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Reflections on the Relevance of the concept of social character

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Erich Fromm's philosophy and thought was first introduced to the Kaunas Society for the Studies of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy thanks to the support of the Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis A.C. (SEMSOAC) from Mexico, especially Sonia Gojman de Millán. We are thankful for her assistance in the acceptance of our society into the IFPS.

In August 2007, a Mexican delegation visited Kaunas and led a seminar on Fromm's clinical thinking, and his research on social character. An important part of the seminar was our experiential exercise with the Interpretative Questionnaire. Members of our society had practiced both interviewing and answering it. The completed questionnaires were discussed and interpreted in the meeting. The concept of social character seemed very relevant to us, living and practicing in a country which is still in the process of adaptation to recent extreme political, economic and cultural changes. It provided an important perspective towards the social processes in Lithuania after reestablishment of independence. And it revealed the new social processes at work amongst a younger generation, that has grown up in a new social and economic reality.

After regaining its independence in 1991, Lithuania has gone through dramatic and far reaching social, cultural and economic changes. As always, the changes are not just positive. For more than three decades Lithuania has had one of the highest incidence of suicide (exceeding 40 per 100,000

inhabitants) which reflects the high prevalence of depression in the population. Before the Soviet occupation, the rate of suicide didn't exceed the European average of 10/10,000. The number of suicide had dramatically decreased again in the period of progressive Gorbachev reforms, and the liberation of Lithuania from Soviet Union. But soon after the change of socio-economic system and beginning of a short but harsh period of wild capitalism and invasion of marketing culture it had overtaken previous records. This is probably one of the most poignant illustrations of the influence of changes in socio-economic conditions and cultural foundations on individual psychic health. One of the explanations for this could be found in the description of social character and its interaction with socio-economic factors, individual personality and psychopathology, developed by Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby.

Social character could also be called internalized culture, interacting with the individual character of the person. In that sense social character constitutes the social foundations of the individual personality. Culture provides moral values, ideals and meanings to the social behavior shared by the group. Social character develops under the influence of social and economic relationships, mode of production, geographic, historical and other complex conditions. It influences individual development during the whole life, facilitating or impeding person's adaptation to



the changes in socio-economic environment and culture. Social character changes slower than the culture or even more dynamic than socio-economic systems, but its transformations are facilitated by the pressure of these faster changes. A significant mismatch between the person's social character and the new socio-economic requirements or cultural values can cause feeling of disconnectedness from the environment, anxiety and depression during the periods of intensive social changes. Especially to the persons with certain individual character traits, like low productivity.

Michael Maccoby, partially in conjunction with Erich Fromm had done explorations of social character in rural and urban areas of Mexico, United States, United Kingdom and Sweden. Despite significant variations in social character some similar tendencies were found that were summarized in his article "The Two Voices of Erich Fromm: The Prophetic and the Analytic:" "Overall, the greater the extent to which people leave village life and adapt to industrial society, the more abstract their language becomes and the more detached they are from direct emotion, authentic relationships, and, to some degree, dreams and the inner life. ... Bureaucratic middle managers and professionals are the ones most forced to market themselves, and their over-adaptation can cause symptoms of depression and self-disgust."¹

Lithuania is a small country in the middle-eastern Europe at the Baltic Sea shore with a population of 3 millions, 80 percent being native Lithuanians. It was the last group of Europeans to be converted to Christianity, at the end of the fourteenth century. This political change demanded the change of economic mode – raids on neighboring Catholic countries were no longer politically acceptable. But remaining high rates of violent crimes and suicide force us to consider that

aggressiveness was not successfully sublimated in our social characters. In Middle Ages even the Vikings had exercised caution towards Lithuanian Kursiu tribes, even today Lithuanians are depicted in Scandinavian mass media as most dangerous criminals.

Because of Lithuania's broad plains with fertile soil and lack of other natural resources, Lithuania had become a traditionally agricultural country. In 1953, 62 percent of the population was living and working in rural areas what was changed during the years of Soviet occupation and process of industrialization to just 33 percent in year 1989. Before gaining independence from Russian empire in 1918 just 10 percent of urban population in Lithuania was Lithuanians. Lithuanian culture and intelligentsia was nurtured in the landlords' estates. Even now intelligentsia is sometimes called "second generation from the plough" reflecting deep roots in country culture.

In many regards, social character of Lithuanian villagers was similar to the one described by Fromm in Mexico. Hard-working, hoarding, often alexythimic, and distrustful. The rather cold climate allows just one harvest in the year, requiring the development of food preservation technologies and hoarding character features. Rather unpredictable weather conditions and prevalence of small independent farms before soviet occupation facilitated creativity and development of productive-hoarding character features.

Due to its geographic position Lithuania was often occupied by invaders from the West and East often trying to change its cultural foundations – whether its religion, language, or socio-economic system. It had formed such national traits as resistance, conservatism and isolation which allowed the survival of cultural foundations in the villages.

