

Book Review Escape from Freedom by Erich Fromm

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1 Introduction

We live in a world of constant and unyielding uncertainty, as the daily news keeps reminding us of the precariousness of our situation both on an individual and societal level. For instance, for all we know intercontinental ballistic missiles are zooming through the stratosphere while you read this. Meanwhile, many¹ suffer from burn-outs, bore-outs, lack of meaning or community. In response to this, many seek ways to mitigate this phenomenon, if not in fact than at least in regards to how it is perceived by the individual. On the one hand, we find the rise of populists who (deliberately or otherwise) sell a radically oversimplified picture of the ills that befall our societies². On the other hand, there has arguably never been a time when people felt as alone as today. People pay others to tell them they are good enough (personal trainers), seek to improve their lives by following the oxymoronically named “self-help” gurus, or fall into escapism via substance abuse³, fleeting forms of entertainment, or (extremist) religion⁴.

In this context, the psychologist Erich Fromm (1900 – 1980) might well have some useful things to say. The book, which was first published in 1942 to explain the rise of fascism, tries to integrate economic, sociological, historical and psychological facts in its explanation. Many factors that played a role in the rise of national socialism turn out to still be in effect today, some have even been amplified. In what follows, I will begin by briefly reviewing the book as I understand it. I will close out with some personal thoughts.

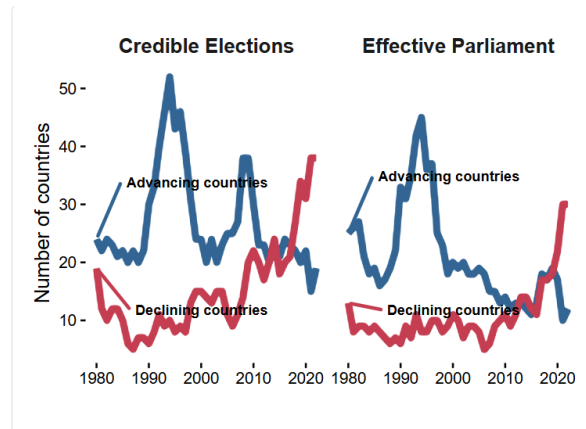


Figure 1: Evolution of two important parameters measuring the global evolution of democracy. Source: [3]

¹Ok, maybe I am projecting here. I do believe the modern world has very strong atomising aspects for the individual, and feelings of alienation should be seen as consequences of this. But most people will probably not conceptualise their situation in this precise manner.

²Since eight years as of the end of 2024, more countries have become less democratic than the opposite, see [3] and the figure above.

³Although there are certainly local increases in substance abuse, I do not think that there is an increase in the West as such. The folks from Our World in Data [2] report that the USA in particular has a problem though.

⁴The case has been made that religion, which can include forms of civil religions such as the belief in the nation-state, can be ways in which people cope with personal difficulties.

2 The medieval mindset and its end in the reformation

The starting point for Fromm, contrasting the the modern situation, is the way the medieval mindset operated in Western Europe. In this *Zeitgeist*, the individual is always firmly submerged in its surrounding world. That is to say, the roles one has and the position in society are fixed internally and clear for all to see externally. Social mobility was almost completely absent. All of this is based on a shared understanding of God, his plan, and our place in it. The superstructure is, in a way, imposed on society by the Catholic church and its monopoly on truth and learning. From king to serf and all in between, all questions pertaining to an individual's role are answered within the superstructure⁵. Significant portions of local economies are tightly controlled by a system of guilds. These organisations set prices and prohibited information flow to external actors, effectively resulting in monopolies. The guild system also functioned to control the quality of products and the master-pupil system ensured stability. With the guilds, cities and towns managed to be largely self-sufficient and thus stable against outside influences. The author asserts that work functioned to maintain oneself and one's immediate social surroundings, which differs significantly from the capitalist mindset that followed, which is aimed at maximising profits at all costs. The alienation from one another, seeing each other as means for profit rather than as unique human beings, is one of these costs.

Fromm notices that the idea of the individual itself is (in part) a modern invention, and does not find a one-to-one translation in the medieval situation. In those days, he argues, a person was fully identified with her or his role in society, leaving very little in terms of self-determination in a modern sense. Of course, then as now society consisted of individuals in the biological sense. But what distinguishes medieval man from today's is that the question of being or doing something else then what one does currently, one's occupation, education, or hobbies would be severely limited in scope for the former with respect to the latter. In this sense, freedom has increased.

