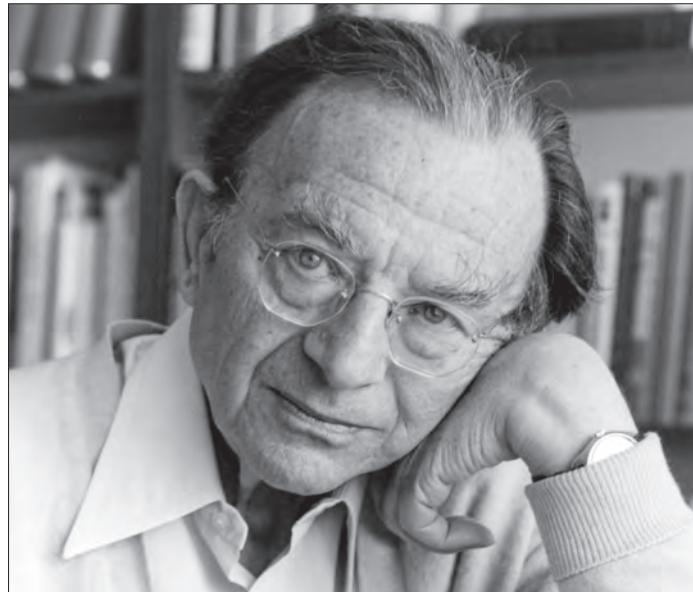




International  
Erich Fromm  
Society

## Fromm Forum 23/2019



Putting Society on the Couch

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# **Putting Society on the Couch**

Papers presented at the  
Second International Erich Fromm Research Conference  
June 21–23, 2018,  
at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin

edited by  
Rainer Funk and Thomas Kühn

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## Introduction

Rainer Funk and Thomas Kühn



everyday lives is changing. Thus, public attention is increasingly focusing on the key question of the relationship between subject and society.

When we symbolically put society on the couch in this volume, we do so by reflecting on what is repressed and unconscious and what actually constitutes normality, subjectivity, or a productive life in the face of rapid change and numerous global threats. How can psychoanalysis and the social sciences help to identify pathways to a more humane society that will be more responsive to the experiential and expressive potential of human subjectivity?

In order to deal with these key questions of modern societies, there's no way around Erich Fromm's approach as a radical humanist and as a psychoanalyst of society. This is all the more important because the general public does not sufficiently perceive the potential import of the work of Erich Fromm for current debates on change and progress in contemporary societies. With this special issue, we want to contribute to closing this gap.

Erich Fromm's concept of the social character provides an important approach for the analysis of social megatrends and their effects on the formation of psychic structures and what is repressed socially. Fromm has constantly focused on social pathologies within seemingly normal—inasmuch as they are hegemonic—social constellations. This made room for an innovative and critical perspective within the social sciences. Building on this discussion, in

The change of contemporary societies is on everyone's lips. It is evident in the mega-trends of digitization, globalization, and acceleration. Scientists from various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, political science and economics may view this change from different perspectives, but they largely agree that the structure of our

this special edition, we will pursue the following question: What implications can be drawn from Fromm's theories for research on contemporary processes of the internalization of social structures, and which methods are appropriate for examining these practices?

This issue is based on contributions from the 2nd Erich Fromm Research Conference that took place in Berlin in June 2018, bringing together international researchers engaged with the work of Erich Fromm, examining the actuality of Fromm's social-psychoanalytic approach, as well as exploring the potential for further development of this approach with regard to contemporary social developments.

This conference was made possible by generous support from the Karl Schlecht Foundation. It is a particular concern of the foundation to promote the significance of the work of Erich Fromm to the understanding of contemporary societies. In his welcome address Karl Schlecht himself pointed out how important Fromm's work was for his own life. Referring to the motto of the conference, he stated that, by putting himself mentally on the couch, he had reflected on his own career and once again become aware of how central Fromm's work had been for him. He had felt particularly personally enriched by Fromm when hearing him on a radio program in 1976 speaking on »vita activa.« In this context, Schlecht emphasized the importance of love as a central concept of Fromm's, which goes far beyond the field of private relationships. It is therefore especially important for an understanding of transformation processes of societies to deal with the potential of development based on the human capacity to love. This was underscored by Klaus Leisinger in particular, whose opening lecture we have already published in the 2018 issue of *Fromm Forum*.

Martin Teising, the President of the IPU Berlin that hosted the conference, stressed the importance of the possibilities of psychoanalysis for understanding societies. The scientific examination of Erich Fromm as the founder of analytical social psychology has to be considered an important contribution for contemporary psychoanalysis.

This special issue is structured into five sections, reflecting core themes that have been discussed during the conference:

In the first section, *The Frommian Approach to Society*, we show Fromm's contribution to psychoanalysis as well as to the social sciences by his social-psychoanalytic approach to the individual *and* to society. Manifold points of connection between Fromm's work and current debates about social change are discussed. It becomes clear that Fromm's work by no means should be regarded as outdated, but is on the contrary of central importance for a transdisciplinary understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. This is made particularly clear by looking at the relationship between psychoanalysis

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and sociology and by linking social transformation processes to Fromm's concepts of social character and psychic productiveness. Links to contemporary feminist debates and a social-psychanalytical connection to the concept of practice, as anchored in particular in the concept of Bourdieu's habitus, are important for further developments of the Frommian approach. Fromm is a central reference for a critical examination of developmental tendencies of contemporary capitalism, as well as for the understanding of such a central historical event as the Holocaust.

The second section focuses on *Alienation and Creativity in the Sphere of Work* as one of the central social territories that is challenged by change and in a state of profound upheaval. Fromm connects his normative concept of psychic productivity and work with a social critique of the organization of work. Alienation thereby is described as the process to satisfy basic human needs in a way that is directly or indirectly harmful for both individuals and society. There are several connected key questions: Which forms of alienation can be identified in contemporary contexts of work? What characterizes them? Which concrete practices and which forms of resistance are there? Simultaneously, we are looking for ways to make Fromm's contribution fruitful for a discourse on how human vitality and creativity can contribute to a restructuring of the sphere of work and organizations. Therefore we discuss which emancipatory approaches already exist and how we can rethink work and leadership by putting humans in the center, especially as we face processes of digital transformation.

In the third section, *Towards a »Sane« Society*, we expand the perspective from the territory of paid employment to society as a whole, taking up this train of thought about possible alternatives. Fromm advocated a socialist humanism, dedicated to promoting the development of human potential and the satisfaction of basic human needs alongside concepts of reason, work and love. In a Frommian understanding, a discussion of ways towards a »sane« society could span, among others, concepts like basic income, working time reduction, participation, democratization, or solidarity. How relevant is a humanistic concept in the tradition of Erich Fromm in our times? What difficulties and potentials lie in contemporary social designs like post-growth, transnational ethics or concepts of global social justice? In this section we discuss current political events like the ongoing rise of right-wing movements and nationalism, the discourse on refugees and post-truth politics, all from the theoretical perspective of a Frommian approach. This includes theoretical reflections on the relationship between subjectivity and society, by discussing individualism and the concept of individual liberation.

*Social Character Case Studies* are the focus of the fourth section. In order to understand individual examples, it is important to understand social charac-

ter orientations that are bound to specific socialization conditions in a world marked by inequality. In order not to make this unequal socialization invisible or to naturalize self-optimization narratives, in Fromm's view, alienation must be taken into account just as systematically as the examination of human potential as a normative reference for a critical examination. The aim is to uncover social processes that deform people and to understand mechanisms that favor the biographical arrangement with pathological normality. Case studies focus on de-industrialized working class communities in the UK, on problems of cross-cultural social character research based on a Bulgarian perspective, on developmental roots of productive and non-productive social character traits and on prisons of women predestined to commit crimes in Mexico.

Finally, in the fifth section we focus on *Fromm's Impacts for Therapeutic Practice*. In Fromm's therapeutic setting, the analysis of dominant social character orientations and the evaluation of the social and professional situation of the individual are of great importance. This becomes especially visible in the importance Fromm assigned to dreams within the therapeutic setting. What influence do Fromm's concepts have for contemporary psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic treatment? How have these concepts been subsequently used and developed within clinical practice? We point out clinical implications of Fromm's concepts, focus on power dynamics in the clinical encounter and discuss necrophilic tendencies in schizophrenia treatment. With the depiction of a necrophilic social character, Fromm described the tendency toward an objectification of the world, where all that can be counted and transformed into a lifeless thing is more attractive than what is vital and alive.

We would like to thank all authors for their commitment, which has enabled us to present this special edition and to make the individual contributions also available as PDFs on the website of the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin (efsc.ipu-berlin.de). Together with the documentation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Erich Fromm Research Conference of 2014, published in 2015<sup>1</sup>, the books show how fruitful Fromm's work is for understanding the dynamics of modern societies.

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1 Funk, R., McLaughlin, N. (Eds), 2015: *Towards a Human Science. The Relevance of Erich Fromm for Today*, Giessen (Psychosozial-Verlag) 2015. The individual papers are also available on the Website of the Erich Fromm Study Center: efsc.ipu-berlin.de. The contributions of the 2014 conference were also published in Spanish under the title: *Hacia una ciencia humana. La relevancia de Erich Fromm en la actualidad*, México (Demac), 2017.

## The Frommian Approach to Society

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### **Erich Fromm: Bringing Psychoanalysis and Sociology Together**

**Rainer Funk**



**Abstract:** In my overview of the development of Fromm's theories, I show, first of all, how Fromm and his theory of relatedness and social character aimed to understand the individual and society in a different way from what was usual at that time. Secondly, I expound how relevant the often ignored social psychoanalytical approach is for current thinking in terms of relatedness, and how open his approach is to insights stemming from human biology.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, method of social psychology, social psychoanalysis, social character, revision of Freud, Fromm's theory of drives, existential needs.

**O**n the question of what scientific value Fromm's work had, one can say in retrospect that he tried to think about man and society in different ways from what was usual at that time. He combined psychological and sociological thinking to form a socio-psychological method and theory.

This attempt, 80 years ago, mirrored the intellectual culture of that time, as is clear from the contrast to today's specialization of scientific thinking and

research but also given what sociology, evolutionary biology and neurobiology have taught us about man and society and their behavior and dynamics. It is just this dominance of biological approaches and scientific methods that leads to the premature conclusion that an interpretative view of science (as is typical of present-day dynamic psychology and critical approaches in sociology and psychology) is obsolete and should be rejected as unscientific.

From a purely scientific viewpoint, Fromm's scientific work on the connection between psychoanalytical and sociological thinking would presumably be regarded as of merely historical interest. But, as Michael Buchholz (2014) has shown in his article »Hermeneutics or scientism,« one must transcend the dichotomy between »explaining via causality« and »understanding via meaning« and expand it by adding a triadic epistemology in which the sociality aspect of new insights is taken into account. Catherine Silver (2017) argues similarly in connection with the therapeutic relationship, in that she speaks of the need to consider the presence of a »social third.«

If one takes these considerations seriously, then Fromm's scientific contributions appear highly relevant. At the heart of his social–psychoanalytic view of man and society was nothing less than the primary sociality of man and human modes of articulation. At least here, at the IPU and among those of us who are active in research on Fromm, his attempts at rethinking man and society should be of prime interest when the question of the relevance of his work is discussed.

Whether his *social* psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the unconscious irrational behavior of the masses, has a chance in today's scientific culture—this is a question that applies to psychoanalysis also. I am all the more grateful that research on Fromm's work is supported by the Karl Schlecht Foundation at the IPU, and that this second Erich Fromm research conference here at the IPU was made possible.

In my presentation I would like to review the development of Fromm's social–psychological theory, as I have come to view it through my almost 50 years of work on Fromm's thinking (see Funk 1999; 2018).

### **The questions in Fromm's 1922 dissertation**

For most students of Fromm, his social–psychological theory originated in the research program on Marxist social science that was established at the Institute for Social Research. Fromm's essay »The method and function of an analytic social psychology: Notes on psychoanalysis and historical materialism,« from 1932, includes the first formulation of the idea that »every society has its own

distinctive *libidinal structure*, even as it has its own economic, social, political, and cultural structure« (Fromm 1932a, p. 132). In this way, Fromm states that the organization of the libido, derived from the sexual drives, reflects the socioeconomic requirements of coexistence, and that this libidinous energy causes man to willingly and urgently do what economic and societal factors constrain him to do.

What Fromm described in 1932 in terms of Freud's libido theory was actually the result of ten years of theoretical development that had begun in his dissertation of 1922. Since there is still no English translation of Fromm's thesis, it has generally received little attention, at least in the (predominantly Anglo-Saxon) world of Fromm studies. It is therefore too little recognized how far Fromm's thinking is colored by his Jewish socialization. This is apparent above all in a focus on the ethos and the ethical attitudes which are the basis for human life and coexistence. This interest also influences the questions addressed in his sociological thesis. Fromm asks there what factors lead Jewish people who live in the diaspora, and thus without the protection and stability of national and state institutions, to think, feel and act similarly.

Fromm's studies of three Jewish groups come to the conclusions that it is the Torah, in other words what Fromm termed a religious »practice of life,« that leads to internalized ethical beliefs and causes these social groups to think, feel and act similarly. The essential idea, namely that a particular practice of life leads to internalized strivings and behavior patterns, colored Fromm's thinking even at a time when he was not yet aware of Freud's psychology.

### **Fromm's acquaintance with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis**

Fromm became acquainted with psychoanalysis shortly after he had completed his dissertation, through Frieda Reichmann, a psychiatrist friend who had trained with Hanns Sachs in Berlin to become a psychoanalyst. The possibility that irrational and dysfunctional forces can affect broadly the thinking, feeling and acting of a human being, without the subject's being aware of these influences, was the long-sought answer to another question that determined Fromm's scientific thinking, namely, that of »How is it possible?« (Fromm 1962a, p. 4.) Why does a woman kill herself and wish to be buried at her father's side? Why did the Germans so enthusiastically fight the deadly war of 1914? What unconscious factors were responsible here, and where did they come from?

The answer that Freud gave, based on his theory of drive, fascinated Fromm: above all, the idea that the repression of wishes, strivings, fantasies

stemming from the libido is not complete; what is repressed can return in the form of irrational, inhibited, self-destructive strivings and disturbed behavioral patterns. Freud had believed that the energy behind such forces stems from innate drives that are searching for satisfaction and thereby come into conflict with societal and cultural norms, so that they have to be repressed. This disagreed with Fromm's idea that a particular practice of life leads to internalized strivings, but this was not to become a problem for him until the mid-1930s.

### **How can behavior of groups be studied by psychoanalysis?**

The fascination with Freud's theory led Fromm to take a psychological training, which he finally completed between 1928 and 1930 in Berlin (see Schröter 2015). It also led him to the question of how the thinking, feeling and acting of many people can be explored psychoanalytically, in order to explain irrational reactions and behaviors of societal groups. Others at the Berlin institute pursued this question, e.g. Siegfried Bernfeld, Wilhelm Reich: not forgetting Theodor Reik (1927), whose paper »Dogma and Compulsion« (Reik 1951 [1927]) related neurotic phenomena in individuals directly to group phenomena.

For Fromm's theoretical development perhaps the most important publication appeared with the title »The Development of the Dogma of Christ« (Fromm 1930a, pp. 3–91) in 1930 in the same journal, *Imago*, in which Reik had published his essay. Fromm, as a trained sociologist, undoubtedly wanted to show that the psychoanalytical method in the case of societal phenomena must necessarily be different from that for explaining irrational phenomena in individuals—for which reason his study ended in disagreement with Reik.

While Reik concluded from the compulsive ritual behavior of individuals that religion was quite generally a compulsion, Fromm focused on the particular practice of life of numerous Christians, and showed in detail, and from the historical perspective, that changes in confessions of faith always had their roots in political and social changes in the individuals.

»The cause for the development lies in the change in the socio-economic situation or in the retrogression of economic forces and their social consequences.« (Fromm 1930a, p. 90)

The evolving commitment to Jesus and changes in religious behavior are therefore expression of changes in the inner motivation resulting from the changing economic, political and social living conditions of the Christians.

## The first definition of analytical social psychology

In his article »The method and function of an analytical social psychology« (1932a) Fromm defined the goal of a psychoanalytical social psychology as follows:

»The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies—and their unconscious roots in particular—in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings.« (1932a, p. 121.)

The aims of social psychological method are defined as follows:

»The phenomena of social psychology are to be understood as processes involving the active and passive adaptation of the instinctual apparatus to the socioeconomic situation. In certain fundamental respects, the instinctual apparatus itself is a biological given; but it is highly modifiable. The role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions.« (1932a, p. 121.)

This concept of analytical social psychology defined the program of the Institute for Social Research at the start of the 1930s. With the link between (Marxist oriented) sociology and libido-based psychoanalysis, Fromm established the theoretical basis for the institute's research on authoritarianism (Horkheimer 1936) and for his own first major empirical study of the authoritarian character of German workers and employees with leftist leanings (Fromm 1980a).

At the start of the 1930s Fromm tried, in his publications, to reconcile his understanding of social psychology with Freud's. Freud, he wrote, »never assumed isolated man, devoid of all social ties, to be the object of psychology« (Fromm 1932a, p. 115), and he supported this with a quotation from Freud's *Group Analysis and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud 1921a, p. 73):

»In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first, individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well.« (Freud 1921c, S.E. XVIII, p. 69.)

Even though Fromm tries here to unite his approach with Freud's concept of social psychology, one should not overlook the serious differences, which were noted by Catherine Silver in her »Erich Fromm and the Making and Unmaking

of the Social–cultural« (Silver 2017, pp. 390–396). While Freud focused on the intersubjective and the family relationships, and assumes that the demands of society adapt themselves to an intrinsic drive dynamic, which in itself is only partly modifiable, Fromm (after writing his dissertation) started from the collective social aspect and from the socio–economic components of a particular practice of life. He thus viewed the libidinous structure as shaped by the demands of the practice of life and not just as modification of an inborn drive dynamic.

For Fromm, the biologically based »instinctual apparatus« is to a large extent modifiable, so that the economic factors have the role of »primary formative factors« (Fromm 1932a, p. 121). At the same time, Fromm sees no role for sociologisms, as though the requirements of a particular practice of life could directly be represented in the »libidinous structure.« Instead, psychological structures established by a particular practice of life constitute a complex sequence of reactions, which endow the requirements of society and culture with libido and thus form them into a passionate striving which a particular society and culture needs for its functioning.

Despite these theoretical questions, it remains clear that Fromm succeeded, using his first definition of analytical social psychology, in clarifying why many people think, feel and act similarly. In every single individual, a libidinous structure formation occurs, which causes people to strive passionately for things that are necessary for economic success, stability and cultural identity of a society, as a coordinated adaptation of all its members. This concept, moreover, allows the libidinous structure to be empirically studied in individuals.

Even in this first definition of social psychology as social psychoanalysis or psychoanalytical sociology, it is clear that the individual exists only as a social being, and that the society and changes in it can be studied in terms of the libidinous structure formation of its many members. This new understanding of the individual and society implies also that not only an individual unconscious must exist, but also a shared unconscious, of which most of them are unaware: in other words, a social repression.

Fromm's new approach, with its concept of the authoritarian character (which stemmed from Fromm, not von Adorno, see Fromm 1936a), passed its first test in Max Horkheimer's *Studies on Authority and Family* (Horkheimer 1936). This contribution of Fromm's has likewise not so far appeared in English.

### **Fromm's doubts regarding the drive theory as the basis of his social psychoanalytical approach**

It was not long before Fromm realized that his social–psychoanalytical ap-

proach was not really reconcilable with the libido theory, favored by Freud, as an explanation of conscious and unconscious psychic strivings. As Roger Frie (2014) also showed in his excellent contribution »What is cultural psychoanalysis?« a whole set of findings led Fromm to doubt the validity of the libido theory: for example Bachofen's research on matricentric cultures or Margaret Mead's and Ruth Benedict's cross-cultural studies. They supported Fromm's criticism of patriarchal aspects of Freud's psychoanalysis and therapeutic practice (see Fromm 1935a).

The decisive impulse that led Fromm to reformulate his own social psychoanalytical approach after his emigration in 1934 came undoubtedly from Harry Stack Sullivan and his criticism of Freud's theory of drive. The mere fact that the most severe psychic disorders are psychotic distortions of relatedness (to reality, to other persons and to the patient himself) suggested that the basic problem of the human is the question of relatedness, rather than the satisfaction or denial of the sexual drive and its derivatives.

What Sullivan called his »relational« approach in psychoanalysis was closely related to Fromm's Jewish socialization and to Fromm's particular interest in sociology, where everything centers on relatedness. This appears to me to be a major reason why Fromm hesitated for so long to revise the Freudian psychoanalysis and to look at the question of relatedness or (as one would now say) attachment as the basic psychological problem of mankind (see Funk 2013; 2017).

In the winter of 1936/7, Fromm took a leave of absence in order to complete the paradigm shift from a libido-theoretical to a relatedness-theoretical explanatory system. In a letter to August Wittfogel (December 18, 1936—in the Fromm Archive) Fromm wrote:

»I am trying to show that the urges which motivate social activities are not, as Freud supposes, sublimations of sexual instincts, but rather products of social processes.«

Fromm justified in detail his new concept of psychoanalysis in an 85-page essay in which he showed why most psychic structures arise from relatedness to objects, independently of libidinous drives.

This essay was central to the development of Fromm's theories (see Funk 2015). It contained a detailed justification as to why and by what complicated routes the socially typical character is formed in many individuals, and so directly depends on a particular practice of life. It was intended for publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, but it was sharply criticized by Horkheimer, Marcuse and Löwenthal. Fromm was considered to be explaining the psychic phenomena no longer in terms of the biologically anchored sexual drive, which

was an essential pillar of the materialistic social science of the Frankfurt school. Fromm's paper on his second social-psychoanalytical approach was rejected (with written support from Adorno), which led to the end of Fromm's work at the Institute for Social Research.

The essay was found by me in 1990, in a German and an English version in Fromm's papers in the New York Public Library. It was published in 1992 in German; the English version can be found in the posthumously published book *Beyond Freud: From Individual to Social Psychoanalysis* (Fromm 2010).

### **The second definition of analytical social psychology**

The conclusions which Fromm drew in the long-lost essay regarding psychoanalysis as social psychoanalysis were, however, summarized by him in 1941 in the appendix to his book *Escape from Freedom* (1941a). A second summary, from the viewpoint of cultural psychoanalysis, was published by Fromm in 1949 in »Psychoanalytic characterology and its application to the understanding of culture« (Fromm 1949c).

The decisive point in Fromm's second definition of analytical social psychology is the justification for his alternative view of man and society:

»We believe that man is *primarily* a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his instinctual needs. [...] The key problem of psychology is that of the particular kind of relatedness of the individual toward the world, not that of satisfaction or frustration of single instinctual desires.« (Fromm 1941a, p. 288.)

Fromm's surmounting of the split between individual and society, which had been accepted since Descartes (see Frie 2015), and between psychology as the science of the individual and sociology as the science of society, is simultaneously a decisive enlargement of the relational approach:

»Society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual can live only as a social human being.« (Fromm 1992e [1937], p. 58.)

According to Fromm, the primary sociality of man is reflected in a particular dimension of the psychic structure formation, namely the »social-typical character« (Fromm 1992e [1937]) or »social character« (see Fromm 1962a, pp. 71–88). It is only natural that Fromm uses a dynamic character concept

to describe the attitudes and urges characteristic of a particular social group, since character formation explains not only the uniform behavior of a social group but also the Ego-syntonic quality which allows the manner in which many people think, feel and act to be seen as »normal.«

Since my aim here is to trace the development of Fromm's theories, I will not describe in detail the various social character orientations which Fromm recognized and studied in the course of his life: the authoritarian, hoarding, marketing, narcissistic, necrophilous and the productive social character orientations. (See Funk 1995; 2019, pp. 89-143.)

Fromm felt that the methodological question of the relationship between sociology and psychoanalysis was answered in essence with the publication of *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a). The resulting new social psychoanalytical approach was, for him, adequately described also. He therefore concentrated, in the second half of his life, above all on his »theory of drives,« namely the theory of the necessary relatedness as the source and driving force of the majority of psychic phenomena. He reformulated this theory of drives, and applied it to central psychoanalytical concepts such as self-regulation, narcissism, and aggression, but also to clinical and non-clinical areas. Because of time limitations, I will only briefly mention Fromm's theory of the existential need for relatedness and its causes.

### **The need for relatedness as the basis of Fromm's theory of drives**

The theory that every individual has to have a relationship to reality, to other humans, to a social group, to himself, to an understanding of the world and to sensory content, had been formulated in detail in Fromm's book *The Sane Society* in 1955. The needs which Fromm described there (Fromm 1955a, pp. 22-66), and later in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973a, pp. 230-237), have in common that they are specific forms of the need for relatedness. The need for a sense of identity, for example, is the concrete form of the need for relatedness to oneself.

Fromm's theory differs from other relational and inter-subjective drive theories in an important respect: for Fromm, every individual, in order to feel that he belongs to a society group, has a need for social rootedness, and thus a sense of societal identity. (See here Fromm 1962a, p. 126; Funk 2015.)

One reason for Fromm's insistence on the »existential« quality of the psychic need for relatedness was given in 1947 in his book *Man for Himself* (Fromm 1947a, pp. 38-50). For Fromm, it was important to base his doctrines on human biology.

In the lost essay of 1937, Fromm explained the psychic, in contrast to Freud's libido theory, as largely as »products of social processes« (cf. the cited letter to Karl August Wittfogel) and emphasized the importance of the historical compared to the natural. In his book *Man for Himself*, which appeared in 1947, Fromm described his theory of drives as reflecting the original biological situation of man, which was characterized by a strong anthropocentrism and a sharp distinction between man and animal.

Man is characterized by a reduction in instinct, on the one hand, and by an enhanced and more differentiated brain on the other. This permits a vastly greater neural plasticity and, more importantly, leads to specifically human abilities such as the consciousness of oneself and the capacity for imagination.

As a result of these self-reflective powers, man is not only *able* but also *required* (for survival reasons) to structure his relatedness to the environment and to himself in specifically human ways. Thus, man must develop individual emotionally regulated neuronal networks or, psychologically formulated, individual psychic motivational structures, with which he satisfies his needs for relatedness.

### **The significance of character formations**

Among the psychic structure formations that perform this task, the *character* formations have special significance: they can be understood as the result of the internalization of relatedness-based experiences and habituated forms of satisfaction. They therefore play a special role in Fromm's theory of drive.

Even though a psychodynamic interpretation of character is difficult today, given that the term has been hijacked by reactionary interests, character formation is from a psychoanalytical viewpoint an important part of psychic structure formation. Precisely when it is a matter of habituated satisfaction forms and internalizations of repeated positive and negative experiences of relatedness, character formations explain why an individual or even several individuals behave in a constant and consistent manner and have strivings from within themselves. Character formations provide specifically human motivational forces, and replace the instinct-regulated behavior of living organisms that do not possess the faculty of self-reflection.

According to Fromm, the character formation is not dependent on the destiny of a particular drive, but rather is the result of internalized experiences of relatedness. Therefore, individual and societal relatedness can be distinguished. Individual character formations are the result of very personal circumstances and modes of satisfying the need for relatedness, while in the

social character formations the requirements, value systems and forms of satisfaction of the society's practice of life return in the form of the individual's own motivational forces—as, for example, the expectation (and thus also the desire) for self-optimization.

Individual and societal character formations can pursue different goals and be characterized by different strivings. Conflicts with the environment can therefore result—but internal psychic conflicts also. In a leadership position, a character that, due to individual experiences of relatedness, is strongly narcissistic, will not satisfy society's expectations of teamwork, or will at least be internally conflicted.

Since the cause for the character formation is not an inborn drive, but rather the individual's need for and experience of relatedness, the internalized experience of relatedness can be either functional or dysfunctional, rational or irrational, mentally constructive or destructive (pathogenic). Therefore, character formations must always be assessed as to whether, mentally and socially speaking, they are productive or non-productive. One also could speak of alienating or pathogenic effects of individual and social character formations.

Generally, affected individuals are not aware of the pathogenic effects of their character orientation because of the Ego-syntonic quality of any character formation. This holds true for all non-productive social character orientations lived by a majority of a population or social group. The »pathology of normalcy« protects the individual additionally against becoming aware of the »socially patterned defect« and his false way of life. (See Fromm 1944a; 1955a, pp. 12–21.)

Fromm's concept of needs and character constitutes his social psychoanalytical drive theory. In it, he formulated a concept of psychoanalysis which, as Neil McLaughlin (2017; 2017a) has convincingly argued, transcends the social amnesia of psychoanalysis. Fromm expanded on his theory in the mid-1950s, but in one respect only: from the early 1960s on, Fromm's theoretical development started to take a further step in the direction of biology.

### **Fromm's sociobiological view of man and society**

The trigger for this was the escalating Cold War and the threat of a nuclear world war through the Cuba crisis in 1962. Fromm interpreted this escalation as a result of the fact that people were increasingly drawn towards what is morbid and destructive, and less to what is alive. In a situation in which the death instinct (in Freud's sense) threatened to become stronger than the life instinct, Fromm began to see the survival fitness of the human race as anchored

in the »love of life« (»biophilia«), characteristic not only of human life, but of all other life as well. As Richard Runge (2012) showed in his bachelor thesis, Fromm's concept of biophilia transcends the anthropocentrism that so far had been so typical of him.

Fromm traced the individual's ability to love to a »biophilia« that is intrinsic to all life forms (see Fromm 1964a), and he believed that the wish to destroy did not appear until the human stage of evolution. This reflects his new interest in the biological basis of human life, as became even clearer in his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* which he published, in old age, in 1973. For Fromm, unlike Freud, many biological, sociobiological and neurobiological findings in his time suggested that forms of destructiveness in human nature reflect a thwarted biophilia and are the outcome of an unlivable life, rather than a biologically rooted death wish. Peter Rudnytsky (2018) discussed this in his contribution to this conference.

Fromm's interest in findings from human biology and in the biological basis of his social-psychoanalytical approach was, in the 1970s, unusual for a psychoanalyst. And it went only so far. For example, in his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Fromm 1973a, p. 235) he mentioned, in addition to the needs for relatedness, also a need for effectiveness. But Fromm did not take the logical step of connecting his need-based theory of drives with the theories of affects and systems of motivations of that time (see Cortina 2015a).

Fromm's interest in findings from biology and other branches of sciences was guided by the wish to justify his social psychoanalytical approach even more completely. His enthusiasm for the attachment research of John Bowlby (cf. Bacciagaluppi 1989), for the cultural-anthropological and evolutionary-biological findings on cooperative and prosocial behavior of humans (cf. Cortina 2015), and for neurobiological findings which reveal man as an organism that actively seeks its own optimal development (cf. Fromm 1973a, p. 255)—all these things would, in his view, mean that the biological situation of mankind lies behind the *need* and the *ability* to develop specific forms of relatedness. Fromm continued to emphasize the concept of mankind's biological situation (he termed it »existential«), even when further advances seemed to downplay the difference between animal and human, between nature and history, between biology and psychology.

Fromm's goal was always to clarify the constructive and destructive possibilities in mankind that set him apart from his animal ancestors, even if there are no watertight differences but rather gradual transitions. This particularly held true for those attachment theories which apply attachment patterns observed in primates directly to humans (see Cortina 1996, p. 103 f.) or which reflect only the primary attachment person, but not the primary sociality. It

therefore makes sense to distinguish between attachment research and relatedness research, as Sonja Gojman and Salvador Millán (2001) have tried to do.

By basing his theory of relatedness on human biology, Fromm counters the objection that he attaches too great significance to society and culture. Fromm saw himself not as the representative of a »culturalist« school but as »a psychoanalyst who has attempted to further Freud's theory by making certain revisions;« he described his interpretation of psychoanalysis as a »sociobiological« one (Fromm 1990d [1969], p. 9).

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## The Art of Living and the Dialectics of Social Transformation

Kieran Durkin



**Abstract:** In this paper I compare Fromm's account of social transformation with that of Alain Touraine. I argue that although there are many points of connection between Fromm's account of »the art of living« and Alain Touraine's account of the »Politics of the Subject,« Fromm ultimately goes beyond Touraine at many points, offering a more detailed explanatory account of how individual transformation is related to the larger, but related, goal of social transformation. I conclude that Fromm's often overlooked account of the mechanics of individual change ought to be returned to in the process of reinvigorating social theory and practice.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, Alain Touraine, art of living, social transformation, politics of the subject.

Today, I want to explore the connections that exist between Fromm's account of the »art of living« and social transformation at large. In particular, I want to look, in a tentative and preliminary manner, at the role that *individual* transformation plays in Fromm's thought and at how this individual transformation may be seen to be both *pre-figurative of* and *conducive to* transformation on the societal level. In so doing, I want to look at Fromm's practical philosophy of the »art of living,« making clear its radical transformative potential by putting it into dialogue with the thought of other influential thinkers, particularly Alain Touraine, but also Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman. The central contention I want to make is that Fromm's program for the »art of living« can help counteract the adverse effects visited on individuals living under late modern consumer capitalism and, crucially, that it can also help point beyond this form of society towards another, more satisfactory one. As such, I will

argue that Fromm's writings offer an often overlooked critical-restorative and transformative resource which can fulfill the dual function of helping to unify the self and to revolutionize the subject—functions which I contend, along with Fromm, are central prerequisites to any sustainable form of social transformation. I want to start, however, with Alain Touraine.

### **A Politics of the Subject in a Fragmented World**

In his 1997 *Can We Live Together?* (published in English in 2000, and henceforth referenced thusly) Alain Touraine speaks of the urgent need, in our current world, to develop what he terms »a Politics of the Subject.« Against the backdrop of the failure of the project of modernization—of ever increasing marketization and rampant nationalism, set amidst a globalized world of capital flows that push and pull individuals and societies as never before—Touraine calls for a politics that recognizes and puts at its heart the desire for *subjectivation*: the desire, that is, to become a *subject*, to become the actor of our own life as opposed to merely the stultified object of external forces. Touraine's evocation of this need for a »politics of the Subject«—which he also speaks of in terms of a double movement »from Politics to Ethics, and from Ethics back to Politics«—is centered round the notion of what he terms a »personal life project.« Taken from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, this notion of a personal life project, which for Touraine is the *only* answer to pathologies of our damaged social world, the only possible source of social movements that can oppose the masters of economic change or communitarian dictators, implies, in his own words:

»a refusal to allow our experience to be reduced to a kaleidoscopic existence or discontinuous set of responses to the stimuli of the social environment« (Touraine 2000, p. 13).

It also, and at the same time, concerns itself with:

»mobiliz[ing] an experience and a culture in our technology and economic activities in such a way that a series of lived situations becomes an *individual life story* and not an incoherent set of events« (ibid.; my emphasis).

Taking a step back, and elaborating on the notion of »the Subject« that provides the basis for such a personal life project, Touraine tells us that it is »an assertion of freedom in the face of the power of both strategists and their apparatuses

[as well as] communitarian dictators« (ibid.). Fighting on two fronts, then, he says, the Subject »resists all the ideologies that would make it conform to the order of the world or the order of the community« (ibid., pp. 13–14). Neither a consciousness, concrete actor nor a personality« (ibid., p. 94) but a *will to individuation*, the Subject, for Touraine, »has no content but its own productivity—it serves no cause, no values and no law other than its need and desire to resist its own dismemberment in a changing world which lacks order or equilibrium (ibid., p. 13).

Importantly, the Subject, for Touraine, is revealed by the presence of ethical values that come into conflict with the social order (Touraine 2000, p. 95). Touraine links this conflict to the greater acceptance of cultural diversity in the face of the rejection of societal norms and values, and thereby, to what he argues is an elementary change in the way we relate to others. But importantly, for Touraine, the way we relate to others is determined first and foremost by how we relate to *ourselves*: »In our experience,« he tells us, »ethics reminds the Subject of its own existence,« (ibid., p. 78) of its own basis as a process seeking realization in defiance of the social forces that impinge upon and constrain it. To quote Touraine at greater length:

»The reconstruction of the individual can come about only if that individual can recognize and assert himself [sic] as a Subject, as a creator of meaning and change, as well as [of] social relations and political institutions« (ibid., p. 58).

Insofar as this is the case, the »ethics of subjectivation,« as Touraine calls it—an ethics without norms and order, but not without principles—this ethics reinforces the project of subjectivation and provides the basis for the reconstitution of social movements.

Underlining the logic of the double movement from politics to ethics and from ethics back to politics, Touraine stresses that we ought, in the first instance, to distance ourselves from the social and political goals of collective action. Touraine here is concerned that »[i]f we trap ourselves into an ethics of responsibility, we leave an unbounded and uncontrolled space for Max Weber's war between the gods (Touraine 2000, p. 95)—that is to say, a war between instrumental ideals and non-negotiable and unargued appeals to convictions and their meta-social foundations. At the same time, Touraine is adamant that he is not lionizing the Subject as a self-contemplative individual nor as an ideal self-image that the individual paints in private: the Subject, as he says, is *action* and *work* (ibid., p. 77). As the appeal to the Subject becomes more concrete, as it is grasped in terms of its social situation, its cultural heritage

and the history of its personality, so it leaves the realm of principles, and enters the public realm, becoming involved in political debate and collective action« (ibid., p. 96). And so, the process of subjectivation, consisting of the development of the personality via action upon ethical concerns and an awareness of the participation in a conflict with a social adversary, acts for Touraine as the basis of a societal movement.

There is much, I think, in this account of Touraine's politics of the Subject that is of value, and certainly much that resonates with Fromm's own writings; there are also distinct differences and points of tension that I have not remarked upon up until this point. What I would like to do now is to look at the extent to which Fromm's writings, and particularly his account of the »art of living,« can be seen to be consonant but also dissonant with Touraine's evocation of the politics of the Subject.

### **Fromm and the Art of Living**

Fromm is united with Touraine, first of all, in the stress that he places on the idea of the potential Subject that desires and seeks out subjecthood. Fromm doesn't use the phrase »personal life project,« nor the term »subjectivation,« but his account of the »art of living« has obvious parallels with them. Building on the process of subjectivation, Fromm's account of the »art of living,« is centered upon the action of the individual in the process of its self-transformation. As the individual transforms itself through dedicated interior and exterior action, it experiences »an ever-increasing awareness of reality and the shedding of illusions« (Touraine 2000, p. 19). Whereas Touraine is quite formalistic, reluctant to discuss details beyond abstract references to the process of self-constitution and the need to accept cultural diversity, Fromm is fulsome in expounding upon what is involved in this process of self-transformation. Variously described as »awakening,« »coming to awareness,« developing »productive relatedness« (to self and other), developing a »being« as opposed to »having« orientation, or a »biophilous« as opposed to »necrophilous« orientation, Fromm fleshes out what constitutes subjectivation and the subjecthood that goes with it.

Practicing the art of living, for Fromm, is concerned with openness to experience, with overcoming narcissism and other illusions, and with realizing loving and productive relations with oneself and others. Here, critical, de-mystified thinking unites with loving, spontaneous practice—what Fromm otherwise terms »the art of loving.« The capacity to love—in the sense of »brotherly love,« or what we might prefer to call *agape*, but also the other types of love that Fromm discusses—is central to the realization of productive relations which

are instrumental in overcoming sexism, nationalism, racism, destructiveness, and so on. Love, on Fromm's account of the art of living, is essential in order to accept the Other, hidden within our own being as well as externally existent in wider society. This art of living, for Fromm, is essentially the choosing of life over death, growth over stagnation—the psychically healthy potentials that bring out the potentially for true Subjecthood.

Crucially for Fromm, unlike for Touraine, the ego is central to this process<sup>1</sup>. Offering a psychodynamic as well as sociological account, the historically-evidenced weakening of the ego is accounted for in Fromm, but the goal of ego unity is not written-off as an illusion, as it is in Touraine. Ever the humanist, Fromm's account of the art of living—the process that forms the basis of the re-constitution of subjecthood—is premised on the notion of a relatively bounded self in a way that seems at odds with most post-structural theory. Fromm recognizes the processual nature of the achievement of Subjecthood, and the many ways in which that process can become waylaid, but he nevertheless holds true to the Freudian goal of the replacement of Id by Ego.

Further psychological depth is added to Fromm's account, relative to Touraine's, by virtue of his account of character and social character. Social character, as Fromm demonstrates, develops alongside socio-cultural influences: the relatively permanent structure that shapes our being-in-the-world in ways that enable us to adapt, in one form or another, to the demands of the socio-economic world. Character provides a third level of intransigence that must be reckoned with, in addition to the powers of the market and the communitarian pressures that Touraine outlines. Although Touraine gives a more recent account of the socio-political landscape, he gives no account of something approximating »the marketing character,« or what me might describe as the »neoliberal character,« for instance.<sup>2</sup> His failure to do so leaves his account with a central deficit, a relative inability, beyond mere reference to social processes, to explain the persistence of consumerist individualism, for instance, and with it the difficulties that a politics of the Subject might face from the point of view of the personal life project.

A further point of difference between Fromm and Touraine can be found in their account of ethics. Whilst for both thinkers ethics is concerned with the

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1 Touraine claims that »the idea of unity of the ego was nothing more than the projection of the unity and authority of the social system, or a prince who had been a father and was internalized as social norms« (Touraine 2000, p. 52).

2 Given the pre-eminence of Pierre Bourdieu in social theory, particularly in France, it is surprising that Touraine doesn't attempt something like this via the concept of *habitus*, which has many parallels with Fromm's concept of social character.

individual and the process of subjectivation that is central to the politics of the subject, Fromm's account of this ethics is more substantive than that offered by Touraine. The art of living, for Fromm, follows from the applied art of what he calls the »science of man,«<sup>3</sup> which imparts what he calls »objective norms.« These norms, it must be stressed, are not authoritarian norms. The ethics that Fromm envisages is a *humanistic* ethics, an ethics that is practically concerned with subjectivation and the spontaneity of the individual as opposed to duty, order, sacrifice, etc. Unlike Touraine, Fromm's humanist ethics are based, drawing on Spinoza, on what he terms »a model of human nature.« Rather than restrictive and theologically ordained, Fromm's account of the model of human nature is explicitly provisional, derived from the account of social and psychic functioning discovered by the science of (hu)man(ity). It is in this sense that Fromm's account is normative: offering a scientific and heuristic account of human flourishing that, whilst never absolute, can be used to appraise social relations and to better encourage the process of subjectivation that is central to the practice of the art of living.

So, I think it is clear that Fromm's account of the art of living, as with Touraine's account of the »politics of the Subject,« is constructed in the belief that social transformation is possible only through a direct appeal to the individual. Both Fromm and Touraine are at pains, however, to stress that they are not advancing a cult of subjectivity but, rather, a form of individual praxis that is also a form of group praxis. So, what I would like to finish on, then, is a discussion of the connections between individual and social transformation, what I suggest ought to be called the »dialectics of social transformation..«

### **The Dialectics of Social Transformation**

In a world of heightened consumerism, pushed and pulled by the impersonal forces of the market and threatened with rising authoritarianism and fear of the Other, we are confronted with two mutually reinforcing imperatives: namely, to *resist* and to *transform*. Just as Touraine argues that the process of subjectivation (the process of »becoming a subject«) can begin only when individuals attempt to resist their dismemberment and their loss of identity,

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3 I agree with Lynn Chancer, in her paper at this conference, that we ought to avoid usage of the noun »man« when describing the whole human race. We should rephrase Fromm here as referring to »the science of humanity.« We lose very little in so doing, it seems to me, whilst gaining a considerable amount, not only the readier acceptance of those fighting androcentrism in all its guises who might otherwise be turned off.

