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## The Dawn of Epimethean Man

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Our society is like the ultimate machine which I saw in a New York toy shop. This contraption is the opposite of old Pandora's box. It is a metal casket which snaps open when you touch a switch and reveals a mechanical hand. Chromed fingers reach out for the lid, pull it down, and lock the box from the inside.

The original Pan-Dora, the All-Giver, was an Earth goddess in prehistoric matriarchal Greece. She let all ills escape from her amphora, but she closed it before hope could slip out. The history of apollonian man begins with the decay of her myth and comes to an end in the self-sealing casket. It is the history of classical society, in which promethean citizens built institutions to corral the rampant ills. It is the story of declining hope and rising expectations.

I want to focus on the ability of man to survive this promethean endeavor, this attempt to escape the punishment of Zeus. I will let the myth speak about the awakening of man from a stable, archaic culture to the precarious balance of historic drama. I will describe the unbalanced attitudes, opinions, and sensitivities which underlie contemporary controversy, and compare this new consciousness with both primitive and classical self-awareness.

I will then outline the style in which we can hope to survive the threat of being smothered in the man-made pan-hygienic environment of a self-sealing box, and describe the self-chosen poverty we would have to live as Epimethean men.

For forty years, Dr. Fromm has pointed toward Bachofen's insight into the most significant revolution which can be historically studied: the [162] transition from matriarchy to patriarchy in preclassical Greece. This essay represents the attempt of his pupil to meditate on the master's treatment of the Oedipus myth, and his attempt to suggest in mythical language that we might just now be going through a revolution no less profound.

ArchePandora was sent to Earth with ajar which contained all ills; of good things, it contained only hope. Primitive man lived in this world of hope. He relied on the munificence of nature, on the handouts of gods and on the instincts of his tribe to enable him to subsist. Classical Greeks began to replace hope with expectations. Their version of Pandora let her bring and release both evils and goods. They forgot that the All-Giver (the Pan-Bringer) was the keeper of hope. They remembered Pandora mainly for the ills she had unleashed. They had become moral and misogynous patriarchs who panicked at the thought of the first woman. They built a rational and authoritarian society. They planned and built institutions from which they expected relief from the rampant ills. They became conscious of their power to fashion the world and make it produce services they also learned to expect. They wanted their own needs and the future demands of their children to be shaped by their artifacts. They became lawgivers, architects, and authors, the makers of constitutions,



cities, and works of art to serve as examples for their offspring. Where primitive man had relied on mythical participation in sacred rites to initiate individuals to the lore of the society, the Greeks recognized as true men only the citizens who let themselves be fitted by paideia into the institutions their elders had planned.

The myth tells us about the transition from a world in which dreams were interpreted to a world in which oracles were made. From immemorial time, the Earth Goddess had been worshiped on the slope of Mount Parnassus. There, in Delphi, was the center and navel of the Earth, and there slept Gaia, the sister of Chaos and Eros. Her son Python the dragon guarded her moonlit and dewy dreams, until Apollo the Sun God, the architect of Troy, rose from the east, slew the dragon, and became the owner of Gaia's cave. His priests took over her temple. They employed a local maiden, sat her on a tripod over Earth's smoking navel and made her drowsy with fumes. They then rhymed her ecstatic utterances into hexameters of self-fulfilling prophecies. From all over the Peloponnesus men brought their problems to Apollo's sanctuary. The oracle was consulted on social options, such as measures to be taken to stop a plague or a famine, to choose the right constitution for Sparta or the propitious site for cities which later became Byzantium and Chalcedon. The never-missing arrow [163] became Apollo's symbol. Everything about him became reasonable and useful.

In the *Republic*, describing the ideal state, Plato already excludes popular music.<sup>1</sup> Only the harp and Apollo's lyre would be permitted in towns because their harmony alone creates "the strain of necessity and the strain of freedom, the strain of the unfortunate and the strain of the fortunate, the strain of courage and the strain of temperance which befit the citizen." City dwellers panicked before Pan's flute and its power to awaken the instincts. Only "the shepherds may play [Pan's] pipes and they only in the country."

