



## The Void within Marketing Character and Normotic Personality

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This paper discusses the importance and usefulness of the concept of „social character“<sup>1</sup> proposed by Erich Fromm, for understanding both the individual within society and the functioning of society itself. We have emphasized the „marketing character“<sup>2</sup> orientation because this deals with what Fromm considered to be the „modern product“ and it has much in common with the „Normotic Personality“<sup>3</sup> proposed by Ch. Bollas (1987). I believe this perspective may help to clear up some psychodynamic aspects involved in that orientation.

We know that Fromm's character theory follows Freud on some essential points, such as the idea that character traits underlie behavior and must be deduced from it. That they are powerful forces of which the person may nevertheless be completely unconscious, and fundamentally that the character is not a mere trait but rather a total organization, which Fromm called „character orientation. (Cf. E. Fromm, 1947)“

For Fromm, Freud's most important discovery was the capacity of the individual to distort the reality of his or her experience in order to adapt to socially established norms. He argued that the most impressive aspect of Freud's discoveries was not what his patients repressed,

but the fact that they had renounced so much of themselves, so many basic dimensions of their experience in order to adapt. These dimensions are denied or unacknowledged through the process of socialization, and the loss of these experiences is subsequently rationalized and covered up through complex processes of repression, self-deception, „bad luck,“ or, in the language recently used by Schafer, „refraining from action.“<sup>4</sup> But why do they renounce so much?

For Fromm, this renunciation came from two sources: the first is the profound and desperate struggle of the human being to overcome the fear of solitude and social ostracism, and thus to avoid the separateness and vulnerability inherent to the human condition.

The second source, which starts with the basic sociological premise that there are forces and patterns profoundly entrenched in society itself, was that the individual must be understood as a primarily social being, and that the psyche develops and is determined by the individual's relation with society. This was the starting point for the concept of the „social unconscious“<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. Fromm, 1941: *Escape From Freedom*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1941; pp. 263-264.

<sup>2</sup> E. Fromm, 1947: *Man For Himself*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947, pp. 81-89.

<sup>3</sup> C. Bollas, 1987: *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, London: Free Association Books, 1987, pp.167-170.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Greenberg and S. Mitchell, 1983: *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 105-110.

<sup>5</sup> R. Funk, 1993: „Fromm's Approach to Psychoanalytic Theory and Its Relevance for Therapeutic Work,“ in: *Cuadernos IV: El Carácter Social, Su Estudio, Un Intercambio de Experiencias*, ed. by Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis. Instituto Mexicano



Fromm spoke of psychological needs (cf. *ibid.*) that must be fulfilled, but whose mode of satisfaction depends on social norms, and is internalized through adaptation to the family, the „psychic agent“ (E. Fromm, 1941 and 1947) of society.

The child acquires the character orientation that „makes him want to do what he must do“ (*ibid.*) and whose nucleus he shares with the majority of the members of his culture or social class. This fact is what allows us to speak of „social character,“ without denying individual differences within a single culture.

Social character becomes the intermediary between the economic base and the ideas and ideals; it is the „glue“ of society, and should be interpreted as a syndrome of passionate conscious and unconscious yearnings.

For Fromm, however, a person that has adapted well to an unproductive economic and social structure, who functions well and is capable of working and carrying this burden, is actually suffering from a „socially formed defect,“ a „pathology of normalcy“.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand the nature of marketing orientation, we must consider the economic function of the market, not only as something analogous to this orientation, but as the basis and condition for its development. The modern market, Fromm argues, no longer represents a place to meet and exchange, but a mechanism characterized by abstract, impersonal demand. Society produces for this market, and its verdict is based on the laws of supply and demand. This is what determines whether the commodities may be sold, and at what price, regardless of its useful value. This emphasis on the value of change rather than on the value of usefulness has led to a similar concept of value with respect to human beings.

For R. Funk<sup>7</sup> many „signs of our time“ may be understood based on marketing orientation, and translated into character traits. Relativism and disorientation are the product of confor-

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de Psicoanálisis A.C., México 1993, pp. 17-42.

<sup>6</sup> E. Fromm, 1955: *The Sane Society*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955, pp. 12-21.

<sup>7</sup> R. Funk, 1996: „Erich Fromm's Approach to Psychoanalysis.“ Paper presented at a Seminar on „Social Character“ in Florence on June 1, 1996, pp. 17-39.

mity. They represent an intense struggle to adapt at all times and in all places, depending on the demands of the market. Coldness is the result of this de-emotionalization, whose mechanisms are repression, denial and isolation of emotion. For the marketing character, emotions are an obstacle because they are features of relation and attachment. Mobility, flexibility, individualism and selfishness are just some of the requirements to participate successfully in the market. To possess a true self is not important; what is important is a show of appearances, the staging of a false self. The reward for loss of self is an orientation toward the „having mode“, and is manifested in a sense of emptiness, a state of anxious boredom, or a depressive lack of initiative, in which individuals feel themselves to be „disconnected“ in the absence of external stimulation.

