

ELEMENTS OF ERICH FROMM'S RADICAL HUMANISM IN THE WORK OF ALBERT CAMUS

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Abstract: The research attempts to identify how Fromm's biophilia may be found in Camus's works (essays and fiction). They both discuss man's destructiveness and freedom, and reject the idea of a human destiny dictated by destructive forces, concluding that any doctrine of absolute salvation should be regarded with suspicion.

Doctor Rieux's attitude (Camus, *The Plague*) shows that man's purpose could only be to diminish suffering in this world, as he is engaged in a never-ending defeat. Man's response to the menace of destruction should be awareness, availability to act, sincerity and love. Fromm distinguishes between defensive aggressiveness and malign forms of aggressiveness; the latter can be reduced by social-economic conditions favourable to human development. His confidence in humanity is based on a critical awareness of all the factors relevant for the survival of humans. This resembles Camus's attitude of avoiding the extremes, nihilist pessimism and facile optimism. Both thinkers promote a rational optimism regarding the future of human species, and consider freedom and solidarity as crucial issues; however Fromm thinks people are inclined to submit to authority, as liberation provokes fear and helplessness.

Both thinkers believe that the solutions are spontaneous love and productive co-operation as part of a "therapeutic method". For Camus negation and absurdity are only

premises for lucidity, revolt and the passion for living (an “optimistic” Camus). The absurd is not a creed for him, but a given; revolt is a practical life attitude. These consequences of the absurd seem compatible with Fromm’s relatedness, his belief in man’s need for a frame of orientation and devotion. Camus’s optimism may relate him to Fromm’s radical humanism. Keeping in mind the nuances in their approaches, we may conclude that Fromm’s biophilia could have as starting point only Camus’s rejection of murder and suicide as solutions or consequences of the absurd.

Keywords: biophilia, absurd, revolt, human destructiveness, freedom, aggressiveness, therapeutic.

I attempt to explore the hypothesis according to which we may speak about radical humanism¹ - in the sense used by the humanist psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm - in the work of the French writer Albert Camus. Radical humanism “considers that if man is alive, he knows what is allowed; to be alive means to be productive, to use one’s strengths not for a purpose transcending man, but for himself, to give a sense to his existence, to be fully human; as long as we think that the ideal and purpose are beyond us, i.e. beyond the clouds, in the past or in the future, we will step outside ourselves and will seek accomplishment where it cannot be found. We will imagine totally inappropriate solutions and answers, as they will be outside ourselves.”

Moreover, my research aims at identifying the way in which life affirmation or *biophilia*² (central concept in Fromm's psychoanalytical theory) may be found in Camus's essays - *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1951) , as well as in his novels *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947). Biophilia "is a productive psychological orientation, which contributes to the development of all individual's potentialities and favours love towards humanity and nature, as well as freedom and independence."

Douglas Puccini and Norman Elrod³ consider that there are two themes common to Erich Fromm and Albert Camus, with major importance in their work, i.e. **human destructiveness and individuals' liberty**; thus, they both analyse with most seriousness the issue of the individual's destructive capacity⁴ and the problem of the epoch's psycho-social maladies, as well as the fact that they are both extremely interested in the individuals' need to acquire and reach freedom. Neither Camus nor Fromm seem to accept in their works the idea of a human destiny dictated by destructive beings and they mainly focus on finding a system of thinking able to come to the support of life, capable to affirm it, criticising any form of destruction. For Fromm this affirmation of life comes from the application of the methods of his

psychoanalytical theory, from the passionate study of Orthodox Judaism, of Christianity and Zen Buddhism. For Camus it comes from the study of socialism, communism and Catholicism. The conclusion they both reach is the following: **any doctrine of salvation and redeeming, irrespective of its origin, should raise our suspicions.**

Camus and Doctor Rieux - therapy for psycho-social maladies

In the case of Camus , although he does not directly forward a form of therapy for the psycho-social ailments of the post- Second World War era, I think we may identify a possible solution in the attitude of his character from the novel *The Plague* (1947), Doctor Rieux. Rieux does not appear, according to Puccini and Elrod, as a saviour claiming to be able to solve all the problems; Camus's suggestion seems rather that the role of the doctor in *The Plague* is to heal the "illnesses on this earth"⁵, being engaged nevertheless in a *never-ending defeat*, as Camus himself confessed in a 1959 interview. I shall explore the idea according to which, for the French thinker, the purpose individuals should propose for themselves is to **diminish sufferings of this world**, without expecting that suffering or injustice disappear altogether.

