

On the Feeling of Powerlessness

**Erich Fromm
(1937a)**

Authorized translation from the German by Susan Kassouf



*On the Feeling of Powerlessness is a significant essay in many respects. It is the last essay that Fromm wrote in German (under the title *Zum Gefühl der Ohnmacht*), as well as the last of his writings that appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Unlike any of his other pieces, the essay also stands out for the way it shows Fromm as a psychoanalyst and an analytical therapist.*

*In *On the Feeling of Powerlessness*, Fromm attempts to describe clinically and explain psychodynamically the feeling of powerlessness against the background of his psychotherapeutic experiences. At the same time, he wants to understand the feeling as a feature of bourgeois character and explain its genesis. The essay shows paradigmatically how Fromm determines the border between »neurosis« and »bourgeois normality«, in which clinical observation and a socially critical perspective, psychoanalytic and socio-psychological thinking, come together.*

Based on his experiences as a therapist, Fromm first describes the different ways in which the feeling of powerlessness expresses itself, as well as our awareness of it and its intensity. He then describes the most important rationalizations and reaction formations related to this feeling, and its affective-emotional symptoms like rage, defiance, anxiety, and excessive solicitude. After a short exploration of the technical analytic question of the analyst's powerlessness, Fromm then offers a classical example of how he understands, with his social-psychoanalytical approach, the origin of the feeling of powerlessness in the bourgeois character. His focus is on the way in which children are not taken seriously, which is of special interest for all kinds of pedagogy and education. (Rainer Funk)

The bourgeois character displays a peculiar dichotomy. On one hand, it exhibits a very active approach to the environment, consciously shaping and changing it. The bourgeois person, more than any predecessor from earlier historical epochs, attempted to regulate the life of society according to rational principles, to change it in the direction of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, and to engage the individual actively in this change. At the same time, he subjugated nature to a degree never before seen. His technical achievements and inventions all but realize every dream ever dreamed about man's dominance over nature and of man's power. He created a previously unimaginable wealth, which for the first time in history made it possible to satisfy the material needs of all people. Never before have humans been such masters of their material world.

On the other hand, however, the bourgeois person exhibits starkly contrasting character traits. He produces a world of the most magnificent and wonderful things; but it is precisely his own creations which alienate and threaten him; once they have been created, he no longer feels himself their master, but rather their servant. The entire material world becomes a monstrous giant machine that dictates the direction and tempo of his life. The work of his hands, destined to serve and delight him, becomes an alien world which he submissively and powerlessly obeys. He maintains the same attitude of powerlessness toward the social and political apparatus. Perhaps later historians may find it even more puzzling than our current generation as to why the masses did not frantically try everything in their power to avert catastrophe. When even a child could see that we were heading toward wars that would bring the most terrible suffering, even for the victors, the masses let war preparations in the form of armaments, military training, etc., simply happen, and even supported them. In light of the tremendous possibilities for human happiness and security achieved through industrial development, historians may further raise the question as to how the great majority reconciled themselves to inaction, and to passively watching the haphazard and helpless manner in which crises came and went, as if the subsequent short periods of prosperity were the work of unfathomable forces of fate.

This essay has as its subject *one* side of the dichotomy of the bourgeois character indicated above, the feeling of powerlessness. In the description and analysis of bourgeois character, this feeling has as yet always received short shrift. One important reason for this is self-evident: the feeling of powerlessness is for the bourgeois person – in contrast to certain types of religious people – essentially not conscious and, on the basis of purely psychologically descriptive methods, can barely be sensed. Therefore, a viable approach to

advance an understanding of the socio-psychological phenomenon in question here appears to us to be to proceed from observations such as those engendered by the psychoanalysis of individuals. Certainly, it will remain for other socio-psychological studies to investigate the universality of the feeling illustrated here. It is, however, a first step on the road to presenting the underlying psychic mechanism in its structure, its conditions and its effects on the behavior of individuals.

We find extreme cases of the feeling of powerlessness only with neurotic personalities; yet, it is not hard to discover hints of the same feeling in healthy people of our time as well. Neurotic cases, of course, lend themselves better to describing the feeling and its symptoms on account of their greater clarity, and therefore in the following we will refer mainly to them. The feeling of powerlessness is so regularly present in neurotic people and represents such a central part of their personality structure that much would speak for defining neurosis precisely on the basis of this feeling of powerlessness. At issue in every neurosis, symptom or character neurosis, is a person incapable of performing certain functions, who cannot do something that he or she should be able to do, and this incapacity is coupled with a deep conviction about one's own weakness and helplessness, be it that this conviction is conscious or that it is an »unconscious conviction«.

