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Violence and Its Alternatives

Interview with Frederick W. Roevekamp

Erich Fromm
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Roevekamp: Dr. Fromm, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the increase in violence generally, have rekindled the discussion of the causes and cures of violence which spread after the murder of President Kennedy. You have studied this problem for the past several years. What is your answer?

Fromm: The problem is complex, of course. There are various causes of violence. One of the most important – and least studied – is, in my opinion, the boredom, the powerlessness, the isolation, the inner sense of being lost that beset man in industrialized society.

Roevekamp: Is this boredom, this isolation, something characteristic primarily of industrial society?

Fromm: In this all-penetrating intensity, yes. And it arises from the feeling of have lost one's direction, one's values, the sense of being guided from within, by one's conscience. This, in turn, is intensified by the lightning evolution of technology, the explosive growth of all-embracing organizations in business and in government, by the monotony of the rhythm of society. The individual feels he is a nobody, that he has lost his control over the things, the institutions and the circumstances which he himself has created. It brings on a sense of separation from others and from himself, a lack of joy and, finally, an indifference to life itself – his own life and that of others.

Roevekamp: Is this a kind of mounting despair which ultimately seeks an outlet in destructiveness?

Fromm: It is. Man begins to hate life because it eludes him. He cannot bear living without feeling alive. So he turns against life, he becomes destructive in order to take vengeance on his un-lived life, the life which has eluded him.

Roevekamp: What do you think about the frequent argument that violence results from overlenient courts and inadequate police forces?



Fromm: Well, this often presented by people with a punishing-sadistic orientation. In fact, these people are not so different from those whom they want to punish. But their reasoning has no basis in fact: Those countries, for instance, that execute murderers, do not therefore have any fewer murderers or murders than those countries that have abolished capital punishment.

Roevekamp: What about the argument that man's destructive drives are inherited from the animal and are difficult if not impossible to control?

Fromm: This hypothesis has been popularized in recent bestsellers such as Karl Lorenz', *On Aggression*, and Desmond Morris *The Naked Ape*. I wish it were right. If we were as aggressive as the primates, we would have a very peaceful world indeed. The fact is that one animal rarely kills another of the same species. Yet we know that millions of human beings have killed millions of others.

Roevekamp: How do you explain that?

Fromm: The animal reacts aggressively against any threat to his life, his territory, his young, his access to females. But the animal's aggressiveness is mobilized only if there is a „clear and present danger.“ Man, being able to create symbols and to imagine future events, can react aggressively not only when his vital interests are threatened directly but when he imagines – rightly or wrongly – that they will be threatened, or when someone persuades him that such a threat exists.

Roevekamp: Do you see any merit in a third argument to the effect that we show – and thereby actually teach – violence through our mass media, through TV, movies, comic strips and so forth? And that this constant picturing of violence induces violence?

Fromm: I do. It comes closer to the real problem. We do teach violence and destructiveness intensively and extensively through the mass media. Our laws permit the description of killing in detail while they forbid an equally detailed description of love-making, for instance.

Roevekamp: You are often called a „Neo-Freudian.“ What is actually the main difference between Freud's system and your thinking?

Fromm: I consider myself rather as a Freudian who tries to develop Freud's theory on the basis of new clinical findings and of a different philosophical approach to the problem of human nature. Freud's approach was that of the mechanistic materialism prevalent at the end of the last century. He dealt with „drives“ which served the physical survival of man, as an individual and as a race. Therefore he looked upon the satisfaction of hunger and of the sex urge as the two principal needs of man.

Roevekamp: What do you see as the motivating forces in man, beyond his needs for physical survival?

Fromm: Man has needs which are specifically human and which one might call „trans-survival“ needs – needs that transcend his need for physical survival alone. Even when all his physiological needs are fulfilled and his trans-survival needs are not, he is still lonely, anxious and unhappy. Man has the need to relate himself to the world around him with all the faculties which are specifically human: love, tenderness, compassion,



reason – reason in the sense of deep understanding. Because he has eyes, he wants to see; because he has ears, he wants to hear. But because he has a heart, he also wants to feel; because he has a mind, he also wants to understand. In the act of relating himself to the world in an active way, he feels alive and he increases his vitality. „Man does not live by bread alone.“ He needs an object of devotion, something to which he can give himself.