Fromm too argues that individuation and Subjecthood are dependent upon the critically-induced recognition of the alternatives that stand before us. Starting the process of becoming an actor in one's own life, practicing the art of living is, for Fromm, the beginning of a revolutionary standpoint. Unlike Zygmunt Bauman, the late great Polish sociologist and social theorist who also spoke of what he called »the art of life,« the art of living outlined by Fromm is not something that we all practice *de facto*, simply by the fact of our very existence as individuals in contemporary society.<sup>4</sup> Fromm's conception of the art of living also differs from that of Michel Foucault, who suggests at an *aesthetics of existence* and a groundless reactivation of attitude, not to mention an anti-humanism that exists at some definite remove from Fromm.<sup>5</sup>

There is, however a more direct connection with Foucault that I think is helpful to our present discussion. In our heavily marketized societies, in which, as Foucault (2010) notes we experience ourselves as »entrepreneurs of the self«<sup>6</sup>—the process of the art of living, of becoming a subject, is central in initiating and completing the difficult process of transforming ourselves from consumers to citizens, or at least to productive, related individuals. As Fromm says, the art of living is central in »breaking through the property structure of our own existence« (Fromm 1989a, p. 117), helping to change our characteristic way of living from that of pleasure-seeking, alienated monads or

4 Bauman contends that life, in what he terms »liquid modernity,« is characterized by the relative absence of the old trustworthy sources of authority. As a result, for Bauman, »our lives, whether we know it or not and whether we relish the news or bewail it, are works of art« (Bauman 2008, p. 20). For Fromm, such an assertion overplays the degree of agency exercised in most examples of daily living. Although Fromm agrees that modernity brings with it greater and greater individual freedom, and thereby greater uncertainty over ethical action, etc., the practice of life as an art on his reading requires a greater sense of conscious engagement and willed action than might be said to be the case in most cases that would fall under Bauman's rubric.

5 In his reflections on Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?* Foucault (1984) lauds Baudelaire's »heroizing« of the present moment« and proffers his account of living life an »arts of existence.« Foucault's conception of this arts of existence, whilst more substantial than a mere dandification of existence—his account of an art of existence is, of course, connected to his wider account of »the critical ontology of ourselves,« not to mention his related discussion of the »care of the self«—is nevertheless conceived along the lines of »aesthetic elaboration of the self« and in terms of »poetic beauty,« both of which are more Nietzschean inflections than otherwise tend to abound in Fromm. Like Bauman, Foucault's account also disavows the notion of »liberating man [sic] in his own being« in favor of the task of producing oneself anew, something that, on Fromm's reading, confuses the genealogical process somewhat.

6 It is interesting to note the direct parallels with Fromm's notion of the marketing character here, incidentally.

automatons, to related, engaged members of the world. But, as something that shouldn't be forgotten in a conference on Fromm, a figure who was central to the humanist recovery of Marx, this individual action on its own is not enough. It doesn't happen in a vacuum, nor by the reflection of thought upon itself alone. It takes place through *acts of resistance*, through building movements in our communities and workplaces, through becoming active in the dual but reinforcing sense of individual and social transformation. And it is here that we might want to probe a little further into the relationship between Touraine and Fromm.

Whilst Touraine wants to talk of the Subject as a social movement, and while he suggests, in abstract, that collective action is central to the process of subjectivation, there is a somewhat *prima facie* separation between the Subject and the realm of public action in his writings, one that approximates Theodor Adorno's downplaying of outwardly social action in his writings. The account of the unspecified period of growth that for Touraine seems would be necessary for the individual *qua* individual to even approach Subjecthood, all the while supposedly refraining from social action and certainly pulling away from community, is concerning. Fromm, on the other hand, speaks clearly of the need for individuals to engage in groups and clubs at different levels of community and interest association, this form of interpersonal development playing an essential role alongside workplace cooperation, in the process of developing towards true Subjecthood and to the new form of society is inseparable from it. This kind of detail appears to be lacking in Touraine, who seems to place too much faith in the Subject's transformation into a social movement *ex nihilo*, without detailing the means by which this process will occur. Alongside proclaiming the (premature) death of »social man,« his statements concerning the lack of a clear adversary risks ceding the initiative in anti-capitalist struggles that are already existent.

And here, it seems to me, there is a connection to work alienation and exploitation that we need to revisit alongside the struggles for mutual recognition and equality that are also so important today. That word »class,« a word that is relatively missing from Touraine, but also to a certain extent from Fromm, needs to be uttered again today, and with greater urgency. We need to return to the exploitative nature of the capitalist system, to strike at the basis of its capacity for self-reproduction in what seems like perpetuity, but which cannot be. We need to look with greater urgency at the ways in which capitalist production, as well as consumption, disfigures, de-humanizes, and does so for members of *all* identity groupings (often, of course, more so to those of the more oppressed identity groupings), and to integrate our identity struggles with the broader class struggle. The consequences of not doing so sufficiently

are staring us in the face at the present moment, whether that be in Germany, Austria, Poland, the UK, Brazil or the USA.

But returning to the central topic of my talk, it is important to note that common to all progressive struggles—struggles against dismemberment by the economy, against the cleavages caused by toxic masculinities and nationalism—is the central position today of the *individual as the revolutionary agent*: an agent that looks to itself but at the same time beyond itself to others in the act of transforming the world. As is clear from Fromm's writings, what is necessary for individual freedom is ultimately social freedom, but what is necessary for sustainable social freedom is individual freedom, cultivated through the art of living: i.e. through a personal life project given over to developing productive relatedness with oneself and others. It is in this sense that I think Fromm offers a deeply dialectical account of social transformation. In the spirit of this dialectical but also radical engagement, I would like to finish by quoting Fromm on the importance of what he terms »total liberation:«

»Any attempt to overcome the possibly fatal crisis of the industrialized part of the world, and perhaps of the human race, must begin with the understanding of the nature of both outer and inner chains; it must be based on the liberation of man in the classic, humanist sense as well as in the modern, political and social sense. [...] The only realistic aim is *total liberation*, a goal that may well be called *radical* (or *revolutionary*) *humanism*.« (Fromm 1989a, p. 8.)

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## The Compatibility of Frommian and Feminist Theory: An Argument for Relevance and Revision

Lynn Chancer



**Abstract:** The work of Erich Fromm is often overlooked in contemporary feminist thought. Yet important areas of relevance—his critiques of symbiotic love and sadomasochism, advocacy of mutual recognition, and objections to patriarchal presumptions in Freud's work—render Fromm's thought useful for feminists. Disadvantages adhere in Fromm's ideas too, including sexist language and biologically-tinged maternalism. However, this paper reinterprets these problems to advocate for rediscovering both Fromm's feminist and humanist aspirations.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, feminism, sadomasochism, mother right, romantic love, power.

In the late 2010s, a resurgence of authoritarianism marks late capitalist societies around the world while rendering more relevant—ironically enough—the work of Erich Fromm. Recent conferences have been organized by US and Canadian sociologists on the Frankfurt School and Fromm's ideas; a new Fromm professorship was recently created in Berlin; new books and articles appearing: taken together, these events attest to renewed scholarly and social/political interest in what Scottish scholar Kieran Durkin calls the »radical humanism« of Erich Fromm. Yet the salience of Fromm's work is much less apparent when it comes to feminism (and the diversity of feminisms that have unfolded from the 1960s onward) even though analogously with Fromm, this is a movement intent on furthering human happiness by deconstructing gender inequalities and widening options for experiencing intimate and sexual freedoms. Indeed few feminist theorists cite Fromm's work as their inspiration. But why this particular brand of irrelevance since, as this paper strives to demonstrate,

Fromm's thought was compatible with feminist critiques of patriarchy and hopes of personal and political fulfillment?

Here I contend that, while not necessarily obvious or known, the work of Erich Fromm is more consonant with feminist theories and thought than is usually recognized. While until recently Fromm has been a relatively »forgotten intellectual,« as Neil McLaughlin has dubbed him, Fromm was nevertheless refreshingly ahead of his time—especially though not exclusively with regard to his critiques of patriarchy and sexism in and outside psychoanalytic establishments. Soon to be detailed is that Fromm's writings were compatible with, and perhaps even anticipatory of, several early and radical feminist ideas. On the other hand, I will argue that Fromm's usually exemplary ability to merge the psychoanalytic and the sociological may have been contradicted by veering toward a biologically based notion of »mother right« and »feminine nature.« These associations in Fromm's work may have distanced feminisms from Fromm, and Fromm from feminisms, and would benefit from revision and re-interpretation.

In addition, I aim to show the importance of Fromm's contributions for overcoming still frequent assumptions that Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic theories are incompatible with feminist beliefs in the overwhelmingly social character and origins of gender inequalities. To explore Frommian and feminist thought today, I start by outlining four advantages of Fromm's thought applicable to and kindred with contemporary feminist theories. I then turn to three reasons why Fromm's thought could easily be perceived—past and present—as not so relevant to feminist thought before concluding, finally, that reconciling Fromm and feminism is important both for political change overall and for overcoming sexism in particular. Let me start, then, with the advantages of Frommian thought for feminist theories.

### **The Advantages of Fromm for Feminisms and Feminist Theories**

First and foremost, feminists are not always aware that some of Fromm's analyses sound like they could have been written by radical feminists of the American second wave. Two important examples can be cited, the first relevant to the practice of psychoanalysis. Fromm wrote a critique of Freud's analysis of Dora that insightfully showed Freud's sexist use of power in that psychoanalytic situation. In Fromm's hands, Dora was not so much a »case study in hysteria« as an example of a therapist/patient reproduction of patriarchal inequalities of power and powerlessness. Fromm showed himself an astute social observer while never letting go of his belief in unconscious and psychoanalytically attuned processes; he perceived Dora's rebellion from the sexist psychoanalytic

situation in which she had been cast as unequal, and as though dependent on Freud to complete her, to finish her analysis whether or not the direction he was proceeding in made sense to and was resonant for her. Indeed, Fromm was able to perceive that Dora leaving her analysis with Freud could be an act of liberation—and perhaps that only leaving could express her desire to be an equal partner in therapy that itself can be a prefiguring of the mutual art of loving.

Indeed, and as a second example, one can interpret *The Art of Loving* (Fromm 1956a) as quite consistent with radical feminist critiques of unequal sexist relationships—and indeed of conventional cultural ideologies of marriage and romance as depending on a notion of women needing men to feel completed. Much romantic ideology suggests that women are »incomplete« unless »completed« by love, by a partner, by—historically—a »man.« As Simone de Beauvoir described in *The Second Sex* (1971), the stuff of young girls' day dreams and musical lyrics can praise »merging« for women, subordinating oneself within male-dominated relationships: »someday he'll come along—the man I love« is the kind of older lyric that accords with both older fairy tales of Cinderella and of Rapunzel and still with contemporary music lyrics across a wide range of music styles. Yet images of women incomplete without love and romance is quite at odds with Fromm's notion of love in *The Art of Loving*. And here, Frommian and feminist ideas appear parallel and kindred insofar as both show that the very idea of love needed to be revised in order to be consistent with gender equality. As I am arguing, for Fromm and many understandings of feminism, to love is impossible unless between two whole people, each of whom loves herself or himself, herself and herself, himself and himself.

If a first advantage of Fromm's thought for feminism has to do with grasping the subtleties and dynamics of unequal power—whether through day-to-day interactions (including psychoanalysis) and as played out in cultural discourses and ideologies of romance and love—a second compatibility involves Fromm's insistent humanism. For what I contend is that Fromm's categories of analysis were and remain radically humanistic and anti-essentialistic: discussions of character structure, of biophilia and necrophilia, of productive orientations, have nothing to do with biological determinism and everything to do with human capacities and possibilities across men and women, races, nationalities, and sexualities. These categories of thought are in no way intrinsically gendered or essentialistic at a time when deterministic thought—about women, about races, about particular groups such as immigrants—are still far too widespread and often are the basis of ongoing modes of dominance and subordination. Another example of this radically anti-essentialistic character of Fromm thoughts pertains to my own doctoral dissertation that later became the book *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (Chancer 1992). My own thought was

very much inspired by Fromm's, especially by Fromm's argument in *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a) that people need to defend themselves against the loneliness and anomie of modern societies—a need that can take the form of submitting oneself to a more powerful being (masochism) or exerting controls over a relatively powerless party (sadism). Masochism and sadism can be seen here as social defense mechanisms. Noteworthy for feminist »appropriation« of Fromm, though, is that nothing concerning Fromm's notions of sadism and masochism was »intrinsically« gendered. Rather than weaving links of biological causality between masochism and women, as unfortunately characterize the writings on masochism of Helene Deutsch with which Fromm would have been familiar, *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) provides no indication whatsoever that sadism is inherently the province of men nor masochism that of women. Rather, a »beauty« of this analysis is that it allows for seeing that society pushes people into skewed gendered directions (men toward sadism, women toward masochism) but not in such a way that is biologically based or essentialistic. For women can be sadistic or men masochistic depending on complex situations. And indeed I would argue that since both sadism and masochism can be present in the same individual, someone who is a woman may be socialized into (say) submissiveness toward a male partner or husband while enacting masochism toward a relatively less powerful person in her life. On the other hand, anyone familiar with both literary and popular cultural depictions of sadomasochism is likely to recall depictions of powerful men whose dominant sadism (during the day) may transpose (at night) into sexual desires to be beaten and dominated. Socialized patterns exist then, as Fromm indicates, but they are not biologically given and can reverse under certain existential circumstances and at differing historical moments. It is a non-essentialism extremely consonant with contemporary feminist insistence—not only in deBeauvoir but going all the way up through Judith Butler—on gender fluidity, and on cultural and social rather than biologically based interpretations of human dynamics including oppressive ones.

But I see a third and fourth advantage of Fromm for feminist theorizing as well. A third advantage is that unlike other progressive visions Fromm's thought insists on offering positive (one could say indeed productive) as well as alternative visions. Whether in *The Sane Society* (1955a) or going back again to *The Art of Loving* (1956a), Fromm suggests that both personal and political relationships premised on precisely the kind of interdependence between self and other that later feminist object relations theorists like Jessica Benjamin describe as »mutual recognition.« Both Fromm and Benjamin, the latter a feminist sociologist who received her PhD from New York University before becoming a full-time psychoanalyst, understood how mutual recognition differs

from master/slave or sadomasochistic dynamics in which one person takes away the freedom of another so as to render himself (or herself) more secure. For the philosophical underpinnings of mutual recognition—so consonant with Fromm's ideas—is that individuals are necessarily social beings while simultaneously endowed with individual, psychic, and psychoanalytic uniqueness. Consequently, in order to be a »person,« one both needs others and to be relatively independent in their own right. In other words, Fromm, like feminists, tried to offer prefigurative visions of what non-sexist relationships—at the individual level but also at the social level—would look like.

Finally, a fourth compatibility between Frommian and feminist theories strikes me as particularly interesting and promising for concerns about »toxic« forms of masculinities about which contemporary feminists are deeply concerned. Whether or not Fromm intended this to be the case, I would argue that Fromm's ideas in effect break down gender binaries of precisely the kind that feminists from de Beauvoir to Judith Butler, Chodorow to Benjamin, have diagnosed. The fact that Fromm's thought has been accused sometimes of being »soft« (an obviously gendered term) or »touchy feely« is actually a strength insofar as it suggests that Frommian thought breaks down gendered dichotomies between reason and emotion, affect and instrumentality. With Fromm, one is constantly talking—as philosophers, as theorists, as psychoanalysts, and as people whether or not as men and women, men and men, women and women—about caring, about love, and about sanity and reason as well as love and existential joy. In other words, »macho« categories of thought become strikingly transcended in the very process of »doing« both Frommian and feminist theories-and-practices of gender.

By extension, Frommian ideas may be very consistent with contemporary feminist critiques of masculinity and masculinities as in the work of Raewynn Connell or C. J. Pascoe or Michael Kimmel. This is because arguably not only sexism but heterosexism presupposes a »hegemonic« masculinity that insists on maintaining rather than breaking down rigid emotional and sexual specifications of gender as well as sexualities.

### **From Thesis to Antithesis: Problems of Fromm's Analyses for Feminists**

Moving along this argument, though, if there are so many relationships of compatibility, of intellectual and theoretical and philosophical affinity between Frommian and feminist thought, why do feminists rarely if ever associate themselves with the Frommian tradition? What are reasons that may help to explain why Fromm and feminism have not been perceived as consonant? With this, I

now turn to three disadvantages that feminists in contemporary context may associate with Fromm and his thought and ideas. Interestingly, these problems potentially contradict precisely some of the advantages just explained that have to do with Fromm's insights into the subtleties of sexist exertions of power and with the radical anti-essentialism of his thought (and the advantages of his profoundly humanistic, non-gendered conceptions).

A first problem, and possible contradiction, then—which may distance feminists from Fromm despite advantages—has to do with language and with contemporary interest in how power is often understood in contemporary theory in relation to language and discourse. For despite Fromm's penetrating critiques of sexist power and inequalities, Fromm continued to use »man«—take for example, the book title *Man for Himself* (1947a)—in many of his generic writings about the human condition. This is something I noted long ago when initially reading Fromm; it is an observation that can easily be passed over and ignored relative to the intellectual power of his ideas. On the other hand, and certainly in this context, the usage is arguably quietly, subliminally, even unconsciously sexist, especially in our contemporary context and in English usages (and much of Fromm was first published in English). Ought Fromm to have known better insofar as other of his contemporaries were not making quite so much use of »man« in their writings around the same period? Arguably so since Fromm lived until 1980, passing away when he was close to 80. He would have had time, by then, to have become familiar with early feminist classics from *The Second Sex* (published in the US in 1951) through well-known liberal and radical feminist books published by Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone among others in the 1960s and 70s. However he may have been long used to employing the species-oriented »man« and, likely, did not have feminist theorists close at hand as among his best friends to protest a linguistic habit he might have been reasonably persuaded to alter.

But a second disadvantage—and explanation of why Fromm is not often seen as relevant for feminist thought— involves why and how Fromm came, despite his overall social constructionist and anti-essentialistic leanings, to refer to something like »feminine nature.« In *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy: About Gender*, Fromm discusses the anthropological ideas of Bachofen; he wrote approvingly of Bachofen's »discovery of mother right« and the relevance of this notion for social psychology (see Fromm 1994a, Table of Contents). Interestingly, as Fromm also mentions, Bachofen's theory—to wit, matriarchies existed prior to their destruction with the rise of patriarchal societies—had also been cited by Friedrich Engels in postulating a historical progression whereby matriarchal societies were overturned and replaced by patriarchal (and also property-based capitalistic) rule. According to Bachofen, and then Engels and

later Fromm, patriarchy is relatively recent» [...] and was preceded by a state of culture in which the mother was the head of the family, the rules in society, and the Great Goddess« (Fromm 1994a, p. 4).

Why does this matter, though, so much to Fromm? Unlike Engels' theorization, which links the overthrow of »mother right« to forced monogamy and the beginnings of property, Fromm's concern is with the rise of cultural and gendered norms that led to psychosocial harms and alienated/alienating personalities and character structures within capitalistic and patriarchal societies. In Fromm's words,

»As a further consequence, the basic principles of the mother-centered culture are those of freedom and equality, of happiness and the unconditional affirmation of life. In contrast to the motherly principles the fatherly principle if that of law, order, reason, hierarchy; the father has his favorite son, the one who is most like him, the most suited to become the heir and successor to his property and worldly functions. Among the father-centered sons, equality has given way to hierarchy, harmony to strike.« (Fromm 1994a, p. 6)

Significant to underscore here is that a deterministic stance is thereby suggested going back to Bachofen; the »essence« of differences between motherly and fatherly love are biologically based insofar as they are linked with women's role in reproduction (Fromm 1994a, p. 5). Fromm quotes Bachofen to the effect that »Maternity pertains to the physical side of *man*« (my emphasis), concluding that

»Two traits, therefore, characterize the relationship of matriarchal society to nature: passive surrender to nature; and recognition of natural and biological values, as opposed to intellectual ones. Like the mother, nature is the center of matriarchal culture; and mankind ever remains a helpless child in the face of nature.« (Fromm 1994a, p. 23.)

With this, though, an explanatory clue emerges about the blatant »contradiction« between Fromm's typically social constructionist (and feminist) writings and the biologism evident from his endeavors to understand how the system socialist feminist Zillah Eisenstein dubbed »capitalist patriarchy« evolved. For perhaps, through Bachofen's allusions to a matriarchal past and the concept of »mother right,« Fromm attempted to reconcile the sadomasochistic, deeply oppressive inequalities of capitalism (and the pathological deviation he witnessed sprouting up in Germany through fascism) with his own anti-patriar-

chal sympathies. The »reconciliation« for Fromm might have been to posit a »feminine« principle through which the possibilities of a different society based on love, caring, compassion and mutually recognizing human beings could be envisioned as more than simply utopian, fantastical—think, perhaps, Benedict Anderson's imagined communities?—given the anthropological documentation Bachofen proffered.

By way of evidence for this interpretation, note how Fromm complains in *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy* (1994a) that previous arguments for women's equality in bourgeois society were based on presuming men and women to be (biologically) equal. Making a case resonant of critiques by radical and socialist feminists or liberal feminists who wanted nothing more than formal equality with men, Fromm writes:

»The theory that woman and man were identical formed the basis for demanding her political equality. But whether it was expressed or only implied, woman's equality meant that she, in her very essence, was the same as man in bourgeois society. [...] The ‚human‘ emancipation of woman really meant her emancipation to become a bourgeois male.« (Fromm 1994a, p. 26.)

Does this justify Fromm's essentialism? Not at all. But it may help to explain this biologism while also providing insight into why Fromm may have thought himself progressive—and even consistently feminist (if socialist/radical, not liberal feminist!)—when excavating an allegedly matriarchal history to ground imaginings of a humanistic future. But I would argue that Fromm did not need to theorize matriarchal roots, thereby veering into essentialistic territory, in order to comprehend the strength of gender differences that empirically separate men and women so that the former often becomes/became (say) more »aggressive« and the latter often becomes/became (say) more »nurturant.« Alternatively, Fromm could have stayed consistent with his usually admirable social constructionist leanings by attributing divergent characteristics to the deeply sociological enculturation that bequeaths and reproduces gendered patterns from generation to generation as well as from country to country. Clearly gender socialization differs not only according to class/national background but along racial, sexual and other intersectionally divergent lines—as Fromm was not known for noting, either—while still creating clusters of behaviors and practices *across* race and class through broad personality patterns of »masculinity« (and masculinities) and »femininity« (and femininities). From this, persistent patterns of gender-divided »habitus«—to tap Pierre Bourdieu's own creative and solidly sociological concept—can be derived so as to render

biological allusions superfluous. Moreover, it is literally impossible to know what is biological or culturally caused so long as the two are overdetermined. Ironically enough, social determinants of gender discrimination would have to »wither away« entirely for us to know, for sure, what was or was not biologically caused: nothing of the kind, i.e. elimination of gender's social concomitants, has yet happened in Fromm's time or our own.

However, where feminists arguably still need Fromm is that the »psychological / psychoanalytic« part of »psychosocially« caused gendered effects have been relatively less explored or expanded upon by movements from the second wave until now. Obviously, as Fromm understood even better than Freud given the former's far more explicit critiques of patriarchy and sexism, gendered patterns create terrible harms for both men and women. These are at once »objective« and »subjective,« social and psychological, through the defense mechanisms, inequitable and authoritarian (gender-skewed) dynamics, and sexual and psychic guilts and angers these patterns impose sometimes consciously and sometimes not. For this reason, in concluding, I turn to whether and how Fromm's ideas can be rediscovered not only in the present context of rising political authoritarianism but that of persistent sexist subordination also. How can Fromm's ideas regarding feminism be reconciled post facto even if this happened only partially (albeit significantly) in his own time, place and space?

Two disadvantages: using sexist language (and thus ignoring power inequalities even though Fromm usually acknowledges them); and veering into essentialism via Bachofen (and Bachofen interpreted too biologically) even where Fromm is arguably admirably and radically anti-essentialistic. A third disadvantage that may have contributed to Fromm being a »forgotten intellectual not just in general but for feminists« may have to do with precisely the analysis Rainer Funk gives us of Fromm having moved away from libido theory. In so doing, did he stop analyzing sexuality in the ways that contemporary feminist theorists— influenced by Butler among others—are now very concerned about, and which involves talking about pleasure, desire, and taking on the socially constructed and imposed, and often discriminated against character of diverse sexuality and sexualities? Here, as with the advantages, it seems possible to revise Fromm back toward a reconciliation between his ideas and feminisms. It is no longer necessary to use »man« when writing about Fromm unless when (of course and reasonably) when quoting him directly. It is possible to use Bachofen in a way that refers to how patriarchal societies mandated divisions between matriarchal and patriarchal parts of ourselves so that they are perceived as biologically based when they are actually deeply cultural. (In other words, one can revise Fromm's interest in Bachofen so that it is interpreted culturally and sociologically rather than biologically and essen-

tialistically—since to smack of »essentialism« seems overall anti-Frommian.) And finally, because Fromm shifted away from libido, that does not have to mean—and I do not think it would mean—that Fromm did not understand the joys of sex as well as the joys of love and creativity and productivity in all other spheres of life. Nor do contemporary discussions of Fromm and feminism have to focus only on sexism rather than also—and importantly in feminist theories of the present—on heterosexism as well. There is nothing that ought make us think that Fromm would not understand and be willing to embrace these levels of complexity—especially as Fromm did not rule out physicality (and may have also been ahead of his time in understanding the limits of social constructionism when taken to an extreme).

### **Coming Full Circle Then: Why Does Fromm and Feminism Matter?**

Perhaps the greatest value of Fromm's thought for contemporary feminism is its centrality in any body of work purporting to demonstrate the compatibility—rather than incommensurability—of sociological and Freudian-influenced psychoanalytic ideas. As Rainer Funk has underscored, Fromm maintains notions of unconscious defense mechanisms but saw human beings as inherently social; anxiety at aloneness, from Fromm, was a »psychosocial« correlate of what Durkheim called anomie. Moreover, reflecting the influence of Karen Horney within psychoanalytic (if not more anti-Freudian feminist) circles, Fromm's concerns about anxiety and relatedness led him to anticipate object relations theory of precisely the kind further developed within psychoanalysis by Melanie Klein and within sociology (and psychoanalysis) by Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow.

But is it possible to see beyond the essentialism that nonetheless appears in some, though by no means all, of Fromm's writings on gender and sexuality? By now, Fromm's essentialistic view of maternalism seems historically obsolesced as men as well as women more commonly parent and co-parent as single parents, in different types of couples, or in group settings from kibbutzim to other communes. And, by now, it seems obvious that nurturance is and can be provided to babies such that non-patriarchal modes of relating empathetically, with oneself as well as others (as, in *The Art of Loving* [1956a], Fromm so clearly and well understood) can result: apparent at this point is that what matters most is not gender but the presence of absence of compassion, love, and respect in parent/children as well as adult relationships. But yet, one wonders if biological as well as psychological differences between people is a matter that extreme social constructionism has rendered as though

unbroachable. Without resorting to gender essentialism, are there realms of biological differences (of, say, weight or height as pertains to—perhaps—what one person or another can carry, or a space that can be fitted into) that can be referred to without judgment, but with detachment? Is biology still something that can be discussed (even if theories of biological origins are not at all close to being easily ascertained) insofar as even conceivably a dimension of life—and death—not reducible to the social? While this was not what Fromm had in mind, sociologists and feminists may still find his work interesting insofar as it allows complexity and multi-dimensionality to be debated, examined, investigated and explored without fear of sadomasochistic repercussions and punishments—and in the spirit of mutual recognition, at once potentially intellectual and psychic and cultural, that Fromm advocated so brilliantly and so ahead of his time.

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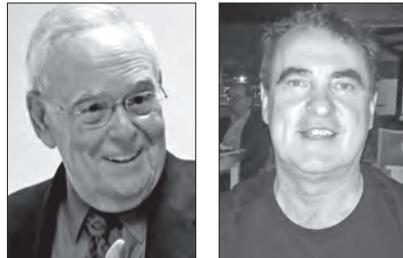
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## Sociopsychanalysis and Radical Humanism: A Fromm-Bourdieu Synthesis

**Michael Maccoby and Neil McLaughlin**



**Abstract:** Mainstream social science has been blindsided by the rise of Trumpism and broader growth of authoritarian populism. We make the case that Frommian work is desperately needed inside the core of contemporary social science theorizing by examining social character theory up against and alongside the concept of habitus developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Both Fromm and Bourdieu were concerned with the human costs of social change and economic development, Fromm with his writings on advanced capitalism in *The Sane Society* (1955a) and on Mexican village life in *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (with Michael Maccoby, 1970b), and Bourdieu with his extended studies of peasants in Algeria during the French colonial war of the 1950s and early 1960s. We will compare and contrast the theory of social character developed in the Mexican study with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and discuss what Fromm's ideas can add to Bourdieu-influenced critical social science.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, Pierre Bourdieu, social character, habitus, Algeria, Mexico.

Mainstream social science has been blindsided by the rise of Trumpism and broader growth of authoritarian populism. Erich Fromm's ideas are needed now more than ever and we thus gather here in Berlin as committed proponents of humanistic social ethics, psychoanalysis and sociology. Some of us will be more focused on doing Frommian-influenced clinical work, social crit-

icism and social theorizing. For those of us who see ourselves doing empirical social science, however, whether inside or outside the contemporary research university, we make the case that Frommian work is desperately needed inside the core of contemporary social science theorizing.

We will make this argument by examining social character theory up against and alongside the concept of habitus developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the dominant social theorist in contemporary critical social science. Bourdieu rose to fame and influence as a French sociologist in the twilight of Fromm's career; they did not directly engage each other's ideas, so we must reconstruct what a conversation or dialogue between these two traditions might look like. As David Swartz puts it, »Bourdieu thinks of the practice of sociology as *socioanalysis* where the sociologist is to the ›social unconscious‹ of society as the psychoanalyst is to the patient's unconscious« (Swartz 2013, p. 10), a vision that has obvious links with Fromm's own combination of sociology, psychoanalysis and social criticism.

Bourdieu certainly did a better job than Fromm in developing a successful school of social science research and theorizing rooted in the modern research university. Fromm wrote insights from the margins of social science. This gave him an independence from social science orthodoxy that was priceless, but he also paid a price for his exclusion from the mainstream. The Frommian vision of a humanistic social science will only succeed if we gain more legitimacy for our ideas and research agendas within contemporary social science; thus we argue here for dialoguing more with mainstream social science, something that will be facilitated by engagement with Bourdieu's work.

To facilitate this engagement, we will first outline the basic contours of Bourdieu's social science career, comparing the reception of his work within mainstream social science with the more familiar story of Fromm's marginalization and contemporary revival. Both Fromm and Bourdieu were concerned with the human costs of social change and economic development, Fromm with his writings on advanced capitalism in *The Sane Society* (1955a) and on Mexican village life in *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (with Michael Maccoby, 1970b), and Bourdieu with his extended studies of peasants in Algeria during the French colonial war of the 1950s and early 1960s. We will compare and contrast the theory of social character developed in the Mexican study with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and discuss what Fromm's ideas can add to Bourdieu-influenced critical social science.

## Two Social Science Careers: Fromm and Bourdieu

Erich Fromm and Pierre Bourdieu were both trained as sociologists but their re-

lationship to the discipline is dramatically different. Fromm did his PhD at Heidelberg in the early 1920s with the supervision of Alfred Weber, Max Weber's younger brother. Yet he was largely marginal to the core of discipline, especially in North America and English language social science (McLaughlin 1998). Fromm was not interested in being an academic, although he did empirical research in the middle to late 1920s on authoritarianism among the German working and middle classes while a member of the Horkheimer circle of critical theorist based in Frankfurt (Funk 1982; Burston 1992; Durkin 2014). Fromm made his living as a therapist, a teacher of psychoanalysts, and author of popular books, however, not as a sociology professor. Only occasionally did he publish in core sociology journals and he was largely uninterested in professional sociology.

Bourdieu's relationship to professional sociology was very different. Bourdieu finished his graduate work in the late 1950s, thirty years later than Fromm, and in France, not Germany. The major difference between the two, however, is that Bourdieu was centrally identified and involved in professional sociology and was focused on producing theoretical and empirical contributions to the field that he hoped would come to dominate the discipline. Bourdieu was a critical sociologist positioned at an elite French institution that allowed him the space and resources to produce an enormous amount of high quality social science research.

Fromm and Bourdieu, however, share much politically and intellectually. Both Fromm and Bourdieu viewed themselves as critical and left scholars and they each engaged the Marxist tradition in substantial ways without being orthodox Marxists. Each were deeply schooled in the classical sociological tradition, drawing on Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel. Both Fromm and Bourdieu were synthetic thinkers who rejected the simplistic agency versus structure dichotomy; they each articulated powerful critiques of American style positivism and were militant opponents of colonialism and American imperial dominance of the world. Moreover, both Fromm and Bourdieu were committed to political action outside of the ivory tower, although their careers as public intellectuals and public sociologists were very different. As Swartz puts it, »Bourdieu's sociology would be critical though not prophetic, theoretical though empirically researchable, and scientific though not positivist« (Swartz 2012, p. 26). As Maccoby has reminded us, there was a powerful prophetic voice in Fromm's intellectual vision, something Bourdieu was opposed to (Maccoby 1995; also see Braune 2014).

After Fromm's initial burst into fame and academic stature with the critically acclaimed *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a), he was largely uninterested in sustaining a record and reputation as an academic social scientist until the last decade of his life. It was in this last period of Fromm's life, when he re-

turned to scholarly work with *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973a), an attempt to synthesize his Freudian-inspired social theory with new developments in neurosciences, archeology and historical anthropology/comparative sociology and, most importantly *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b), an empirical test of his social character theory written with Michael Maccoby.

Bourdieu, in contrast, rose to the very top of the French academic hierarchy with his election to the College de France in 1981 as the dominant empirical researcher in sociology of his generation because of his work developing a theoretical framework for a scientific sociology based on the concepts of fields, capital and habitus. It was only then that Bourdieu spent a decade writing more accessible books critiquing neo-liberalism and American culture in France, offering his thoughts on gender inequality, attacking mainstream media and the French socialist party for their conformism and contributing his intellectual stature to the anti-globalization movement of the period.

While Fromm and Bourdieu were politically active as radicals, the nature of this engagement was similar but also quite different. Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) was a theoretical text with a political subtext—he was making the argument for the American entry into World War II to defeat the Nazi regime. Many other of Fromm's books had clear political intent and he was politically active in radical and liberal causes. In the end, however, Fromm's political activism was a sideshow to his major focus as a psychoanalyst, a writer and a social theorist. Fromm was aware that he was temperamentally not suited to political activism and electoral politics.

The same was true with Bourdieu even though initial involvement in politics and scholarship were linked together during the French colonial war in Algeria. As a young man from a lower-middle class background, Bourdieu was in the military when the Algerian revolution against the French dominated politics in his nation, and he was sent to Algeria in a non-combat role because of his vocal opposition to the colonial war. After a couple of years of service, Bourdieu went back to start his career as a researcher and academic teacher in Algeria; his first publications were rooted in his anthropological observations of Algerian peasant life in the context of modernization and colonial violence. *The Algerians* (1962) was a fairly traditional work of anthropology as were his first series of publications on Kabyle society in northern Algeria. Bourdieu was primarily an academic social scientist intensely focused on preserving his scientific credibility—he never signed petitions, involved himself in protests or took sharp positions on political issues until the last decade of his life. Bourdieu did share with Fromm, however, an anti-colonial politics and their *The Algerians* (1962) (published in French in 1958) and *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b) represent the most directly comparable works they each did.

## **Social Character versus Habitus: Competing and Complementary Theoretical Traditions**

The concept of social character was Fromm's most original and important contribution to social theory. Social character relates to what Fromm termed a character matrix, a syndrome of character traits that has developed as an adaptation to the economic, social, and cultural conditions, common to that group. Distinct from national character theories, Fromm's social character theory has more affinity to Bourdieu's theory of habitus, with more psychoanalysis, less cognitive psychology and a different history and set of analytic goals. Fromm critically integrated what he viewed as core insights from both Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud while rejecting orthodox dogma from the theoretical systems of Marxism and psychoanalysis respectively. The core of the theory was expressed clearly in »The social and individual roots of neurosis,« in the *American Sociological Review* (Fromm 1944a).

The particular ways in which a society functions are determined by a number of objective economic and political factors, which are given at any point of historical development. Societies have to operate within the possibilities and limitations of their particular historical situations. In order that any society may function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to act in the way they have to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to desire what objectively is necessary for them to do. Outer force is to be replaced by inner compulsion, and by the particular kind of human energy which is channeled into character traits (Fromm 1944a, p. 381).

One can see the Marxist roots of Fromm's social character theory in this quote, but he rejected the inattention to emotions, morality and human nature in orthodox versions of Marxism.

## **Social Character in a Mexican Village**

Fromm initiated this study in 1957 after having lived in Mexico since 1950 when he had been invited by some of the leading psychiatrists to establish the Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis and to train these psychiatrists to be psychoanalysts. Although Fromm was often attacked as a mystical thinker or a radical polemicist and he was, at times, more of a prophetic intellectual than a social scientist, it would be a mistake to ignore his roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian radicalism and the traditions within sociology concerned with designing a better society through the use of science.

Fromm had a fair amount of resources at his disposal for the Mexican character study, far more than Bourdieu did as young graduate student/junior scholar in Algeria also in the late 1950s. Fromm had the cooperation of the national and regional Mexican government, local elites in the village, Father William Wasson, the founder of a large orphanage in the surrounding area, some American Friends Service volunteers as well as volunteers from the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute he had founded, and he received funding from the Foundations Fund for Research in Psychiatry. Maccoby was funded by the National Institute for Mental Health. Fromm had selected a small village made up of 280 families that was typical of villages where some of the *campesinos* who had been *haciendo peons* were given *ejidos* after the revolution of 1910–20. By interviewing every villager over the age of 16 and half the children, using economic surveys, statistical analysis, psychological tests, and participant observation, Fromm and Maccoby sought to demonstrate with scientific rigor that the sociopsychanalytic concept of social character could explain relationships between economic, social and psychological factors.

Fromm engaged a Mexican internist who was living in the village to interview adult villagers using a questionnaire that elicited responses that could be interpreted according to character types. Mexican psychologists administered Rorschach tests and TATs. From 1958 to 1960, two American anthropologists named Theodore and Lola Schwartz, who were linked to Fromm's old friend Margaret Mead, carried out participant observation and an economic survey of village families. There were conflicts between the Schwartz couple and Fromm, partly having to do with theoretical differences (Fromm felt they were not committed to the psychoanalytic theoretical frame for the study) and questions of ethics (Fromm wanted to preserve the confidentiality of the village while Lola Schwartz, in particular, wanted to use the data for her dissertation) (Friedman 2013).

In 1960, Maccoby joined the project, essentially as a replacement for the Schwartzes (although there was some overlap, as the young anthropologists left in 1961). Maccoby interpreted all of the questionnaire and projective text material in terms of social character types. At regular project meetings with Fromm, he discussed many of the interpretations and results. Maccoby, together with an anthropologist and psychologist studied the children. He also led an agricultural club for adolescent boys with help from the American Friends Service Committee. Maccoby organized the statistical analysis and wrote all the book's chapters that reported the study's results, and was responsible for the history chapter that framed the study in the context of the colonial destruction of traditional culture and the oppressive nature of Spanish economic rule. It was unfortunate that there was an unpleasant professional conflict

between Fromm and the Schwartzes that extended for some years after. If the Schwartzes had been more involved, the final study might well have provided more ethnographic data.

## Results of the Study

The most important contributions of *Social Character in a Mexican Village* to knowledge about development concerns the relationship between social character and behavior and the interaction between economic, social, cultural, and psychological factors. At the start of the study, Fromm raised the following question: What happened to the *campesino* after the Mexican revolution? Despite the fact that they were given land, many *campesinos* failed to take advantage of their opportunities. Alcoholism appeared to increase, and there was a high incidence of violence. Why did this happen?

The study showed the importance of social character in explaining this failure of development. Those villagers brought up before the revolution in the culture of the semi-feudal hacienda lacked the self-confidence and the self-directed, hard-working character of successful peasants throughout the world. Their submissive, receptive, unproductive character, which was adapted to life in the hacienda, made them vulnerable to alcoholism and exploitation after the revolution. Furthermore, the children of these villagers were apt to share some of these character traits.

In contrast, the villagers who had been landowners did demonstrate adaptive productive hoarding traits. They farmed their land effectively, and they attempted to maintain conservative, patriarchal values and traditions. Those few villagers with a modern outlook and an entrepreneurial character, the productive exploitative types, proved best able to take advantage of the new opportunities, and they also took advantage of the unproductive villagers. They opened small businesses, and they rented land from the alcoholics. They took the lead in transforming the culture, getting rid of costly fiestas, while building roads and schools.

The study thus demonstrated that although the revolution left the villagers in a state of equality, a class system emerged partly because of differences in social character. One of the most significant findings of the study is the relationship between character and the actual farming behavior of the *campesinos*. Those who were psychologically more productive as interpreted from the questionnaires were also economically more productive. They planted the major part of their land in cash crops such as rice and vegetables which demanded much care and hard work. While some of the psychologically receptive un-

productive landholders rented out their land, the others farmed it with sugar cane which produced a much lower profit but greater security. Cane required fewer days of work and less care. The difficult, dirty job of harvesting the cane was done by migrant workers who occupied the lowest class in Mexican rural society and were hired by the sugar refinery, the »cooperative,« which took on the paternalistic role of the old hacienda. Some landholders who tried to escape the control of the cooperative found their crops ploughed under. The most astute villagers planted a small percentage of their land in sugar cane, just enough to satisfy the cooperative, gain its benefits (scholarships for their children, health care, low cost loans) and avoid trouble, while optimizing their income.

Fromm and Maccoby's *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b) was a remarkable piece of work for its time that succeeded in its core goal of providing an empirical test of social character theory, but it was largely ignored in the academic literature. There are a range of reasons for the marginalization of *Social Character*, including being caught between the competing intellectual logics and research methods of economics, psychology, anthropology and sociology. One additional factor, however, is that its co-author, Michael Maccoby, never entered the academic profession but went on to develop social character theory outside the university in a series of best-selling and carefully researched works of applied social science directed at business leaders and executives (1976, 1980, 1988, 2004, 2007, 2015). There was also a small network of Mexican scholars and psychoanalysts (Cortina 2015; Gojman de Millán and Millán 2015) and a German based international Erich Fromm Society led by Fromm's former assistant Rainer Funk who did work on social character (Fromm Society 1995), but all of the major promoters of social character theory were marginal to the modern research university.

