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Erich Fromm on Resonance and Alienation

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Man – of all ages and cultures – is confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separateness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement.
(Erich Fromm, *Die Kunst des Liebens.*)

Introduction: Context

The background of this text is formed by Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance, developed in his latest book; *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (2016). At the *Kolleg Postwachstumsgesellschaften* of the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, I wrote a working paper (*Between Alienation and Resonance: Atomization and Embedment from Schopenhauer to Camus, from Hegel to Honneth, and from Thoreau to Houellebecq*) in which I analyzed different *Weltbeziehungen* as developed by a wide range of authors – both philosophers and literary writers – in regard to the question of how they could contribute to an understanding of "resonance" (M. Peters, 2015). I will return to this concept below.

This working paper was mainly exploratory and suggestive in nature. My aim was not to provide a comprehensive historical or philosophical overview of the authors I discussed, to reduce their observations to only one theme, or to summarize modernity-critique in general. Instead, I wanted to show how, throughout the

works of the authors I discussed, a longing for connection, embedment or warmth forms a returning idea and follows from a negative diagnosis of the status quo – how different their observations otherwise may be.

One of the authors I discussed was Erich Fromm, and I concluded that his observations come the closest to the idea behind this working-paper and, eventually, to an understanding of the notion of "resonance". Throughout his works, after all, Fromm places himself in a line of authors who, in his view, all express discontent with modernity and claim that a certain way of being in the world has been lost. As he writes in *Escape from Freedom*, for example

The position in which the individual finds himself in our period had already been foreseen by visionary thinkers in the nineteenth century. Kierkegaard describes the helpless individual torn and tormented by doubts, overwhelmed by the feeling of aloneness and insignificance. Nietzsche visualizes the approaching nihilism which was to become manifest in Nazism and paints a picture of a "superman" as the



negation of the insignificant, directionless individual he saw in reality. The theme of the powerlessness of man has found a most precise expression in Franz Kafka's work. In his *Castle* he describes the man who wants to get in touch with the mysterious inhabitants of a castle, who are supposed to tell him what to do and show him his place in the world. All his life consists in his frantic effort to get in touch with them, but he never succeeds and is left alone with a sense of utter futility and helplessness. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 154.)

The following text contains my analysis of the understanding of "resonance" that can be based on Fromm's works. This analysis follows from an exploration of that which Fromm understands as the origins of a "feeling of isolation and powerlessness" (l.c.) that, in his view, characterizes modern man.

To embed this analysis in a theoretical context, I will first provide a brief introduction to the notion of "resonance". Following Fromm's observation in the passage cited above, I will do this with help of several ideas developed by Søren Kierkegaard.

Alienation and Resonance

In his 1846 essay *A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard develops a critique of the society and culture in which he lived by contrasting it with what he calls the "revolutionary age". The present age, he opens his essay, "is essentially *sensible, reflective, dispassionate, eruptive in its fleeting enthusiasms and prudently indolent in its relaxation*" (S. Kierkegaard, 2011, p. 60). Kierkegaard frequently uses the notion of "reflection", which has several meanings in his essay. Firstly, it refers to the ability to think, to deliberate and to reflect on oneself, which has stifling consequences, in his view:

Nowadays not even a suicide does away with himself out of desperation, but considers this step so long and so sensibly that he is strangled by good sense, casting doubt on whether he may really be called

a suicide, seeing that it was mainly consideration that took his life (l.c.).

Deliberation is therefore contrasted in the essay with the ability to act, to manifest oneself as a passionate and spontaneous being *in* the world: "There is as little action and decision these days as shallow-water paddlers have a daring desire to swim" (S. Kierkegaard, 2011, p. 63).

Secondly, "reflection" refers to the ability to abstract from particular, empirical entities. Kierkegaard links this ability to the social phenomenon of the press: "the present age is the age of advertisement, the age of miscellaneous announcements" (S. Kierkegaard, 2011, p. 62). Instead of focusing on action and passion itself, individuals merely read about events in watered-down and abstract *reflections* in newspapers. This disconnects them from that which is actually happening and makes them withdraw into the inwardness of their shallow and actionless subjectivity, Kierkegaard observes.