These character traits are not taken as inherently negative; all of these characteristics also represent human abilities.

In today's market, Fromm says, both objects and personalities are up for sale. Packaging and brand names have become fundamental, and success depends on how well the person is able to position themselves in the market, depending on their packaging: whether „jolly,“ „aggressive,“ etc. Even more important is their family background, or their connections with influential people. The personality must be free, free of all individuality in order to fill a single condition: to be in demand. (Cf. E. Fromm, 1947, p. 70)

M. Maccoby<sup>8</sup> points out that Fromm's description of marketing character corresponds more to the unproductive characteristics of his self-developing type, in which what is sold is not personality but abilities. In contrast to people

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<sup>8</sup> M. Maccoby and B. Lenkerd, 1993: „Social Character: Fromm's Empirical Research as seen by Michael Maccoby, in: *Cuadernos IV. El Carácter Social, Su Estudio, Un Intercambio de Experiencias. Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis*, ed. by Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis A.C., México 1993, pp. 43-58. - M. Maccoby, 1996: „Introduction to the Transaction Edition,“ in: E. Fromm and M. Maccoby, 1996 [1970]: *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, New Brunswick (USA) and London (England): Transaction Publishers, 1996, pp. ix-xxxii.



that lack a strong sense of self and try to become „something that will sell” on the market. He agrees with Fromm that adaptation to modern capitalism favors the development of marketing character traits, but adds that it also favors democratic traits and increased social sensitivity.

On this point, we might ask ourselves to what extent the market characteristics described by Fromm are changing or acquiring new expressions.

Some authors working from the standpoint of sociology have reflected on postmodernism as „the expression of the interior truth” of this new social order, recently born out of late capitalism.

F. Jameson (1983) in his article „Postmodernism and the Consumer Society”<sup>9</sup> says that there is a constant attempt to transform reality into images, as a sort of „pastiche,” in whose essence the „death of the subject” is reflected. In other words, the end of the individualism that characterized the great inventions of modernism, and in which time is experienced as an endless present.

In his article „Manifesto for an Accelerated World” (1988), Thomas Friedman<sup>10</sup> says, „we live in a globalized world, which in contrast to the highly static cold war system includes the integration of free markets, of nation-states and information technologies with an unforeseen degree and speed. The driving idea is free-market capitalism, and its symbol, a net around the world (World Wide Web), which unites us all.”

Jean Baudrillard (1983), following Habermas’ theory of communication, says in his article „The Ecstasy of Communication”<sup>11</sup> that „the new dimension of advertising is all-invasive. It monopolizes public life as it does private life. Public space is no longer a spectacle, and private life no longer a secret. Now this opposition is di-

luted into a kind of shadowy darkness where the most intimate processes of our lives become the virtual pastures in which the communications media feed. We are no longer part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication, and this ecstasy is obscene.

But it is no longer the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, prohibited, or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the too visible. It is this obscenity in which there are no more secrets that puts an end to all representation. We are faced with a new form of schizophrenia. Since internal life and intimacy have ended, individuals can no longer produce the limits of their own being. They have become a mere screen, a distribution center for all the webs of influence.”

Interestingly, Fromm also spoke of a kind of „schizophrenia”<sup>12</sup> to explain the psychodynamics of marketing character. He proposed „automatic conformity” (cf. E. Fromm, 1941) as a fundamental mechanism in which the individual ceases to be himself, and becomes what the cultural standards dictate: „I am what you want me to be.” This creates a pseudo-self, which generates pseudo-thoughts and pseudo-feelings. „Today,” he said, „equality has become synonymous with interchangeability. Instead of the condition necessary for the development of every man’s idiosyncrasies, it means the extinction of individuality. Equality used to go hand-in-hand with difference, but now it has become synonymous with „in-difference,” and it is certainly indifference that characterizes the relationship of modern man with himself and with his peers.”

In this sense, Winnicott’s concept of the development of personality in terms of „false self” (cf. J. Greenberg and S. Mitchell, 1983, pp. 105-110) is very similar to Fromm’s concept of marketing character.

In fact, many authors from widely different theoretic traditions have begun to discuss the problem of pseudo-normality as the most common of our time. Conceiving this as a disturbance in the development, structuring and exer-

<sup>9</sup> F. Jameson, 1983: „Postmodernism and the Consumer Society,” in: *Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, 1983, pp. 165-186.

