Escape from Freedom Study Guide

Escape from Freedom by Erich Fromm

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"Escape from Freedom" is Erich Fromm's psychological history of the social conditions that developed in Europe between the Middle Ages and the mid-20th century which culminated in the rise of the Nazi Party to power in Germany under Adolf Hitler. Fromm is writing in 1941, after Hitler has come to power and begun his aggressive campaign to conquer Europe, but before the United States has entered what is to become the Second World War. The underlying question of Fromm's work is how the German people allowed HItler's totalitarian regime to gain power seemingly willingly and with their enthusiastic support. A secondary question Fromm asks is whether or not democracy such as that found outside of Germany makes a people safe from similar developments. He identifies a basic psychological need which has led to the support for the Nazis in Germany and concludes by warning that this need is not necessarily filled in a democracy.

Fromm answers his main question by characterizing the social character of the German people after World War I as one especially susceptible to the message of the Nazi Party. He traces this social character to the individual psychological characters of the people in the German lower middle class. These people have become especially isolated from their work and their society owing to the rise of capitalism that began during the Protestant Reformation, Fromm argues. They have become economically "free" as employees of the capital holders, but this freedom is actually a burden as they try to reconnect the ties to their work that earlier generations enjoyed.

The seeds of this isolation are planted by the Protestant doctrines of Luther and Calvin, who teach that man stands alone before God, not with the Catholic Church as an intermediary. Furthermore, they teach that man is essentially bad and must work in order to achieve or prove his salvation. Man is now free from the authority of the Church, but is now responsible for himself before a vengeful God.

Man naturally seeks to escape from the isolation and alienation that accompanies this growing "freedom," Fromm contends. By applying psychoanalytic methods, Fromm concludes that one primary mechanism by which individuals escape is to make themselves dependent on others. Tied directly to this mechanism is a parallel tendency for individuals to try to dominate others. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party masterfully exploit this mechanism, Fromm explains, by promising their followers a kind of freedom which appeals to their desire to submit to a powerful leader who will lead them into victory over others.

Fromm concludes his work by warning that this kind of psychological need is largely a function of capitalism, which tends to isolate people from their work and from each other. He calls for the creation of a planned socialist economy that allows for the development of true self-awareness and positive development by eliminating the psychological need to "escape" the burden of freedom.

Freedom - A Psychological Problem?

Freedom - A Psychological Problem? Summary and Analysis

Fromm begins his work with the statement that the history of modern Europe and America can be summed up as a struggle for freedom from domination over the individual. However, what does this freedom really mean for individuals, Fromm asks, and is it really what we think it is?

In this chapter, Fromm lays out the basic arc of his argument that freedom is actually a kind of burden on the individual. While individuals seem to have a basic drive to be free from domination by external forces, actually achieving this kind of independence also creates an awareness in individuals that their freedom is really a kind of isolation. Man does not wish to be isolated, Fromm argues. In fact he has a basic drive to cooperate with others and belong to a society. This sets up competing forces within each individual, the drive to be "free" and the drive to belong to a group.

How individuals reconcile these competing drives and others defines their character, Fromm argues, which is an underlying tenet of the psychoanalytical approach that Fromm applies to his subject. Furthermore, Fromm argues, the characters of the individuals in a society combine to create a social character. Fromm will examine these ideas in more depth later in the book. Fromm takes special care to distance his thinking from that of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, by pointing out where he feels Freud does not go far enough in his assertions and where he feels Freud has drawn incorrect conclusions. Fromm will return to these issues in the appendix to the book.

Making the matter even more complicated, Fromm suggests, is that individuals may not be fully aware of the competing drives within them. He hints that individuals may not even be fully aware of the origins of their own thoughts, an idea he will discuss in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

Fromm closes the chapter with a succinct summary of his argument, which is that as individuals seek to satisfy their drive to belong to a society, they have a choice as a society to find a way that will allow true freedom, or to adopt a definition of freedom and a social structure that actually destroys true freedom.

The Emergence of the Individual and the Ambiguity of Freedom

The Emergence of the Individual and the Ambiguity of Freedom Summary and Analysis

In the second chapter, Fromm takes a psychoanalytic look at the development of the idea of individuality. Early man did not imagine himself as separate from nature, Fromm claims, and only gradually he began to thin of himself as being somehow separate from nature and other men. The process of "individuation" took place throughout the medieval period and peaked after the time of the Reformation, he claims.

Fromm likens this process to that which takes place in an individual, who as an infant and child has no real concept of themselves as an individual. Children are connected to their parents by "primary ties" that eventually are cut as the child gains a stronger sense of its own individuality. This growing sense of individuality drives the child to become more independent, which also increases its sense of being alone in the world, no longer able to rely on the primary ties that offered it protection and a sense of belonging.

Individuals naturally seek to replace this sense of belonging that is lost through the process of growing up, Fromm claims, driving them to find ways to cope with their increasing sense of being alone in the world. For many, this means finding a way to submit to others to recapture that feeling of being protected and belonging to a group. In this way, Fromm argues, freedom can actually create submission and the destruction of individuality.

True freedom, Fromm argues, is only possible where a person can "connect to the world without eliminating his individuality." (p. 29) He calls this relationship "spontaneous," meaning that it originates within the individual himself and is not dictated by an external force. The highest expressions of this kind of relationship are "love and productive work," Fromm claims. (p. 29)

Only if a child is able to increase the strength of its own self-awareness at the same rate that it has its primary ties to its family cut can this kind of true freedom be achieved. This does not happen in modern society however, Fromm claims. There is a gap between these two processes. To compensate for the gap, people come up with certain "mechanisms" to escape the conflict that arises. Fromm will examine these mechanisms in a later chapter.

Fromm further defines the dual nature of freedom by differentiating between "freedom from" and "freedom to." Man struggles to be free from domination, but this is not the same thing as being free to govern himself and be a true individual.

Fromm closes out the chapter by outlining the approach he will take over the next several chapters to trace this development of the individual from medieval times through to the modern age.