## Theory of Habitus

Bourdieu's equivalent theoretical construct parallel to Fromm's notion of social character is »habitus,« a key part of his conceptual framework alongside »capital« and »field.« For Bourdieu does not focus so much on cultures as anthropologists do or on societies as sociologists tend to, but on fields. As Swartz puts it, fields are: »Arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate capital.« (Swartz 2013, p. 35). There are various forms of capital in Bourdieu's theory, primarily economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, and there are various ways in which individuals can accumu-

late, exchange and transform each form of capital into one of the other three.

This constant competition within fields for gaining capital is mediated and facilitated by what Bourdieu calls an internalized habitus. As Swartz describes it, »Habitus derives from the predominately unconscious internalization—particularly during early childhood, of objective chances that are common to members of a social class or status group.« (Swartz 2012, p. 104.)

Habitus, as Swartz put it, »transforms social and economic necessity into virtue« by leading individuals to a »kind of immediate submission to order« (Swartz 2012, p. 54), or as Fromm would put it, people learn to want to do what they have to do, in order to survive and prosper in the particular society they live in given their own class position.

Bourdieu's concern with understanding Algerian underdevelopment has significant overlap with the Fromm/Maccoby concern with the Mexican case. As Steinmetz puts it, »In his earliest publications, Bourdieu blamed Algerian underdevelopment not on the Algerians' own shortcomings but on the 'shock effect of a clash between an archaic economy and a modern one (1958, p. 55).« In *Sociologie de L'Algérie*, he asked how different groups of Algerian reacted to this »clash of civilizations« (Bourdieu 1958, p. 119).« (Steinmetz 2013, p. 37.)

In the early Algeria work (1960), Bourdieu defined habitus as »a system of durable, transposable dispositions which function as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices« (Bourdieu 1979, p. vii). A later definition in 1980, which is the more commonly used one in the current literature in the sociology of culture and education suggests that the habitus is:

»a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them« (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53).

In various other places in his massive output of scholarship, Bourdieu, as David Swartz has documented, had used the wordings of »cultural unconscious,« »habit-forming force,« »set of basic, deeply interiorized master-patterns,« »mental habit,« »mental and corporeal schemata of perceptions, appreciations, and actions,« and »generative principle of regulated improvisations« to designate his key concept (Swartz 2012, p. 101). Yet Bourdieu relies on sociological and cognitive frames, downplaying an explicit psychoanalytic analysis of emotional attitudes, the core strength of Fromm's social character theory.

## Bourdieu and Feelings

The major difference between Fromm's concept of »social character« and Bourdieu's theory of the habitus revolves around their relationship to psychoanalysis. Fromm's analysis of both Nazism and Mexican peasant life was grounded in an understanding of how internalized oppression and irrationality can shape political, economic choices and their emotional attitudes. Social character theory was created and designed precisely to help us understand how our social analysis must give an adequate weight to authoritarian impulses, feelings of humiliation and despair and passions for control and destructive revenge as well as feelings of love and compassion, and desires for transcendence, solidarity and productive living. It is precisely with respect to these emotional dynamics where Bourdieu's theory of habitus falls short.

There is a deep ambivalence in Bourdieu with regards to psychoanalysis. Throughout most of his career, Bourdieu was known to be a strong and unyielding critic of the psychoanalytic tradition, viewing it as unscientific and insufficiently sociological. The core flaws in Bourdieu's theory of the habitus is thus something that Fromm's theory of social character can help address. There is a need for a theory of self-destructive/undermining character traits that can complement a structural theory of oppression-exploitation that would put emotions centrally into the dynamics of the habitus.

It is understandable, of course, that Bourdieu did not want to emphasize how the social psychology of the Algerian peasants played a role in their own oppression as Fromm carefully attempted to do with Mexican peasants in *Social Character in a Mexican Village*. Bourdieu was sent to Algeria as part of the French military, he did not speak the local languages and he was studying the region during a brutal colonial war. But the theoretical issues cut deep. Bourdieu did not believe there was much value in exploring the concept of internalized oppression and he was openly dismissive of Franz Fanon who is the most important theorist of this idea along with the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire. Bourdieu felt that Fanon's ideas were »false and dangerous.«

The habitus internalized by the oppressed in Bourdieu's theory leaves actors unfamiliar with the rules of the game they need to succeed in the particular field they are competing in. It provides a mental map and perceptual frame that makes it harder for the lower classes to move through and up the class structure and it results in a social and cultural deficit that is difficult to overcome relative to the position of advantaged elites. Bourdieu's theory of habitus, however, says little about how feelings of low self-worth, fatalism, emotional passivity created by society and existing family dynamics or how comfort with/adaption to unhealthy and exploitative emotional relationships can make it difficult for

the oppressed to overcome their disadvantages. Fromm and Maccoby's *Social Character* study explicitly addressed and showed how social character factors, partly rooted in historical economic relations of oppression, shaped rates of alcoholism and violence against women. There are dynamics that generally have not been addressed by Bourdieu's habitus theory that tends to downplay the emotional mechanisms created in families and fields and almost exclusively highlights the role of structures and elites with little attention to these kinds of internalized and then externalized forms of oppression.

This kind of research is extremely sensitive and the kind of research done by Fromm and Maccoby done by outsiders to the communities runs the risks of been weaponized to »blame the victims« of oppressive structures or attacked as white or colonial and/or male social science. This is especially true in our social media age where the results would quickly enter circulation in decontextualized ways that lose the nuance and care that would be required to contribute real insights not just recycle platitudes and stereotypes. The obstacles to quality work are immense.

### **Towards a Social Character and Habitus Synthesis**

The most practical use of a social character/habitus synthesis will thus not likely come from research on the descendants of those colonialized, invaded and enslaved, but research projects that look at the emotional dynamics of modern nationalism, populist authoritarianism of both the left and right and the psychological consequences of digital and social media on the emotional life of the middle and professional classes. Bourdieu's habitus theory has little to say about the emotional and irrational aspects of nationalism although his structural analysis of fields and his focus on different forms of circulating capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) provides a framework that Fromm's social character theory could sharpen and improve. While Bourdieu had little to say about actual violence (Cheliotis 2011), Fromm shows how the social character that is a social cement in normal times can become social dynamite when it no longer connects to a changing world. The sociologist Michael Mann has pioneered the sociological study of fascism, Stalinism and ethnic cleansing but produced a theoretical framework that has little to offer with regards to the social psychology of genocidal-violent leaders as Fromm did in his studies of Stalin, Hitler, Himmler and Mao (Fromm 1973a; Mann 2004). In less dramatic contexts, a synthesis of habitus with social character theory offers a way into understanding the appeal of both Trumpism on the right and the shallowness of what Maccoby has called the »interactive« character in modern societies that is undermining progressive liberalism and social democracy internationally.

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## Erich Fromm and the Culture of Contemporary Capitalism

Fabrício Maciel



**Abstract:** In the first part, the article reconstructs, through the idea of »pathology of normalcy,« Fromm's critique of the cultural foundations of contemporary capitalism. In the second part, it is carried forward through the concepts of »social character« and »alienation,« in order to understand how the late twentieth-century capitalism deepens an anti-humanist culture as never before.

Finally, in the conclusion, it seeks to demonstrate how Fromm anticipates some essential features of the critique of capitalist culture, later analyzed by critics of the »new« capitalism, such as Axel Honneth, Richard Sennett and Boltanski & Chiapello.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, pathology of normalcy, social character, alienation, capitalism.

**I**t is doubtless that Erich Fromm is one of the most important social theorists of modernity. In this text, I would like to explore some aspects of his theoretical thinking aiming to demonstrate its importance in the constitution of a critique of the culture of contemporary capitalism. I will especially refer to his book *The Sane Society* (1955a), which is one of his main works. In his work, Fromm is willing to understand the predominant existential *malaise* in modernity, orienting his analytical scope to its political consequences (cf. the analysis of Fromm by Funk 1982).

The starting point for the discussion is that he baptized this project as a »humanistic psychoanalysis« (Fromm 1955a, p. 12). The main argument is

»that basic passions of man are not rooted in instinctual necessities, but in specific conditions of the human existence, in the need to find

a new relation between man and nature after having losing the primal relation, which was typical for pre-human stage« (ibid.).

This statement has a take on the Freudian theory which allows Fromm a double hermeneutical analysis: he »culturalizes« the basic passions of humanity and suggests that they can change according to a historical epoch, its economic and social context. In the first part of this theoretical analysis, he abandons the Freudian perspective in which our profound and deep passions are explained by our instinctual needs. In the second, he identifies the »specific conditions of human existence« as a base on which the content of our desires will emerge.

In this sense, I would like to propose a theoretical exercise through which this analytical stance of our human and cultural condition is going to be utilized to shed light onto the singularity of the behavior and the passions determined by the specific content of the culture of contemporary capitalism. Fromm's work reveals its relevance, amongst other good reasons, because it is able to grasp that the main pathology of our time is not individualized in people which do not suit the standards of the good behavior defined by the culture of meritocracy and success, but in a collective and objective pathology shared, in some extent, by each one of us. Especially in *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm seeks to go beyond his diagnoses. He sketches concrete suggestions for the functioning of a »sane society.« Fromm was convinced that »progress« can only occur when *simultaneous* changes in the economic, sociopolitical and cultural spheres are operated (Fromm 1955a, p. 2).

I will divide the text into two parts. Firstly, it will be important to understand what Fromm means by »pathology of normalcy.« Hereafter we will focus primarily on the rapport between social character and alienation. Finally, we will sketch a conclusion, which draws back on the affinity between Fromm's diagnosis and what contemporary authors like Richard Sennett and Axel Honneth call »new capitalism.«

### **The pathology of normalcy in the contemporary capitalist culture**

It is not arbitrary that in *The Sane Society* Fromm begins his analysis with the fundamental question: Are we mentally sane? Fromm initiates his book delineating a general framework about contradictions in the political, economic and social cultural life. In the political field, we mostly admire statesmen for avoiding war without recognizing that they commonly are responsible for it. In the economic affairs, we restrict our agricultural productivity, for example, aiming to stabilize the market, although millions of people starve. The literacy

rates increased considerably, and also our access to the media and sources of information (Fromm 1955a, p. 19).

Confronted with this paradox, Fromm begins to structure his critique on a significant portion of the psychoanalytical theory and psychiatry, which refuses to admit that the whole society lacks mental sanity. His basic point of view identifies the problem of mental sanity in a society that cannot be reduced to the number of »deviant« individuals or »misfits,« but is rooted in the pathological culture. In other words, Fromm's basic theoretical concern centers itself not on the individual pathology, but on the »pathology of normalcy,« and specifically its background of the Western culture (Fromm 1955a, p. 19).

Fromm considers the assumption, according to which, in the present society, the high suicide rates directly reflect a lack of stability and mental sanity. It is clear that this circumstance is not the result of material poverty, considering that the poorest countries present the lowest suicide rates, according to the data in 1950s. He also notices that increasing economic prosperity in Europe was accompanied by the rise of suicide rates. Fromm was also convinced that alcoholism was a symptom of mental and emotional instability and knew intuitively that the causes were rooted in essential traits of the capitalist culture (ibid., p. 70: 24).

Having once posed these questions, the author inquires: Can a society be sick? Taking this on, he tries to develop the idea of pathology of normalcy. Fromm positions himself against the dominant relativism of his generation. He alludes to the position of the majority of the sociologists who believe that society is normal in its functioning and that pathology can only be defined as the lacking of adjustment of the individual to the norms and the dominant lifestyle of the society (Fromm 1955a, p. 26). On the contrary, in his perspective, to talk about a »sane society« implies a completely different premise in comparison to sociological relativism. This only makes sense when we admit the existence of a society which *is not sane*. This presupposition implies the existence of a universal sane criterion for the whole of humanity. Only this criterion will enable the correct judgment of the level of mental sanity for each society. This would constitute the basic stance of his »normative humanism« (ibid.).

The humanity develops its potentiality, transforming it according to its own possibilities. He underlines that this stance is neither biological nor sociological, but transcends this dichotomy with the supposition that the basic human tendencies and passions are an outcome of the »total existence« of humanity. Some of them lead us to health and happiness, others to illness and unhappiness (ibid., p. 28)

Fromm identifies an important difference between individual and social mental disease. He suggests the distinction between the concepts of »defect«

and »neurosis« (ibid., p. 29). This leads us to a deeper reasoning about the idea of freedom. In Fromm's point of view, if a person fails to achieve freedom, spontaneity and genuine expression of the »I,« he or she can be considered as a bearer of serious defects, once he or she recognizes that freedom and spontaneity are goals to be achieved. If this goal is not achieved by the majority of the individuals in a given society, we stand before a phenomenon that can be defined as »a socially patterned defect« (ibid.). Someone may have lost some of their authentic feeling for happiness and their human fullness, as to be compensated by the safety of being in harmony with the rest of humanity, at least under the known way. In reality, even the defect may be considered a virtue by one's culture, providing a sense of success (ibid.).

The social defect patterned by the contemporary capitalist culture leads us to the condition of creatures which act and feel in a robotized manner, which never experience anything as authentically theirs, and which sense their »I« entirely in the way they supposedly think it is. As Fromm puts it, the artificial smile substituted the authentic one, blabbering substituted the communicative seminar and a deaf despair substituted the authentic suffering. In fact, for the majority of individuals, contemporary culture enables them »to live with a defect without becoming ill« (ibid., p. 30). Everything seems to work so that each culture provides the remedy against the externalization of manifested neurotic symptoms, as a result of self-fabricated defect.

At this stage, we begin to understand what a significant portion of the sociologists defined as »*deviance*.« In Fromm's perspective, the model provided by contemporary culture does not operate in benefit of a minority. Here, he means people, whose individual »defect« is more serious than the average, so that the remedies offered by the cultural industry do not suffice to avoid the burst of a manifest illness. (Fromm alludes to individuals who are highly motivated by the pursuit of power and fame). On the other hand, there are those whose character structure and internal conflicts differ from the majority in a way that the effective antidotes cause no positive effects. The German thinker situates this group of people as having more integrity and sensibility than the average. Precisely for this reason, they refuse to accept the »cultural opiate« whilst simultaneously, they do not find themselves sufficiently strong and sane enough to live well »against the stream« (Fromm 1955a, p. 31).

Briefly, Fromm defines this investigation explicitly leaning on his mentor—Freud—as the » *research into the pathology of civilized communities*« (ibid., p. 34). He addresses the idea that a sane society must be one, which corresponds to the needs of humanity, even considering that most pathological desires may be subjectively felt as something that someone needs the most. Fromm wants to draw our attention to the fact that societies must correspond

to what *objectively* constitutes humans needs, so that they can be determined by the inquiry on the »cultural« human nature. In the next section, we will take a step further with the appreciation of the concepts of social character and alienation as well as the identification of how the human condition is determined by 20th century capitalism in order to understand how it presents, most likely, the best example of »pathology of normalcy.«

### **Social character and alienation in the capitalist society**

Social character and alienation are two key concepts that will guide the reconstruction of Erich Fromm's line of thought in this section. This appreciation will lead to an understanding of the insufficiency of the human experience within contemporary capitalist culture. Fromm believed that it would be necessary to achieve the idea of the »personality of the average man,« who lives and works subject to this culture. Even if incomplete and uncertain, this would be the correct path to the creation of the concept of »social character.« With this theory, Fromm wants to provide an account of »*the nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture*« which differs from the individual character, distinct to each person (Fromm 1955a, p. 86).

Fromm believed that members of the same society, the same social class and *status* group necessarily need to behave in such a manner that allows them to act in the required way by the collective. In fact, the function of the social character consists exactly in shaping the members' energies in a way that their actions and decisions are not questionned on a conscious level. There is no decision about whether to follow a rule or not, but only the desire to behave according the demanded standard, taking pleasure in proceeding in the culturally required way. Briefly, the function of social character is »*to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society*« (ibid., p. 87). As an example, Fromm argues that modern industrial society would not have achieved its goals, if it had not regimented the energy of free individuals willing to work with intensity never seen (ibid., p. 88).

Once more, we could consider the structure of society and the function of the individual in this culture as the determining content of the social character. In this context, Fromm considered the family as a kind of »*psychic agency of society*,« that is, an organization that aims to transmit the requirements of society to the growing child (ibid., p. 89). Considering that the character of most parents is an expression of the social character, the essential qualities of the »socially desirable character structure« are transmitted to the child (ibid.,

p. 90). Under such a circumstance, the educative methods can only acquire relevance as a transmission mechanism, and become correctly understood, if we above all link them to which types of personality are desirable and needed in a specific culture.

In an effort to understand exactly how the capitalist culture molded the social character of the 20th century, we need firstly to clarify the configuration of capitalism in the 19th century, according to Fromm. From his standpoint, it is extremely important to notice the role of modern market economy as »the central mechanism of distributing the social product« (Fromm 1955a, p. 94). For this reason this institution is the basis for the formation of human interactions in the capitalist society. Under this notion, the market is a vehicle of distribution, which automatically regulates itself, and which makes the division of social production unnecessary. This eliminates the constant urge to use force in society. The economic preservation of the market relies on the competition of individuals who want to sell their commodities as well as their labor force or their services on the labor market. The conclusion is tragic: in this struggle for success, the social and moral rules of human society crumbled, considering that the relevance of life is to be in the first position of a competitive race (ibid., p. 95). In this path, Fromm defines precisely the moral situation of capitalist society of the 19th century:

»What characterizes income distribution in Capitalism is the lack of balanced proportion between an individual's effort and work and the social recognition accorded them financial compensation. This disproportion would, in a poorer society than ours, result in greater extremes of luxury and poverty than our standards of morals would tolerate. I am not stressing, however, the material effects of this disproportion, but its moral and psychological effects. One lies in the under evaluation of work, of human effort and skill. The other lies in the fact that as long as my gain is limited by the effort I make, my desire is limited. If, on the other hand, my income is not in proportion to my effort, there are no limitations to my desires, since their fulfillment is a matter of opportunities offered by certain market situations, and not dependent on my own capacities« (Ibid., p. 97).

In an almost prophetic tone, Fromm anticipates the degrading moral condition that prevails nowadays, especially in the periphery of capitalism, like in Brazil. Besides that, he explains that the pleasure of property, independently of production and the search for profit, is one of the key aspects of the character of the middle and upper middle classes. The social character of the 19th century

is an assemblage between rational and irrational authority. It is an essentially hierarchical character, although not living in a feudal society, which was based on the divine law and tradition. Hierarchy sets itself by the possession of capital. Fromm's refined interpretation of the conflict between capital and labor lies on an even more important level than the struggle between classes and for the participation of the social production. It is the conflict between principles of valuation, that is, »between the world of things, and their amassment, and the world of life and its productivity« (Fromm 1955a, p. 101).

I will now keep on following Fromm's path by reconstructing the main changes on the moral and psychological level, in the capitalist society of the 20th century, as well as their effects on the individual experience (cf. Kühn 2017). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most flagrant change is technical. The inventions of the steam machine, the combustion engine, electricity as well as nuclear energy were landmarks. Alongside these, the relevance of the internal market also increased. Every economic organization relies on the principle of mass production and consumption. This process leads to what Fromm calls the »miracle of production« and the »miracle of consumption.« Now, we are human beings who control stronger forces never seen, which are more powerful than nature ever offered. Theoretically, there are no traditional barriers, which restricted someone to buy what he or she wanted. Everything is reachable, can be bought and consumed.

Faced by this alarming picture, Fromm poses a fundamental question: what type of people does the actual society need? What is the adequate social character of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? His answer suggests a deep reinterpretation of the capitalist culture. Now, the capitalism needs people who cooperate in large groups without greater resistance, who consume more and more, and whose tastes are standardized, predictable and easily influenced. It also requires that individuals feel free and independent, that they do not perceive their subjection to any authority, principle or consciousness, but desire to be commanded or simply to do what is expected, longing to adapt without adding any tensions to the social order (Fromm 1955a, p. 115)

Fromm adds a psychological dimension to Marx's concept of alienation, which is the guideline to his analysis. He initiates by pointing out two main characteristics of capitalism: quantification and abstraction. The transformation of »concrete« values into »abstract« developed itself beyond the mere economic incidents in the production system. The modern business man deals not only with millions of dollars, but also with millions of clients, thousands of shareholders, thousands of workers and employees in the office. All these people are a piece of the gigantic machine, which must be controlled. Its effects must also be calculated. Under such circumstances, each person is represented

by an abstract entity, cipher, and on such a database, economic risks and incidents can be calculated, tendencies can be predicted and decisions are made (*ibid.*, p. 116).

In this scenario, the separation between proprietors and directors of big corporations, which already operated in the 19th century, becomes intensified. Workers are hired by institutions, in which directors are impersonal parts of the corporation and have no personal contact with those who hire them. The only one in contact with the product of a corporation (or a section) in its totality is the director. Nevertheless, the director's point of view confirms the product as an abstraction and its essence is its exchange value (*ibid.*, p. 117). In this sense, the contemporary culture privileged its reference almost exclusively to the abstract qualities of people and things. People are now evaluated as incarnations of a quantitative exchange value. This abstraction process has deep roots in the origins of modern age, that is, the dissolution of a qualitative framework linked to the process of life.

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nature and society still preserved their concrete and precise character. The natural and social worlds were manageable, and had defined contours. On the other hand, the proportions with which we deal today are ciphers and abstractions. They stand beyond the limits of concrete experience. There is neither a manageable nor an observable structure of reference that is properly adaptable to human dimensions. While our eyes and ears receive impressions, which are based on human dimensions, our concept of the world has lost this particular quality and no longer corresponds to our own human dimensions. Science, politics and business lost all their humanly understandable foundations and proportions. For the reason nothing is concrete anymore, anything is possible, factually and morally. Indeed humanity was ripped off its defined position where it can manage and dominate its own life. We are now rapidly dragged by forces, which we created (Fromm 1955a, p. 124).

This explanation paves our way to understanding Fromm's concept of alienation. It alludes to the central question about the profound effects of contemporary capitalism on the personality. He understands alienation as an experience modus in which the individual feels as a stranger, alienated from himself or herself. The person does not feel as the center of its own world, creator of its own actions. The individual obeys and even adores his or her own masters. The alienated person is not in touch with the self and with other people (*ibid.*, p. 124). The person mainly motivated by its thrust of power and money does not understand his or her human greatness and limitations, but becomes a slave of an inner partial impulse, which projects on external objectives. In Fromm's standpoint the common quality of various human phenomena—like the adoration of idols, the idolatry of God, adoration of a politician, of the estate, or

the cult of the exteriorization of irrational passions—is the phenomenon of alienation (ibid., p. 127).

In such a framework, Fromm attributes an interesting role to the corporate directors in the alienation process of contemporary capitalist culture. It is true that they administrate the whole, not the part, but they are also alienated from their product as something concrete and useful. Their task consists of the profitable allocation of the capital invested by the shareholders. It is symptomatic that executives, who manage people and sales, acquire an increasingly important role in capitalism<sup>1</sup>. Managers, and also workers, deal with gigantic impersonal procedures: the giant competitive corporation, the humongous internal and world market, the giant consumer public, which needs to be incited and administrated, giant unions, with a giant government. All those giants are alive and determine the role of the executives in the corporation (ibid., p. 129).

It is no coincidence that Erich Fromm identified the centrality of the director's role in the reproduction of the alienated capitalist culture. The manager's role illuminates one of the most significant phenomena of this culture, that is, the process of bureaucratization. Both big business and the government operate through a bureaucracy. Bureaucrats are the specialists in administrating things and people. Due to the large scale of the organization to be administrated and its consequent abstraction, the interaction between bureaucrats and their public is totally alienated. This explains how a manager can be so cold hearted in dismissing, at once, millions of people with just a single signature. Subjected to the administration, the individual becomes objectified. Its management involves neither love nor hate; it is impersonal. Managers and bureaucrats must not feel anything for their professional activity; they must manipulate the people as if they were ciphers and objects. They are an essential component of the corporation: without them it would collapse, because nobody would know the secret that keeps it operating (ibid., p. 129).

The validity of this analysis is confirmed by the fact that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relevance of big businesses became increasingly bigger in its normative significance to our culture. At this stage, Erich Fromm recurs to Peter Drucker's writings, the well-known corporate guru. For the latter, corporations grow as determining institutions of lives, even for those who do not directly participate of their activities (Fromm 1955a, p. 131). As a consequence, the owners of these big corporations entertain an alienated relationship with them. Their property consists in a sheet of paper, which represents a certain monetary quantity. They are not at all impelled to maintain a concrete relationship with them.

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1 I am currently developing an empirical research with executives in Brazil that confirms Erich Fromm's arguments.

The example of corporate managers permits us to understand some of the basic aspects of Fromm's basic theses. He highlights that, in contrast to the majority of the societies in which social rules are based on tradition and political power, capitalism does not make its rules explicit. Capitalist societies root their principles on the fact that the struggle of each individual for their own interests on the market will result in the common good, and the consequence will be order and not anarchy. This alienating process leads to the loss of general social bonds, which characterized medieval and pre-capitalist societies (ibid., p. 141).

The »alienated personality,« which puts itself on sale in the market of personalities, must necessarily lose a good deal of the sense of dignity that was so characteristic in pre-capitalist cultures. It ends by losing of all »sense of self, of himself as a unique and induplicable entity.« The feeling of being one's self must be aroused by being the subject of one's own experience as well as one's own judgments, thoughts, feelings, decisions and actions. It presupposes that the experience is exclusively individual and not alienated. So long things do not possess a self. »*Things* have no self and men who have become things can have no self« (Fromm 1955a, p. 144).

To conclude, Fromm articulates the relationship between the alienated social character, fabricated by the capitalist culture, and problems of meritocracy and suicide. For him, the modern individual faces a new challenge: to ponder on which life is worth living. As an outcome, it deals with the possibility that life might be a failure or a success. Those ideas base themselves on a concept of life as an enterprise, which must enable the accumulation of some profit. In this sense, life is thought to be the bankruptcy of a business, in which losses exceed the gains (ibid., p. 150). The interpretation of life as commercial enterprise is one of the pillars of the increasing suicide rates in contemporary Western societies.

## Conclusion

Under the influence of contemporary authors like Axel Honneth (2015), Boltanski & Chiapello (2009) and Richard Sennett (2006), we can notice the value and significance of Erich Fromm's writings. These authors belong to a previous generation that tried to explain the main shifts of capitalism since the 1970's. They basically elected normative and cultural factors. A good portion of what Erich Fromm and other immensely significant sociologists like Wright Mills (1951) remarked was updated by this new generation.

For example, the idea of alienated social character, as described above, can be an important instrument to analyze the »flexible capitalism« described by

Richard Sennett (2006) as well as the »third spirit of capitalism« by Boltanski & Chiapello (2009), and the »new capitalism« highlighted by Sennett (2006) and Honneth (2015). In reality, all these perspectives are unfolding the cultural aspects of capitalism, which are, in great deal, seen in Fromm's writings. By the way, the idea of an alienated social character serves as a fundamental base for the comprehension of a certain »corporate *habitus*,« set as a norm and as an expectation nowadays in big corporations.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to all promise of happiness, recognition and plenitude in the present corporate world, which presents itself as a moral avant-garde of the capitalist culture, the corporate *habitus* suggests exactly what was described by Fromm: total sacrifice to the labor system, incessant search and sublimation of all needs of consumption. It is also worth mentioning the loss of idle time and of the meaning of life. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2009) put it, the work executed by the main managers and executives, that is, the conscious making and reproduction of a class domination, which is even more invisible and oblique than in previous periods, is demonstrated in the comparison between the decades 1960s and the 1990s.

We may conclude that Erich Fromm is responsible for a deep critique on the capitalist culture, an understanding of it as the production of human suffering shaped by a deep malaise. The contributions of the theorists of the »new capitalism« like Richard Sennett (2006), Boltanski and Chiapello (2009) and Axel Honneth (2015) resemble those made by Fromm a lot. The main example in Sennett's analysis is the farce of teamwork as well as the »new spirit of capitalism,« which corresponds to the effort in covering social domination. Axel Honneth (2015) tried to show how the present »market morality,« through pathological forms of interaction, do not allow us to reach social freedom, which is seen as an inescapable need of modern individuals. In an unconscious or conscious manner, these authors advance the inestimable contribution of Erich Fromm's critique in an effort to enhance the critical capacity of our own experience beyond the imprisonment of alienation.

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2 I am developing the idea of corporate *habitus* based on the empirical research mentioned above, with various managers of various levels in Brazil. A relevant aspect of this *habitus* corresponds to the lifestyle and the »abilities« found in the middle classes and the elites, like the ability to »give orders« and to be a »leader.«

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## **Psychoanalysis, Persecution and the Holocaust: Erich Fromm's Life and Work during the 1930s**

**Roger Frie**



**Abstract:** Erich Fromm's life during the 1930s, his confrontation with Nazism and his family's experience of the Holocaust is explored. The impact of this period on his writing, especially *Escape from Freedom* is considered. The current political situation, in which anti-Semitism has increased and minorities are persecuted makes the examination of Fromm's experience of persecution and exile especially relevant. The author uses his own German family history and his discovery of his grandfather's Nazi past to examine the importance of Fromm's analysis of authoritarian tendencies in Germany in the early 1930s.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, Anti-Semitism, trauma, Nazism, Holocaust, authoritarian.

Contemporary psychoanalysis is increasingly concerned with the social and cultural contexts of experience. The so-called sociocultural turn is seen by many as an attempt to respond to the dramatic political events of our time. But as anyone versed in the writings of Erich Fromm knows, the intersection of the social and the psyche is hardly new. It was during his affiliation with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s that Fromm first studied the formative impact of society on human experience and bridged the gap between social research, sociopolitical commentary and psychoanalysis.

The period of the 1930s proved to be richly generative for Fromm, but it was also a time of political and personal trauma. After the Nazi regime was elected to power in March 1933, Fromm fled Germany for New York. In the following years, the rapid increase in anti-Jewish legislation and Germany's

belligerent actions towards its neighbors presaged the Second World War and the Holocaust. Fromm reached safety in 1934 but was consumed with worry about his family members. Given Fromm's emphasis on the formative role of social forces, I want to consider how his own life and scholarship reflects this turbulent and painful period. This seems to me an important, if underdeveloped area of inquiry. Indeed, I think it is worth reflecting on why relatively little has been written about this important chapter in Fromm's life.

Part of the difficulty for any of us who seek to write about Fromm, the man, is that he was by all accounts an intensely private person who kept his own experiences firmly in the background. My plan is not to engage in biography *per se*, but to examine the historical facts as we know them.<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of a larger, ongoing project and will necessarily be limited in scope (see also Frie 2014). My discussion will begin with Fromm's arrival in Berlin in 1928 and end with his publication of *Escape from Freedom* in 1941.

### **Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute to the Frankfurt School**

It is easy to overlook just how central the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute was to the growth of the analytic profession during the 1920s. It was arguably the leading Institute of the time and strongly allied with left-wing thinking. Certain of its analysts identified as Marxists and believed that the revolutionary ideas of psychoanalysis went hand in hand with a socialist critique of bourgeois society. One might even describe the outlook of the Institute as a reflection of the city itself. By the late 1920s Berlin had become the center of Weimar Germany's progressive and experimental culture. It was a hotbed of learning and the arts and known for its heady mix of utopian and emancipatory ideals. It's no wonder that psychoanalysis thrived there! Fromm arrived in Berlin in 1928. This was Berlin before the onset of the Nazis, before Goebbels and his Brownshirts could impose their racist ideology at will. But the National Socialists were becoming more visible and pitched battles with the communists, together with the growth of a Nazi-inspired, virulent anti-Semitism portended an ominous future.

In the midst of these turbulent political forces, Fromm was deeply engaged in his psychoanalytic training. His academic background in sociology enabled him to comment on the events around him and in 1928 he presented a paper on »Psychoanalysis of the Petty Bourgeoisie.« Fromm completed his training analysis with Hans Sachs in 1929 and was certified by the German Psycho-

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1 I want acknowledge my debt to Rainer Funk, who kindly shared two articles he wrote on the topic in the early 2000s.

analytic Association (DPG) in 1930 (Schröter 2015). In 1929 he also gave a lecture in Frankfurt on »Psychoanalysis and Sociology« (Fromm 1929a), which was a preliminary attempt to create a convergence between Freud and Marx. His work brought him to the attention of the director of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, Max Horkheimer, who invited to join the Institute. By the early 1930s Fromm was thus on his way to establishing a career that combined social analysis with psychoanalytic practice.

Over the following years and under the auspices of the Institute, Fromm wrote a series of important papers outlining many of the ideas for which he is known today. Fromm sought to show how people are shaped by socio-economic class, religion and ideology and that these social forces result in »socially necessary character types.« He was particularly interested in demonstrating how society produces persons who are adapted to specific roles, with the result, as Fromm famously put it, that individuals want to act as they have to act.

Fromm's aim was to elucidate the specific historical, sociological and economic conditions of a person's life. Among his noteworthy early works is his study of the character structure of the German working class during the late Weimar Republic (Fromm 1980a), which revealed pro-Fascist tendencies among workers who were presumed to be solidly against authoritarianism. Based on a series of questionnaires, Fromm and his team concluded that only a small percentage of workers actually demonstrated clear anti-authoritarian beliefs. His study provided a means to understand the collapse of German workers' parties during the rise of Nazism, and foreshadowed Fromm's later work on the authoritarian character in *Escape from Freedom*. But it also became a thorn in Fromm's relationship with the Frankfurt School. In fact, Horkheimer refused to publish it, believing its conclusions lacked validity.

Fromm pressed on, regardless, and developed an interpersonal approach that took him far from his Freudian beginnings. By the late 1930s Fromm had come to believe that the person is a fundamentally social being, by which he meant that society was always at work in the individual. As he states in »Man's impulse structure and its relation to culture,« a little-known paper from 1937: »Society and the individual are not opposite to each other. Society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual exists only as a social human being« (Fromm 1992e, p. 58). Fromm challenged Freud's account of the social realm and took him to task for asserting the universality of his intrapsychic model. Needless to say, none of this sat well with Horkheimer or Fromm's growing nemesis, Theodore Adorno, who cast aspersions on Fromm, labelling him in private as a »sentimental social democrat« (Friedman 2013, p. 61). Among the German radical left, these were fighting words indeed.

## Persecution, Exile and Terror

Even after so many decades, Fromm's short-lived tenure with the Frankfurt school has held our attention. Fromm's association with the Frankfurt school took place amidst a seemingly unending string of tumultuous events, from the rise of Nazism and election of Hitler, to the spread of anti-Semitic persecution and the hostile expansion of Nazi Germany into neighboring countries, all leading to the start of World War II in September 1939. To describe these years as turbulent and threatening is an understatement.

And yet, a cursory scan of Fromm's writings and major secondary works that cover this period suggests that Fromm's personal experience remains firmly in the background, unspoken and rarely articulated. This is no doubt a reflection of the fact that Fromm steadfastly separated his personal life from his scholarly work. This might also explain Lawrence Friedman's account of Fromm's departure from Germany in 1934, which is summed up in a few brief sentences:

»Perhaps because his immigration had not been particularly onerous Fromm never elected to characterize himself as a refugee from Hitler's Germany, even though his return was precluded at least until the end of Nazi rule. Even so, and despite having to leave behind many of his books and possessions, Fromm considered his move to America his own choice rather than the result of an immediate threat to his survival.« (Friedman 2013, p. 68.)

These sentences give pause. It is hard to imagine Fromm would ever have »chosen« to leave his country, culture and language behind, were it not for the rise of the Nazis. Nor is there any mention of his separation from family, friends and colleagues. We know that immigration under any circumstance is difficult, even painful. Being forced to leave one's country for political reasons, going into exile or escaping with one's life, involves enormous loss. Immigration to another country may provide a sense of safety, but it is also accompanied by betrayal and grief; a life that was once taken for granted has been forcibly taken away by the country of one's birth.

To illustrate what emigration could be like for many German Jews, I want to draw from the experience of the Israeli psychoanalyst, Chezzi Cohen (see Frie 2017, p. 121). Born in Germany in 1932, Cohen has shared with me his experience of his family's departure for Palestine in 1938. Cohen's parents had briefly visited Palestine in the knowledge they might one day have to leave. Yet like so many others, they did not think they would actually be forced to flee the country in which they had been born and for which they fought in the First

World War. When the time finally came Cohen was only six years old. He has a single, searing memory of their departure that is as painful now as when he first experienced it. The memory is of his father breaking down and crying on the train platform as they waited to board. An unknown future awaited, colored by the uncertainty of when they would next see their loved ones.

In 1934 Fromm could not know what the future would hold, but he clearly knew enough to understand that he should leave. Anti-Jewish legislation was increasing at an alarming rate. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws disenfranchised German Jews and prohibited them from participating in most sectors of society and government. The massive destruction of synagogues, business and homes throughout Germany and Austria during the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9, 1938, along with the degradation and deportation of 340 Jewish men to Buchenwald, was a final turning point (see Frie 2018). In the years that followed the Nazis' initial support for Jewish emigration was turned into a policy of mass deportation and murder. Most Germans greeted the legislated disappearance of their neighbors with a sense of disinterest, if not active support. Under the Nazis, the latent anti-Semitism of the 1920s had become a vicious, persecutory outlook that made life for German Jews precarious and threatening.

And what of Fromm's relatives?<sup>2</sup> Fromm's father, who came from a small family, died of a heart attack in late 1933, having witnessed Hitler's rise to power. His father's younger brother immigrated to the United States while Fromm's cousin and life-long friend, Gertrud Hunziker-Fromm left for Switzerland. His mother, Rosa, came from a large family of five children. She had initially chosen to stay behind in Frankfurt, but after Kristallnacht, Rosa recognized the urgency of her situation. Fromm obtained a monetary loan to pay the high fee required by the Nazis in order for Rosa to be able to leave Germany. She spent the next 18 months in England. Before Rosa was able to join her son in New York in 1941, Fromm was required to pay another hefty fee, this time to the US authorities; their policy for admitting German Jews had become harshly selective, particularly with the increase in American anti-Semitism.

Some of Rosa's family members managed to leave in time and settled in countries far and wide. However, two of her siblings remained in Germany, which sealed their fate. Fromm's aunt and her husband, Sophie and David Englaender, were deported and killed in Theresienstadt, while his uncle, Martin Krause and his wife, Johanna, were deported to a ghetto and then to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. Fromm's cousins and second-cousins who did not flee in time were persecuted or pursued. Some perished and others

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2 I am drawing here chiefly on earlier work carried out by Friedman 2013, and on Funk 2005 and 2009.

committed suicide. One second cousin, Heinz Brandt, miraculously survived despite the odds. He was imprisoned in 1934 for his communist affiliation and subsequently endured two years at Auschwitz and the infamous death march to Buchenwald late in the war. His survival over ten years of imprisonment was a rare exception to the tragic norm.

Throughout the years leading up to, and especially after Kristallnacht, Fromm was involved in an intense and urgent campaign to save those whose lives were in peril. Fromm was one of the few emigres to have an established income, and was asked to come to the aid of family and friends. He also sought to rescue Jewish political activists, intellectuals and religious leaders in Germany and beyond.

### **Escape from Freedom and the Specter of anti-Semitism**

Fromm carried out his scholarship and psychoanalytic practice against the background of these unfolding personal tragedies. It is hard to imagine how he was able to manage it. Much of his focus in the late 1930s was directed towards developing his book, *Escape from Freedom*, which had a long gestation period. It was written in the years directly after Kristallnacht, when fears about Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews and its threats toward European neighbors were turning into reality.

Working on *Escape from Freedom* became a means of responding to events in Germany by using the familiar intellectual medium of analysis and explanation. But when we reflect on Fromm's experiences at the time, it is hard to conceive of the book only as an intellectual exercise. And indeed, Fromm was one of very few, and perhaps the only European Jewish psychoanalyst to publicly confront the rise of Nazism in Germany while it was still unfolding.

*Escape from Freedom* was published just before America's entry into the war in December 1941, and proceeds by way of a grand and sweeping historical narrative. The timely and accessible nature of the book helps explain its popularity. According to Fromm, modern European society created the conditions for the emergence of autonomous and rational individuals, but it also created a deep-rooted sense of alienation and isolation. This meant that individuals were faced with a choice: engage productively with other human beings and garner the benefits of society or escape a sense of fear and loneliness by submitting to a greater authority.

Turning his lens to Nazi Germany, Fromm located this tension within the German lower middle classes, which he felt were particularly susceptible to the appeal of Nazism. Fromm's overwhelming focus on social class, rather than on, say, the German national character, or racist ideology, reveals his grounding in

Marxist thought. But as it turns out, this was also a weakness because we know today that Nazism appealed to all social classes and support for Hitler was present throughout Germany. While Fromm's assessment of the German lower middle class may have been overly hasty, his broader conclusions are applicable.

At this point it seems appropriate, if admittedly unusual, to share some of my own family background related to this topic. My interest in Fromm began when I was a university student. *Escape from Freedom* had a personal resonance for me. Although I grew up in Canada, I am the son of Germans who were born in 1935, and the grandson of Germans who were active in World War II. I always struggled to make sense of the dark history that preceded me. Like many grandchildren of the generation of perpetrators and bystanders, I knew relatively few details about my grandparents' beliefs and actions. Fromm's analysis helped me to understand some of the social and psychological dynamics at work that spurred the rise of Nazism and the Third Reich. I often wondered how Fromm's arguments might apply to my own family members, but by the time I read *Escape from Freedom*, my grandparents had already died and I was unable to ask. In fact, in my family, as in many other post-war West German families, direct questions about the Third Reich were generally avoided. I lived with a half-known family history, in which knowledge about the past was governed by what was said and what remain unsaid, by what was known and what remained, crucially, unknown.

On a visit with family members in Germany some years ago I discovered an unfamiliar photograph of my young grandfather in uniform (see Frie 2017). The photograph revealed an unspoken family history that had been silenced by the inherited guilt and shame of my parents' generation. My grandfather, it turned out, had been a Nazi party member and joined the rank and file of the regime. While there is no evidence to suggest that he was ever involved in crimes of genocide, it is clear that he lent his support to Hitler. After further research, I learned that he applied to become a member of the Nazi party in 1936 and was accepted into the party in 1937. He was also a participant in the National Socialist Motor Corp (NSKK), a paramilitary organization concerned with the operation of cars and motorcycles. Though the NSKK was initially perceived in postwar West Germany as an apolitical organization that was devoted only to the maintenance of motorcycles and automobiles, subsequent historical research (Hochstetter 2005) has established that the apparently innocuous »car club« was in fact a paramilitary group whose members had to be »one-hundred percent a Nazi and one-hundred percent an anti-Semite« (p. 415). My grandfather, in other words, was a sympathetic enabler of the Nazi regime and a facilitator of the war effort. His complicity haunts me, and the silence in my family about this history shames me.

My grandfather was an artist and artisan who spent much of the 1920s and early 1930s living in Berlin. He would have lived there at the same time as Fromm. After visiting various German archives, I also learned that my grandfather had been involved in left-wing causes while in Berlin, something I also did not know, and that he evidently had a communist affiliation. After Hitler came to power, my grandfather changed his political allegiance, swinging from left to right, lending credence to Fromm's analysis of German workers (Fromm 1980a). Like so many others, my grandfather seems to have looked to authoritarianism to lessen economic and psychological uncertainties, especially after the devastating effect of the First World War on his own father and his family's livelihood.

