



The Third World and the Social Character

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1. Conflict between the sexes and the „socially molded” character

When we arrive in an investigation at a difficult or critical point, we surely take a new look at our original scheme and go over the steps we have followed to see if, in some way, we can find another way forward. This is a principle valid also in social research, especially when we are confronted with structures determined by ideologies or resulting from socio-economic factors.

The social character, a concept proposed by Fromm (cf. E. Fromm, 1941a; 1947a; 1955a; 1962a and E. Fromm and M. Maccoby, 1970b), allows us to understand, among other phenomena, the emotions which arise, are experienced and fluctuate during the processes of social adaptation. In a scheme, the social character would cover a space between the economic base and the ideas (cf. E. Fromm, 1965a).

As researchers, we are observing, discovering, detecting, whereas we are arguing as social participants. However, the question remains valid: How shall we facilitate the breaking down of the rigidity of the structures without opposing it rigidly with a solution? And in the very terms of the social character, how shall we face the rigidity of character, if it is itself the result of social adaptation, a process in which class differences, exploitation on the job, and inequality prevail as determining elements and in which, as a dominant emotional characteristic, is apparent a vertical authoritarian type of relationship and a passive-exploitative character?

We may approach the problem from the

point of view of the social character, which, taking additionally into account ideology and economic aspects, endeavors to find an explanation for the emotional phenomena. Let the conflict between the sexes - also known as the war of the sexes - serve as a pretext to explain some of them. The male manifests himself through a machismo type of conduct, which carries the emotional significance of a strong maternal dependence, although he will live with many women, whom he courts or rather uses, while, nevertheless, he is worshiping the mother.

He also turns to alcoholism, as a mitigator of his problem, and here he shows a strong tendency toward violence which is the result of his real frustrations or his fantasies. He shows a rigid behavior more than an authoritarian one in attempting to impose his criteria, his standard, his power. The latter, he sustains through the aggressiveness which he expresses in the use of violence, maltreatment and blows, with which he succeeds in imposing his will.

The woman appears as the weak one, fearful, resentful and subjected by this „power”. Her obedience is only superficial, as at heart she lives in a constant conflict, waiting for revenge - it is not surprising that this relationship is described as sadomasochistic, where the dynamic play goes in both directions. The woman, if she has the possibility, allies herself with her children to subvert his official authority. In both sexes, we find a clear preference for their own kin, which is attempting to impose and consolidate their customs, habits, familiar foods and their very personal religious expression. It can be understood that, because of this struggle between the



two, they forget about their own children, whom they involve rather in the battle, which, in the end, closes the door on their particular possibilities as a couple in formation or as individuals in a presumed independence, thus adversely affecting their growth, their progress and their spontaneity.

A diagnosis of emotional immaturity comes to mind, although basically there exists a fear of freedom and consequently a fear of growing up, since they need to remain connected - anchored to their ancestors and previous stages. Psychoanalytically, we call it a symbiotic family fixation - a socially and ideologically favored phenomenon. This atmosphere doubtless contributes to generating social distrust and personal incredulity and even guilt, if there is an attempt to break the bond, and even when there are sporadic sketches of success, these are not taken into account. In symbiotic couples involved in conflict, it will be the tragic facts which will determine events and painful memories which will write their stories and distinguish the drama of a couple which never comes to be.

The war of the sexes finds an explanation in terms of the thesis of Fromm (cf. E. Fromm, 1943b) which starts from the basis of certain biological differences which give rise to character differences, although these may be strongly tinged by social factors - character differences which are not to be understood in terms of good or bad, but in terms of subtle shadings, that is, in the virtues and vices peculiar to each group, which are transmitted to each individual who forms a part of it.

The thesis points out that the typical character of men and women within the culture is ultimately determined by their respective social functions, masculine and feminine roles already determined. Intimately, the man must show his ability to get and maintain an erection. His specific fear is that he will fail - in the extreme case this may be translated into a fear of castration. The vulnerability of the woman, on the other hand, is rooted in her dependence on the man. The element of insecurity in relation to the sexual function is not rooted in any failure of hers, as she has no need to prove herself as the man does. Female insecurity is rooted in the fear of being abandoned. The profound contradiction

between the sexes is due to the fact that the fears and anxieties of each one refer to different spheres: In the man, they are due to a need for narcissistic satisfaction of his ego, which causes him to uphold his social prestige - social narcissism - and the value he derives from the woman's eyes looking at him. In the woman, it is in finding pleasure which the intimate relationship gives her. These are differences which, if not resolved, give rise to the ancestral conflict between man and woman.

