



## Report from the Conference in Magliaso

Rainer Funk

“Report from the Conference in Magliaso,” in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition - ISBN 1437-1189) 10 / 2006, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2006, pp. 73-78.

Copyright © 2006 and 2011 by Dr. Rainer Funk, Ursrainer Ring 24, D-72076 Tuebingen, E-Mail: funk[at-symbol]fromm-online.com.

Brilliant sunshine, glorious fall weather, the lush vegetation still in full bloom, houses painted in such an intense shade of red that they seem to be competing with the scarlet leaves of the sumac; through the trees a breathtaking view of Lake Lugano, reflecting the sun; the first conference participants have already discovered the conference center's rowboats. Early the next morning—though late October—two of the 140 conference guests go for a swim in the lake. „Productive Orientation and Mental Health“: given the benevolence of nature and the climate the topic of the conference in honor of the twentieth anniversary of the International Erich Fromm Society in Magliaso, Switzerland does not appear to be utopian at all.

What is productive orientation? Productive orientation means the practice, the practical application or utilization of one's own thought, feelings, and action, as *Rainer Funk* describes on the first evening in his introduction to the conference theme. A productive person is someone who senses something inherent in himself or herself and generates something out of himself or herself, who experiences himself or herself as alive, who consciously perceives his or her feelings, who senses an interest and a need to exist in relatedness to the world and to other human beings. Who not only has eyes in order to see and an olfactory sense in order to smell but also a soul in order to feel, who is endowed with a phantasy to activate his or her powers of imagination, who has the self-awareness to reflect on himself or herself and on the purpose of his or her existence. But how can a conferencegoer ex-

ist in a social environment without a television or a telephone in his or her room at the Centro Evangelico Magliaso? The most important technical means of assistance can't simply be withheld. Or can they? Or is it conceivable that life in a social context is only possible then?

While often necessary, technical aids or means of assistance are generally only called for when we are unable to do or create something on the basis of our human ability alone. This begins with language. The conference participants speak either Italian or German or English, and need translations of each of the other languages. Translations of the lectures and shorter papers have been prepared in advance, and copies are available with the conference materials.

Language is less of a barrier when it comes to personal encounters. A number of the participants have met before at earlier conferences, others, for example, Johannes Neumann, Armin Bader, József Koch, Ute Wiest, Otto Lüdemann, and Peter Wriedt are former members of the Executive or the Advisory Boards, and have come not only to attend an international conference focusing on a central aspect of Fromm's thought but also to celebrate the anniversary with an evening of festivities. With much good-naturedness, the appropriate facial expressions, ample gestures, and body language, as well as a smattering of English the participants manage to articulate their questions and discuss the contributions in the discussion sections following the lectures.

Apropos goodwill: anyone who is familiar



with conference centers and their current rationalization policies is pleasantly surprised how accommodating, efficient, engaged, and interested the staff members of this facility run by the Protestant Church of the Canton of Zurich are, greatly contributing to the success of the conference. Apparently they can even anticipate the wishes of their guests, and do everything in their power to fulfill these. What matters here is not economic but human productivity, which actually desires the guests' well-being—whether in the kitchen, at the reception desk, in the desperate attempts to start the multimedia projector and the speaker system or in the rearrangement of the dining room—flooded with light and overlooking the lake—for the evening festivities.

*Sergio Caruso*, professor of political science at the University of Florence and a practicing psychoanalyst, greets the conference speakers and guests as President of the nine Italian institutes of psychoanalysis (OPIFER) which have coorganized the conference. The first evening focuses on Erich Fromm's biography. *Lawrence Friedman*, a professor of history in Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A., chronicles his attempts to research and write the first comprehensive Fromm biography. This project is inordinately difficult due to the extremely limited scope of the extant correspondence. Other sources—interviews with Fromm's friends, relatives, and associates who are still alive, numerous photographs, and, above all, Fromm's political writings—can, however, with the appropriate interpretation, offer considerable insight into his personality, since, in Fromm's case—a rarity among renowned scholars—life, teaching, and thought constituted a unity. This, too, is indicative of Erich Fromm's own productive orientation.

Precisely this is the emphasis of the paper by *Gérard Houry*, written on the basis of his personal encounters with Fromm in Mexico. Although a severe cold and fever unfortunately have prevented the Lebanese-born scholar from Aix-en-Provence from attending the conference, his lecture is available in printed form.

The thematic focus of the conference—“Productive Orientation and Mental Health”—is to be developed in four major papers concentrating on two specific areas: the clinical-therapeutic area and the sociopsychological

area. In a complex and penetrating lecture *Romano Biancoli*, the founder of the psychoanalytic training institute in Bologna, offers insight into his application of productive orientation in the therapeutic relationship. Biancoli sees the uniqueness of Fromm's clinical approach toward patients in the mutual concentration on the here-and-now of the patient, which he also follows in practice. Not the reconstruction of the there-and-then of the patient and his or her relationships at the time but the here-and-now of *his* or *her* feelings, suffering, action, and self-experience in the being mode enable the productive inner powers to become effective and to restore mental health.