He links this emphasis on "reflection" as well to the emergence of feelings of envy and egotism: people do not truly desire or throw themselves passionately into "life" anymore, he writes, but only *compare* their achievements and status with those of others. This is made possible, in his view, by the level of abstraction achieved with the introduction of money: in a Marxist fashion, he argues that the *general* form of money enables the comparison of objects that are, *in themselves*, different from each other – "money becomes the object of desire: indeed it too is a promissory note, an abstraction" (S. Kierkegaard, 2011, p. 66). In Kierkegaard's view, money robs every act, idea, feeling or individual of its particular nature, which results in a *leveling* atmosphere in which ambiguity and characterlessness reign:

[W]hile a passionate age *accelerates, raises and topples, extols and oppresses*, a reflective, passionless age does the opposite – it *stifles and impedes, it levels*. Levelling is a quiet, mathematically abstract affair that avoids all fuss. While the eruptive



short-term enthusiasm might look de-
spondently for some misfortune, just to
taste the strength of its existence, no in-
terruption can help the apathy that suc-
ceeds it, any more than it helps the level-
ling engineer. If an uprising at its peak is
like a volcanic explosion in which not a
word can be heard, then levelling at its
peak is like a deathly stillness over which
nothing can raise itself but into which eve-
rything impotently sinks down. (S. Kierke-
gaard, 2011, p. 75.)

Kierkegaard argues that these phenomena are
not purely individual or psychological in nature,
but are deeply entwined with social structures.
He observes, for example, that in the "present
age" society erases "all that is concrete" be-
cause "the press creates this abstraction the
public, composed as it is of unreal individuals"
(l.c., p. 81). This "public", in his view, is nothing
but an abstract mass in which individuals are
pushed, robbed of their individual qualities and
are reduced to "nothing", to an "abstract waste
and emptiness" (l.c., p. 83), which makes level-
ling into "not a single individual's action but an
activity of reflection in the hands of an abstract
power" (l.c., p. 76).

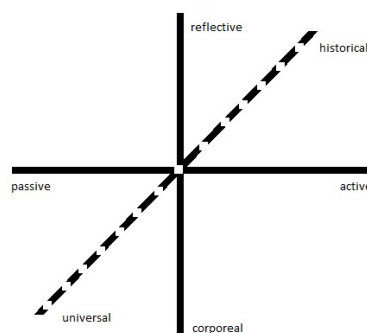
This implies that the notion of "reflection" can
be interpreted in a *third* way: instead of con-
necting to other people, the world or to nature,
and to appreciate and perceive the individuality
and particularity of those we face and of our
own selves, the "present age" has imprisoned
the individual in a cage of *reflecting mirrors*.
The modern individual only perceives an ab-
stract reflection of herself, mediated by the
levelling nature of overly general images that
society and the press create.
Furthermore, this individual only perceives
others by way of this mirror, Kierkegaard sug-
gests, since she constantly compares their wealth
and status with her own.

This dualism between "reflec-
tion" and "levelling" on the one
hand, and experiences of con-

nection, engagement, spontaneity and em-
bedment on the other, return in different forms
in the analysis that Erich Fromm constructs of
what could, broadly, be defined as "moderni-
ty". In his texts, I will show in the following, the
idea is developed that the generalization, ra-
tionalization, fragmentation, reification and
commodification that he associates with mo-
dernity and with economic and social structures
that came into being with the rise of modern
capitalism, has constituted a gap or schism be-
tween self and others, self and world and self
and body, resulting in what he characterizes as
an *atomization* of the modern subject.

The conceptual background of my analysis of
Fromm's ideas is therefore formed by the no-
tions of "alienation" and "resonance". I under-
stand the first concept in the broadest possible
way: as the constitution of a gap between the
self and something or someone that or who
thereby becomes *alien* to that self. This process
"silences" the context in which this self lives
and reduces the subject to an atom that has no
bonds with others or nature.

The second term – "resonance" – is more dif-
ficult to define, especially because Erich Fromm
himself does not specifically define it; it is de-
veloped within a sociological and critical con-
text, after all, by Hartmut Rosa. In my use, this
concept refers to the opposite of "alienation"
and thereby to the experience of a *connection*
between self and body, self and other people
or self and world. It refers to the experience of
"warmth" and to that which we can define,
with Kierkegaard, as a passionate experience in
which the body often plays an important role.



In order to flesh out this term in
a structural way and to be able
to analyze how Fromm's ideas
contribute to our understanding
of it, I will use the following
thematic and, of course, rather
simplistic coordinate system to
characterize Fromm's concept
of "resonance" at the end of
this text:



The vertical axis refers to our embodiment and is opposed to the mind. The horizontal axis to activity, which is opposed to passivity. And the third axis refers to the possible historical nature of the term and is opposed to the idea that it is ahistorical and universal in nature.