In neurotic cases, the substance of the feeling of powerlessness can be described more or less as follows: I cannot influence anything, set anything in motion, achieve anything by my own will such that something changes in the outside world or within myself, I am not taken seriously, I am invisible to other people. The following dream of an analysand offers a beautiful illustration of the feeling of powerlessness:

»She had drunk something in a drugstore and given a ten-dollar bill as payment. After she finished drinking, she asks the waiter for the change. He replies that he had given it to her a while ago and she should just take a good look in her purse, and then she will find it. She rummages through all of her things and of course does not find the money. The waiter answers her in a coolly superior tone that it is not his problem if she has lost the money and he cannot concern himself with the matter any further. Full of rage, she runs out onto the street to summon a police officer. She first finds a policewoman to whom she tells the story. The officer then goes into the drugstore and confers with the waiter. When she returns, she tells the dreamer in a smiling, superior way that it is obvious she has received the money, »Just take a proper look and you will find it.« Her rage increases and she runs to a policeman to ask him to

intervene. He barely makes an effort to listen to her and responds with absolute condescension that he cannot bother himself with such things and she should see to it that she moves on. Finally, she goes back into the drugstore. The waiter is sitting there in an armchair and asks with a grin if she has finally calmed down. She flies into a powerless rage.«

The objects to which the feeling of powerlessness relates are multiple. First and foremost, the feeling refers to people. The conviction persists that one cannot in any way influence other people; one can neither control them nor succeed in getting them to do what one wants. Such people are frequently very surprised when they hear that someone else spoke about them in a serious manner, or even referred to them or an opinion of theirs. Their actual abilities have nothing to do with this. One analysand who enjoyed an extraordinary reputation in his scientific field and was widely cited, was surprised each time anew that anyone took him seriously at all and attributed any importance to what he said. Even long experience that this was actually the case hardly changed anything in his mind. Such people also do not believe that they could offend anyone, for that reason they are often to an unusual degree capable of aggressive remarks and are completely surprised when someone is insulted. When one looks into this surprise, the reason that emerges is precisely the deep conviction that they cannot ever be taken seriously.

These people do not believe that they could have anything to do with the fact that someone loves them or likes them. They also do not make any effort to come out of their shell, to behave in the active manner that would be necessary to gain the love and affection of others. When this of course does not happen, they draw the conclusion that no one loves them, and do not see that there is an optical illusion here. While they suppose that, as a consequence of some sorts of shortcomings or unfortunate circumstances, no one loves them, in reality it is their incapacity to make any sort of effort to gain the love of others that lies at the root of the situation that they lament. Since they do not believe that they could do anything at all to be loved, they concentrate their entire attention on those innate inner qualities with which they were endowed at birth. They are constantly preoccupied with the thought if they are smart, beautiful, good enough, to attract others. The question is always: »Am I smart, beautiful, etc., or aren't I?« One has to find this out, since the possibility of actively changing oneself and influencing others does not exist for them. The result then is usually a deep feeling of inferiority that one simply does not have the qualities needed to find love and affection. With regard to the wish for recognition and respect, it is no different. Such people think compulsively about whether they might be talented enough to elicit the admiration of everyone

else. Their feeling of powerlessness, however, prevents them from making an effort to work, to learn, to produce something that others truly recognize or admire. A sense of self that oscillates between grandiose ideas and a feeling of absolute worthlessness is usually the result.

Another important consequence of the feeling of powerlessness in relation to other people is the incapacity to defend oneself against attacks. This can also mean physical attacks, and the consequence is then a more or less pronounced feeling of physical helplessness. This often leads to people being unable to make any use of their existing physical powers in the event of danger, they seem paralyzed and it does not even occur to them that they can defend themselves on their own. In practice, the inability to defend oneself against all other types of attacks is much more important than the inability to defend oneself against physical threats. One finds in these cases that people simply accept any criticism directed at them, both justified and unjustified, and are incapable of offering counterarguments. Sometimes they know that the criticism is unjustified but cannot utter anything in their defense. In extreme cases, however, their helplessness is so great that they are no longer capable of even feeling that they are unjustly criticized, and they inwardly accept any criticism or reproach as justified.

This same defensive incapacity frequently extends to all sorts of insults and humiliations. Here, too, their behavior oscillates between an incapacity to respond appropriately to an insult and a docile acceptance in the conviction that the other person has the right and reason to abase them. Often it takes hours or days for the fact of an unjust reproach or the brazenness of an insult to enter into consciousness. Then, frequently all of the arguments occur to them which they could have used to refute the accusation, or the sort of rude responses with which they could have countered the insult. They replay the situation again and again in their mind, fantasizing down to the last detail about what they should have done, working themselves into a rage, directed sometimes toward others, sometimes toward themselves, only at the next opportunity to behave in exactly as paralyzed and helpless a manner in the face of an attack.

The feeling of powerlessness is just as evident with respect to things as to people. It leads to people feeling completely helpless in any situation which is unfamiliar. This can mean that they feel incapable of finding their own way in a foreign city, or that when their car breaks down that they are completely unable to make even the slightest attempt to see where the problem lies, or that when on a hike in which they must jump over a small stream they feel themselves completely paralyzed to do so, or that they are unable to make their bed, or to cook something for themselves when the situation requires it. A behavior that one might describe as especially impractical or inept can often be traced back

to the feeling of powerlessness. We suspect that the feeling of powerlessness is not infrequently at the root of a fear of heights.

The feeling of powerlessness also manifests itself in relation to one's own person. Indeed, this is perhaps of greatest consequence for the individual. One manifestation of the feeling of powerlessness on this level is a helplessness in the face of one's own active drives and fears. The confidence that one could even attempt to control one's drives or fears is entirely lacking. The motto is simply always: »I just am this way, and there's nothing I can do to change that.« Nothing seems more impossible than to change oneself. They can spend their lives whining and complaining about how terrible it is that they suffer from this or that quality, they can also consciously show themselves extremely willing to change, but upon closer observation it becomes clear that they only hold on all the more doggedly to the conviction that they themselves can change nothing. In some cases, the discrepancy between this unconscious conviction and conscious compensatory performances is nothing short of grotesque. Whether or not such people run from one doctor to the next or from one religious or philosophical doctrine to the other, whether or not they have a new plan every week as to how they can change themselves, or if they expect every love affair to bring about the great change, all of this busyness and conscious effort is still only the screen behind which they hide in a feeling of the most profound powerlessness.