*Sandra Buechler*, a psychoanalyst from New York City, situates her lecture on the productive orientation of the therapist in a different theoretical framework yet comes to a similar conclusion. Singling out several specific values that inform the professional therapeutic stance, which she also discovers in Fromm's works, Buechler illustrates that therapeutic abstinence and neutrality cannot mean disallowing values such as the search for truth, courage, freedom, or love for life in the therapeutic relationship. The decisive question is, naturally, how such a therapeutic work ethic is carried out. Through her lecture it becomes exceedingly clear that it is her own productive orientation that manifests itself in—to use Biancoli's words—her total concentration on the here-and-now of the patient, and in her decision not to place techniques or ethical expertise between herself and the patient.

Both lectures communicate what *Otto Lüdemann* and *Jürgen Kalcher* from the Hamburg School of Social Work make visible in their presentation on their work with masks and what finds unsurpassable artistic expression in the improvisations by the Scuola des Teatro Dimitri from Verscio (near Locarno). Is the other, often unconscious side of the individual personality to emerge through the creation of handmade masks, in order to directly access one's self and others, the actress and actor from the Scuola des Teatro Dimitri, *Sarah Lersch* and *Giuseppe Spina*, under the direction of *Jean-Martin Moncéro*, attempt to artistically express inner perceptions through facial expressions, gestures, and motion in such a way that no thought, let alone a tech-



nique, can intervene. Here productiveness is the equivalent of „leading out“ („pro-ducere“) or „presenting“ what spontaneously and randomly arises in the performing artists at this moment. „Oh—an experience!“

Artistic productivity can also be encountered on the well-attended excursion to Montagnola on Sunday afternoon, led by *Renate Oetker-Funk*. How arduous, crisis-ridden, and painful the development of artistic productivity can be in a writer to make history is readily sensed in the small Hermann Hesse Museum there. The documents and memorabilia from different periods in Hesse's life have been thoughtfully assembled in the exhibit, calling to mind the numerous affinities between the Swabian writer and Fromm.

However vividly productivity can be depicted through artistic creativity—in therapeutic work it is also possible to illustrate the turn to productivity and mental health. In a fascinating case study *Manuela Salmi*, the new director of clinical training at the Fromm Institute in Bologna, impressively demonstrates how the liberation from the dictates of a „correct“ therapeutic „technique“ can lead to a productive development in a patient. *Harold Davis* of New York City discusses the problem of determining under what circumstances a therapeutic „technique“ can be useful at all. Davis, a former President of the International Federation for Psychoanalytic Education for many years, maintains that everything depends on whether the therapeutic „technique“ promotes or impedes human development and thus orients itself on a humanistic ethics.

*Armin Bader*, a therapist in Bochum, began to study Fromm's concept of productive orientation more than twenty years ago in his doctoral dissertation. In Magliaso he presents a case study of a patient from a psychosomatic clinic, showing how a highly successful woman lawyer was able to regain intellectual productivity and mental health only after having allowed herself to go through a long-resisted process of grieving. In the therapeutic process it is not always a matter of repelling or resisting feelings of loss. There are other, completely different possibilities of being alienated from one's own individual human ability, allowing a nonproductive orienta-

tion respectively a mental illness to develop. *Enzo Lio*, the cofounder of the Istituto Erich Fromm in Bologna, chooses to discuss Fromm's concept of alienation in his reflections on productiveness and mental health, illustrating that the „pathology of normalcy,“ which not only affects patients but therapists as well, clearly influences the therapeutic relationship and must be recognized if a therapy is to be successful.

Several of the other speakers go beyond the scope of therapeutic work with patients in shorter presentations. *Burkhard Bierhoff*, a Professor of Education and an educational theorist in Cottbus, is unable to attend the conference; his reflections on consumer behavior today, one of his long-term research interests, are all the more worthy of consideration. Bierhoff raises the question to what degree consumption is destructive as well as detrimental to mental health, yet also indicates that there is a productive kind of consumption in the being mode of existence, in which a „voluntary simplicity“ leads to a „prudent and, at the same time, ecological and sustainable way of life.“ *József Koch*, from the University of Pécs in Hungary, also contemplates the question of the concrete ways of dealing with matters in everyday life. The political upheaval in Hungary has confronted his students with the temptations of a market-oriented economy and the resultant personality changes. In this context he observes to what degree Fromm's humanistic thought has an effect which could reinforce a productive orientation.