Alienation and Symbiosis

As is well known, Fromm's analysis of modernity is developed within a framework that consists of a combination of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Like most researchers belonging to the *Frankfurter Schule*, Fromm attempts to understand why modernity culminated in the horrors of Nazi Germany, but also develops a critique of capitalism and consumerism.

Fromm's theory is based on a description of a form of human life that, in places, comes close to an almost universal human condition. At the same time, however, he links this description to an interpretation of *historical processes*. In *The Art of Loving*, for example, he argues that human beings develop themselves as individuals by elevating themselves out of a whole characterized by oneness, by primal bonds between the subject and the world in which she lives. It is clear that this idea is inspired by both Hegel and Freud. Fromm describes this process on three different levels. On one of these levels, he refers to the origins of humanity as a species:

What is essential in the existence of man is the fact that he has emerged from the animal kingdom, from instinctive adaptation, that he has transcended nature – although he never leaves it; he is a part of it – and yet once torn away from nature, he cannot return to it; once thrown out of paradise – a state of original oneness with nature – cherubim with flaming swords block his way, if he should try to return. Man can only go forward by developing his reason, by finding a new harmony, a human one, instead of the prehuman harmony which is irretrievably lost. (E. Fromm, 1956a, p. 6.)

With this emergence out of nature, Fromm

claims, culture began: instead of being embedded in a natural whole, driven by instincts and devoid of reflection, self-awareness led to the constitution of society; of social structures that arose out of the human animal's ability to reflect on herself as an individual being.

On a second level, Fromm approaches this elevation out of nature as a historical process by arguing that the constitution of self-awareness can be understood as lying at the origins of modernity. Whereas in pre-modern times, human beings were firmly embedded in a society in which especially religious theories provided a meaning-generating metaphysical framework, modernity begins at the moment these frameworks start crumbling down (Nietzsche's "death of God") and the subject has to find her *own* place in the world *as an individual*. Fromm observes in *Escape from Freedom*:

The social history of man started with his emerging from a state of oneness with the natural world to an awareness of himself as an entity separate from surrounding nature and men. Yet this awareness remained very dim over long periods of history. The individual continued to be closely tied to the natural and social world from which he emerged; while being partly aware of himself as a separate entity, he felt also part of the world around him. The growing process of the emergence of the individual from his original ties, a process which we may call "individuation", seems to have reached its peak in modern history in the centuries between the Reformation and the present. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 49.)

The third level on which Fromm refers to the breaking of these primary bonds between self and world concerns the development from fetus to child to adult. Fromm writes:

In the life history of an individual we find the same process. A child is born when it is no longer one with its mother and becomes a biological entity separate from her. Yet, while this biological separation is the beginning of individual human exist-



ence, the child remains functionally one with its mother for a considerable period. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 40.)

It is the change from an original state of embeddedness to a state of separation and individuality that Fromm understands as the human being's greatest challenge. Not only does this individuation result in her *freedom*, it also means that the individual is constantly longing for a new state of connection and embeddedness, a state of oneness – *resonance* – that she lost when she developed awareness:

To the degree to which the individual, figuratively speaking, has not yet completely severed the umbilical cord which fastens him to the outside world, he lacks freedom; but these ties give him security and a feeling of belonging and of being rooted somewhere. I wish to call these ties that exist before the process of individuation has resulted in the complete emergence of an individual "primary ties". They are organic in the sense that they are part of normal human development; they imply a lack of individuality, but they also give security and orientation to the individual. They are the ties that connect the child with its mother, the member of a primitive community with his clan and nature, and the medieval man with the Church and his social caste. Once the stage of complete individuation is reached and the individual is free from these primary ties, he is confronted with a new task: to orient and root himself in the world and to find security in other ways than those which were characteristic of his pre-individualistic existence. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 40.)

Following this loss of connectedness, rootedness and oneness, Fromm claims that human beings, throughout their lives, desire to *belong* to something outside of themselves. He understands this need as part of "man's nature" and explains most social and cultural phenomena as following from this "need to avoid aloneness" (l.c., p. 34). One can be physically alone, he observes, and long to be surrounded by and close

to other people. But one can also be "morally alone" and look for connectedness by relating to "ideas, values or at least social patterns that give [...] a feeling of communion and 'belonging'" (l.c., p. 34).