As already mentioned above, they have no faith that they can assert their desires and achieve something independently. People of this type are always waiting for something and are deeply convinced that they can contribute nothing toward the outcome. Very often this feeling goes so far that they give up desiring or even wanting anything at all, indeed, they no longer even know what they actually desire. Pondering what others expect of them usually takes the place of their own desires. For example, their decisions take the shape of brooding about whether, if they take this step, their wife will be mad at them, and if they take a different step, their father. In the end, they decide according to whose anger they fear least, but the question of what they actually would like to do most is never even broached. The consequence is often that such people consciously or unconsciously have the feeling that they are violated by others, which enrages them, and yet they do not see that it is primarily they who let themselves be violated.

The degree to which the feeling of powerlessness is conscious fluctuates no less than its intensity. In many cases the feeling as such is conscious. These are usually, however, cases of severe neuroses in which productivity and social functioning are so limited that people are relieved of the compulsion to delude themselves about feeling powerless. The amount of psychic suffering linked to a complete consciousness of the feeling of powerlessness cannot be

overestimated. The feeling of deep anxiety, of the senselessness of one's own life, is regularly present in such cases. The same effects of the feeling of powerlessness, however, can be found in severe neuroses, without these being at all consciously perceived as such. Usually, lengthy analytic work is required to raise the unconscious feeling of powerlessness into consciousness and to link it with its symptoms. But, analysis typically shows that even where the feeling is conscious, this is true only to a small extent. Most of the time, it turns out that the deep anxiety accompanying the feeling of powerlessness allows it to enter into consciousness only in very attenuated form.

A first attempt to overcome the torment lies in a series of rationalizations intended to justify the feeling of powerlessness. The most important of the explanatory rationalizations are as follows: powerlessness is attributed to physical deficiencies. In such cases, people insist that they are physically weak, they cannot tolerate any exertion, they have this or that physical defect, they are »ailing«. They thereby succeed in attributing the feeling of powerlessness, which in reality has psychic roots, to physical deficiencies that are not their fault and that also in principle cannot be changed. Another form of explanatory rationalization is the conviction that they have become so damaged by particular life experiences that they have been robbed of all activity and courage. Certain experiences in childhood, unhappy love, a financial collapse, disappointments with friends, are seen as the causes of their own helplessness. A simplistic misunderstanding of psychoanalytic theory has in some ways made these rationalizations even easier. It gives some people the excuse to believe that they owe their powerlessness to the fact that when they were three years old they were once beaten by their mother, or when they were five an older brother made fun of them.

Another form of explanatory rationalization often proves itself to be especially disastrous, namely the tendency in fantasy or also in reality to pile one difficulty on top of another, and thus the hopelessness of an actual situation makes it understandable that one feels helpless in the face of it. What happens here is, for example, as follows: an official is supposed to write a report and feels helpless to complete the task. As he sits at his desk and becomes aware of his feeling of weakness, it runs through his head that he is afraid to lose his position, that his wife is sick, that his friend will be angry with him because he has not written him for so long, that the room is too cold, until he has finally concocted in his imagination such a sad and hopeless situation that the feeling of powerlessness appears to be a completely natural and appropriate capitulation to such enormous difficulties.

Even more disastrous is when the tendency to aggravate the situation does not limit itself to the imagination only but rather extends to behavior in reality.

The person will then be inclined to really become sick, to provoke his boss in such a manner that he in fact dismisses him, to pick a fight with his wife so that discord dominates the home all day long, and when he succeeds in all of this, he feels completely justified in seeing his powerlessness as based on the unbearable nature of external circumstances. To be sure, the tendency illustrated here to inflict suffering on oneself in fantasy or reality, to make oneself weak and unhappy, has other roots as well. A discussion of this leads to the problem of masochism, which we cannot explore here. (See *Sozialpsychologischer Teil*, 1936a, GA I, pp. 139–187, as well as K. Horney, 1937.) The rationalization of one's own feeling of powerlessness, however, is certainly one of the factors responsible for a tendency toward an imagined or real increase in one's own suffering.

A different group of rationalizations arises when the feeling of powerlessness is less conscious than in those cases just discussed. Then the rationalizations have less of an explanatory and more of a comforting character, and serve to raise the hope that one's own powerlessness is only temporary. The two most important forms of these comforting rationalizations are a belief in miracles and a belief in time. A belief in miracles revolves around the idea that by virtue of some sort of externally intervening event, one's own powerlessness suddenly disappears and all desires for success, achievement, power and happiness will be fulfilled. The forms that this belief takes are extremely varied. Often it is the case that one expects some sort of change in external life circumstances will bring about a turnaround, be it a new love affair, a move to a different city or a different apartment, a new suit, a new year or even just a fresh sheet of paper on which the work will come out better. For religious people, a belief in miracles at times takes the shape of God suddenly intervening in their destiny. A further form of this belief in miracles is that one's own destiny can be changed by particular people. A typical (already mentioned) example of this is people who run from one doctor to the next and expect each time that he will work miracles. A common feature of all of these comforting illusions is always that one need not do anything for the desired success, nor can one even do anything, rather an external force or constellation will suddenly fulfill one's desires.