Apollonian man assumed responsibility for the laws under which he wanted to live and for

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<sup>1</sup> Plato was conscious that "as the mode of music changes the fundamental laws of the state always change with them" and "if amusement becomes lawless the youth themselves become lawless."

the casting of the environment into his own image. Primitive initiation into mythical life was transformed into the education (paideia) of the citizen who would feel at home on the forum.

The world of the primitive was opaque, factual, and necessary. By stealing the fire from the gods, Prometheus turned facts into problems, called necessity into question and defied fate. Classical man crisscrossed the environment with channels, roads, and bridges, and even created man-made environments in the form of cities and cathedrals. He was aware that he could defy fate-nature-environment, but only at his risk. Only contemporary man attempts to create the world in his image, to build a totally man-made environment, and then discovers that he can do so only on the condition of constantly remaking man to fit it. We now must face the fact that man himself is at stake in his transition from Apollo to spaceman. Only those who have grasped this can grow beyond the processes launched by Prometheus, and the stage of Apollo, into the epoch of epimethean men.

That man can gamble on the survival of mankind to satisfy his fancy became manifest in the special supplement which *The New York Times* published for the first day of this decade. Every article bespeaks the perplexity of inhabitants in a totally man-made world. Life today in New York produces a very peculiar vision of what is and what can be, and without this vision, life in New York is impossible. A child on the streets of New York never touches anything which has not been scientifically developed, engineered, planned, and sold to someone. Even the trees are there because the Parks Department decided to put them there. The jokes [164] he hears on television have been programed at a high cost. The refuse with which the child plays in the streets of Harlem is made of broken packages planned for somebody else. Even desires and fears are institutionally shaped. Power and violence are organized and managed: it is the gangs versus the police. Learning itself is denned as a consumption of subject matter, which is the result of a researched, planned, and promoted program. Whatever good there is, is the product of some specialized institution and it would therefore be foolish to demand something which some institution cannot produce. The



child of the city cannot expect anything which lies outside the possible development of institutional process. Even his fantasy is prompted to produce science fiction. He can derive the poetic surprise of the unplanned only from the encounter with "dirt," blunder, or failure: the orange peel in the gutter, the puddle in the street, the breakdown of order, program, or machine, are the only takeoffs for creative fancy. "Goofing off" becomes the only poetry at hand.

Since there is nothing desirable which has not been planned, it soon becomes a verity for the city child that we will always be able to design an institution for our every want. He takes for granted the power of process to create value. Whether the goal is meeting a mate, integrating a neighborhood, or acquiring reading skills, it will be defined in such a way that its achievement can be engineered. The man who knows that nothing which is in demand is out of production soon expects that nothing which is produced can be out of demand. If a moon vehicle can be designed, so can the demand to go to the moon. Not to go where one can go would be a subversive act. It would unmask as folly the assumption that every satisfied demand entails the discovery of an even greater unsatisfied one. Such insight would stop progress. Not to produce what is possible would expose the law of "rising expectations" as a euphemism for a growing frustration gap, which is the motor of a society built on the coproduction of services and increased demand.

The Greeks replaced hope with expectations. They framed a civilized context for a human perspective. The modern city replaces the classical city with a world of ever-rising expectations, and thereby forever rules out all satisfaction. The state of mind of the modern city dweller appears in the mythical tradition only under the image of hell: Sisyphus, who for a while had chained Thanatos (death), must roll a heavy stone up the hill to the pinnacle of hell, and the stone always slips from his grip just when he is about to reach the top. Tantalus, who was invited by the gods to share their meal, and on that occasion stole their secret of how to prepare [165] allhealing Ambrosia, suffers eternal hunger and thirst standing in a river of receding waters, overshadowed by fruit trees

with receding branches. A world of ever-rising demands is not just evil—it can be spoken of only as hell.

