p.35)

Have we ever considered the fact how the T.V. radio, car etc becomes the factor of generating laziness. Through a simple act of pushing a button we have strength to produce music or speeches, sport shows, movies etc on T.V sets. The pleasure and satisfaction of driving a car lies also in large part in getting a big machine moving by pushing a button. Now, clearly, the T.V and cars are simply the examples of mechanical efficiency. But does it not play havoc by producing laziness and sloth. There is an even greater problem that it in turn, generates. This lies in the general boredom in man's life. It is also a type of hostility towards work. A businessman often feels about himself that he is a prisoner of his business. He also feels that he is the prisoner of his own commodities which he sells. He is a creator of his product but has a secret contempt for it, he hates his customers who in a way compel him to show in order to sell. The most important thing in all this is that he hates himself because he sees his life pass by. He feels his life makes no sense beyond the temporary intoxication of success. Fromm says:

"Of course, this hate and contempt for others, for oneself, and for the very things one produces, is mainly unconscious, and only occasionally comes up to awareness in a fleeting thought, which is sufficiently disturbing to be set aside as quickly as possible." (Fromm, Erich, 1990, p.184)

There are organizations or industries like T.V industry, automobile industry etc which one can say are boredom preventing industries. But they also make man a cog in the process of production of the machine. They transform man into consumers whose aim is to have and use more and more. Marx has said that society produces many useless things and at the same time and in the same degree many useless people. Man has become a cog in a machine and stops being a human being. Mostly, he spends his time in works which he is not interested in doing. If he is not producing that would mean he is not consuming. He is eternally sucking with the open mouth, as it can be said. The boredom preventing and producing industries force him to be without inner activity. But the boredom preventing industries like the T.V industry, movie industry etc. can only succeed in preventing the boredom but not from man becoming consumer. In the end, in fact, these industries increase boredom though it remains unconscious.

It is not hard to create an industrial society centered on the full development of human being. This though requires a drastic change in present social structure and its overall purpose. If we are able to make these changes we will be in a position to avoid the danger of disaffection. Among the things that promise some hope, one is that we have the techniques and materials and theoretical knowledge to humanize the technological society. Other one is increasing demand for humanization among all Americans and radical students. There is a growing consciousness among the people that our lives have become more and more depersonalized, that there is something fundamentally wrong with our way of life. The mechanical efficiency is leading to painful boredom. Fromm says: "I believe that the increasing awareness of the human consequences of our type of social organization, and our valueless planning, may be, indeed, a critical factor for the survival of our civilization." (Fromm, Erich 1971b. p.87)

Possessiveness is a pathology characteristic of today's industrial societies. People eat but can't digest. They drink a lot but not to quench their thirst but to assure themselves that they have the means and capacity to drink. There is a complete passivity against what is pedaled to them through media advertisements. The patterns of production and consumption are determined not by the active but passive traits. According to Fromm,

"Man's passiveness is only one symptom among a total syndrome, which one may call the 'syndrome of alienation'. Being passive, he does not relate himself to the world actively and is forced to submit to his idols and their demands. Hence, he feels powerless, lonely, and anxious. He has little sense of integrity or self-identity. Conformity seems to be the only way to avoid intolerable anxiety and even conformity does not always alleviate his anxiety." (Fromm, Erich 1971. p.39)

It was a common tendency of 19th century man to have deep attraction for mechanical things. In twentieth century this tendency has only got exacerbated. The things to which man is emotionally attracted are mechanical like computer. Man has become a slave of non-living things. For the present day youngsters the fascination for the mechanical objects has become mania. The idea behind constructing a computer-man is also to save in man's activities like thinking, feeling, acting etc. But, Fromm says, it is not at all easy to construct a computer man. A computer-man may do certain human functions more efficiently but it will never be possible to transform a computer-man into a man or a man into a computer-man. For Fromm himself what is needed is to change the existing man into a more rational and peace loving being.

Fromm says that the possibility that is there is that we construct the robot who is not strange or stranger to us. Our present shows us that man acts like robot. All individuals working in giant enterprise act like robots. In future, therefore, there will not be any problem to build a robot type man. The idea of man-like computer is a choice between inhuman use of machine and man. The computer helps in increasing life activities in all aspects, but the idea that it replaces life or that it will manifest the human dimensions of life is a sign of the pathology of our time. In nineteenth century people's belief was that the machine will help lighten man's burden that it will remain a means to an end. But they did not see the danger that if the technology is permitted to follow its own logic, it will become a cancer-like growth eventually threatening the structured system of industrial society life.

Conclusion:

Our present way of life is full of increasing dissatisfaction. It lacks joyfulness and is depersonalized. The desire for happiness is still meaningful. Those specific needs of man which he has developed in the early few thousand years of his history are still there to make him different from machines. The human traits are now all powerful because the wealthy part of society has already tasted material satisfaction. But, on the other hand, the affluent part of the population has found out that the consumer paradise does not deliver the happiness it promised.

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