A special form of this belief in miracles is the substitution of causal influence by magical acts which allow one's consciousness the illusion of its own activity. The content of the magical gesture can be very varied. Whether giving alms to a beggar, visiting an elderly aunt, doing one's duty with utmost precision, or counting to thirty three times before beginning to work, the expectation is always the same. If I do this or that, then everything will turn out as I wish. As with all magical acts, a causal nexus existing solely in the mind of the subject takes the place of objective influence. Often, the person is not even

conscious that he carries out a certain act in the spirit of a magical gesture, often, especially with obsessional neurotics, the magical gesture can deteriorate into an extremely tormenting ceremonial. One of the traits of obsessional neurosis lies precisely in the intensity of the feeling of powerlessness and the magical gesture that overcomes it.

With the belief in time, a sense of the momentary suddenness of change is missing. Instead, there is the expectation that everything will take care of itself »in time«. It is expected that time will manage to solve conflicts that feel incapacitating, without one having to take on the risk of a decision. We find this belief in time especially often in connection with one's own achievements. People console themselves about the fact that not only do they not accomplish anything of what they want to achieve, but that they themselves make no effort to do so, after all there is all the time in the world, and there's no reason to rush.

An example of this process is a case in which a very talented author who wanted to write a book, which in his opinion would belong among the most important books in world literature, did nothing more than entertain a range of thoughts about what he wanted to write, wallowing in fantasies about the sort of epoch-making influence his book would have, and telling his friends that he was already almost finished. In reality he had not yet written a single line, although he had already »worked« on the book for seven years. The older such people become, the more desperately they must cling to the illusion that things will happen in time. For many, reaching a certain age – often around the beginning of forty – leads to a sobering realization, to giving up the illusion and to attempting to use one's own powers, or to a neurotic breakdown based in part on the unbearableness of living without the comforting illusion of time.

With these comforting rationalizations, if the feeling of powerlessness is vaguely conscious, but its thorn dulled by the hope of overcoming it, then a third reaction goes even further in suppressing the feeling. It is replaced here by overcompensating behavior and concealing rationalizations. The most common sort of such overcompensation is that of busyness. We find that people who have repressed a deep feeling of powerlessness are especially active and busy, and generally to a degree that they appear to themselves and to others as the exact opposite of powerless.

Such people must always be doing something. If they feel threatened in their position, they do not behave as we illustrated above, piling difficulty upon difficulty in order to prove to themselves their inability to undertake anything, they also do not wallow in fantasies about a miracle that will happen, but rather they begin to run from pillar to post, attempting first this and then that, and create the impression of utmost activity in fending off danger. Or, if

they have to write a scientific paper, they do not sit dreaming at their desk, but rather order dozens of books from the library, consult with all sorts of experts whose opinion could be important, make trips to study certain problems, and thereby protect themselves from the insight that they feel powerless to realize the expected achievement.

Another form of pseudo-activity manifests in things like an overinvestment in clubs, in a continual concern about other people, or even simply in card games or long conversations with one's regular crowd. It is often very difficult to draw a line between this superficial and real activity. We can very generally say that busyness always applies to things that are incidental and ancillary in relation to the problem to be solved, and that busyness bears no relation to the fundamental features of the task at hand. In the case of the neurotic, the opposition between true activity and busyness is much easier to recognize than in the case of a healthy person adjusted to reality. The latter usually has problems to solve which require basically nothing more than a certain routine and do not demand any sort of true activity.

The average person in bourgeois society sees himself faced with a range of tasks and problems which he is trained early on to tackle in a routine manner, and because nobody expects anything different from him, consciousness of his actual powerlessness never becomes so distressing that he would need to hide it behind an extreme and ridiculous measure of busyness. What appears by social standards to be activity may be understood psychologically as busyness, and often one may not even be able to agree about ascribing the behavior to one category or the other.

An even more radical reaction formation against the feeling of powerlessness is the striving for control and power in every situation. In many cases, this desire remains limited exclusively to the realm of fantasy. People then give in to fantasies about how much better they would lead a business or a university than the *de facto* leaders, or they imagine themselves as dictators of a state or all of humanity and revel in these fantasies. Or, it does not even come to the formation of such elaborate fantasies, rather the grandiose ideas remain vague and less conscious. In such cases, one often finds only the conscious expectation of being superior to everyone one meets, or, should this expectation be repressed, a reaction of rage when one meets people upon whom one's superiority cannot be imposed. Even if this reaction of rage is repressed, nothing is usually visible beyond a certain inhibition and shyness toward those who can pull rank.

Regardless if the grandiose ideas are more or less developed and more or less conscious, their frequency and their intensity, especially with members of the bourgeois middle classes and in particular intellectuals, can hardly be overestimated. Because people awaken sobered time and again from such reveries,

these daydreams only very imperfectly fulfill their function of compensating for the existing feeling of powerlessness. It is a different story when the desire for control and power is not limited only to fantasies, but rather is expressed in actual behavior.

