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Bulgaria – A social psychological portrait

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Making a psychological portrait of a country is a difficult task, especially if that country is the country where the author of the psychological portrait was born and where he/she grew up. Why is it so difficult for someone who was born and grew up in the country which is being depicted to make such a portrait? Is not that the necessary condition so that such a portrait could be realistic? Or perhaps a foreign researcher would be more impartial to the psychological analysis of the country, as an observer who is away from the political and everyday events that happen in a certain country? I will attempt to answer those questions below. Furthermore, an analysis of a country requires that we have a certain evaluation criterion which will allow us to make the analysis objective. The criterion I chose for the analysis is the idea of "the social character", widely used by the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm.

In this respect it is impossible not to mention Karl Marx's contribution – an undeservedly rejected author and perhaps the scholar and person towards whom exists the most contradictory attitude in our country – to shaping Fromm's thinking and his idea of the social character. Marx has not been rejected by accident because the distortion of his thinking for the aims of the ideology, as well as the mandatory boring study of his ideas during communism in Bulgaria, lead to rejecting

him at the dawn of the democratic changes¹. The analysis will be limited to certain traits of the social character of the Bulgarians because describing the social character in full would require writing a book and a lot of additional research.

What is social character? Why do I refer to the character of the Bulgarians? If we look objectively at it, there is no such entity as Bulgaria, there is no such entity as state or society – those are abstractions, words behind which there is no real substance. What actually exists is a group of real people – Bulgarians, Gypsies, Turks – citizens, but after all, people. People who do different jobs, some work with forklift trucks, others are businessmen or politicians. No politician is the state itself, no institution is the state itself, either individually or together. There is no such entity as state in the real sense of the word, the state may exist as a psychological essence or image but not as being

¹ Before 1989 some of Marx's ideas were taught in secondary schools in Bulgaria. When applying to university the applicant had to sit an exam not only in the desired subject but also an exam in politics. At university the students studied a cycle of ideological disciplines. Every year the students were taught one ideological discipline. They were: history of BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party), Political Economy, Dialectical Materialism, Scientific Communism. All of these subjects examined Marx's ideas; however, often they did not include studying his books but rather studying what critics had written about them.



reality. Moreover, the state as a psychological essence is part of man because as a subject he creates that psychological essence in his mind. In this sense, the state does not oppose the people as one object to another, but it is a result of the relationships between real people. That is, relationships between living people who enter into a certain kind of relationships and not relationships between some abstract entities, not politician and elector but person to person relationships. Calling someone a politician is an abstraction, a label that one receives because of the job one is doing. Why is "politician" an abstraction? It is an abstraction because the word "politician" is void of content, it does not explain why a person is what he/she is or why the politician behaves in a certain way during his/her political activities. This principle is very important for understanding that the psychological portrait of a country may only refer to real human relationships, to relationships people have with each other and not to abstract definitions of what a person is or what a group of people are, for example, politicians, policemen, engineers, etc.

According to Fromm, "There is no 'society' in general, but only specific social structures which operate in different and ascertainable ways"². Fromm defines the social character as

*"the nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture in contradistinction to the individual character in which people belonging to the same culture differ from each other."*³ (Italics by Fromm).

According to Fromm, the most typical human trends are product of social process, that is, they appear and intensify in a certain social structure⁴. He thinks that human nature is not conditioned in advance but a re-

² Fromm, Erich, (1956), *The Sane Society*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, (second edition, 1991), p. 77.

³ Fromm, Erich, (1956), *The Sane Society*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, (second edition, 1991), p. 76.

⁴ Fromm, E., *Fear of Freedom*, London 1942, p. 10.

sult of social life that stimulates the appearance of certain trends and stops the appearance of other trends. He gives for example the Renaissance when a large number of people had a burning ambition for fame; that ambition was absent during the Middle Ages. Let us say it in Marx's words as well:

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."⁵

When Fromm defines the task of social psychology, he explains the direction and the way in which the social character exerts influence: "Its task is to show not only how passions, desires, anxieties change and develop as a result of the social process, but also how man's energies thus shaped into specific forms in their turn become *productive forces, moulding the social process*"⁶ (Italics by Fromm). The connection between man and the economic conditions is neither one-sided nor hierarchic in nature. Man is shaped by the economic conditions and the mediator in this model is the social character which is the intermediary between man and the economic conditions.

In order to avoid wrong conclusions that lead to materialistic interpretation of the process or lead to assuming that man is a

⁵ Marx, Karl, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, with some notes by R. Rojas.