Besides the shift in the organisation of economies, there is obviously also simultaneously a shift in religious life that occurred around the end of the middle ages. Calvin and Luther had some gripes with the Catholic church of their days. Catholics use mental gymnastics to combine the idea of an all-knowing god with human freedom, leaving open the possibility of changing your eternal fate through your actions. Calvin and Luther, though, reject the idea of human freedom because it would make it impossible for god to know everything. Thus, the idea of predestination was rolled out with the protestant revolution. The direct consequence of this notion is that you do not, in fact, have any power to change your fate through the actions you choose. One is either destined to go to heaven or not after death, and neither pleading nor good good works will have any influence (although you still had to believe of course and somehow). Fromm believes that large parts of Western Europe have been infected with this very destructive, if not rather unpleasant, thought. It goes hand in hand with the complete subjugation of the individual to a higher authority.

3 The rejection of (negative) freedom

When a child is born, it identifies itself with its immediate surroundings, initially mostly with the mother. The cutting of the umbilical chord may separate the child in a physical sense, the initial link between needs and means is so direct that one cannot make out a distinct individuality in this initial stage. There is no "I", as such, this is formed gradually over the years in actions; attempts, failures, and the overcoming of obstacles form the basis of a felt separation between the individual and the rest of the world. Initially, the child is ruled by a type of innocent egotism, in that it is implicitly assumed that the purposiveness of itself and of the environment are one and the same. Later, during education, children learn of other minds and the care they are owed in the context of civilisation. To this end, the child is subjected to rules and norms which have to be internalised to function effectively. The parents function as a kind of medium between the child's ego and the world out there. Initially, the father and mother possess a kind of natural authority over the child, as the latter has an implicit understanding that the former represent the latter's interests. In the process of growing up and the increase in both independence and responsibilities, "the instinctive" is repressed to a large degree in the human animal. We display learned behaviour that cannot be explained fully in terms of our nature as such, or are underdetermined by them. Nevertheless, we desire to regain a sense of unity with nature and with one another. What was once as natural as breathing itself, can become a constant struggle later in

⁵Fromm doesn't use the term "superstructure" as such, but the term seems applicable here.

life. With the increase in freedom, we have lost connection. It is this tension, inadequately answered within a culture, that can lead to problems on a societal scale. When there are insufficient routes for the individual to experience such a type of unity, people will seek ways to address it that are often far from harmless.

The flight for freedom is usually a result from what Fromm denotes by neurosis, which is conceptualised as follows. The idea of what can be described as “normal” can be done in two ways: on the one hand via the purposes of maximising the individual’s flourishing, happiness and growth; and on the other hand normal as in following the norm in regards to one’s functioning in society. The fact that these two notions of “normal” do not coincide creates a tension in the individual. This may lead someone to grasp at an all-encompassing proposed answer in the form of an ideology⁶.

In essence, we find that freedom can become a burden if too much alienation is experienced by the individual. This can have several different expressions or consequences. For instance, it can lead a person to display authoritarian behaviours, or/and support authoritarian parties. Another common related phenomenon is that of an uncritical following of mainstream norms. Fromm concludes that it is not enough to ensure negative freedom (a “freedom from”), the conditions must also be set to realise a “freedom to” or positive freedom. In combination with economic stresses, the individual is liable to lapse into extremist behaviour.

3.1 Masochism and sadism

Masochism and sadism are two different but intimately related ways in which people can attempt to escape feelings of alienation. A sadist strives for a feeling of being in control by exerting (mental or physical) control over another being. It is crucial here that the other being is capable of suffering. In effect, the sadist attempts to override his overwhelming sense of powerlessness by overcoming it with a definite subjugation of someone else. The sadist can say to himself “I have power”, hereby (at least at some level) replacing or answering the initial psychological state.

Masochism, meanwhile, stems from a very similar starting point in the implicit assumption that having power means having power *over someone else*. But rather than seeking to dominate another, the masochist seeks to be dominated. This can be linked to the belief one should submit to a greater good in a totalising manner. The total submission of the self to an external good is incarnated in the submission to a representation of this external good. The aim is to annul the self, which is felt as in some way weak or impotent. The absence of self-worth leads to blindly attaching oneself to a “higher” organisation, foregoing the use of her/his critical faculties.