When real power on a small scale manages to replace real powerlessness on a grand scale, an equilibrium is frequently established that can last an entire lifetime. The most common cases of this kind are men such as we find especially in the European petty bourgeoisie, who are completely powerless in their social and economic lives, but have an intense desire for power and control in terms of their wives, children, and perhaps the dog, and are capable of realizing and satisfying this desire. In neurotic cases, we usually find that the division of the world into a sphere in which one is powerless, and another in which one is powerful, does not work. The neurotic experiences the desire for control and power in every situation, even when their exercise is impossible. It is unbearable for him to have a superior, he always has the feeling that he understands and can do everything better, in every conversation he wants to play the dominant role, in every society he wants to rule over others. Because of this intensified desire for control and power, situations which for other people would in no way demonstrate their inadequacy become for him shameful defeats. In extreme cases, which are actually very common, any configuration in which he is not leading and controlling means a defeat and proof of his powerlessness. It becomes a *circulus vitiosus*. The intensified desire for control and power is at the same time a reaction to the feeling of powerlessness and the root of its intensification.

Like every other repression, the repression of the feeling of powerlessness does eliminate it from consciousness, but repression does not prevent the feeling from existing and having certain effects. Of course, the nature of the effects depends on whether or not the feeling of powerlessness is conscious, its strength, however, essentially depends only upon its intensity.

The most important and universal consequence of the feeling of powerlessness is rage, a rage that is especially marked by its powerlessness. Unlike other sorts of rage, its goal is not an active and targeted eradication of the enemy, rather it is much more vague, indefinite, but also much more destructively directed against the outside world and one's own self. In children, this is often expressed by thrashing about, in adults by crying, but sometimes also in a fit of rage that lacks any sort of target or relation to action. Usually, however, powerless rage is not conscious. It is often expressed or replaced by defiant and stubborn behavior. This defiance can be quite conscious. Here we find people who can never follow orders, who must always raise objections, who are never satisfied and so on. Defiance can also be unconscious, and then usually

a picture of general inhibition emerges. In such cases, the people in question have the best of conscious intentions to be active and to do what others expect of them and what they expect of themselves. But despite all good intentions, they are constantly apathetic, ill-humored, and incapable of taking initiative. If rage and defiance are not only repressed from consciousness, but also broken and bent at the roots, then one often finds a reaction formation that expresses itself in excessive solicitude and compliance.

The consequence of rage is always anxiety. The more the rage is repressed, the greater the anxiety. At this point we cannot go into the complicated mechanisms that are responsible for this. We do want to emphasize, however, that the most important mechanism is the projection of one's own rage onto others. In order to safeguard the repression of one's own rage, a feeling is produced that is captured by the following motto: »I am not angry with others, rather they are angry with me.« This results in the feeling that one is hated or persecuted by others, and the consequence of this is anxiety. In addition to this indirect route through which rage is repressed, anxiety is also fed directly by the feeling of powerlessness. Feeling unable to achieve one's goals and above all feeling defenseless against attacks by others necessarily produces new anxiety. The feeling of powerlessness creates anxiety, but anxiety, in turn, reinforces the feeling of powerlessness. In so many cases, this circle is the reason why a feeling of powerlessness, once present, increases in strength, rather than gradually disappearing, and with every step, so to speak, people sink deeper into the swamp.

The psychoanalytic situation offers a particularly advantageous place from which to observe the feeling of powerlessness and different forms of its concealment or attempts to overcome it. Some analysands of this sort will repeatedly explain to the analyst that they cannot change because they are already too old, because neurosis runs in their family, because they wouldn't have the time to carry out a long enough analysis, or whatever else they can find for rationalizations. Even more common than the open feeling of powerlessness and the hopelessness of analytic efforts are cases in which a certain conscious sense of optimism and positive expectation predominate. An analysand has the feeling that he wants to change and is capable of this, but upon closer examination, one discovers that his great expectations include everything but the notion that he could do anything about them. His basic expectation is that the analyst or »the analysis« will resolve things for him and that, in essence, he can passively submit to the procedure. His real disbelief in any sort of change is often obscured by the comforting rationalizations illustrated above. He expects that the great transformation will take place within him overnight if only the »infantile trauma« is discovered. Or, he prepares himself for a timeframe of

several years, and after five years of unsuccessful analysis he has the feeling that the analysis has not been quite long enough to change anything.

In the analytic situation, too, we find again obfuscating and overcompensating busyness. Such analysands are extremely punctual, they read all the available literature, they put out propaganda for analysis among all their friends, they make this and that arrangement in their life because it »is good for the analysis«, and they do all of this in order to hide from themselves that they are neither ready nor capable to change anything with regard to the fundamental questions of their personality. Closely linked with this is behavior in the spirit of a »magical gesture«. The analysands for whom this plays a major role are especially careful »to do everything right«. They follow the instructions of the analyst precisely, and the more rules and regulations he makes, the more satisfied they are. They have the feeling that if only they follow the analytic ritual faithfully, this obedience will magically result in a change of their personality.

At this point, a short digression about a problem in analytic technique may be permitted. If our initial assumption is correct, that the feeling of powerlessness, albeit in a more moderate form, is present in many people of our culture, then it is only natural that it is even found among a number of psychoanalysts. In such cases, it is not only the patient who is fundamentally convinced that he cannot change himself, rather the analyst is equally if entirely unconsciously convinced that one cannot influence anyone. Behind his conscious professional optimism lies a deeper disbelief in the possibility of any transformative influence on people. He almost hesitates to admit to himself that analytic therapy is a form of influencing people. Of course, it should not influence people in the sense of leading them to certain viewpoints or actions. But we forget that all healing, like all education, always presumes influence and that, where influence is phobically avoided, success will necessarily remain absent.