Man has developed the frustrating omnipotence to be unable to demand anything because he also cannot visualize anything which an institution cannot do for him. Surrounded by omnipotent tools, man is reduced to a tool of his tools. Each of the institutions meant to exorcise one of the primeval evils has become a fail-safe self-sealing coffin for man. Man is trapped in the boxes he makes to contain the ills Pandora allowed to escape. The blackout of reality in the smog produced by our tools has enveloped us quite suddenly. Just as the rise of Apollo, of civilization and critical thought, happened suddenly, like a sunrise, so—quite suddenly—we find ourselves in the darkness of our own trap.

When I grew up in the thirties, the world was still permeated by the common sense of Apollo. I shared with my contemporaries certain notions of reality which lay beyond the reach of the scientist, engineer, or educator. We believed that there were some things not made by man, some things which could never be wished away. Whatever expectations we formulated, they were still rooted in the earth. Progress had not yet overtaken development—we still expected the engineer to increase our satisfactions while reducing our wants. We had not yet fallen victims to the new dogma that all men were insatiable consumers—and had a right to equal madness.

This has changed for those born after Hiroshima, those born right into the coffin. Reality itself has become dependent on human decision. The same president who ordered the ineffective invasion of Cambodia could equally well order the effective use of the atom. The "Hiroshima switch" has become the navel of the Earth, which could be cut by man himself. This new "omphalmos" is a constant reminder that our institutions not only create their own ends, but also have the power to put an end to themselves and to us. The absurdity of modern institutions is evident in the case of the military. Modern weapons can defend freedom, civilization, and life only by annihilating them. Security in military language means the ability to do away with the Earth.



The absurdity underlying the nonmilitary institutions is no less manifest. There is no switch in them to activate their destructive power, but neither do they need a switch. Their grip is already fastened to the lid of the world. They create needs faster than they can create satisfaction, and in the process of trying to meet the needs they generate, they consume the [166] Earth. This is true for agriculture and manufacturing, and no less for medicine and education. Modern agriculture poisons and exhausts the soil. The "green revolution" can, by means of new seeds, triple the output of an acre—but only with an even greater proportional increase of fertilizers, insecticides, water, and power. Manufacturing of these, as of all other goods, pollutes the oceans and the atmosphere and degrades irreplaceable resources. If combustion continues to increase at present rates we will soon consume the oxygen of the atmosphere faster than it can be replaced. We can then calculate the day when we will wither like mice locked into a jar with a burning candle. We have no reason to believe that fission or fusion can replace combustion without equal or higher hazards. Medicine men replace midwives and promise to make man into something else: genetically planned, pharmacologically sweetened, and capable of more protracted sickness. The contemporary ideal is a pan-hygienic world: a world in which all contacts between men, and between men and their world, are the result of foresight and manipulation. School has become the planned process which tools man for a planned world, the principal tool to trap man in man's trap. It is supposed to shape each man to an adequate level for playing a part in this world game. Inexorably we cultivate, treat, produce, and school the world out of existence.

The military institution is evidently absurd. The absurdity of nonmilitary institutions is more difficult to face. It is even more frightening, precisely because it operates inexorably. We know which switch must stay open to avoid an atomic holocaust. No switch detains an ecological Armageddon.

One important reason for our perplexity is a lack of insight into the sudden emergence of a new style of social reality. It may help us to understand this reality if we compare it in a num-

ber of specific aspects with the respective worlds of primitive man and apollonian man.

Primitive man found himself in a world in which he lived in hope and trembling. His culture provided a stable balance, unchangeable within the horizon of one—or even several—generations. Apollonian man rendered this balance unstable; he discovered that he could increase his chance for survival, and he could increase his ability to develop into fuller manhood by creating institutions which would meet his new expectations on a new level of balance. For him the instability of culture became a valuable asset. Contemporary man has gone one step further. He objects in principle to the existence of a balanced world. Such a world for him would be worthless. He wants to build and manage institutions which can increase output [167] indefinitely, which can coproduce goods and ever rising expectations, and which can insure all men of the world the status of consumers with equal rights.

