



Erich Fromms Views on Youth

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The place of youth in Erich Fromm's thought

Youth is not given special treatment by Erich Fromm; this time of life, for him, is just a phase of life among others. Of course, adolescence like old age has its own problems, but how they are to be solved is a function of character, not of age. Hence the complete edition of Fromm's writings contains only 13 entries on „youth“—not much when you compare it with „childhood“ or „education“, which each have some 200 entries.

When Fromm speaks of youth, what he usually has in mind is the rebellious and revolutionary young of the late 1960s and early 1970s. To the critical part of the young of the time, among whom I would have to number myself, he was basically well-disposed. Fromm reposed great hopes in their revolutionary zeal, yet also clearly warned against two dangerous tendencies: radicalization and regression to childhood. One focus of the youth rebellion was sexuality. Noting that sexuality in a marketing-oriented society had become a more or less underhand consumer good, disaffected young people, citing Freud and Reich, were led to protest against this trend. One mode of protest was group sex – a form of sexuality perhaps still in vogue today, but no longer as a protest. The theoretical and political point of group sex was to help overcome jealousy and possessive urges. Critically, Fromm asked whether this form of sexuality, in which having serial sexual partners was acceptable, was not a sign of inability to love or enter into intimacy. The protests of the beatniks and hippies were, for Fromm, neither political nor

revolutionary; they were an outcry against the absence of love. How empty and hopeless must young people be, he asked, if they have to find consolation in drugs and pop music. Strivings to set aside the urge to consume, especially those made by the Beatles, that product of mass consumption, seemed to him grotesque.

Come with me, if you will, as I set out in four steps Fromm's views on youth. We may even digress to consider his basic approach to educating boys and girls.

- What mindset were the young of the 1960s and 1970s raised in?
- What hopes did Fromm set in the youth of his day?
- What dangers did he foresee?
- What lessons are there for today's teachers?

What mindset were the young of the 1960s and 1970s raised in?

The goal of education in a society dominated by the marketing character is to turn out people who form snap judgments and then successfully implement them. Not insight or understanding but finding effective outlets is the criterion of success. Training programs that inculcate all manner of skills drive out true learning.

This thesis of Fromm's has lost none of its topicality; he foresaw a trend that is now dominant. As a pupil and later as a student, I was taught by many a teacher or professor (often elderly) who espoused the ideal of the educated citizen. But in today's school such notions seem rather antiquated—what are now „in“ are



learner modules and training programs. Who could have anything against aptitude tests, computer classes, first-aid courses, social conduct training? My objection is not that that these programs don't work. They do--they also work to stop us thinking.

Young people back then could not evade the prevalent trends, nor can their counterparts today. Not to feel the lure of the necrophilous [ich kann nur necrophilic belegen] social values paraded at every turn would be strange indeed. „Do not ask for human rights, ask what's in it for you,“ is the slogan we nail to our mast. Fromm's diagnosis of his own times was radical: ethical values were out; drugs and crime were in; cultural and social life was a no-no.

Beethoven ended his Ninth Symphony with an „Ode to Joy. But young men today have gone one better: „girls just wanna have fun.“ We worship so much at the altar of money that only turning a profit matters; how we do it interests no one. Television managers want to know the viewer ratings, not what informed critics are saying. And it is hard to buck the mainstream, even when, especially when, its values are all bogus. The rich world is a consumer's paradise, at least for the top two-thirds: too bad for the excluded rest, they're simply down on their luck. Inhabiting paradise returns us to childhood; „big mama“ economy supplies our every need; she feeds us with consumer goods; she beguiles us with drugs and television. All „big mama“ wants, in return, is that we do her bidding. We moderns need wrestle with no tougher decision than what make of car we're going to drive this year, or what brand of beer best tickles our palate.

What we learn from exposure to social forces goes deeper than anything we learn at school. Society wants the kind of person who can play his allotted role. So it has an interest in young people falling in line with the dominant social character. Fortunately – for the moralists among us – society runs into some barriers, even if schools, with their preference for readily testable factual knowledge over the ability to think for oneself, merely reinforce this tendency (especially since PISA). Of course learning without knowing the facts is empty; yet no amount of stored information can replace thinking, it may

even choke it off. To know is not to have information; it is to penetrate the surface of things. Only by peering below the surface can we know with our beings. As for the kind of knowledge we merely have – and it is this that rules the roost in the European educational system – here the focus is very much on practical outlets, with some small provision being made for luxury courses for the elites, because knowing a few Latin sayings (such as *quo vadis iuvenis*) or a thing or two about alien and exotic cultural ways can never harm one's standing. Mere havers of knowledge may be able to cite „their“ philosophers, but they can never truly engage with them. So great is the lure of tidbits of luxury information that many students succumb to it. Fromm had this to say:

„From Indian thought and art to existentialism and surrealism, a vast smorgasbord of knowledge is offered from which students pick a little here, a little there, and in the name of spontaneity and freedom are not urged to concentrate on one subject, not even ever to finish reading an entire book.“ (*To Have or to Be?*, New York 1976, p. 41.)