It is important to emphasize that Fromm links this need to the human ability to *reflect* and to *think*: only when human beings start to reflect on themselves, do they become aware of their separateness from others; of the fact that they are fundamentally alone. And this awareness leads to anxiety, Fromm claims, an anxiety that forms the main drive behind almost every form of human behavior, in his view:

Man is gifted with reason; he is *life being aware of itself*; he has awareness of himself, of his fellow man, of his past, and of the possibilities of his future. This awareness of himself as a separate entity, the awareness of his own short life span, of the fact that without his will he is born and against his will he dies, that he will die before those whom he loves, or they before him, the awareness of aloneness and separateness, of his helplessness before the forces of nature and of society, all this makes his separate, disunited existence an unbearable prison. He would become insane could he not liberate himself from this prison and reach out, unite himself in some form or other with men, with the world outside. The experience of separateness arouses anxiety, it is, indeed, the source of all anxiety. (E. Fromm, 1956a, pp. 6-7).

Fromm understands capitalism as one of the main forces behind the process of individuation and observes, thereby referring to Max Weber: "What Protestantism had started to do in freeing man spiritually, capitalism continued to do mentally, socially, and politically. Economic freedom was the basis of this development, the middle class was its champion. The individual was no longer bound by a fixed social system..." (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 126). However, Fromm goes on, this resulted at the same time in a system in which individuals became more and



more isolated, disconnected and alone, generating the above-mentioned feeling of anxiety.

The kind of freedom that these systems generate is described by Fromm as a "freedom from". We become disconnected *from* the social, natural or familial structures that used to govern our lives and our existence and prevented us from feeling anxious and alone, which increases our freedom. But at the same time this "freedom from" only throws us into a world in which we are completely alone and responsible for our own existence: man now is "alone and free, yet powerless and afraid. The newly won freedom appears as a curse; he is free from the sweet bondage of paradise, but he is not free to govern himself, to realize his individuality"(E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 50).

This brings us to Fromm's discussion of the concept of *alienation*, which plays an important role in his thought and which he mainly interprets in a Marxist sense:

In capitalism economic activity, success, material gains, become ends in themselves. It becomes man's fate to contribute to the growth of the economic system, to amass capital, not for purposes of his own happiness or salvation, but as an end in itself. Man became a cog in the vast economic machine – an important one if he had much capital, an insignificant one if he had none – but always a cog to serve a purpose outside of himself. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 130.)

The freedom found in this state of alienation, in other words, only increases the individual's anxiety, and places her in a social whole in which rootedness or connectedness cannot be found. In fact, the whole in which she is embedded is experienced as overpowering, threatening and hostile, as completely alien to her self:

Those factors which tend to weaken the individual self have gained, while those strengthening the individual have relatively lost in weight. The individual's feeling of powerlessness and aloneness has in-

creased, his "freedom" from all traditional bonds has become more pronounced, his possibilities for individual economic achievement have narrowed down. He feels threatened by gigantic forces and the situation resembles in many ways that of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 144).

Fromm describes different ways in which human beings attempt to overcome the feelings of aloneness and isolation that characterize this existence. He describes experimenting with drugs and the longing for a trance (E. Fromm, 1956a, p. 9), but also sexuality and "orgiastic states" (l.c., pp. 9-10). Most importantly, however, he refers to political systems that enable the isolated individual to *escape from her freedom* and to submit her self to something *external*.

The first system Fromm discusses is that of Nazism and, more generally, totalitarianism. These systems, he argues, provide an experience of being embedded in the world that he characterizes as "symbiotic" and defines as follows: "the union of one individual self with another self (or any other power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of its own self and to make them completely dependent on each other" (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 180). This "symbiotic relationship" can be masochistic or sadistic in nature, Fromm observes, and in both cases one's self is connected to the self of someone else or to external structures in such a way that one's individual autonomy is corroded or even completely destroyed. Authoritarian structures, in other words, provide the self with a feeling of embeddedness, but do this in such a way that this self becomes completely dependent on these structures and thereby loses its ability to freely develop as an autonomous being.

Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism have in common that they offered the atomized individual a new refuge and security. These systems are the culmination of alienation. The individual is made to feel powerless and insignificant, but taught to project



all his human powers into the figure of the leader, the state, the "fatherland", to whom he has to submit and to whom he has to worship. He escapes from freedom into a new idolatry. (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 208.)

