

OUR WAY OF LIFE MAKES US MISERABLE

Erich Fromm

Erich Fromm was born in 1900 in Germany and died in 1980. Educated at universities in Heidelberg and Munich and at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin, Fromm emigrated to the United States in 1934 and subsequently became a citizen. A famous psychoanalyst, social critic, and philosopher, Fromm taught at Yale University and Columbia University.

Most Americans believe that our society of consumption-happy, fun-loving, jet-traveling people creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Contrary to this view, I believe that our present way of life leads to increasing anxiety, helplessness and, eventually, to the disintegration of our culture. I refuse to identify fun with pleasure, excitement with joy, business with happiness, or the faceless, buck-passing "organization man" with an independent individual.

From this critical view our rates of alcoholism, suicide and divorce, as well as juvenile delinquency, gang rule, acts of violence and indifference to life, are characteristic symptoms of our "pathology of normalcy." It may be argued that all these pathological phenomena exist because we have not reached our aim, that of an affluent society. It is true, we are still far from being an affluent society. But the material progress made in the last decades allows us to hope that our system might eventually produce a materially affluent society. Yet will we be happier then? The example of Sweden, one of the most prosperous, democratic and peaceful European countries, is not very encouraging. Sweden, as is often pointed out, in spite of all its material security has among the highest alcoholism and suicide rates in Europe, while a much poorer country like Ireland ranks among the lowest in these respects. Could it be that our dream that material welfare per se leads to happiness is just a pipe dream? . . .

Certainly the humanist thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who are our ideological ancestors, thought that the goal of life was the full unfolding of a person's potentialities; what mattered to them was the person who *is* much, not the one who *has* much or *uses* much. For them economic production was a means to the unfolding of man, not an end. It seems that today the means have become ends, that not only "God is dead," as Nietzsche said in the nineteenth century, but also man is dead; that what is alive are the organizations, the machines; and that man has become their slave rather than being their master.

Each society creates its own type of personality by its way of bringing up children in the family, by its system of education, by its effective values (that is, those values that are rewarded rather than only preached). Every society creates the type of "social character"

which is needed for its proper functioning. It forms men who want to do what they have to do. What kind of men does our large-scale, bureaucratized industrialism need?

It needs men who cooperate smoothly in large groups, who want to consume more and more, and whose tastes are standardized and can be easily influenced and anticipated. It needs men who feel free and independent, yet who are willing to be commanded, to do what is expected, to fit into the social machine without friction; men who can be guided without force, led without leaders, prompted without an aim except the aim to be on the move, to function, to go ahead.

Modern industrialism has succeeded in producing this kind of man. He is the "alienated" man. He is alienated in the sense that his actions and his own forces have become estranged from him; they stand above him and against him, and rule him rather than being ruled by him. His life forces have been transformed into things and institutions, and these things and institutions have become idols. They are something apart from him, which he worships and to which he submits. Alienated man bows down before the works of his own hands. He experiences himself not as the active bearer of his own forces and riches but as an impoverished "thing," dependent on other things outside of himself. He is the prisoner of the very economic and political circumstances which he has created.

Since our economic organization is based on continuous and ever-increasing consumption (think of the threat to our economy if people did not buy a new car until their old one was really obsolete), contemporary industrial man is encouraged to be consumption-crazy. Without any real enjoyment, he "takes in" drink, food, cigarettes, sights, lectures, books, movies, television, any new kind of gadget. The world has become one great maternal breast, and man has become the eternal suckling, forever expectant, forever disappointed.

Sex, in fact, has become one of the main objects of consumption. Our newsstands are full of "girlie" magazines; the percentages of girls having premarital sexual relations and of unwed mothers are on a steep incline. It can be argued that all this represents a welcome emancipation from Victorian morality, that it is a wholesome affirmation of independence, that it reflects the Freudian principle that repression may produce neurosis. But while all these arguments are true to some extent, they omit the main point. Neither independence nor Freudian principle is the main cause of our present-day sexual freedom. Our sexual mores are part and parcel of our *cult of consumption*, whose main principle was so succinctly expressed by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*: "Never put off till tomorrow the fun you can have today." Nature has provided men and women with the capacity for sexual excitement; but excitement in consumption, whether it is of sex or any other commodity, is not the same as aliveness and richness of experience.

In general, our society is becoming one of giant enterprises directed by a bureaucracy in which man becomes a small, well-oiled cog in the machinery. The oiling is done with higher wages, fringe benefits, well-ventilated factories and piped music, and by psychologists and "human-relations" experts; yet all this oiling does not alter the fact that man has become powerless, that he does not wholeheartedly participate in his work and that

he is bored with it. In fact, the blue- and the white-collar workers have become economic puppets who dance to the tune of automated machines and bureaucratic management.

The worker and employee are anxious, not only because they might find themselves out of a job (and with installment payments due); they are anxious also because they are unable to acquire any real satisfaction or interest in life. They live and die without ever having confronted the fundamental realities of human existence as emotionally and intellectually productive, authentic and independent human beings.

Essay Topic

In “Our Way of Life Makes Us Miserable,” Erich Fromm describes American society as he saw it in 1964. To what extent do you think American society today resembles the culture that Fromm discussed and defined? In developing your essay, be sure to use specific examples drawn from your reading, your observations, and your experience.