Freedom in the Age of Reformation

Freedom in the Age of Reformation Summary and Analysis

In the third chapter, Fromm begins an historical account of the ideas he presents in the introductory chapter. He divides the chapter into two sections, the first addressing the periods of the Middles Ages and the Renaissance and the second covering the Protestant Reformation.

Looking first at the middle ages, he characterizes this period as one without individual freedom. Medieval man was "chained to his role in the social order," Fromm writes (p. 40) and had very little chance of movement within society. At this time, a person's identity is the same as his occupation, Fromm claims, tying his identity directly to the economic structure of his day.

While this does not sound like freedom from a modern viewpoint, Fromm argues, within their society medieval individuals actually enjoyed a good deal of expressive and emotional freedom because they all had the relative comfort of knowing their exact place within their society. The Catholic Church prevailed at this time, and while it taught that people were guilty for their sins it also gave them a promise of forgiveness and unconditional love. Fromm will later contrast this religious outlook with that of the Protestant movements that follow.

Despite this relative freedom, medieval man was still in a form of bondage, Fromm writes, because he was not yet self-aware. Indeed, Fromm adds, the idea of an individual did not even exist as it does today, suggesting that while we would not consider medieval people free in a modern sense, this modern sense would have made no sense to people of that day.

Central to Fromm's argument is the economic change that takes place in Europe. Since a person's identity is so closely connected to his occupation in this time period, when the economic conditions change it directly affects a person's sense of identity both as an individual and as part of his society.

Economic conditions do change as Europe moves into the Renaissance, especially in Italy, Fromm writes, where a new class of ambitious and powerful people with money first arises. The older class distinctions based on birth and nobility first begin to break down as wealth becomes a more important factor in social influence.

It is also during this period that the idea of men as individuals matures in the modern sense, Fromm argues, just like a child who first realizes it is separate from its mother. Men begin to view themselves as separate from nature, and look at nature as something that can be enjoyed and examined for its beauty. This new individuality enjoyed by the wealthy and powerful is a kind of freedom, but again it comes at the cost

of the relative security of the former social order. One of the consequences is that members of this new upper class begin to seek fame, Fromm argues. It becomes important to become well-known. This seeking after fame is a way for these newly isolated people to create an indestructible link back to the larger society.

While it is in the Renaissance period that the idea of the individual first appears, Fromm argues, the economic conditions leading to modern capitalism are to be found elsewhere. Fromm now returns to an overview of the economic development from the middle ages to the Renaissance.

The medieval economy is based at first on many small craftsmen and merchants doing business within the fairly small area of neighboring towns and cities, Fromm writes. Some of these craftsmen and merchants naturally become more successful than others and differences begin to arise in their comparative wealth. Guilds are formed to control prices and monopolize business within certain crafts. Individual journeymen are shut out of the center of commercial activity.

The underlying opinion of the medieval craftsman or merchant, Fromm argues, is that wealth is a necessary evil of a productive society and not a goal in itself. Ineffective attempts are made to reduce the power of the monopolies, but they continue to grow in power. Capital becomes more and more important. The measurement of time becomes more advanced and a new emphasis is placed on efficiency. All of this serves to sever the economic and thereby the social ties a person has to his work and to others. Classes develop, which move as a whole and also allow the limited movement of an individual between classes. This means a person's place in his society is no longer fixed. He has been cut loose, but this is itself a freedom, Fromm explains. Man is now able to "try his luck" in the new economic system.

Fromm next moves on to the period of the Protestant Reformation. Lutheranism and Calvinsim are movements not of the upper classes, Fromm explains, but of the newly emerging middle class. Fromm states his intention to analyze these movements partly by analyzing the motivations of their leaders, Martin Luther and John Calvin. He introduces the concept that actions can have motivations that are different than the ones given by their performers. This can be intentional or subconscious. In other words, a person may think and say he does something for a certain reason, but he may have other motivations for doing it that he is unaware of. It is a psychoanalytic approach that can best delve into these subconscious motivations, Fromm believes.

Fromm begins by describing some of the beliefs of the Catholic Church from which Luther and Calvin deviated. The Church teaches that man is essentially good, but corrupted by sin. He can be alleviated of the guilt of this sin, and is free to choose to do so and be saved. Some Catholic thinkers differ on the question of whether a person's fate is predestined, Fromm notes, but most share the idea that man has a free will and that his actions have a direct bearing on his salvation. These ideas are especially appealing to the wealthy class, Fromm explains, who are able to essentially purchase forgiveness from the Church, a practice that Luther condemns.

Luther's ideas challenge the authority of the Church and place religion in the hands of the individual, Fromm explains. Furthermore, Luther stands in stark contrast to the Church's teaching in believing that man is essentially evil and not good. He is not free to choose the right path, because he is constitutionally unable to know what it is. Only by humiliating himself before God will he receive God's grace and be saved.

Fromm traces Luther's motivations for his beliefs to doubt about man's role in the world. Luther, along with his adherents, are uncertain about their place in society because of their newly realized economic and social isolation. These feelings are most present in the new middle class, Fromm argues, and it is within this group that Luther's movement gains foothold.

From its middle position, this middle class has an ambiguous relationship to authority, Fromm explains. It stands in opposition to the authority of the upper class and the Church, but it also wishes to exercise authority over the lower classes, which it despises as a group, Fromm argues. This seemingly contradictory view of authority will be resolved by Fromm in a later chapter.

John Calvin's protestant movement in Switzerland is similar to Luther's in many ways. Like Luther, Calvin believes that only by complete submission to God can a man be saved. Calvin differs from Luther and the Church in his belief in predestination, however. Calvin believes that each person is either destined for salvation or damnation, and nothing he does will prevent his fate.

This does not mean Calvin thinks a person should not try to live a virtuous life, Fromm explains. In Calvin's doctrine, the fact that a person is able to strive toward virtue is an indication that he is among those who will be saved. This continuous striving, along with the rest of Calvin's doctrines, appeal to the same middle class individuals as Luther's teaching.

Calvin's call for continuous virtuous action is a mechanism for alleviating the anxiety that accompanies doubt, Fromm writes, and from it an emphasis on the importance of work arises. This work ethic in turn becomes one of the driving forces behind the full development of capitalism, Fromm argues, and thus by trying to alleviate his doubt and anxiety Fromm suggests man actually strengthens the system that creates his doubt and anxiety in the first place.