Roevekamp: You speak of objects. What kind of objects?

Fromm: There are many. The nature of the object to which we devote ourselves tends to determine the kind of experience, the feeling, we have. If our devotion revolves around life, we experience aliveness and joy. If our devotion revolves around things, institutions or mere circumstances, we deaden our aliveness, the clarity of our awareness of life.

The prophets of the Old Testament called the devotion to dead things idolatry. We, in an affluent society, tend to worship things and institutions. We, in effect, worship idols.

Roevekamp: „Idol worship“ sounds strange in modern society.

Fromm: It does because we do not recognize the symptoms. Modern industrial society is highly idolatrous in two major ways: One, and here many theologians would agree with me, is that God, to many people, has become an idol. He is the super power that runs the world and they think it would be kind of stupid not to be aligned with Him. We don't really love Him, we want to use Him.

The other aspect of contemporary idol worship is that we have submitted to the products of our hands and minds – machines, money, production, the corporation, the labor union, the state, the flag, the race, the class, the party. As you notice, these are all dead things. We don't call them idols; we call them „national interest“, „class interest“, „patriotism“, „communism“, „capitalism“, „inevitable development“, „progress“ or what have you.

But we think so much of these idols, these dead concepts, that we sacrifice human beings to them—spiritually and physically – just as the Aztecs sacrificed to their gods as many as 25,000 human beings on one day because they thought it was necessary to get the cosmos to run. In fact, I think they had a somewhat better reason than those we cite for our wars today.

What is characteristic of worshipping idols is that we submit ourselves to them. We sink into a state of inner passiveness; in worshipping things, man transforms himself into a thing.

Roevekamp: How does this passiveness, as you call it, express itself?

Fromm: Well, among its many forms of expression, the most visible one seems to me our obsessive habit of consumption. Everything is turned into an article of consumption: cigarettes, liquor, sex, books, movies, lectures and even other people, as through exploitation.

Our attitude of consumption is symbolized by the open mouth. We fill ourselves up with all sorts of things without a really active effort, without genuine participation. We



pay for being filled up. It's like driving into a service station. In more extreme cases, in depressed and excessively anxious persons, one observes this in the form of compulsive eating or buying; this is an effort to overcompensate for the painful feeling of inner emptiness, to drug – to suppress – our realization of this emptiness.

Roevekamp: You said that modern man tends to engage even in creative activities in a non-active, passive way. How did people in earlier civilizations engage in such activities?

Fromm: With a different idea in mind and therefore with an entirely different experience or feeling: They engaged in religious rituals, in dances, in painting – as far back as the cave paintings – with the idea that this was something life-giving, joy-giving. Even their work was carried out that way. Therefore these activities made them feel alive.

Therefore since modern man has lost much of this idea of life behind his creative activities, these activities as such do not make him feel any more alive and therefore they lose their meaning and their purpose for him. This is partly why our work – as well as our leisure – has lost much of its life-giving effect on us today.

When the prophets of the Old Testament said, “Ye have been without joy in the midst of plenty,” it amounted to the most serious accusation among the Hebrews of that time. Well, I think it should carry the same weight in our society of plenty.

Roevekamp: In your new book, *The Revolution of Hope*, you say that consumption is the principal expression of our freedom today. Could you explain that?

Fromm: To me it seems that the symbol of individual freedom in industrial society is the supermarket. We go in and choose from a dozen brands, „nationally advertised;“ brands which woo our favor. Whether we have little money or much, we feel like the king of the supermarket, like superman, if you will. In the 19th Century, freedom, aside from its formal political context, meant largely freedom to use one's capital as one saw fit. Today, most people don't have capital. They are employed and depend on weekly or monthly paychecks.