The novel *The Plague* is truly relevant here as it represents an analysis both of individuals' capacity of destruction, and of the epoch's psycho-social ailments; the plague epidemic in Oran is the occasion to observe different ways of individuals' action: fear, indifference, courage, denial of reality, love for the others and solidarity with the threatened. Moreover, the plague may be interpreted not only as a symbol of the Nazi regime in Germany, but also as a **paradigm for human existence as such**, because human destructiveness is inevitably part of our world, as Camus seems to suggest.

I may thus affirm that what is important is the very attitude of individuals put in front of the possibility of destruction, and the attitude that seems appropriate to Camus may be illustrated by a sentence from *Letters to a German friend* (July 1943 - July 1944): "It means a lot to fight despising war, to accept to lose everything keeping the taste of happiness, to run towards destruction, carrying the idea of a superior civilisation."⁶ Moreover, I must also remark a quotation included by Puccini and Elrod in their article, as they draw together Camus's solution in the confrontation against evil and destruction with that included in Erich Fromm's psychoanalytical theory, and in psychoanalysis in general: "Each of us...must keep endless watch on ourselves."⁷ This watch supposes, according to Camus: **the observation of**

reality, as well as the control of impulses of a destructive type, redirecting them towards the very service of life. To act against a calamity of aggressiveness and destructiveness supposes reflection and awareness of the truth; Elrod and Puccini remark that for Camus the psycho-social illnesses come from ignorance and that is why the message of the novel *The Plague* may be read as follows: in order to fight against evil on this earth we need **knowledge and awareness, availability to act, sincerity and love.** Doctor Rieux is an individual who identifies himself with the disease-stricken, declaring his solidarity with them.

Fromm - human destructiveness and liberty

As for Fromm, he admits that **aggressiveness** is a biological given, which however does not manifest itself spontaneously, it appears as a result of a threat against individuals' vital interests: their own development, their own survival, but also the **survival of the species in general.** Fromm distinguishes between **biologically adaptative aggression** (innate, with benign character) and **destructiveness and cruelty** (acquired forms of aggressiveness, with malign character) in his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. The first one is called **defensive aggressiveness** and it is associated to the instinct of life and sexuality .Defensive

aggressiveness differs from the other type of aggressiveness by the fact it is not specific only to humans; on the other hand, **destructiveness and cruelty** are forms of aggressiveness lacking purpose. Fromm's expression is suggestive: **its satisfaction is lustful**. He also insists on the fact that human beings are different from the rest of beings by the fact they **kill** - they are the only primates who kill and torture members of their own species without a well-defined reason, and who experience satisfaction when they do it.

The malign forms of aggressiveness, says Fromm, can be reduced when the social-economic conditions are replaced by conditions favourable to human development according to man's real needs and capacities⁸. Empirical data nevertheless show a real possibility of building a different world only if the political and psychological blockages are removed. Thus, Fromm confesses to have a "rational faith"⁹ in man's capacity to eliminate the aforementioned blockages. His confidence in humanity¹⁰ is based on a critical knowledge and awareness of all the relevant factors as regards the conditions in which the human species can survive.

What we have here is the same attitude attributed to Camus by John Cruickshank¹¹, and Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu¹², i.e. the avoidance of the two extremes: **the nihilist extremism** (specific to Camus's epoch of creation) and

facile optimism of a past era. Both in Camus's and Fromm's case we may thus speak of a rational or reasonable optimism regarding the future of the human species. Camus himself affirms: "I do not believe in the definitive decay of our civilisation. I believe - obviously keeping, in this respect, nothing but reasonable illusions -, yes, I think a rebirth is possible."¹³

