

Economic questions: the Erich Fromm Question

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This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).

After the first two posts in this series, the topics have been chosen by me, and this is one of those. This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

Why have I included Erich Fromm in this series? The immediate reason is that I wrote a post yesterday, entitled '[What to do?](#)' Jacqueline read it and assumed I would reference Fromm - whom we have both read - rather than Voltaire, and so he featured in our conversations during the day. The result was that it became apparent that Fromm had to appear in this series for two reasons.

The first is that he very obviously cared - and that is a key feature of my work now.

The second is that he asked the key question: 'What is there to do about what is wrong?' That is fundamental because in a world where most supposed thinkers simply note issues, but do not go further to look for solutions, Fromm had the courage to do just that: he looked for answers. That is why he is here.

Erich Fromm is often presented as a critic of capitalism, a psychoanalyst of consumer society, and a writer on alienation and fear. That is all true. But it misses the sharpest point of his work. Fromm believed that a diagnosis without a remedy is an evasion. The question he repeatedly returns to is not merely 'why are we sick?', but 'what do we do now?' That question might be summarised as 'What to do?'

In '**The Sane Society, To Have or To Be?**', and elsewhere, Fromm argues that

modern economic life systematically undermines the conditions for human flourishing.

It replaces genuine freedom with market discipline.

It replaces love with possession.

It replaces meaning with status.

And it replaces security with chronic uncertainty.

He insists this is not a private tragedy; it is a structural failure. Societies that produce mass mental distress are not healthy societies, no matter how wealthy they appear.

Fromm, therefore, forces political economy into the realm it too often tries hardest to avoid: ethics, mental health, and the purpose of life.

Hence the Erich Fromm Question: ***If we can see that modern society is making people anxious, isolated and psychologically unwell, what are we going to do about it, and why does our political economy seem incapable of even asking the question?***

The refusal to ask the right question

Fromm's first claim was brutal in its simplicity. He suggested that modern societies often treat symptoms as individual failures rather than social outcomes.

Depression becomes a personal weakness.

Anxiety becomes bad coping.

Loneliness becomes a lifestyle.

Burnout becomes a lack of resilience.

Fromm insisted that we should reverse our questioning of causality. His suggestion was that if millions are suffering, the issue is not their inadequacy but the system's design. He argued that a society that normalises distress is not neutral but is organised in a way that generates distress.

So '***what to do?***' begins with a refusal: a refusal to accept that mass suffering is natural, inevitable, or private.

A sane society must be designed

Fromm's '**what to do?**' is anchored in a radical proposition, which is that sanity is not merely psychological, it is social. A sane society is one that produces people who can love, reason, cooperate and feel secure enough to be free.

That means sanity cannot be reduced to therapy. It is a political economy question. It depends on how:

- * work is organised,
- * housing is secured,
- * care is distributed,
- * inequality is tolerated,
- * people are valued,

and whether life is treated as sacred or expendable.

Fromm's critique is not that capitalism creates unhappiness incidentally, but that it often requires it, because anxious, status-driven people are profitable.

The shift Fromm demands: from "having" to "being"

Fromm's central prescription is cultural and economic: societies must shift from the mode of '**having**' (ownership, status, control, consumption) to the mode of '**being**' (relationship, creativity, solidarity, meaning).

This is not a lifestyle slogan. It is an economic programme. A society oriented to 'having' will:

- *
- commodify everything it can,
- *
- treat nature as a store of inputs,
- *
- treat people as market actors,
- *
- treat worth as measurable in money.

A society oriented to 'being' will instead treat:

*
care as essential infrastructure,

*
leisure as human necessity,

*
community as wealth,
*
nature as belonging, not property.

This is Fromm's '**what to do?**' at its heart: we should redesign economic life to support human development rather than market addiction.

The problem of freedom: we fear it

Fromm's earlier argument in '**Escape from Freedom**' becomes central here. His argument is that many people say they want freedom, but emotionally struggle with it. Freedom is uncertain. It demands responsibility. It exposes loneliness. It removes excuses.

So people often flee freedom into conformity:

- * obedience,
- * consumption,
- * bureaucracy,
- * authoritarianism,
- * identity tribes.

This is why '**what to do?**' cannot just be institutional reform. It must also be moral and educational reform to help people become capable of freedom rather than to merely be consumers, trained to comply.

Fromm's point is uncomfortable: political economy fails when character fails, and the society we live in does not want character to develop.

Work: the pivot of reform

Fromm places enormous emphasis on work, because it is where the economy most

directly shapes the soul. He argued that work can be:

- * meaningful,
- * cooperative,
- * creative,
- * socially valuable.

Or it can be:

- * humiliating,
- * alienating,
- * insecure,
- * empty.

Fromm insists that a society organised around profit extraction will degrade work, because it treats labour as a cost. A society organised around human development must treat work as a human activity, not an industrial input.

His '**what to do?**' **does**, therefore, include an implicit demand, which is that we redesign work so that people are not broken by the economy that claims to serve them.

What answering the Erich Fromm Question would require

Fromm's '**what to do?**' is not technocratic. It is transformational. It would require at least that:

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Economic security becomes a baseline, meaning that no one is trapped in fear of hunger, homelessness or medical catastrophe.

*

We revalue care, not as a private burden but as the central public good.

*

We place limits on inequality because extreme wealth concentrations produce submission, envy, resentment and civic collapse.

*

Life be democratised, meaning that democracy be understood as something much more than voting, but that it be integrated into life by granting people a voice in workplaces and communities.

*

Human worth must be decommodified, requiring that education, health, dignity, and belonging must not depend on market success.

*

There must be cultural resistance to consumerism by replacing status competition with social purpose.

These steps do not reject economics. They redefine its goal to become the production of healthy human beings in a stable world.

Inference

The Erich Fromm Question exposes a deep cowardice in modern political economy, which is its refusal to ask what society is for. Fromm insists the proper aim of civilisation is not maximum output but human flourishing, represented by the development of loving, creative, rational, and secure people capable of freedom.

'**What to do?**' therefore becomes a test of seriousness. If we continue to organise society in ways that produce mass alienation and psychological harm, it is not because we do not know better. It is because we are afraid to challenge the institutions that profit from sickness.

Fromm's '**what to do?**' is ultimately simple, and deeply demanding: we must build an economy that makes sane lives possible.

Previous posts in this series:

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- * [Economic questions: The Mark Carney Question](#)
- * [Economics questions: The Keynes question](#)
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