Roevekamp: But couldn't this consumption pattern be regarded as the exercise of our freedom to use, if not our capital, then our paycheck, as we see fit?

Fromm: Even that is largely an illusion. We are not free to buy except what is on the shelves. We often buy what we don't really need and we often don't realize to what extent our „needs“ and our „desires“ have been programmed into us by advertising or what you might call brainwashing.

Roevekamp: How about our other freedoms? Political freedom and freedom of enterprise, for instance?

Fromm: Well, from all I can see, freedom of private enterprise is fading out, except among small entrepreneurs and professionals. In large corporations, a few top people may feel free to use their talents and their initiative. A few giant companies dominate production and sales, and they are so much alike that they might as well be one super corporation. In politics, our participation is very limited. We vote for candidates who compete for our favor at election time but who, in many instances, are more motivated by their career interests than by interest in our well-being and progress.



Roevekamp: What are, in your opinion, the principles by which this society is run?

Fromm: One of our major principles is: One ought to do what is technically possible to do.“ Never mind what is useful for man, what benefits his growth, what is true and what is beautiful. If it is technically possible to go to the moon, we go to the moon. If it is technically possible to build more devastating weapons, we build them. And we do it regardless of how sterile the moon is and how much we need technological efforts on our earth and regardless of how these weapons of ours constantly increase the possibility of destroying life on earth.

Roevekamp: If this is a problem of industrial societies, does this hold true for the Soviet Union, despite our ideological differences?

Fromm: Yes, I feel that both societies are materialistic, both feel they „ought to do what is technically possible“; both, in essence worship idols, both live by ideologies. Both do not practice what they preach. In the West, our ideology is identified with God, love and democracy. In the USSR, they talk in the non-theistic language of the same basic humanist tradition, of „the new man“, of „mankind“ and „brotherliness.“ Yes, there is as little equality over there as there is love here.

Roevekamp: What about the people who say, both here and in the USSR; „Even if nuclear war is the last resort, we'd rather all die than destroy ourselves spiritually by giving into Godless communism or, respectively, to inhuman capitalism?“

Fromm: It seems to me that both, Americans and Soviets, are destroying themselves spiritually every day, without any help from each other, just by the split between their beliefs and their practices. If the people who constantly wail about the loss of values, really cared, they would do something to restore these values in their respective societies, rather than talk about the death alternative. This death „alternative“ at times can actually be traced to a very serious psychological problem, both individually and in society.

Roevekamp: Does this relate to what you said earlier, namely that the individual who feels that life has eluded him, seeks to take revenge on life by turning violent and destructive?

Fromm: Yes, of course. You find an ultimate example of this tendency in Adolf Hitler and some of the men around him. Look at the way Goebbels died, first killing his own children who certainly had little to fear from the Allied occupation. Hitler too, died by suicide. These personal acts of self-destruction symbolized the desire of these men to destroy Europe, Germany and as many other people around as they could.

Hitler, to me, was a low-grade schizophrenic who needed to justify his actions by ideology. You recall what we discussed about rationalization and justification: any man must convince himself and others that his action are sane and moral. A partly sick man like Hitler had to share his conviction of being right with millions in order to believe that he was indeed right or sane.

And when their ideology failed in defeat, the only thing they could do was to take as many people as they could with them into destruction. The destruction, to them, was a proof that only death and destruction could stop their ideology; it was the sick man's



final „proof“ of his sanity. In a way, they had no way out unless they managed to become sane. And they didn't.

Roevekamp: Is this a kind of psychological chain reaction? An escalation of destructiveness to its ultimate conclusion?

Fromm: It is. This chain reaction, as you call it, is actually a process which applies to all human thinking, decision and action, whether healthy thinking and acting or unhealthy thinking and acting. Take a simple example: Many children are born because a man said to a woman: „Let's have a drink.“ At that point, both are entirely free not to have a drink. After the drink, they are much less free and with every following they lose more freedom of choice until the moment when neither is free, and something results that neither wanted. This sums up the problem of human freedom, in a way.

