

## **The idea of the “Escape from freedom” of Erich Fromm in light of post-industrial and globalization changes of modern societies: a theoretical analysis**

The article analyzes the idea of the “escape from freedom” of Erich Fromm in the context of globalization and post-industrial transformations of modern Western societies. It determines the destructive character of socioeconomic and psychological tendencies, which follow these transformations and establishes their connection with the idea of the escape from freedom”. It is argued that this idea preserves its topicality and heuristic potential for the analysis of contemporary political and social challenges in the conditions of post-industrial, consumerist democracy.

*Keywords:* “Escape from Freedom”, globalization, post-industrial society, authoritarianism, democracy.

## **Konceptcja „Ucieczki od wolności” E. Fromma w świetle przemian globalizacyjnych i postindustrialnych współczesnego społeczeństwa: analiza teoretyczna**

W artykule przeanalizowano koncepcję „ucieczki od wolności” Ericha Fromma w kontekście przemian globalizacyjnych i postindustrialnych współczesnych, zachodnich społeczeństw. Dokonano deskrypcji destruktywnego charakteru społeczno-ekonomicznych i psychologicznych tendencji towarzyszących tym przemianom, a także określono ich związek z analizowaną koncepcją. Postawiono uargumentowaną tezę, iż w warunkach postindustrialnej „demokracji konsumpcyjnej”, „ucieczka od wolności” zachowuje aktualność i potencjał heurystyczny dla analizy politycznych i społecznych wyzwań współczesności.

*Słowa kluczowe:* „Ucieczka od wolności”, globalizacja, społeczeństwo postindustrialne, autorytaryzm, demokracja.

## **Концепція "Втечі від свободи" Е. Фромма у світлі глобалізаційних і постіндустріальних трансформацій сучасного суспільства: теоретичний аналіз**

у статті проаналізовано концепцію «втечі від свободи» Е. Фромма у контексті глобалізаційних і постіндустріальних трансформації сучасних західних суспільств. Обґрунтовано деструктивний характер соціально-економічних і психологічних тенденцій, які супроводжують дані трансформації, й визначено їх зв'язок з концепцією «втечі від свободи». Аргументовано, що в умовах постіндустріальної, «споживацької» демократії ця концепція зберігає свою актуальність і евристичний потенціал для аналізу політичних та соціальних викликів сучасності.

*Ключові слова:* «Втеча від свободи», глобалізація, постіндустріальне суспільство, авторитаризм, демократія.

Erich Fromm's work *The Escape from Freedom* postulates two fundamental issues. First of all, it reveals on the basis of psychoanalysis the most deep-laid psychological determinants of human behavior, and on this ground maintains the close relationship between psychology and political activity. Secondly, it outlines the ways of establishment of human freedom in the past and on this basis tries to foresee the future of the Western civilization. Despite the book has been written before World War II, it is as relevant in our time as it was half a century ago, since the development of European and American society during this time confirmed the majority of Fromm's surmises and monitions, and the threat of the re-establishment of totalitarian regimes in the XXI century, in light of the acts of terrorism in September 2001, does not seem so vague as it was presumed by the philosopher-liberal in the beginning of 1990s. Furthermore, the progress of technology and means of communication, globalization and worldwide modernization have caused the most tremendous and rapidly ongoing destruction of those traditional ties and cultural patterns that had formerly determined the lifestyle of most societies on our planet. Under such conditions as the feelings of estrangement and loneliness of a person and the sense of losing oneself in the pitiless world of inhumane market mechanisms, is perhaps stronger and more palpable than ever before. It concerns not only economically undeveloped countries of the Third World, but successful countries in the West as well. The success and growing popularity of different nationalistic, extremist and fundamentalist religious slogans, that are nowadays observed in almost all regions of the planet (Ukraine is no exception), have at least related origins, if not a common source. The idea of "the escape from freedom" can therefore be viewed as a key to understand those threats and challenges

to democracy that emerged before mankind on the threshold of the XXI century. But first of all we should briefly outline the contents of this fundamental work.

