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## The Links Between Erich Fromm and Konrad Lorenz

Marco Bacciagaluppi

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*Fromm Forum* readers are familiar with Fromm's critique of Konrad Lorenz in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. In that book, Fromm criticizes the views on aggressiveness of Lorenz and Freud. He labels them as a "hydraulic model", whereby aggressiveness is regarded as welling up spontaneously. In particular, Fromm refers to the views expressed by Lorenz in his 1963 book, *Das sogenannte Böse*. In this paper, I attempt to establish other links between Fromm and Lorenz.

### An early contribution

I am grateful to Rainer Funk for sending me an early paper by Lorenz, published in 1940. Here are careful observations of ducks and geese, and comparisons between wild and domestic varieties. Domestication, as a rule, introduces disturbances of inborn behavioral patterns as compared to the wild species. Mutants that would be eliminated in nature are, on the contrary, selected by us in domesticated animals. One important behavior, of survival value, is monogamy. Another is the avoidance of incest. Both these behaviors are probably in common to human beings in their original prehistorical environment. This high scientific level earned Lorenz the Nobel Prize in 1973.

Wolfgang Schmidbauer (1973) warns against establishing links between remote species and human beings. He believes comparisons with apes are more relevant. However, there is universal validity for the avoidance of incest, which, following Westermarck, was referred to human beings by Mark Erickson (1993), because inbreeding may lead to the accumulation of harmful recessive genes. This, of course, is the exact opposite of the view held by Freud, whereby in human beings there is a natural tendency to incest.

In his early paper, Lorenz then addresses human behavior. He speaks of the "domestication" of human beings living in large cities, namely in an unnatural environment, compared to the original one of prehistory. Here he approaches a critical view of modern society, which would have been congenial to Fromm. He suggests that unnatural living conditions may lead to an increased mutation rate. This may be linked to the modern notion of epigenetics, whereby the environment, through methylation, may lead to DNA modifications that change the expression of genes (in 1940, of course, Lorenz was not aware of this modern view of genetics, because DNA was only described by Watson and Crick in 1954). However, towards the end of this paper, in order to deal with deviants, Lorenz uses the Nazi term "rassenhygienisch" (pertaining to



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the hygiene of the race), to which Fromm strongly objected.

### A later contribution

There is an early, and indirect, link between Fromm and Lorenz, of which Fromm was not aware. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973a) he mentions an earlier book by Lorenz, the "charming *King Solomon's Ring*" (p. 38 of the paperback edition). In this book, Lorenz describes the following response of goslings as an example of imprinting in a critical period. If a gosling, when it is hatched from its egg, as first thing sees Lorenz, it believes that he is its mother, and start to follow him. When, in 1951, Julian Huxley gave John Bowlby an advance copy of this book, this was Bowlby's introduction to ethology and gave him the theoretical underpinnings of attachment theory, as Bowlby acknowledges on p. xviii of *Attachment* (Bowlby 1969). As we know, Fromm was a great admirer of Bowlby and of attachment theory. He mentions Bowlby several times in *The Anatomy*, and in the Fromm Archive in Tübingen there is a copy of *Attachment* with notes in Fromm's handwriting. Therefore, Bowlby and attachment theory represent an earlier, and indirect, link, between Fromm and Lorenz.

### A still later link

A later link was established by Lorenz in a book he published after Fromm's death, *Der Abbau des Menschlichen* (Lorenz 1983). In the Preface Lorenz expresses concerns similar to Fromm's. He says that the prospects for humanity are grim. Even if we do not commit suicide through nuclear warfare, we are polluting the environment. There is also a gradual decline in the qualities that make us human. This decline could be viewed as a disease, and in this connection he mentions Aldous Huxley, to whom he often refers in the rest of the book.

The book is divided in four parts. In the first, Lorenz challenges the view that evolution is pre-established. In the second, he challenges the idea that only what is measurable is real. Our subjective processes are equally real. In the third he discusses the increasing rate of cultural evolution. In the fourth he says that technical and economic development are leading to perverse results. Technocracy leads to a hyper-organized society. As an antidote, we should re-awaken a sensibility for values such as goodness and beauty.

In Chapter 1 he is very close to Fromm in decrying ceaseless technological development. He gives the example of the expression "to develop an area", used in the United States. This expression actually implies the destruction of any form of natural vegetation and its replacement by cement. This area is then sold to some consumer, addicted to urban life. In technology, says Lorenz, the technical possibility of carrying out a project is taken as a duty to do so. There is an obvious similarity to Fromm's critique of unlimited economic growth in *To Have or to Be?* (Fromm 1976a)

In his book, Lorenz twice quotes Fromm with approval. In Chapter 8 (p. 137 of the Italian translation) there is a long quote from *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973a). Paradoxically, Lorenz approves of a book in which Fromm criticizes him. He mentions Fromm again on p. 172, where he says: "We believe with Erich Fromm that only a wholly deviant individual can avoid the severe psychotic disturbances due to the constrictions that modern civilization imposes on life" (my translation from the Italian). He goes on to say: "The technocratic



system which now dominates on a planetary scale is about to destroy any authentic cultural difference” (p. 173). Fromm would have appreciated this radical social critique, similar to his own.