Roevekamp: How does it?

Fromm: Well, we endlessly debate whether man is „determined“ in his actions or whether he is „free.“ The fact is man, in each chain of decisions, is free in his first steps. As he locks himself into the consequences of step after step, he has fewer and fewer choices.

Compare it to chess: In the beginning, both players are equally free to win. After the first wrong move, one player is only about 40 per cent free to win. After the fourth and fifth moves, he has lost practically all his chances to win.

If you want to go to an example which involves survival of life on earth, you could apply this to our concept of nuclear warfare: We like to think that we are free to make decision but before we have taken a few, we have lost our choices.

Roevekamp: And yet, this is just what our nuclear planners deny. They actually use the term „game theory“ in thinking through responses on both sides. And they say that this is the only way to handle the problem of avoiding nuclear destruction.

Fromm: Well, I remain entirely unconvinced.

Roevekamp: Didn't the Cuban missile showdown prove that we do have choices?

Fromm: Well, I am not a nuclear planner but all it proved to me was the exact opposite: It was a perfect example that the nuclear game doesn't work. If Mr. Khrushchev had decided not to withdraw in ignominy, we might not be sitting here and discussing this question.

Roevekamp: Where was the mistake then?

Fromm: The first mistake was Mr. Khrushchev's in putting missiles close to our shores. The second mistake, I still believe, was the President's in accepting the trap Mr. Khrushchev had set for him. The Soviet strategists evidently did not expect that the President would threaten to stop their ships at sea which would have been an act of war under international law.

When the President did just that, Mr. Khrushchev backed out. The fact that he did, doesn't prove that someone else, under different circumstances, might not stick to his guns, so to speak. The greatest reason for man's lack of freedom lies in the failure of the individual and of governments to see far ahead into the consequences of their actions.



Playing chess may be a harmless way of playing Russian roulette. Playing games with nuclear weapons means playing with the lives of nations, of people all over the globe. The difference between this game and chess is that a good chess player knows after the first few moves whether he has lost. The poor player knows only at the bitter end.

It seems to me that the whole concept of nuclear weapons and war theory is the most tragic example of idol worship in history: we feel we have lost control over these monstrosities, these products of our hands and minds, and so we invent theories of logic to justify their continued existence.

Roevekamp: I take it you use „idol worship“ as another word for „alienation“ the term used by modern philosophy?

Fromm: Yes, I use it because I think it is more understandable. Alienation means estrangement of man – from his values, from himself, from life, from other men. It's the same concept.

Roevekamp: If this estrangement is the great problem of modern society, if it represents the effect of our loss of traditional values, would you briefly sum up what these traditional values are?

Fromm: Well, we speak of them frequently and yet our understanding of them has degenerated to the point where they are largely empty ideologies for most of us. Both, the Soviet Union and the Western nations have a common tradition of humanism. In the West it is specifically the humanist tradition that comes from the Judaeo-Christian religion: love the stranger and the enemy, feel compassion with all sentient beings, do justice, speak the truth.

In Communist nations, they profess the values of humanism as taught by the non-theistic humanists such as Karl Marx. His writings essentially emphasize the idea that both, wealth and poverty are evils; and what matters is that man *is* much, not that he *has* much; that man is the root of all things and that society must serve the unfolding of his whole personality and the growth of all his faculties rather than making the satisfaction of material needs the main purpose of individual and social life.

And yet if you talk about the values of Judaeo-Christian religion in the West or about the values of Karl Marx in communist countries, people get bored. The individual in both societies is aware that these beliefs don't mean much; he sees how society – and he himself – has failed to practice them.

Roevekamp: Essentially, does this not boil down to the difference between idea and ideology?

Fromm: Indeed. An idea or an ideal is abstract of course, but when it enters the individual – from within or from without – it becomes very real. Ideas are not merely thought but felt. This is why ideas have become the greatest force in history. An ideology is an idea which does not come from within the individual but from the outside. It is an idea he gets by pure consumption, you might say. He buys it from others, from demagogues, from the mass media and when it sinks into his heart and mind, he imagines that it grew within himself.