4 The emergence of National Socialism

A central concern of the book is to gain an understanding of how the Nazis took power in Germany. Fromm stresses that no single “ultimate cause” is likely to bear truth, we are dealing with a complex phenomenon with an involved causal web of mutually supporting factors. Besides economic factors, and the humiliation felt by the Versailles treaty imposed after the first world war, psychological factors have to be taken into account. In particular, there are two important questions that need to be addressed:

1. Why did a very vocal minority become enchanted with the authoritarian politics of national socialism?
2. Why did the majority (who was not quite so enthusiastic) fail to form an effective response within the democratic framework?

To answer the first question, Fromm gives an analysis of the psychological profile of what he dubs the white-board proletariat or the lower middle class. This class, consisting of shopkeepers and salesmen, was under severe strain from the depression of 1929 onwards. Even though, as is quite typical within a revolutionary context, the whole middle class was on the verge of collapsing, the aforementioned group seems to have been hit especially hard. The mindset of the shopkeeper class is based on working hard and saving. Fromm has some hard words for this class, which he sees as small minded, suspicious of strangers, and frugal to a fault both financially and in regards to mental efforts. During the 1930s,

⁶I do believe that the author believes that we all follow some or other ideology. What frightens Fromm is the potential introduction of new and dangerous ideology.

the inflation of the Deutschmark was truly staggering. The very virtues defining the group of people and entrenched in the Calvinist world view, their aptitude for saving money (for which they denied themselves many small pleasures), turned into what punished them especially hard. This caused a rejection of the (predominantly capitalist) framework in which the society was organised. Masochist and sadist personality traits projected the ills of society onto an imagined enemy, a group of “others”. The need for belonging formed a further part of the mechanism of how the popular movement found its adherents. The individual attempts to subsume (part of) itself into a larger collective, so that it no longer has to be concerned with the question of what to do to address the problems faced.

But this leads us to the second question, why (in particular) the liberal, socialist, and social democrat opposition forces failed to oppose the rise of the nazis. This seems to come down to two factors. On the one hand, the general failure of the democratic process to facilitate solutions to the very practical problems faced by the populace. This seems to have led to a general disillusionment with democratic processes even in those without explicit antagonism. On the other hand, the nazi party succeeded in effectively divide and rule over the various sections of society until it gained a political monopoly through the abolition of the other parties in 1933.

5 Freedom and democracy

The final chapter of the book reflects on the situation of democracy in relation to the psychological phenomena discussed earlier in the book. The insignificance and impotence experienced by the individual is also a factor in liberal democracies. We may have the freedom to speak our mind (freedom of speech), but this is of no consequence if we have no thoughts of our own⁷. This brings Fromm to discuss how the ideal of authenticity exemplified in the young child is moulded by its upbringing and by the norms set by society. We learn to smile when we don’t want to smile, be polite when we want to bluntly walk away from a situation, and at all times maintain a “civilised” attitude to the point of ignoring or negating any and all genuine feelings we have, until we don’t recognise that we have them any more. In addition, we are taught to display feelings we don’t have, to maximise our functioning in society (for instance as a salesman).

Fromm argues that, furthermore, we have not yet managed to successfully embed either the sex drive or the tragic aspects intrinsic to life (in particular: death) into our cultural practices. As a result, many turn to the use of alcohol when dealing with any kind of undeniable feeling related to these fundamental aspects of human life. One of the ways in which modern man is alienated is in how facts are presented to him. Rather than being provided a tapestry of inter woven facts to form an integrated and shared picture of the world, the importance of each fact is presented as somehow sterile. Fromm notes how a radio news report on a bombing raid is immediately followed by a soap advertisement. This type of praxis precludes us from forming a shared world of meaningful and interconnected facts. We are like a child who is left alone in a room with a 1000 piece puzzle. We are given all of the pieces, but no instruction on how to compose it into a meaningful whole. We are confronted with a constant flow of superficial and meaningless information generated by the mass media. This is a flow of distraction, denying the formation of critical thought⁸.

6 Analyses and verdict

6.1 A reflection on what comprises freedom

Fromm doesn’t seem to offer a self-contained explication or definition of what comprises freedom. Probably, this can be forgiven, as it is a non-trivial thing to do. There are a number of suggestions to a characterisation of freedom to be found in the book, but these all rely on a shared understanding of another term. Besides the idea of “freedom from (external domination)”, Fromm maintains the need for a “freedom to”; the context required to fulfil or express fully one’s deepest nature. Such an idea comes with some baggage, however. Without flourishing in the guise of the latter, many will seek a

⁷Note from reviewer: it would also help if our thoughts and words could in some way interact with others and the world. Maybe it would be nice if someone would understand what you are trying to say every once in a while. But hey, you can’t have everything.