Here are some further details on the book. Part Three is full of social critique. Chapter 7, echoing the title of Freud’s book, is called “The Discontents of Civilization”. Lorenz discusses the increasing speed of cultural evolution, far outstripping that of biological evolution. New cultural traditions have become second nature for human beings. Cultural norms are very different from those of Kantian ethics. The sanctions for the violations of the former are shame, those for the violations of the latter are remorse. Technocracy is leading to an artificial environment which is inimical to life (p. 125 of the Italian translation). It thus violates Kant’s categorical imperative, which, in evolutionary terms, can be formulated thus: “is my action in favor of the conservation of the human species?” (p. 127). The more a culture develops, the greater the distance between cultural norms and human inclinations. In modern industrial states there is an increasing number of individuals who are unable to withstand these tensions and therefore become asocial or neurotic (p. 128).

In Chapter 8, Lorenz remarks that a hierarchical social structure developed together with sedentary agriculture (p. 133). This led to hostility between agriculturalists and pastoral nomads (p. 134). One dangerous consequence of agriculture was aggressiveness in defense of territory. A second consequence was the population explosion (*ibid.*). Personal relations are the best antidote to this aggressiveness. That is why the de-personalization that characterizes relationships in our society is so dangerous (p. 135). The aim of democracy is to create a compromise between order, which is absolutely necessary because of the enormous number of individuals making up society, and individual freedom (*ibid.*). However, it is difficult to preserve one’s humanity in a position of power (p. 136). Behind the politicians, the real tyrant is large-scale industry (*ibid.*). The concentration of people in large cities leads to an increase in mental illness, drug abuse and criminality. This is where Lorenz introduces a long quotation from *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (p. 137). There is a tendency towards quantitative growth. In nature, there are limits to growth. Instead, there are no limits to the growth of an industrial enterprise (p. 139). Here Lorenz mentions *Brave New World*, the dystopia written by Aldous Huxley (p. 140). The tendency towards expansion is also true of mass media (p. 141). On p. 143 Lorenz discusses the use of the computer, which is no longer a means, but becomes an end in itself. Then Lorenz discusses the danger of competition, which may lead to the collective suicide of humanity (p. 145). As knowledge increases, a division of labor and specialization become inevitable, and an individual can no longer take an interest in other areas (p. 146). Most people deal with objects made by other people, and lose touch with living beings (p. 148). Publicity is acceptable if it communicates useful information, but now it manipulates emotions (p. 151). Political propaganda, which is indispensable in authoritarian states, is based on aggressive collective enthusiasm (p. 153), aroused for the defence of certain values against outside threats (p. 155). On p. 156 Lorenz describes similar behavior in the chimpanzees observed by Jane Van Lawick-Goodall.

In Chapter 9, Lorenz discusses collective diseases of humanity. One is greed: the accumulation of goods leads to accumulate still more.



In Part Four Lorenz describes the highly complex technocratic system by which we are dominated. On p. 170 he says that the explosive economic and demographic growth will lead inevitably to a catastrophe. To avert this, the terrifying totalitarian state described by Aldous Huxley may develop (p. 171). Then, again, on p. 172, he quotes Fromm. He points out that certain technological developments, once set in motion, are difficult to stop. He mentions as an example nuclear reactors. This is linked to the notion that human beings have no innate strivings, that at birth they are a *tabula rasa*, and that behavior can be manipulated indefinitely (p. 177). The neglect of innate needs leads to the condition of hospitalism, observed by René Spitz in hospitalized children (p. 180). Technocracy may be stabilized by the phenomenon observed by the sociologists Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger, whereby we consider as real what was considered as such in the society in which we developed (p. 181). Lorenz then remarks that the atrophy of human qualities is not limited to totalitarian regimes. When the population growth exceeds certain limits, the society becomes totalitarian even if it defines itself as democratic (p. 184). At first, totalitarian power may be based on fear, as in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. But gradually this is replaced by incentives, as in capitalistic mass domination. An example is the automobile (p. 186).

In Chapter 11 Lorenz examines the situation of young people living in modern conditions. There is the risk that they become cynical and believe that life is devoid of meaning (p. 196).

In the last chapter, Lorenz says that modern society is actually a disease (p. 200). One reason for hope is that more and more people are becoming aware of this. It is important to awaken a feeling of solidarity for living things, in the spirit of Albert Schweitzer (p. 211). Lorenz devotes a paragraph to the need to avoid lying. On p. 220 he speaks of innate values. From the point of view of the theory of knowledge, there is only one external reality, recorded by the perceptions and the emotions of all species (p. 228).

### One last contribution

Finally, there is one more contribution by Lorenz with which Fromm could not have been familiar. This is the "Russian Manuscript" (Lorenz 1992). It is actually the first book Lorenz wrote, when, as a medical officer, he was a prisoner of war of the Russians during World War Two. He wrote it in emergency conditions, on wrapping paper. It is an anticipation of all his future work. After his return to Austria, he made use of it to write his books, but then it was apparently lost. It was only discovered after his death in 1989, in a hidden corner of his library, and was published in 1992.

In my opinion, one central point of this book, of great philosophical importance, is the reformulation of Kant's principles in terms of evolutionary theory. According to Lorenz, Kant's categories of time and space are *a priori* for the individual, but *a posteriori* for our species, which acquired them in the course of evolution because they corresponded to the structure of reality, and therefore had survival value. Silvano Arieti, a pupil of Fromm's at the William Alanson White Institute, wrote the same in a section on "The biological origin of knowledge" of his book, *The Intrapsychic Self* (Arieti 1967). There is a surprising convergence with the views of Lorenz, of which, obviously, Arieti was not aware.

Fromm would have appreciated this philosophical point made by Lorenz. There are many ref-



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erences to Kant in the "Register" of the *Gesamtausgabe*, and, in particular, there are two in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*.

### Conclusion

As in an earlier paper (Bacciagaluppi 2014), with this contribution I try to show the continuing relevance of Fromm by pointing out his links with many different authors.

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