Erich Fromm, analyzing the phenomenon of totalitarianism, explains it as a joint effect of psychological and historical factors. According to Fromm, the traditional type of society, which had been dominant from ancient times until the Renaissance, could be characterized, first of all, by close ties between an individual and the community to which he belonged. The community – either a kin or a city state – via solidarity between its members, vouched for the feeling of safety and security in the day-to-come. At the same time it regulated the activity of each of its members and it deprived them of their ability to act and to live the way they wanted. The New Time, according to Erich Fromm, marked an overturn of the world of values. The focus of an individual's world view was no longer a community with its traditional ties, but an individual with inalienable value of his freedom<sup>1</sup>. The crucial moment of transition to the modern thinking and public organization was marked by the Reformation, which displaced the church as a mediator between man and God and put the former face to face with the Latter. The ideals of the Reformation which emphasize an individual as the sole subject of responsibility before God have found their embodiment in the idea of Calvinism and its doctrine of salvation through permanent labor. This was the exact ideology that underpinned the market mechanisms of the modern societies. Taking this into account, there can be drawn a certain parallel between the views of Fromm and those of Max Weber who also viewed the capitalist relations through the prism of Protestant ethics. However, Erich Fromm argues that having given an individual freedom and the possibility to live of his own free will, the market economy and the ethic system attached to it, simultaneously deprived him of his affiliation with a community and the feeling of safety and certainty in the future. Freedom under such circumstances has become a burden for a man, and this calls forth a natural desire to exchange it for the primeval ties of group sameness. The psychological background of this desire is also constituted by sadomasochistic impulses which are regarded by Fromm as an instinctive need to rule or to obey power. These very factors are primary cause of totalitarian regimes, the formation of which is first of all the result of human longing to cast down the burden of freedom, or as Fromm had stated, to escape from it.

The focus of Fromm's analysis thus appears the problem of man and his interaction with the outer world, and this implies a whole number of problems of political theory. Let us outline some of them. Aren't the political values and institutes of modernity, which are, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the subject of the global cultural consensus, in reality threatened by the psychological alienation of man which they indirectly call forth?<sup>1</sup> If yes, do democracy and political freedom that underlies it at all correspond with the anthropological nature of

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<sup>1</sup> З. Бжезінський, Демократія перса лицем глобалізації, «І» (незалежний культурологічний часопис), 2000 nr. 19, s. 42

man? Or maybe traditional, or "closed" as Karl Popper called them<sup>2</sup>, societies provide a more natural environment for human life and work than democracy, which lays on the wearisome burden of freedom?

"The Escape from Freedom" makes us once more return to those questions, which have seemingly been answered long ago. However, it should be noticed, that Fromm's theoretical conclusions on the nature of man have also found their empirical corroboration. The controversial socio-psychological experiment, realized under the guidance of Stanley Milgram in 1960s, discovered the unexpected propensity of a man to manifest cruelty and sadism. Reflecting upon the results of the experiment, Milgram asserted that if concentration camps, similar to those of the Nazi, had been opened in the United States, their personnel could have been recruited out of the inhabitants of any average town<sup>3</sup>. If the impulses from the "dark part" of the human mind are so strong, the stability of our political regimes is in fact illusory. The psychology of the masses can thus be likened to a sleeping volcano that is about to explode at any moment with the fire of dictatorship and totalitarianism<sup>3</sup>. The tendencies of globalization constitute a good ground for such an explosion. Let us discuss some of them.

The estrangement of man from the community, with which he is connected by traditional ties, is according to Fromm, the starting point to of the rise of totalitarian forms of power. In modern time it is the civil society that forms the above mentioned "traditional ties". According to the sociological research data, the civil society of western countries came to a period of progressive decline in the second half of the XX century. The article of Robert Putnam "Playing skittles alone: the decline of American social capital" presents convincing evidence, how the number of civil institutes in the USA has rapidly shortened: the number of members of the civil organizations has shrunk by more than half over past four decades – from 32,5% in 1953 to 15,2% in 1992; the regular church attendance rating fell from 48% in the 1950s to 41% in the end of the 1970s; the number of members of Parent-Teacher Associations decreased from more than 12 million in 1964 to less than 5 million in 1982 etc<sup>4</sup>. The decrease of participation according to Putnam has more or less affected virtually all independent civil organizations in the USA. Among the reasons which had caused the mentioned metamorphosis Putnam named the switch of women from the domestic sphere to the professional, the growing preference toward technical forms of spending one's leisure time, the growing social mobility of the population and different social factors (for example, the increase of the number of divorces with the concomitant decrease of the number of marriages). All these factors were determined by economic, cultural and technological reasons, which follow the post-industrial transformations of society. Thus, it can be stated, that the sole alternative for the declining civil society

<sup>2</sup> К. Поппер, *Закрите суспільство і його вороги*, Київ 1994, s. 444.

<sup>3</sup> Conscience and authority," <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/conscience.html> (ogłądane 6.10.2014).