Concealing one's own feeling of powerlessness behind a magical gesture plays a special role for some analysts. For them, just as for some patients, it appears that the correct performance of the analytic ritual is the crux of the entire procedure. If only they follow all of Freud's instructions faithfully, they believe that they have done everything possible, and their real powerlessness to influence the patient need not become conscious. We may assume that the singular importance of the analytic ceremonial for analysts of this sort ultimately goes back to their own feeling of powerlessness. The ceremonial becomes a magical substitute for the de facto influence on the patient.

With regard to the origin of the feeling of powerlessness, one encounters the same difficulty that always exists when wanting to specify the causal conditions for a psychic mechanism. There is never one simple condition that can describe the »cause« of the mechanism in question. Rather, in order to fully

understand the conditions of origin of this singular psychic mechanism, one must always be aware of the entire constellation of external circumstances under which someone lives and the complicated dynamic of his character structure which emerges as a reaction to the outside world.

The attempt to outline the basic causal conditions of the feeling of powerlessness, especially an examination of the fundamental role of masochism, would go far beyond scope of this essay. In general, we also consider it methodologically justified to describe an unconscious mechanism and to investigate the many consequences of this mechanism in the sense of rationalizations, reaction formations and so on, without also simultaneously analyzing all of the *causal* factors underlying this unconscious tendency. In so far as these factors are explored in the following, we will focus only on those circumstances that give rise to a feeling of powerlessness in an *immediate* way, or strengthen an already present feeling. But even with this restriction, the causal conditions will only be described roughly and in outline.

In the description of the feeling of powerlessness and the symptoms stemming from it, we have focused mainly on its neurotic rather than »normal« manifestations because they offer a clearer picture of the phenomenon at hand. In describing causal conditions, it is more appropriate for us to focus on those conditions generally present in bourgeois society which, when intensified within the individual, lead to the neurotic symptoms of feeling powerless illustrated above, whose common occurrence we may suspect as a cause of the normal feeling of powerlessness in the bourgeois character.

We have to expect that such a deeply internal and intense feeling as that of powerlessness does not first materialize later in life but rather appears on account of experiences from very early childhood. This expectation is quickly confirmed when we examine the situation of the child in the bourgeois family from the vantage points that interest us here. The behavior of the adult toward the child can be characterized by the fact that ultimately the child is not taken seriously. This state of affairs is obvious in cases in which children are neglected and treated very poorly. Here, parents have the very conscious opinion that the child does not matter, they want to suppress the child's individual will and personality, for them the child is an involuntary instrument of their whims and has absolutely no say in any matter. In extreme cases, the child is already punished if it even dares to express a wish; but the notion that the child itself could determine something, influence its parents in their decisions, achieve something independently, is completely inconceivable in this constellation.

Less transparent but no less consequential is the way that coddling and spoiling hide the fact that the child is not being taken seriously. Such children are certainly shielded and protected, but the unfolding of their own powers,

or even the sense that they have their own powers, becomes more or less completely paralyzed. They are given everything that they need, and then some, they are also allowed to ask for anything, they are allowed to say everything that they want. But, basically their situation mirrors that of a captive prince. He, too, has all pleasures in abundance and many servants to whom he can give orders. And yet everything is unreal and otherworldly, since his commands only hold as long as they do not go beyond the confines of his prison. All of his power is an illusion that he can best maintain when he no longer even thinks about being a prisoner, and no longer even wishes to win his freedom. No doubt, he can command his subordinates to serve him instantaneously; but if he wanted to order them to open the gate to the castle in which he is imprisoned, they would behave as if he had not said anything at all. In such extreme cases of pampering or the average case of a child treated »lovingly«, the only difference is the degree to which a child is not taken seriously. Common to all cases is that a child has no right of its own to direct, accomplish, influence or change anything. The child can receive much of what it wants when sweet and well-behaved, but it can receive nothing beyond what is given to him, and he can achieve nothing without an adult stepping in.

Not being taken seriously does not usually manifest in any dramatic and immediately obvious ways. One must search for very subtle peculiarities in the behavior of the adults in order to understand the influence meant here. The slight and barely perceptible smile when the child says or does something self-sufficient can have just as crushing an effect as the crudest attempts to break its will. Indeed, it is often the case that when the parents appear hostile, the child can likewise develop a defiance that permits it to separate from his parents and begin an independent life, while the parents' friendliness can hamper the child from developing any principled opposition and thereby render the child all the more helpless and powerless.

Not infrequently, one finds in analyses that people remember the powerless rage they felt as children when they were accompanied to school beyond a stage when it was necessary, when they were helped to get dressed and were not allowed to decide which clothes they wanted to wear, or when it was time to dress more or less warmly. Not being taken seriously is expressed in a number of other typical behaviors. Promises made to the child are not kept, certain questions are not taken seriously or are answered insincerely. Commands are given without telling the child the reason why. This may all happen in the friendliest manner, but the child continues to feel that it is not being taken into account and basically that all liberties may be taken with it.

Even when promises are kept and answers given, but the adult has done so in an especially friendly or accommodating way, the impression on a child is no

different. The child only feels itself taken seriously when the adult feels obliged to be as sincere and trustworthy toward the child as he is toward other adults whom he respects. A particular toy has always impressed us as symbolic of the child's situation here, namely the toy telephone. It looks like a real telephone, the child can pick up the receiver and dial numbers, only it does not connect the child with anyone. The child cannot reach anyone, and although it does exactly the same thing as the adult who uses the phone, his act remains without any effect and influence. (In modern pedagogical theory and practice, there are approaches which, through a series of measures, provide the child with a feeling of being taken seriously. We do not wish to discuss the effectiveness of such measures here.)