Primitive man satisfied his hunger in a factual manner; he expressed his creativity in traditional forms. He cultivated—but did not conceive of the world as a project. Apollonian man learned to develop new appetites and the right to the satisfaction of new needs. For him society was itself the result of an endeavor which could reach its maturity only by acquiring and satisfying new civilized needs. Contemporary man believes in the constant progress of man in the world, and in the progress of the world itself. Progress swallows development, because continued improvement denies the possibility that any process leads to maturity. According to the contemporary world view, man can always profit from and therefore always and at all cost should seek further schooling, further medical service, further acquisitive power. Society can always profit from further expansion or improvement of a chance for some of its members. Contemporary man replaces the idea of civilized life, with equal rights, to make ever new demands for consumption which generate ever more ravenous needs.

For his sustenance, primitive man inescapably depended on the handouts or the caprice of gods, and on the instinct of the members of his tribe, and on the munificence of nature. He



might try to propitiate the gods, to protect and shelter the hordes or family, to protect himself by observing the taboos. Fundamentally, he relied on hope.

Apollonian man did not accept an inescapable lot, but rather faced a tragic fate. In his struggle with necessities he or his peers might triumph or be defeated, but the struggle was always drama. He had to trust the virtue or morality of his neighbors and cocitizens who felt responsible for him. Even more important than protection from enemies was the preservation of the institutional order, the effectiveness of his institutions. He educated his children to fit them, revised his institutions in the light of principles he considered unchangeable, and interpreted the law according to traditional equity.

Contemporary man relies on science to permit him to define new puzzles and find new solutions. He depends on planned chance. Where primitive man could trust the instinct of others, and apollonian man their morality, he gambles on the enlightened self-interest of the functionary, the voter, or the majority, and insures his risks as best he can.

Observance of the taboo and obedience to the laws of the city are replaced by constant adaptation to progress. Trust in nature or the proven [168] effectiveness of tried institutions is replaced by concern with the efficiency of the processes which engineer tools, goods, and services and their consumers; this trust in nature is replaced by the manipulation of the consumer, and laws which create the sense of increased efficiency.

The relationship of the self to the world is also distinct in the three situations: primitive man lived in a world without measure. He could neither measure the world nor could the world measure him. His initiation into reality—as perceived and maintained by his group—happened through initiation rituals. In primitive thought a member of the tribe grows into a man by sharing mythically in the lives of the gods as their doings—at the beginning of the world—become present in the rite.

In classical culture man's learning was a process of measurement; man measured the world with his body and discovered that the world was made to the measure of man. Dis-

tances were measured in feet—or in days traveled at the pace of man. Competition could occur, but only man against man, not man against some abstract measuring stick.

Contemporary man learns that he is measured by the same scale which can also be applied to things.

Clock time takes the place of life time; economic space overwhelms living space; speed makes human pace obsolete. Mass supplants weight and the Earth becomes just one of many centers of gravity. While primitive man was surrounded by immeasurable chaos and Greek man had projected the measure of his body into the cosmos, modern man lets measuring instruments impose the same law on things and himself. Mechanics provides the stuff out of which the myths of contemporary man are made. Schooling becomes a supernational measuring stick with its grade levels and test results. Health, welfare, and social service all become measurable.

As the Greeks discovered that the world could be made man's *opus proprium* they also perceived that it was inherently precarious, dramatic, and human. The world of the city child has lost this apollonian transparency. It has reacquired the facticity, necessity, and fatefulness which was characteristic of primitive times. But while the chaos of the barbarian was constantly maintained in the name of mysterious, anthropomorphic gods—today, only man's planning can be given as a reason for the world being as it is. Man has become the plaything of scientists, engineers, and planners.

In this new logic we grant a man the right to survive until the macho-hygienic environment will have come true, and man will have been [169] reengineered to fit it. But we grant him this right only if—in the meantime—he does not detain the coming of the reign of the machine.

We see this logic at work in us and in others. I know a Mexican village through which not more than a dozen cars drive each day. A Mexican was playing dominoes on the new hard surface road in front of his house—as he had probably done since his youth. A car sped through and killed him. The tourist who reported the event to me was deeply upset, and yet he said: "He had it coming to him."