<sup>4</sup> Р. Патнем, *Гра в кеглі наодинці: занепад соціального капіталу Америки*, «І» (незалежний культурологічний часопис), 2001 nr. 20, s. 34-35.

seems to be an atomized society of aloof, socially indifferent individuals that can be re-integrated into some wholeness only by a totalitarian political myth.

The next factor which intensifies the feeling of estrangement and urges a man “to escape from his freedom” is presented by the way in which post-industrial economics is organized. Alvin Toffler in his famous books suggested that in the second half of the XX century took place the transition from the society of “smoking pipes” to the society of “the third wave”. The post-industrial “super-symbolic” economics, which is grounded on the high intellectual abilities of its agents, creates, its own kind of class antagonism. If the industrial era, according to Marx, was characterized by rivalry between classes that had been brought about by unequal possession of property, the post-industrial era in turn, makes a sharp distinction between people with high and low intellectual abilities.<sup>5</sup> Following the massive implementation of technologies in industry, labor becomes more and more highly intelligent. In our opinion, there are two issues of concern about this. Firstly, it threatens to produce groups of “redundant” people, who are unable to realize themselves in the sharp every-day vying. Secondly, it raises too high demands for a man himself. Besides this, according to Herbert Marcuse’s suggestion<sup>5</sup>, the post-industrial economics exploits not only the physical powers of man, but his mental and emotional powers as well, and from this point of view is even more oppressive than any former class formation had ever been.

Freedom thus becomes a burden for the majority of people, since it demands from them very high intellectual capabilities, a certain set of distinctive features, necessary for an individual to succeed, and strong will power to develop those features. The popularity of diverse youth extremist movements (anarchist, Neonazis etc.) in our opinion can be viewed in the light of the estrangement of person in particular under the post-industrial economic conditions.

Above we tried to examine conditions of “the escape from freedom” idea within framework of a certain society. It should be noticed, however, that one of the major features of the social process of our time is represented by globalization, i. e. by the destruction of national borders and the formation of the unified global community. Without exaggeration it can be stated, that globalization is the exact factor that to a great extent begets the above mentioned feeling of estrangement and the desire to “escape from freedom”. These feelings swell in proportion to the level of involvement of a society in the global economic and cultural discourse. Robert Dal in his article “The Shift of Borders of the Democratic Governments”<sup>6</sup> stressed the historical regularity of enlargement of the social environment toward broader spatial structures. If such structure in the Ancient times could be compared to a city-state, in the New time it became identical with a national state. It would be natural therefore to foresee that this tendency would last as far as to create the unified world community under the common

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<sup>5</sup> Г. Маркузе, *Одновимірна людина*, Москва 2006, 526 с.

<sup>6</sup> Р. Даль, *Зміна меж демократичного правління*, «І» (незалежний культурологічний часопис), 2001, пг. 20, с. 34-48

political rule. However, the processes, observable nowadays in world politics, not only bear no constructive potential for this but nurture tendencies almost contrary. It takes place most of all due to the lack at the level of global cultural interchange of that traditional, archetypal legitimization that characterizes both a city-state and a national state of the modern time. In this context we should pay attention to Jurgen Habermas's theory of the formation of democratic forms of government in the New time and the formation of the concept of the ethnic nation at the same time, which he regarded as two sides of the single process. "The idea of the ethnic nation presumes, Habermas argues, that the demos of citizens must be rooted in the ethos of compatriots in order for it to stabilize as a political association of free and equal bearers of civil rights. The pale "workshop" opinion about constitutional patriotism cannot replace the "healthy national consciousness." This concept of constitutional patriotism is thus suspended. The appeal to the nation, to the "we-consciousness" that is included within it and can bind emotionally, therefore cannot be omitted"<sup>7</sup>. The ethnic nation as an "imaginary society", according to Benedict Anderson's definition<sup>8</sup>, exists within democratic states of the New Time and, providing their integrity, actually can be regarded as an archetypal idea of kin enlarged to the scope of a nation-state. The ethnic nation provides an emotional solidarity in society, and in this aspect its socializing function is identical to Fromm's "traditional ties", that endow a man with the feelings of safety and affiliation with a community. The processes of globalization in their turn do not constitute such irrational legitimization in the world-wide scope; at the same time the directions of their development do destroy the traditional national environment, dissolving it in the global cultural discourse. Thus, following the extent of openness of society to the global influences, the low-grade ersatzes of mass culture supplant the traditional national values and, cultivating the crisis of identity, intensify the social atomization. The spiritual void that in such a way inevitably appears will try to heal itself by radical nationalist or religious fundamentalist slogans which are potent enough to ruin individual freedom and human rights. In fact, under such conditions the society would rather sacrifice its liberty than lose its national identity.