⁸The author proposes that critical thought is to be understood (roughly) as the rational pursuit of human values. This means that human values, our interests in the world, are used in critical thought.

form of life that rejects or sacrifices the former. In other words: deny people the expression of their internal selves, and they will seek to dominate or be dominated in a vain attempt to feel relevant. Perhaps Fromm is hesitant to give a fuller interpretation of freedom, as doing this could be contrary to his project. In other words, what it means to be free could be linked to our capacity to form *and realise* the concept for ourselves.

Let us separate two distinct plausible sounding, but tentative, definitions of positive freedom. Let's call the first freedom₊₁:

Freedom is the ability to shape yourself and your surroundings in such ways as to approach what you yourself can imagine.

This is to be contrasted with the following formulation, let's call it freedom₊₂:

Freedom is the ability to shape yourself and your surroundings in such ways as to approach what can be imagined.

The phrase “what can be imagined” replacing “what you can imagine”, does a lot of heavy lifting here, because it transfers what can be conceived by someone at a certain time and context to something rather abstract. None, or at least very few people from the middle ages could imagine the freedom to obtain a driver's licence for a motorised vehicle. They would not suffer in the slightest from not having the freedom₊₂ to obtain such a licence, while strictly speaking they can be argued to have freedom₊₁ in this regard. The reason is simply that first concept could be rewritten as an implication relation $\forall x : \text{conceivable}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{attainable}(x, y)$, where x is some good and y our medieval person. If some x cannot be imagined by y , the implication relation is met vacuously and the person can be said to posses freedom₊₁⁹.

There is a constant tension between conceptions of negative vs positive freedom in the book. While much of it comprises an analysis of negative consequences of the former without the latter, we are drawn to Fromm's acknowledgement that there is such a thing as positive freedom as a usefull psychological, political, and sociological term. This then would mean something like “being free to express who/what you really are”. It is here that I do object to this framing. Such notions rely on a definite teleological notion, an explanation of what one is doing in terms of what one will (or rather ought to) become. But this merely transfers the question of interest to the nature of what it is one is to become. As soon as we answer this question, Fromm would rightly accuse us of imposing an ideal onto the individual, thus counteracting the search for freedom. Nevertheless, Fromm definitely suggests that human beings, or rather each individual, has a kind of “essence”. Realising this essence then provides a way of conceptualising the attainment of positive freedom.

6.2 Criticism

But this does leave a lot to be desired in terms of whether de attainment of freedom (whatever we mean by this precisely) will be a good thing overall, unless we assume our “essences” are themselves good or valuable in themselves. Fromm compares the fall into authoritarianism with the psychological status of *neurosis*. But again, I have found no self-contained definition of neurosis in the book. Nevertheless, Fromm asserts that most ordinary people suffer from neurosis to some degree. It seems to involve one or another kind of obsessive behaviour, resulting from an underlying psychological problem.

We can add many instances of simplifications of a troubling or less troubling nature to our list of grievances against the book. For instance, it is a bit of an ahistorical assertion to say that the medieval mindset did not allow for a revolutionary spirit. We know of a number of uprisings enacted by serfs against their lords, even before the renaissance. But as a general trend, rather than a universal statement, it could be used as a working hypothesis. The book offers part of an explanation for the rise of authoritarian political powers. I cannot confirm that the historical facts alone do not significantly favour Fromm's account to those of others when it comes to explaining significant historical events or processes.

⁹You can compare this for instance with statements such as “ All of the millions of euros I have were rightly earned” when applied to me. Since I have no millions of euros, the statement is true regardless of the context of my employment.

Another point I'd like to critique is the status and use of scientific knowledge. Regarding the possibility and the desirability of value-free knowledge, Fromm argues against the logical positivists¹⁰. Fromm argues that any pursuit for truth has human values as a motivating factor. As a consequence, there is no room for value-free descriptions or statements. We must always ask the question: "whose interests are behind this inquiry, this theory, this statement?". I think part of this is a mistake. We should at all times, except only at funerals and first dates, seek to speak truth in such a way that it is devoid of personal and societal interests. It forms part of what it means to have a shared understanding of the world. Without it, I believe, communication is reduced to an exchange of fist blows at worst or pheromones at best. Of course, what is said in news reels, talkshows, or podcasts cannot be regarded as free from interests.