Learning of this kind is simply a tool for social climbers: students, especially the more acute and openminded ones, pick up on this. Hence Fromm's hope that the rebellious youth of his day might gravitate to a love of life. In the re-discovery of Bachofen's theory of matriarchy Fromm even saw a sign of this happening. If Bachofen is right, women, or at least a gynocentric value system, held sway throughout most of human history, patriarchy only displacing it some 10,000 years ago. That Bachofen is undergoing a revival has its social and psychological reasons: the patriarchal system with its wars, famines, environmental inroads, has clearly failed, even as clamors for greater democracy and emancipation are abroad.

What hopes did Fromm set in the youth of his day?

Fromm was highly impressed when he saw the rebellious young resisting the having orientation and necrophilia. Children and young people should not be passive objects; they should be al-



lowed to follow their own imperatives. That children and young people are not simply „unfinished“ grown-ups had been recognized by Pestalozzi and Freud – as the 20th century wore on, this insight turned into a commonplace, or at least should have! The young will act when their future is at stake, they will choose the kind of life they want to lead. Those who were young in the 1960s and 1970s

- protested against war and environmental destruction,
- raised issues concerning the quality of life,
- rated interesting and meaningful work higher than moneymaking,
- went in search of spiritual values, and
- were drawn to authenticity and vitality.

Sometimes they took a wrong turning--of which more later. Yet even in the zeal with which they got sidetracked, their love of life, if somewhat dimmed, shone through. The young of 1970, like their counterparts in 2002, could pick and choose from a number of subcultures, so we really can't talk of *the* young, only of a mainstream (as Martina Becker has noted). What the young of 1970 and 2002 share is a commitment to life and to loving life, which gives grounds for hope. Both younger generations embraced, or are embracing, a lifestyle at odds with the majority, with its penchant for having. This is especially evident in their consumption habits, which are not hidden forms of acquisition but rather find joy in being active. Fromm gives an example from his day that could apply equally well to today's young: a willingness to undertake arduous journeys to attend musical concerts, visit interesting places, meet other people. Their reasons and purposes are not at issue here – these fall within the realm of taste – what matters is that young people should

- dare to be,
- not count the cost,
- be sincere and upright in their dealings, and
- strive for meaning.

The young in today's rich countries had their counterparts too in the upper classes of Ancient Rome, whose members ended up turning to Christianity, the religion of poverty and altruism; they are also the latter-day descendants of

Prince Siddhartha, who became the Buddha; also of the Russian *Narodniki* („Friends of the People“), who left their fine villas to help the downtrodden peasantry, teaching them how to read and write. Spontaneous altruism is youth's great strength; it is also its weakness.

What dangers did Fromm foresee?

The young lack tradition and experience, mature judgment and political savvy. While altruism may make up for these deficits, there is always the danger that overestimating one's hand may end in narcissism. Fromm rejects rebellion for its own sake, rebellion that would only be „free,“ as if there was no such thing as human dependency. He criticizes youth's almost phobic indifference to intellectual tradition, its narcissistic belief that one can discover everything for oneself. Arrrogance in those who think they know better often stands in the way of success. Confronted with failure, many resign or lapse into apathy and cynicism; others take the path of violence and terror.

Although Fromm saw democracy as under greater threat from the fight against terrorism than from terrorism itself (recall the draconian West German laws of the 1970s against membership in terrorist organizations; think of the so-called „Patriot Act“ in our own day), he did not omit to ask how a loving and religiously motivated woman like Ulrike Meinhof could turn into a hate-driven terrorist. To point out that in every political movement there are destructive characters struck him as overly simplified. As Fromm saw it, the terrorists had lost the power to love. Paradoxically, their focus on self-sacrifice was intended to deny that this had happened. The *Narodniki* spawned the terrorist groups of the „Social Revolutionary Party,“ out of which came the Bolsheviks; many of the „sixty-eighters“, the generation of 1968, ended up joining the „Red Brigades“ of West Germany and Italy. All altruistic impulses, which in Christian tradition even extend to loving one's enemies, had been abandoned.

Fromm's second critique alleged a „frivolousness“ that led especially the more radical young to steer clear of responsible work, either



because they didn't feel up to it or because they had a diminished sense of accountability. The true revolutionary, for Fromm, does not lapse into *dolce far niente*; he is at all times active, diligent, focused, as exemplified by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, or Mao. Hitler, by contrast, was not a true revolutionary; even the irresponsible bohemian drifter, only the pursuit of power could arouse him, productive work never. However, Fromm noted that precisely the revolutionary among the young were drawn to this type.

The third thing to draw Fromm's critical ire was the one-sided matriarchal orientation of the young, as manifested in

- group sex,
- convergence of gender difference in clothing and appearance („unisex“),
- abandoning traditional male values (e.g. economic provider, decision maker),
- gravitation to ingroups that cater to one's every need, and
- passivity, e.g. „doing drugs.“

Fromm notes, with a sense of alarm, that neo matriarchal tendencies are but a negation of the patriarchal system, resulting in a regression to childhood. Like a baby needing his mother, each young person needs an ingroup—or a drug of choice, a favorite consumer item, a pc with online access, a cellphone with inbuilt camera.