As regards Fromm, I must also point out that the way in which the issue of individuals' freedom takes shape for him is similar with that of Camus; for Fromm too, people mainly contribute to their own bondage and submission to different types of authority. Fromm talks about the individuation process, a term which describes the intense process of man's detachment from his original ties, from the surrounding universe, **getting aware** of the fact he is an entity distinct from the natural world created by divinity, but also different from the rest of individuals; each individual should acquire, during this liberation process, the freedom to act (positive **freedom**). Liberation (which is only **negative freedom**) brings about sentiments of fear and helplessness, hence the need for submission and finding new forms of dependency (religious fanaticism, the nationalism of the 20th century, etc.). In this situation, what Fromm calls in his psychoanalytical theory **to be one with the others as free individual**¹⁴ (in other words the oneness with others as

a free man) is replaced by the effort to be like the others, leading to submission and conformism.

I must also emphasize the fact that both Fromm and Camus draw the attention upon the necessity of *co-operation* among individuals, on people's capacity to ensure their survival *in common*, as opposed to an immersion into a compact mass in which the elements are not inter-differentiated. For both thinkers, **spontaneous love** and **productive co-operation**, as Puccini and Elrod put it, are essential in the fight against conformism and separation among individuals.

Returning to the novel *The Plague*, we should point out one of its critical moments, when Doctor Rieux, at the end of the epidemics, after having received the news of his wife's death, is capable to affirm that he can move on, that life can and must be continued. This critical point and its importance are explored also by Fromm in his studies, remarking, like Camus, the risk that in those moments individuals embrace extremes of thinking meant to grant them *salvation*, that is to take away the responsibility of carrying the burden of their own life.

The issue of the therapeutic method

If Fromm and Camus may be drawn together as regards the identification of psychosocial maladies after the Second World War, there may be certain problems regarding the “therapeutic method” forwarded by each of them, issues that I intend to approach with care in the analysis I am about to conduct. I consider it appropriate to speak about a therapeutic method in the case of Camus as well, because for him too it is extremely important that, after a philosophic analysis of the meaning of life and absurd, one may derive directions of action for individuals: “I am not a philosopher. I do not believe enough in reason to believe in a system. First of all I am interested in knowing how one should behave. And more precisely how one should act when one believes neither in God nor in reason. (...) **In all cases, it is not perfection we should try to reach, but balance and control.**”

Fromm, as Puccini and Elrod remark, offers rather concrete alternatives to the problems of aggressiveness and destructiveness; he is confident in the development of authentic love among individuals, approach which was not totally shared by Camus, the latter being reticent even towards his own capacity to love: “From time to time I accuse myself of being unable to love someone. And this may be

true, but I was capable of choosing a few persons whom I cherished in my heart the best I could, regardless of what they did.”

So, if Fromm rather thinks that we should keep in mind the entire duration of an individual's life (seen mainly as a patient), in the case of Camus we may say that he considered that as being self-deception. Furthermore, if Fromm thought he could see and transmit the entire range of real alternatives to the patient subjected to the psychoanalytical therapy, Camus would have doubted it, mentioning the unforeseen situations, the surprises, the accidents. The difference as regards strictly the therapeutic method originates in the fact that for Camus certainty does not represent a category of human life; it is possible, according to Puccini and Elrod, that Albert Camus would have accepted only the category of **probability**. We may nevertheless explain the difference by Fromm's rigour required by the direct therapeutic experience.

Premises of Albert Camus's optimism

Last but no least I return to an idea expressed above, i.e. that of the optimism of Camus's work. I consider it relevant in order to highlight the pertinence of drawing together Camus's and Fromm's way of thinking. Vasile Dem.

Zamfirescu considers that in the case of Camus pessimism, meaning *negation and absurdity*¹⁵ (present in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*), represents only a starting point, the two are only premises which, due to their presence in the French writer's epoch, cannot be ignored. The consequences of these premises are nevertheless *lucidity, revolt and the passion for living*: "Rejecting suicide in the condition of the absurd, the love for life, the trust in man and the possibility of his happiness entitle us to talk about an optimistic Camus."¹⁶ **The absurd does not represent a creed of Camus's work, but a given**; revolt is a practical life attitude, proven both logically and historically by Camus.