<sup>10</sup> T. Friedman, 1988: „Manifesto for an Accelerated World,” in: *The New York Times*, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> J. Baudrillard, 1983: „The Ecstasy of Communication,” in: *Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, 1983, pp. 192-197.

<sup>12</sup> E. Fromm, 1973: *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974, pp. 347-352.



cise of an authentic personal subjectivity, they have even come up with new diagnostic descriptions, such as „Normopathic“ (McDougall, 1985, p. 156) and the Normotic Personality (C. Bollas, 1987, p. 137).

For Bollas, a „normotic personality“ is a person with the specific drive to be „normal,“ characterized by the paralysis and ultimate cancellation of the personality, in favor of a self that is conceived as a material object among other manufactured products in the world of objects. This type of person has succeeded in neutralizing the subjective element of their personality, and their minds are characterized less by the psychic (symbolization through representation of feelings, sensations and inter-subjective perceptions) than by the objective. „This mentality,“ Bollas says, „is not destined to represent the object, but rather to be the „echo“ of material objects, to be an object of commodity in the world of human production.“

The normotic personality is someone abnormally normal: too stable, secure, calm and socially extroverted. Since they are fundamentally uninterested in the subjective life, they are inclined to reflect on the material characteristics of objects, on their material reality, or on „facts“ regarding material phenomena.

Subjective states of mind are transferred to an external material object and the result is the de-symbolization of mental content. This is an evacuation of subjective states of mind onto objects, and even though these objects are used and joined together in a familiar space, they have lost their symbolic purpose. A person like this lives in a world replete with objects but void of meaning. Due to their lack of interest in subjective life, they have rarely used their capacity for introspection, and reveal a real ingenuousness when asked questions that require an examination of himself or herself or the other in any depth.

They like to be members of an institution, since this allows them to identify with the existence of the impersonal: the tasks of an institution or the products of a corporation. To be a part of the team, to be at ease in a committee, secure in social groups, where pseudo-intimacy serves as an alibi for not forming a profound friendship with anyone.

For Bollas, it would not be true to say that the Normotic personality lacks a sense of identity, but it is more striking as a kind of „artificial acquisition,“ as if no mental work had gone into placing it within its history.

Neither could we say, he continues, that the Normotic Personality cannot fall in love or form a bond. But they are attracted to similar personalities, and since love can resemble any addiction, they can live with someone without engaging in the slightest subjective questioning.

Normotics may have a sense of humor; they may enjoy laughter and may seem to be *bon vivants*, but instead of experiencing sadness, they decay. Since for them, life is defined by action, depression or anxiety are not presented as mental constructions, they only delay the person's search for another „fail-safe“ way to obtain happiness. Incapable of feeling within themselves the process of subjective states, they may give the impression of being unusually strong and solid. „In their most extreme form, they impress us as having a terrifying emptiness, but this observation is much more noticeable when we are the only ones to notice it, and the persons themselves see no fault whatsoever.“

These individuals do not lack conviction or standards. They have numerous rules to define proper and erroneous conduct, but they seem to have inherited them from somewhere else, and not from a work of self.

They are impressive because they seem unborn. As if the final stages of psychological enlightenment had not been completed because the person was only partially „seen“ by the father and mother.

It seems likely that children that give in to the Normotic element perceive in their parents' mode of being a form of hatred, a kind of attack on life as such, which tries to snatch life away from existence. Their violence is not directed against the personality of the child, nor is it present in what „is said,“ but rather in their way of excluding life. None of the parents is inclined to celebrate the imaginative life of the child. Above all, they want their children to be normal, and they do not want them to exhibit behavior that might be considered inappropriate or remarkable. The child is rewarded for being good, in this case meaning common.



### A Case of Normotic Personality

Ernesto is a 42-year-old man who uses mechanical metaphors to describe his situation in recent months, which prompted him to seek help. He has been feeling „down,” „deflated,” and „in poor working condition.” Even his insatiable desire for new sexual adventures had diminished. In addition, for the past two months he has been suffering from pain in his left leg, which makes it impossible for him to exercise-an activity that he was fanatical about from a very young age.

He claims to have very few memories of his childhood, although he described it as a „good experience.” He grew up in a structured family, with a comfortable economic situation. An „ideal” family, whom friends considered to be solid people, „with their feet firmly on the ground.”

In his words, he is „happily married,” and has two daughters. He describes his father as an honest man, a hard worker who spent little time at home. He remembers him „sunken into his armchair” reading, while waiting for the sleeping pills to take effect.

Within the family, this experience was lived as „don't bother your father,” the mental equivalent of which might be „leave the part of your mind related to your father alone.” His father died 10 years ago in a car accident. One doctor thought it might have been a suicide, but Ernesto rejects the possibility, arguing that for as long as he could remember, his father „regularly took anti-depressants.”