Except the atomization of civil society, the class polarization on the basis of intellectual factor, and the erosion of ethnic culture, there is one more weighty factor of the transition to the society of secondary (ideological) kind of integrity which the globalization entails and we should pay attention to. We mean the growing ideologization and propagation of political myths and radical political sentiments in majority of the poor societies of the World. As Zbigniew Brzezinski suggests, "The spread of literacy and especially the effect of the means of communications have caused the unprecedented growth of political consciousness of the masses that have become more susceptible to the emotional attraction of nationalism, social

<sup>7</sup> Ю. Габермас, *Залучення іншого*, Львів 2005, с.190

<sup>8</sup> Б. Андерсон, *Уявна спільнота*, Київ 2001, с. 272

radicalism and religious fundamentalism. The attraction of these ideas is also raised by better information about the differences in welfare status of different countries that provokes the comprehensible feelings of envy, enmity and indignation toward what may be called a hedonism of the privileged. Thus with each day it becomes easier to mobilize the poor and the oppressed<sup>9</sup>. This process calls to live the revolutionary situation, about which the Marxist theorists wrote, when the masses become conscious of their oppressed state and spurn the existing status quo. The ruination of the traditional social ties is thus accompanied by the process of understanding of an ethnos of its status in the World and of the inequality in material well-being. This in its turn creates a good ground for susceptibility of an ideology – a revolutionary self-consciousness of masses. The nature of these processes is different but their result is common – the formation of the totalitarian society of the secondary social ties.

But is it appropriate to speak in this context about the escape from freedom? Is this thesis applicable to the traditional societies, whose life had been for ages suppressed by patrimonial customs and despotic rules and which now believed in nationalist and religious fundamentalist soteriological formulas? In our opinion, we should speak here about the escape from potential freedom – the freedom that has not already come to being, but has the potential to do so, due to common actions that should be taken by the developed and the developing countries. The dilemma which now appears before the latter consists in their choice between democracy which bears its fruits only in the long historical perspective and totalitarianism which forms the illusion of instantaneous solving of all the problems of society and demands this illusion be paid for in blood.

Regarding the aforesaid, we approached the crucial moment in this paper. Are there any alternatives to the society of freedom, such as the society of total equality, the society of pure blood or many other resembling “societies” that have been for ages postulated by the theorists of different utopian teachings starting with Ancient Greece? The answer is clear: there is no other alternative for the society of human rights. History serves as a confirmation to this thesis and it demands no metaphysical arguments for its favor. In this case why could freedom be a burden, and is there a possibility to cast down the burden and preserve freedom at the same time? Erich Fromm answers the following: “Submission is not the single way to avoid loneliness and anxiety. The other way – the only fruitful one, which leads to no insoluble conflicts – is the way of spontaneous connections between people and Nature. I mean such connections that unites a man with Nature without harming his individuality. Love and creative work are the most noble manifestations of such connections, which are rooted in the plenitude of an integral personality. That’s why they not only unbind human personality but encourage its development to its supreme level<sup>10</sup>.”

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<sup>9</sup> З. Бжезінський, Вибір: світове панування чи світове лідерство, Київ 2006, с. 48

<sup>10</sup> Э. Фромм, Бегство от свободы, Москва 2009, с. 33

Freedom is neither the Hobbesian war of all against all, nor even a softened kind of this war in the form of market competition. Such freedom, with the motto of "each man for himself" perhaps truly is an unbearable burden. True freedom is in our opinion, a dialog between You and Me in which You as well as I, are not purely independent entities only (for example, as bearers of abstract rights), but are bound by those spiritual chains which, according to Vladimir Solovyov, make Me see in You the same absolute quality which it due to its egoism is prone to see only in itself. In other words, only that society may be considered to be really free, in which the concept of "thou shalt not kill" is followed by the concept "thou shalt love thy neighbor". Applying this thesis to our time, we will not be mistaken to suggest that only in the case of a dialog between countries, nations and cultures, in which along with preservation of each of its identities, their unification around values common to all mankind will have taken place, any appeal to "escape from freedom", any sermon of violence or dictatorship will be condemned and thrown off like myth. Globalization has for the first time in history created conditions to make such dialog possible and, according to the Pope's John Paul II conviction, "is *a priori* neither good, nor bad but will be such as people will make it"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Przemówienie Jana Pawła II w Papieskiej Akademii Nauk Społecznych 27 kwietnia 2001 roku. Cytowane według З. Бжежинський, Вибір: світове панування чи світове лідерство, s.136