Two Aspects of Freedom for Modern Man

Two Aspects of Freedom for Modern Man Summary and Analysis

In Chapter IV, Fromm continues to trace the path of capitalism after its first appearance during the Reformation. Protestant thinking has prepared people for their new roles in a capitalist economy, Fromm argues. This new capitalism is especially suited to take advantage of this new outlook which emphasizes the individual as an independent unit.

It is in the modern ages that the contradiction inherent in "freedom" fully manifests, Fromm argues. On one hand, man becomes "more independent, self-reliant and critical," he writes, but at the same time he becomes "more isolated, alone and afraid." (p. 104) This apparent contradiction can be resolved Fromm suggests, but looking at both factors as part of the same phenomenon.

Part of the problem is how freedom has been defined, Fromm states. It is largely thought of as freedom from authority and from external constraints. As freedom is gained from these external forces, however, Fromm argues new internal forces replace them. As an example, Fromm offers the ideal of freedom of speech. As people are more able to enjoy this freedom, they become more aware that what they think and say are perhaps not exactly what everyone else thinks and says. This accentuates each person's isolation from the others in his society, Fromm believes. It arises partly from an ignorance of less obvious constraints like popular opinion and the need to feel one's ideas are shared by others.

Fromm is not entirely critical of capitalism. It is not bad to be free from the old traditional bonds, he states, and the political freedoms that accompany capitalism are "positive" freedoms. The problems with capitalism lie with its individualistic character, he believes. The economic order of things have been reversed since medieval times. Capital is no longer the "servant of man" as it was in the medieval era. Now man is the servant of capital.

Luther's teaching of the inherent corruption of man and the practice of humiliating oneself in service of God has well prepared modern man for submitting to an employer who in turn is driven by the forward cycle of earning money and reinvesting it to perpetuate the economy.

There is a seeming contradiction, here, Fromm admits. Modern man does not seem to be inclined to humiliate himself before capitalism, but seems to pursue his own self-interest at every opportunity. The answer lies again in taking another look at traditional definitions, Fromm explains.

Acting in one's self-interest is usually described as a kind of selfishness, and selfishness, it is taught by Luther and others, is to be condemned as a kind of self-love. Fromm takes the exactly opposite view. Selfishness does not grow from self-love, he says, but self-loathing. It is insecurity in one's love for oneself that leads a person to overcompensate. Here Fromm is careful to point out that he differs from Freud in this assessment.

What is crucial to realize, Fromm argues, is that man is not aware that his struggle for self-promotion comes from this lack of love fro himself. Rather, he feels he is actually acting in his own self interest. The way in which he does this is determined by the capitalist economy. Employees are now commodities like other objects and a person sells his services and himself to an employer and his value is determined by external entities, not by himself. As an object himself, his value is also partly derived by the other objects associated with him, such as his possessions and property. With these things come prestige and power, two more external measurements of a person's worth.

Capitalism changes the role of individuals by making them into consumers. No longer are they connected to the people from whom they purchase things, and no longer are they treated as people by producers. Instead they are commodities, part of the larger economic machine who must be persuaded by emotional means to choose one producer over another. This is done through the emotional appeal of advertising which emphasizes non-critical thinking, Fromm argues. This method is used in political campaigns and propaganda as well, he explains.

This emotional appeal is harmful to democracy, Fromm argues, for it deadens capacity for critical thinking. It is all the more dangerous because it is not recognized and because it appears to appeal to customers' critical judgment when in fact it only perpetuates his isolation and feelings of smallness in a larger world he does not feel a part of. This apprehension is reflected in popular culture, Fromm contends, with the repeated themes of small characters escaping larger threats, but not actually ever conquering them. Fromm will examine this unconscious desire for escape in the central chapter which follows, along with the mechanisms that people use to achieve it.

Mechanisms of Escape

Mechanisms of Escape Summary and Analysis

In Chapter V, Fromm presents the central ideas behind his theory of the mechanisms of escape referred to in the title of the work. He digresses from his mainly chronological structure to fill out the ideas he has been developing regarding man's isolation in a modern capitalist society and how individuals compensate for this fear and isolation. Crucial to his argument is the belief that societies have characters just as individuals do, and that by examining psychological mechanisms in individuals one can draw conclusions about the actions of the groups to which they belong. In this case, Fromm is preparing to analyze the rise of Nazism in Germany and what collective psychological mechanisms contribute to it.

The person who is confronting the kind f fear and isolation Fromm has described so far has two options as he explains it. He can "progress" toward "positive freedom," where he is free to act of his own will in a way that does not degrade his character and integrity (p. 139) or he can try to reconnect the ties that have been severed with the rest of the world and give up his freedom in order to belong once more. This second option is a false one, Fromm argues, because man only imagines it will actually reunite him with the world. It is a compulsive action out of panic.

Fromm divides the chapter into three major sections. In the first he addresses "authoritarianism" by which he means the "striving for submission and domination." (p. 141) This striving is an attempt to recreate the primary bonds lost when a person becomes aware of his isolation and looks outward to find "strength which the individual self is lacking." (p. 140) Fromm also refers to such striving for submission and domination as masochistic and sadistic tendencies.

Masochistic people seek to submit to stronger individuals, as Fromm describes them. They seem to act in deference to others with no original thought of their own. They rationalize these submissive acts as being due to love or loyalty and see themselves as victims of circumstances.

On the other side of the coin from masochistic feelings are sadistic feelings, Fromm explains, and they are often found together. Sadistic tendencies are those which aim to create dependence in others on oneself, to gain power either physically or more often mentally over others, or to make others suffer.

Sadism is actually a form of dependence like masochism, Fromm explains, for the sadistic character relies on having others to dominate. It is in this domination that he finds strength and without an object of his sadism he is lost. Fromm uses an example of a husband who is cruel to his wife out of a sadistic tendency, but when she finally responds she will leave him changes his behavior at once and begs her to stay, thereby

extending the cycle of sadism. Sometimes sadism is rationalized by the sadistic person as love, but Fromm argues that this is not love at all.