The second system that Fromm describes is capitalism, which provides the isolated individual with the possibility of becoming what he calls an "automaton". Unlike Nazism, which explicitly emphasizes the idea that the individual should submerge in a larger whole and overcome her independency, modern capitalism provides human beings with the *illusion* that they are free and unique individuals while manipulating their existence on a minute scale. This provides the isolated individual with the belief that she is not alone, while the possibility of forming an autonomous self is undermined. Fromm writes:

Because we have freed ourselves of the older overt forms of authority, we do not see that we have become the prey of a new kind of authority. We have become automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals. This illusion helps the individual to remain unaware of his insecurity, but this is all the helps such an illusion can give. Basically the self of the individual is weakened, so that he feels powerless and extremely insecure. He lives in a world to which he has lost genuine relatedness and in which everybody and everything has become instrumentalized, where he has become a part of the machine that his hands have built. He thinks, feels, and wills what he believes he is supposed to think, feel, and will; in this very process he loses his self upon which all genuine security of a free individual must be built. (E. Fromm, 1941a, pp. 279-280.)

This has resulted in a society in which alienation reigns:

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might

say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, is experienced as things are experiences; with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively. (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 111.)

Fromm describes different forms of alienation and argues that this experience has permeated almost every sphere of modern, capitalist societies, placing himself in a line of authors like Györgi Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor W. Adorno.

Like Marx, Fromm claims: "personal relations between men have this character of alienation; instead of relations between human beings, they assume the character of relations between things"(E. Fromm, 1941a, pp. 139-140). Furthermore, in *The Sane Society* Fromm describes how modern individuals experience alienation in the process of *love*, since they do not manage to remain equal and autonomous beings in loving relationships but submit themselves to others instead (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 113). They are also alienated from *work*, he argues (following Marx), and from the *things* and *pleasures* they consume, since they do this in a commercialized whole in which consuming equals *buying* and in which they are disconnected from the individual qualities of objects (l.c., p. 125). Furthermore, Fromm describes alienation from the *state*, to which the modern individual completely submits herself (l.c., p. 128); from *herself*, because she approaches herself as "a thing to be successfully employed on the market"(l.c., p. 129); and from *authority* in general (l.c., p. 138). A last form of alienation Fromm describes concerns the dimension of *time*, anticipating Hartmut Rosa's analysis of acceleration (2013):



[F]or modern man, patience is as difficult to practice as discipline and concentration. Our whole industrial system fosters exactly the opposite: quickness. All our machines are designed for quickness: the car and airplane bring us quickly to our destination – and the quicker the better. The machine which can produce the same quantity in half the time is twice as good as the older and slower one. Of course, there are important economic reasons for this. But, as in so many other aspects, human values have become determined by economic values. What is good for machines must be good for man – so goes the logic. Modern man thinks he loses something – time – when he does not do things quickly; yet he does not know what to do with the time he gains – except kill it. (E. Fromm, 1956a, p. 92.)

In modern society, Fromm summarizes all these forms of alienation, individuals have become "atoms": "Modern society consists of "atoms" (if we use the Greek equivalent of "individual"), little particles estranged from each other but held together by selfish interests and by the necessity to make use of each other"(E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 127). And in another text:

Contemporary society preaches this ideal of unindividualized equality because it needs human atoms, each one the same, to make them function in a mass aggregation, smoothly, without friction; all obeying the same commands, yet everybody being convinced that he is following his own desires. Just as modern mass production requires the standardization of commodities, so the social process requires standardization of man, and this standardization is called "equality". (E. Fromm, 1956a, p. 13.)

It is clear that Fromm herewith develops an understanding of alienation that is almost total, and that he furthermore comes close to the idea that the world has been "silenced" and nihilism reigns. In *The Sane Society*, Fromm indeed positions his ideas in line of Nietzsche's

analysis of nihilism:

In the nineteenth century the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead. In the nineteenth century inhumanity meant cruelty; in the twentieth century it means schizoid self-alienation. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots. (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 312.)

Alienation in the modern world, in other words, results in a death-like existence, devoid of creativity, spontaneity, embeddedness or rootedness: "Psychologically, the automaton, while being alive biologically, is dead, emotionally and mentally. While he goes through the motions of living, his life runs through his hands like sand" (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 281). Herewith, the ideas of authors focusing on human existence (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as the above-mentioned Kierkegaard) and reflections on historical and economic structures (developed by Hegel, Marx and Lukács) are combined with the insights of Freud, resulting in a radical condemnation of modern capitalism and the suffering it causes.