What is certain is that in the work *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1951), revolt essentially contains life as objective value, then human nature and solidarity. That puts us before a universality in which all men are mirrored and "suffering before the absurd becomes collective."¹⁷

To conclude, these consequences of the premises of the absurd are compatible with the solutions Erich Fromm presents within his psychoanalytical theory by introducing the individuals' need for *a frame of orientation and devotion* or the concept of *relatedness*. Most of individuals' desires may not be explained as having an instinctual basis, says Fromm. The absence of harmony between human

existence and the existence of the rest of nature generates needs transcending man's animal origin, such as the imperative to restore a lost unity and a balance between himself and nature; he also must create a reference mental frame from which he can derive answers related to his place in the world and the requirements of his specific position. I also consider that only starting from Camus's optimism we can legitimate the connection with Fromm's *radical humanism*. The affirmation of life can have as starting point only Camus's conclusion regarding the rejection of suicide or murder as consequences of the absurd.

Notes

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¹ Erich Fromm, *L'homme pour lui meme*, ed. Les editions sociales francaises, Paris, 1967, p.188

² It is a productive psychological orientation, which contributes to the development of all individual's potentialities and favours love towards humanity and nature, as well as freedom and independence.

³ In the article *Erich Fromm and Albert Camus - similarities and differences in their analysis of psycho social illness and its treatment*, International Conference "Erich Fromm - Psychoanalyst and Supervisor", Ascona, Switzerland, 4 - 5 April 1997.

⁴ Fromm does that in works such as *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973)

⁵ Douglas Puccini and Norman Elrod, *Erich Fromm and Albert Camus - similarities and differences in their analysis of psycho social illness and its treatment*, International Conference "Erich Fromm - Psychoanalyst and Supervisor", Ascona, Switzerland, 4 - 5 April 1997 , p.2

⁶ Albert Camus, *Essays*, Univers Editions, Bucharest, 1976, Romanian translation by Modest Morariu, *Letters to a German friend*, p.17

⁷ “each of us...must keep endless watch on ourselves.”, Douglas Puccini and Norman Elrod, *Erich Fromm and Albert Camus - similarities and differences in their analysis of psycho social illness and its treatment*, International Conference “Erich Fromm - Psychoanalyst and Supervisor”, Ascona, Switzerland, 4 - 5 April 1997, p.3

⁸ **“To the development of human self-activity and man’s creative power as its own end”**, E. Fromm - *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, ed. Penguin Books, New York, 1984, p.576

⁹ He distinguishes between *rational faith* (faith based on the clear awareness of relevant data in order to believe a certain thing), and *irrational faith* (faith based on an illusion created by man’s desires)

¹⁰ **He has: “rational faith in man’s capacity to extricate himself from what seems the fatal web of circumstances he has created.”**, E. Fromm - *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, ed. Penguin Books, New York, 1984, p.547

¹¹ In *Albert Camus and the literature of revolt*, Oxford University Press, London, 1959

¹² In *Ontic Injustice (Philosophic Attempts)*, Trei Editions, 1995, essay “Albert Camus’s Optimism” (in original in Romanian)

¹³ Albert Camus, *Essays*, Univers Editions., Bucharest, 1976, Romanian translation by Modest Morariu, “Excerpts from interviews”, p.378

¹⁴ “The oneness with others as a free man is replaced by being similar to others”, Puccini and Elrod, *op.cit.*, p.4

¹⁵ **The absurd** is defined by Camus as: “the divorce between man and his life, between actor and his set.”, in Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Rao Editions, Bucharest 2001, Romanian translation by Irina Mavrodin and Modest Morariu, p.115 - it is at the same time an affective and an intellectual state, placing the individual before an incoherent world, that cannot be understood.

¹⁶ Vasile Dem.Zamfirescu, *The Ontic Injustice: Philosophic Attempts*, Trei Editions, 1995, essay “Albert Camus’s Optimism”, p.30 (in original in Romanian)

¹⁷ Vasile Dem.Zamfirescu *The Ontic Injustice: Philosophic Attempts*, Trei Editions, 1995, essay “Albert Camus’s Optimism”, p.35 (in original in Romanian)

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