Fromm notes that sadism seems to many to be "natural" as it emphasizes the survival of the strong and the struggle of man to excel over nature and other men. How then, Fromm asks, can masochistic tendencies be explained? What does it mean that there seems to be in some people a natural desire to suffer and submit? Fromm argues that there is no contradiction, really, because all people desire pleasure, and masochistic characters actually receive pleasure from their submission, with the pain that comes with it only a by-product.

Fromm returns to the interdependence of the masochistic and sadistic characters. While they have outwardly very different actions, they are both striving for the exact same thing, he argues, which is to compensate for their weakness caused by isolation and fear. The masochistic character does this by "annihilation" of his individuality by submitting to another. The sadistic character overcomes his weakness by seeking power over others. Fromm calls this mutual striving "symbiosis." (p. 157) Neither is able to escape without the other.

This symbiosis is also called sado-masochism, Fromm explains, but since this term has been used to describe the same tendencies in a sexual way, Fromm chooses to call it the "authoritarian character" because of the attitude it holds toward authority. The authoritarian character both respects authority and wishes to submit to it as well as exercise it over others. It is this symbiotic definition of authority that characterizes Fascism, Fromm explains.

From continues to refine his definition of authority. It is not simply power to compel others to do what one wishes, but is defined by the character's relationship to power. This power can come in forms such as physical dominance or as something imagined as being love, but the power itself stands apart from the individuals who are seeking to either submit or dominate. They are each one side of the same coin, Fromm argues.

The second major section of the chapter Fromm devotes to the idea of destructiveness. Destructive tendencies can be seen as an extreme kind of sadism, he explains, but they are fundamentally different because sadism does not aim to destroy its object only to dominate it. Indeed, destroying its object ruins the goal of sadism. Still, Fromm explains, destructiveness stems from the same thing as sadism and masochism, which is a feeling of powerlessness.

Fromm next turns to the third major section of the chapter, a discussion of the mechanism that most "normal" people engage to escape their feelings of fear and isolation. He calls this "automaton conformity," and it is the practice of becoming so like everyone else in one's society that one is no longer troubled with the idea of being isolated. It is a kind of submission of the self, Fromm argues, but not to any higher authority. Rather it is submission to the collective authority of one's group.

This automatic conformity takes place even without the knowledge of the individual, Fromm contends. This is possible because of the ability of individuals to imagine their thoughts are their own and originating within themselves when in fact they come from some other source. This is most evident in the case of hypnosis, where ideas can be directly implanted into the mind of another. The same thing happens in a subtler fashion regularly, Fromm argues, when we unconsciously repeat the opinions of others as if they are our own. Fromm refers to this as "pseudo-thinking."

The phenomenon extends into politics and all other human activities as well as into the realm of feeling. Fromm gives an example of a person who is otherwise dissatisfied acting happy and satisfied while at a party. He imagines that he is actually happy for a time because this is the feeling he has grown to associate with the activity of attending a party, but the feeling is not his own. It is imposed upon him by the situation. Throughout this discussion, Fromm provides extensive support for his contentions by the hypothetical psychoanalysis of the typical people he holds up as examples. This holds with Fromm's suggestion from earlier in the chapter that by psychoanalysis of the individuals in a society one can move to inferences about the society as as whole.

This reliance on automatic behavior does not decrease but actually increases the amount of fear and isolation in a society, Fromm argues. As he closes the chapter, he describes the lower middle classes of Germany as being especially characterized by the authoritarian character he has described and promises to explain how this fact leads to the success of Nazism in the following chapter.

Psychology of Nazism

Psychology of Nazism Summary and Analysis

in Chapter VI, Fromm brings his chronological narrative into his contemporary time and applies the theories about authoritarianism and the automaton to the specific events leading to the rise of Nazism in Germany. Fromm explains that two contradictory explanations for the rise of the Nazi Party are the most popular. The first holds that the Nazis came to power through sheer political force supported by powerful elements in the society and coerced the population to follow them. The second theory is that Hitler and his followers are neurotic or mad and offers a purely psychological explanation for the success of Nazism.

Neither is entirely correct, Fromm argues. Nazism is a psychological phenomenon, but it is also a product of its political and social context. Fromm divides the German people into two main groups based on their reaction to the rise of the Nazis. In the first group are those who submit to the power of the Nazi Party without ever emphatically adopting its ideals. These are mainly working class and liberal Germans, Fromm states. In the second group are those who fully adopt the program of the Nazi Party and support its mission. These people are found mostly among the lower middle class, Fromm states.

The first group submits to Nazi power mostly out of resignation and "tiredness," Fromm contends. Their spirits have been depressed during the period after World War I when they had hoped for a more socialized democracy that did not develop. They have ceased to believe that they can have any political influence. They still hold onto their political beliefs, but once Hitler comes to power they are unable to oppose him without seeming to oppose Germany itself and they are unable to attack the group they feel they belong to.

By contrast, Fromm states, the lower middle class of "small shopkeepers, artisans and white-collar workers" for the most part embraces the Nazi ideology, especially the younger generation. (p. 209) The authoritarian character is typical among the members of the lower middle class at this time in Germany, Fromm contends, more than in any other segment of the population. The Nazi ideology, which called for obedience to a leader while promising victory over inferior peoples satisfied their dual desires for submission and power.

These desires were in existence before the rise of Hitler, Fromm notes. Prior to the first World War, the lower middle class was able to look to the relatively powerful German monarchy for its need to submit to a leader. As a whole, its economic situation was stable and provided it with security. After Germany's defeat in World War I, this class saw its economic stability erode and the decline in power of the German leadership. Thus the political and economic situation was such that a figure like Hitler and the ideology he espoused was welcomed, Fromm contends.

Hitler is very effective in recognizing these dual desires and in exploiting them for political gain. Fromm points out that Hitler at first poses as a champion of this middle class, but eventually shifts his position as he finds support among the upper classes. This is because the Nazis have no real political or economic convictions, Fromm argues. Their single goal is exploit every opportunity to gain power.