⁶ Fromm, E., *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 10.



passive subject of the economic conditions, I would like to mention that the economic conditions themselves are conditioned by the development of man. The development of capitalism would not be possible if man had not developed himself intrapersonally, if his striving for an increasing understanding of nature, striving for creating and producing, was not present. The economic base of capitalism consists in the production of machines which begin to replace human labour but that economic base would never appear without man who made the machines in order to make his life easier, in order to apply productively his power. Therefore, it should not be unreservedly argued that capitalism has only negative or only positive features, irrespective of the trends that it stimulates in people. On the other hand, communism would not have disappeared in Bulgaria if the economic conditions that existed had not started to change. The process started in the early 80s with another economic crisis and finished in 1989 with an ongoing regime change. Since the economic conditions change a lot faster than the social character, the social character lags behind to a great extent. The "lag", a term used by Fromm to name that process, can also explain part of the behaviour of the Bulgarians during the anti-monopoly protests.

Some of the slogans of the so-called anti-monopoly protests ("23 years of transition are enough", etc.) showed that the social character lags behind the economic conditions of development. In fact, today a large number of people mentally still live in communism. That is a fact supported by some of the historians who study Bulgarian history: "The [communist] system collapsed politically but survived psychologically, it left deep traces in the "experience of the nation" and the study of the reasons for that is an important part of a historian's work and one of the important premises for overcoming them."⁷ In fact, the transition in Bulgaria has

⁷ Знеполски, И. (ред.), *История на Народна република България*, Институт за изследване на близкото минало, София, 2009, с. 19 (Znepolski, I. (Ed.), *History of People's Republic of Bulgaria*, Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, Sofia, 2009, p. 19).

finished economically but psychologically it has not finished because the social character of the majority of people still features the traits of the social character that existed until 1989. The further we look at the people who were born earlier, the more those traits show. It could be claimed with some degree of certainty that the telephone scams that we observe in recent years which involve a phone call from a "relative" who had had a car crash or who had hit someone are successful because they are directed precisely towards that older generation which during communism was used to coping with situations by bribing. That generation knew that paying could solve a lot of problems, could save someone or under certain conditions it could put one in a more advantageous position. That certainty is so strong, unconscious and emotionally justified that it is an obstacle to realizing rationally that it is a scam, that they have to check if that had really happened before giving the last of their savings to some anonymous person⁸.

The self-perception of Bulgarians consists of a number of illusions, a number of half-truths and half-lies. This way of thinking is not just irrational thinking but something that goes deeper under the "surface" because in its basis lies an emotional matrix. The emotional matrix constantly charges it with energy. The self-perception of a Bulgarian is confused. If we transfer that social thinking to the sphere of the individual thinking, we will see how distorted it is. That is, if we evaluate the social thinking as if it belongs to a client who is having a consultation, we would more clearly understand its meaning. Here we have to note that this transfer can-

⁸ The telephone scam scheme consists in the following: The fraudster phones the "victim" and pretends to be a relative of his/hers (daughter, son, grandson, cousin, etc) and asks for a large sum of money to pay for a surgery, or to bribe a police officer after a car accident, because he/she had hit someone. The "victim" does not question the situation that is being described and the need to pay because he/she thinks bribing as a way to solve a problem still holds true and although the "victim" actually hears the fraudster's voice, he/she does not doubt that the voice belongs to his/her relative.



not exist on its own but only within the framework of some evaluation criterion. It is not possible to evaluate all group processes from the point of view of individual mental phenomena because that would be a mistake. Some individual mental processes do not occur in the same way in groups. For example, the resistance of a certain social group does not look like and is not the same as the resistance of an individual.

Let us now go back to what was said about the distorted thinking of the Bulgarians and give an example about it. In the same conversation which several people are having, you could hear the opinion that we are a nation with a slave mentality that lets politicians oppress it and at the same time someone can say that the Ottomans ruled us for 500 years, the Greeks ruled us for 200 years, then communism ruled us and they never defeated and overpowered us and that we are a tough nation. It is obvious that between those two statements there is a sharp contradiction – on one hand it is argued that the Bulgarians have a slave mentality, on the other hand that they have a strong mentality and no one could crush them. That is just one example for the presence of irrationality in some of the ways Bulgarians think.

Explaining this example with a feeling of inferiority however does not explain the presence of the feeling itself. The explanation that the Bulgarians feel inferior and overcompensate may show the mechanism of reaction but it does not explain why they behave the way they do. This nationalism (strong mentality) and nihilism (slave mentality) are not contradictory viewpoints but they are two sides of the same coin. It is obvious that they have some social function whose purpose is to maintain both of them in a relative balance. It is difficult to say what this social function is because that would require a more detailed analysis of the conditions which give rise to this type of thinking.