The most violent attacks on its social and cultural foundations were started during the Soviet occupation in 1940. Deprivation from the possession of the land and of the means of production suppressed productivity, exchanging it for the promise of security guar-

¹ M. Maccoby, "The Two Voices of Erich Fromm: The Prophetic and the Analytic," in: M. Cortina and M. Maccoby (Eds.), *A Prophetic Analyst. Erich Fromm's Contribution to Psychoanalysis*, Northvale (Jason Aronson) 1996, pp. 61-92, p. 71.



anted by strong authoritarian rulers. The forced removal of people from the land they were cultivating to collective settlements, the imported Russian tradition of consuming strong alcohol promoted detachment from the authentic relationships and development of fatalistic helplessness directly related to increase of suicidal rates. The authoritarian Soviet system had also facilitated the development of traits characteristic for receptive and bureaucratic social characters – passivity, vulnerability to dependency, striving for intimate relationships, acceptance of hierarchy, organizational loyalty, morality, identification with parental authority and role. Cruel suppression of the eight year long armed resistance after the Second Soviet occupation in 1944-1952, killed or exiled 200.000 people, or roughly ten-percent of the total population, mostly productive and socially active persons. The persecution of dissidents, prohibition of religion, ideologization and censorship of cultural activities were intended to increase the submissiveness. But the effect was opposite – strengthening of national pride and creativity in non-violent silent resistance against the occupants. Specifically, innuendos were used to hide political themes in films and books.

It had changed paradoxically after liberation of the country. The collapse of iron curtain and exposure to the prospering market economy and consumer culture of the West after 50 years of isolation had made most people feel hopelessly small and poor. The least productive and adaptive persons experienced independence as a loss of security and caring authorities with the increase of anxiety and longing for the old system or looking for its substitute in European Union or NATO. More productive persons accepted new economic opportunities for development and taking advantage from their exploitative or hoarding character traits to improve their satisfaction with their lives.

In the last decade of the century suicide rates remained the highest among middle-aged males living in the rural areas reaching 100 per 100.000. One of the reasons was that villagers with receptive character traits experienced helpless incapacity to deal with

the regained land and painful incompetence in the changed independent socio-economic system.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, emigration had become one the biggest social problems in Lithuania. One third of the population emigrated abroad. Are they receptive characters striving to be fed by the omnipotent capitalistic mother and searching for symbiosis? Or are they productive-hording and narcissistic-entrepreneur characters looking for better opportunities of self-realization? Discussion on this question continues in mass media for some years already.

These processes in Lithuania coincided with the emergence of new modes of production and the rise of the so-called "Information Economy." At the same time, a new, interactive type of social character developed. This new character is based on the ideals of independence, free agency, tolerance, with the appreciation of self-development and self-marketing, innovativeness, proneness to experiment and consumerism. Demands of new global market economy for such character traits were most easily accepted by young educated persons with least experience in authoritarian-bureaucratic soviet system. But it brought together new anxieties about uncertain employment, acceptance by the group and social isolation. These fears are rooted not only in the specific features of a family dynamic but also in the social environment of interactive generation. In a rapidly and asymmetrically changing socio-economic environment and culture as in post-soviet Lithuania, persons with new social character traits can experience real misunderstanding and rejection from persons with prevailing bureaucratic traits of social character. When experienced from parental figures, it can lead to significant inner and interpersonal conflicts with increased insecurity, a lack of self-trust, loss of productiveness and depression.

The following clinical case-study illustrates this: A 25 year old patient requested analysis because he was feeling depressed and dissatisfied with himself. He said that he had lost trust in himself, didn't want to see any-



one while feeling down and ashamed, and felt unable to go to job interviews. He thought he was suffering from depression and he was looking specifically for psychoanalytic treatment because he had read about psychoanalysis in internet and believed it was the best treatment for him. This is untypical in Lithuania, as psychoanalysis is not widely recognized, having been banned for 50 years. This period of depression had started after he had left his bachelor studies in economics at the end of the last semester. There was no obvious serious reason for that. Some months before he had broken up with his girlfriend after a short reunion, but he didn't consider that as something important. It was at least his second episode of depression. The first one had started 3 years ago after his first separation with his girlfriend because of her infidelity. They had been together for 2 years. During that period he had left his studies at the Technical University in engineering but had successfully developed his own business running a computer gaming cafe. He had abandoned it when he was depressed. Similarly this time he had developed a business plan with internet trading of artworks but had abandoned it at the last moment when depression began. One of the reasons for not finishing it was that he didn't manage to go to the potential investor for the project.

He was a second child in a typically patriarchal family. His father had grown up without the parents who died in exile after the Second World War. The patient described him as very cold man, authoritarian and always dissatisfied with his son. His mother was empathetic and caring but often missing at work, leaving him with unsatisfied striving for secure maternal attachment.

