

BOOK REVIEW

Erich Fromm *An Anatomy of Destructiveness* Jonathan Cape £4.50.

This is a long, somewhat rambling, but very readable examination of the various theories put forward to account for human cruelty and destructiveness. Fromm rejects the idea that 'primitive' man is basically aggressive and suggests therefore that modern malignant aggression (which term he uses to describe cruelty and destructiveness) is not a regression to a previous psychological state. Instead he suggests that something new is responsible. And that this something has to do with personal alienation, social injustice, and the stresses that arise from a high order technology. Many of Fromm's ideas seem to me to have a sound basis and he argues with cogency and power. But my overall impression is that he tends to oversimplify, to be too keen to demolish the instinctivists—who are certainly demolishable—at the expense of really investigating his own theories in depth.

He seems to subscribe to the 'great men' theory of history and spends a great deal of time analysing the lives of Hitler and Himmler. This is fascinating, but I doubt its relevance to the subject. Both men would seem to be psychopathic sports and their behaviour patterns cannot generalize to mankind as a whole.

Fromm also spends considerable time refuting Lorenz's theory that 'model responsibility may gain control over the primeval drive' and that 'militant enthusiasm is an instinctive response with a phylo-genetically determined releasing mechanism'. Fromm denies that it is 'human nature' to commit atrocities during a war.

Referring to Stanley Milgram's experiment, Fromm suggests that equally important as the ability of ordinary people to inflict cruelty under quasi-official pressure, is the parallel existence of extreme stress based on conscience.

Fromm also quotes Zimbardi (72) who showed the extreme power of role playing—a random group of students divided into prisoners and guards built up such a realistically emotional stressful situation that one third of the group acting as prisoners wanted to give up before the experiment was concluded—even without being paid for it.

In both this and Milgram's experiment, Fromm criticizes the failure to differentiate '... to *behave* according to sadistic rules and ... to *enjoy* being cruel to people.'

This really is a critical distinction as between psychological and social causes of malignant aggression. It is the difference between the punishing parent/teacher who really does believe that 'he has to be cruel to be kind' and the kind of sadistic playfulness evidenced by American soldiers when killing 'gooks' in Vietnam.

Fromm has an interesting side swipe at Freudian's psychoanalysis, which he suggests is not an instinctivist theory except as regards the development of the 'id'. He sees psycho-analysis as 'a theory of unconscious strivings, of resistance, of falsification of

reality according to one's religious needs and expectations. Describing newer theories as developed by Laing *inter alia*, he sees them developing 'an ever deepening understanding of the unconscious processes going on in interpersonal relations.' He does, to my mind, go too far when he says 'they describe *fully* what goes on in relationships between two people (my italics) and even further when he criticizes the work of existentialists such as Binswanger as 'lacking in precise descriptions of the interpersonal processes, substituting somewhat vague philosophical notions for *precise clinical data*. (Again, my italics.) To my mind it is precisely this blind searching for 'precise clinical data' that has so bedevilled experimental psychologists.

Southwick (64) reported an increase in aggressiveness among rhesus monkeys as their territory became more crowded but an even greater increase with the introduction of strange individuals to the group. Fromm claims that the two root causes of destructiveness are sadism—'the passion for unlimited godlike control over men and things' and necrophilia—the attraction to all that is dead. This last he sees as an essential property of urban life.

Turning to anthropology, Fromm divides into Life-affirmative, Non-destructive aggressive, and destructive. The evidence here is against the existence of an instinct of destructiveness study (55) of the incidence of homicidal, suicidal and destructive acts among forty non-literate societies showed that more than half of the cultures had low or a medium degree of destructiveness.

If malignant aggression does not arise from man's animal nature, perhaps it comes from his human nature, and what is that? The Greeks tied it in with rationality, American anthropologists suggest the ability to absorb cultural values, Darwin offered flexibility, imagination and the capacity mental abstraction and use of symbols, Maslow added the need for development of the individual, of the self. Fromm emphasizes the essentially dichotomous nature of man—driven by emotional character-rooted passions that can be satisfied in greatly different and contradictory ways.

There is a clue perhaps in the insight of the palaeontologist Bergounioun—(primitive) . . . man felt himself brutally torn from his environment and isolated in the middle of the world whose measure and laws he did not know . . . His first feeling thus was existential anxiety which may even have taken him to the limits of despair'.

Man's way of dealing with existential of despair is to construct a frame of orientation, however illogical, and this itself, once fully accepted as a reality, can be used to justify behaviour otherwise completely unacceptable.

A simpler but not unlikely causal mechanism may come from boredom—an individual's failure to be stimulated by the environment.

These unemployed German labourers could assuage their boredom by beating up Jews and communists and small children sometimes pass the time by pulling the wings off flies, teasing dogs and cats or each other. Boredom coupled with deficient imagination

or empathy could be a important factor. I am reminded of the story of the anthropologist who ran excitedly from his laboratory shouting that he had discovered the Missing link— the subhuman anthropoid which bridged the gap between the great apes and fully human man. What kind of animal was this? he was asked. 'It's us!' was his answer.

Fromm would not agree. Let him have the last word. 'My thesis . . . is that destructiveness and cruelty are not instinctual drives, but passions rooted in the total existence of man. They are one of the ways to make sense of life; they are not and could not be present in the animal because they are by their very nature rooted in the 'human condition'.

Vivian Milroy

SHELL

later you show me one
of them it is whorled
it is hard it englobed
some pulpy creature
against the bang of the ocean

but now
now it is quite empty

'my sound has no more words'

Ken Edwards

Book Review

With us in Mind, A C.S.V./Mind Kit, 1975, £3.75.

This is an extremely laudable piece of work, primarily aimed at project work for secondary schools and youth groups, but nevertheless well worth reading by anyone concerned with the field of mental health. It contains pamphlets entitled *What Is Mental Health* and *What Is Mental Handicap, What Is Mental Illness and Provision for the Mentally Disordered*—Also *Action Sheets, Project Sheets and Resource Sheets*.

Kathy West, who contributed a great deal of the material seems well versed in and well disposed towards the teachings of humanistic psychology. In fact the whole weight of this piece of educational soft-ware comes down on the side of the humanistic psychologist's view of mental health. No real defense, support or full discussion is given to the rat psychologist or orthodox psychiatric view of mental problems. Although methods of treatment are not gone into, it is the philosophy of the third way which shines through everywhere, and painted as pure as reason itself.

It is really good to think that this kit will be being worked on in hundreds of our schools, rather than some concoction along the lines of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

I cannot recommend this kit as value for money to the ordinary reader, since it is mostly in the form of children's project sheets and costs over £3. However, as an educational tool and resource medium it is highly recommendable, and recommended.

Nick Owen

Dr. Bates found that it is only when the twenty or so eye muscles coordinate properly that we have a clear precise impression of the object regarded. This play of muscles depends upon the quality and direction of nervous impulses. This co-ordination however, is not something that you do in the ordinary sense of the word. It is really non-doing which must not be confused with passive collapsed inertia. Just stop doing the wrong thing. Let the way be free by simply focussing the attitude with body detensed.

Olive L. Brown - YOUR INATE POWER - George Allen & Unwin 1967.