Among the Bulgarians exists a desire to follow the Western model of development of economy, culture and, on the whole, everything that comes from Western Europe and the USA. That could be dangerous because

no one realizes that the introduction and strengthening of capitalism in the form it exists in those parts of the world would lead to certain characterological changes, that is, changes of the social character, which are negative and which, as we can tell, have already begun. Erich Fromm calls the orientation of the social character of the so-called developed Western world marketing orientation. In his book *Man for Himself* he describes the positive and negative aspects of this type of social character. The positive aspects are purposeful, forward-looking, social, open-minded, curious, efficient, experimenting, able to change, witty, generous, tolerant, etc, and the negative ones are unable to be alone, inconsistent, without principle and values, indifferent, childish, tactless, wasteful, etc.⁹ The appearance of the positive aspects depends on the relative strength of the productive orientation within the overall structure of character.

We should know that alongside the appearance of the positive traits he describes, there will appear characterological changes towards the negative traits as well. The atomizing of the Western worker and of the employee in general is something that is not true for Bulgaria but which will appear and develop during a more intensive development of the capitalistic type of relations. We should have in mind that the marketing orientation as an orientation of character does exist to a certain degree in our country and may be the leading orientation of the big businessmen whose wealth could be estimated to be millions of lev, of the bankers, bank managers, who in one way or another are in greater contact with the developed capitalism in the way it exists in the West, therefore they experience and perceive the world in a different way, unlike the majority of the population of our country. In order to understand some of the buying and selling relationships between the people in the Western world, one needs to give up the idea that the way one thinks is characteristic of all the people around the world, that is,

⁹ Cf. Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself: an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, (1949), pp. 115-116.



that one's own logic is typical for the rest of the people who are not citizens of our country but expressed with words from one's own language. The life practice of every nation is different and it gives rise to specific cultural phenomena and experiences.

Let me give an example with the TV commercials in Bulgaria to make clear how important the economic base is. No matter how many commercials that make people consume and make them turn into consumers are made, those commercials would not be effective, not because they are not effective in general, but because the influence they have depends on the underlying economic base. It is not possible to make someone consume when the economic relations he/she enters do not allow living in a way that will allow being a consumer. On the other hand, the economic conditions have not stimulated the appearance of such a trait in the character of the Bulgarians.

The conclusion we could make is that in Bulgaria capitalism does not exist in the form it exists in the Western world, because if it did exist its economic base and the relations that arise between the people would lead to the appearance of certain trends in the Bulgarians. Those trends, if we refer to the description of the positive and negative aspects of the "marketing character" that exists in the USA and Western Europe, are absent or they are barely present in our society. There is always a choice but we should know the consequences of each choice.

Both Fromm and Marx claim that one can influence the economic base, that is, the process is not one-sided. One may attempt to become aware of the psychological characteristics of the society in which one lives (social character) because one also shares them to a degree. I consider that we Bulgarians – politicians, workers, businessmen, teachers, students, pupils and university teachers – have a choice, but we have to know what the consequences of our choice would be. Following the route of world capitalism which could already be called "ultra-capitalism" would lead to a certain kind of relations that have to do with losing one's individuality, atomizing, becoming an append-

age to a machinery. Everywhere in our country no matter if we look at unskilled labour jobs or skilled labour jobs one would notice that the worker or employee is not an appendage to a machine, he/she controls it and directs it, the machine needs him/her and not the other way round, the worker has the freedom to think how to improve one's work; nobody is required to unquestioningly and with pedantic accuracy comply with exact parameters so that no room for creativity could be left. Here I do not mean doing a job that requires the construction of a part that has an exact size because then it would be understandable to comply with exact parameters; I mean a job that has to be done in a fixed number of minutes or seconds and that each action has to be done in a fixed time and each delay of the action would lead to delay of the entire process of work.

It is not true that the Bulgarians have a slave mentality, although it is often said so. If that was true there will not be any protests, the protest of 10th January 1997 would not have taken place, neither the protest of the teachers, nor the anti-monopoly protests would have taken place. The comparison with developed countries, with their history which is very different from the history of Bulgaria, with the fact that some countries had colonies, with years of development during Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Middle Ages is entirely purposeful though unconscious and its aim is to prove that we are always lagging behind, that we are not good enough. This comparison with the developed countries that we Bulgarians make tries to prove that we are underdeveloped but the development of these countries has to be followed according to the geographic and economic characteristics of our country because our country has its own traditions which should not be ignored. There would not be enough space to refute all the illusions which the Bulgarians need to support in their minds. Why they are being supported and what the psychological meaning of supporting those illusions is, needs further research.

Having in mind what social character is and that social character is common to the



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members of the same society, we now can answer the question who will be more objective – the foreign researcher or the scholar who grew up and lives in that society. The answer is: neither of the two; rather the scholar who has managed to step outside of the social character, who has managed, though not fully, to become aware of certain characteristics of one's own society and critically evaluate them. An external observer would lack objectivity in the evaluation of the society because consciously or not, he/she would project one's own social character, or at least certain aspects of it, on the society that is being analyzed. On the other hand, if the researcher who lives in the society that is being analyzed does not become aware of certain aspects of social character and is not able to step outside of the own society and look at it with an outside eye, one would be too subjective in its evaluation.