At first sight the tourist's remark is not dif-



ferent from the statement of some primitive bushman reporting the death of a fellow who had run across the taboo and therefore had died. But the two statements carry opposite meanings. The primitive can blame some tremendous and dumb transcendence—while the tourist is in awe of the inexorable logic of the machine. The primitive does not sense responsibility—the tourist denies it. In both the primitive and the tourist the apollonian mode of drama, the style of tragedy, the logic of personal endeavor and rebellion is absent. The primitive has not become conscious of it, and the tourist has lost it. The myth of the bushman and the myth of the American are made out of inert, inhuman forces. Neither experience tragic rebellion. For the bushman, the event follows the laws of magic: for the American it follows the laws of science. The event puts him under the spell of the laws of mechanics which for him govern physical, social and psychological events.

The mood of 1970 is propitious to a major change of direction in search of a hopeful future. Institutional goals continuously contradict institutional products. The poverty program produces more poor, the war in Asia more Vietcong, technical assistance more underdevelopment. Birth control clinics increase survival rates and boost the population; schools produce more dropouts; and the curb on one kind of pollution usually increases another.

Consumers are faced with the realization that, the more they can buy, the more deceptions they must swallow. Until recently, it seemed logical that the blame for this pandemic inflation of dysfunctions could be laid either on the limping of scientific discovery behind the technological demands or on the perversity of ethnic, ideological, or class enemies. Both the expectations of a scientific millennium or a war to end all wars have declined.

For the experienced consumer there is no way back to the naive reliance on miracle technologies. Even Buckminster Fuller is not radical [170] enough anymore. Too many people have had bad experiences with neurotic computers, hospital-bred infections, and jams wherever there is traffic on the road, in the air, or on the phone. Only ten years ago conventional wisdom anticipated a better life based on an in-

crease in scientific discovery. Now there is a propensity to dread the contrary. The moonshots provide a fascinating demonstration that human failure can almost be eliminated among the operators of complex systems—it does not allay our fears that the human failure to consume according to instruction might spread out of control.

For the social reformer there is no way back, either, to the assumptions of the forties. The hope has vanished that the problem of justly distributing goods could be sidetracked by creating an abundance of them. The cost of minimum packages capable of satisfying modern tastes has skyrocketed, and what makes tastes modern is their obsolescence prior even to satisfaction.

The limits of the Earth's resources have become evident. Even if some humanitarian and totalitarian egalitarianism succeeded in stopping any further increase in the standard of living of the rich, no breakthrough in science or technology could provide every man in the world with the commodities and services which are now available to the poor of rich countries. For instance, it would take the extraction of a hundred times the present amounts of iron, tin, copper, and lead to achieve such a goal, with even the "lightest" alternative technology.

Finally, teachers, doctors, and social workers realize that their distinct professional ministrations have one aspect—at least—in common. They create further demands for the institutional treatments they provide faster than they can provide them.

Not just some part, but the very logic of, conventional wisdom is becoming suspect. Even the laws of economy seem unconvincing outside the narrow parameters which apply to the social, geographic area where most of the money is concentrated. Money is, indeed, the cheapest currency, but only in an economy geared to efficiency measured in monetary terms. Both capitalist and communist countries in their various forms are committed to measuring efficiency in cost/benefit ratios expressed in dollars. Capitalism flaunts a higher standard of living as its claim to superiority. Communism boasts of a higher growth rate as an index of its ultimate triumph. But under either ideology the total cost of in-



creasing efficiency increases exponentially. The largest institutions compete most fiercely for nonmonetary resources: the air, the ocean, silence, sunlight, and health. They bring the [171] scarcity of these resources to public attention only when they are almost irremediably degraded. Everywhere nature becomes poisonous, society inhumane, and the inner life is invaded and personal vocation smothered.

The suspicion that something is structurally wrong with the reality vision of *homo faber* is common to a growing minority in capitalist, communist, and "underdeveloped" countries alike. This suspicion is the shared characteristic of a new elite. To it belong people of all classes, incomes, faiths, and levels of civility. They have become wary of the myths of the majority: of scientific Utopias, of ideological diabolism, and of the expectation to give goods and services with some degree of equality. They share with the majority the sense of being trapped. They share with the majority the awareness that most new policies adopted by broad consensus consistently lead to results which are glaringly opposed to their stated aims. Yet, whereas the promethean majority of would-be spacemen still evades the structural issue, the emergent minority is critical of the scientific *deus ex machina*, the ideological panacea, and the hunt for devils and witches. This elite begins to formulate its suspicion that our constant deceptions tie us to contemporary institutions as the chains bound Prometheus to his rock. Suspicion becomes vocation—a call to the task of exposing the Promethean fallacy.