2. Types of character in the modality of leaders

Another determinant social structure which comes into play in the formation of the social character is the one known as the „socially molded defect” (cf. E. Fromm, 1955a, p. 15). This term is given to a phenomenon, which society encourages and stimulates because it is needed for its dynamics. A type of irrational character appears, which is seen not as a defect but on the contrary as something necessary since it facilitates the balance of the social structures themselves. Let us look at an example which has come forth from psychosocial research in Mexico, which we are likely to find also in other communities: The so-called natural leaders, those who are able to organize groups of people and to undertake actions and tasks in common.

In our case, his characteristics distinguishes him as persistent, orderly and enterprising. He possesses empathy and the approval and acceptance of others. He has that spark which is necessary to attract and organize. When the work in common is at its minimum, such as street cleaning improvements, arrangements for organizing a sports field, etc., he coordinates and carries it out with ease and pleasure. When there are major common projects in which other factors of greater scope intervene, for example, the search for solutions to problems having to do with public services, like drinking water, electricity, etc., he runs into established social structures. Here the attitude of our leader is to balance forces and not to carry through his own solution against them. The character traits of this leader, which grow stronger with his social ac-



tions, are basically of the hoarding productive type (cf. E. Fromm, 1947a, pp. 65-67), that is, orderly, methodical and achieving.

We may ask how the established structure can absorb him and why this is a socially molded defect, and we shall find the following explanation. It is not unusual for these natural leaders to be sought after and to receive a series of invitations in which they participate formally, which offer and insist and convince them that through established channels the solutions will appear and arrive more quickly. When they accept the deal, reality changes, for in a system things are different. There are dependences and determinations, so that the desired solutions are conditioned either to a previous program or to a general project or simply to problems of budget and priorities, etc. In a way, the solutions fall into the realm of the abstract.

The natural leader, who, from a mixture of personal ambition and social narcissism, has accepted this formal agreement, is absorbed. At first, he enjoys the privileges of his new post, status, position, although he suffers in what was his own initiative, since he is forced to change and must adopt a new behavior based on receiving orders, more than on exercising his initiative, which will be limited, in the best of cases, to interpretations he may make or to his experiences. All his original strength of simple, natural work, his manner of relating with his independent work group and his way of looking at problems, approaching them, proposing solutions, etc. is lost in waiting and being submitted to the structural power. Inwardly, he is haunted by frustration which he tries to compensate rationally by the hope of transforming things, although he must wait. Far from him now is that direct activity with people of his group. Such seems to be the price of belonging to an established order.

Another example: A laborer, who succeeds in getting by the risks inherent in his work in a mine and stands out, both because of his ability and his dedication and effort, also becomes a leader. He likes to antagonize the owners, his bosses, against whom he makes demands, rebels, and becomes known as a trouble-maker. His language is filled with words like „get” - get it out of the ground, get the work done, get from

the company, from his boss, get something, a benefit, etc. At first, he proclaims it like an offensive weapon, an action to bring about social betterment, „get” compensation for the union with extra profit.

Then there is a transformation, a change. His speech becomes ambiguous and it is no longer clear whether „get” is in terms of those represented by him or in personal terms. And it is not unusual that, as time passes, this transformation will bring to him an economic change, especially after ignoring defects or „understanding” accidents or becoming blind to the risks of the work itself. Here the traits of character which have been in play are consolidated with his activity. They are of the passive-exploitative type (cf. E. Fromm, 1947a, pp. 64f.). The structures produce and require these rebels who become allies.