Ernesto was his „favorite” son, the only one he occasionally spoke with to give him „wise advice,” such as „if your problem can be solved, don't worry; and if it can't, don't worry either” or „life is like that: it has its ups and downs.” He gave the impression, however, that he could never really discuss Ernesto's problems or doubts.

Ernesto remembers very little contact with his mother, describing her as „an enchanting woman, with exquisite taste,” who, despite her illness (rheumatoid arthritis), always maintained her good humor and optimism.

In terms of professional life, he describes himself as a „workaholic.” He has succeeded in

building his own company and has enjoyed great professional and economic success, thanks to „his character,” which he describes as outgoing and humorous, and his „good relations” with most of his former schoolmates, who are now „high level” politicians and businessmen.

One major concern has been the passage of time, with its repercussions on his physical condition, since something that has given him „a sense of security” in the past is his attractive face and athletic body. Another concern has been his tireless pursuit of sexual adventures, because he „believed deeply in monogamy” and „knows” therefore that his behavior is „incorrect.” Even so, there is „something that drives him to a search which is carnal.”

From the beginning, he would open our sessions with pertinent humorous commentaries. He would tell me of the „events” that occurred since the last session, speaking of places and objects instead of people. If I tried to draw his attention to moods or feelings, he would look at me, perplexed, and immediately ask „What must I have felt?” or „What would you have felt in my place?” When I tried to discuss his experiences with him, he inevitably resorted to one or another of his father's sayings, like „yes, well, but if you want to win in life you have to put up with it.” In almost all of the sessions we were able to hold, almost at the end, he would take out a little page with questions on it to ask me. He said this could be a „professional deformation.” What did the method consist of? What exactly should he be thinking about for the next session? Why did I think that there was something that he might not know about himself?

I very quickly came to feel that I was facing a mentality that did not admit introspection or reflection, the constant sensation that while he had all the answers to everything, I had none. He did not remember any dreams, with the exception of one he had had repeated since adolescence:

„I was in a bed, and milk came out of the mattress, as if it had holes in it. I went out to a party, and when I came back the mattress was deflated.”

Three months after our first meeting, he had to have an operation on his spine for a slipped disk. When he returned, he said he had discov-



ered a way to feel much better. When he woke up, as he generally did, with a lack of energy and motivation, he listed for himself everything he „had,” his family, company, material goods, etc., then compared it against what he „didn't have, this is „real and objective problems.” In addition, before he got out of bed, he would repeat to himself, „I must live this as if it were the last day of my life.” This procedure took barely 15 minutes, he said. Hardly comparable with the 50-minute sessions he had with me, plus an hour's commuting time to my office. Unfailingly cordial and courteous, he assured me that our appointments „had helped him a lot” and he took his leave, wishing me „the best of luck.”

For Fromm, the essence of marketing character was the emptiness that marked „some potential in the person that was not developed”<sup>13</sup>. This point of view coincides with Bion's proposal (1977) regarding „the absence of the alpha function.” (Cf. C. Bollas, 1987) In some individuals, the psyche is incapable of registering emotional experience and constructing representations, since it has become a mere organ of perception. And in this sense there is also a mechanism that is the opposite of animism, where „living objects are endowed with attributes of the dead.” From this point of view, Ernesto's dream might represent „the attack of the alpha function.” For Bion, these attacks were

the product of hatred and envy, the battle took place on the ground of the intra-psychic, and therefore the individual.

Bollas (ibid.) questions this approach, proposing that the absence of alpha elements is not the product of hatred and envy, but rather the result of interaction with parents that refused to be emotionally alive to the subject. This was not, then, a mechanism common to the schizoid character, because in this case an interior, private self exists through the split, which continues to lead a secret and even rich life. What it appears to be rather is a self that has been „de-fracted”, whose interest has been deflected from the subjective world toward material objects. An „object with no subject,” a happy, and alive object in a world of material objects, and whose mind functions by „incorporating” more than interjecting, „evacuating” rather than projecting. In Bollas' words: „If the psychotic condition is characterized by a break in the orientation toward reality, the Normotic condition is uniquely characterized by a radical break with subjectivity and a profound absence of the subjective element in daily life. We may say that if the psychotic „has shut himself up in the extreme depths,” the normotic „has shut himself up in the extremely superficial”. We are dealing, therefore, with a person that gives us to understand that the psyche as such, and particularly the unconscious, is an anachronism, a thing that should be abandoned in the pursuit of human progress.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. E. Fromm, 1947; and also E. Fromm, 1976: *To Have Or To Be?*, New York. Harper & Row, 1976, pp. 77-87, 142-143.