Although extreme examples of not taking a child seriously are due to individual circumstances, the attitude described has its roots in the overall social constellation and the psychic constellation it determines. The first factor to be considered here is the sharp separation of the child from the reality of life, a separation to be sure that applies less to the proletarian and peasant child. The bourgeois child is decidedly shielded from coming into contact with reality; because of this, its world inevitably acquires an illusionary, even otherworldly, character. The child is taught to develop the virtues of modesty, restraint, charity.

For the vast majority of people, it is necessary that they can be accommodating, that they reduce their own demands for happiness and, to a certain degree actually embody these virtues. However, for the small group of those who grow into capable businessmen and all other types of successful people, such rules may not apply. They must be demanding and ruthless if they want to be successful. But, at the right moment, the sons of the »elite« discover the secret necessary to achieve this success – all that is preached to the children is to be forgotten. The great masses may not manage to discover this. Thus, most remain confused their entire lives and do not understand at all what is actually happening in the larger society. For many, the contradiction between the wish for success and the wish for fulfilling those ideals taught to them in childhood leads to neurotic illness. The frequent result of the adults' behavior toward the child is that the child cannot be taken seriously at all because it is after all dumb, that is, the child understands nothing of the rules of the game of life that the adults play.

The child is not taken seriously, no more than the sick and the elderly – despite all ideologies to the contrary. In bourgeois society, the value of a person rests upon his economic ability to achieve. The measure of respect accorded him depends upon the extent of his economic capacity. People who demonstrate no economic power are ultimately disregarded as human beings as well. If one looks more closely at the behavior toward old people or the

way sick people are treated in hospitals, then one rediscovers the same range of behaviors that also exist toward the child. They run the gamut of feelings from brutal disregard to oversolicitous helpfulness.

Failure to take the child seriously is based on its biological helplessness. Certainly, the child is helpless for a relatively long time and dependent upon adults. But this helplessness evokes in adults a chivalrous or maternal inclination only in part, for the rest we find the conscious or unconscious inclination to despise and humiliate the child precisely because of its helplessness. This inclination, which could more broadly be described as sadistic, is in turn founded on the role of the adult in the social process. If the adult is at the mercy of powers over which he has absolutely no control, then to compensate for this powerlessness a tendency develops in which he feels strong and superior toward those who are weaker than he is. In the great majority of cases, sadism as such is completely unconscious and manifests only in the inclination to overemphasize the biological helplessness of the child, and in the failure to take the child seriously, as discussed.

The conditions for the child's feeling of powerlessness are repeated on higher levels in the life of the adult. Of course, the explicit moment of not being taken seriously is missing here. On the contrary, the adult is told that he can achieve anything he wants, if only he really wants it and makes an effort, and he is as much responsible for his success as for his failure. Life is represented to him as a great game in which primarily his own skill, hard work and energy, and not chance, are decisive. These ideologies stand in glaring contradiction to actual circumstances.

The average adult in our society is in fact tremendously powerless, and this powerlessness feels even more oppressive the more he is made to believe that things should actually be very different, and it is his own fault if he is so weak. He has no power whatsoever to determine his own fate. Even those capacities that he can develop are dictated by an accident of birth; if he can find work at all, which profession he can choose, are largely determined by factors independent of his will and effort. The very freedom to choose his lover is constrained by narrow economic and social limits. Feelings, opinions, taste are hammered into him, and he pays for every deviation with growing isolation. Statistics can show him what a small percentage of those who begin with the illusion that the world stands at their disposal achieve even a modicum of independence and economic security.

Mass unemployment and the threat of war – at least in Europe – have increased the actual powerlessness of the individual in recent years even more. He has to be thankful for every day that he still has work and that still separates him from the horrors of a new war. He is completely powerless to shape

economic and political conditions. In authoritarian states, this lack of influence is elevated to a conscious principle. But in democracies, too, an extraordinary discrepancy exists between the ideological notion that an individual member as part of the whole of society determines his own fate, and the distance which in reality separates the individual from the centers of political and economic power.

The fact that the bourgeois person is unaware of the psychic impulses that determine his behavior finds its parallel in the fact that he is unaware of those forces that determine economic development in a market-regulated economy and that they appear to him as impenetrable forces of fate. In contemporary society, understanding how political economy functions in contrast to other economic models requires a specialized knowledge. Similarly, psychoanalysis is required in order to understand how the individual personality functions, in other words, to understand oneself. The feeling of powerlessness is intensified in the extreme by the fact that complicated processes of an economic and political nature as well as psychic processes are impenetrable.

Even when the bourgeois person believes he knows what is happening, this illusion changes nothing of the fact that he is almost completely lacking in any orientation about those fundamental forces at work in society and within himself. He sees hundreds of details, latches on to one or the other, and attempts to understand the totality from this one, only to be continually surprised and confused by new details. Since correct insight into the key forces and constellations is the first condition for effective action and influence over one's own destiny as well as society's, the consequence of ignorance and a lack of insight is to render the individual powerless. And this powerlessness is also registered by him internally, even if he desperately tries to defend himself against registering it with all sorts of possible illusions.