Positive Freedom and Love

In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm develops the following observation:

Once the primary bonds which gave security to the individual are severed, once the individual faces the world outside of himself as a completely separate entity, two courses are open to him since he has to overcome the unbearable state of powerlessness and aloneness. By one course he can progress to "positive freedom"; he can relate himself spontaneously to the world in love and work, in the genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities; he can thus become one again with man, nature, and himself, without giving up the independence and integrity of his individual self. The other course open to him is to fall back, give up his



freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 161.)

It is clear that Fromm understands the symbiotic unity of fascism and the conformity that is offered by capitalism as belonging to this second path. However, even though he observes that these two systems have become extremely powerful in modernity, his analysis is less pessimistic in nature than, for example, Adorno's critique of modernity:

The escape into symbiosis can alleviate the suffering for a time but it does not eliminate it. The history of mankind is the history of growing individuation, but it is also the history of growing freedom. The quest for freedom is not a metaphysical force and cannot be explained by natural law; it is the necessary result of the process of individuation and of the growth of culture. The authoritarian systems cannot do away with the basic conditions that make for the quest for freedom; neither can they exterminate the quest for freedom that springs from these conditions. (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 264.)

This brings me to the first road Fromm mentions in the passage above: the road characterized by *positive freedom* – "freedom to" instead of "freedom from" –, which forms the direct opposite of alienation, atomization, anxiety and isolation and which may result in an experience that can be defined with the term "resonance".

An understanding of the good life, for Fromm, is based on a satisfying solution to the problem of aloneness, of feeling isolated and atomized, which follows from the cutting through of primary ties. At the same time, however, this answer does not point towards a *regress* to a primary, pre-individualistic situation, in Fromm's texts. The main experience that Fromm describes to characterize this experience is that of *love*. Mainly in *The Art of Loving* but also in other works, Fromm defends a specific kind of love that he differentiates from that which he

understands as the common idea of this phenomenon, and which he places in the "confusion between the initial experience of *falling*" in love and the permanent state of *being* in love, or, as we might better say, of "standing" in love" (E. Fromm, 1956a, p. 3). Love is not something that "overcomes" people and then just stays the same, Fromm argues, but it is an "art" that has to be learned and *actively* practiced.

This observation is closely linked by Fromm to the argument that searching for love and union is not an irrational practice. Instead, it is based on the quest for knowledge, which Fromm interprets in an almost mystical manner as lying in the "act of love":

The experience of union, with man, or religiously speaking, with God, is by no means irrational. On the contrary, it is as Albert Schweitzer has pointed out, the consequence of rationalism, its most daring and radical consequence. It is based on our knowledge of the fundamental, and not the accidental, limitations of our knowledge. It is the knowledge that we shall never "grasp" the secret of man and of the universe, but that we can know, nevertheless, in the act of love. [...] Care, responsibility, respect and knowledge are mutually interdependent. They are a syndrome of attitudes which are to be found in the mature person; that is, in the person who develops his own powers productively, who only wants to have that which he has worked for, who has given up narcissistic dreams of omniscience and omnipotence, who has acquired humility based on the inner strength which only genuine productive activity can give. (E. Fromm, 1956a, p. 27)

In this passage, Fromm mentions what he understands as the key characteristics of love: activity, productivity, humility, care, respect and knowledge. But the most important characteristic Fromm describes is *spontaneity*, by which he paradoxically *does* point at a certain "overwhelming" aspect of the relationship between



self and world. This experience of being "overwhelmed", however, originates, according to his analysis, from *within* the subject. In a long passage in *Escape from Freedom*, he summarizes these ideas as follows:

Most of us can observe at least moments of our own spontaneity which are at the same time moments of genuine happiness. Whether it be the fresh and spontaneous perception of a landscape, or the dawning of some truth as the result of our thinking, or a sensuous pleasure that is not stereotyped, or the welling up of love for another person – in these moments we all know what a spontaneous act is and may have some vision of what human life could be if these experiences were not such rare and uncultivated occurrences. [...] Spontaneous activity is the one way in which man can overcome the terror of aloneness without sacrificing the integrity of his self; for in the spontaneous realization of the self man unites himself anew with the world – with man, nature, and himself. Love is the foremost component of such spontaneity; not love as the dissolution of the self in another person, not love as the possession of another person, but love as spontaneous affirmation of others, as the union of the individual with others on the basis of the preservation of the individual self. The dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that it springs from the need of overcoming separateness, that it leads to oneness, - and yet that individuality is not eliminated. Work is the other component: not work as a compulsive activity in order to escape aloneness, not work as a relationship to nature which is partly one of dominating her, partly one of worship of and enslavement by the very products of man's hands, but work as creation in which man becomes one with nature in the act of creation. What holds true of love and work holds true of all spontaneous action, whether it be the realization or participation in the political life of the community. It affirms the individuality of

the self and at the same time it unites the self with man and nature. The basic dichotomy that is inherent in freedom – the birth of individuality and the pain of aloneness – is dissolved on a higher plane by man's spontaneous action. (E. Fromm, 1941a, pp. 286-287.)

By arguing that love and work form the main ways in which human beings generate a spontaneous relationship with themselves, others and nature, Fromm claims that the only healthy way of looking for connection after the initial cutting through of primary ties that throw human beings into a state of aloneness, is the positive freedom to constitute oneself as an autonomous *and* connected creature. Herewith, Fromm suggests that only *as a whole*, as a thinking and acting being, can the subject find happiness. And whereas the modern individual lives in a society in which her emotions are suppressed (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 270), this means that a happy individual lives in a society in which she is not reduced to an automaton or put in a submissive or sadistic relationship with others. Fromm's analysis herewith also gains an economic dimension: "the realization of positive freedom and individualism is also bound up with economic and social changes that will permit the individual to become free in terms of the realization of his self" (E. Fromm, 1941a, p. 298).

Besides the need to be related, Fromm mentions several other needs that are part of the human condition, most systematically in *The Sane Society*. All of these needs contribute to the understanding of "resonance" that, I want to argue, can be based on his analyses. All of these needs *also* contain the danger of resulting in behavior that, in Fromm's view, is negative and destructive. He describes *transcendence* – being endowed with reason, the individual needs to do something about his passivity as a creature "thrown into the world without his knowledge" (E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 41) and can do this by either destroying *or* creating –; *rootedness* – the need to feel at home in the world after leaving "the protective orbit of the



mother" (l.c., p. 43), which can be done by developing oneself as an autonomous individual or by "returning to the womb" and refusing to grow up –; the need to form a *sense of identity* – which can again be done by becoming an individual or by wanting to become part of a herd (l.c., p. 63) –; and the *need for a frame of orientation and devotion* – which refers to the rational need to understand the world and make it meaningful, which can be done by either understanding it in relation to one's feelings and emotions or by manipulating and distorting the world (l.c., p. 66).

This emphasis on activity, productivity and spontaneity is taken by Fromm from the philosophy of Karl Marx, especially the *Early Manuscripts*. In *Marx's Concept of Man*, Fromm observes: "Only in being productively active can man make sense of his life, and while he thus enjoys life, he is not greedily holding on to it. He has given up the greed for *having*, and is fulfilled with *being*; he is filled because he is empty: he *is* much, because he *has* little" (E. Fromm, 1961b, p. 29).

Fromm also links this emphasis on production to other authors. He mentions Goethe, for example, from whom he uses the following quotations:

As long as [the poet] expresses only these few subjective sentences, he can not yet be called a poet, but as soon as he knows *how to appropriate the world for himself, and to express it*, he is a poet. Then he is inexhaustible, and can be ever new, while his purely subjective nature has exhausted itself soon and ceases to have anything to say.

Man knows himself only inasmuch as he knows the world; he knows the world only within himself and he is aware of himself only within the world. Each new object truly recognized, opens up a new organ within ourselves (as quoted in E. Fromm, 1961b, pp. 28-29).

Herewith, we find a Hegelian element in Fromm's thought as well: the subject only finds

connection and embedment if she *appropriates* the world around herself. Fromm observes: "For Hegel, knowledge is not obtained in the position of the subject-object split, in which the object is grasped as something separated from and opposed to the thinker. In order to *know* the world, man has to *make this world his own*. Man and things are in a constant transition from one suchness into another..." (E. Fromm, 1961b, p. 27). Becoming one with the world and escaping the isolation of one's subjectivity, in other words, means *creatively, spontaneously and actively* changing it, *understanding* it and *forming* it.