A digression into male and female principles of love

Fromm distinguishes two types of love: There is the maternal principle, as represented by the mother, its hallmark unconditional love and acceptance; then the paternal principle, as represented by the father, its hallmark the posing of clear demands. Here Fromm is following Bachofen. A mother's love, being the upwelling of nature, does not have to be earned, nor can the child forfeit it by misbehaving. But a mother's love can hinder the child in growing up, since it rewards helplessness. In religious- sociological terms, this kind of love is the kind the Catholic Church propagates: „Mother Church“ will not turn its back on the repentant sinner;

but it will be the Church that decides what is good or evil, not the sinner. On one side, the cheerful but infantile Catholic; on the other, the autonomous but guilt-stricken Protestant who insists on doing his own thinking. The paternal principle is assigned squarely by Fromm to the Lutheran camp. The father (or God) loves his child provided he performs to expectation. A father's love always comes with conditions attached; the child can win that love, or forfeit it. Unlike a mother's love, it is not beyond the power of the child to alter. So the child can cultivate the ability to gain his father's good graces. The loss of security is replaced by a love of obedience, if but to regain a modicum of security. Dangerous, however, is the authoritarian father who keeps his child in a state of dependency; his values are beyond the child's power to grasp or criticize – and so can never be made into values of his own.

Fromm is not interested in freezing the gender roles; what he wants is to free up the possibilities of human behavior. Children need both kinds of love if they are to realize their full humanity:

- the maternal principle to help the child unfold its powers, and
- the paternal principle to instill in the child a sense of limits.

A mature person who is fully self-aware will have imbibed both kinds of love in his formative years. Love of oneself and of others stems from the maternal principle, power of judgment from the paternal principle. Without the maternal principle we wouldn't be fully human, without the paternal principle we would be without conscience. True parental love consists in the child being able to outgrow this love.

What lessons are there for today's teachers?

Fromm was extremely critical of any kind of education that merely adapts people to society. This can only frustrate the human striving for autonomy, and we are not born to be frustrated.

In any socially differentiated society--or, to use Marxist terms, in any class-based society--the



predominant values are those of its elites. The wisdom teachers of ancient Egypt and the Hebrew Bible reflected the normative world of state officials and the rich. The knightly virtues of the Middle Ages might have meant something to the nobles, but the peasants had to await the life-to-come for their ills to be redressed. Today the knightly virtues are outdated, true wisdom is located in knowing the bottom line in cash terms. In modern society, however, the values of the non-elites are no longer dismissed as inferior. Not only is this good for the individual, who can now find his own social niche; it serves the interests of society too, for much ethical debate can be avoided. A society that embraces social difference is not likely to founder on its own contradictions. The name we often hear in this connection is pluralism--a misnomer in my view, for it is functionality that we pursue today, not our humanity.

What in our political enemies – once the Soviet Union, today Islamic fundamentalism – we dismiss as propaganda or indoctrination, we are likely in our own system to call education and information, small though the differences sometimes are. How to inculcate core values is a problem every society faces. Teaching values always smacks of manipulation, since the institutions (school or university) called upon to teach them invariably resort to authoritarian methods. As someone who teaches history, political science, and Protestant Christianity, the dilemma I face everyday is this: if I teach knowledge without values, this has no value; but if I teach knowledge with values, how do I legitimize such an incursion into the autonomy of others? Are my humanist goals just my own, or are they, as Albert Schweitzer put it, „imperatives of thought“? What Schweitzer meant was that

- these goals can be justified by reflection alone, not by pointing to social realities; secondly, and that
- they can be grasped by any thinking person.

The goal of education, for Fromm, is the autonomous person,

- who has honed his critical skills,

- who doesn't confuse knowledge with information,
- who has grasped the forces underlying material and social processes, and
- who has had his esthetic sensibilities kindled.

There is much in this goal to recommend it. No new ideals are needed; all that is necessary is to follow the great teachers of mankind (Buddha, Jesus, or Spinoza) who have enunciated the norms for living well. In different languages and conceptual edifices, they gave their humanism eloquent expression. If the merely functional was no longer made the goal of education, if the new goal was a commitment to human unfolding, that would be a giant step forward. Education would then be what, all along, it was supposed to be. The Latin word *educare* means „to lead out“, „to bring out“, „to lead upwards.“ The aim is to bring out whatever makes us what we are.

Because the teacher is a participant in this process, in which searching is as important as finding, he learns too along with his pupils or students; in no sense is he a mere flunky, cramming „content“ into his charges. He demonstrates by his example what humanism really is--or, as the Romans put it, *tua res agitur*. He accesses human potential, living potential, social potential. For him nothing less than the future of the young is at stake .

Fromm never wrote better of his educational ideals, in my opinion, than in his „Credo“; let me close by citing a few words from it:

„I believe that education means to acquaint the young with the best heritage of the human race. But while much of this heritage is expressed in words, it is effective only if these words become reality in the person of the teacher and in the practice and structure of society. Only the idea, which has materialized in the flesh, can influence man; the idea, which remains a word, only changes words.“ (E. Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, New York 1962, pp. 176f.)