There is much that remains unknown about my grandfather's motivations, particularly the question of whether he may have endorsed the hateful policies and anti-Semitism espoused by the Nazis. As we know, the Nazi worldview was grounded in a pernicious racial ideology. While Fromm helps us to understand why someone like my grandfather may have joined the Nazi Party, he does not explain why anti-Semitism became such a powerful force in Germany. In fact, there is no explicit discussion of anti-Semitism in *Escape from Freedom* and the personal traumas out of which the book emerged remain hidden. The theme of anti-Semitism was similarly absent in the questionnaires that made up Fromm's study of German workers' attitudes in the early 1930s. Nor to my knowledge is the subject discussed in any of Fromm's other papers from this period. How might this be explained?

Looking back we find that it was not Fromm who tackled the subject, but arguably his closest professional colleague at the time, Harry Stack Sullivan. In 1938, Sullivan published an important paper on anti-Semitism. Is this coincidental? I don't think so. In fact, and at risk of engaging in speculation, I think Fromm's hesitancy to write about anti-Semitism, which he would have known and experienced growing up in Germany, was linked to two factors: first, to his tenuous personal relationship with Judaism, given that he embraced a secular identity when he was in his early twenties; and second, to his status as a recently arrived émigré in the United States, where anti-Semitism was powerfully ascendant throughout the 1930s. Above all, being identified as a Jewish writer who wrote about anti-Semitism could have meant becoming a target of prejudice, precisely the reason he left Germany.

We can justifiably ask whether it was because Sullivan was not Jewish that he could more easily engage the subject. To be sure, Sullivan struggled with societal prejudices in other ways. As a closeted gay man he was careful to hide his sexual orientation from public view at a time when homophobia was rampant. Thus, while Sullivan wrote papers on anti-Semitism and racism towards African-Americans, he never wrote explicitly about homophobia or its

pernicious effects. In a similar sense, Fromm engaged the nature of authoritarianism but he did not discuss the virulent anti-Semitic attitudes that led to his own exile or the murder of his family members.

## Conclusion

*Escape from Freedom* was published in 1941 but the war would rage on for another four years, during which reports of the bloodshed and the unfolding horrors of the Holocaust were a daily reminder of human destructiveness and tragedy. During the deportations of the German Jewish community from 1941 to 1943, the letter writing campaign between Fromm and his far-flung family members increased exponentially. Yet beyond the rescue of his mother, and despite his efforts, Fromm was unable to help his aunt and or his uncle.

It may be tempting to conclude that *Escape from Freedom* is a kind of intellectualization of Fromm's own experiences in Germany. But this would surely be hubris. After all, how do we find words for that which so often defies expression and articulation? In fact, it would take many years before discussion of the Holocaust and its traumatic effects became an accepted topic of collective reflection and memorialization. I think it is more likely that Fromm's painful experiences strengthened his belief in the need for moral awareness and political activism, ideas that were already present in his work before the Nazi reign of terror, but that really took hold in the decades to come.

Looking back, what is remarkable to me is that Fromm actually confronted the Nazi past and the political realities in which he lived, rather than remain silent. *Escape from Freedom* remains relevant in other ways too. Fromm's account of the appeal of authoritarianism, especially in times of uncertainty, helps explain the current attraction of right-wing populism. The destructiveness that Fromm says can follow from deep-rooted anxiety evokes current political trends. The social isolation and powerlessness of many economic groups in the face of neoliberal policies and globalism has given rise to leaders and movements who are eager to harness anxiety and secure support for their right-wing and racist agendas.

Fromm has helped us to understand the extent to which we are inalterably shaped by our surroundings. But how do we respond, as individuals and as clinicians, to the politically and socially troubled times in which we live? What can we learn from the historical traumas that precede us? What role does our own history play in this process? As psychoanalysts we need to be socially and politically aware and sensitive to effects of overt prejudice and racism in this time of heightened uncertainty. Fromm, the writer, has much to teach us; and

Fromm's personal experience of persecution, exile and terror illustrates the extent to which each of us is prey to social and political upheavals. It seems to me that the feminist assertion, »the personal is political,« was never more pertinent than it is today.

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## II

## **Alienation and Creativity in the Sphere of Work**

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### **Toward a Humanization and Democratization of Work: References of Work, Organizational, and Economic Psychology to Erich Fromm's Concepts**

**Wolfgang G. Weber**



**Abstract:** Concepts from Self-Determination theory are related to Fromm's conceptualizations of existential human needs and human strengths. Empirical findings seem to support Fromm (1955a) in stating that socio-economic environments which embody particular values will influence psychological well-being, health and social relations of consumers. Further, empirical studies on effects of working in democratic enterprises and experiencing a sociomoral work climate upon employees' attitudes and behaviors will be presented. All in all, the findings support Fromm's vision of a humanization and democratization of work.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, existential human needs, productive orientation, ethical work climate, organizational democracy.

## 1. Introduction

Fromm's concepts, often further-developed by representatives of analytical social psychology, are of great importance for contemporary scientific work and organizational (w&o) psychology and for economic psychology—and vice versa. Unfortunately, a lot of w&o psychological as well as economic psychological research seems to be driven more by profit seeking, improved performance, and retention of power (consequently dominating and instrumentalizing human potentials) than by promoting working persons' personality and supporting the development of sane societies based on democratic and humanistic planning of the economy (see the criticism by Groskurth & Volpert 1975 and also more recent analyses by Bal & Doci 2018; Weber & Huter 2015). Thus, relevant concepts and empirical findings of analytical social psychology in the tradition of Erich Fromm are often neglected in w&o and economic psychology.

Against this background, in the following, I will argue that concepts from analytical social psychology can help researchers and practitioners to transcend the economicistic, instrumental restriction in w&o and economic psychology.

## 2. Relations between Erich Fromm's social philosophical and social psychological concepts and concepts from work, organizational, and economical psychology

### a) A snapshot: References within academic mainstream w&o and economic psychology

A »quick & dirty« superficial PsycINFO databank search (June 7, 2018), restricted to publications within w&o and economic psychology in which »Erich Fromm« was quoted, provided only a moderate result:

- ▶ *Man for Himself* (Fromm 1947a) was cited in 52 publications by other authors but only two publications were classified under w&o psychology
- ▶ *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1955a) was cited in 13 publications, none of them was filed under w&o psychology
- ▶ *The Revolution of Hope* (Fromm 1968a) was cited in 11 publications, two of them were assigned to w&o psychology
- ▶ *To Have or To Be?* (Fromm 1976a) was cited in about 500 publications, only four of them were allocated to w&o or economic psychology

By the way, while B. F. Skinner's book *Science and Human Behavior* (1953, 1965) is cited 1948 times in the internationally highly appreciated PsycINFO database, I found only *seven* citations of *The Art of Loving* (Fromm 1956a) in

PsycINFO. This meager finding tells us much about the Zeitgeist, and, maybe, a little bit about the ethical state of mind of contemporary academic psychology and its databases.

Not to forget: I found only 3719 citations of the millennium edition of *The Art of Loving* in the Google Scholar database.

**b) Not far away from Fromm's social psychology:  
Self-Determination Theory**

Erich Fromm's conceptualizations of *existential human needs* (Fromm 1955a, 1968a, 1973a) and of the two orientations concerning »To Have« and »To Be« (Fromm 1976a) have met with a positive response within the Theory of Self-Determination as an influential stream in contemporary psychology including social, organizational and economic psychology. Both approaches investigate which living and working conditions are adequate to support persons in their psychological and social growth.

From the conditions of human existence Fromm construed a conceptualization of existential human needs whose satisfaction is important for personal growth. Depending on socio-economic life circumstances, socialization agencies, life experiences, and individual action strategies, persons' existential needs will develop in a more productive or a more non-productive way. Erich Fromm (1955a, 1968a, 1973a) characterizes the productive mode of these fundamental human needs as follows:

1. *Relatedness through love and need for unity*
2. Experiencing transcendence through creativity
3. Rootedness through sister-/brotherhood
4. Sense of identity
5. Frame of orientation and object of devotion
6. Effectance
7. Stimulation

Self-Determination Theory (abbrev.: SDT) postulates the following *basic human needs* (Deci & Ryan 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser 2001; the arrows symbolize in how far they can be related to Fromm's conceptualization of existential needs):

- Need for *autonomy*: The striving for having a choice, to act through one's own volition, experiencing one's actions as self-chosen and self-endorsed, or »feeling like you are the cause of your own actions rather than feeling that external forces are the cause of your actions« (Sheldon et al. 2001, p. 339)  
→ no clear counterpart within Fromm's existential needs.

- ▶ Need for *competence*: It is »a propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it« (Deci & Ryan 2000, p. 231), to explore one's surroundings, to learn things for its own sake, or to experience a »feeling that you are very capable and effective in your actions« (Sheldon et al. 2001)
  - Transcendence through creativity (Fromm 1955a)
  - Effectance (Fromm 1973a)
  - Sense of identity (Fromm 1955a)
- ▶ Need for *relatedness*: The need to be connected to others, i.e., to love and care and to be loved and cared for and, moreover, to be effective in the social world or the need for »feeling that you have regular intimate contact with people who care about you rather than feeling lonely and uncared for« (sensu Sheldon et al. 2001, p. 339)
  - Relatedness through love (Fromm 1955a)
  - Rootedness (Fromm 1973a)
- ▶ Still there is a theoretical discussion within SDT on a fourth basic need, namely the *need for self-esteem* (Sheldon et al. 2001), the need for feeling oneself as a worthy person who has many positive qualities
  - Sense of identity (Fromm 1955a)

The majority of the respective needs in both approaches is corresponding to a considerable extent. Thus, research findings gained by representatives of SDT, to a certain (methodologically limited) extent, may contribute to an empirical validation of Fromm's need conceptualization.

Overall, research indicates that a frequent satisfaction of the basic needs is positively associated with several indicators of psychological wellbeing and health (for research reviews see Deci & Ryan 2000; Ryan, Huta, & Deci 2008). In contrast, ongoing deprivation of those needs during childhood and youth seems to result in compensatory motives that are clearly associated with a *having* mode of existence (Fromm 1976a) or with extrinsic aspirations, in the terms of SDT. Here, the socio-economic system and living conditions influence the possibilities for people to satisfy their basic needs and to develop and aspire specific values (see also Funk 2017). Further, basic need deprivation is related to a variety of mental health problems (e.g. a-motivation, problems of self-esteem, anti-social behaviors). Thus, clear parallels from SDT to Fromm's (1973a) thinking exist that human destructiveness may result from a continuing frustration of existential human needs.

In the following I will focus upon a further theoretical parallel that refers to w&o and economic psychology: Fromm's treatise on good living in »To Have or To Be?« and the conceptualizations of Eudaimonia vs. Hedonia and intrinsic vs. extrinsic

life aspirations in SDT refer to the same roots, namely Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. Correspondingly, main representatives of SDT refer to Fromm (1976).

The *Eudaimonia* way of living (according Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics), according to SDT, encompasses, for example, valuing reflectivity and self-reflectivity, sense of meaning, personal growth, vitality, affiliation and intimacy, fairness in communication and interactions, generativity as well as contributing to one's community (Ryan, Huta, & Deci 2008). Here, *intrinsic aspirations* are oriented toward an *Eudaimonia* way of living and, in this case, persons strive for actions that realize those values mentioned by Fromm (cf. the *being* mode of existence) as well as Ryan and his colleagues, namely self-acceptance (e.g., personal growth and choice), affiliation (e.g., intimacy, close relationships), community feeling (e.g., helping the world be a better place), physical fitness (e.g., being healthy). In contrast, people pursuing *extrinsic aspirations* (or a *having* mode of existence sensu Fromm 1976a) strive for 1. wealth, financial success, material possessions, 2. appealing appearance, 3. social recognition and fame (Kasser & Ryan 1996; Ryan et al. 2008).

Why is this duality of life aspirations of specific significance for organizational and economic psychology?

It is because, firstly, characteristics of the socio-economic system influence which life orientation a person will follow to a great extent and, secondly, intrinsic vs. extrinsic aspirations and corresponding goal attainments have very different effects on psychological wellbeing, health, and social issues. Already in *The Sane Society* in 1955, Fromm has stated both hypotheses referring to the radical form of so called »free-market« capitalism. About four decades later, the research network of SDT began to study those hypotheses, empirically.

A research review on mostly quantitative studies by Ryan, Huta, and Deci (2008) suggests that individuals following *intrinsic aspirations* or gaining *intrinsic goal attainments* in labor, economy, and further life domains compared to individuals pursuing *extrinsic aspirations / goal attainments* tend to experience

- ▶ more self-actualization
- ▶ better psychological well-being
- ▶ greater self-esteem
- ▶ better friendship and romantic relations
- ▶ better subjective vitality
- ▶ lower depression or anxiety
- ▶ better physical health
- ▶ more responsible behavior toward the natural environment

Complimentarily, a further SDT research review by Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan (2007) on the »costs of American Corporate Capitalism« indicates that

*consumer materialistic or financial success values* (extrinsic aspirations) are significantly associated with

- ▶ less generous and prosocial behavior
- ▶ more anti-social activities
- ▶ lower empathy
- ▶ shorter, more conflictual and more mutually instrumentalized close relationships

Empirical studies suggest that satisfaction of the three basic human needs for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness mediated the associations between intrinsic/eudaimonian aspirations vs. extrinsic consumer-materialistic aspirations and psychological outcomes in several reported studies (Dittmar et al. 2014). An extensive meta-analysis of studies from different countries and cultures all over the world demonstrates relationships between extrinsic aspirations and several indicators of personal well-being (Dittmar et al. 2014). Materialist values and beliefs as an expression of extrinsic aspirations are associated significantly with

- ▶ subjective well-being (rho = -0.24; k = 34 studies, N = 13.479 persons)
- ▶ negative self-appraisals (rho = 0.32; k = 7 studies, N = 1.426 persons)
- ▶ depression (rho = 0.22; k = 22 studies, N = 8.651 persons)
- ▶ anxiety (rho = 0.19; k = 12 studies, N = 1.659 persons)
- ▶ compulsive buying (rho = 0.53; k = 26 studies, N = 9.792 persons)
- ▶ risky health behaviors (rho = 0.39; k = 8 studies, N = 2.730 persons)
- ▶ self-reported physical health (rho = -0.39; k = 14 studies, N = 12.549 persons).

Further, the meta-analysis revealed that cultural environments that emphasize materialistic *values* strengthen those effects. The reported findings seem to provide evidence for Fromm (1955a) stating that socio-economic environments that embody particular values and stimulate corresponding behaviors form a field of socialization for the consumers. A frequent exposure to materialistic consumer culture's ideologies and institutions may undermine the well-being of those who internalize that ideology despite their superficial conformity as »happy consumers.«

### **c) Ethical forms of organizational climate**

The question arises of which organizational principles and practices could business organizations use to support employees in satisfying and further de-

veloping their basic human needs in a *productive* manner—like the needs that Fromm (1955a, 1973a) has derived from the human condition. Of course, because business organizations will follow not only humanistic but also economic-instrumental goals in every society, their potential support for employees' personality development will be limited. Nevertheless, within w&o psychology, several conceptualizations of *ethical work climates* or *ethical organizational cultures* have been developed and investigated concerning their effects upon employees' well-being, attitudes, and behaviors (for research reviews see Ardichvili & Jondle 2009; Newman et al. 2017). Findings let us assume that specific features of an organizational climate are not only able to satisfy those existential *human needs* but they will also foster some of the *human virtues/strengths* that Fromm has conceptualized.

For example, in *The Revolution of Hope*, Fromm (1968a) has anticipated such an ethical work climate when conceptualizing his basis-democratic concept of direct participation groups as core constituent of societal, economic, and organizational democracy:

» It is essential for the possibility of a dialogue that each member of the group not only try to be less defensive and more open, but also that he try to understand what the other person means to say rather than the actual formulation he gives to his thought. In every fruitful dialogue, each participant must help the other to clarify his thought rather than to force him to defend formulations about which he may have his own doubts. Dialogue implies always mutual clarification. [...] Eventually, information and debate would remain sterile and impotent if the group did not have the right to make *decisions* and if these decisions were not translated into the real process of that social sector to which they belong.« (Fromm 1968a, pp. 110 f.)

As a sub-area of organizational climate, *the sociomoral atmosphere* or *climate* represents specific criteria of organizational and leadership principles and practices, in particular communication, teamwork, collective problem-solving, and decision-making (Pircher-Verdorfer et al. 2013; Weber et al. 2008). It forms a *field of socialization* for prosocial, civic, and democratic orientations as well as behaviors. In my view, these behavioral orientations are not identical but can be related to human virtues in the sense of Fromm's analytical social psychology. The concept of »moral atmosphere« was proposed by the U.S.-American research group around the moral psychologist and philosopher Lawrence Kohlberg in studying socialization processes in schools.

Five components constitute a socio-moral climate within a business enterprise or a large unit of a company concerning a standardized questionnaire that we developed to analyze the socio-moral climate (Weber et al. 2008). In the following, arrows mark those existential human needs that will be presumably stimulated through the respective climate component:

- (1) *Open but constructive confrontation of the workers with social problems, contradictions, and conflicts within and between interests, values, rules, and norms.*  
→ Relatedness (Fromm 1955a)  
→ Rootedness through fraternity (Fromm 1955a)  
→ Self-identity through individuality (Fromm 1955a)
- (2) *Reliable / constant appreciation, care, and support by supervisors and colleagues.*  
→ Relatedness (Fromm 1955a)
- (3) *Open and free communication and participative cooperation, also about the legitimacy and change of rules, norms, principles, and prevailing cultural values in the company.*
- (4) *Trust-based assignment and allocation of responsibility for the well-being of persons within and outside the company.*  
→ Relatedness (Fromm 1955a)
- (5) *Organizational respect for the individual.*  
→ Relatedness (Fromm 1955a)  
→ Rootedness through fraternity (Fromm 1955a)  
→ Self-identity through individuality (Fromm 1955a)

Meanwhile, several empirical studies from different countries conducted by our Innsbruck ODEM (Organizational Democracy) research group or cooperating research groups indicate that the more pronounced the components of the socio-moral climate within business companies appear, the stronger the respective employees demonstrate attitudes, value orientations, or behaviors that can be related to features of a *productive character orientation* or of a *being mode of existence*. This may be true for such *human strengths* like reason (in the sense of the enlightenment; not only »rationality«), autonomy, cosmopolitan interest, moral judgement, empathy, compassion, solidarity, fantasy, and creativity (Fromm 1968a, 1976a). Table 1 (see next page) summarizes the main findings of the five ODEM- or ODEM-related studies on effects of the socio moral climate.

TABLE 1. A pronounced socio-moral climate is significantly associated with...				
Psycholog. outcome	effectsize	N	country	study
Solidarity at work	eta2 = 0.102***	449	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013)
Prosocial work behavior	eta2 = 0.018*	449	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013)
Democratic engagement orientation	eta2 = 0.043***	362	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013)
Humanitarian-egalitarian ethics orientation	n. s.	362	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013)
Self-efficacy to promote justice in the world	n. s.	362	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013)
Civic orientations (composite of Solidarity, Prosocial behavior, Democratic engagement orient.)	$\beta_{std.} = 0.50^{***}$	285	I	Pircher-Verdorfer, Weber, et al. (2013)
Moral reasonning (consistency)	n. s.	285	I	Pircher-Verdorfer & Weber (2016)
Civic attitudes	$\beta_{std.} = 0.06^*$	1891	U.S.A	Wuestewald (2012)
Organizational cynism	$\beta_{std.} = -0.72^{***}$ $\beta_{std.} = -0.68^{***}$	259 171	U.S.A. D	Pircher-Verdorfer, Steinheider & Burkus (2015)
Meaning in work	$r = 0.47^{***}$ $\beta_{std.} = 0.45^{***}$	197 373	A A	Schnell, Höge & Pollet (2013) Höge & Weber (2018)
Emotional exhaustion	$\beta_{std.} = -0.20^{**}$	373	A	Höge & Weber (2018)

Note: A = Austria, D = Germany, I = Italy, \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

To summarize these empirical studies with reference to Fromm's theory, business organizations that practice leadership behaviors and communication practices that tend to satisfy their employees' needs for relatedness and rootedness in fraternalism (Fromm 1955a), allowing its employees to receive and to provide care, appreciation, consideration, and sharing of experiences and resources, are able to contribute to the development of their employees' productive orientation (including related human strengths) and to help to promote their psycho-social wellbeing.

However, those empirical studies all applied standardized questionnaire methods and are based on a cross-sectional research design. Therefore, longitudinal studies also using qualitative research methods are required to gain a clearer and more valid understanding of occupational and organizational socialization as well as selection effects concerning those phenomena.

**d) *Economic democracy, democratic enterprises, socialist humanism and humanistic planning***

Against the background of his position, that societal pathologies are inseparable from the »free market« form of capitalism and that a sane society requires a different socio-economical structure, Erich Fromm formulated his vision of *economic and industrial democracy* within a *communitarian socialism* (Fromm 1955a). Corresponding to the complexity and diversity of capitalistic economies, Fromm did not present a complete, »one size fits all« counter-model. Instead, he proposed different components of a democratization of the economy and its organizations in the long run. On the level of the society, Fromm (1955a and 1960b), refers to works of the utopian socialists (like Robert Owen, Charles Fourier), the Fabian Society, guild socialism, and early Karl Marx. Based on them, he draws a rough sketch of a communitarian or humanistic socialism.

Its basic ideas include that—more or less—all citizens should be allowed to participate in decisions about economic issues via their representatives on the national level as well as directly on the local level (e.g., via democratic community meetings; cf. Fromm 1968a). Further, social and ecological utility instead of the »free« (i.e. the corporation-driven as well as driven by manipulated solvent customers) market should guide the development of goods and services. Because of the terrible experiences with Stalinist communism, on the one hand, and the insight that a pure nationalization of corporations in western social democratic countries did not guarantee a democratic governance of these enterprises, Fromm strongly opposed the model of state socialism. Accordingly, in all of those different firms the employees and further stakeholders, as far as they are concerned through the business activity (like trade unions, consumer associations, the families of the employees), shall participate in important organizational decisions (Fromm 1955a, 1960b).

To illustrate organizational democracy, Fromm (1955a) referred to early systems of codetermination in Europe, in which representatives of the employees or of the unions were elected into the supervisory board or into the executive board of an enterprise. Given that the employees provide 50 percent of the board members at least (as Fromm proposed for small and medium-sized firms in 1960b), then they gain substantial influence on strategic decisions within their company. This is the case in contemporary democratic reform enterprises (see Weber et al. 2008). Further, in adopting the ideas of guild-socialism, Fromm (1955a) advocated worker cooperatives as a relatively successful form of democratic enterprises that combines employee ownership with direct and indirect employee participation in strategic decision making. Additionally, as early as 1965, economic democracy and democratic enterprises

became subjects that were discussed during an international symposium on *Socialist Humanism*, edited by Erich Fromm (1965a).

In an extensive case description, Fromm describes the big watch manufacturing enterprise of Boimondau in France that existed 1939 until 1970, a more radical form of organizational democracy (Fromm 1955a, pp. 306 ff.; see also Lorenzen 2018). More or less representative of about 100 *communitarian enterprises* that existed in Europe during that time, Boimondau had realized all main features of a humanist socialist economy that Fromm proposed. Based on a jointly developed humanistic constitution, all members of this living and working community owned the means of production together and participated in strategic decisions concerning their enterprise. This was realized through a system of workers' self-management in which all decision agents or boards were elected by the collective of the workers. Moreover, neighborhood groups consisting of five to six families living in the surroundings discussed problems of the Boimondau company and developed proposals to solve them. Thus, Boimondau also represents an early example of a stakeholder democracy attending to unite interests between the domains of industrial work and family.

The spirit of Boimondau that represents the domination of labor and social relations over capital lives on in hundreds (maybe thousands) of communitarian enterprises located within solidarity economy, common welfare economy, communes, or the Kibbutz movement (see Dyttrich & Wührer 2012). In a mitigated form, communitarian principles survived also in the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in Spain, the largest network of democratic enterprises, worldwide.

Like Pateman (1970), who advocated a system of organizational democracy, Fromm (1968a) formulated a *spillover hypothesis* stating that the kind of work that people execute will have a socializing effect upon their attitudes, value orientations, and behaviors in their social and societal lives. Following Fromm, Pateman and further conceptualizations of a democratic economy, our Innsbruck ODEM research group has defined *democratic enterprises* as business organizations where participative structures and processes are located at the organizational level and where employees or their elected representatives are actually involved in decision-making processes also concerning strategic or tactical issues. Optionally, their participation rights may be based on employees' shareholder status (Weber, Unterrainer, & Höge 2008).

Of course, in contrast to private capitalist corporations or public enterprises, democratic enterprises still represent a small minority. However, they are not so rare as one might think; for example, the European Committee of Worker and Social Cooperatives encompasses about 50,000 Enterprises with 1.3 million employees in 2017 ([www.cecop.coop](http://www.cecop.coop)). This number is far from

TABLE 2 Structurally anchored democracy <sup>1</sup> or employees <sup>4</sup> individually perceived democratic participation <sup>2</sup> is significantly associated with...				
Psychological outcome	Effect size	N	country	study
Prosocial work behavior	n. s.	449	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013) <sup>1</sup>
	p — q 22***	335	A, D, I	Weber, Unterrainer & Schmid (2009) <sup>2</sup> ,
	n. s.	285	I	Pircher-Verdorfer, Weber, et al. (2013) <sup>1</sup>
Solidarity at work	eta2 = 0.149***	449	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013) <sup>1</sup>
	r = 0.26***	325	A, D, I	Weber, Unterrainer & Schmid (2009) <sup>2</sup>
	d = 0.26*	285	I	Pircher-Verdorfer, Weber, et al. (2013) <sup>1</sup>
Democratic engagement orientation	eta2 = 0.171***	362	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013) <sup>1</sup>
	r = 0.40***	325	A, D, I	Weber, Unterrainer & Schmid (2009) <sup>2</sup>
	d = 0.38**	285	I	Pircher-Verdorfer, Weber, et al. (2013) <sup>1</sup>
Humanitarian – egalitarian ethics orientation	eta2 = 0.074***	362	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013) <sup>1</sup>
	r = 0.28***	325	A, D, I	Weber, Unterrainer & Schmid (2009) <sup>2</sup>
Self-efficacy to promote justice in the world	eta2 = 0.024*	362	A, D, I	Weber & Unterrainer (2013) <sup>1</sup>
	r = 0.32***	325	A, D, I	Weber, Unterrainer & Schmid (2009) <sup>2</sup>
Moral reasoning (consistency)	d = 0.28*	285	I	Pircher-Verdorfer & Weber (2016) <sup>1</sup>
Civic attitudes	Bstd. = 0.07***	1891	U.S.A.	Wuestewald (2012) <sup>2</sup>

Note: A = Austria, D = Germany, I = Italy, \* = p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.005.

being complete because many democratic firms exist in different forms (see Weber et al. 2008).

Table 2 summarizes findings from studies by the Innsbruck ODEM research group who investigated whether working in a democratic enterprise is associated with prosocial and civic behavioral orientations that may be considered as features of a *productive orientation* or of a *being mode* of existence (Fromm 1955a, 1976a; Funk 2017).

In all of the ODEM studies, organizational democracy was strongly associated with the socio-moral climate. This finding suggests that both factors interact in fostering the development of prosocial, civic, democracy-supporting orientations and behaviors.

Overall, the results let assume that—of course, together with other institutions like families, schools, political and cultural associations—democratic enterprises represent a field of socialization of employees' positive orientations toward their fellow human beings and their society. Notwithstanding

the methodological limitations that the findings are based on cross-sectional study designs and on quantitative methods, and that the effects are of small to moderate sizes, the results lend some support for Erich Fromm's assumption that participating in democratic decision making in democratic enterprises will stimulate some of the human virtues and strengths that are characteristic for a *being* mode of existence.

### 3. Conclusion and outlook

Fromm's concepts of existential human needs and of the two modes of existence (*being* vs. *having*) direct very high requirements to individual and collective actors in business organizations, economy, and society. Therefore, realizable step-by-step acting and interventions on all system-levels in a long-term perspective should strive for creating socio-economic, organizational, and psychological resources to support employees in (further) developing a productive character orientation (including their *Being* mode of existence). It should be taken care that the persons concerned will not be overburdened. Our findings indicate that business firms striving for an ethical climate of care and justice, for the common welfare, solidarity economy, or for organizational democracy are able to build bridges into the future of a global economy in which basic humanistic values are realized—ideally—for all people in all cultures, nations, corporations, and smaller enterprises as Erich Fromm and further moral philosophers have sketched out.

To conclude, I hope I was able to demonstrate that several significant theoretical synergies exist if concepts from analytical social psychology are brought together with concepts and empirical studies from the humanist culture of work, organizational, and economic psychology. Further, this essay tried to document that research findings stemming from other theoretical approaches—sharing conceptual similarities with analytical social psychology—can contribute to the validation of some of Erich Fromm's hypotheses. This seems especially relevant in areas like social motivation, ethical organizational climate and leadership, and employees' organizational participation.

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## Leadership in a Digitally Transforming Social World Based on Fromm's Humanistic Approach

Thomas Kühn



**Abstract:** In the social sciences, there are different points of views on how social change has an impact on good leadership in contemporary societies. As a contribution to this debate, this article builds on basic ideas of the humanistic approach of Erich Fromm and highlights the associated possibilities for an adequate understanding of contemporary leadership demands. Key narratives and open questions related to challenges for leadership in contemporary societies facing digital transformation are evaluated from a Frommian perspective.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, leadership, digital transformation, digital leadership, humanistic psychology, productive orientation, ambivalence, social change.

### 1. Introduction

How changes in societies are named and summarized is always part of a narrative that highlights certain developments more strongly than others. Change narratives tell a story of a society by connecting the contemporary state of affairs with iconic moments of the past and an outlook into the future. This cannot be seen apart from different political point of views as a frame for those narratives.

Discussions of social change in contemporary societies have to acknowledge technological progress and its consequences for human relations. Though different interpretations are possible, it is a broadly accepted assumption that the digital transformation of our social world is challenging established forms of human interaction, not only between two interacting individuals, but also related to groups, organizations and institutions.

With an ever-growing presence of digitalization in various domains of society, there is a rise in new forms of communication, the amount of available information as well as the possibilities of data-transfer and -exchange. This does not only increase the importance of measurements in different areas of social life (King et al. 2018), but is also setting the ground for new normative expectations of how individuals, groups and organizations have to behave.

The digital transformation of the social world is one of the most discussed issues within businesses (e.g. Sacolick 2017; Rogers 2016). Again, processes of change in this context are framed in different ways, highlighting different perspectives. Some predominantly focus on the new possibilities that arise from real-time communication beyond borders and new logistical possibilities. Others focus on shifts and disruptive consequences for certain business areas, such as the transportation sector that is challenged by new possibilities of automatized driving. And some voices highlight threats to society, e.g. by pointing out the danger that many jobs might become redundant, leading to higher unemployment rates or a loss of national control related to the power of large multi-national companies, mostly US based.

Irrespective of the view on the link between digital transformation and social change, there is wide agreement on the necessity of a leadership response to these changes and society's need to adapt to related new requirements.

So far, Erich Fromm's humanistic approach has not explicitly been linked to the debate on leadership in a digitally transforming world<sup>1</sup>. His approach might seem to be outdated at first sight: Considering that the digital transformation occurs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than 40 years following Fromm's death in 1980, how can he be linked to it?

I will argue in my essay that Fromm's theoretical considerations are indeed very current and might be even more valuable for debates on the changing relation between man and technology today than they were at their time of publication. Today, they can be related to a development that had in fact commenced during Fromm's lifetime, but has grown in visibility and presence since. I will also point out that the work of Fromm offers a great potential for the debate on contemporary leadership, as he reflects on the relation between technological progress and human needs and development potentialities.

As an example, I will repeatedly refer to the book *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* that was published by Fromm in 1968. It includes insights that are fully relevant for the current situation and worth considering in finding answers to contemporary questions.

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1 There are only very few recent exceptions, like the work of Leisinger (2017) and Funk (2015).

In a long-sighted manner, Fromm discusses the threats to a society that is no longer directed by men, but by computers. These reservations are of particular importance in a society faced with the rising possibilities of artificial intelligence:

»A specter is stalking in our midst whom only a few see with clarity. It is not the old ghost of communism or fascism. It is a new specter: a completely mechanized society, devoted to maximal material output and consumption, directed by computers; and in this social process, man himself is being transformed into a part of the total machine, well fed and entertained, yet passive, unalive, and with little feeling.« (Fromm 1968a, p. 13.)

Already in 1968, Fromm pointed to the danger of humanity losing control over its own system of interactions, being more and more dependent on algorithms, as we are faced with today:

»Perhaps its most ominous aspect at present is that we seem to lose control over our own system. We execute the decisions which our computer calculations make for us. We as human beings have no aims except producing and consuming more and more.« (Fromm 1968a, pp. 13 f.)

It would be a mistake to assume that Fromm aimed at spreading feelings of hopelessness and desperation. His aim was indeed to facilitate a fruitful discussion on the possibilities of a suitable relation between humans and computers. Fromm promotes the idea of »humanistic planning« that does not demonize technological progress, but instead creates possibilities to make use of new technological possibilities for humane ways of being productive:

»Computers should become a functional part in a life-oriented social system and not a cancer which begins to play havoc and eventually kills the system. Machines or computers must become means for ends which are determined by man's reason and will. The values which determine the selection of facts and which influence the programming of the computer must be gained on the basis of the knowledge of human nature, its various possible manifestations, its optimal forms of development, and the real needs conducive to this development. That is to say, man, not technique, must become the ultimate source of values; optimal human development and not maximal production the criterion for all planning.« (Fromm 1968a, p. 103.)

This article is meant to be a first attempt to linking the discourse on leadership in a digitally transforming world with Erich Fromm's work. Therefore, in the next chapter I will first focus on challenges for leadership in contemporary societies facing digital transformation, as pointed out by business leaders. Key narratives and open questions will be summarized and in a next step evaluated from a Frommian perspective, arguing why the work of Fromm should be understood and used as an important contribution to discussions of good leadership in contemporary societies.

## **2. Reflecting on narratives of leadership in a digitally transforming social world**

There is a broad consensus that social changes linked to new digital contexts challenge leadership. As one of many examples, this can be illustrated by a quote from Daniel Newman, the CEO of Broadsuite Media Group:

»Businesses are changing right before our eyes as the digital transformation takes place around the world. And yet many dinosaur leaders, as I like to call them, are still in these businesses risking extinction if they can't adapt to this ever-changing environment. It's true that leaders must be willing to accept change in order to remain competitive. However, I believe it goes even further than that. Change-agile leaders must be forward-thinkers who believe that the future is important above all else. They must be able to change quickly and fluctuate as the business world changes—sometimes on the daily.« (Newman 2018)

The quote illustrates a typical tension in the discourse on changing leadership demands: on the one hand, there is the fascination with new possibilities, the drive to make things better, to be more agile and to have the opportunity to think outside the box without being limited and oppressed by traditional forces. On the other hand, there is environmental pressure forcing the necessity to change as an external demand rather than an idea or a need that might grow from the inside. Within this narrative, digital transformation is linked to an increasing competitiveness threatening leaders and companies, highlighting the risk of wrong decisions.

Related to this area of tension, it can be observed that discussions on leadership come with a high degree of uncertainty with regard to the right answer to ongoing changes. Moreover, the discussions are characterized by a high intensity, as the question of an adapted leadership is seen as a crucial one within companies.

This is expressed in the augmented importance of strategic consultancy provided by external partners (Handelsblatt 2017) and by the way meetings and conferences are framed. As an example, I will reflect on the announcement and marketing of a conference that took place parallel to the Erich Fromm Conference in 2018: the Digital Leadership Summit #3 that was organized in Cologne on June 21st, 2018.

»In no phase of history has there been such a surge in innovation as in our time. As a result of the new technical possibilities, the world is growing together into a networked global system of great heterogeneity. Opportunities and risks are closely related. Dealing with the new in society has become a major challenge. At this high pace of innovation, citizens are looking for opportunities to understand the new and to recognize social and technical processes in context.«<sup>2</sup>

To underline the importance, the current situation of change is described as being historically unique in relation to its speed and acceleration of innovation. In addition, it is framed not as a question that can be solved on a national level but has to be seen as a global phenomenon. Furthermore, while new technological possibilities are regarded to be the driver of change, leadership is nevertheless fundamentally linked to the need of dealing with uncertainty and the human need for understanding and sense making.

Still, when reflecting on the demands arising from the digitalization of industries, establishing new metric systems and optimizing IT systems is top-of-mind for business leaders. Developing tailor-made data mining systems that help to proactively understand clients' demands and offer related services is seen as a key requirement. Likewise, assessment of the internal performance of staff members is seen as an important task within business units.

But beyond these technological aspects, the awareness that change has a larger impact is broadly shared within business leaders. In Germany, this is underlined by recent surveys. In a survey that was conducted by researchers from the TU Munich in cooperation with the *HypoVereinsbank* it was stated that awareness of the need for cultural change within the own organization is usually present, whereas a consistent strategy for its implementation often seems to be lacking (*HypoVereinsbank* 2018).<sup>3</sup> In a representative survey conducted

2 [www.digital-leadership-summit.de/programm](http://www.digital-leadership-summit.de/programm)—Original quotation in German, translation by the author of this article.

3 Within two weeks, leaders of companies in different sectors and of different size participated in an online survey, consisting of two waves (n=428 in the first wave, n= 246 in the second wave).

by *Growth of Knowledge* (GfK) in cooperation with *etventure* only 38 percent of the managers see their employees as sufficiently qualified for the changes brought about by digitization (*etventure* 2018)<sup>4</sup>.

Though leaders are aware of the need to re-think the way that people work together within their organizations, many of them nevertheless agree that the predominant focus so far has been on automatization and IT based efficiency, rather than on human relations:

»However, very few organizations are able to meet this requirement of holistic further development. The vast majority of digitization initiatives are aimed at process automation and efficiency optimization; too few these processes themselves are shifted into the focus of questions.«<sup>5</sup>

Invited speakers at the 3rd Digital Leadership Summit have been asked to respond shortly to two questions before the conference:

- »1. For me, digital leadership means...
- 2. In your opinion, what are the most important trends and challenges in the field of Digital Leadership & People Management in 2018?«

Their answers have been published on the conference website ([www.digital-leadership-summit.de](http://www.digital-leadership-summit.de))<sup>6</sup>. In the following an excerpt of the quotes will be presented as an illustration for the way how change is related both to technical developments and human relations. (*see opposite page*)

If we consider these quotations as an example for the discourse on leadership demands facing digital transformation, again we observe that the question of how men and machines are integrated within companies is the key question.

Again we find that »digital leadership« is linked to IT expertise and the need to create new tools that enable for example »leading on distance« and making use of »people analytics.« It's seen as a crucial role for leaders to integrate artifi-

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4 It's a representative survey including respondents from »around 2,000« major German companies with a minimum annual turnover of 250 million euros. Respondents have been decision-makers who are involved in the topic of digitization in their respective companies. The survey took place in the first two months of 2018.

5 [www.digital-leadership-summit.de/programm/](http://www.digital-leadership-summit.de/programm/)—Original quotation in German, translation by the author of this article.

6 [www.digital-leadership-summit.de](http://www.digital-leadership-summit.de)—Original quotations are in German. Translation of excerpts by the author of this article.

Excerpt of the quotes of »Digital Leadership«		
	For me, digital leadership means...	In your opinion, what are the most important trends and challenges in the field of Digital Leadership & People Management in 2018?
Andera Gadeib, Serial Entrepeneur & CEO, Dialego AG	»...to implement the digital future with courage, vision and willingness to create.«	»Important trends are Artificial Intelligence, big data and digital assistants like Alexa: How can the diverse data sources be used for positive effects in your own business? The biggest challenge is people's fear that things will move very fast, that individuals will not come along, or that they may see their own workplace at risk. Fear paralyzes and needs to be proactively addressed. »It's ok to be scared, we just should not be cowardly.«
Dr. Carsten Linz, Global Head, SAP Center for Digital Leadership	»Digital leadership is an integral part of a New Leadership—the leadership of the future is more entrepreneurial, digital and transformative.«	»As business leaders, it is our duty to avoid a digital divide in society. Politicians can not do it alone. It needs both, the head and the heart. [...] In spite of all technology, the focus is on people in the digital transformation, because everyone in the company has to go on a journey.«
Dr. Reza Moussavian, SVP Digital & Innovation (IHR), Deutsche Telekom	»...to lead adults who want to be treated like adults—with confidence and some cool tools.«	»1) Leading on distance: everyone talks about it, nobody understands it or is able to do it. 2) Agile Leadership: What is the role of a leader in the transition to an agile organization? What does the day-to-day management of an agile manager look like in an agile organization? 3) People Analytics: How can executives better lead people based on numbers, data and facts?«

cial intelligence, big data and digital assistants into their own business models. Leadership is associated with entrepreneurial skills, courage and vision.

But in all quotations, we find the understanding that good leadership goes beyond just efficient tools and a modern IT system. People and human relations have to be put in focus, as digital transformation has an impact on their feelings and their modes of interaction. Fears, a potential divide between different social groups, experiences of being excluded rather than participating in the change process are explicitly named as core issues related to »digital leadership.«

On the one hand there is the endeavor for highest efficiency, focusing on establishing technological solutions that enable the measurement, control and evaluation and to render human efforts, evaluations and decisions unnecessary as much as possible. On the other hand we can identify a rather psychological oriented narrative taking into consideration human fears, uncertainties

of upcoming decisions, changing power relations and the need for a feeling of belonging, social sense—making and identification with social groups and one's own productive activities.

This is not an isolated finding, but an observation that is typical for the contemporary perception of chances and challenges of digital transformation within businesses. Accenture, one of the leading global management consulting and professional services firms, summarizes it in the following sentence: »Digital transformers know that digital isn't just a tool for improving business efficiency but something more profound.« (Accenture 2018). Something »*more profound*« is hard to define as it is connected to the whole relation between leaders and workers, and more than this the meaning of paid work in societies and the way that productive orientations and activities are framed in our contemporary social world.

There is fear that new business models will lead to the extinction of successful companies in traditional industries. People feel threatened by the change as leaders, owners, workers and as citizens. People and their needs have to be shifted into the focus of attention. We need to understand the dynamics of emotions and rational aspirations. Fears cannot be simply discounted as »irrational,« but must be taken seriously, just as much as the need to create an atmosphere of trust. There is a perceived danger of an increasing social gap within societies, dividing between winners, full of options, and losers, excluded and without any functional integration. From this perspective, the digital transformation is seen as a threat of more social inequality and social injustice, not only within national societies, but also between different nations. On a political level, right-wing and so-called populist movements might be seen as a result of citizens looking for control and security. Organizations have to be attentive to developments in their surrounding social world (society), as a social divide would threaten their business possibilities in the long run.