Fromm next turns to a psychological analysis of Hitler primarily through his writings in his autobiography "Mein Kampf." Fromm finds evidence in this book that Hitler fits his description of a authoritarian character in many respects. Hitler displays a sadistic drive to overpower, both in the hatred he shows for other groups and in the professed love he has for the German people. Drawing from Hitler's writing, Fromm finds numerous examples of not only Hitler's sadistic desire to gain power but his canny recognition that there exists in many people a need to submit to power. Hitler understands how to exploit this desire, Fromm writes, and is able to do so by powerful suggestion and the careful crafting of his message.

When Hitler calls on his followers to sacrifice themselves to the cause of Nazism, Fromm sees the other side of the authoritarian character. This is the masochistic element of the Nazi ideology, Fromm argues. Hitler appeals to the elements of his society who are most likely to feel this need to submit because of their economic situation. He also emphasizes the notion that fate has played a central role in bringing about the current situation, appealing to the masochistic feeling of powerlessness in the face of chance.

Given the apparent success of Nazism at the time the book is written, Fromm asks the rhetorical question of whether it is a viably stable regime. On the surface, he admits, it may appear stable because it seems to satisfy the psychological needs of it population. It cannot be stable, Fromm argues, because this satisfaction is only an alleviation of a symptom. It is only a temporary "escape" from the real problem, which is the increased individuation and isolation of man, a process which has been ongoing for 400 years, Fromm claims, and which will continue unless the social and economic systems that created it are changed. Fromm will address the kinds of changes he believes will correct this problem in the final chapter that follows.

Freedom and Democracy

Freedom and Democracy Summary and Analysis

In this final chapter, Fromm extrapolates from his theory and the lessons taken from the rise of Nazism to suggest a proper course of action for society to achieve true freedom.

Fromm begins by asking rhetorically if democracy protects a society from Fascism. It does not in itself, he replies, as long as the economic forces of monopolistic capitalism continue to isolate individuals. It is this isolation that creates the "fertile soil" that will allow Fascism to grow anywhere. (p. 240)

Even in a democracy like that in the United States in the 1940s when Fromm is writing there is much pressure on individuals to conform to popular standards of behavior and suppress their real individuality. Fromm uses child-rearing and the educational system as examples of these forces. From an early age, children are taught manners where they are expected to act in ways they may not feel. Once in the educational system they are further expected to conform and master the same facts as the other pupils. The end result, From argues, is a both a distrust of information provided by others and a willingness to believe anything that is said with authority. This dulls the ability to think critically and makes people susceptible to manipulation through "pseudo-thinking," the mechanism Fromm describes earlier where a person thinks he is thinking for himself but is actually mimicking the thoughts of others. Modern people think they know what they want in life, Fromm writes, but all the really know is what they are supposed to want.

Fromm repeats his argument that the belief that freedom from external political restraints does not constitute true freedom. Removing these structures only create a new need for fearful and isolated individuals to find other places to put their dependence, driving a cycle of dependency. It is possible to escape from this cycle, however, Fromm argues.

Every person has the potential to express himself completely as an individual, Fromm writes, and to engage in spontaneous action and original thought. By "spontaneous" Fromm means action that grows from a what a person actually feels and thinks and not what he is supposed to feel or think. "Original" thought, Fromm says, is not thought that nobody has ever had before, but thought that actually originates in an individual and thought he has unconsciously borrowed from another and thinks to be his own.

True freedom to develop one's individuality means that the self is the center of a person's world and not some external authority. Fromm raises the potential objection that a society where each person acts only for himself sounds like anarchy. He replies that this objection only arises because of a faulty definition of social ideals. Humans in a truly free society will still hold to higher ideals in choosing their behavior, but these will be true ideals, not the false ones presented by those who wish to manipulate the fearful and alone. They will be ideals that further life and do not destroy it.

Furthermore, Fromm argues, the objection that anarchy will ensue if man is acts only in deference to the authority of his self is based on the notion that man is basically bad and will act destructively if allowed. Man is neither good nor bad, Fromm argues, and it is his isolation and fear that drives him to act destructively. If the isolation and fear are eliminated then destructive behavior will cease among most people.

Finally, Fromm addresses the question of how such a society that will allow for the complete realization of the self can come about. He does not condemn democracy, and warns that the freedoms that democracy affords should not be given up. Fromm reiterates his theory that social, economic and psychological factors are all tightly connected, and so a solution must take all of these factors into account.

Fromm advocates reconnecting man with his work by bringing democratic principles to a planned economy that eliminates the rule of a select few who hold most of the capital. Fromm realizes that such a planned economy requires a centralized and coordinated authority, but adds that this central bureaucracy must be supported by the people in order to achieve his goal. He calls this system democratic socialism.

The economy must once again become the servant of man and not its master, Fromm writes. Only then can he be safe from the dangers of Fascism and realize his true potential.

Appendix: Character and the Social Process

Appendix: Character and the Social Process Summary and Analysis

In an appendix to the main work, Fromm fills out some of the theoretical ideas behind his historical analysis of the development of modern society and the fear and isolation that has accompanied it.

Fromm defends his idea that one can make inferences about a society's character based on the analysis of its individual members. The typical character that is the most common among these individuals can be said to make up the character of their society. This social character in turn influences the social process, the process by which people learn to become productive members of their society.

Fromm takes care to note that his social interpretation of human development differs fundamentally from Freud's. Freud, Fromm writes, views the individual as a self-standing unit in his development, with internal conflicts contributing to his character development which in turn affects how he is able to relate to others in his society. Fromm gives social forces a central role in human development, connecting them not only to the development of individual character but to the development of social characters and ultimately to historical developments. Thus elements of individual character have a direct bearing on historical events and Fromm is justified in applying psychoanalytic techniques in examining history, he suggests.

Fromm also clarifies his interpretive methods by distancing himself from other historians who share Freud's thinking that instinctual drives are the main force behind human activity. He criticizes so-called Marxist historians who he feels have misunderstood Marx to say that a drive for personal economic gain drives history when Marx actually pointed to economic differences as the primary force in historical movement, as Fromm's method does. Finally Fromm criticizes "idealistic" historians such as Max Weber who believe that religious ideals drive social processes. Fromm restates his theory that the social character of a society is the source of its ideology and that the social character is tied directly to the individual characters of its typical members. These characters are largely determined by the economic structure of a society as people adapt to the conditions they find themselves in.