Prometheus is usually thought to mean "foresight," or sometimes even "he who makes the North Star progress." He tricked the gods out of their monopoly of fire, taught men to use it in the forging of iron, became the god of technologists, and wound up in iron chains.

The brother of Prometheus was Epimetheus, or "hindsight." Epimetheus was infatuated when he beheld Pandora. The warnings of Prometheus could not stop his brother from taking Pandora to be his wife, and when the bride opened her amphora, the cycle of civilization started. Promethean Man began to *make* this world. Epimetheus stayed with hopeful Pandora, and the couple continued to *do* their

thing," as one says today. Epimetheus fathered Pyrrha, who became the wife of Deucalion, the Noah of Greece. Except that his daughter was the second mother of mankind, Epimetheus was forgotten. Only now awakens the possibility that men of his boldness might survive the end of the promethean age.

Pandora was wed as *homo faber* began his ascent. We are now in the twilight of Apollo's day. The Pythia of Delphi has been replaced by a computer which hovers above panels and punch cards. The hexameters of the oracle have given way to twelve-bit codes and instructions. Man the helmsman turns the rudder over to the cybernetic machine. The ultimate [172] machine closes in on us. Children dream of flying in their spacecrafts away from crepuscular earth.

We need a name for those few who love the earth, and on whom the earth's survival depends. Dom Helder Camara has suggested calling them an "abrahamic minority," because Abraham was the father of the faith of Christians and Jews. Dr. Fromm pointed out to Dom Helder that Noah was an even better symbol, since the helmsman of the ark was the father of believers and unbelievers alike, and his commandments did not demand an explicit belief in God but enjoined only the rejection of all idols. Even further in the background stands the father of Pyrrha, the woman on the ark of Noah-Deucalion, son of Prometheus. The grandchildren of Prometheus stand in the line of the forgotten brother Epimetheus. After the twilight of Apollo, hope beyond darkness lies in the dawning of epimethean man.

*Homo faber* has peopled the world with machines in his image and likeness, machines which make things, in the manner of the sorcerer's apprentice. Epimetheus robs his brother of his deceptions, takes unto himself the products which have been crowding him off the earth and its highways, and uses technology to build roads on which man can once again walk, opens channels by which men can put themselves back in contact with one another. Prometheus has replaced hope with expectations. Epimetheus tears down walls and builds access routes to pierce the darkness and shrink the distance separating the men of the modern city. He seeks after others, not to consume with them,



but to live and act in communion.

The Platonic liberal has set minimum standards of manipulation which he imposes on all men to make them into what he considers more human. He needs schools, hospitals, and armies to bring all men under his benevolent control. Epimetheus seeks to guarantee freedom from all processes prescribed for improving or saving a person.

Man the producer spends more and more on tooling others to demand and then use his wares. Epimetheus removes restrictive licensing, credentialing, and all other limits on the free exchange of services.

Man as Sisyphus exhausts himself and the earth as he compulsively produces and consumes in an unending cycle of zealously progressive destruction. Epimetheus protects the munificence of nature by setting maximum per capita levels for the consumption of scarce resources.

Man as Tantalus sees his stolen ambrosia turn to poison as he engineers the production of self-satisfaction right into the organism of man. [173] Epimetheus knows he is the keeper of hope for others, and he can find hope only in the other he chooses for his neighbor.

In the morning hours of Apollo's day, man had to struggle with that nature he wished to conquer. As darkness falls on his pride, he has now to struggle with himself. The dawn awaits the hour when man will renounce his power to make things which shield him from the other. Prometheus taught us to shape iron. Epimetheus has but to learn to let his heart speak. The drama of Prometheus was a struggle with the gods. The drama of Epimetheus is the search for peace among men.