Roevekamp: What are the actual functions of ideology?

Fromm: First, it explains our actions to ourselves and others rationally. Secondly, it justifies them morally. No matter how great a crime he commits, man feels he must prove that the crime is a) reasonable and b) moral. It is the minimum satisfaction he needs to act at all. Only those who are totally pathological, can act without meeting this inner need.

Look at the use of ideology in World War I: The German government didn't say they wanted the war to get territory in the East or oil in the Ukraine. The Allied governments didn't say they wanted the war to win Alsace Lorraine for France or the Dardanelles for Russia. Both sides said – and many of their people bought the argument – that they were fighting for freedom; the Germans, because they were fighting the Czar ; the Allies, because they were fighting the Kaiser. Both actually had to invent atrocity stories in that war to prove they were fighting devils, not just other men.

Roevekamp: What effects does this contradiction between ideology and practice have on the individual?

Fromm: He feels guilty. But most of us are not aware of our guilt feeling or we give erroneous explanations for it. Many think they feel guilty because of frustrated sexual desires, of aggressive impulses, when, in fact, they feel guilty because of the constant betrayal of their conscience. The young generation has a fine sense of identifying this lack of sincerity and it reacts to it by refusing to participate in the game.

Roevekamp: How can then the individual regain a sense of the meaning of life, of values?

Fromm: First of all by trying to become aware of the lack of reality of his words and concepts. Any attempt to take these values seriously must begin with this critical effort. Secondly, by becoming aware of how his personal life and the life of his society would have to be structured if he tried to take these values seriously, which means if he applied them to the practice of life. In order to make these first steps, however, he must learn to be honest with himself, to extricate himself from constant obsessional busyness and to resist brainwashing.

Once he is at this point, he will find more specific methods for his self-development and he will discover that one of the most important factors is to keep good company and to avoid bad company.

Roevekamp: In what direction do you feel we need social change?

Fromm: In terms of immediate practices and social goals, I would say that we must end the war in Vietnam, end the cold war, remove the obstacles to progressive disarmament, reconstruct our slums with imagination and boldness, change our pattern of consumption, bring about economic and political liberation of the underdeveloped sector of the American population and provide large-scale planning and help for the poor nations of the world in cooperation with all other industrial nations.

Roevekamp: Would you explain how we should change our consumption pattern?

Fromm: There are many things we can and must do. One is to enact a federal law, like



our Food and Drug Act but covering all products, that prohibits a) advertising of all harmful products and b) the use of hypnoid advertising – commercials and ads with hidden emotional, irrational appeal. It would force advertisers to tell only facts. Secondly, our consumers should have a chance to help determine the kind of products they really want. This would require a great deal of study but there should be a way of having such issues discussed by laymen and experts and to pass their recommendations on to government and business.

Roevekamp: Wouldn't that run into opposition from business management? They argue that production and the nature of products should be determined by consumer demand as expressed in how people buy.

Fromm: Well, this is a half truth: consumers buy what they can get, not necessarily what they really want if they aren't brainwashed and if they have a choice in the first place.

Roevekamp: In terms of general principles, what other changes do you propose in our political and economic structure?

Fromm: First, we should find new forms of democratic life which correspond to the size and complexity of twentieth-century society. The most appropriate term for this goal, to me, is „participatory democracy“ as against „bureaucratic democracy“ which leaves the individual powerless and hence uninterested in the affairs of society. We must arrive at a new form of humanist democracy in which authority and initiative flow in both directions, from the bottom up and from the top down again. A democracy of greater private initiative for the individual.

Roevekamp: Do you have specific recommendations along this line?