3. Socio-economic influences

Capitalism calls for „men who are ready to work, disciplined and punctual, whose principal interest is monetary gain and whose principal goal in life is the profit derived from production and trade” (E. Fromm, 1965c, p. 210; cf. J. Rickert, 1986, p. 360). This definition, which moreover favors mainly competitive, ambitious and mercantile traits of character may perhaps be valid in countries where permanent means of production exist and are established. In the so-called third world conditions of economic crisis push people to the edge of survival and at the present time many qualified employees have been dismissed, so a fixed and secure type of employment has ceased to exist. Now they form in the lines of unemployed or job-hunters who go into the area of services, sales, itinerant vending and apprenticeship, a particular phenomenon of the great cities. The character traits which are favored in such situations are those of real rivalry and unfair competition. They are urgent acts which take place with the serious anxiety of extreme adjustment, survival, even hunger.

We can now observe and analyze experiences of the recent past, where, in societies of the East, attempts of change were made, based on theoretical premises, in order to modify



structures rapidly. These attempts were indispensable but, because of their present failure, these societies are accused of having nullified the „utopian socialism”, which brought them into being. They offered, in their time, orchestrated solutions which guaranteed direct und collective benefits.¹ This thesis can be taken as an example of a rigid solution to change a rigid structure, a rapid change that actually signified a passage between authoritarian feudalism and a state socialism, that is to say, a passage from the czars to Stalin, since they were attempting to modify complete social structures, which was supposed to produce well-being for the community. There is no doubt that there really were modifications in the methods of production, but they were always orchestrated from above, which is why the patriarchal, authoritarian power structures were maintained. This orchestrated experiment hung onto power by imposition and decree for 70 years, although they did not achieve what had been promised. Fromm, who did not live long enough to see this failure, anticipated it when he pointed out the stunting in those countries of a *Humanistic Socialism*, which might have combatted the alienation or the structures of power and the dehumanization in general. In this socialist change, he did participate (cf. E. Fromm, 1968a). In the East, schemes of cold, rigid, authoritarian command were maintained without permitting any opposition or disobedience, so that what was offered and postulated as the emancipation from work and the taking of power by the workers themselves was only window-dressing. The present failure caused more surprise in their own ranks than in foreign

¹ Galia Ackerman, a Russian intellectual, published *Russia make Sacrifices on the Altar of the Market*, which particularly indicates the economic system created by Stalin in five essential points. I list them: 1. A planned economy in which the quantity of needles or flatirons to be manufactured in a lapse of five years was programmed and enforced. 2. A strictly hierarchial structure of the economy which guaranteed the subordination of transport and business to the directives imposed from the center. 3. Arbitrarily determined wage scales. 4. A very limited roll for money, as the basic needs of the population were satisfied almost free of charge. 5. A common economy covering all the Soviet territory. - Quoted according to *Proceso Magazine México*, No. 791.

critics.

It should be noted that, in that type of society, individuals did not reach a stage of emotional development, in humanistic terms, nor autonomy, nor freedom, nor did they exercise their own criteria. There were material and ideological changes, but for those societies - just as in the West - it is really important and necessary to achieve at the same time as socio-economic development a full emotional development. Let this proposal stand as an alternative for a better individual-society relationship.

Fromm, in the letter addressed to Martin Jay (E. Fromm, 1971b, p. 254; cf. M. Jay, 1973) stated that his essential point in *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) was to show that socio-economic conditions determine how hard it is for man to gain his freedom. In *The Sane Society* (1955a), he continued that same theme and always sustained the same point of view. He adds that the ability of man to gain freedom, for love, depends almost entirely on the socio-economic conditions he has to face and only exceptionally can anyone find it in another way. Fromm comments that he was called a moralist for having assumed an opinion in the sense that a greater number of people can achieve their transformations by their own acts, through good will or through prayer, although he always maintained and was convinced as long as he lived that freedom cannot be gained in the established social conditions. Neither in the East nor in the West, I might add.

There is no doubt that Fromm was a pioneer in his attempts to apply psychoanalysis to social phenomena, with a thesis which originally emerged from the appreciations of the clinical aspects of individuals, in which he was able to state that regular, constant attitudes of cleanliness, accumulation and order, for example, correspond to a particular character and that the manifest fulfillment of these attitudes completely satisfies the individuals, achieving their consolidation, when they come in contact within a society.