*Sergio Caruso* takes up another very different aspect, providing a transition to the sociopsychological application of the concepts of productivity and mental health. Proceeding from the position—also held by Fromm—that culture exerts a vast influence on the psychic structure of the human being, Caruso pursues the question how the alter has been seen throughout history and how it is manifest as an inner structure in the human being. Caruso maintains the existence of a transition from ego to self in an internalized alter, positing a link to Fromm's concept of the social character orientation.

In the Frommian understanding productive orientation and mental health are not only individual entities but, to the extent that every hu-



man being is always a social being, social entities as well. This is why social change is also always reflected in personality changes respectively in changes in the social character orientation. This sociopsychological dimension of productiveness and mental health is explored in depth by *Rainer Funk* and *Gerd Meyer* in their lectures, which demand great attentiveness. Their focus is what causes an increasing percentage of the population today to similarly think, feel, and act in a certain way. Central to their considerations are those persons who have adopted a post-modern lifestyle, that is, a lifestyle entailing the impassioned attempt to construct and stage new and different, above all „I-am-me“ oriented realities. While Rainer Funk chiefly assesses the potential for alienation inherent in this way of living and contemplates what constitutes the pathology of normalcy for the „I-am-me“ oriented postmodern person, when „human“ ability is increasingly replaced by „made“ or „fabricated“ ability, Gerd Meyer attempts to fathom the chances for a productive orientation and reports the findings of an empirical study on the post-modern „I-am-me“ orientation.

Productive orientation is by no means an exclusively *intellectual pursuit* at the conference. The beautiful natural surroundings and the temperate climate of Ticino, the warm and supportive atmosphere at the conference center and among the conference participants, the contributions from the realm of artistic creativity, the case studies from therapeutic practice—all of these allow productive orientation to be intensely experienced as well. And since human productivity has a great deal to do with a love for life, joint celebration, and creative participation, the *festivities* marking the twentieth anniversary of the International Erich Fromm Society continue far into the night.

The paramount event is a retrospective view of the past twenty years. A PowerPoint presentation prepared by *Rainer Funk* depicts highlights at conferences and meetings, including a number of conferences organized by the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies (IFPS). The Secretary General of the IFPS, *Sonja Gojman de Millán* from Mexico City, is present and, in her welcoming speech, emphasizes the extraordinary significance of the Fromm Society

for the international reception of Erich Fromm's thought. And the celebration also opens with a first: the conferral of honorary membership on three individuals who have played pivotal roles in the founding and development of the Erich Fromm Society: *Johannes Neumann* from Oberkirch, Germany, *Marco Bacciagaluppi* from Milan, Italy, and *Jorge Silva* from Tlalpan, Mexico. In a spontaneous and unofficial act, *Ute Wiest*, *Martha Pelster*, and *Peter Richter* present Rainer Funk and Renate Oetker-Funk with flowers and wine as a token of appreciation for the hospitality which the Fromm Society enjoys in their home at Ursrainer Ring 24 in Tübingen.

The sumptuous buffet beckons, then the raffle with 500 prizes (!), meticulously organized by *Regine Bonfert* of Stuttgart during weeks of preparation, the proceeds of which are designated for the work of the Erich Fromm Society. Fine wines, handmade bookmarks, photographs, cards with texts by Erich Fromm, and scores of Ritter Sport candy bars are among the items to be raffled.

Following the culinary delights of the buffet dinner, *Georg Osterfeld* and *Susan Garton* serve as master and mistress of ceremonies for the rest of the evening, abounding with creative moments. *Felix Wicki* accompanies silent films featuring Laurel and Hardy with masterly piano improvisations. *Barbara Nespethal* delights acoustically with three pieces for the recorder from three musical periods: the medieval, the Renaissance, and the modern. Late in the evening *Armin Wallrapp* and his harmonica are the center of attention. *Georg Osterfeld* is unforgettable with his rhymed and witty words of wisdom. *Kathrin Krüger-Mlaouhia* attempts to increase Friedrich Schiller's popularity among Italians, Mexicans, Americans, Scandinavians, the Russian philosopher Omelchenko, and (non-Saxon) Germans through transpositions of his texts into Saxon, while *Jürgen Kalcher* and *Otto Lüdemann* dramatize the struggles of two Germans from Hamburg with the „pathology of normalcy.“ And since the productive sometimes takes the form of the totally unexpected or suddenly conjured, *Günter Pohl* captivates with magic tricks at a late hour.

And what does Erich Fromm say? „Productiveness is man's ability to use *his* powers and to



---

realize the potentialities *inherent in him*." And, to echo Hermann Hesse, at the end of the conference and with the best intentions of renewing

one's own efforts at productive orientation, to say: „Every beginning has its own special magic...“