Conclusion: Fromm on Resonance

We have seen that Fromm understands human existence as characterized by a fundamental need for connectedness, relatedness, unity, rootedness and transcendence, which stem from the cutting through of primary ties; the leaving behind of an original oneness and the constitution of what he calls "freedom from". The leaving behind of this oneness results in a state of alienation that is exploited and increased when the need for reconnection results in an embrace of fascist or capitalist structures. But it can also result in a positive form of freedom ("freedom to"), which Fromm mainly understands as embodied by experiences of love. He claims that this experience only results in true positive freedom if the individual develops herself in such a way that she, *on the one hand*, experiences embeddedness, belonging and unity, but *on the other hand* also becomes an *autonomous* and particular person. Fromm understands this process as biological (humanity leaving a state of nature), historical (the rise of the modern self out of religiously dominated discourses) and psychological (the human self developing from birth to adulthood) in nature.

This means that we can position the understanding of "resonance" based on his ideas as follows in the coordinate system briefly described above: this understanding has a strong *historical* dimension. Even though Fromm suggests that the need for connection is a basic



human need that characterizes human existence in general, he argues at the same time that this need only truly finds its expression in modernity, in which processes of capitalism, differentiation and individualization have constituted what he calls a "freedom from" social or natural bonds. This ambiguity is reflected by the fact that he places his theory in line of those developed by Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Goethe, who all attempted to find a solution to modernity's problem of alienation and its accompanying need for connection, but, in his view, did this only by focusing on the human condition itself and did not explicitly discuss economic structures; even though Kierkegaard's above-discussed essay does contain analyses of money, the Danish philosopher does indeed not focus specifically on the details of economic structures and relations.

On the mind-body axis, Fromm clearly positions resonance in the middle: only if an individual is united *as a whole*, and if both her ratio and her emotions define her existence and her outlook on the world, does she truly develop herself as *both* an embedded *and* an autonomous being. Lastly, Fromm emphasizes the *active* and productive aspects of the modern and free individual: the subject only finds freedom and love, he argues following Hegel and Marx, if she appropriates the world around herself in a creative manner.

This last observation, I believe, is the most important point made by Fromm in relation to the notion of "resonance". Even though it is tempting to associate "resonance", in a romantic way, with a passive subject that is "overcome" by an experience in which she loses her autonomy and becomes part of a bigger whole, Fromm emphasizes the idea that the opposite of alienation should be understood as a combination of *embeddedness* and *autonomy*; of *connection* and *individuality*; and of *rootedness* and *spontaneity*. Perhaps the best illustration of this idea is found in his argument that "bad" forms of connection are those in which the individual loses her autonomy and becomes part of a larger whole – a process Fromm associates with

fascism and capitalism, as well as with the overly romantic and naïve understanding of love fabricated by the culture industry.

The notion of resonance that can be distilled from the writings of Fromm, I therefore want to conclude, should not be based on the romantic idea of a *passive* subject that is *overcome* by feelings or by a larger whole. To illustrate this negative understanding of passivity, I want to cite a passage from Marx's *Early Manuscripts*; a book that, as stated above, had an important influence on Fromm. These manuscripts contain the following passage on music:

Just as music alone awakens in man the sense of music, and just as beautiful music has *no* sense for the unmusical ear – is no object for it, because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers and can therefore only be so for me as my essential power is present for itself as a subjective capacity, because the sense of an object for me goes only so far as *my* senses go (has only sense for a sense corresponding to that object) – for this reason the *senses* of the social man are *other* senses than those of the non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.) – in a word, *human* sense, the humanness of the senses – comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labor of *humanized* labor. The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present. (K. Marx, 1988, p. 108.)

If we want to understand the ways in which we perceive the world, Marx argues, an analysis of our biology and the physical qualities of our five



senses is too limited. Instead, by shaping objects around herself and going through different stages, Marx observes in a Hegelian fashion, the senses become "humanized" and we learn how to experience and appropriate the world around us. Even the beauty of music, in other words, which is often romantically approached as completely enveloping the subject and embedding her in a larger whole in which she loses her autonomy, is understood here as the product of a *historical* consciousness that has *learned* how to *actively* appropriate this art form and therefore as constituted by a *process* that is *dialectical* in nature. It is precisely this emphasis on spontaneity and activity, I want to conclude with Fromm, that implies that resonance is only truly experienced if it goes hand in hand with autonomy, individuality and active self-development; if a *dialectical* relationship is constituted between subject and object and neither of these poles collapses into its Other.

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