Characters

Martin Luther

Martin Luther is the leader of the Protestant Reformation that takes place in Germany in the 16th century, which challenges the authority of the Catholic Church. This movement is important in Fromm's argument, as it is in the Reformation that he sees the seeds of capitalism and the growing isolation of the individual from his society.

The Church, as Fromm describes it, stands as an intermediary between God and the individual. The individual can confess and repent to the Church and receive forgiveness. Luther teaches that the Bible is the sole authority over Christians, effectively removing the church as an intermediary and placing each Christian alone before God. This idea is paralleled in the capitalist economy that is gaining a foothold in Europe at this time, Fromm claims. The Protestant ethic, which reinforces and is reinforced by capitalism, leads to increasing isolation among the German people, laying the foundation for the modern conditions in which Fascism and Nazism arise.

Fromm provides a rather extensive psychological examination of Luther from a psychoanalytical viewpoint. He sees in Luther a typical "authoritarian" character, one who desires to submit to a higher authority while also dominating others. Luther shares this trait with Adolf Hitler, who like Luther will formulate a movement that will play upon the psychological need of its followers to both submit and dominate.

Adolf HItler

The leader of the Nazi Party and dictator over Germany at the time Fromm is writing. Hitler's success at receiving the popular support of the German people leads Fromm to seek the reasons why a society would seemingly willingly give up its freedom to a dictator.

Fromm rejects the idea that Hitler and his party are simply bullies who coerce their followers in obeying them. He also rejects the purely psychological explanation that Hitler and his followers are somehow mad. Instead he traces the roots of Germany's social character to medieval times and shows that by the time Hitler and the Nazis arrive on the scene, the German people are especially susceptible to the message the Nazis present. Hitler is also particularly adept at tailoring his message to meet the psychological needs of the German people at this point in history.

Like he does with Luther, Fromm performs a psychological analysis of Hitler based on his writings, primarily from "Mein Kampf," Hitler's autobiography. Fromm judges Hitler to have an authoritarian character much as Luther does, seeking to strengthen his position by dominating others while also calling on his followers to submit and sacrifice themselves to the cause, promising them ultimate victory over inferior peoples.

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud is the founder of psychoanalysis and a theory of human development based on internal conflicts between different parts of an individual's personality. Fromm is himself a practicing psychoanalyst and bases his theories on those of Freud. He differs significantly from Freud in some key respects, however, and Fromm is always sure to note these differences.

John Calvin

A protestant leader in Switzerland. Calvin, like Luther, emphasizes the role of the individual in Christianity and in Fromm's view reinforces the fear an isolation that emerges in the middle classes.

Max Weber

A sociologist and economic historian who writes about work and work ethics, especially among the protestant people of Germany.

Karl Marx

A philosopher and historian who proposes that economic differences among groups is the primary force behind history. Fromm adheres to Marx's philosophy of history.

Harry Stack Sullivan

An early psychoanalyst who promotes direct observation of subjects over the more abstract methods of Freud. Fromm supports Sullivan's ideas, and cites him early in this work.

Jacob Burckhardt

A cultural historian whose most prominent work is about the Renaissance in Italy. Fromm cites Burckhardt in his discussion of the development of individuality in Italy.

Karen Horney

A German psychoanalyst contemporary to Fromm who also challenges some of Freud's conclusions, especially those concerning sexuality and the secondary role of society.

John Dewey

An influential American philosopher and educator and the author of Freedom and Culture, a work that examines the cultural causes of Fascism which was published shortly before Fromm's work.

Objects/Places

Nazi Germany

Germany under the control of the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler, between 1933 and 1945. The period is marked by persecution of minority groups and expansionist policies that lead eventually to World War II. Fromm is German of Jewish heritage who has left Nazi Germany for the United States.

Reformation Europe

Europe during the 16th century at the time when Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin are teaching and forming new churches in opposition to the Catholic Church.

Renaissance Italy

Italy during the 15th century at a time when arts and sciences are enjoying a resurgence following the Middle Ages. This resurgence is supported largely by a newly wealthy class of people in Italy, as well as by the Church.

Catholic Church

The primary religious power throughout Europe from the end of the Roman Empire through the Middle Ages and up to the Reformation in the 16th century. Led by a single Pope located in Rome.

Protestant Church

A generic term used to indicate churches that arose in "protest" to the Catholic Church.

Middle Class

An economic class within capitalism made up largely of small businessmen and white-collar workers, as Fromm defines it. Situated between the lower, working class and the upper class which controls most of the wealth. In Fromm's analysis, the psychology of the middle class is most important in determining the psychology of a society.

Capitalism

An economic system where relatively few hold the wealth and means of production, or capital. Fromm characterizes capitalism as being primarily responsible for the fear and isolation felt my modern man by separating him from his work and making him an independent economic unit.

Trade Guilds

Early groups of artisans and merchants engaged in the same trade which band together into a guild to promote their trade, protect against competition and control costs. Fromm explains that trade guilds begin to evolve into monopolies as economic disparities begin to emerge in the earliest days of capitalism.

Trade Unions

Organizations of workers within a capitalist economy that seek to protect workers from the advantages held by those who control capital.

Journeymen

Typical practitioners of a certain trade who have reached a certain level of proficiency. Journeymen make up the backbone of the early European economy.

Sadism

A psychological tendency to wish to see others suffer, or to make them dependent on oneself. In extreme conditions, sadism can be destructive, but not usually, Fromm argues, because a sadist relies on his object to provide him with a means for satisfying his desire.

Masochism

A psychological tendency to desire to submit to another. Masochists do not seek pain itself, Fromm argues, but accept it along with the pleasure of submitting.

Symbiosis

Fromm's term for the interdependent relationship between sadism and masochism. He chooses the term over the more common "sado-masochism" because of the sexual connotations attached to that term. Symbiosis is not a sexual relationship, but is a

common mechanism used to "escape" fear and isolation. Fromm also refers to this type of character as "authoritarian."