Because of the general nature of the themes of the book, it is often hard to disentangle what the author really aims to prove. Much of it reads like he knows what his audience wants to hear; the explanations often appear rather simplistic. Beneath the words lies a constant reference to an ideal form of a perfect humanist possible future. We are told implicitly that the ideal human being is, in some sense, the human baby. We must (in some way) recreate the baby's experiential unity between the world and its own ego. I am not sure Fromm discusses the possibility that neither the world nor our value judgments can approach the other much in this book. It could be the case that it is a good thing to "grow up" in the sense of accepting the divide between the ideal and the world, which seems contrary to the author's position. But perhaps this is too strong of a reading. Fromm may only want to preserve the *perspective* of a small child for us to consider. We should, as it were, not kill the child within ourselves entirely. We should recognise it for what it is, and represent it in our actions. It is the voice of those who do not yet have one.

There is one point of fundamental criticism I have that cannot be left unsaid. Fromm maintains that all revolutionary actions and processes were instantiated as attempts for the people to gain freedom, and that this has been a constant struggle throughout history. In the examples that are to be regarded as successful, this means primarily liberation from an oppressive force, an increase in negative freedom. Yet Fromm seems to have hope for a future project of increased positive freedom too, which would be something above and beyond anything we have seen.

To give an impression of the flowery language in which this conveyed, we are supposed to focus on "spontaneous action" and "self-realisation". What are we to make of this? What should a psychopath do if his authentic self is a school shooter?

Furthermore, we are continuously reminded that it is *this* age, rather than a previous one, in which we are in danger of losing our authentic self. Does this mean that there was more possibility for this in previous ages? Perhaps so, but wherein lies the difference? Much of it, I would argue, is the fact that people have liberated themselves from forms of oppression. For instance, we now are free to move anywhere we want (basically), in contrast to the medieval serf who was tied to his noble. Yes, it is no longer possible in a material sense to authentically live your life as a medieval serf. And this is a bloody good thing, we are the lucky ones.

Finally, Fromm asserts that most problems both on an individual and societal level are actually easy to understand, and do not require expert knowledge to solve. If this is true,

6.3 Praise

The analysis of the need for positive freedom, in addition to negative freedom, is a valuable insight. In my home country of the Netherlands, the liberal party¹¹ (which has been in power for many years now) often seems to have reduced the relation between government and electorate to that of service supplier and customer. Sections of the population "fall through the cracks" and no longer feel connected to society at large. As a result, multiple "micro-societies" arise, each with their own convictions and membership rites. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the emergence of the internet and social media, as groups like Q anon and the so-called "autonomous" appear to be modern examples of what Fromm is getting at. The echo-chamber characteristic of social media amplify self-identification with

¹⁰From the trenches of WW1 came among other things, part of Ludwig Wittgenstein's tractatus logico-philosophicus, which gave a picture theory of meaning. This inspired some scientist and philosophers to do philosophy anew, based on the methods of science. The logical positivists tried to abolish all metaphysics, and base their philosophy on what can be determined by observation or experiment. They argued for the logical analysis of language, in which any sentence that cannot be checked by any possible experiment must be deemed meaningless.

¹¹I don't want to bash just the liberal party, I would rather bash all parties except those to which I have been invited.

a subgroup in society, rather than strengthening the more inclusive national identity or preferably still, the identity as a human being. It should be noted though, that the middle class is still quite strong in many countries when compared to its historic lows. With regards to the flooding of our brain with information without context or significance, there could well be a few examples of this we could point to. The fact that we do not have a shared view of the world, providing a context for the facts, leads to problems. Many people in the USA, for instance, only believe in messages of one out of two news¹² organisations. Many of societies ills stem from improper organisation (or rather: absence thereof), which results from people not sharing a world view conceived in the broader sense (which includes norms and value judgments). A second point I appreciate is the recognition that most of the thoughts we profess to have are not of our own individual making. Not only is thinking hard and energy-demanding, in most societies there seems little appreciation of or even space to form an independent opinion regarding many subjects matter. I know this to be the case because someone else told me. Haha. It is often easy to classify a collection of humans on the basis of the preconceptions they hold dear, which form the basis for the groups they (want to) belong to. The notion that most people spend their free time in ways that are not quite ideal, however, may find a cold reception with many. Fromm asserts that leisure time, or free time, should be used (at least in part) for the purpose of bettering ourselves. I think most people will retort this suggestion by saying they themselves will decide how to spend their free time.

References

- [1] Erich Fromm, *De Angst voor Vrijheid*, Bijleveld paperback, 1952
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- [3] International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v7.1, 2023., <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/global/>

¹²To call Fox news a news organisation is rather misleading, but still.