Numerous sociological findings (e.g. Baumann 1991; Rosa 2012; Illouz 2012) show that contemporary societies are characterized by structural ambivalence as a result of social change. According to Rosa, the fundamental ambivalence consists in a freedom to an unknown extent on the one hand and an increasing exposure to social demands on the other. This is embedded in social acceleration processes that, according to Rosa, lead to temporal norms becoming more and more effective through the introduction of time limits, deadlines, schedules, and speed bonuses. As a result, more and more responsibility is being shifted to individuals, making it a central subjective task for them to lead and shape their lives in a way that keeps them a competitive market player. Although there are less binding regulations on what to do, what to believe, how to love or think, everyday practices in various areas of

life are therefore increasingly following a rhetoric of duty that diametrically opposes the idea of a self-determined lifestyle (Rosa 2012, pp. 296 ff.). This fundamental ambivalence is also of central importance to leadership because it has a decisive impact on both the experience of employees and the self-image of organizations.

Leadership has to take this ambivalent social situation, including related uncertainties and fears that exist on an individual and political level, into account. Within companies, it has to create and strengthen structures that lead to innovation and assure competitiveness, while promoting integration between diverse people and awareness of social responsibilities at the same time. This in turn means that leadership needs to be rooted in psychological knowledge and skillfulness to a great extent, including the capacity to identify contradicting demands and ambiguous contexts, accepting ambivalent circumstances and being able to deal with them (e.g. Kühn 2015).

It is exactly this demand on leaders for psychological knowledge, for understanding existential human needs and their relation to societies, for the necessity to deal with uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence that justifies the work of Erich Fromm being an essential reference for the discourse on leadership in a digitally transforming social world. This will be further outlined in the next section.

### **3. Linking Fromm to narratives on leadership in a digitally transforming social world**

Although Fromm's oeuvres originated in the 20th century, they have by no means lost any of their significance for the understanding of the ongoing processes of social change.<sup>7</sup>

Ambiguity according to Fromm should not be understood as an exceptional situation but as the basis of human existence. Human action is not predetermined by instincts but depends on thinking and imagination. Man therefore transcends nature like no other being and is nevertheless subject to its laws. Accordingly, dealing with an ambivalent initial situation is something originally human.

»Man *qua* man has been thrown out of nature, yet is subject to it; he is a freak of nature, as it were. This objective, biological fact of man's

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<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Hartmut Rosa argues in his theory on the resonance of social relations that the resonance-theoretical core of Critical Theory undoubtedly emerges best in Fromm's work (Rosa 2016, p. 565).

inherent dichotomy requires new solutions, that is to say, human development. Subjectively, the awareness of having been torn away from his natural basis and of being an isolated and unrelated fragment in a chaotic world, would lead to insanity (the insane person is one who has lost his place in a structured world, one which he shares with others and in which he can orient himself.) All the energies of man have the aim to transform the unbearable dichotomy into a bearable one, and to create ever new and, as far as possible, better solutions for this dichotomy.« (Fromm 1977g, p. 6.)

Fromm considers human knowledge to be always context-bound and historically conditioned, since it is based on previous experiences and is therefore always incomplete. Because the humanly possible is unknown, man is »indefinable and indescribable« (ibid., p. 10). He assumes that although human ambiguity can never be completely eliminated, society can become more human in the context of dialectical processes and »liberate itself from the influence of irrational and unnecessary social pathology« (ibid.). In this sense he considers the fate of modernity not sealed (Rosa 2016, p. 570), but as shapeable by humanistic planning.

His assumptions are based on a humanistic image of man that emphasizes his potential for growth and productivity and depicts man as a being that becomes active on his own initiative (*sua sponte*) and wants to shape reality with his own talents and skills (creativity). According to Fromm, human action does not follow the logic of a *homo oeconomicus*. Rather, man has to be seen as a social being. To be in relation with others is an existential necessity, because the individual human being needs others in order to survive. Being related to others provides creative spaces and the possibility to experience resonance in contact with others. According to Fromm, man »must be affectively related to others in order to overcome the anxiety produced by his total isolation« (Fromm 1977g, p. 6), at the same time he needs stimulation and is himself stimulating: »Human potentialities strive passionately to express themselves in those objects in the world to which they correspond and thus they unite and relate man with the world and free man from his isolation.« (Ibid.)

In the context of leadership therefore it should be aimed to establish an organizational culture that opens space for employees to express their human potential and reflect their own social relevance in the organization and society.

On the one hand Fromm recognizes alienating and isolating tendencies in capitalism. On the other hand he points out the need of human beings to be productive within groups and organizations. From a historical point of view, he framed the emergence of markets and organizations as a contribution to

positive freedom, to the development of an active, critical and responsible self (Fromm 1941a). Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the important role of organizations, including companies, in social transformation processes. This requires an increased discussion of how ethical and sustainability principles can be better integrated into the economic system itself, but also within organizations with leaders as change agents.

For that purpose, one should be aware that confidence in the ability of things made by man may have a negative psychological consequence, as Rainer Funk points out in his work (e.g. Funk 2011). People learn to rely on the adaption of technological possibilities instead of developing their own human abilities to think, to feel, to fantasize, to communicate. They might lose sensitivity for their own inner compass and are less and less active on their own initiative. To awaken and promote the creative potential of employees that is rooted in mankind itself and not in technological progress, is one of the key tasks for leadership facing digital transformation. The focus should be on enabling employees to develop a productive orientation in the sense of Fromm by developing their growth and creative expression potential in the organizational context.

#### 4. Final remarks

Connecting the work of Fromm with contemporary discussions on leadership facing digital transformation, we can state: Not tools and numbers, but changing human relations should be key when focusing on digital transformation. Also, one should avoid drawing a clear contrast between »old« and »new« leadership—humans are still humans and though their surroundings might change in a fast pace, basic human needs stay the same. Principles rooted in a humanistic ethics may become more visible and a clearer demand for successful leadership, but they shouldn't be seen as something new emerging from social change, but rather as a stable rule and guideline. Fromm clearly shows that robots are not better people and that the automation of processes has its limits. When we think the opposite, it's rather a projection that expresses an alienated relation to our social world that has created a social imagery of man as machines. This is by far an underestimation of human potential.

By linking human potential and technological possibilities, the ability to balance becomes more and more crucial for leadership. In order to find the right balance, a value-based leadership culture is key. The main guideline should be to create trust, foster commitment and focus on relationships - and not the mere reduction on people analytics. Do not ignore fears, but incorpo-

rate them into change processes. For this purpose, create a space for employees to express tensions and ambivalences and to find a way to deal with them within the work process. Fromm's work makes clear that we have to re-think the relationship between paid work, productive activity and life – and that it's for sure more than just a simple »work-life-balance.«

Finally, the work of Fromm underlines the necessity of vision, courage, empathy and enthusiasm for human relations as crucial parts of good leadership. Therefore, a quotation from Fromm that states the importance of true compassion and knowledge of man, shall be presented to conclude this essay:

»[We should] free ourselves from the narrowness of being related only to those familiar to us, either by the fact that they are blood relations or, in a larger sense, that we eat the same food, speak the same language, and have the same ›common sense.‹ Knowing men in the sense of compassionate and empathetic knowledge requires that we get rid of the narrowing ties of a given society, race or culture and penetrate to the depth of that human reality in which we are all nothing but human. True compassion and knowledge of man has been largely underrated as a revolutionary factor in the development of man, just as art has been.« (Fromm 1968a, p. 87.)

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## **Alienation and »Productive Orientation« in Work A Contribution to Erich Fromm's Critical Analysis of Society**

**Sünje Lorenzen**



**Abstract:** Erich Fromm had developed a dialectical approach on alienation phenomena in work. On the one side he criticizes today's poor working conditions and on the other side he shows productive orientation in work. In my essay I will discuss empirical and theoretical contributions of social-psychological research in this Frommian perspective.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, alienation, productive orientation, social-psychology, communities of work, democratization of work.

Erich Fromm had developed an independent critical social theory in which he combines psychoanalytical, sociological, social-psychological, political-economic, philosophical and cultural perspectives. Fromm's theory opposes the idea of the division of labor both in theory and practice, as it is being advanced in psychology and social research today. Fromm is one of those scientists and theoreticians who, guided by psychoanalysis, develops the critical impulse in research and thought.

Many social science studies rightly criticize today's poor working conditions. Fromm describes it as an expression of social alienation. In this perspective, I would like to discuss empirical and theoretical contributions from social psychological research. Furthermore, I would examine the »productive orientation« in work which can be seen as resistance against alienation. I will discuss empirical research and social psychological approaches in this Frommian perspective.

## Alienation as a »Relationship of Unrelatedness«

In his book *The Sane Society* (1955a, p. 120), Fromm defines:

»by alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as alien. He has become [...] estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship.«

In today's modern society, as Erich Fromm perceives it, alienation is almost total. »Non-productive« forms of relationships that make real, meaningful, intense contact with the social environment difficult are dominant. In our alienated society a person is »out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person.« In alienation, humans experience themselves as things are experienced; »with the senses and common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively« (ibid., pp. 120 f.). Alienation pervades our relationship to our work, to the things we consume, to the state, to our fellow man and to ourselves.

In her study on alienation, *Entfremdung*, Rahel Jaeggi (2016, p. 329) has described alienated relationships as »relationships of unrelatedness.« People treat themselves and each other like things and do not feel at home in their social environment. Nor does the outside world offer them any possibility of this relation of »feeling at home,« »the social world« gives »no occasion for such identification and no possibility for appropriation« (ibid.).

Rahel Jaeggi's definition of alienation as the relationship of nonrelation describes a counterpart to the »productive orientation« in Fromm. It goes along with the feeling of powerlessness. It describes the experience of subject and object being separated from another. In his understanding of the »productive orientation,« Fromm is concerned with a productive relation of subject and object in which one can develop his own potentialities as a human being.

## »Productive« and »non-productive« orientations

In his work *Man for Himself* (1947a) Fromm distinguishes between »productive« and »non-productive« orientations in how one re-establishes a relationship with the world and the society after recognizing that he is alone and separated. Erich Fromm argues:

»Human existence is characterized by the fact that man is alone and separated from the world; not being able to stand the separation, he is impelled to seek for relatedness and oneness. There are many ways in which he can realize this need, but only one in which his own powers unfold in the very process of being related.« (Fromm 1947a, p. 96.)

Only if one can experience oneself as separate from the world and humans, one can consciously decide to re-establish a relationship with the world and society. Man can relate to the world in a »productive« and »non-productive« way, but only in »productive orientation« does man remain as a unique and healthy human being in relation to the world and society. Only in »productive orientations« can man realize his human potential in the act of being related.

The »productive orientations« and the »non-productive orientations« are individual and social. The »productive orientation« and the »non-productive orientation« find their expression in the alienation phenomena in our society. Both »productive« and »non-productive orientations« symbolize a particular form of how man re-establishes relations to his environment, to things, and to his fellow human beings. The »productive orientations« stand for a socially desirable relationship to the world and »non-productive orientations« stand for the possibility of alienated relations, »relations of unrelatedness« to the world and society. Unlike in the productive, only in the alienation of the non-productive relationship to the world, man can lose contact with himself, things and his environment.

Among the non-productive character orientations, Fromm counts the »receptive orientation,« the »exploitative orientation,« the »hoarding orientation« and the »marketing orientation.« In his work *Ich und Wir*, Rainer Funk (2005) develops the »postmodern orientation« in relation to present days. All these orientations have in common that they are often far away from a development of a »normal, mature, healthy personality« the »fully developed character,« »that is the aim of human development and simultaneously the ideal of humanistic ethics« (ibid., p. 83) which Fromm also argues in his work, *Man for Himself* (1947a, p. 84):

»The 'productive orientation' of personality refers to a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience. It covers mental, emotional and sensory responses to others, to oneself and to things. Productiveness is man's ability to use his powers and to realize the potentialities inherent in him.«

Only »productive orientation« offers a way out for man from his fate of loneliness and alienation.

## »Productive orientations« in work set impulses to freedom

Work in its essence is an active relation of humans to nature. In today's work environment, this nature of work has changed. Division of labor and the development of private property mean that workers can no longer fully experience their work as their own creation. Their work appears to themselves as something alien. Fromm understands our modern working culture, especially in large industrial organizations, as Jaeggi does, as an alienated working culture.

In *Beyond the Chains of Illusions* Fromm (1962a, p. 128) explicates that the individual usually »does not permit himself to be aware of thoughts or feelings which are incompatible with the patterns of his culture, and hence he is forced to repress them,« however, »the unconscious always represents the whole man.« In every culture, even in alienated working culture, man has all possibilities in himself. Man has in every culture the »capacity for reason, for love, for justice« (ibid.). When a person works in alienated conditions, there are »contradictions between the need for the full development of man and the given social structure« (ibid., p. 133). Such contradictions can be expressed as repression as well as possible freedom. Such contradictions indicate the effects of exploitation and ideology. However, these contradictions can bring about an impulse of freedom as represented by the »productive orientation.« Workers in an alienated employment often find their own strategies to enforce their »productive orientation« for themselves. Such »productive orientation« in alienated work is often kept a secret; such »productive orientation« in the work should not be exploited.

With the alienation in the »non-productive character orientations,« one can understand in which way one can relate to his environment in a »relationship of nonrelatedness,« as suggested by Rahel Jaeggi. With Erich Fromm one can understand how »productive orientation« shows in an alienated working culture. I understand these »productive« and »non-productive orientations« as ideal-typical terms, which Erich Fromm differentiates in case studies, such as in his analysis of the watchcase factory called Boimondau. Similarly, one can see how »productive orientation« can be played out in group discussions, as I will discuss later.

### Boimondau—The Sane Society

Fromm was very keen in searching for examples of the »productive orientation« in work. He found the study called *All Things Common* by Claire Huchet-Bishop (1950). Bishop was a writer and she was interested in the communitarian

movement of France. In her work, *All Things Common*, she provides examples of »Communities of Work« that were owned by workers. The »Communities of Work« Fromm refers to was called Boimondau. Boimondau manufactured watchcases. Bishop visited Boimondau twice. The first time in 1946 shortly after World War II. The second time in 1950. During her visit in 1946 she noted (Huchet-Bishop 1950, p. 1):

»It was just a factory courtyard, a few low buildings around a rather muddy square. A small factory, I thought, like many others in France. [...] The watchcase factory I was about to visit was one of the largest, since it had 133 workers.«

Boimondau, in 1946, was not a fancy place. It was basic; the place was developing. But as you can see from the following statement of Bishop, workers seemed to be happy with their work in Boimondau:

»I waited in an unassuming office [...]. Outside there was the busy humming of machines. Men and women came in and out the office. They looked busy, carefree and free. [...] Apparently it was quitting time; but no one was leaving. The cleaning woman who came in looked as if she owned the place, in the sense that a housewife owns her home. She began tidying up the office as if she were tidying up her home. Then a sort of committee took charge of me. 'Too late' they said, with a smile, 'you won't see the machines running.' From the way they said this, I could see that they liked machines and were proud of their own.« (Ibid., p. 2.)

Boimondau was established in 1941 by Marcel Barbu. Marcel Barbu was a watchcase craftworker. He had an idea of establishing a factory »in which the distinction between employer and employee shall be abolished« (ibid., p. 186). He went to the streets and asked workers to join him, buy a ground and a fabric and start working together. He would show them his craftsmanship. They started living together on the same ground and developed their fabric together. Their aim was not to get rich together, »but to liberate oneself more and more and together, in order to liberate others« (ibid., p. 190). They developed a variety of rules for living together in a good democratic way. Those rules touched all kinds of social togetherness such as working ethics, religion, neighborhood work and good salaries. Every question that arose of a good social experience was discussed democratically within the group. Their goal was to »make watchcases in order to make men« (ibid., p. 186). That is, men

who are free and creative. »Companions should remember the Community as a place where they were happy« (ibid., p. 189).

In 1950, when Bishop visited Boimondau a second time it gave her the following impression:

»It has grown materially, even in its outward appearance. Gone the muddy yard and the makeshift door. A beautifully designed doorway, a paved courtyard, an assembly hall, new buildings, new machines, music in the workshops to relieve the monotony of tasks [...]. A restaurant where meals are excellent and abundant, and where you can read the newspaper of your choice while sipping your coffee [...]. Medical service, library [...].« (Huchet-Bishop 1950, p. 191.)

In that time Boimondau made a market share of 20 percent of the French watch-case production. But the most impressing for Bishop was how the fabric had handled the severe French crisis of 1948 in which a lot of the regular French watchcase factories had to shut down their production. In this time Boimondau workers decided to »work for nothing« in Boimondau:

»How could they live? The woman took work outside to feed the family [...]. Everyone worked to the maximum and with a will to save the Community. All together, they did save Boimondau, without any outside help, and without selling one machine or one ounce of raw material. And all the 140 Companions [...] were still there when they finally emerged from the struggle.« (Ibid., p. 185.)

The workers saved Boimondau with their »moral capital and their work« (ibid., p. 187) It seems that Boimondau, as an example of a »Community of Work,« was functioning well. In 1950 Boimondau had already financially helped four other Communities to get started and it had also »given a friendly financial push to ten Communities at times when they were stuck« (ibid., p. 198).

### **Informal Communities of Work**

In the Community of Work, as Fromm describes it with Boimondau, the »productive orientation« is institutionalized. It is formally organized. Also, in today's industrial companies there is something like a formal and an informal »productive orientation.« In a group discussion, Thomas Leithäuser organized with automobile workers on the assembly line, and there was a lot of discuss-

sion about such concrete forms of human relationships at work, which one can consider a Frommian phenomenon of resistance to the alienation of the assembly line work. In these concrete human relationships assembly line work shows »productive orientation.« At first it may seem paradoxical that assembly line work can have forms of »productive orientation.« I understand it here as an attempt to cope with the physical effort, plague and stress in the monotony of a timed work with the assembly line.

The first text passage from the group discussion organized within a project titled »Which moral values influence my thoughts and actions in everyday life and at work?« deals with solidarity within the teamwork of the automobile workers. A key sentence, in which the »productive orientation« of assembly line work shows, is: »We are lucky, we really are a team.«

### **»We are lucky, we really are a team«**

The experience shown in this key sentence of the group discussion is further explained by the assembly line workers:

»You are rushed from every side, whether it is your master, whether it is at home, whether it is the school, the tax office or the authority or something! No matter what, you're just rushed! Then you bring this with you, whether home or to the company. We are lucky we really are a team, which has been together for a long time that we also support each other at work. If one is just living in divorce, then she can really cry out in our team. In the team we have the opportunity to talk about our problems, whether it is during the break or when working side by side, we have the chance to communicate with each other. But otherwise, outside—socially—not.«

The technical side of the work can be massively alienating as in the case of assembly line work, but one can come to terms with it and find comfort in the social contexts in which they are integrated through the work. The workers, in the group discussion, are always oppressed; they feel constantly rushed in their lives, whether at work by their master, by institutions such as schools of their children, the tax offices, which asks for evidence for the taxes paid, or from the authority from which one may expect child support. Everywhere one has to provide services, whether it be physical or mental. Everyday life is like an assembly line that needs to be kept running that should not come to a halt under any circumstances. The worker is kept in constant anxiety, what if a

document is missing to prove that one is in need? Will the status of neediness then be lost? What if a proof for the tax cannot be provided in time, then one does not get the additional payment? The rhythm of life is inexorable and requires constant mindfulness, which can be exhausting. Compared to the daily struggles of life, the work on the assembly line is still the most manageable. On the assembly line, one can share one's worries with one's colleagues, who have quite similar life situations to deal with, and get emotional support from them. One can share one's worries, for instance, what should happen if children, spouses or relatives do not work the way the strict daily routine demands. What if there is a parent talk at school or a meeting with a divorce lawyer, but there is no time for it? During these unpredictable circumstances the assembly line workers can be loyal in their support for each other. It poses no further challenges than to be kept running. For the participants in the group discussion, the place that seems »social« to them is not the »outside,« the world outside the factory. It seems that the automobile workers within the factory, within their work, are more familiar with one another's lives inside the factory than the often unpredictable life outside the factory. On the assembly line or during the break time they can »really cry out,« they can organize themselves; they can support each other in solidarity. They know and understand one another's problems, so their individual problems may seem less burdensome. Their workplace becomes a place of communication and solidarity about the hardships of life.

### **»I'm lucky, I see the finished product«**

Not only in the social side of work can people in alienated employment relationships experience a mitigation of alienation. The involvement in the work process itself, as a feeling of being involved or having an overview of the entire work process, mitigates the alienation in the assembly line work. In another example from the group discussion, the assembly line workers reported of such experiences in the work:

»I am lucky, I see the finished product, I am now in quality assurance and I take off the finished vehicle. That was luck. Right at the beginning of my work here in the factory eight years ago, I landed on this workstation. I'm lucky because I have an overview of how to work. I even jumped around. I was a jumper. I helped out at the assembly line if someone was missing there. We had an occupancy rate of over 94 % every 67 seconds. This is awesome!«

For the worker, it is fortunate that she can see the finished product, the car she was involved in creating. The worker does not seem insignificant, as a small screw in the transmission. She belongs to the transmission; she can overlook the entire transmission. She knows what she does her job for. She knows if she joins in, then the car can be made quickly. She works in a productive rhythm. She and her colleagues manage »an occupancy rate of over 94 % every 67 seconds.« On good days they play together, they are like a good piece of music. Then the work is easy. Then the work is fun, and she feels great happiness at work. Unmistakable here is also a pride in working, which refers not only to the workplace and an acceptable work for them, but also to the whole product in whose production they were involved. The workers feel that they are an important part of making the car. This pride is directed against and mitigates the alienating experience of the assembly line work. Assembly line work is actually not a heaven on earth, but its consequences and experiences can be mitigated by the productive orientation in the work.

The motives and the productive orientations, as expressed in the group discussion, are widespread, as the works of Marie Jahoda, Konrad Thomas, Philippe Bernoux, Fritz Böhle, Thomas Leithäuser, Birgit Volmerg and Eva Senghaas-Knobloch show. Such productive motives and orientations that emerge in all industrial work are a resistance to the alienated organization of labor that turns people into things and make the world of work a »relation of unrelatedness.« Such motives and productive orientations can be found as the basis of Boimondau and similar experiments.

### **The way out of alienation, as the way of »freedom to«**

Today there is much criticism on such projects as Fromm had in mind as places of development and promotion of »productive orientation.« With the example of Boimondau, Fromm shows democratic ways of working together. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941a, p. 270) he argues:

»The victory of freedom is possible only if democracy develops into a society in which the individual, his growth and happiness, is the aim and purpose of culture, in which life does not need any justification in success or anything else.«

Fromm was committed to a social transformation and forms of peaceful living together. He criticizes the criticism that such ideas are repeatedly brought against. Fromm insists in *The Sane Society* (1955a, p. 321) that the

»the glib condescension implying the futility and lack of realism of all these experiments is not any more reasonable than was the first popular reaction to the possibilities of railroad and later of aeroplane travel. It is essentially a symptom of the laziness of the mind and then inherent conviction that what has not been cannot be and will not be.«

The »productive orientation,« as Fromm has worked out socio-psychologically on the background of his Marx-oriented alienation theory, shows the way to recognize alienation phenomena, and to master it in solidarity.

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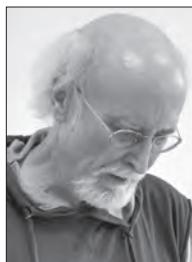
## III

## Towards A »Sane Society«

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### Thoughts on Liberation On the Way to a Humane Society

Burkhard Bierhoff



**Abstract:** Fromm was one of the first psychoanalysts to deal with the crisis of civilization. His ideas about human nature, the social character and the social unconscious, the pathology of normalcy and the ideal of productivity are important. Fromm criticizes industrialism for its unrealizable promises of freedom and happiness, which correspond to an ideology of growth and progress. The satisfaction of »false« needs and desires does not lead to human well-being.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, analytical social psychology, social character, human nature, habitus, subject theory, human productivity.

#### 1. Introduction

Fromm was one of the first psychoanalysts who dealt with the crisis of civilization in theory, bringing psychoanalysis and sociology together. Fromm's references and admonitions in this regard were announced to a larger audience

in 1976 in his book *To Have or To Be?* Furthermore, Fromm was one of the first critics who dealt with the topic of changing the way of life.

Fromm's criticism of industrialism bases on the assumption that industrial progress is ambivalent or two-faced, since it exposed promises of freedom and happiness with an unlimited satisfaction of wishes and needs. They are considered as »false« through the expanded production of goods. This ideology of growth and progress has been criticized because it is based on »false« needs and desires that are not capable of creating human well-being. This is a quasi-religious belief in progress. The »great promise« of industrialism has not been fulfilled. To the contrary, it has initiated a process of destruction of enormous proportions. The prosperity which was achieved in Western countries is measured only quantitatively. It also shows clearly conformist and compensatory tendencies on the subject level, which are leading to consumerism and up to shopping addiction—and thus causing new forms of alienation.

»Liberation« means overcoming the current crisis of civilization, which is especially related to the ecological problem, but also to poverty and alienation. Speaking of a »problem« trivializes it; ultimately, this question of civilizational existence is about life and death. The conditions of this question of survival are reaching into the deep structures of the psyche (social character and social unconsciousness). Until the ecological question is not accompanied by fear of existence no radical changes are to be expected. The approach of Fromm's analytical social psychology can fill such an attempt at liberation with content if it is extended by the dimension of the productive ideal.

Thinking about liberation requires reference theories that take the socially reproductive structures into account that condition the characteristics of the social character in the sense of conformity (conformist integration) and transcendent productivity (reflexive integration). In the following, we will reflect on the theoretical foundations that allow liberating action and thoughts to be grasped. Different approaches are possible, but my contribution prefers the theory of the social character and the theory of human relatedness opposed to other theories such as habitus theory and drive theory, since the author believes that they embody an appropriate, realistic view of man corresponding to human inventiveness.

The relationship between man and society is to be described with the help of an appropriate theory, whereby the destructive tendencies of civilization are captured with the ecological crisis. With the dynamic character concept is a tension of productive and conformist character orientations. How the productive human forces are rooted and energetically fed is due to the nature of man and in relation to the existing social structures, and how they are rooted in social characterology. Fromm's concept of man is not exhausted in the existing

social structures, but refers beyond them. Accordingly, for Fromm, man is not a blank sheet of paper on which culture only writes its text in socialization processes, but a part of an interactive process. Man is seen as an independent factor in the historical process.

If one considers liberation in the age of the ecological crisis and climate change, analytical social psychology is a reference theory which, with the potentiality of the human being, represents central hope-giving moments. This concern should be clearly elaborated in this article.

To create a human society, a theoretically blind approach has to be avoided. However, it is necessarily linked to conceptual efforts, namely to choose the possibilities and approaches that can be suitable to rethink life practice and to find (new) ways to transform it according to humane criteria. The theory must analyze the practice and examine the misery of what suffering means for people all over the world. This theory has to arrive at a social diagnosis that unveils violence and repression in life contexts. It also has to point out the factors that have to be fulfilled for a life worth living and it must stimulate the humane transformation of social structures and life practice. Especially, this theory must also be able to analyze the escalating crisis of our time without any glossing over, without illusions or ruthlessness. In the age of climate change and the ecological crisis, there is not much time left to redefine the course, because we may already have entered the exterministic stage of scientific-technical civilization. Industrialism reveals its destructive forces. However, we cannot seek destructiveness only in external conditions, but we are called upon to find the destructiveness within ourselves so that we can achieve a change in our relation to civilization. This article asks how Erich Fromm's suggestions can help us to find a way out of the crisis.

In the past decades, the concept of social character has been repeatedly received in sociology, but predominantly neglecting the dynamic concept of character.<sup>1</sup> The peculiarity of the social character concept lies in the fact that Fromm approaches the character structures behind the behavior patterns and actions. Fromm also analyzes them in their sociospecific typology. A fundamental sociological matter lies in the question of how the individuals adopt the standards and values of their reference groups to maintain their affiliation to society, to social milieus or classes. Fromm answers this question with his socio-psychoan-

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1 In German socialization research, for example, the term social character has mostly been used without the dynamic understanding of character. H.G. Rolff (1973) understands social character as »a generalizing category that unifies the empirically found regular behaviors and attitudes of certain groups« (p. 42; own translation). Characterological categories are not used to describe social characters.

alytic concept of social character. The mostly known competing concept in this respect is the habitus theory of Pierre Bourdieu. This sociological theory fulfills the function of explaining how socially typical behavior patterns in class-specific variation arise at the behavioral level. Both concepts can be expected to explore the extent to which they are able to examine the deep social structures that determine the current crisis of Western civilization. A special expectation is to carry out the analysis taking account into the relationship between man and society, i.e. to ask how human behavior affects social life, the economy etc. experienced as external structures. It also has to be asked how, conversely, human behavior is influenced by these structures. The essential question is how the specific character structures underlying human behavior are generated.

## **2. The concept of analytical social psychology**

Erich Fromm's concept is based on the combination of historical materialism and psychoanalysis. Fromm developed the fundamentals of this guiding concept for a long period in his work. He also dealt with the fundamental philosophical and sociological question of the relationship between man and society. One of Fromm's contributions to this question is that he has made the unconsciousness a relevant topic in the analysis of society by exploring the unconsciousness in society.

At the core of his social psychology is the concept of social character, with which Fromm has described the adaptation of man to social and other (e.g. geographical and climatic) environmental conditions in relation to the mode of production and the state of material productive forces. The ecological dimension of society is the ensemble of these conditions.

Besides the social character is the social unconscious, the central concept of Fromm's social psychology. The social unconscious consists of thoughts and feelings that are socially suppressed and are, as it were, subject to a ban on articulation. As long as these thoughts and feelings are socially suppressed and a subject to a ban on articulation, there is practically no hope of solving the ecological problem. They are difficult to express conceptually or remain purely intellectual, without any connection to affective knowledge. If these thoughts and feelings became socially known, they would severely disrupt the course of society. With his analytical social psychology Fromm asks about people's chances of developing their independence and productivity. He also asks how man can overcome alienation and oppression.

There is a special difficulty here. On the one hand the adaptation of man to society by means of the social character is necessary for anthropological

reasons, but on the other hand this adaptation can be excessive and restrict opportunities for freedom. The adjustment by social character serves, *inter alia*, to find a framework of orientation and to attain social affiliation. The force that lies in the nature of man needs to be shaped by the social character so that he can express himself in an existing society. The crucial question relates how men can achieve independence and productivity at the basis of this adaptation without missing their individuation in subordination and conformity. With this concept Fromm connects the expectation that man succeeds in overcoming alienation through a biophilic action that unfolds the love for the living in personality, human relationships and in the structure of society.

### **3. The approach of social character and the conception of human nature**

At the center of analytical social psychology is the approach of social character, which Fromm has described, among other things, as the adaptation of man to the structures and functional conditions of society. However, this adjustment does not have to be mixed with the submission of man in totalitarian and authoritarian societies. This forced adaptation is inhuman, because it leads to character deformations and normo-pathological phenomena in the social world. In contrast, we must ask ourselves what a society really needs to develop human potential in interpersonal relationships and in the structures of life and work. The goal is to reduce alienation to a minimum.

A theory on the relationship between man and society must deal with the problem of how man and society can be coordinated, so that the psychological forces of man can be used as productive forces in society. However, this theory also has to work out the complementary perspective of how subjects are capable to change social reality in their interrelated actions and adapt them to their needs. It also has to show how they adapt the social reality in accordance to their own needs, especially true needs as opposed to false needs. For example, an American sociologist who lived in the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, named Lester Frank Ward, described this problem with the criticism of social Darwinism and with proposals for the melioration of society.

Fromm achieves both with his concept of social character: The description of the necessary integration and the achievement of getting an effective member of society that belongs to a social group or class. Fromm clearly sees that man cannot be adequately described as a social being only in the dimension of integration or subordination. In the dimension of productivity, his forces and activities are directed towards the transformation of society in the sense

of its humanization. With this attempt Fromm describes man as a productive being, who realizes his or her potential. Fromm combines the question of how men can understand themselves as the originators of social conditions and consciously shape them. If humans want to realize their potential, they must develop a productive relationship to themselves and other people and to their world. At this point, Fromm's conception of human nature with his specific image of man is important, to which I will refer now.

In his examination of Karl Marx's idea of man, Erich Fromm referred to the questions that were left out at Marx's time. These questions are the core issues for the subjectivity and anthropology in historical materialism. In his perception of Marx, Fromm dealt especially with Karl Marx's idea of man and alienation. Fromm worked out the idea of human nature in detail to find some standards for a change into the direction of a civilizational rescue dynamic. In this context, the dispute with Herbert Marcuse over the critical reading of psychoanalysis also has its place.

Erich Fromm does not regard man as a blank sheet of paper that can be used arbitrarily for any enslaving or liberal social purpose. His version of the relationship between man and society—in the light of humanistic moral concepts—regards man as a human being, based on development and self-realization (or individuation). People need to develop their potentials and therefore they need a society with relationships and social structures which support them in their development. This idea is the best case of a harmonized relationship between man and society instead of a contradictory model that stands in contrast to human possibilities. By this standard, all totalitarian and authoritarian social structures are inhuman and lead to deformations of the character and normo-pathologies of the social setting. In order to develop their possibilities, people need a society with relationships and social structures that promote them. All in all, humans are not only there for keeping the society working; the society has to support them in their development. The current social character, which represents the people of a society in relation to their different tasks in the context of their social situation and their value orientations, can be described by different levels of development in terms of human productivity. The existence of a humane society depends on social supporting structures.

#### **4. Social character or habitus— a comparison of two competing approaches**

The concept of social character is the key concept of Erich Fromm's analytical social psychology. On the one hand, Fromm's social character examines the

socially significant character structures that are typical for an epoch, so that the given necessities of society are fulfilled and the social structure is maintained. However, the social character is not a concept of order—i.e. not a concept that merely depicts the social order—rather, the concept extends to the processes of social change through friction between the established structures of order, the technical productive forces and the resulting new demands on the psychological structure that arises. The social character is a dynamic concept, which is based on the psychoanalytic character theory and it has been continued by Erich Fromm in relation to a historical-materialistic social theory. His social theory approach is also anchored in anthropology, which enables Fromm to understand humans as social beings who are not absorbed by the given social structures in their being. Rather, Fromm approaches the »nature« of man as an independent factor in the social process associated with human inventions and productivity. His anthropology incorporates the idea of a human potential for the possibility which is realized in the history of the species. Despite some ambiguities in his theory of productivity<sup>2</sup>, Fromm's comments on the productive ideal and the productive character structure are of considerable importance in so far as they both avoid an »over-socialized« view of man and an unsocialized view. The potential of liberation is formed in the tension between socially specific expectations of adaptation and productive responses of the individual to his life practice. The thoughts on liberation in my contribution are largely based on suggestions made by Erich Fromm on how a human society could be achieved. According to Erich Fromm's image of man, people are basically—albeit not under all social conditions—able to deal with repressive, restrictive living conditions. First of all, it has to be said, that the conducive conditions of these attempts at liberation are to be recognized as the social misery with its dangers and the global destruction process and to define a way of life that is in harmony with human development possibilities. On the theoretical level, this debate needs a coherent concept that encompasses repression as well as attempts at liberation. This concept can be found in Erich Fromm's analytical social psychology, which includes the social character, ideas about human nature, the social unconsciousness, the pathology of normalcy and the ideal of productivity. The practical attempts on liberation are addressed to concrete social problems, such as the environmental crisis with its ecological destruction on a global scale. The amount of potential for liberation is organized collectively in social movements; this is beneficial for the success of liberation.

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2 See Michael Maccoby (1982). On the criticism of Fromm's concept of productivity see Burkhard Bierhoff (1993a), pp. 162–166.

A theory which competes with the concept of social character is the habitus theory of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron.<sup>3</sup> One of its central characteristics is to avoid both an »over-socialized« view of the individual and an objectivist view of society. Referring to Noam Chomsky, Bourdieu defines the habitus as a »system of internalized patterns,« through which »all typical thoughts, perceptions and actions of a culture—and only these« are generated (Bourdieu 1970, p. 143—here and in the following my own translations). »Habitus« can be understood as »a generative grammar of patterns of action« (ibid., p. 150). As generative patterns they form structures and can be internalized by the individuals. They do not need to be aware. How these patterns are acquired remains unclear in the habitus theory. There is no approach comparable to Fromm's concept of character that could explain how these patterns are transferred into the habitus. In Bourdieu and Passeron there are only two different »imprinting methods« that the authors refer to with regards to education. One of these imprinting methods produces »a habitus through the unconscious imprinting of principles, which are only expressed in the practical state in which they come into practice (implicit pedagogy).« The other one produces »the habitus through the methodically organized imprinting as such of formulated and even formalized principles (explicit pedagogy)« (Bourdieu & Passeron 1973, pp. 62 f.). Accordingly, educational sociology must examine the reproduction of structures »which are understood as a system of objective relationships that give the individual his or her relational characteristics, before and after his or her existence« (ibid., p. 91). The habitus has the function to intermediate the structures of the educational system with the class-specific structures of the way of life. The habitus is the result of such mediation and at the same time the basis for the reproduction of these structures. A special feature of this concept is the mediation between the individual and society which was made without a subject theory (as character theory is). In the habitus, life-historical experiences with the social structure are conveyed by means of symbolic violence—based on class situation—in such a way that the social necessities and imperatives prevail in individuals. Seen in this way, the habitus functions as a mediation category between the individual and the structure of class relationships.

The habitus provides objective barriers that define the range of behavior which is typically possible for the members of a society, class or reference group. According to the theory of social character, however, this behavior in the strict sense is not socially determined, because the specific combination of

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3 On habitus theory in comparison to the concept of social character see Bierhoff 1993a, pp. 141–144.

unproductive and productive character orientations leaves room for inventive behavior. The advantage of the characterological approach over habitus theory seems to lie in the fact that the assessment of liberation potentials is possible. In contrast to Bourdieu's approach, Fromm's approach contains an explicit subject theory. In addition, the concept of social character is complemented by theories of the social unconscious, productivity and the »pathology of normalcy.«

Many traits and orientations of the social character cannot be reflected by people, since they are related not only to the personal unconscious, but also to the social unconscious. The continuous reproduction of the character structure, with the recourse to its elements, creates a certain unity that can only be questioned in a very limited self-reflexive way. How the socially predominant character orientations emerge and how they are reproduced stands in the background and remains unconscious to the actors. Pierre Bourdieu also assumes that the habitus arises through the unconscious imprinting of certain class specific principles. However, this can be understood as an elaborated concept of the social unconscious.

The habitus concept does not base on a dynamic idea of character or personality. Attention has to be drawn to the external characteristics, i.e. appearance and behavior from Fromm's point of view; a social-behaviorist or action-theoretical perspective, which corresponds to a typical action, must be overcome. Instead of this, Fromm is concerned about the forms of human relationships that result from the socially specific character structures. Overall, according to Fromm the difference between behavior and character is very important (cf. Fromm 1962a, pp. 71–74). The habitus concept does not include any of these criteria. Accordingly, it can hardly be used as a relevant basis for a conceivable liberation from the performative structures of the class situation. Because of this I prefer Fromm's approach to social character and the productive ideal.

## **5. Drive heuristics or human relations— the critical potential of anthropology in a critical theory of society**

The attempt to contribute to the liberation of man with a specific »expansive« theory requires a theoretical fixed point. From this point it is possible to determine the anthropological foundations in which the critical resistance potential of man against repressive social structures can be found. The controversy between Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm in the 1950s—which went down to the history of critical theory as a dispute against culturalism and revisionism—is very instructive at this point, since the theoretical approach is about a fundamental consensus despite all the differences. For their theoretical

reflections on liberation, both authors need a hopeful theoretical dimension that makes this resistance to repressive forms of socialization plausible and substantiate it empirically.

After his separation from the *Institute for Social Research* in 1939, Erich Fromm had a wish for oblivion; his formerly central role in the Institute as the head of the social-psychological department and research director was pushed in the background and even denied in the official descriptions of the Institute. The dispute had a historical dimension in the development of critical theory, where the philosophical or therapeutic reading of psychoanalysis was concerned. This concealed also the personal animosities of the exponents. After all, it was Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse who represented this debate, which was already made up in their personalities and in the differences between Fromm and the other members of the *Institute for Social Research*.

In the 1950s, the journal *Dissent* published a basic paradigmatic discussion between Herbert Marcuse (1955a) and Erich Fromm (1955b). This discussion can be reduced to this question: Where can we find the critical and resistant potentials in humans? This question is also directed against repressive socialization. The tradition of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School leads to the necessity of rebellion against repressive forms of socialization. This resistance can be justified with the help of the drive heuristics (so Herbert Marcuse). Otherwise, it can also be found in an anthropological approach (according to Erich Fromm), which emphasizes the potential of human nature. Both opponents give a similar solution, which is anchored in the drive structure (Marcuse) or in nature of man (Fromm).<sup>4</sup>

As I described in the dispute between Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, Marcuse is concerned with the hopeful function of drive theory. The drive theory says in essence that making real freedom is possible with the development of libidinal reason. However, the question arises to the point, if the western concept of reason is sufficiently in this sense or not. Fromm rejected the biologism of the Freudian drive theory and presented a functionally equivalent theory that refers to the nature of man. Both concepts—the drive theory of Marcuse and the anthropology of Fromm—are anchored in resistance forces that can articulate themselves in course of history. They also show some possibilities for living humanity and humanization in forms of society and interaction.

Fromm's description of human nature clearly shows that man can be integrated to a high degree into almost every form of society. However, if certain limits of repression are crossed, man can oppose the de-individualization and alienation which is taking place and fight against the destructive effects.

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4 For the positions of Marcuse and Fromm see Bierhoff 1993a, pp. 85–108.

In the course of an epoch the real potential is formed in individuals. The transformational forces arise from their character-orientations, their habitus or the drive structure.

The task of a critical theory is to find out which possibilities can be developed in humans—either in the sense of a resisting refusal (cf. Marcuse) or in the sense of productive personality development (according to Fromm). In principle, it is unpredictable how men can process their experiences and what conclusions they draw from them. They can think over terms which already exist or supposedly autonomously express their disappointment and their lack of agreement with social developments in a powerless protest. In any case, it is difficult to predict how human beings will behave normally under conditions of alienation and »pathology of normalcy.« Integration can be associated with high psychological costs for the individual and his happiness. Today there are numbers of changing tendencies, as Jeremy Rifkin (2010) and Lloyd deMause (2002) have observed in very different ways.

The debate between Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm on revisionist culturalism is usually seen as a paradigmatic document for differences in the theoretical status of psychoanalysis in a critical theory of society. Typical for this dispute is that we cannot decide which is the »better« argument. On the one hand, the opponents are relatively close in their positions, since they share a critical understanding of science from their origins in the *Institute for Social Research*. On the other hand, this dispute is ultimately about two competing positions to theoretically justify the human potential for resistance against social repression. Both refer to psychoanalysis, although they use different readings (philosophical versus clinical-theoretical reading). They both conclude that such a potential can be found in the drive structure (Marcuse) or in the »nature« of man (Fromm). Without following the chains of argument here in detail, Marcuse concludes that the *libidinal reason* constitutes this potential for resistance, while Fromm recognizes such a potential in *human relatedness* on the basis of love and reason. Without striving for a consensus, both authors arrive at the theoretical solutions of their common basic problem, which are equally important and contain a counterpoint against repressive forms of socialization. If one immanently accepts the respective arguments and constructions, one will find a comprehensible solution for both, which does not mean surrendering to the repressive social system.