Themes

The Dual Nature of Freedom

By entitling his book "Escape from Freedom" Fromm conjures up what seems to be a paradox. How can a person escape from freedom? And why would one wish to escape? As Fromm develops his argument it becomes clear, however, that to understand what he means one must redefine the way one thinks about freedom.

Most people think of freedom as freedom from something, Fromm argues, usually freedom from some kind of external constraint. This is the kind of freedom that men have struggled to achieve in the formation of democracy, he points out, which propose to guarantee freedom of speech, freedom of religious practice and other freedoms without interference. This freedom from external control is indeed freedom, Fromm writes, but it comes at a cost.

The more a person is free, Fromm argues, the less he is connected to others. Fromm uses the example of freedom of speech. When this freedom does not exist, nobody is able to express their own ideas freely. Once this freedom does exist and people are able to express themselves openly they become more aware that they do not feel and think the same way as others in their society. This contributes to a feeling of isolation from one's group, he claims. Many people choose to remain silent or to adopt the dominant ideas of their group rather than exercise their freedom. Thus the freedom itself becomes a constraint and a burden because the social structure does not fully support it.

Confronted with these new freedoms, people try to compensate, Fromm argues. They try to escape from the isolation and fear that freedom creates. This is what Fromm means by "escaping from freedom." Unable to cope with their isolation and fear, individuals seek to reconnect with their society by making themselves helpless and dependent on others. At the same time, they seek strength in their independence by making others dependent on them. Fromm calls this an "authoritarian" character, which he argues is at the root of the Fascist movement and the Nazi party.

This escape mechanism explains why people will willingly support a movement that is as morally repugnant as the Nazi movement appears to be, Fromm suggests. The Nazi party promises freedom from the fear and isolation that haunt modern Germans, he argues, but it is a false kind of freedom.

Fromm is careful to note that the political freedoms offered by democracies are positive freedoms, but they can still create the kind of fear and isolation that make a society susceptible to those who would manipulate it. To make these kinds of freedom complete, a society must support a positive development of the individual, Fromm claims. Only then will freedom be properly defined and realized.

Individual Character and Social Character

Central to Fromm's historical analysis is the idea that societies have characters just as individuals have characters. This allows historical movements and events to be analyzed from a psychological viewpoint much as one would analyze an individual person, Fromm believes. Furthermore, by examining the psychology of a typical member of a society, one can make inferences at the social level. Finally, Fromm suggests that the ailments of society can be treated by ensuring the true psychological satisfaction of its members.

Fromm is a practitioner of psychoanalysis, a field of psychology pioneered by Sigmund Freud. Fromm differs from Freud in many respects, however, which Fromm is careful to point out in his text. This view of the relatedness of individual and social character is one area in which Fromm departs from Freud. Freud believes that internal conflicts drive the development of a child's character into adulthood, with society playing an external, secondary role. Fromm argues that it is a child's first awareness of himself as apart from the rest of the world and the constraining influence of his society that forms his character as his primary ties to his mother and family are severed and he struggles to cope. As he tries to cope, he learns the behaviors that his society expects him to display in order to be a productive member of his society.

This begins a circular mechanism, Fromm argues. The social forces that encourage a person to conform to a certain set of beliefs and behaviors is a product of the society's social character. This social character is in turn a product of the collective characters of the society's typical members. In this way, both social and individual characters reinforce one another through successive generations.

Thus individual and social character are closely entwined, Fromm suggests. He writes, "In studying individual psychology as a basis for the understanding of social psychology, we do something which might be compared to studying an object under the microscope. This enables us to discover the very details of psychological mechanisms which we find operating on a large scale in the social process." (p. 136)

Fromm uses a similar method to analyze the Protestant movements of Martin Luther and John Calvin as well as the Nazi movement of Adolf Hitler. By making psychological examinations of these individuals based mostly on their own writings, Fromm attempts to determine their individual character and psychological motivations. He then applies his findings to an analysis of the movements led by these men

Capitalism, Work and Character

The most important factor guiding and diverting the development of individual and social character is the economic structure of a society, Fromm argues. This is because of a natural tendency among humans to define who we are by what we do. In other words, the nature of our work has a direct bearing on our individual character and psychology

and inasmuch as our work is determined by our economic conditions, economic structure is central to a society's psychological character.

Working is required in order to live, Fromm notes. To provide food and shelter for oneself, work must be done. In medieval times, Fromm writes, work was something that was done out of necessity because of outside forces. No person worked more than was required to meet their own needs, as there was no value placed on obtaining wealth for its own sake. The economy was one of small merchants and artisans who were defined as people by what their jobs were, Fromm argues. A baker was a baker, not a person working as a baker. He could be secure in this knowledge of his place in his economy and his society, Fromm suggests.

This relationship changes during the Reformation, Fromm argues. The doctrines of Luther and Calvin teach that each individual stands alone before God's authority and not as a member of a larger group. At the same time as the economy grows and capital begins to be concentrated among a smaller number of people, capitalism gains a foothold. Just as a person is an individual before God, a person is now an individual in the economy as well, an employee. Protestant ethics support this development by making work something valuable in itself.

As capitalism progresses into the modern age, individuation increases and economic classes develop, Fromm writes. As people become more an more isolated within their economy, the problems that Fromm attributes to this isolation become apparent. People begin to seek security by attempting to submit to authority while also gaining authority over others. When this condition is present, a society is prone to manipulation by authoritarian leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Fromm argues. Capitalism in particular creates this condition, Fromm argues, and in the final chapter of his book he calls for the creation of a planned economy based on socialism which will reconnect man with his work and prevent the fear and isolation that accompanies capitalism.

Style

Perspective

Fromm is a German writer of Jewish heritage who has left Germany because the Nazi Party has come to power. His assessment of the German social character, which is central to his argument, comes from a personal perspective of someone who was raised and educated in Germany. Likewise, he has a personal perspective on the rise of the Nazi Party which he witnesses before leaving the country. Writing in 1941, before the United States has entered the fighting in Europe, Fromm has seen Hitler's success but does not yet know the outcome of his aggressive campaign to conquer Europe.