Nevertheless, the history of character traits and their behaviors, be they oral, anal or phallic, which make a distinction between individuals, does not explain enough about entire societies. To this end, we have available the con-



cepts, transformed by Fromm himself, which offer an ample non-individualistic frame indicating the dynamics faced by individuals who, besides their own needs, are confronted with certain options because of the socio-economic conditions of the society. This is why, when speaking of these dynamics of the interaction between the individual and his society, we actually speak of character dynamics, the fundamental basis for understanding the concept of social character. The action of the psychoanalyst was not limited to simply transferring the individual concepts and accommodating them to the social effects in the act of interpretation. In order to understand the phenomenon in its real dimensions, Fromm resorted in his search to the theory of Marx (cf. E. Fromm, 1965a), and he particularly recommended recovering and applying the psychological understandings implicit in it. This option, the psychology of Marx, furnishes the opportunity to point out, when speaking of the concept of alienation, that this is quite distant from the language of insanity used in psychopathology and psychiatry and that, in terms of humanistic psychoanalysis, it is understood as a synonym of the estrangement from themselves suffered by individuals.

So, for example, while working in a factory, the worker, during the process of production, finds himself in an activity which for him is totally inconsistent with his own creative needs or his beliefs and even more inconsistent with his particular way of life, but he is employed-hired. Here is alienation as a concept of betrayal of oneself. It means at the same time acts necessary for survival, although these are not inherent, so that the options permitted to them keep the individuals away from their own creative capacity. They live separated from their own capacities.

This phenomenon can be comprehended by realizing how predetermined a worker's life is, which is the result of opportunities and acts carried out in consequence, which in reality derive from the socio-economic conditions of a society in such a way that individuals find themselves cornered in survival jobs. How hard it is to free oneself from this weight determined by economic conditions, is also easily to understand.

4. The Processes of the Praxis

In the microcosm mining community under study², there have been observed in three years changes in the structure of the family group. The groups have gone through basic changes that have transformed them. Although there is a simple economical explanation - Latin America's lost decade -, it is not so easy to find the reasons in the dynamics of the social character. The family, three years before, was largely made up of nuclei of parents and directly involved children, as at the present time, but there were also an important group of families that were constituted as a family labor union, including additionally uncles and aunts, grandparents and cousins, all in cohesion to defend and hold each other in economic support in the face of the crisis. These types of family have clearly decreased.

Another observation concerning the woman's participation points out that the woman now shows up as a laborer as does the man. Another, referring to quality, shows that those who at first were largely classified as laborers are no longer in this category but appear as service workers, whose labor is for hire. Present socio-economic conditions have molded this type of family. The adjustment in types of family necessarily affects the relationships between parents and children and causes them to be modified. Potentially, other authorities appear, that is, adults who exercise command, so this modifies and hinders the processes of identification and has repercussions in the relationship with authority. In many cases the children, not surprisingly, are relegated to the last place in the chain because of their age or because their personality is not yet defined. Given their natural conditions they need to adapt quickly, do something toward that end, exercise their skills, avoid being put down, and participate in the labor market.

To move from these economic aspects to the psychological aspects I want to define the field of study which we have found in the formation of children's character in the community

² See S. Gojman de Millán: „Sociopschoanalytic Intervention Process in a Mexican Mining Village”, in this collection.



under study and extrapolate it for similar conditions in Mexico and other countries in crisis in Latin America.

5. Final notes

- (a) We found that the character traits showed flexibility, in the children study - CONACYT report - and we think that the reason was due to the care and interest displayed over all, both by the participating researchers and by the parents involved in the process. All this favored not only the biological development of the children, but also an emotional development. From the theoretical point of view, character traits do not undergo modifications, even though social structures may be changed through improved work plans or modern production, if changes are not included which will favor these character traits. This is what just happened in the East, where the intention of the leaders was to bring about change, which they offered, but the authority relationship was dominating and even totalitarian and the character remained feudally dependent.
- (b) So it seems that we require an emotional diagnosis in the same way as is done for a pathology diagnosis in the hospital and we also require a care of emotional health, parallel to that of biological health, with action similar to the care already established for other human functions.
- (c) Individual character traits do not generally change with the good wishes of authorities, parents, social analysts or teachers. I quote A. Aramoni (1981, p. 21), who in turn quotes Tolstoy: „The only revolution that is worth the while is that which happens in-

side one.” And paraphrasing in the social field: Changes which come about and last do not come from outside or above; they come from inside and are directed toward the outside from below to above and not in other directions.