The late debate between Fromm and Marcuse, which should have been held at the *Institute for Social Research* as early as the mid-1930s, showed from both positions, which were already close together, that a critical examination of real developments of the epoch is possible, which points out a comparable thrust against repression and alienation. These are the main differences in

the anthropological concept, which in Marcuse's case referred to the drive structure and in Fromm's case contained a productive potential founded in nature. In my opinion, the following match is the most important one. Both positions recognized the central importance of the renewal of anthropological theory to make a basis for a changed image of man from which impulses for liberating actions can emanate. A detailed comparison of the positions of both opponents led me to the conclusion that the differences were overvalued and that both positions were functionally of equal importance with regards to the theory-immanent significance of the respective reasons.

This result is also supported by the later rapprochement of the positions of Fromm and Marcuse. Fromm commented on *An Essay on Liberation* (Marcuse 1969), which followed Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955b) and *The One-Dimensional Man* (1964), as a change of position that contained neither pessimism nor nihilism, but it was humanistic in its essence. In his late lectures, Marcuse approached the character concept and referred to the *destructive character* associated with ecological destruction.<sup>5</sup> From today's view it seems promising to start exactly where Fromm and Marcuse get along with each other. At this point we have to ask to which statements and findings, a theory formation and social analysis, are related to today's changed and aggravated reality with its social and ecological problems, which consequently follows a *rescue dynamic*, as Rudolf Bahro (1994) has called the new theoretical basis directed against a logic of exterminism.

This dynamic of rescue can refer to both Fromm and Marcuse. Both opponents tried to form an appropriate social theory that can serve as a basis for liberation. In theory, there are clear differences, which have been established in the therapeutic as opposed to the philosophical reading of psychoanalysis. What they have in common, in fact, is that they argue from a similar perspective, namely anthropology, in order to support the liberating forces of man against repressive structures. From a socio-theoretical point of view, Fromm's concept of the social character seems to be more far-reaching, because the social character is, to a certain degree, the »transition point« from social structures into psychological structures. Even if one associates Marcuse's drive

5 Herbert Marcuse defines radical change »as a change [...] also in individual consciousness« (1979, p. 30). According to Marcuse, today's society is determined by a destructive character structure. He regards institutionalized destruction as the background for the reproduction of destructiveness in the individual character (cf. *ibid.*). For him, the alternative is a »radical character structure,« which he describes as the predominance of life instincts over the socially organized death instinct (*ibid.*, p. 32). With these statements, Marcuse takes a position that has clearly come closer to his former opponent Erich Fromm.

structure with a potential to resist repressive forms of socialization, Fromm's social character theory appears to be more far-reaching.

## 6. Dimensions of liberation and human productivity

The liberation attempt goes on from the attempts of the early critical theory to bring more »reason« into society and to establish a »theory of the course of the epoch,« as Horkheimer called the purpose of building a critical theory. It is a feature of this theory to reduce poverty and alienation. It aims to find out how the forces of social destruction prevent a »sane« society. It also empowers the subjects to circumvent the disciplining instead of submitting themselves to authorities, to overcome social injustice and to reduce alienation. Fromm was involved in this social experiment as a member of the *Institute for Social Research* until the end of the 1930s. Today, the processes of social formation in neoliberalism have significantly accelerated and led to the paralysis of the subjects as collective actors, partly by prescribing mass consumption as a means of compensation. This is, in a manner of speaking, the part of the theory that continues the development of capitalist society and describes the peculiarities of rulership. The classical working society, which is characterized by industrial work and services, has been replaced by the knowledge-based society, which develops new forms of work. Since the late 1980s, changes in the structure and function of work have been clearly discernible and the concept of work has significantly changed (cf. Bierhoff, 1993b, 2013). Particularly forms of work outside wage labor have come to the fore which includes certain non-alienated forms of human relation, whose value goes beyond the reproduction of labor, because they promote a sphere of human relationship. This sphere is characterized less by alienation than by authenticity. Certain forms of educational work in the context of the »modernist psycho-class« (Lloyd deMause) are an example beyond the reproductive function, insofar as they apparently determine their own dynamics.

In contrast, in his theory of normo-pathology Fromm also outlined hidden disciplining, which effectively captures people in existing structures and integrates them in a repressive manner into the existing system, especially of everyday consumption.

Today, the hidden disciplining has reduced the emphatic concept of freedom. This takes place through the idea that the new freedom is the freedom of consumption. In the consumerist way of life, which has globalized and spread out all over the world, humans hurt other humans who are living now or in the future. Furthermore, they hurt also themselves. The reason for this is that

man deprives himself of the possible opportunities of development. This disciplining, which seems not to be violent at first glimpse, is based on the subjects' self-humiliation and disempowerment. This term was described by Fromm (1955a) in his theory of an »insane society« as the »pathology of normalcy.« This pathology is difficult for the individual to recognize, because the disciplining influences are reaching into the deep structure of drives and passions and establish a general lack of happiness, which in a state of alienation is accepted by the subjects as a normal state. This delusion must be reversed in sane social structures in which people can develop. From the perspective of Erich Fromm, the question is how the social character can change in a productive direction.

In the current development, it appears precarious that the present epoch seems to be dominated by necrophilous structures and tendencies alloyed with industrialism and negating human progress. The unleashed material productive forces are leading to an increasing destruction of nature.

Essential theoretical contributions are given with the concept of social character, which Fromm also refers to its productive functions. On this point, it should be noted that Fromm defines the concept of productivity in very different ways, especially from an inherent productivity (for example in relation to the social »productive forces«) to a system-transcending productivity (which Fromm described with his »productive ideal«). The concept of social character is also related to new character types which are appearing in the development of society, for example an »ego-oriented character« (Funk 2005) or the »post-industrial character« (Bierhoff 1993b).

Whether this concept of »post-industrialism« is useful depends on the point of view. The present society is still based on industrialism, but industrial work declines due to automation processes and new accents with new qualities. This had changed the manifestations of industrialism and had also caused consequences on the subjects and their character structures. People have emerged in the sequence of steps from an agricultural society to an industrial society and further to a service society and knowledge-based society. The new social character does not have to describe the release of traditional work only as a loss. Furthermore, it is an opportunity for new activities beyond the wearing and alienating work associated with participation in the community and forms of relation in social relationships.

To investigate the changes in social character, complementary concepts such as Pierre Bourdieu's habitus concept and Alfred Lorenzer's theory of forms of interaction can be used.

In addition to the habitus concept, Alfred Lorenzer's theory of forms of interaction, which is based on his materialistic theory of socialization, also has to be taken into account. This theory does not contradict Fromm's theory

of social character. This theory is built on the view of a sociality of drives. As can be seen, Freud's drive theory has been revised here in a similar way as in position of Fromm, too. Unfortunately, Lorenzer has not been received in American socialization theory because it is hard to find any English contributions or translations of his work. However, some of his work has been translated into Spanish and one of his works has also been translated into Croatian. A short insight gives the elaboration of a former student (cf. Schaffrik 2002).

Thinking about liberation, at the basis of Fromm's work, leads to a closer look at the scientific concept of Erich Fromm. Throughout his life, Fromm declared his support for a humanist socialism. The characteristic feature of his theories is the double reference to Marx and Freud, whereby he has further developed historical materialism, which takes psychoanalytic dimensions of character and the social unconscious into account (cf. Fromm 1962a). In the process, a new theoretical structure has emerged that Fromm has described already in the 1930s as analytical social psychology. This is an extended scientific model that goes beyond description and explanation and contains normative orientations of an ethical nature. In the sense of a philosophy of practice, it has also provided ideas for shaping life. In this way scientific and ideological aspects are combined, which are reflexively and ideologically self-controlled, but nevertheless contain a new expansive type of scientific research practice. This type rather falls outside the scope in the mainstream of science and belongs to the unwanted or »forbidden worlds« in the sense of Alvin W. Gouldner. If one considers Erich Fromm as a sociologist, he is close to »sociological thinking« (Charles Wright Mills) or »reflective sociology« (Alvin Gouldner). In the scientific landscape of the 20th century, however, Fromm stood up for himself without founding his own school. With his complete writings Fromm has left essential impulses for theoretical work.

## 7. Conclusion

Fromm left us a legacy for a radical science of man with his revised psychoanalysis which is based on a theory of human relatedness. It includes the view of human nature in terms of biophilia and productivity, the continuation of Karl Marx's theory of alienation, and the integration of psychoanalysis and Marxism.

In theory formation, the reflection on liberation is promoted by a series of positions. For example, in the social theory, it starts with the relationship between man and society. In the sense of a critical anthropology, which establishes an idea of man, who finds himself in course of his development in a reflexive distance from the social structure than to evaluate it in respect of

repressive and liberating moments. Attempts at liberation refer both to the theoretical criticism of the appropriation of people by a repressive social structure and to reflections on how prevailing character orientations can be combined with the productive potential in humans. Here, only Fromm's concept of the social character offers a positive tension between productivity and conformism.

Erich Fromm's thoughts are rich and forward-looking. In detail, his approach requires a slight continuation. In addition to some fundamental considerations of analytical social psychology, the question arises of which social trends are today supporting liberation from obviously hostile structures. Moreover, the considerations also lead to a break with the unconscious destructive development dynamics of this civilization. Changes in lifestyle, emerging new lifestyles, subversive protest activities, new forms of contacts and relationships, and developments in the areas of love and empathic care must be included, too. Finally, socioeconomic and cultural developments in the labor society and the knowledge-based society also have to be seen, as they also lead to new forms of income outside the labor market and gainful employment.

With this conclusion I would like to draw attention to the »thoughts on liberation,« which are concerning especially the environment and the way of life and at the same time require a productive and sustainable lifestyle.

A possible solution to the crisis of civilization needs a bundle of different approaches, ranging from the development of a convivial technique, through the distribution of wealth, to a change in the consumerist lifestyle. The solution is also linked to the question of how relationships and social structures can be created to promote the development potential of all members of society against social erosion processes and reduce alienation to a minimum. Only when life in harmony with nature and social well-being in an empathic civilization becomes possible, human energies can increasingly be directed towards communitarian and aesthetic goals and achieve quality of life through playful action and targeted activities. This will only be possible if the unconscious in society is transformed into a conscious personal and social way of life. Here, however, there is the persistent difficulty that resistance to insight is so great that the unconscious structures remain unappropriated. The task remains to develop thoughts and concepts on how to make unconscious structures conscious.

The question of civilizational survival is about life and death. Until the ecological question is still not accompanied by existential fear, no radical changes are to be expected. Intellectual knowledge is often not related to affective insights. The so-called »ecological problem« stands for barriers to feeling and acting responsibly and is an example of social unconsciousness.

There is still a gap between environmental knowledge and environmentally responsible behavior. This can be explained by social repressions which

are leading to cultural self-evidences that are pathological because they are associated with destructive consequences for humans and nature. In addition, there is helplessness and a lack of love of life as well as false needs, the satisfaction of which hurts people's integrity and deprives them of their chances of development. While certain crisis tendencies can be identified at the theoretical level, the practical implementation of the apparently not urgent insights is missing, so that the necessary consequences are not drawn. Obviously, it is difficult to arrive at a meaningful understanding in everyday life with the corresponding behaviors determined by reason and love. Even if people do not react reflexively to social and economic structures but use them actively, ambiguous structures remain in the subject and in the social structure, which in extreme cases form a repressive framework from which it is difficult to break out. The economy with the consumer sector largely follows premises that adhere to destructive mass production and produce a destructive surplus. Through consumption and reproductive activities in everyday life, people are bound to socio-economic structures that they can hardly oppose. The alternatives of life are determined particularly by the economic structures that people need as consumers, even if resources are exhausted and life is destroyed. The social character transforms the social and economic demands and necessities into passions and psychological needs that people accept as their own. However, since the process of destruction is largely irreversible, a structural and psycho-social rescue logic must be promoted that transforms industrialism and leads to a sustainable way of life that is acceptable to the earth. These changes call into question the social character of the past, but ultimately lead to a changed social character whose task is to ensure the survival of people belonging to a special society, class or reference group.

The unconsciousness in society must be brought back into the conscious availability of man—to overcome alienation. Without getting in contact with this unconsciousness, a deep insight into the civilizational crisis is not possible. To get in touch with the social unconscious, changes in the social character are indispensable. Today, the new social necessities not only have to ensure the survival not only of the members of a society, but of the human species as a whole. At the same time they stand against the economic premises and commandments that are destructive and involve people in perceived functional needs such as quantitative economic growth and mass consumption. In the struggle between the life instincts and the socially organized death instinct, a new way of life must emerge which, in the sense of Fromm, increasingly leaves the having mode behind and is attracted to an authentic being. This being corresponds to a genuine authentic way of life that is oriented towards one's own self and is determined by voluntary simplicity. We live too comfortably, we

have established ourselves in the lifestyle of consumerist abundance with its conveniences. We do not want to give up the satisfaction of many compensatory needs and at the same time we accept that by our daily actions we further stimulate the deadly spiral of civilizational destruction, do not leave it out of fear and helplessness, but adhere to the compensatory satisfaction of needs. Erich Fromm has shown how one can get in touch with one's deeper layers in steps from having to being in a conceptual and exemplary way, combined with concrete suggestions for shaping one's life (Fromm 1989a).

The only appropriate response to the ecological crisis would be fear as an emotional response to the expected consequences which we are feeling today. There is still a long way to go to reduce the social destructiveness that threatens life on our planet. These endangerments can only be overcome by a characteristic attitude determined by human productivity and biophilia, and at the same time practicing realism without illusions that avoids cultural pessimism and technophobia.

The critical theorist has to pay a special attention to the life-saving tendencies and movements, which are currently forming and are still partly hidden. The liberating potentials and tendencies in technological-civilizing development, which influence the way of life and working, are to be reevaluated. A special aspect is dedicated to the change of nature and environment. On the one hand, the exploitation is increasing and natural resources are being destroyed; on the other hand there is an increasing alienation of Western civilization from nature.

In this context the distinction between *capitalist* and *authentic ecology* is particularly useful (cf. Marcuse 1972). Of fundamental importance is the approach to character, whereby people and structures are not strictly separated, but they are considered as an interacting phenomenon. Furthermore, the emphasis on the anthropological structure, which is a structure that changes in the social process, leads to the emergence of new human potential and to new accents in the definition of man.

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## Fromm's Contribution to the Analysis and Critique of the Ongoing Rise of Right-Wing Movements

Patrick Ehnis and Katrin Voigt



**Abstract:** One of the most important political changes in Europe, the USA and beyond is the growth of nationalistic parties and authoritarian structures within states. This contribution aims to demonstrate how a Frommian perspective on basic psychological needs,

asynchronicity and alienation could contribute to a social-psychological understanding of nationalistic trends. At the end of the paper, we present some conclusions drawn from this social-psychological point of view concerning the development of a sane society.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, nationalism, right wing movements, social change, alienation, sane society.

The rise of right-wing movements and authoritarian structures within states is one of the most significant contemporary changes in Europe, the USA and beyond. To explain the success of right-wing movements and parties, country-specific reasons can be found. As many authors rightly point out, very different phenomena and national identities are at work behind right-wing movements in different countries (cf. Wiegel 2018, Minkenberg 2011, Kühn 2015).

At the same time, it is obvious that the success of right-wing nationalism is not only a phenomenon of a specific nation nor a specific group of people within this nation, but—if we look at Europe and the USA—is a concept with which one is able to win elections, and therefore is often supported by the majority of the prevailing society. Trump in the USA, Erdogan in Turkey, Putin in Russia, Orbán in Hungary, PiS in Poland, Brexit in the UK, AFD and PEGIDA in

Germany, Lega Nord in Italy, Le Pen in France—are all examples of such global tendencies of nationalism and many times of violent and hateful exclusion of the constructed stranger.

This transnational phenomenon seems to reflect, apart from all specific reasons, a general unease of ongoing social change in contemporary societies. In order to understand it in-depth, within this article, I argue that it is very useful to look at three mainly social-psychological concepts of Erich Fromm.

1. The understanding of nationalism as a satisfaction of the psychological basic need for relatedness, belonging and rootedness.
2. The concept of asynchronicity between social-economic development with modern value orientation and traditional social character in today's society.
3. The experiences of alienation as a result of late-capitalist modernity. Here I would like to discuss feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and indifference.

In this paper, we will introduce these three concepts and show the actuality of Fromm's approach by using current scientific research (mainly from Germany). At the end of this paper, we present some conclusions, which can be drawn from this social-psychological point of view concerning the development of a sane society.

To start with, it is important to explain the basic approach of Erich Fromm when it comes to the analysis of societies. Fromm postulates that one always has to look at human relations, which are fostered by the prevailing society, when analyzing societies and their changes.

In the manifesto *Let Man Prevail: A Socialist Manifesto and Program*, which Fromm wrote in 1960 as part of his engagement in the SP-SDF (Socialist Party-Social Democratic Federation) in the US, he stated:

»Every social and economic system is not only a specific system of relations between *things and institutions*, but a system of *human relations*. Any concept and practice of socialism must be examined in terms of the kind of relations between human beings to which it is conducive.«  
(Fromm 1960b, p. 30.)

In line with Fromm, one can certainly add, that the theory and praxis of every social system, not only socialism, should be examined regarding the relationships between human beings produced by the system. This is an important addition to classical inequality research, since, first and foremost, it is not about

economic growth or who owns something, nor is it about whether this is fair or not, but it is about what kind of sane or pathological relationships to oneself, to others or to the world one is likely to have in different social circumstances. The human being, according to the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2018), and his or her relationship to the world are put in the center of the analysis.

Putting the analysis of human relations into the center of the analysis of social structures is a specific quality of Fromm's. Following Fromm's tradition, the following question is of importance: What are the (institutional) relationship structures one has to oneself, to others and to nature, which support a return or as, Zygmunt Baumann (2017) says, an orientation towards »Retrotopia,« towards modern versions of old nationalist concepts?

## 1. The satisfaction of the psychological basic need

Fromm's first observation is that the orientation towards nationalism is a reaction to, as Fromm calls it, the »human condition« which consists of the fact that the human being is a part of nature but also is not. Human beings have to reflect on their own actions and need to establish their own meaning of life, and find their own ways to establish identity and relatedness. To put it in Fromm's words: »Man is the only animal who finds his own existence a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape.« (Fromm 1955a, p. 24.)

To deal with this situation is, in Fromm's sense, the universal human necessity. According to Fromm, nationalism is one form to establish the basic psychological need of rootedness and a sense of belonging (cf. Fromm 1955a, pp. 38 ff.). In »The Sane Society« Fromm indicates: »The average man today obtains his sense of identity from his belonging to a nation, rather than from his being a son of man« (Fromm 1955a, p. 58).

As we know from Benedict Anderson and others, nation is an *imagined community* (cf. Anderson 1988; Kühn 2015, p. 107). If you ask a nationalist to characterize members of his group, they will name criteria that seem arbitrary, but positive with regard to the group. Surprisingly often, it does not matter if one really behaves within the defined categories as long as one does not doubt the whole story of national glory and can identify oneself with the national values as the ideal ones. They may name »blond, intelligent, beautiful, strong and disciplined« as a criteria, or even »democratic, orientated on equality and rational.« But it is basically this same principle; Nationalism is not a descriptive category, but always goes hand in hand with a claim of »how to be.«

Certainly, it matters, which one of the many possible variations of nationalism is developing. Erich Fromm himself distinguishes between malignant and

benign nationalism (cf. Fromm 1964a, p. 77 ff.). The latter refers to its own efforts and merits, while the former asserts the natural superiority of its own nation, culture or ethnic group. The psychological effect of malignant nationalism is a simple one: through the devaluation of the other, one's own value can be increased without effort. From this point of view, we are experiencing at the moment the rebirth of a malignant manifestation of nationalism, including explicit xenophobia.

In Europe there is a new right-wing movement called »die Identitären«—The Identitarian. Identity here means literally to become one with ones »own« ethnic group and »own« culture. The supposed principles of the »own« ethnic group and the individual should merge, so to speak. Their symbol is a Lamda, which refers to the shield of Sparta's warriors who defended their people against the Roman Imperium. This example shows two characteristics of the symbolic politics of right-wing populism in general: they represent themselves to be a fighter for their »own« homogeneously imagined culture and to act in self-defense as a victim of aggressive strangers. If an identification with one's nation, culture or ethnic group takes place in this way, it will be directly connected to one's own emotions. Thus, if for example the national glory is called into question, it will also be seen as an attack on one's own identity and it will lead to aggressive reactions.

Fromm marks this as a regressive way to establish relatedness to oneself, to others and to the world (cf. Fromm 1955a, pp. 58 f.). In the end, it (this regressive way) not only damages one's relations to others (to the »strangers«) but also keeps one dependent. Self-esteem is easy to destabilize as long as it builds on the group and is not based on the development of one's own abilities. In Fromm's eyes, people act like a child that does not want to become an adult. »This incestuous fixation not only poisons the relationship of the individual to the stranger, but to the members of his own clan and to himself.« (Fromm 1955a, p. 58.)

In this way, with Fromm we can make an ambivalent diagnosis: on the one hand, nationalism is a social-psychological phenomenon to establish self-esteem by harming others and oneself and keeping oneself dependent, narrow-minded and anxious. On the other hand, humans are social beings who need a sense of relatedness and rootedness that in one way can be satisfied by nationalism. From this perspective, the rise of right-wing populism can also be seen as a sign that contemporary societies have failed to provide spaces and resources for emotional cohesion, care and solidarity between independent and at the same time social, and therefore interdependent, human beings. Erich Fromm offers here a second in-depth analysis, which seems central to explain the phenomenon of rising right-wing movements.

## 2. The concept of a-synchronicity within social change

A very modern thought in Fromm's work, and later strongly represented by sociologists such as Bourdieu or Foucault, is the idea that modern societies legitimize their hierarchical structures with the inner agreement of most members of the society. In Fromm's understanding, it is the social character, which manages adjustment between the individual and society.

»I call the blending of the individual psychical sphere and the socioeconomic structure *social character*. The socioeconomic structure of a society molds the social character of its members so that they *wish* to do what they *have* to do. Simultaneously, the social character influences the socioeconomic structure of society, acting either as cement to give further stability to the social structure or, under special circumstances, as dynamite that tends to break up the social structure.« (Fromm 1976a, pp. 133 f.)

The function of the social character is twofold: on the one hand, individuals are able to satisfy their basic needs by adapting to social requirements; on the other hand, society is able to unfold its productive forces due to the appropriateness of the individuals. As long as both social as well as individual needs are fulfilled, the structure is consolidated (cf. Fromm 1941a, p. 282). But social change during the last decades seems to cause an asynchronicity between social-economic development with modern value orientations and former hegemonic traditional social characters. In recent years, economic globalization and social change has challenged the basic institutions of modernity—as Ulrich Beck (et al 2004, pp. 32 ff.) calls them: The heterosexual nuclear family, the male-dominated normal standard employment contract and the nation-state.

Even if those have not disappeared, they have at least been weakened. Gender and relationships become more diverse, working life becomes fragmented and in some respects more insecure (fewer jobs are determined by collective wage agreements, more people working part-time, more subcontracted workers, etc.) and the national ability to control its own work structures seems to get lost by being embedded into global and European affairs as well as international financial markets.

More important in our context is the feeling many have that the old values and ideas about how to live are losing institutional weight. Value-based, normative state regulations, e.g. concerning different family constellations and sexual orientation were relativized or completely abolished in law. Values such as diversity, flexibility, a certain kind of multiculturalism and cosmopolitan

habitus have become guiding principles and important subjective orientations. Such values also fit better to export-oriented, global operating companies. Fromm's concept of asynchronicity regains importance in today's society. The dissatisfaction about the needs inherent in the traditional social character orientations leads to many people becoming more and more dissatisfied with the existing conditions, and the needs anchored in the character change from a cohesive to a disintegrating element that threatens the existing society (cf. Fromm 1992e [1937], pp. 63 ff.).

Through this Frommian perspective of asynchronicity, one can partly understand the disturbing increase of nationalistic movements. At this moment in history, nationalist movements are gaining ground, paradoxically because some of the nationalists' ideologies are in conflict with the current social-economic development and a new understanding of values within economically and politically ascending groups. In this sense, we come to understand that there is not a rising number of people who turn to nationalism, but rather those people participating in nationalistic movements have always believed in the nation-state.

In various places on the globe, the human need of social relatedness and the fear of losing the old nationally structured social bonds lets people fight for the nation state and against everyone they regard as a threat. Recent research seems to confirm this perspective. According to quantitative analyses, the sociologist Holger Lengfeld comes to the conclusion that class variables (such as income and education) have hardly any direct influence on the approval ratings of the AFD in Germany (cf. Lengfeld 2017). Rather, he emphasizes that there are AFD voters in all strata. He stated that their anger feeds on cultural disappointment. It is not primarily the economically dependent who are currently rebelling in Germany (and elsewhere), but, above all, those »culturally dependent« (ibid., p. 3) who realize that their orientations are losing their institutional weight.

In a qualitative study with potential AFD voters Wakenhut and Vogt come to a similar understanding: »Values that are particularly emphasized in modern, globalized societies were not considered relevant by any of the participants.« (Wakenhut and Vogt 2017.) They conclude that this feeds the increasing dissatisfaction with the societal development.

Based on data from the European Social Survey 2002–2014, focusing on an analysis of the election decisions for populist parties in Europe, Inglehart and Norris (2016) conclude that the rejection of certain cultural processes such as changing gender relations, openness to multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are crucial to the emergence of right-wing parties. »This perspective emphasizes the popularity of a long-term process of value change, the ›silent revolution‹,

which has transformed Western cultures during the late twentieth century« (Inglehart and Norris 2016, p. 13).

Koppetsch (2017) states that it is not just cultural disappointment, but primarily the feeling of belonging to a descending social group that loses privileges and enjoys less and less social recognition, which leads to the support of right-wing movements.

»Those with an outmoded habitus do not believe in a better societal future, but look to the glories of bygone times, to the former order, the former position, whose relevance is often equated by many supporters of right-wing populism with the meaning of their own nation. Their own decline and the decline of the economic power and glory of their own country seem to be inseparable.« (Koppetsch 2017, p. 227.)

This leads to the third analytic category of Fromm.

### **3. The experiences of alienation**

According to the above, it may seem as if globalized capitalism would go hand-in-hand with values like creativity, spontaneity, self-fulfillment and tolerance, while some people with their social character orientations remain in the era of post war boom nationalism. While to a certain point this seems accurate, it still rests an insufficient explanation.

Rather, market processes were and still are intensified in many ways. They, on the one hand, were accompanied by a relative indifference towards traditional values and so allowed more diversity in lifestyles, on the other hand, being financially successful became more and more the only benchmark of life. In this way what Erich Fromm has described as a marketing character orientation (cf. Fromm 1947a, pp. 67 ff.; Funk 1995, pp. 34–41) is socially consolidated. Above all, this is characterized by an orientation towards economic success and efficiency and leads to treating and feeling oneself and each other as more or less valuable goods, which is in a Frommian perspective a non-productive, alienated way to relate to oneself, others or the world. Human beings lose contact to themselves, their »own« emotions, longings, plans and abilities and they become more and more driven to permanently optimize themselves to be well placed in the market. The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2012) argues that experience of alienation increases in western societies today, as the gap between the claim to lead an autonomous and authentic life and the possibility to do so grows.

In »Escape from Freedom,« Erich Fromm writes after he presented the liberating effects of capitalism on modern people: »Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless.« (Fromm 1941a, p. x.) Feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and indifference, in this sense, seem very important to explain the success of nationalism. Fromm pointed out that these three feelings are embedded in our social and economic structures. People internalize them and they become part of their psychic structure and basis for interaction with other humans.

## Anxiety

Contrary to the hegemonic ideology, even late modern capitalism continues to operate mainly with existential anxiety as the main driving force for gainful employment. In Germany, the fear of sliding down the social ladder increased with neoliberal reforms of the welfare state in the 2000s. The reforms should have helped to establish a low-wage market-sector, but they were introduced under slogans such as empowerment and emancipation through gainful employment. This led to a paradox: on the one hand, authentic autonomy within gainful employment can be seen as the highest social ideal, on the other hand, fear and pressure are still the basic tools to motivate people. In reality, it is becoming even more difficult for many to believe that their job is a suitable and meaningful activity, or to achieve a job with sufficient economic income. To picture this, the sociologist Oliver Nachtwey uses the image of an escalator, which for large part of the population is beginning to descend. Many people have to make much more effort to stay at the same level (cf. Nachtwey 2016).

The fear of the potentially rapid social decline in the modernized welfare state also leaves the middle classes in particular open to nationalistic ideologies, which claim to be able to save the welfare state by limiting it to German nationals as much as possible. According to a qualitative study by the Hans Böckler Institute »concerns about the reliability of one's own employment future« (Hilmer et. al 2017, p. 7) can be used in Germany as a driving force by nationalistic movements. Hence, Hannah Arendt's observation gets new actuality, that there is nothing worse for a society based on labour markets than that it runs out of work (Arendt 1958). The potential increase in efficiency due to digitalization 4.0, which is increasingly present in public discussions, can thus offer no perspective with regard to liberation from the compulsion to work, but at least in some parts of the population, it creates one thing above all: the fear of being left behind in the future.

## Powerlessness

Erich Fromm pointed out that the feeling of powerlessness is a common experience for subjects within authoritarian states. And even in a democracy, the ideal of democratic participation diverges from the reality, where the individual is separated from the centers of political and economic power. From a Frommian perspective the sensation of powerlessness, the impression that »those up there do what they want to« is not abstract but tied to the experiences of the majority, not least in their everyday work in hierarchical organizations (cf. Fromm 1960b; Fromm 1941a, pp. 273 f.).

Production of goods and services happens in organizations where the majority of employees, according to operational or tariff regulations, have nothing or little to decide. It is normal to follow the orders from the top, because one's own existence depends on the good will of the supervisor. Moreover, one can legitimize one's own actions by referring to the hierarchical structure of decision making within the organization. The supervisors and managers themselves can refer to an anonymous power: the market, the constant competition and the necessity to make a profit. Seemingly, human beings are not responsible for any decision concerning the »who, what, when and how«-questions of the production process. In Fromm's view, this lack of democratization, especially in economic production processes, leads people to the sensation of being powerless in everyday life.

In their qualitative analyses Wakenhut and Faus (2017) find out that, the loss of trust in social actors (like managers, politicians and journalists) is typical for AFD voters in Germany. The skepticism towards established, democratic mandate holders and the media, as well as the feeling that nobody can understand the more and more complex society, increase the desire of many to live under authoritarian leaders, who set and enforce simple guidelines. At the same time, nationalist ideologies can create feelings of superiority and power that counteract the feeling of powerlessness.

## Indifference

Even Erich Fromm describes indifference as a central problem of modern societies (Fromm 1991e [1953], p. 67 f.), again primarily (but not only) based on the capitalist production principle. »It is obvious that the relationship between competitors has to be based on mutual human indifference. Otherwise any one of them would be paralyzed in the fulfillment of his economic tasks—to fight each other and not to refrain from the actual economic destruction of each

other if necessary.« (Fromm 1941a, p. 118.) In my own analysis of interviews with managers, I was able to show that learning to be tough on oneself (and others) is described as an important lesson to reach higher managerial positions in companies (cf. Ehnis 2014).

Furthermore, production and distribution are not primarily orientated to the needs of individuals, nor to universal physiological needs like nutrition or sleep. Rather, the principle »goods for money« is of higher value than the need of individuals e.g. to satisfy their hunger. A violation of this principle would undermine the whole production system and endanger its efficiency. In the end, nothing would function anymore. Goods need to be sold. Non-sold goods need to be destroyed and cannot serve for the gratification of concrete human needs. That is one reason why half of all food in the world ends up at the garbage dump instead of in a belly (cf. Süddeutsche Zeitung 2013). For global economic contexts, sociologist Stefan Lessenich (2016) described this as an externalization-habitus, meaning that the Western world can and wants to outsource the costs of its way of life to the global south, while at the same time, being indifferent to concrete living and working conditions there.

The common principle to attach greater importance to the functioning of systems than to concrete human suffering has an enormous influence on our consciousness. It makes us somehow indifferent to concrete human destiny: we know how our jeans are produced, but we buy them anyway, we see that people drown in the Mediterranean, but we do nothing to stop it, because otherwise the system would no longer work. We see hunger in the world and yet food must be destroyed in order to regulate its value. We see global inequality of poverty and income, but rest idle, because otherwise, the system may lose efficiency. We see the effects of climate change but it is hard to do anything against it because the system works as it does and we need economic growth and so on.

From a Frommian perspective it can be said: Positions of indifference, fear and powerlessness are deeply embedded in Western capitalist societies and can be particularly activated for nationalism in times of asynchronicity. It is, among other things, these feelings that guide the process of »group narcissism« (Fromm 1964a) and promote the feeling of relatedness and rootedness through the construct of a »national identity.«

### **Towards a sane world society?**

Humanistic solutions seem complicated in comparison to the simple nationalist nostalgic efforts. And it is also clear that solutions cannot be developed on the rostrum, but as Katrin Voigt has worked out (cf. the following contribution),

that the struggle for a new common ground is task of everyday practice and this practice requires an ongoing critical discussion. Nevertheless, we would also like to put some guidelines for discussion with thoughts from Erich Fromm: The first principle would be the need for a strong narrative of solidarity based on the fact that all human beings are placed in the same—as Fromm calls it—»human situation« and mutually recognize each other in this fundamental sense as equals without denying differences, social inequality and different social positions (cf. Fromm 1964a, pp. 319–321). A humanistic search for solutions, if conducted in a comprehensive way, could offer the potential to give many a sense of belonging through a common reflection and practice on the way we want to be in the world.

Politically, Erich Fromm saw advantageous conditions for a productive, human development mainly within a two-fold approach: A first step should liberate humans *from* existence-threatening conditions of work and life. The cornerstones of his arguments were a guaranteed basic income or free food and housing. Furthermore, he argued for a reduction in working hours to reduce the time spent in alienating gainful employment. »A further effect of a guaranteed income, coupled with greatly diminished working hours for all, would be that the spiritual and religious problems of human existence would become real and imperative.« (Fromm 1966c, p. 2) Nowadays, the idea to liberate humans from existence-threatening conditions is still worth fighting for. However, they have to be global regulations and they should lead to a redistribution of income and property from the global north to the global south. In consequence, a democratization of markets by harmonized global income is preferable. The enormous discrepancy of global income and property is not only economically unfair, but also unfair in questions of participation in a global society: Who can and who should decide about the development of the world?

Another significant step for Fromm is the shift of liberty from e.g. existential fear, towards liberty to develop human abilities (cf. Fromm 1965c, p. 220). Fromm sees the key for the shift primarily in forms of participation and democratization especially in the field of labour. In general, Fromm argued that the redirection of production from private to public infrastructures is necessary to enable everyone to benefit in their productive human development.

»A vast change in industry from the production of commodities for individual consumption to the production of commodities for public use: schools, theaters, libraries, parks, hospitals, public transportation, housing; in other words an emphasis on the production of those things that are the basis for the unfolding of the individual's inner productivity and activity.« (Fromm 1966c, p. 4.)

Very important in this sense is the possibility to get education, to be able to use a (health) care system, the right of free speech and the democratization of gainful employment. The participation in production, in Fromm's view, is not the same as nationalization, expropriation or equality of income. Rather, democratic processes are important forces towards the productive development of human values, responsibility and against the feeling of powerlessness and indifference (cf. Weber et al. 2007). In Fromm's view differences of income or property should reasonably be justified by job performance or capacity. They should not be that high, so that all humans still have a similar relation to the world (cf. Fromm 1966c). Guaranteed basic income, reduction in working hours and especially an increasing public infrastructure, participation and decentralization were Fromm's main concepts regarding the road towards a sane, positively activating and liberal society (cf. last chapters in Fromm 1955a, 1968a, 1976a).

Amid ongoing tendencies of globalization, digitalization, as well as climate change, inequality and deficient democracy in different parts of the world, it seems essential to revitalize Fromm's ideas of a socialistic humanism. Such a social utopia, however, is also faced with considerable challenges and ambivalences in a complex, global world, which also requires scientific processing.

With regard to Erich Fromm, the central questions to answer are: What kind of relationships between human beings to themselves, to other people and to nature will be implemented within social change? And in terms of the economy: Who should decide in a humanistic society what goods are when and where produced and for whom?

Thereby, Erich Fromm was conscious of the fact that the road towards a society of productive need satisfaction is a long social process and somehow experimental. He was certain that the human, striving for liberty and solidarity, only by institutional support obtained a strong hegemonical social character. Inversely, humans striving for liberty are needed to construct the structures of a humane society. Fromm therefore was certain, that a long, evolutionary process of reformation, necessarily non-violent and humane, was necessary to gain such a society. The transforming humane attitude needed to be already a part of everyday life, in order to reach a productive, sane orientation both in people and in society.

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## Contested Common Ground and the Question of Emancipatory Value: Applying Fromm's Radical Humanism and Social Narcissism to the Discourse on Refugees and the Nation

Katrín Voigt



**Abstract:** Universality is being deconstructed within contemporary social struggles. Focusing on struggles around the discourse on refugees and the nation, and so-called »welcome culture« in the German context in particular, questions arise regarding the emancipatory potential of emerging narratives of a contested common ground (Hark et al. 2015). This article proposes Erich Fromm's understanding of »radical humanism« (1968a) and its line of argumentation towards »global solidarity« (Wilde 2013) instead of national »group narcissism« (Fromm 1964a) as a normative base to evaluate the emancipatory value of emerging narratives.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, universalism, contested common ground, radical humanism, welcome culture, group narcissism.

In a 2015 position paper, German sociologists Hark et al. introduce the concept of a *contested common ground* (German: das umkämpfte Allgemeine). In various social struggles, so goes their claim, universality is put into question. Drawing on post- and decolonial theory (cf. Balibar, 1995, Chakrabarty, 2000, Grosfoguel, 2012), it becomes clear that hegemonic epistemology claiming universality often would be better understood as particularism in the sense that it represents the perspective and interest of a particular group in power:

»If universal truth is constructed through the epistemology of a particular territory or body (whether it be Western, Christian, or Islamic), and through the exclusion of others, then the cosmopolitanism or global

proposal that is constructed through this abstract universalist epistemology will be inherently imperialist/colonial.« (Grosfoguel 2012, p. 94.)

The deconstruction of universalism as particularism that is »inherently imperialist/colonial« necessarily leads to the question of alternatives. Within post- or decolonial schools, we can find different answers, among them Aimé Césaire's *universal concrete*, »un universel riche de tout le particulier« (1957, p. 15), the concept of *transmodernity* by Enrique Dussel (2012), or *pluriversalism* by Walter Mignolo (2000). These authors have in common, not to dismiss the idea of a universal in total, claiming disconnected particularisms, but to aim for decolonization of universalistic epistemology instead.

Observing a disruption of the old *common ground* within various social struggles, Hark et al. do not dismiss the idea of universality either. Aware of the post- or decolonial critique, in their article, they call for a critical analysis of emerging narratives claiming universality instead. By pointing out that a *new common ground* (German: das neue Gemeinsame) is neither predefined, nor necessarily inclusive or fair (Hark et al. 2015, p. 102), questions regarding the basis to evaluate emancipative potential of such narratives of a *new common ground* arise.

Focusing in this paper on contemporary discourse on refugees and the nation and in particular on »welcome culture« as one influential narrative in this context in the German discourse, the concept of a *contested common ground* is useful to grasp the plurality of discursive formations aiming for hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe 2006). It becomes clear that the same configuration promotes a wide range of oppositional conceptions. Increasing nationalism, calling for national isolation, fighting everyone perceived as other, here »the refugee« as constructed »total other,« and granting human solidarity only within national confines, is one prevalent expression of contemporary struggle for a *new common ground*. Citizens showing solidarity with non-citizens, seeking asylum in Germany would be a different and opposing example of social struggle, contesting the *common ground*. While it seems plausible to dismiss the first example as non-inclusive, this paper will concentrate on a critical analysis of the more complex second case. At this point, it is important to stress the fact that transnational solidarity in the context of flight-migration, understood as struggle towards a *new common ground*, takes on many different forms. These forms are neither predefined nor naturally emancipative. The Frommian concept of social narcissism shall be proposed as theoretical and simultaneously normative approach to analytically distinguish different forms as well as to evaluate their emancipative potential. In order to comprehend the normative side, I will start with a brief introduction to Fromm's perception of radical humanism.

## The concept of Radical Humanism in Erich Fromm's Work

A radical humanistic position is central to large parts of Erich Fromm's writings (Durkin 2014). In the following, four key features of radical humanism as outlined by Fromm in his book *The Revolution of Hope* (1968a) shall briefly be introduced. Firstly, a radical humanism to Fromm means overcoming isolation, by surmounting one's own ego, greed and selfishness. »This transcendence is the condition for being open and related to the world, vulnerable, and yet with an experience of identity and integrity« (Fromm 1968a, p. 139). The overcoming of »egomania« (ibid.), Fromm defines as modus of to *be*, juxtaposing it with to *have* or to *use*. As second principle of radical humanism, Fromm describes the rejection of idolatry, connecting it to alienation in a secular context. Idolatry or alienation, he sees among others within the worship of political leaders or human made institutions like states and nations. As a third feature of radical humanism, Fromm defines a »hierarchy of values in which those of lower orders follow from the highest value« (ibid., p. 139) and points out their binding character. In this regard, Fromm also stresses the importance of the »principle of *practice*« over the principle of »submission to an *ideology*« (ibid., p. 140). A radical humanism to Fromm is concrete and current action rather than an idealistic conception of the future. While ideas are important to unify people in order to create a radical humanistic movement with according practice, they always have to be bound to real activity in order not to get lost to idolatry. As a fourth feature of radical humanism, Fromm defines solidarity to all humans and loyalty to life and humanity. In this sense, he defines true love to another human being always as love and recognition of entire humanity, recognized within this person. Differentiating true solidarity from narcissism, Fromm states:

»True solidarity exists by sharing deep and authentic human experiences, not by sharing ideologies and common fanaticism which in its very root is narcissistic and hence does not create solidarity any more than common drunkenness does.« (1968a, p. 152.)

A radical humanism, in this sense, strives for »global solidarity« (Wilde 2013) as it requires love for humanity, beyond social group or identity affiliations like nations.

Furthermore, Fromm conceptualizes radical humanism as »truly international« (1968a, p. 42), as he sees it appear in all countries and religious communities. In his writings, he refers to different cultural and religious contexts,

quoting from Jewish, Christian and Buddhist ethics. In this sense, the concept could hold as a »pluriversal« (Mignolo 2000), claiming universality by acknowledging a broad, exceeding the western epistemological basis. In his analysis of contemporary examples of radical humanistic struggles, Fromm focuses on his own, the US-American context, while an understanding of radical humanism as pluriversal concept would still require and enormously profit from a broader and more diverse empirical basis of concrete radical humanistic practice.