Fromm: First I am thinking of the formation of face-to-face groups of about 500 people each, an equivalent of the Old Town Meeting. They would receive adequate and objective information about all significant facts of political and social life. They would discuss the issues and eventually they would vote on them. With the help of computers, this vote could be tallied within a day or two. These groups would vote on everything - from anti-pollution measures to mass transportation, from education to the question of war and peace, from disarmament to taxation – anything our nation must tackle.

Roevekamp: How would their vote count? A veto over legislation?

Fromm: There could be a veto over Congressional legislation on the part of these groups and over key executive decisions such as formal and de-facto declarations of war and so forth.

Roevekamp: What other social changes do you have in mind?

Fromm: We must open an opportunity for participation of all who work in an enterprise, in various phases of planning and organization. Such participation again requires new forms of management procedures which will call for a great deal of study.

Roevekamp: In your book [*The Revolution of Hope*] you propose ways of providing fuller expression for cultural values and concerns in our decision-making process. Could you sum up that idea?



Fromm: I suggest the formation of a council which you might call „The Voice of the American Conscience“, both at national and local levels. These councils would be made up of the best minds in our nation and respectively in each local area. Let us say, each would have fifty members, including people from all professions, occupations and backgrounds, whose integrity and competence are unquestioned.

The national council would assume the task of discussing and issuing statements on the broad principles and crucial decisions of foreign and domestic policies. It would advise the nation on the alternatives we have in developing our culture – in education, in the arts, in architecture, city planning, slum reconstruction – in any effort in which we need new concepts and new plans. The councils would function parallel to the political structure.

Roevekamp: How would the members be selected?

Fromm: By a process which seems logically impossible but is practically very possible. Three or four scientists, businessmen and artists etc. would select another ten in various fields. These ten, in turn, would each recommend five others. After some sifting, you would get a membership that might not satisfy everybody but which most people would regard as a fair representation of American culture. These members would not necessarily be people of fame but of outstanding achievement and integrity.

Each council would be private and independent and would have no power except the influence of its reputation and of the logic of what it has to say. The local councils would be mainly occupied with the application of the principles of humanism to specific local problems like housing, traffic, air pollution and educational facilities.

Roevekamp: What would you do to help the average individual to overcome the sense of isolation and boredom industrial society breeds?

Fromm: I think it would be helpful to create a movement of local clubs where people can simply come to share common experiences with others, where they can talk about joint interests, engage in activities they enjoy such as dancing, reading; where they would exchange views with each other frankly, in short, where they would become more alive. This would provide an opportunity even for those people who do not want to change lives radically, who just want to overcome isolation and loneliness and share with others. There must be many millions of such people in this country who feel that way.

Roevekamp: Dr. Fromm, do you see signs in our society and others today that major changes in values and institutions are underway? Do you see reasons for hope?

Fromm: I do indeed. First there is the rebellion of youth. They have begun to look through the façade of our practices to the emptiness of our values. This holds true of Western and Communist nations.

Secondly I see it in politics in the United States, in what I call „the McCarthy phenomenon.“ Senator McCarthy is a new kind of political leader. He is neither a hero, a Savior or a demagogue. He does not sway people. Yet people give readily of their money and their time to support him, and they vote for him, too.

He is challenging the absence of values in our society. He is challenging our dead-



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ened institutions. He is challenging the country to an entirely new departure in politics and government. I think also that his campaign illustrates the workability and desirability of „participatory democracy.“ Just look how his campaign organization works; these people are primarily volunteers. Ever since New Hampshire the whole movement has been a grass-roots movement.

Thirdly, I see signs of change in religion. The most significant perhaps is the growing influence of the humanist, radical wing in the Roman Catholic Church. It essentially says: „Rituals, procedures and concepts are less important than the inner experience of man. Abbé Pire who received the Nobel Prize for his work with refugee children, sums it up well :“What matters today is not who is a believer and who is not a believer but who cares and who doesn't care.“

Roevekamp: How would you summarize the alternatives to violence, Dr. Fromm?

Fromm: The alternative is to make life more interesting, the individual less impotent and to build a society in which there is greater possibility to practice love and integrity, a society which functions in the name of life.