The lack of a correct social and, as far as the individual is concerned, psychological theory is an important source of the feeling of powerlessness. Theory is a precondition for action. But the existence of a theory, and even its easy accessibility, is not enough to enable people to just take effective action. The European situation strikingly shows just how passively people resign themselves to their fate, although millions of them possess a correct theory of social processes in principle. The same process recurs repeatedly whenever a theoretical knowledge of psychological processes does so little to help people change them. For people in whom the feeling of powerlessness is present, theory essentially holds no vital interest. Since they do not expect to be able to change anything, any insight that describes how one could change something is also colorless and insignificant. Even if one has insight, it remains abstract knowledge, a cultural artifact like historical dates or poems that one learned in school, or – a *Weltanschauung*.

In the psychic attitude of the broad masses and their leaders, especially in those countries defeated in the last war [World War I], one can discover an almost chronological sequence of the compensation mechanisms described above. The first years after the peace agreement were characterized by extraordinary political and social activity. People created new constitutions, new symbols, new laws. Above all, leading politicians gave the impression of extreme activity. They explained that they were the ones who worked practically, they did not dream, but rather changed reality, they »knuckled down«. A lot did happen, but nothing that touched on the foundations, and as a consequence nothing that represented even the beginning of real change. »Knuckling down« and the zeal of the leaders (to the degree it was at all honest and not simply deception and trickery), even to a certain extent the activity of the masses, proved to be empty busyness which hid a lack of real activity and a feeling of powerlessness with regard to real change.

The lack of results of their efforts soon led to a »belief in time«. One had the feeling that their unsuccessful efforts were to be explained by time being too short to allow for success, and one was comforted by knowing that big changes would follow if only one were patient and did not rush things. Patience became a fetish and impatience a serious reproach. Gradually, one had to admit, however, that not only did development in the desired direction fail to materialize, but rather the opposite occurred. What had been achieved in the first rush disappeared slowly and surely. Indeed, one had to suppress any insight into what was really happening in order to be able to hold on to a belief in time.

Then, bit by bit, a belief in miracles took its place. One despaired if human effort could change anything at all, and expected everything from »gifted« leaders and »some sort of change« in conditions. One renounced knowing what one wanted to change and how to change it, and believed that some sort of shift, even if one did not affirm its substance, was better than nothing at all and at least contained the possibility to accomplish what one's own efforts had failed to do. This hope for a change, whatever form it took, was fertile soil for the growth of ideologies that led to the victory of the authoritarian state.

The chronological sequence outlined here is certainly not a strict one and refers only to the emphasis that each of the various forms of compensatory mechanisms had. To a certain degree, all mechanisms were always present simultaneously. The belief in time was to be observed already in the first phase after the collapse. (In this respect, a 1918 slogan disseminated in the German press and on posters is quite characteristic: »Socialism is on the March«. In this formulation, people as effective and active objects of political events are eliminated, »socialism« becomes the subject and it is asserted that it is on the march;

a nuance of the unpredictability of the process finds expression here.) Many, especially the defeated leaders, did not give up this belief, even after the victory of the authoritarian ideology. On the other hand, a belief in miracles was already present from the beginning, albeit mainly in a certain social class, the petty bourgeoisie. Due to a series of events, primarily the increasing economic disempowerment of the petty bourgeoisie, the feeling of powerlessness was strongest in this class. In the first years after the war, one expected a miracle from the return of the monarchy and the old flags, later from »leaders« and an »upheaval«. Without question, in certain parts of the population true activity predominated without a belief in miracles or time. This is true of the most progressive parts of the working class as well as for, in a different and more limited sense, the most powerful and, in an economic sense, the most progressive parts of the entrepreneurial class, even if their objectives were in opposition to each other.

If one characterizes the postwar period [after World War I] by an increase in the feeling of powerlessness, a new objection arises. Didn't the proponents of authoritarian ideologies show a great degree of activity and a feeling of power, did they not reshape political and social conditions with tenacity and energy? Superficially, this objection seems compelling and leads to the conclusion that those classes and individuals who championed these victorious movements, especially the petty bourgeoisie, overcame their innate feeling of powerlessness. Yet, if one looks more closely, it appears that the activity they display today [1937] is highly conditional. War, suffering and poverty are seen as fixed and unchangeable features of human co-existence and any attempt to tamper with these foundations is viewed as stupidity or a lie. The attitude in relation to fundamental political and social factors is inextricably linked to the feeling of utter dependency. These forces of fate may realistically be rationalized as »natural law« or »cold hard facts«, philosophically as the »power of the völkisch past«, religiously as the »will of God«, or morally as »duty«, but there always remains a higher power external to man in relation to which any individual activity ends and only blind submission is possible. The helplessness of the individual is the basic theme of authoritarian philosophy.

Bibliography

- Fromm, E., 1936a: *Sozialpsychologischer Teil*, in: M. Horkheimer (ed.), *Schriften des Instituts für Sozialforschung*, Band V: *Studien über Autorität und Familie. Forschungsberichte aus dem Institut für Sozialforschung*, Paris 1936, pp. 77–135 (Felix Alcan).

Horney, K., 1937: *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, New York (W. W. Norton & Co.).

First publication under the title *Zum Gefühl der Ohnmacht* in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Paris 6, (1937) pp. 95–119. Reprinted in *Erich Fromm Gesamtausgabe in zwölf Bänden*, Stuttgart (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag) 1999, GA I, pp. 189–206.

Copyright © 1937 by Erich Fromm; Copyright © of the translation into English 2020 by The Estate of Erich Fromm. Authorized translation from the German by Susan Kassouf.