### **The Theory of Social Narcissism**

Fromm's dedication to radical humanism, as outlined above, plays a key role in his normative evaluation of social narcissism. In *The Heart of Man. Its Genius for Good and Evil* (1964a) Fromm explains social narcissism in analogy to individual narcissism as a form of psychic energy, that—besides its destructive parts—can also be understood as preserving force of the individual or group. It is the transformation of individual into social narcissism that allows people to equally strive for the persistence of the group, if not prioritize the group over their own lives. Furthermore, group narcissism can be a resource to protect the hurt individual ego. For the economically and culturally disadvantaged classes, group narcissism, according to Fromm, provides a strong imagination of belonging to a superior group. Not being excluded along class-lines but rather called in, as part of »one great nation« or »one superior race,« could compensate for the individually felt and structurally embedded inferiority:

»A society that lacks the means to provide adequately for the majority of its members, or a large proportion of them, must provide these members with a narcissistic satisfaction of the malignant type if it wants to prevent dissatisfaction among them. For those who are economically and culturally poor, narcissistic pride in belonging to the group is the only—and often a very effective—source of satisfaction.« (1964a, pp. 75 f.).

Addressed in this quotation is a normative distinction of a malignant from a benign type. The malignant form of narcissism, according to Fromm, focuses on the alleged given, the group in its alleged primordial form, the fame and glory of past times. Subject of malignant narcissistic satisfaction is nothing to be achieved, but rather something pre-given. In this concentration on the rigid, Fromm especially sees danger of exclusion and destruction. People are not able to recognize »the other« as a valuable human being, with potential for creation, similar to their own, but rather emphasize their differences and

strengthen an ideology of pre-given human hierarchy, in which they themselves take the lead. Benign narcissism, on the contrary, Fromm understands as a pride towards achievements of one's own social group, combined with an urge to create. This urge for creation makes it indispensable to see beyond one's own social group, to cooperate with others and therefore recognize their human potential. In the context of nations as social groups, this Frommian idea of benign social narcissism similarly can be found in Habermas' (1976) argumentation for constitutional, instead of national, patriotism. Here, we find the idea of redirecting social pride away from a group, conceptualized as an essentialistic, closed entity, towards a created constitution as binding force to a voluntary group of people, joined in the positive formulated goal of human striving.

The Frommian distinction of benign and malignant narcissism contains a normative hierarchy, the benign narcissism allegedly being a less severe form. It could be argued that this hierarchization holds a class bias (McLaughlin 1996), ascribing severe narcissism especially to lower classes resulting from dissatisfaction due to class oppression, as in the quotation above. In this regard, it seems necessary, not to undermine the influence of middle-class participation in nationalistic movements in the past and present, as one form of severe narcissistic exclusion and devaluation of »the other« (Koppetsch 2017).

Nevertheless, apart from this normative hierarchization, the distinction itself poses the opportunity to analyze the phenomena described as »benign« equally as a form of narcissism and in this, as a form of exclusion. In this sense, Fromm distinguishes benign narcissism clearly from his approach of a radical humanistic practice. A person or group within a state of benign narcissism may acknowledge »the other« equally as human being, still, that person or group is far from transcending *egomania*. Within a state of narcissism, love for »the other« as love for humanity cannot be reached, as all libidinous energy is directed to the ego. Love and care for »the other« are just features to underline one's own greatness. Given the destructive energy of narcissism that is still prevalent within its benign form, a different wording could be argued for, in order to prevent misunderstandings regarding severity. Instead, the key feature of distinction between the two phenomena described by Fromm seems to be the role of »the other«. Whereas »the other« is combatted within the malignant type, within the benign type, cooperation is possible, while »the other« still is acknowledged mainly for his or her purpose for the ego. The question of severity should then be left open to be answered by those experiencing the effects of othering.

### **Benign Narcissism within »Welcome Culture«**

Applied to contemporary German discourse on refugees and the nation, the Frommian concept of social narcissism is helpful to criticize an outspoken nationalism in the form of hate and violence towards »the other« as a form of malignant narcissism. Furthermore, by the concept of benign narcissism, it also helps to shed some light on different forms of solidarity with refugees. The Frommian approach underlines the importance of a detailed analysis of such different forms regarding their potential to be truly emancipative, inclusive or fair (Hark et al. 2015, p. 102), respectively radical humanistic (Fromm 1964a, pp. 139 ff.). An in-depth analysis of different forms of solidarity with refugees appears to be a necessary task in order to understand the social and subjective dynamics at play within the struggle for a *new common ground*, as well as to be able to identify potentially emancipative practices. The call to focus on *concrete* struggle (Hark et al. 2015) and radical humanistic *practice* (Fromm 1964a), to aim for a *universal concrete* (Césaire 1957) rather than a new abstract universalism, implies to the social sciences the necessity to ground such research on qualitative empirical data. A study on the field of solidarities with refugees should engage with the following questions: What types of solidarities can be found? What conceptions of the self and »the other« are present in those narratives and what are the consequences in terms of integration or exclusion? And finally, in what way can the emerging narrative be regarded as emancipatory?

The concept of benign social narcissism in such research would help to distinguish rather paternalistic approaches, where the engagement for refugees is used to display the helper's superiority. This superiority could also be felt for the nation. This, for example, could be the case when »welcome culture« becomes nationally framed. Within public German discourse, this term often refers to the executive decision of German state officials in September 2015 to »welcome« refugees into Germany that were held up in Hungary, facing a humanitarian crisis, as well as to the engagement of civil society supporting arriving refugees. Within a nationally framed narrative of »welcome culture,« the engaging individuals are likely to become national subjects and as such their action will become a field for positive national identification and pride. Understood as a form of benign social narcissism, this national narrative of benevolence is proof of national superiority. As opposed to a malignant narcissism, here »the other« does not have to be neglected or combatted, but instead »the refugee,« as victimized »total other,« becomes the necessary object to act out one's own altruism.

## Conclusion

Current enforcements of nationalistic movements in numerous places in the world give empirical evidence to the doubt that global solidarity in a radical humanistic sense will become a prevalent practice in the near future. The contemporary global landscape hardly poses an environment in which love for humanity and transcendence of egomania could compete in anyway with the strong affiliation to nations, leading to a polarization of *I* or *us* and *them*. Still, it is important to provide a dialectical perspective on the contemporary that at once focuses on social narcissism, inequalities, alienation and exclusion as well as on concrete struggles for participation and greater human integration. Therefore, it is a great strength of the Frommian approach to simultaneously provide a solid basis for critique of the status quo, and also place the focus on emancipating practices. In this sense, returning to the question on what grounds the emancipative potential of an emerging narrative of a *new common ground* could be evaluated, the Frommian concept of radical humanism poses a possible answer. Still, as Hark et al. (2015) point out, the process of evaluation necessarily has to be understood as an ongoing social discussion, including voices from social struggles of the oppressed. Therefore, Fromm's conception of a radical humanism builds a starting point to argue for global integration, while its concrete realization has to be part of an ongoing discourse. The continuous implementation of critique, e.g. right now from antiracist and feminist movements, would contribute enormously to the emancipative force of a *new common ground*.

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## Post-Truth Politics as a Pathology of Normalcy: Beyond Alienation and Narcissism in the Age of Globalization

Takeshi Deguchi



**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine post-truth politics using Erich Fromm's theory of narcissism and showing a route towards a sane society in Fromm's sense. Post-truth situations are generated by negative synergistic effects between narcissistic psychological tendencies and social media. Both of them have so-called filter bubble effects which segregate people from inner and outer reality. The process of integrating an unknown experience or reality into the self produces a new experience. That is a definition of Fromm's love and the way to overcome narcissism.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, post-truth politics, narcissism, alienation, self-love, self-interest.

### Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine post-truth politics using Erich Fromm's theory of narcissism and to show a route towards a »sane society,« in Fromm's sense.

»Post-truth,« according to Oxford Dictionaries, refers »to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than the appeals to emotion and personal belief.« The United Kingdom's European Union membership referendum and the 2016 United States presidential election are often considered exemplary political events driven by this phenomenon. In Japan, since the Brexit Referendum and the 2016 US presidential election, *Posuto Shinjitsu*, or Post-truth, has become a popular topic of discussion among

the general population. It is true that some Japanese media researchers say that the Japanese political climate is relatively free from post-truth situations because Japan is linguistically and geopolitically isolated from European countries and the U.S. However, post-truth political scenarios can also often be observed in Japan. For example, hate speeches based on a misunderstanding of colonial history, made by right-wing politicians and activists against Korean people living in Japan, are a serious problem. The Korean population in Japan are the descendants of people who emigrated from the former colonial Korean Peninsula to the Empire of Japan before and during the Second World War.

My paper is divided into four parts. First, I will explain what »post-truth« is by focusing on the architecture of social media, including Twitter or Facebook. Post-truth situations are generated by negative synergistic effects between narcissistic psychological tendencies and social media. I will argue that social media give rise to a »filter bubble.« Second, I will re-construct Fromm's narcissism theory as a critical social theory by describing the theoretical development from Sigmund Freud to Erich Fromm. Here, I will pay special attention to three key points, namely self-relation, self-interest and group-narcissism. Third, I will diagnose post-truth politics as a pathology of »normalcy.« Finally, I will argue that Fromm shows a way to recover from narcissism through individual self-transformation and social movements.

### **Post-truth politics and social media**

The Oxford Dictionary definition and the above-mentioned events show us that in post-truth situations people disrespect or distort objective facts and they are divided into friends and enemies who are emotionally opposed to each other. This indifference to objective facts and emotional cohesion are brought about by the architecture of social media. First, users make friends only with people who have similar political beliefs or personal preferences and, consequently, read only their favorite posts or news. Second, users can easily share or retweet contributed articles with the push of one button and, therefore, these articles are spread widely and instantly without any fact-checking. Third, by using website algorithms, social media cannot only selectively block news and posts which individual users dislike but also distribute only the information that users want to read.

By combining these three aspects, social media provide their users a personalized »filter bubble.« Filter bubble refers to a situation in which people are surrounded by facts they want to know regardless of whether or not these facts are true.

Furthermore, in post-truth politics it is no use denying subjective reality by showing objective facts, because people do not merely disrespect facts but actively believe in »alternative facts,« which are »objective« from their perspective.

Briefly, post-truth politics has two characteristics: first, it binds people together and forms a very emotional aggregate where groups are isolated from each other, and second, people believe in their own objective facts which are psychologically real for them.

### **Narcissism from Freud to Fromm**

Fromm himself regards narcissism as one of Freud's great findings in psychoanalysis. For Freud, narcissism is immediately related to his libidinal theory. He postulates the existence of two types of drives: one is ego-instinct or psychical interest and the other is sexual instinct. Narcissism can be defined as a state of individual mind in which the libidinal sexual instinct, which has been withdrawn from the external world or objects, has been directed to the ego.

To develop Freud's clinical theory of an individual pathology into a critical social theory using Fromm's theory, I will introduce three concepts: self-relation, self-interest and group narcissism.

The concept of self-relation aims to shed light on the relationship of the self to the self itself. Put simply, the relationship of the subject to the object can be never separated from the relationship of the subject to the subject itself. We can find this idea clearly in Fromm's distinction between selfishness and self-love. According to Fromm, Freud is strongly influenced by the bourgeois materialism of his age and, consequently, cannot think of psychical power without material power. Freud identifies the psychical instinct with sexual energy because psychical and physical behaviors are strongly interrelated in sexual phenomena. Based on this, Freud concludes that the more people love themselves, the less they love others, because the total amount of sexual energy derived from the libidinal instinct is relatively constant.

Fromm thinks that sexual desire and love are often mixed, but they must also be separated in that, while sexual desire aims exclusively at being satisfied, love is an expression of life itself and the power to generate something new, such as thoughts, emotions and experiences, both in the subject and the object of love. In other words, the relationship of the subject to the object can be never separated from the relationship of the subject to the subject itself. Fromm suggests that people who can love others can also love themselves, while on the other hand, people who fail to love themselves are also unable to

love others, because both the self and others are the object of the love of the self. It follows from what we have discussed above that in Fromm narcissism involves psychical tendencies caused by the lack of self-love, while Freud regards narcissism as loving the self too much.

Fromm explains narcissistic people's emotional attachment to themselves, to their own group or to what they have through overcompensation. People who cannot love are not able to generate anything on their own. Thus, they cannot but make up for their inner emptiness with overestimations of themselves or the group to which they belong. They may also appear selfish because they must satisfy their vanity.

Now that we have established that the narcissistic psychical tendency of selfishness is caused by a lack of love for both self and others, the next step is to investigate narcissistic people's subjective reality. Fromm himself pays attention to historical changes in the ethics of self-interest. Fromm's concept of self-interest appears in the form of »selfishness, self-love and self-interest« in *Man for Himself* (1947a), a revised version of »selfishness and self-love« coined in 1939 (Fromm 1939b).

Fromm argues that the meaning of self-interest has changed drastically from ancient Greek philosophers, through Spinoza, to modern culture. Fromm notes, like Michel Foucault in his later writings, that in ancient Greek self-interest refers to the care of the self. This idea can be seen in the Stoic School of Cicero and Seneca. In Spinoza, self-interest is identical to self-preservation or the ego-instinct in the Freudian sense and refers to the full development of human potentialities. Fromm names these ethics »the art of being.«

However, in modern culture the meaning of self-interest has evolved into selfishness or »subjective« interest in material goals: status, honour, success, power, money and so on. Consequently, paradoxically, self-interest assumes an ethically negative character. By contrast, ancient Greek philosophers and Spinoza consider self-interest an objective goal. To realize this goal people should have knowledge of themselves; in our modern society self-interest is just a collection of »subjective« preferences. Material goals outside and transcending individuals are much more »real« and ironically more »objective« than inner self-interest.

From the criteria of modern culture, narcissists are seemingly too interested in themselves; however, from the perspective of Fromm's art of being, narcissists lose objective goals and do not take care of themselves and are occupied, or rather, alienated, by various kinds of outer goals and idols which transcend themselves.

It may also be noted that instead of the ego-instinct Freud himself uses an expression of »ego-interest« or »psychical interest.« We could say that Fromm

also understands Freud's ego-instinct or self-preservation within the stream of ethical thought on »self-interest« from ancient Greece to modern society.

In summary, Fromm's considerations of self-interest show us that the »subjective« reality of our everyday life can conceal our objective self-interest. This perspective constitutes a critical base for analyzing social phenomena. We shall return to this point later.

Let us now leave self-interest and turn to group narcissism. Fromm distinguishes group narcissism from individual narcissism in *The Heart of Man* (1964a). To establish a critical social theory of narcissism, it is important to examine the gap between the individual and the collective levels. Fromm does not develop a thorough theoretical explanation here; however, we can conclude the following of both the societal and individual processes.

At the societal level, through the introduction of the theory of the social construction of reality, it can be argued that reality is essentially subjective but becomes objective through the intersubjective process of interaction. At the individual level, narcissistic people who share the same beliefs or preferences bind together in an extremely tight way because such people tend to be fond of those who are similar to themselves. In addition, since narcissistic individuals who belong to the same aggregate think and behave as a collective and in similar ways, the psychologies of individuals are applicable to the collective phenomenon.

## Subjective reality and alienation

Now we must return to and diagnose post-truth politics from the perspective of a critical social theory of narcissism. People in post-truth situations experience a subjective reality surrounded by a filter bubble and also form tight emotional binds with people who share their beliefs or preferences. In other words, they are included within another, bigger bubble which separates the in-group and the out-group. Under these circumstances, brought about by social media, narcissistic psychical tendencies such as overestimation of the self and one's membership group, or one's attachment to subjective reality are strengthened. The same tendencies in turn increase one's dependence on social media.

Before we address the move towards a sane society, I would like to return to Fromm's self-relation or self-love and self-interest as discussed above. From the ethical point of view, narcissistic tendencies are generated by a psychological state which is alienated from self-love and self-interest. To Fromm, love is an expression of life itself and the power to generate something new. By realizing self-love, people can have the new experience of producing ideas and

emotions, which is the experience of »becoming« or *Werden*. We can say briefly that through self-love and self-interest people will be able to move out from self-alienation and emancipate themselves from narcissistic tendencies such as »subjective« overestimation at the individual level. To clarify this emancipatory process, I will address Fromm's concepts of being conscious and unconscious.

For Fromm, it can be said that our subjective reality is constructed and maintained by the filter effects of language and grammar. People cannot necessarily perceive our whole experience of our inner and outer worlds. Due to the filter effects of language and grammar, some aspects of our experience are accessible to us but others are not. Consequently, we are »conscious« of the experience of realities which we can approach; however, other aspects of our reality remain in our unconsciousness.

To make this process clear, Fromm refers to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis from cultural anthropology. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that everyday ways of living and thinking are closely connected to language and grammar. Differences in culture and ways of life depend on different languages and grammars. Put another way, the realities in which people live vary from culture to culture. There is no sole and objective reality; rather, there exist various realities. Fromm adds social character (personality structure) and the repression of society to language and grammar as cognitive filters. Social character and repression also give rise to collective consciousness, or a »social consciousness,« which people in certain groups or societies cannot perceive.

Within the individual self, there exist two kinds of cognitive objects: one of which we are conscious, and the other of which we are unconscious. They are distinguished from each other by language, grammar and social character, which function as filters. In this sense, narcissistic people in post-truth circumstances are surrounded not only by the outer filter of social media but also the inner filters of language, grammar and social character. Hence, these people cannot fully access their own experiences and, consequently, construct a distorted reality.

### **Towards a sane society**

The way to control narcissistic tendencies is to expand the conscious against the unconscious. For Fromm, the conscious and the unconscious experience of reality are not firmly disconnected. Fromm refutes a spatial image of the unconsciousness and warns us that we should not think of the unconscious as a secret underground room which people can never access. We can recover from narcissistic tendencies to an extent we can become aware of the uncon-

scious and can integrate it into the conscious. The more clearly we are aware of the unconscious, the more objective we can be. However, it is impossible to be objective at a point distant from the subjective self. Therefore, being objective means that we experience an ongoing process of being conscious of the unconscious and by doing so, subjectivity is opened towards an unperceived experience and decentralized.

At the societal level, Fromm says that it is relatively easy to direct narcissistic energy to challenges which human beings must deal with: starvation, disease or disaster. If we can cooperate and produce something important, we can be proud of it together. We must here again return to self-love and self-interest. The process of integrating an unknown experience into the self and the de-centralization of the subject produce a new experience. In conclusion, we can say the best way towards a sane society or a society free from narcissism is, both at individual and societal levels, to produce something new through the cooperation or unification of heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting elements. That is the definition of love in Fromm's sense.

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**Takeshi Deguchi**, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, The University of Tokyo, Japan;  
E-Mail: deguchi@da2.so-net.ne.jp

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## The Self-Conscious Person Above Social Pressures: Erich Fromm's Guidelines for Individual Liberation

Dmitry Leontiev



**Abstract:** Erich Fromm succeeded in embracing with equal depth all the main aspects of human existence: unconscious dynamics, social formative influences and self-determination of the human being as a conscious agent. This last aspect of Fromm's heritage allows us to speak of him as an existentially minded thinker. His analysis of human situation, theory of existential needs, view on human nature as undefined, theory of freedom and theory of being as opposed to having make a priceless contribution to the existentialist line of thought.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, personality, existentialism, freedom, awareness, being.

**B**eing neither a psychoanalyst nor a social scientist my field is the psychology of personality and philosophical anthropology. These referential contexts define my view on Erich Fromm's heritage. I believe that the importance and contemporary relevance of Fromm's ideas deserve a far broader perspective than that of the couch.

I have been teaching classes on personality theories at Lomonosov Moscow State University and some other places for nearly 20 years. I am proud to say that my professor who taught this course before, in the 1970s-80s, when I was a student, was Bluma Zeigarnik, whose name is also associated with Berlin where she started her outstanding academic career.

While teaching my course, I gradually came to an insight regarding the very special place of Fromm's personality theory among all the classical personality theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Every author has been creating his or her own vision. But if we had to choose just one author whose theory would be the

most comprehensive, embracing in one coherent theory both deep psychological mechanisms, social and cultural influences in individual development and optional agentic self-determination capacities, this single choice would be Erich Fromm. This is why for me he is more than just one of the classical authors.

In my view, what can be labelled contemporary as opposed to old-school psychology started in the 1970s after what I would call a closed fracture in psychological science. After this fracture all psychology radically changed in many respects, and many new fields of study appeared that never existed before, but the most important change was the following. The dominant way of development of pre-fracture psychology was through the plurality of schools; each of them offered its own vision as an alternative to others, and often also its own language and explanatory principles. In post-fracture times the vector changed from a centrifugal to a centripetal one. The multitude of schools gave place to a complicated coherent field, the language was becoming an integrated one, and no new theory that would position itself as an alternative to all others had a chance to survive. Fromm was, as in many other respects, ahead of his time, trying to combine different contexts and even scientific disciplines in one theory of person-and-society.

I need not speak of Fromm as a prominent social scientist or as a revolutionary in psychoanalysis. Not less important seems his underestimated contribution to the understanding of our resources of being self-conscious agents overcoming the social and unconscious mechanisms (»chains«) that make us passive victims of alienated forces. Not only did he reveal our being conditioned by the society and by the unconscious, following the paths of Marx and Freud, but he also investigated the ways of liberation from them, following Spinoza's thrust. I will speak about Fromm as an existentialist who articulated many key tenets of the existentialist view on the human being much better than the authors whose names are usually associated with existentialism. For him there was no incompatibility but rather a complementary relationship between existentialism and psychoanalysis, like that between psychoanalysis and sociology; they comprised different dimensions of the same multidimensional picture.

This aspect of Fromm's heritage, explicated especially in *Man for Himself* (1947a), *The Sane Society* (1955a), *The Heart of Man* (1964a) and *To Have Or to Be?* (1976a), allows us to speak of him as an existentially minded thinker. He rarely, if ever, referred to existentialists, but his analysis of the human situation and the theory of existential needs (Fromm 1955a), his view of human nature as undefined (Fromm 1964a), his theory of freedom and theory of being as opposed to having (Fromm 1976a), make a priceless contribution to the existentialist line of thought.

First of all, I would like to specify what I mean by existentialism, because there is no unambiguous definition of this orientation in philosophy and psychology; a few years ago I was involved in an international group preparing the statute of the *World Association of Existential Psychotherapy* (its first congress took place in 2015 in London), and reaching a relative consensus on the basic definition of existential therapy took over a year. As for myself, I have been working at this definition since about 2000, and still cannot stop. Here are my

## Definitions

- (1) The *existentialist worldview* means treating the world as a total uncertainty, the only source of bringing certainty into it being yourself, provided that you do not see yourself as the possessor of ultimate truth and that you validate your views in dialogical exchanges with your fellow humans.
- (2) *Existential psychotherapy* is a strategy of providing psychological help based on treating clients as conscious agents beyond and above their mental mechanisms. Reflective awareness and agentic capacities allow them to take responsibility for their lives and finding meaning despite the objective uncertainty and anxiety-provoking unpredictability of the future. Specific choices based on this responsibility are negotiated with other fellow persons in dialogical encounters, existential psychotherapy being a part of this process.

The most important point is that the existential approach is not a special school, alternative to other ones, like psychoanalysis (May 1967); it adds one more dimension neglected by psychoanalysis and begins where psychoanalysis ends. This was clearly phrased by Rollo May, the founder and the leader of the American branch of existential psychology and psychotherapy, who was at the same time a certified and practicing analyst, whose personal analyst was Erich Fromm.

What seems especially important in Fromm's ideas of the existential dimension of the human being is that these ideas were developed not in isolation from his views on the social and psychodynamic determinants of human conduct, but rather as complementary aspects of a unified picture.

## Human nature

Fromm's view on the human essence, most pointedly articulated in *The Heart of Man* (1964a), gives a very convincing answer to the ancient philosophical

question: Is the human being essentially good, godlike by nature, or essentially evil, »a naked ape« not much different from other animal species? Fromm's answer is purely existentialist: »the essence of man [should be defined] not as a given quality or substance, but as a contradiction inherent in human existence« (Fromm 1964a, p. 112). We have no predetermined potentialities which would direct our development; the human essence lies in its universal transcendent capacity of developing in any direction, so to say, godwards or beastwards. Indeed, the history of the 20th century proved that there is no peak a human being could not reach and there is no baseness a human being could not fall down to.

»Man is neither good nor evil. If one believes in the goodness of man as the only potentiality, one will be forced into rosy falsification of the facts, or end up in bitter disillusionment. If one believes in the other extreme, one will end up as a cynic and be blind to the many possibilities for good in others and in oneself. A realistic view sees both possibilities as real potentialities, and studies the conditions for the development of either of them.« (Ibid., p. 119.)

This idea is absolutely accurate from the viewpoint of philosophical anthropology of our days, and it perfectly resonates with the most recent ideas on the challenge of uncertainty: we cannot expect that our nature or society will instruct us on what is the right way to live. We are to decide for ourselves at our own risk, thus creating ourselves through these decisions and defining ourselves, defining what we are indeed. I would say that the humane in us is a possibility (which may come true or not), a challenge (which we are to face proving our humanity or denying it), and a responsibility (for us to accept and to bear, if we dare).

### **The third factor**

Fromm was the first to replace the traditional binary, biosocial view of the human being, which suggests that our sociocultural acquisitions make us humans, helping us to control impulses, by a trinary structure in which the person for himself has to overcome both biological impulses and social constraints. In Fromm's works (in particular in *The Sane Society*, 1955a), personality is treated not in terms of biosocial interaction; rather, both biological and social determinants appear as equally distant from the person proper. Both systems create fields that allow the person to function without awareness, needing no

freedom; an alternative is the personal field-independent way of awareness, awakening, choice and courage. Fromm described individual development as a sequence of births overcoming the initial »psychological symbiosis« (ibid, p. 25–27). Here we find an important paradox of human existence: human life and human well-being, as recent studies show, are based on social ties and social support; however, personality development above the level of collective mentality is possible only through overcoming these ties.

Some similar ideas can be found in Carl Gustav Jung's works of the 1930s (Jung 1954), but without much elaboration. Later, similar ideas have become more popular. Kasimierz Dabrowski (1964) wrote about »the third factor« of personality development, besides nature and nurture, being the person oneself. Viktor Frankl (1969) stated that it is not the character but the person that finally decides, the spiritual person that is capable of taking a detached attitude or position toward one's heredity, environment, needs, and character, though does it not often. Alexei Leontiev (1978) stated that both nature and nurture are premises of personality rather than its components, and the problem of personality refers to a special dimension distinct from the dimensions where biological and social mechanisms are located. The same idea was articulated by Fromm who wrote that a human being emerges through the transcendence of our inherited biological nature, and reason and consciousness lead us along this way (Fromm 1964a, p. 113). We may however deny this specifically human way and replace biological imperatives by social ones which also relieve us, in a similar way, from the burden of self-determination and choice.

### **Freedom as awareness**

Fromm was the first to make freedom an object of psychological analysis. In *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a) he proposed a theory of freedom, including the distinction between *freedom from* and *freedom to*, the tight connection between freedom and responsibility and, due to the latter, an understanding of freedom as a burden for many who strive away from freedom rather than toward freedom.

In *The Heart of Man* (Fromm 1964a) he elaborated his theory of freedom further. Freedom, says Fromm, is »nothing other than the capacity to follow the voice of reason, of health, of well-being, of conscience against the voices of irrational passions« (ibid. p. 126). The issue of freedom is not a general, but a specific one: whether and to what degree is this person free? We have a chance of choosing good rather than bad inasmuch as we are clearly aware of the situation. Fromm listed six aspects of this awareness that may make us free:

(1) awareness of the good and the evil; (2) awareness of the way of acting that would be appropriate for attaining a goal; (3) awareness of your unconscious determinants; (4) awareness of options to choose between them; (5) awareness of eventual consequences of this or that choice; (6) the awareness that it is not enough just to be aware, but that we are to take action, to face challenges, to bear pain and adversities, to resist passions, to pay a price (*ibid.*, p. 128).

In his last book, *The Art of Being* (1989a), Fromm stressed again the importance of inner liberation rather than liberation from external constraints, though he is rather critical regarding most popular practices of »inner liberation.«

### **Overcoming narcissism**

Narcissism, including social narcissism, sets boundaries between ourselves and reality; it replaces a transparent window to the world with a mirror where we see only ourselves. It screens us off from reality, and still worse, it is an obstacle for any dialogue, and existential dialogue is a relation into which we are entering open and ready for change, and which serves as a necessary condition for personality development and searching for shared values rather than imposing predetermined ones. In our postmodern world we cannot uncritically rely on values that someone has given us centuries ago, but we also cannot rely on our inner feeling alone. We check our values and criteria for choice against other people, finding a common ground for our actions and making a self-organized society. Narcissism is an antonym to dialogue, and also an antonym to tolerance, because narcissism, especially its social form, suggests that there is only one truth, and everything that deviates from it is a lie, a fake, a stupidity, an evil. Tolerance suggests that different people may have different truths and none of them is *a priori* supreme (however they need not be absolutely equal, and this can be found out *a posteriori*, in the course of their practical verification). This is why Fromm summarized the main message of all the major humanistic religions: »It is the goal of man to overcome one's narcissism« (1964a, p. 85).

### **Aliveness, biophilia, being**

Fromm was one of the first authors who made life the object of psychological analysis, and his construct of biophilia vs. necrophilia is very important in this context. The main difference between them lies in the specifics of psycholog-

ical determinism. Necrophiles are determined by rules and regulations, and everything is for them pre-established and prescribed; there is no place for uncertainty, surprise, chance, play, creativity that together make up the main content of the world of biophiles. This distinction parallels the distinction between conformist vs. individualist ways of personality development (Maddi 1971) and the opposition of being »on tape« vs. being alive (Bugental 1991a). »Living is a fundamental business of life. We all do it only partially« (Bugental 1991b, p. 30). In this sense being alive means transcending both one's psychodynamic and one's socio-typical constraints and having the courage to decide for oneself.

Among the leading psychologists of the 20th century, Erich Fromm was probably the only one who succeeded in embracing with equal depth all the main aspects of human existence: unconscious dynamics, social formative influences and the self-determination of the human being as a conscious agent. Spinoza, who was the third referent author for Fromm, after Freud and Marx, stated in the fourth part of his *Ethics*, »Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions,« that humans are enslaved by their affects; and in the fifth part, »Of the Power of the Understanding, or of Human Freedom,« that liberation is also possible (Spinoza 1677/1883). The same refers to society and its constraints: we are in a sense enslaved by them, but also keep the potential for liberation, though not all and not many make proper use of this potential. Fromm's message says that there is a sound alternative, though it is not warranted and requires much awareness and effort. No one can help being the object of social pressures, but following them without any choices is not the only option. In the case of an insane society, the person's creating his or her independent, personal philosophy as the supporting ground may be a real path away from being caught in social conflicts, and Fromm's works provide the guidelines for doing so.

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## Erich Fromm and American Individualism

Tomohiro Uozumi



**Abstract:** This paper shows that Fromm's discussion is curiously connected to the tradition of American individualism. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm suggests that authoritarianism derives from aloneness as a result of modern individualism and entrusts his hope in democracy for spontaneous activity and solidarity. But why is spontaneous activity and solidarity hopeful in democracy? The interesting thing is, this conclusion is close to the discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville, who also regarded spontaneous relationships as an important foundation of democracy. Based on Tocqueville's insight, there is a tradition in sociology that argues for the relationship between democracy and individualism, such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* and Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*. This paper attempts to show how Fromm was influenced by the tradition of American individualism and discusses Fromm's impact on later American individualism studies.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, spontaneous activity, solidarity, democracy, Individualism, social character.

This short paper is part of my research project on the importance of »American individualism« in understanding Erich Fromm's thoughts, which are compatible with and influenced by American individualist thought. This paper comprises two parts: part one briefly introduces the tradition of American individualism, and part two discusses how Fromm's thoughts are related with the tradition and considers in what way Fromm's thoughts were influential.

Although Fromm's thoughts have been studied in many aspects, the examination of their relationship with American sociology or social thoughts is still

limited to some works of Neil McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>. McLaughlin (1998) reveals that Fromm was once very influential, however, today, he is a »forgotten intellectual.« Nevertheless, McLaughlin agrees that Fromm's social character theory has been inherited by some sociologists (McLaughlin 2001).

### What is American individualism?

American individualism is a tradition of thought, commonly seen in the works of American sociologists such as David Riesman (Riesman et al. 1950), Robert Bellah (Bellah et al. 1985), and Robert Putnam (Putnam 2001)<sup>2</sup>. These sociologists have examined and considered the changing social character or the cultural characteristics of American society based on insights from Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville 2000) illustrates the cultural climate of the American society where people constantly join together in groups, eager to establish voluntary associations. He regards this cultural character, spontaneous and active relationships between people, as an important basis for supporting democracy. Based on this insight, the abovementioned sociologists have discussed the changing character of American society. However, these researchers, particularly Riesman and Bellah, have further focused on the level of social character, expressed in many ways, such as ethos, mores, habits of the heart, or social character<sup>3</sup>.

In *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman directly refers to the influence of Fromm's theory and the concept of the »other-directed character« and analyzes the transition of American society's social character from an inner-directed character to other-directed character. The concept of the »other-directed character;« the key term in his analysis, is derived from Fromm's concept of the »marketing orientation« (Riesman et al. 1950, p. 23) and his basic methodology is based on Fromm's social character theory (Riesman et al. 1950, p. vi).

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah points out the changes in American cultural character. According to him, the character of American individualism has changed from the tradition of republican individualism, observed by Tocqueville, to that of utilitarian's individualism, by which people are egoistic and

1 Some works like Wilde (2004), Durkin (2014) also discuss this question to some extent but it is not a main theme and their reference is limited.

2 Elliott and Lemart (2004) refer to this American tradition of thought as »isolated individualism.«

3 Putnam (2000) shares the theme of Individualism but his research method is based on statistical analysis of social capital and does not directly discuss social character.

withdraw into their own worlds, with no commitment toward public community (cf. Bellah et al 1985).

Riesman and Bellah share some characteristics. Both have attempted to describe changes in the American society and their discussions have focused on the levels of social character. Therefore, they have attempted to understand the common social characters through conducted active interviews with many people; in reality, Riesman's study became a model for Bellah, who stated that his research method for understanding character and society was inspired by Riesman<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, the aforementioned studies on character and society have been influenced by Fromm's social character theory.

### ***Escape from Freedom* and individualism**

In this section, I present the following two reasons that I believe enable Fromm's theory to influence the above mentioned studies: First, Fromm's social character theory provides sociologists a useful methodology to discuss character and society. Second, since Fromm's discussion is parallel to the tradition of American individualism, it is applicable to these sociological studies; this point is discussed further.

In *Escape from Freedom* (1941a, p. 269), Fromm presents the argument of the book as follows:

»The future of democracy depends on the realization of the Individualism that has been the ideological aim of modern thought since Renaissance. The cultural and political crisis of our day is not due to the fact that there is too much individualism but that what we believe to be individualism has become an empty shell.«

Fromm recognizes the problem of democracy as a problem of individualism; his answer to the problems of democracy and authoritarianism is »spontaneous activity« (1941a, p. 259). However, a question to be examined is why is spontaneous activity the answer to the problem of democracy and individualism?

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4 Additionally, Bellah also refers to Michael Maccoby, who was Fromm's co-worker during his social research in a Mexican village (Bellah et al. 1985, p. xii).

## Spontaneous activity and solidarity

Fromm's discussion of the concept and theory of authoritarian character in 1936 was still clearly under the influence of Freud's ego theory; therefore, in his article, he states that the answer to authoritarianism is the development of the ego or self against the super-ego (1936a, p. 159).

Also in *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) Fromm emphasized the development of ego or self-realization (or positive freedom), but the concept of spontaneous activity was first introduced. What is the meaning of this change? Why is spontaneous activity the answer to democracy?

According to *Escape from Freedom* the problem of authoritarianism is seemingly caused by »aloneness.« In the age of individualism, wherein individuals are free from the primary bonds of society, they must establish secondary bonds and solidarity with other people; spontaneous activity provides an important basis to create solidarity. Furthermore, solidarity based on spontaneous activity between people is considered to be the foundation of democracy in the age of individualism. Therefore, this discussion was based on the premise of human nature that relatedness with others is essential for human existence<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, I do not know whether Fromm was conscious about the tradition of individualism thoughts; perhaps, he did not read Tocqueville's text. Nevertheless, his theory following *Escape from Freedom* is similar to the American tradition of individualism that regards spontaneous relationships between people as the basis for democracy.

## Conclusion

In this short paper, I first introduced the tradition of American individualism and analyzed the works of Riesman and Bellah to elucidate the changing character of American society, in which Fromm's theory of social character plays an important role. Second, I explored why Fromm's theory was useful to these studies on individualism. I examined Fromm's discussion of spontaneous activity, identifying that his perspective on democracy is parallel to the tradition of individualism, which regards spontaneous relationships between people as an important basis for democracy.

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5 Fromm's later theory of human nature (Fromm 1947a) connects to humanistic ethics in the tradition of Aristotle, Spinoza, and Dewey. These thinkers are in agreement with the thinkers on the topic of autonomy and individualism, listed in Steven Lukes' study on individualism (Lukes 1973).

Therefore, both Fromm's theory of social character and his analysis of democracy are useful for discussing modern individualism. Fromm's thoughts are crucial to and even inherited in American individualism studies. Although Fromm appears to be a »forgotten intellectual,« the topic Fromm has discussed is relevant even today in individualism studies. Further research of individualism studies is necessary to understand the relevance of Fromm's theory.

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## IV

**Social Character Case Studies**

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**Revisiting Fromm's Concept of Social Character and Social Change: An Example from De-Industrialized Working Class Communities in the UK****Luis Jimenez**

**Abstract:** This paper highlights the relevance of Erich Fromm's concepts of social character and social change to offer a more nuanced understanding of the neo-liberal inter-generational traumatic legacy of loss of stable work, changing worker gendered identity, disrupted affect, community engagement and historical memory within a global context of insecure labour and emerging neoliberal forms of social character in the aftermath of massive redundancies and unemployment experienced recently in some post-industrial working class communities in the UK.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, social character, social change, neoliberalism, identity, post-industrial work, community, psychosocial research.

**Introduction**

In this paper, I use Erich Fromm's concepts of social character and social change (Fromm 1932a, 1941a, 1947a, 1955a) as key conceptual framework to reflect

and further understand the psychosocial significance of recent global processes of chronic job insecurity, massive redundancies and unemployment endured by entire working class de-industrialized ex-steel communities in the UK.

I then also connect these Frommian notions to other contemporary explanations and debates about the neoliberal subject of work and neoliberal mode of production and its relevance to understand new/emerging forms of social character, the workings of identity in relation to changes in the labor market and practices of community regeneration in the context of globalization and the forthcoming UK exit from the European Union.

To do this, I have drawn on and re-read (secondary analysis) research data generated from two previous research projects (Jimenez & Walkerdine 2011; Jimenez & Walkerdine 2012; Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012; Jimenez 2014) aimed at exploring the impact for regeneration of the closure of a number steel works that have been taking place since 2002 up until 2016 in various locations in South Wales, UK. Our research also explored similar work-related changes on worker identity and subjectivity using a comparative sample in New South Wales, Australia.

### **The research context**

In particular, we were interested not only about what had happened to the redundant ex-steelworkers (all male workers), but also to their families and others within the community, after the closure of the major local employer, the steelworks in South Wales.

The aim of the study was to understand what role forced identity changes played in the issues affecting the town. Most regeneration issues focus on bringing services and jobs to areas, but of course we know that major events such as the closure of a town's major employer has massive (often traumatic) long-term effects on people's senses of themselves, on their ways of coping, on family relationships and on children.

Our key research questions about responses to socio-economic changes in ex-steel communities were:

- ▶ How do people construct their senses of identity these days?
- ▶ What are the consequences of the identity paths people choose?
- ▶ How do identity choices intensify or ease social conflict?
- ▶ What is it like to build an identity in situations of social exclusion?

Our main research findings were about the impacts on people's identities after redundancies, and how a community changes in response to them.

In summary, some of what we learned from our interviews with over 20 ex-steel workers and their families was:

- ▶ Differences in responses to the redundancies are markedly age related.
- ▶ The younger workers are more able to let go and learn from their previous work experiences: they see the redundancies as a challenge and an opportunity to further retrain, reorient and find other ways of developing their careers.
- ▶ The older workers seem to have less motivation and interest in mobilizing their personal and social resources to face the redundancies in the way the younger men do. By contrast, they become much more cautious and sometimes skeptical about the uncertain job options that are offered to them.

Use of Transferable Skills in New Employment				
Age Group	Transferable		Non Transferable	
	N	%	N	%
30 – 34	2	10	3	15
40 – 44	1	5	2	10
45 – 49	1	5	1	5
50 – 54	0	0	9	45
55 – 59	0	0	1	5

One of the most important aspects of the work was to think about how a community based around one employer changes from a relatively homogeneous to a heterogeneous community.

For example, the importance of the patterns of interaction and sense of belonging built up by the patterns of work and family life imposed not only by the steel works, but by geography and the history of the area, meant that many people experienced their ex-steel communities as being a kind of family itself. The community gave many people a very deep sense of being and belonging which sustained the inhabitants emotionally as well as socially (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012).

This was expressed by many people; it also manifested as a fear that other communities would only look after their own, so that it would be better to stay put than to move somewhere else for work.

Main Coping Strategies to Deal with Redundancies	
Age Group	Coping Strategies
30 – 34	positive attitude, further education, new career path
40 – 44	resignation, stoicism, indifference, feeling that there is no time to waste, isolation, alcoholism, job seeking
45 – 49	stress, isolation, indifference, sick leave
50 – 54	resignation, isolation, indifference, resentment, vulnerability, job seeking, prepared to leave working life
55 – 59	indifference, resentment

Peter (37) reflected on the importance of his family in his decision not to relocate to find work after he was made redundant:

»There was no way on earth I was going to leave my family and go down there to work [...] I think a lot more of my family than I do of steel corporations.«

A major trend in the research interviews was for most people over 23, and some under 23, to have a very strong sense that children and parents had to be cared for, that the best way forward was to re-organize the family unit (for example, to have the wife take on more work to compensate for the drop in the husband's wages), rather than to move for a better life.

Kate (37) reflects on her own and her partner's work patterns and how they as a couple still have to accommodate these in order to have a family life together:

»You know, if you want things, I mean, because obviously, it's all to do with material things isn't it, you know, you've got bills to pay or if you want to go on holidays and all that sort of thing, most people would say that two of you have to work to give yourselves a better standard of living and I think that just comes, that could be any two people, you know whether they've worked in the steelworks or not. It depends on what you want, as to what sacrifices you're prepared to make and you know, if it means that one of you has got to work shifts so it means that perhaps you haven't got quite as much time together, that's what you do, you know, that's just something that you've got to be prepared to do.«

Given that the ex-steel Welsh community is one that gives its members a deep

sense of meaning, we often wondered, how can it transform itself after the loss of the employer? Could it survive a major shift in which people no longer go out and come home at the same time? We also wondered, how would local people adapt to doing different kinds of work outside of the town, in which patterns of the gendered division of labor change fundamentally, and in which young people can no longer find work?

### **The role of the trade unions**

The local trade unions had a key role in making the transition from steel work to new forms of work easier than it would otherwise have been. It could be argued that the unions prepared the workforce for a neo-liberal workplace. Their strategy was to encourage workers to think about building their new careers out of their leisure interests. One worker, for example, turned an interest in music and guitars into a job as a guitar maker, with training paid for by the union. Two others turned an interest in young people into a career in youth and community work. Again, it was the Welsh study that allowed us to see the central importance of this for the working lives of the participants.