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Zusammenfassung: Die Dritte Welt und der Gesellschafts-Charakter

Die von Erich Fromm aufgestellte Theorie des Gesellschafts-Charakters gibt uns die Möglichkeit, uns die emotionalen Prozesse zu erklären, die sich in den Individuen im Verlauf des sozialen Anpassungsprozesses entwickeln und verändern. Nach Fromms Schema, das von den sozialen Strukturen ausgeht, ist der Gesellschafts-Charakter zwischen der ökonomischen Basis und den Ideen angesiedelt.

Wenn man in Rechnung stellt, dass die sozio-ökonomischen Faktoren den Charakter beeinflussen



und determinieren, kann man nicht von einem gleichartigen Charakter in der Ersten und der Dritten Welt sprechen - Differenzen, die in empirischen Studien aufgewiesen wurden, haben das gezeigt.

Im vorliegenden Beitrag wird die Dynamik des Geschlechterkampfes geschildert, der nicht nur für die Dritte Welt zu gelten scheint. Die Studien zum Gesellschafts-Charakter haben unterschiedliche Charaktertypen beschrieben; in diesem Text werden Charaktertypen dargestellt, die bei führenden Persönlichkeiten in einer mexikanischen Provinzgemeinde angetroffen wurden. Ebenso werden einige theoretische Aspekte untersucht, wie z.B. der Einfluss der sozio-ökonomischen Bedingungen, das kapitalistische Modell und der Zusammenbruch der totalitären Regime in den Ländern des Ostens. Schließlich erfolgt eine kurze Zusammenfassung des praktischen sozialpsychoanalytischen Prozesses, im Anschluss an eine methodologische Studie, die der Anwendung des interpretativen Fragebogens in der erwähnten Provinzgemeinde vorausging.

Riassunto: Il terzo mondo e il carattere sociale

La teoria del carattere sociale elaborata da Erich Fromm ci dà la possibilità di spiegare i processi emotivi che si sviluppano e si modificano negli individui nel corso dei processi di adattamento sociale. Secondo lo schema di Fromm, che parte dalle strutture sociali, il carattere sociale si colloca tra la base economica e le idee. Quando si tiene conto che i fattori socioeconomici influenzano e determinano il carattere, non si può parlare di un carattere simile nel primo e nel terzo mondo. Ciò è stato dimostrato dalle differenze rilevate negli studi empirici. In questo lavoro viene descritta la dinamica della lotta tra i sessi, che non sembra valere soltanto per il terzo mondo.

Gli studi sul carattere sociale hanno descritto tipi di carattere distinguibili; in questo testo vengono presentati dei tipi di carattere trovati in personalità preminenti di un'amministrazione provinciale messicana. Vengono anche esaminati alcuni aspetti teorici, come per esempio l'influsso delle condizioni socioeconomiche, il modello capitalistico e il crollo dei regimi totalitari nei paesi dell'Est. Segue infine un breve riassunto del processo sociopsicoanalitico pratico, dopo uno studio metodologico che ha preceduto l'applicazione del questionario interpretativo nell'amministrazione provinciale già menzionata.

Sumario: El tercer mundo y el carácter social

La teoría del carácter social propuesta por Erich Fromm nos permite explicarnos los fenómenos emocionales que se dan y fluctúan en los individuos durante los procesos de adaptación social. La misma estaría colocada entre la base económica y las ideas, esquema que describe a las estructuras sociales.

Tomando en cuenta que los factores socioeconómicos influyen y determinan el carácter, no se puede hablar de uno mismo para el primer mundo o para el tercer mundo, las diferencias encontradas en los estudios empíricos lo han demostrado. Se describe la dinámica de la lucha entre sexos que parece vigente no solo para el tercer mundo.

Los estudios del carácter social han descrito tipos de carácter y en el texto se describen los encontrados en la modalidad de Líderes en una comunidad de provincia del estado de Hidalgo. También algunos aspectos teóricos de las influencias socioeconómicas, el modelo capitalista y el „fracaso” totalitario de los países del este. Por último una breve reseña de los procesos de la práctica sociopsicoanalítica derivada de un estudio metodológico previo con el cuestionario interpretativo, en dicha comunidad de provincia.