Fromm is also a practicing psychoanalyst, and his political theories about social character are based on his perspective of human development. He argues that societies develop a character in the same way that individuals do and that they can be analyzed in much the same way. Fromm departs from Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalytic theory, in some important ways, however. His perspective reflects these important differences, which Fromm is careful to note in his book.

Fromm is also a Marxist thinker who believes that the economic structure of a society has a direct bearing on the development of individuals within the society, which in turn affects the social character of the society. His assessment of European history as well as his ideas about a future ideal democratic society are both informed by this Marxist perspective.

Tone

Fromm's tone is methodical and straightforward, even clinical at times, particularly when he is describing psychoanalytic assessments of human psychology. He frequently intersperses lively examples between these more clinical passages and the result is an engaging work that makes its main point effectively.

Fromm is often critical of modern society, especially popular culture as propagated by movies and advertisement. These have a detrimental effect on human and social character, he believes, and his contempt for them breaks through his otherwise measured prose.

Fromm is also critical of Sigmund Freud, the founder of the psychoanalytical method that Fromm expands upon in this book. Fromm does not dismiss Freud entirely, but occasionally mentions where his own ideas depart from those espoused by Freud, sometimes adding where he feels Freud drew incorrect conclusions.

Fromm's tone seems coldly analytical to a modern reader when he examines Hitler and his psychological manipulation which led to the rise of the Nazi Party. From a modern

perspective where the full extent of Hitler's rule is known, as well as his fate, Fromm's treatment is striking.

Structure

Fromm arranges his work in a generally chronological manner, tracing the origins of social character to the earliest civilization, following them through medieval history into the Renaissance, the Reformation era and finally into the modern age in which he is writing. The book is arranged in seven chapters plus an appendix, each addressing a specific time period or specific aspect of Fromm's argument. In Chapter I, " Freedom - a Psychological Problem?" Fromm lays out his definition of freedom and explains how it affects individuals and societies psychologically. In Chapter II Fromm traces the psychoanalytic development of the idea of the individual and the dual nature of "freedom." Chapter III looks at the origins of the idea of the individual as it emerges at the end of the medieval period and the Protestant Reformation led by Luther and Calvin and how these movements became psychologically attractive in the European societies where they first took hold. In Chapter IV, Fromm moves into the modern age and addresses the economic and social conditions that have arisen from this earlier chain of developments.

Chapter V is a slight digression from the timeline in which Fromm fills out his idea of man's need to "escape" the burden that individuality and freedom places on him. In Chapter VI, Fromm returns to the timeline to discuss events current to the book, specifically the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany, the success of which he ties partly to the psychological mechanisms described in the previous chapter. Chapter VII is a look ahead as Fromm attempts to define a democratic society that will encourage true freedom that is not a psychological burden on man or society.

Fromm adds an appendix to the work in which he gives more supporting argument to his assertion that a society can be said to have a character much as an individual does, and that individual psychology has direct influence over this social character.

Quotes

"Modern European and American history is centered around the effort to gain freedom from the political, economic and spiritual shackles that have bound men." p. 1

"However, submission is not the only way of avoiding aloneness and anxiety. the other way, the only one which is productive and does not end in an insoluble conflict, is that of spontaneous relationship to man and nature, a relationship that connects the individual with the world without eliminating his individuality." p. 29

"Thus the mode of life, as it is determined for the individual by the peculiarity of an economic system, becomes the primary factor in determining his whole character structure, because the imperative need for self-preservation forces him to accept the conditions under which he has to live." p. 16

"Our aim will be to show that the structure of modern society affects man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more independent, self reliant and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone and afraid." p. 104

"In the medieval system capital was the servant of man, but in the modern system it became his master." p. 110

"In any society the spirit of the whole culture is determined by the spirit of those groups that re most powerful in that society." p. 112

"Many a reader will raise the question whether findings won by the observation of individuals can be applied to the psychological understanding of groups. Our answer to this is an emphatic affirmation. Any group consists of individuals and nothing but individuals, and psychological mechanisms which we find operating in a group can therefore only be mechanisms that operate in individuals." p. 136

"No doubt with regard to its practical consequences the wish to be dependent or to suffer is the opposite of the wish to dominate and make others suffer. Psychologically, however, both tendencies are the outcomes of one basic need, springing from the inability to bear the isolation and weakness of one's own self." p. 156

"A great number of our decisions are not really our own but are suggested to us from the outside; we have succeeded in persuading ourselves that it is we who have made the decision, whereas we have actually conformed with expectations of others, driven by the fear of isolation and by more direct threats to our life, freedon and comfort." p. 197

"In contrast to the negative or resigned attitude of the working class and of the liberal and Catholic bourgeoisie, the Nazi ideology was ardently greeted by the lower strata of the middle class, composed of small shopkeepers, artisans, and white collar workers." p. 209

"Nazism never had any genuine political or economic principles. It is essential to understand that the very principle of Nazism is its radical opportunism." p. 218

"But although foreign and internal threats of Fascism must be taken seriously, there is no greater mistake and no graver danger than not to see that in our own society we are faced with the same phenomenon that is fertile soil for the rise of Fascism anywhere: the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual." p. 240

"We believe that the realization of the self is accomplished not only by an act of thinking but also by the realization of man's total personality, by the active expression of his emotional and intellectual potentialities. These potentialities are present in everybody; the become real only to the extent to which they are expressed. In other words, positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality." p. 257

Topics for Discussion

Fromm defines "freedom" in at least two distinct ways. What are these definitions and how do they differ?

How are figures like Martin Luther, John Calvin and Adolf Hitler similar in Fromm's estimation? How do they differ?

Fromm states his belief that societies have psychological characters just as individuals do. What implications does this have in Fromm's argument?

Fromm believes that a society's character is determined by the individual characters of its typical members. Is he justified in this belief? What support does he offer?

How does Fromm's view of history differ from Freud's according to Fromm?

What role do women play in Fromm's analysis of the importance of work? Does he address this adequately?

Does Fromm find anything of value in capitalism?

What does Fromm think of popular entertainment? What changes might he wish for in a more perfectly free society?