



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij

Social barriers to biophilia: Merging structural and ideational explanations for environmental degradation



Ryan Gunderson*

Department of Sociology, 316 Berkey Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 July 2013

Received in revised form 8 June 2014

Accepted 8 June 2014

Available online 29 June 2014

Keywords:

Erich Fromm

Environmental sociology

Critical theory

ABSTRACT

Erich Fromm argues that the only reliable way to solve the environmental crisis is to alter current social formations in a way in which biophilia can flourish, so humankind can solve its existential dichotomy as well as meet survival needs in an ecologically sound way. However, society's preoccupation with the non-alive—elements such as technique, the mechanical, gadgets, and commodities—shows that the modern social character is far from biophilous. Instead, modern societies are inherently ecologically destructive due to systematic processes and attraction to its progress is a less acute form of, what Fromm terms, necrophilia. His insights can help formulate a social theory of environmental degradation that includes structural and ideational variables. Prescriptively, this means appeals for value changes must correspond with fitting appeals for structural changes in social systems.

Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of Western Social Science Association.

1. Introduction: biophilia and its alternative

The elemental underpinnings of Erich Fromm's social thought hold that human beings must (a) interact with the environment to achieve self-preservation and (b) solve an existential dichotomy at an individual and social level.¹ The latter human imperative results from being part of the natural world yet transcending it via self-awareness and reason, an anthropology described and reworked in countless ways in the East and West since ancient times. The tension resulting from humankind's existential dichotomy is the reason for the menacing experiences of lostness, meaninglessness, and insignificance, fears that one can reasonably assume would not occur without the capacity for self-reflection, as described well by Albert Camus

(1955, p. 38): “[i]f I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem [the experience of meaninglessness] would not arise, for I should belong to this world.” Humanity's existential dichotomy and the corresponding threat of aloneness and meaninglessness result in a psychological drive to restore unity with nature and other humans (Fromm, 1947, p. 55). The best way to go about meeting this existential need for unity is through the development and perfection of the human capacity for biophilia: “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive; . . . the wish to further growth, whether in a person, a plant, an idea, or a social group” (Fromm, 1973, p. 406, cf. 1964).² Developing and perfecting the potentiality of biophilia—a vision similar to Albert Schweitzer's (1960, pp. 307ff) reverence for life ethics—would establish a reconciliatory mode of

* Tel.: +1 517 355 6640.

E-mail address: rgunder@msu.edu

¹ These ideas are presented in all of Fromm's major works. Perhaps the best overview is the third section of *Man for Himself* (1947), entitled “Human Nature and Character.”

² A roughly comparable though distinct notion of biophilia was later presented in E.O. Wilson's award-winning *Biophilia* (1984). However, Wilson's notion is more reductionist, non-sociological, and theorizes a natural need to “emotional affiliate” with life as opposed to *loving* living beings, proper (Wilson, 1993, p. 31).

relatedness to the natural world while also maintaining the progressive aspects of humanity's cultural evolution (Gunderson, 2014). Further, a biophilous social character would allow survival needs to be met without destroying the natural environment in the process by radically reorganizing society in line with security, justice, and freedom (Fromm, 1964, p. 52) so the appropriation of the biophysical world may be done in a non-destructive way. However, social structures not only stand in the way of biophilia, but distort and maim humanity's existential need to establish a new harmony with the natural world.

The stunted development of biophilia fashions an antagonistic tendency in humanity's character structure and social systems, an affinity for the non-alive and mechanical. Fromm sees environmental destruction as connected to these outgrowths of, what he terms, necrophilia. The primary purpose of this essay is to explicate Fromm's unique theory of environmental destruction as derived from his sociological and social psychological systems. The present study argues his theory of environmental degradation can contribute to the environmental social sciences in two ways. First, Fromm's notion of necrophilia as a characterological and social structural category helps integrate prominent explanatory frameworks in environmental sociology. His theory of environmental destruction rests on his notion of social character as an intermediary between material conditions and ideology, which aids in conceptualizing the links that exist between objective social structural processes that lead to environmental harm and ideational reasons for environmental harm. To date, neo-Marxist models of human–nature relations have not systematically theorized how structural processes are reproduced in the ideas and actions of individuals and groups, which can be corrected with Fromm's theory of necrophilia as built upon his notion of social character. Second, Fromm's theory has important normative implications. Although he provides a moral vision for a biophilous society, he focuses on explaining the social preconditions needed for such a society and illuminating the structural barriers that stand in the way. Prescriptively, this means appeals for value changes must correspond with fitting appeals for structural changes in social systems. There is a reason Fromm's work was an inspiration for the early Green movement (Burston, 1991, p. 5), and it ought to be rediscovered and reassessed on similar grounds.

2. Environmental destruction as a consequence of a necrophilous society

Fromm sees a variety of reasons for the failure of advanced industrial capitalism's goals. One of the chief reasons for the failure of what he terms "The Great Promise of Unlimited Progress" is due to the reality of natural limits. In his last great treatise, *To have or to be?* (1976), Fromm explores many of the works that helped establish modern environmentalism, including the Club of Rome commissioned *The limits to growth* (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972) and *Mankind at the turning point* (Mesarovic & Eduard, 1974). In these reports, Fromm finds ecological

footing for what he has maintained since the 1940s: humankind must develop a new and non-destructive unity with nature to solve its existential dichotomy. The reports merely express the fact that humankind has failed to do so in an ecologically disastrous way. The failure of the reports, however, are the abstract and depersonalizing methodology and, connected to this, the exclusion of political and social factors in conceptualizing the creation and solution to ecological degradation. Although the reports are right to claim that humanity must develop a new ethic toward nature, their assumptions undermine this call. Without the social and political variables to guide the reports, which means questioning the basic values and structures of industrial societies, it is unsatisfactory and naïve to argue for a new ethic toward nature.

Right living is no longer only the fulfillment of an ethical or religious demand. For the first time in history the *physical survival of the human race depends on a radical change of the human heart*. However, a change of the human heart is possible only to the extent that drastic economic and social changes occur that give the human heart the chance for change and the courage and the vision to achieve it. (Fromm, 1976, p. xxxi)

However, contemporary society does not hold the social and political prerequisites necessary for a biophilous change of heart. There is an opposing trend developing in contemporary society: that of a necrophilous social character and social system.

Necrophilia, a term usually used to describe sexual attraction to and/or relations with corpses, is used by Fromm (1973, p. 369, emphasis removed) more broadly to describe "the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion to tear apart living structures." Less acute necrophilous tendencies are seen in today's cybernetic humanity, distinguished by a lack of feeling, the spread of bureaucracies, and a distorting and limiting need for abstraction and quantification (Fromm, 1964, p. 59; cf. 1973, p. 387). All of these characteristics correspond to industrial society's preoccupation with technique—a focus on means and methodology at the expense of formulating substantive end goals—and the mechanical: "this attraction to the non-alive, which is in its more extreme form is an attraction to death and decay (necrophilia), leads even in its less drastic form to indifference toward life" (Fromm, 1968, p. 44). Although necrophilia is formulated as an individual and social psychological category, Fromm (1973, p. 387) speaks of technocratic, consumer capitalism as a necrophilous society. That is, necrophilia describes the contemporary social character's attraction to the non-alive as well as the structure and processes of modern social systems (Fromm, 1973, p. 390).

The results of a necrophilous society are manifested in ecological crises as well as the inability to do anything about them (Fromm, 1976, p. 138). Modern societies are environmentally destructive and its leaders are prepared to continue in the name of progress.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/140053>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/140053>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)