Therapy began with the realization that psychoanalytic setting was unaffordable because of financial grounds. So agreement for psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy had been made. Quite unexpected was to realize in the first sessions that the patient had limited capacities for introspection despite declared active interest in psychoanalysis. First probative transference interpretations were hastily rejected. And the

sessions were shortened by patient's constant tardiness. This caused some disappointment in analyst and led to just partially recognized counter transference reaction beginning to apply more cognitive and supporting techniques, encouraging or pushing the patient to pull up, to finish education and business project. Depression and social withdrawal worsened, and the patient was signaled regression and a lack of mutual understanding, while demanding for antidepressants. At that moment, the self-analysis of counter transference helped the analyst to find himself enacting projective counter-identification with the projected by the patient aspects of bad object of the demanding and devaluating father. Patient was looking for a good object of parental figure who would be supportive in his attempts to build an independent living while he was at the same time feeling fear of punishment and devaluation for not succeeding at that. His longing for an unconditionally loving mother who would accept him with all his failures and losses was too unacceptable in the context of therapeutic relationship with a 15 year older man and was concealed by reaction formation. The patient's attempts to look competent and potent denying the regressive longings were so effective that the analyst once had even experienced fantasies that the patient was just pretending he had social phobias and depression. It could be another reason for the analyst's identification with a castrating father.

Even very cautious interpretation of oedipal situation in a transference-countertransference relationship sounded very frightening to the patient. He reacted, saying that he doesn't question the authority of the therapist and that he always realized how righteous the demands of the father were.

More acceptable for the patient and fruitful in the development of the interpersonal understanding was the analyst's calling into question eagerness of the father and other parenting figures to understand his needs and support his attempts to realize his capabilities. After some time the patient started learning a programming language and creating basic programs for internet pages as a



freelance programmer. He again was constantly late for the sessions complaining on the lack of time or urgent jobs. After winning a contract to make a web page for a psychotherapist from the UK, he began to discuss possible application of CBT for himself and even tried to learn some methods of overcoming social phobias from the manual. It brought back to the sessions discussion about oedipal rivalry which was again denied by the patient. Soon new period of depressed mood occurred at the beginning of the school year and coinciding with analyst's questioning about the plans to continue and finish the studies of economics. This coincidence stimulated to scrutinize the countertransference reactions and possibility of enacted revenge to the oedipal rivalry of the patient.

At that moment the self-analysis of the therapist and the further development of the therapeutic process were very much helped by the recall of an article "Towards a Science of Social Character" published by Michael Maccoby in International Forum of Psychoanalysis in 2002. In this article, based on his presentation in XI International Forum of IFPS, Michael Maccoby describes main differences between the bureaucratic and newly occurring interactive social character. Rereading the article the analyst was able to recognize those features of bureaucratic social character which he shared with the father of the patient with whom he also shared childhood and education in the autocratic Soviet system. Satisfying security needs by working in a big governmental institution instead of concentrating on the development of his private activities, giving preference to the formal education instead of acquisition of effective and practicable skills. For the therapist it was keeping his position in the big medical university hospital despite constant frustrating conflict with the prevailing bio-pharmacological attitudes and rather successful private practice. Five years of psychoanalytic education after eleven years of medical studies was implicitly communicating to the patient the value given to formal education by the therapist. For the father of the patient it was keeping his low-paid position in a big governmental enter-

prise instead of developing his rather successful private business. He was explicitly insisting that his son would finish university, practice for some years as an employee in some reliable enterprise and only then could begin his own business. Worth mentioning is also the best friend of the patient who was doing successful career in the bureaucratic machine of a municipality.

These explicit or implicit requirements from authoritative figures were in conflict with the requirements of the new interactive society and with interactive social character traits of the patient. His abilities for experimentation, for being innovative, for self-development and self-marketing in the global market of World Wide Web were rather adaptive in the new socio-economic reality. But at the same time they made him feel resigning traditional values and losing social bonds disappointing his father or being different and maybe worse than his peers what was confirmed by rejection of his girlfriend (what was a repetition of mother's rejection in the first year of living).

The implicit but sensible attitudes of the therapist were not just another confirmation for these anxieties and self-disappointments. They also brought a feeling of misunderstanding and resentment into the interpersonal field of therapy and prompted resistance. Proposed interpretations and discussion about the differences of social characters as the reason for misunderstandings in therapeutic and other relationships was more acceptable to the patient than the classical interpretations of the oedipal complex. It was the moment of "meeting of minds". It was followed by unanticipated changes in social relationships – the patient got involved with a new girlfriend. It didn't last for long as she had unfinished relationship with her ex-boyfriend. But, in this case, it did not cause a depressive self devaluation and social withdrawal for the patient.

Rapid socio-economic changes demand the development of new social character traits to be successful in the process of social selection. But these traits come into conflict with still prevailing cultural values or individual super-ego ideals. It can cause the feelings



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of a disconnect from the cultural basis and losing bonds with social environment leading to depression and social anxieties. Michael Maccoby discovered that in newly occurring interactive social character types, social anxiety about group acceptance is typical to it as children in interactive families are less dependent emotionally on parents. But alternative theory could be that it is a typical feature of a transitional period and clash of different social characters. This clash can happen also in the interpersonal

encounter of analytic treatment and would be taken into account analyzing intersubjective experiences especially in its difficult moments and times of intensive socio-economic changes. I think that the concept of social character hadn't lost its relevance in the globalizing world and gives an important perspective on the analytic encounter especially when we are working with patients with significantly different social and cultural backgrounds.