By contrast, we saw in the Sydney data that workers experienced redundancy alone and were most likely to feel that they bore some responsibility for it. They felt that they had to work on themselves to become appropriate workers for the new labor market. This attitude was almost nonexistent for the redundant Welsh workers (though it was more noticeable in young people). The Welsh workers experienced redundancy as a collective thing overall and certainly with no intimation that it was their responsibility.

### **Some responses from young people**

Overall, the young men and women were much more caught up in neo-liberal discourse and the need to develop skills than older workers (see Silva 2014). This is realistic but does pose a challenge to sustaining a community for older and younger inhabitants.

While some young people were willing to move for jobs, others, like older workers, wanted to stay in the community. This posed significant difficulties for a minority of young men. These young men found the idea of available work, particularly work in the local supermarket, embarrassing.

On exploring this further it became clear that this embarrassment was common amongst young men; it was associated with work that had the appearance

of femininity. Young men were embarrassed to be seen working in a »feminine« role, rather than in heavy industry.

### **Some responses from women**

We strongly gained the viewpoint that women are the bedrock of the community. They are the ones who express most strongly the idea that their communities are like a »family,« and just as they are often the emotional bedrock of the family, so too are they the bedrock of the community.

Martha (66) who is a local resident says that women are the ones who help to hold the community together. She sums up what the collective process of dealing with steel redundancies looks like for her so far:

»People are starting to come back together. I think it was the point of them saying—right the steelworks are gone now we've got to go forward or we've got to get something else here. [...] Now let's stand together, shoulder to shoulder. They've put us down we might be down but we're not out...And like the phoenix we will rise from the ashes... So the attitude of people in the community is fantastic we're like one big family. It's sort of we're all belonging to one another. I mean our families have been here for generations, except the people that have come in the last few years and, if they don't like our ways, well there's nothing we can do about that.«

### **Some responses from older men**

For many of the older men, the consequence of neo-liberalism and changes in the labor market is a sense of disillusion. They felt there is no political commitment to them and that the unions cannot in the end do anything. This means they feel the need to be pragmatic, have a different sense of life—e.g. take holidays, spend quality time with family—and take whatever they can find.

Impact on Health After Redundancies			
Age Group	Type of Impact		
	N	%	
30 – 34 (n = 5)	0	–	–
40 – 44 (n = 3)	2	10	stress, anxiety, psoriasis, arthritis
45 – 49 (n = 2)	2	10	depression, alcoholism
50 – 54 (n = 9)	5	25	depression, high blood pressure
55 – 59 (n = 1)	1	5	depression

Older men do not feel that they have the necessary skills to feel fully engaged with an entrepreneurial narrative, and they remain local for the most part.

Overall, for both older and younger men, the importance of work in shaping their masculine identity is much less central. There is an awareness of the importance of quality time, flexibility, being at home and some limited gender flexibility. This signals the end of a strong work identity as a central characteristic of masculinity. We think this is an important aspect to consider in policy terms.

This also emerges from a daily realization that they are trapped geographically, that there is only so much they can do to retrain, and that their community is shrinking. They had pride in the steel works and they felt that they were good at what they did—this keeps them going. Suffering was there in the past, with exploited steel workers working in dangerous conditions, but now they are earning half of their previous wages (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012).

### Family responses to redundancies and change

Many participants talked about their ex-steel communities as a kind of family. This showed the way that they think about community ties and its significance to the continuity of their sense of being. In fact, there were no people living alone in the study. The decision not to move away from their community meant that accommodation had to be made within the family. The man may take work he does not like, and the woman may take more of the burden of wage earning; meanwhile, domestic tasks and childcare may begin to be shared. In other words, the relationship accommodates the redundancy by making changes that will allow for continuity.

This could also mirror how we might think of a community's ability to accommodate some changes while being able to feel the same. The Welsh Valleys were among the areas most in favor of Brexit.

### **Male coping with the new labor market**

The average income of the Welsh ex-steel workers is now half of their previous wage (only £12—13,000 per annum). However, in many ways, they do not miss the steel works. These men are now able to talk about how hard, dangerous and exploitative the work was, which they would not return to were it not for the money.

However, the steelworks did provide a center-point to the community, and its loss is as much about that as it is about the work. The inhabitants struggle to bring a life-giving focus back to the community when the steel works is gone.

### **Coping with unemployment in both samples (Welsh & Australian)**

In both samples (Wales -UK and New South Wales- Australia) there was an age-related response to redundancy; older workers showed a great similarity in their desire to get out of the house and the fixity of their relationship to domestic labor.

However, there were important differences. The Sydney narratives conformed to shifts more theoretically expected, that is, a shift to particular kinds of neo-liberal narratives of the self [e.g., seeing oneself as responsible for developing an appropriate demeanor for the new forms of work]. This was not the case for the redundant steelworkers in Wales. The Welsh narratives showed a marked absence of this attitude and a total absence of aspirational discourse.

As for the young men, there were similar aspirations within this group, but while young Sydney men might have to cope with poorly paid work, they were noticeably better off and had higher aspirations than their Welsh peers, for whom poverty was much more conspicuous.

### **Community breakdown and community cohesion**

»Affective practices« (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012) is a term we developed to understand the historically developed practices for the production and maintenance of community, and the related processes of social change. These practices can also be understood as defenses. These practices have been developed

in specific historical circumstances and are central to preserving community relations.

Certain things cannot be spoken in particular contexts, e.g., workers agree never to talk about families at work, and families agree never to discuss personal problems outside the family. We mapped relational approaches to change both within the whole community and in families, including the mobilization of fantasy, to explore the ways in which groupings changed one aspect of their relationship in order to preserve a sense of continuity of being.

### **Affective responses to neo-liberal work-life changes and intergenerational affective and traumatic transmission of collective lived experience**

Our research tried to bring an awareness of the affective social processes by which chronic traumatic experiences of loss and insecurity pass from one generation to another, often in unspoken ways and through unspoken affective accommodations, in these ex-steel communities (see Jimenez 2014).

Drawing on Eshter Bick's (1968) notions of skin ego and skin envelope, we also then devised the concepts of »affective communities« and »affective relatedness.« In particular we then used Davoine & Gaudilliere (2004) notions of »resonance« and the »historical link« as a way to provide a space for reflection, dialogue and sharing in the community that aims to recuperate, re-value and re-moralize the idea of vulnerability in a deeper humanistic sense, and not merely within a neoliberal agenda. In this way, we highlighted the importance of inter-dependence and cooperation in personal and social relationships (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012).

However, we could also connect these same efforts within a Frommian idea of »courage« and »center-to-center relatedness« (Funk 1982, 2013), as both approaches are not mutually exclusive, but actually contribute to each other. More than a theoretical debate, this has important implications for policy in relation to the way communities cope with change and loss.

If we pay attention to the affective aspects of regeneration, we consider that which, while it may feel more ephemeral than the introduction of new jobs to the town, is central to the sense of well-being and belonging of the inhabitants.

In this sense, Fromm's notions of social character and social change do help us develop a framework to further understand the particular ways in which local people make sense of and engage with their current lives and work projects. Fromm's (1932a, 1941a, 1947a, 1955a) theories and research on social character and processes of social change have much to offer to debates about community breakdown and cohesion.

## Intergenerational trauma and defensive affective survival

Using a psychosocial approach to look at our data, we have argued that what some sociological theory (Mc Kenzie 2007) sees as »class collectivism« is actually affective practices and affective community, honed through specific historical circumstances and forms of work. Rather than seeing these community responses as a bastion of working class resistance of collectivism, we could understand how these practices work to allow the inhabitants to have a sense of belonging and being.

We speculated that such practices of speaking and silence, the said and the unsayable, could be part of a necessary defensive process that allows for the possibility of social cohesion, the ability to cope without burdening others, and the maintenance of feelings of support and solidarity, which were necessary for survival (Jimenez & Walkerdine 2012; Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012; Jimenez 2014). All of these responses bind the community in patterns of affective organization, which allow it to survive and which defend against anxieties which might threaten the breakdown of the community.

## Some implications of the research

Our psychosocial research (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012) brought up issues of affect and fantasy not normally considered in identity research on community regeneration. Fantasy/phantasy and imagination were initially central to helping workers start facing both the loss of the past and their fear of the future. This has untapped implications for policy, as government retraining support packages often only address the skills needed to transform a worker into a neoliberal working self, which was still alien to the Welsh workers, since their whole sense of being and belonging was still tied into an industrial work ethos. Some of these issues included the effects of social trauma and social catastrophe, which often manifested as conscious and unconscious resistance to such neoliberal policies that focused mostly on re-training and new work skills needed. These policies seem to assume all individuals are standard recyclable units to be retrained with new sets of skills and work-skills packages needed in the service sector.

Similarly, we found the so called »crisis in masculinity« thesis (Payne 1985, Nixon 2009) is too general, since our research shows that these men were eventually able to adapt and change.

The cross-cultural comparison (UK-Australia) also revealed the importance of location and the need to understand more clearly how neoliberalism and globalization were experienced by different workers.

Understanding identity as something that is produced relationally allows us to think about the relational practices and affective relations through which this is accomplished. We (Walkerdine & Jimenez 2012) devised the concepts of »communities of affect« and »affective practices« to allow us to potentially understand how affective relations are central both to community development, cohesion and breakdown, and to the move from homogeneity to heterogeneity.

Some young men had difficulties with work they saw as »embarrassing and feminine.« This is related both to complex peer pressure and to gender-segregated family relations. It is also a way of coping with the previous generation's loss. (Jimenez & Walkerdine 2011)

We also found Foucaultian explanations of governmentality are insufficient to understand processes of social change and resistance to that change, as these do not pay attention to issues of »ambivalence of neo-liberal self sufficiency and subjectification,« which is often understood as mere social practice (Barnett et al. 2008).

This is also connected to other critiques of the governmentality approach to neoliberal ideology in what Paul Hoggett (2012) and others have called the »affective turn« in the social sciences.

### **Erich Fromm's basic tenets on dynamics of social character and their relevance to neoliberal processes of social change**

The following Frommian quotes (1941a, pp. 276–287) capture, in our understanding, Fromm's key notions of how he understood and developed his concept of social character and its relationship to processes of social change:

»The essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group is such which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group. [...] Ideas can become powerful forces, but only to the extent to which they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character. [...]»

The subjective function of character for the normal person is to lead him to act according to what is necessary for him from a practical standpoint and also to give him satisfaction from his activity psychologically. [...]»

The social character internalizes external necessities and thus harnesses human energy for the task of a given economic and social system. [...]»

Although character development is shaped by the basic conditions of life and although there is no biologically fixed human nature, human nature has a dynamism of its own that constitutes an active factor in the evolution of the social process.«

From these quotes, we get an idea of how Fromm's notion of social character can also be used to reflect further on how social change and personal identity changes can take place within neoliberal ideology and practice.

Indeed, Fromm (1941a) had already argued that the new freedom of early capitalist society generated feelings of immense insecurity, powerlessness and anxiety in individuals. These same feelings were also clearly reflected in our own research data, particularly in the coping responses to redundancies within the South Wales (UK) research sample, as they clearly capture a sense of insecurity, powerlessness and anxiety in trying to deal with the transition from industrial to post-industrial work.

Similarly, Fromm had already noted how the ideas and doctrines of the Reformation period did not mitigate or lessen the individual's fear and insecurity; they were instead, intensified. Fromm also showed how post-reformation capitalist society made productive use of the individual's insecurities by channelling the psychic energy generated by new socioeconomic conditions into the »compulsion to work,« and the readiness/willingness to make one's life a tool for the purposes of an extra-personal power.

This process, in which a social character can be stabilized by making productive use of psychic suffering, is indispensable for understanding the affective attachment to neoliberal social arrangements.

### **Further implications of Fromm's work for our psychosocial research**

We also soon realized how governmentality discourse does not quite acknowledge the individuals' emotional investment in the identities and commitments fashioned by neoliberal discourse and its associated work practices.

Within a Frommian approach, the ways in which social relations productively shape social order and change is explained as a highly spirited process, rather than as mere logic of submission to neoliberal norms and demands. Fromm claims that ideas can become powerful forces »only to the extent that they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character« (1941a, p. 79).

I have shown above how these same responses were also evident in our own psychosocial interview-based research data, since these community responses—discussed earlier in this paper—clearly capture how most of our Welsh

respondents made all sorts of arrangements in order to preserve a sense of continuity of being which also often involved resistance to neoliberal changes (Walkeridine & Jimenez, 2012).

It is the psychodynamic basis of Fromm's account that distinguishes it from sociological accounts of social integration like that of Talcott Parsons, and which also makes Fromm's theory suitable for challenging the affective deficit of current theorizing about the ideological mechanisms of neoliberal society.

Some central assumptions of neoliberal ideology, including self-reliance, personal responsibility and individual risk, have become part of the »common sense« fabric of everyday life. As Foster (2017) has argued:

»What is significant about Fromm's notion of social character, is that it manages to unify ›top-down‹ approaches like governmentality focused on ideas and policy, with ›bottom-up‹ approaches focused on how the insights of day to day experience are mediated through culture.«

One implication of this would be to adapt Fromm's social character to theories about neoliberalism, in such a way that the »common sense« nature of neoliberalism, and the lack of a reckoning for its massive economic failure (as evidenced by the 2007 Great Recession [Konings 2015]), are explicable through the formation of a »neoliberal social character,« by means of which experiential processes align with cultural meanings and, subsequently, fuse with social expectations. For Fromm, these sorts of psychic accommodations engendered by changing social conditions are central to making sense of how social values transform themselves into individual motivation.

In Fromm & Maccoby's *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b), social character is given a far more materialist grounding. The authors describe social character as »a syndrome of character traits which has developed as an adaptation to the social, economic and cultural conditions common to that group« (ibid., p. 16) and where the most important conditioning factor in the creation of social character, the context in which it is shaped, is the mode of production.

»A serf, a free peasant, an industrial worker [...] an independent entrepreneur of the 19th century and an industrial manager of the 20th century have different functions to fulfil...the industrial worker has to be disciplined and punctual, whereas the 19th century bourgeois had to be parsimonious, individualistic and self-reliant.« (Ibid., p. 17.)

## Neoliberal discourse and Fromm's views on social change

Other current contemporary competing theoretical explanations of the role of neoliberal mode of production and processes of social change e.g., top down governmentality, neoliberalism as therapeutic fantasy, still do not fully capture nor pay attention to Fromm's idea of the power of the »emotional matrix,« understood as the strong affective dynamism of ideas and its effectiveness in processes of change and resistance to social change.

This includes the psychic consequences of wounded attachments, not only in post-Reformation era of European Capitalism but also in contemporary neoliberal times.

The spirit of neoliberalism has also been seen as a predominantly therapeutic fantasy. Dartington (2012) depicts vulnerable people as self-managing and self-sufficient units rather than people engaged in meaningful interpersonal relations. The therapeutic disdain for relationships is part of its attack on dependency whereby responsibility for others, which is often messy, unpredictable, and time-consuming, is often seen as a threat to the capacity of the therapeutic self to efficiently manage its own resources.

Other recent neoliberal developments have also emphasized the rather anti-social neoliberal notion of »self-reliance« within a therapeutic ethos of a »therapeutic self.« An example of this is the growing influence of positive psychology with its known impatience with the depth of psychological investigation of relationships that keeps individuals close to socio-cultural and environmental influences and social relations.

Similarly, self-help techniques (Rimke 2000) and self-help cultural narratives and related management consumption products, e.g., self-help books and coaching techniques have also capitalized and embodied neoliberal ideologies by promoting a hyper-individual notion of subjectivity in which the individual is meant to develop internal control techniques of self-governance thus giving the illusion of mastery, self-reliance and self-actualization in which social dependency on others and vulnerabilities are demonized and occluded for sharing and discussion with others.

In this context, the neoliberal aim of positive psychology, which often claims to allegedly »liberate« the individual by stopping and dismantling a whole range of relationship habits, deep-seated beliefs and negative thoughts that keep individuals tied to dependence and routine, in order to develop a neoliberal way of mediating with others in a more instrumental way, still needs critical revision in light of Fromm's work. This would involve challenging the limitations of the neoliberal managerial framework of the self, as this has led to a devaluing of the notion of the »relational self« which is no longer seen as

encompassing obligations and deep emotional connections with others, since these »others« are meant to be experienced as mere instrumental resources in the project of personal and private »happiness,« whatever this might mean (Blinkley 2011, 2014). In this neoliberal context, the main aims of such mental health practitioners is to act as mere »happiness officers,« »chief happiness image consultants« etc., the whole happiness industry (Davies 2016, 2017).

### **Fromm's contributions to reframe neoliberal subjectivity**

Fromm's theoretical and research contributions on social character and social change have had a clear impact on contemporary debates about the emergence of neoliberal forms of social character, particularly in the context of complex ongoing global changes in the relationships between work and subjectivity. Lynne Layton's (2008, 2010, 2014) psychoanalytic critique of neoliberal subjectivity has close affinities with a Frommian perspective, as it reminds us of the importance of further understanding the psycho-social processes by which subjectivities, in their resistance to oppressive social norms, at the same time often simultaneously implicitly collude in sustaining these normative neoliberal values, discourses and practices.

This includes the emergence of a range of backlash movements which are central in some neoliberal societies (US, UK, Europe) where the common attacks on women, the poor, gays, people of color or anyone who is read as culturally »different« transform the extreme vulnerability stemming from the decline of social care and containment into fantasies of invulnerability and forms of attack on demonized others.

In this sense, as Layton argues, vulnerability and insecurity is harnessed in a way that disavows painful experiences, thereby preventing awareness of the traumatic nature of individual life within neoliberal society (e.g., the forthcoming UK exit of the European Union will also be a social scenario to further explore the impacts of these recent neoliberal arrangements on emerging neoliberal forms of subjectivity, social change and social character (Funk 2013, 2014). It is precisely these Frommian insights that are needed today, as these can still help us to better understand and challenge current narrow neoliberal explanations of how social change is experienced and explained.

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## Developmental Roots of Productive and Unproductive Social Character Traits

**Sonia Gojman de Millán and Salvador Millán**



**Abstract:** A longitudinal study of early attachment and social character development of 14 Nahuat mother-infant dyads -since the infants were 11 months, having assessed them at 9 years of age and again in their late adolescence- show a significant improvement on

the youngsters' emotional development. The study conducted by the Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis within a 40-year-long humanizing project in the village, called »Intercultural Participation Project,« suggests the benefit of promoting the rescue of their indigenous Nahuat culture and tradition.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, intercultural-participation, joy-of-life, passive-hopelessness, character traits, Nahuat-culture.

The *Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis* (SEMSOAC)<sup>1</sup> is conducting a longitudinal study of early attachment and social character development of 14 Nahuat mother-infant dyads since the infants were 11 to 15 months, having assessed them at 8 to 9 years of age and again in their late adolescence at 17 to 18. Seventeen more were assessed at infancy and at age 9 but are not 17 years old yet. We plan to assess them when they reach that age. Our work has

1 The authors thank all SEMSOAC members for their participation through the years, Teresa Villarreal who has with her enthusiasm and comments supported and promoted the whole development of the attachment research project of SEMSOAC; Gerardo Hernández for his statistical consultation and support; Bob Duckles for his careful English editing of this paper as well as PRADE—especially Francisco Sanchez and Beatriz Acevedo—for their collaboration and work in the Nahuat Village.

been possible thanks to the existence of a social humanizing project called the »Intercultural Participation Project« that has been taking place in the Nahuat village.

First, we will introduce the »Intercultural Participation Project.«<sup>2</sup> The project has been underway for more than 40 years and is still ongoing, using a human-centered social sciences approach that is a dynamic and self-conscious understanding of the way social knowledge is constructed. Sánchez and Almeida's social sciences approach sees as central to the process the researcher's role as an »involved participant.« This perspective has also been adopted in today's field of relational and interpersonal psychoanalysis, in which the analyst is considered a »participant observer.«

We will now describe and reflect on the longitudinal study of 14 boys and girls conducted by the *Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis* when they became young adults, in 2015.

### **The »Intercultural Participation Project«**

In 1973, PRADE (*Proyecto de Animación y Desarrollo*, Activation and Development Project), a group of Mexican non-Indians, came to live and work with poor and very poor indigenous peasants of a Nahuat village in the Northern Sierra of Puebla.

The »PRADE team« aimed to participate in a »dignified way of life« by not complying with the alienated and unjust economic system that denies the existence of human beings who live in poverty. By centering their attention on Indian culture and everyday life, PRADE members have dedicated themselves from the start to enhancing the quality of life for both the villagers and themselves. To do this, they have created and supported the establishment of production and consumer cooperatives; a vigorous human rights commission directed to create awareness on the extreme violence present in the community that is usually hidden; a health center accessible to all inhabitants; and a special project that seeks to improve the children's nutrition. The health center offers both traditional and western medicine. All these projects are centered around rescuing indigenous culture and tradition.

PRADE members have reflected on their experiences and participation through the years in a dynamic, thoughtful, and systematic way, both as indi-

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2 The name was given to this effort by Sánchez and Almeida in their 2005 book *Paths of Uncertainty. Intercultural Relations and Dignified Survival*, reflecting, in 2005, on the experience (Sánchez & Almeida, 2005).

viduals and collectively. This has taken them to a deep understanding of their own and of the Indians' motivations and meaning of everyday life experiences, and reconfigured their own and each other's identities. On this path, participants have encountered ways to nurture and re-configure their »dignified« senses of identity: both of the indigenous villagers and of the non-indigenous team members.

During intermittent encounters between PRADE team members and SEMSOAC members, we reflected together on this experience. We at SEMSOAC feel we have, through the years, been witnesses to the critical originality and dedication of the PRADE participants.

### **The longitudinal study of Nahuat children conducted by SEMSOAC**

We intended to contribute to the understanding of the ongoing process of the Intercultural Participation project, with a more complex psychological and developmentally informed perspective. Since 1999, we have been studying early attachment relations and social character formation of the Nahuat children, and the influence of their mothers' social character traits on their development. We initiated the study with 14 Dyads in 1999, adding 17 more in 2005 (See Gojman et al. 2012, 2013, Gojman and Millán 2015 and Gojman, Millán, Sanchez, and Gonzalez 2017).

We classified each mother's central character orientations using the social-clinical view proposed by Fromm (Fromm 1947a; see also Fromm and Maccoby 1970b). Mothers' responses to the interview were then scored on six scales developed by SEMSOAC (Gojman, Millán, Sanchez, Gonzalez, and Rodarte, 2013). The interviews were conducted to understand the mothers' principal unconscious attitudes towards their lives, towards their children, and to see if and how much these influence the quality of their care-giving.

The scales we developed were: *joy of living, sensitivity towards their children's emotional needs, lovingness, as well as instrumental attention to survival in everyday life, and passive and active-violent hopelessness*.

We had filmed and coded the infant's attachments patterns with their mothers through the Ainsworth Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth et al 1978). We had also filmed the mothers' caregiving practices in home observations (See Ainsworth et al 1978) and their adult attachment interviews. (Main, George, and Hesse 2003–2008).

When the children reached the age of 8 to 9 years (14 in 2007 and 17 in 2012), we interviewed the children with the *Social Character Interpretative Questionnaire* (SIQ), adapted for children. This included Piaget-like cognitive

moral reasoning stories, family drawings, as well as a brief story about the family. We classified the central character tendencies of the children using the social-clinical view proposed by Fromm (Fromm 1947a; see also Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) and assessed them on the six character traits scales developed by SEMSOAC specially adapted for children. The children's—and later on adolescents'—character trait scales were: *joy of living, sensitivity towards their own and others' emotional needs, harmonious versus authoritarian non-supportive relations with parents, passive and active-violent hopelessness and sibling and peer rivalry*. Results from these two phases of the study, when the children were 11 to 15 months and 8 to 9 years old, have been examined and published elsewhere (Gojman et al. 2012, 2013, 2017).

### **The productive and unproductive character traits evolution from 9 to 17 years of age in 14 Nahuat children.**

In 2015, we were able to work again with the first 14 of the infants from the study. They were now late adolescents, about to become adults (17 to 18 years old). Some had started to work, and some others were initiating parenthood. We interviewed them again with the *Social Character Interpretative Questionnaire* (SIQ), asked for their House-Tree-Person drawings, and conducted Adult Attachment Interviews with them.

Thirteen of the 14 young adults or late adolescents (six boys and eight girls) had been able to register for and attend a post-secondary technical school recently established in the village. One girl was unable to do so because her assistance of her mother was crucial to the family's survival.

When we interviewed them, we found that most of them were in the second year of the technical school. When they complete these studies, they are expected to have a chance to get a better, though a still elemental, job.

The technical school reflects some progress regarding schooling in the village. Not long ago the highest possible achievement was graduating from secondary school. This made the children who achieved it, and their families, very proud and happy. The recent progress seems not have worked equally well for girls as for boys, however. None of the boys had stopped attending, compared to three of the girls who started, but later had to drop out. Two left because they had given birth to their own babies. The other dropped out because her family was no longer able to support her school attendance financially.

So far, we have been examining the childrens' evolution from the ages of 9 to 17 using a sort of case study in which we pay attention to their global character orientation as assessed by their answers to the social character in-

terviews, and by using the six character traits scales. These have been showing important improvements in their character development.

Thirteen of them were studied when they were 9 years old (six boys and seven girls, one girl's family had temporarily moved away). Considering their shared, dominant character orientation, we found that three of them, 23%, showed a tendency toward a productive character orientation (either to be a productive-receptive or productive-hoarding orientation). The other 10, 77 %, were considered unproductive, with a passive-receptive orientation.

When 14 were interviewed at age 17–18 as young adults (six boys and eight girls—the family of the girl that had been studied as an infant and had moved away came back to live again to the village), nine of them, 64%, were considered to have a global dominant character of productive (either receptive or hoarding) and five, 36 %, were considered unproductive receptive in the McNemar statistical test .031 \*sig (See Table 1).

TABLE 1			
Dominant Character Orientation	Productive Character Orientation	Unproductive Character Orientation	
At 8–9 Years	(3) 23 %	(10) 77 %	Highly Unproductive
At 17–18 Years	(9) 64%	(5) 36%	Highly Productive
McNemar Test Sig: .031*			

When assessed through the six scales developed for the character traits we also found an improving tendency: The first three scales point to what we think favors a significant human emotional development, and therefore enable them to overcome or contend with adversity. We found an important improvement of their scores over time as a group on the *joy of living scale* (Wilcoxon statistical test .041 \*sig), the *sensitivity towards their own or others' emotional needs scale* (Wilcoxon test .001 \*\*), and the *harmonious versus authoritarian relations with parents scale* (Wilcoxon test .038 \*sig, See Table 2, next page).

The remaining three scales point to what we believe indicate character orientations likely to hinder their emotional development. They suggest an affective or traumatic experience and internalized attitude that does not tend to facilitate the capacity to overcome adversity. When we considered responses on the three scales of *passive-hopelessness scale* (Wilcoxon test .033 \* sig), *rivalry towards siblings or peers* (Wilcoxon test .065 not sig), and *active-violent hopelessness* (Wilcoxon test .564 not sig), we found a decrease in these neg-

TABLE 2

Character Scales	At 8-9 Years High Scores	At 17-18 Years High Scores	At 8-9 Years Medium Scores	At 17-18 Years Medium Scores	At 8-9 Years Low Scores	At 17-18 Years Low Scores
Joy of Life Wilcoxon, sig:0.041*	(2) 15%	(5) 35% ++	(3) 23%	(6) 42% ++	(8) 61%	(3) 21% --
Sensitivity to self & others feelings Wilcoxon, sig:0.001**	(1) 8%	(5) 36% ++	(2) 15%	(5) 36% ++	(10) 77%	(4) 28%
Harmonious Relations with Parents Wilcoxon, Sig:0.038*	(2) 15%	(6) 43% ++	(3) 23%	(4) 28% ++	(8) 62%	(4) 28% --

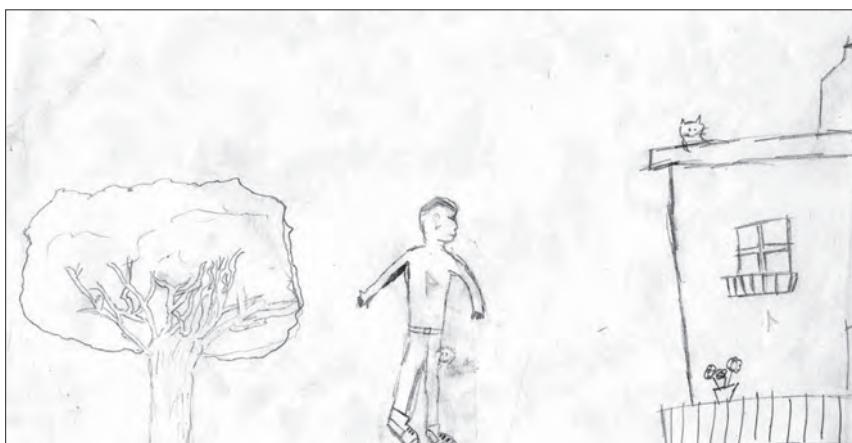
TABLE 3

Character Scales	At 8-9 Years High Scores	At 17-18 Years High Scores	At 8-9 Years Medium Scores	At 17-18 Years Medium Scores	At 8-9 Years Low Scores	At 17-18 Years Low Scores
Passive Hopelessness Wilcoxon, Sig:0.033	(5) 34%	(3) 15% --	(4) 30%	(5) 36% ++	(4) 30%	(6) 43% ++
Active Violent Hopelessness Wilcoxon, sig: 0.564	(0) 0%	(0) 0% ---	(1) 8%	(1) 7% ---	(12) 92%	(13) 93% ++
Siblings Rivalry Wilcoxon, Sig:0.065	(4) 31%	(2) 14% --	(1) 8%	(0) 0% --	(8) 62%	(12) 86% ++-

ative scores considered as a group. Generally, we found few expressions of *violent-active hopelessness in the group* among them in general (See Table 3).

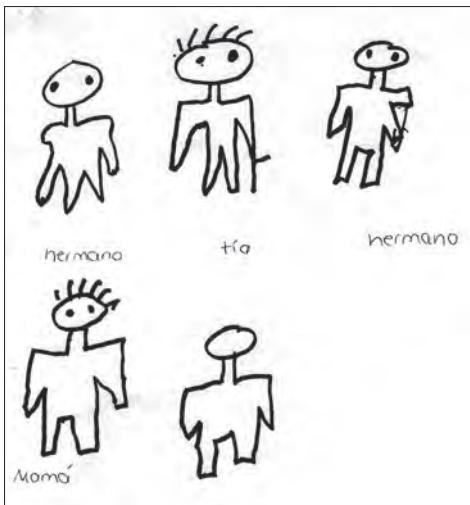
Looking at each of the adolescents, we detect that the evolution of the character traits of the children from ages 9 to 17 have individually improved in 77% of this group. Some improved minimally but palpably (six cases, or 46%). Others show a really important improvement (4 cases, or 31%), notably increasing their scores on »joy of life« and/or »sensitivity to their own and others' feelings« as well as decreasing their »passive hopelessness« and/or »rivalry with peers or siblings.« Even the »harmonious relationship with parents, as opposed to authoritarianism and submission« scale, seemed to show important improvement compared to when they were 9 years old. The scores of one girl from one of the very few medium low-income families in the village were high or very high as indicators of productive or developmental tendencies. It was therefore almost impossible for them to be any better.

In only two of the 13 cases (15%) did we notice no improvement. One of them, who we will call Mario, really seemed to have started on a road to authoritarianism with an extreme need for and admiration of power and control, only very slightly countered by some *joy of life*, since he was 9 years old. This trend was confirmed at age 17. He reached very high scores on *passive hopelessness* at 9 and 17 years and even increased his high score on *rivalry with siblings and peers* at age 17. It was evident at both ages that he was not receiving any emotional support from his authoritarian family. He was a son of a single mother in an extended family household, and he spent a lot of time on the Internet. He seemed to be quite well informed intellectually. He seemed to be counting on his intelligence and his confidence in his own excellent »performance« for succeeding economically. At age 17, his drawing of the person in the House-Tree-Person drawing was drawn in profile and was impressively vague and evasive (See drawing #1). His AAI revealed that he was on the same trend as a strong Derogatory Speaker (Ds2) indicating a tough prognosis, especially regarding possible cruel attitudes towards persons or even towards animals.



Drawing 1

The other boy, Genaro, who did not improve from age 9 to 17, shared with Mario, perhaps coincidentally, the experience of not being able to rely on his father, since his father had passed away before he was one year old. Mario and Genaro both deeply longed for their fathers' presence all through childhood. When assessing Genaro's interpretative questionnaire as a whole at 8-9 years of age we found that he was passive-receptive in general, but looking at the scales developed by the SEMSOAC he did not rate high on any of the specific scales: neither on the productive ones (*joy of living*, *sensitive* or *harmonious*



Drawing 1

Both Genaro and Mario attended the post-secondary technical school, not having started to perform work outside their family. Genaro had occasionally contributed to the family income since he was very young, and occasionally receives an income when he participates in paving or building bridges in the village's projects. They both daydreamed about leaving the village to make huge financial progress. Both had a negative prognosis when they were infants. Both were insecure on the SSP, and their mothers provided them low sensitivity or cooperation in the filmed home observations. They both showed highly unproductive character orientations. We wonder how much weight to attribute to the absence of the father during childhood. These two are the only ones in the study who did not improve and who did not have the presence of their father while growing up.

We will now present a vignette of two of the children who improved significantly: One boy, Gilberto, and one girl, Jacinta, who overcame fearful, traumatic experiences and frightful fantasies, and having realistically been afraid for their own and their family members' physical safety when they were 9 years old. They improved especially in their social character interviews. We had considered them to be tending toward a passive-receptive orientation at age 9. At 17, they both showed a clear productive orientation. They showed important increases in their *joy of life* and *harmonious relations with parents* scales and decreases in *rivalry with siblings or peers*. Both also came from very poor peasant families. They were insecurely attached to their mothers when they were infants, but they were not disorganized. This did not offer a positive prognosis although not the most negative prognosis either. Their mothers were

relations with parents) nor on the unproductive ones (passive or active-aggressive hopelessness or rivalry with siblings). We noted the primitive strokes in his family drawing at age 9, and especially that his portrait did not include a face (see Drawing #2). His AAI was also non-autonomous, showing an Unresolved by loss, Dismissing, and fearfully preoccupied by traumatic events state of mind (U/Ds3/E3).

Both Genaro and Mario attended

illiterate, as some native Nahuat people in the village are since their native language is not Spanish, but Nahuat. Both mothers were non-autonomous speakers on the AAI but showed at least medium sensitivity to or collaboration with their infants during the filmed home observations. These mothers had also shown very high scores on *passive hopelessness* and null or very slight *joy of life* and *sensitivity towards her children's emotional needs*.

These youngsters had started to work and receive an income of their own. Gilberto worked as a Tourist Guide, and Jacinta embroidered shirts together with her siblings. Both Jacinta and Gilberto were proud to be able to contribute to their families' finances.

Jacinta initially registered and attended the post-secondary technical school, but had to drop out because the family could not support her financially while still sending their youngest daughter to the elementary school. Jacinta certainly regrets not having been able to continue her studies, but for the moment, this has not had as negative an effect as we might have expected. In her comments throughout the interview, we noted how much she enjoys embroidering and participating in the dancing in the yearly ceremonies of the feast of the patron saint. Being selected to dance is a special privilege in the village. These activities seem to support her vivacious interest in what she does and her *joy of life*.

When describing herself at age 9, she said that she »likes the trees because little birds are born in the nest, and they keep the tree from falling even when a strong wind blows.« She spontaneously included a tree as if it were another member of the family in her drawing. She painted a remarkable lively family drawing although she did not use the colors that were available for her on the table (See Drawing # 3). This aspect of her interview made us aware of the central attention the indigenous culture gives to nature.

Gilberto also amply described taking joy in nature, as Jacinta did, while showing tourists—»people from other places— the natural caves and lush nature of the area. He clearly showed pride in being able to help his mother economically and in now being able to



Drawing 2

avoid the frequent, violent scenes his alcoholic father inflicted on his mother when he was a child, which he was unable to do anything about.

Not all the children we have been able to follow who have shown a meaningful improvement in the productive character traits have started to have a steady income as Jacinta and Gilberto have, but the two of them have shown the highest improvement when coming from traditional Indigenous families. In the interviews, they also mentioned aspects of their culture with pride and respect. When he was 9 years old, Gilberto mentioned a PRADE member, who tells them traditional stories in their own language, as someone who he admires and would like to be when he becomes an adult when he was 9 years old. In the moral reasoning stories and in other contexts, Jacinta and Gilberto both spontaneously mentioned the importance of helping people when they are in trouble. We think these statements are significant when combined with their opportunities to actively contribute to the betterment of their family's everyday material lives, doing so engaging in activities that are consistent with, not contradicting or disrupting their tradition and cultural values.

### **As a way of Conclusion**

In its 40 years of existence, the Intercultural Participation Project of PRADE may have helped to improve the everyday lives of villagers through the establishment of the human rights commission, the producing of consumer cooperatives, as well as the bi-cultural health center, and the nutritional improvements for the children. The village has also struggled through these years to install a water distribution system, now available to most households. All these have reduced some of the hardships of their everyday lives. While we find these critical, we also find the evolving relationships between the the people of the PRADE members and the Nahuat villagers should also be given significant weight. It has indeed expanded the capacity of the members of each group to know themselves better by coming to know the »other.« This has shaped the identity of both groups and the emotional lives of all of them. They have, through the years, faced transcendental experiences together, and shared everyday life experiences with those who are clearly from a very different culture. These experiences vividly demonstrate how being in touch with the »other,« »the stranger,« gives us insight on finding ourselves, and leading us to discover the deep meaning of the phrase, *Nothing human is alien to me*.

PRADE members have learned to make sense of the indigenous culture's main value: their fierce resistance to adapting to today's western world. The core of their purpose involves »a passion to survive to celebrate for its own

sake» (Sánchez & Almeida 2005).

We see the indigenous resistance to the larger economic system that revolves around material values and their accumulation. Indigenous villagers resist, and defend themselves against an alienated system that only takes into account people who can achieve earnings and material success, a system where transcendental human values are lost. Indigenous people are not only not considered important; they are not even seen. They do not even exist. There is hope in finding ways to live a dignified, meaningful life, and the courage to fight for this life, while living in a larger culture in which these values are almost non-existent.

The *Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis* has focused on the children's development through these years. We are offering PRADE an understanding of the importance of attachment relationships and their social character development. We have benefitted from reflecting with them on the evolution of the community. We have also benefitted from witnessing their hopeful and permanent efforts: the cooperatives, the human rights commission, and the health system. Our intermittent visits to study the children have probably called the attention of villagers—mothers and others—to the children's development, as well as to the recognition on their own educational roles.

We are encouraged by the improvements we have seen in the children between ages 9 to 17, but have yet to see if these continue into adulthood. We also do not know if these trends are unique to these children or represent a more general human development.

The experience and recognition of diametrically opposed human perspectives on life can certainly nurture the participants' ability to experience empathy and compassion for each other. This is a significant emotional development that might encourage a hopeful feeling of solidarity, and a productive, sensitive joy of life.

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## The Many Prisons of Women Predestined to Commit a Crime. Sadomasochism as a Female Survival Strategy

Amparo Espinosa Rugarcía



**Abstract:** This is an approach to Mexican female delinquency from a Frommian sadomasochism and a non-punitive criminal justice perspective, based on autobiographical life stories written by women confined in Mexican prisons. Those women have always lived in a society which assaults them in a thousand ways and treats them with inequity; whatever their crime, they are not judged with a gender perspective. Almost all are poor, many of them are mothers forced to abandon their children to serve their sentence behind bars in despicable conditions, accused of crimes that many times they commit induced by their partners' behavior against them.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, Mexican prisons, female delinquency, gender inequity, destructiveness, necrophilia.

**O**livia: »Without him my life would not make any sense. When my daughter was born, my husband became more jealous. One day he pushed me off the dance floor and started hitting my face with his fist. At the third blow I felt my nose and mouth burst. ›Why did you cheat on me? You made me look as an asshole. I'm going to kill you.‹ In spite of all that, I loved him. I felt that without him my life wouldn't make any sense and, when he asked me for forgiveness, I forgave him.«<sup>1</sup>

Today I will present a preliminary approach to Mexican female delinquency from a Frommian sadomasochistic and a non-punitive criminal justice-per-

1 Olivia Arredondo Grimaldo, accused of organized crime and crimes against health; Tepic, Social Rehabilitation Center, Mexico (DEMAC) 2016.

spective. I will do it based on autobiographical life stories written by women secluded in different Mexican prisons, within the context of a necrophilous, violent and tumultuous Mexico.

Every day there are more women confined in Mexican prisons. These women have always lived in a society which assaults them in a thousand ways and treats them with inequity; when they commit crimes, they are not judged with a gender perspective and are usually sentenced to greater penalties than men. All of them are poor. Most are mothers forced to abandon their children to serve their sentence. A good number of these women have been victims of crimes whose perpetrators will never be prosecuted. Meanwhile, they will spend years behind bars in despicable conditions, accused of crimes that they often commit induced by their partners. Those data come from statistics, but:

Who are those women being behind bars today?

How were their childhoods?

What experiences have left a mark in their lives?

What faces of marginalization have they seen?

Is it justified for them to be behind bars?

Inspired by the Frommian hypothesis that a punitive criminal justice based on punishment is doomed to failure because it does not address the root causes of crime—which for Fromm are poverty, unconscious motivations and what happened before the crime (see Anderson & Quinney 2000, p. 124). For 20 years, DEMAC<sup>2</sup>, a non-profit association, has been offering an autobiographical writing program for women held in Mexican prisons.

It is a space seeking to pave the way towards a non-punitive justice by encouraging these women to commit their lives to paper, to reflect on their life experiences and, if the circumstances allow it, to become aware of their deep-rooted motivations. If they agree, their texts are then published and disseminated by DEMAC.

Next, I will present to you some excerpts of writings (edited for time's sake) that I consider representative of the 500 that make up the DEMAC collection of autobiographical texts of women behind bars.

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2 Cf. the website of DEMAC ([demac.org.mx/quienes-somos](http://demac.org.mx/quienes-somos)): »We are women devoted to make known the stories of other women of different ages and life conditions through the dissemination of their autobiographical testimonies. We intend to create an open and pluralistic community fostering an exchange of experiences and knowledge and, at the same time, bringing about social changes.«

### Rosa Elia Escobar Galván: A dog bothering and causing pity

» I am from my childhood as if it were a country,« Antoine de Saint-Exupery in *Flight to Arras* (1942) said. Thus, from that hostile country that was her childhood, and secluded in a prison in the State of Puebla, Rosa Elia Escobar Galván introduces us to her life through a writing that she dedicates to herself and that not in vain she entitles: *My Prison before Being Jailed*.

»My childhood and my adolescence went by among fears, beatings, sexual abuses and emotional blows. Bertha, my older sister, beat me for anything. Many times I wanted to take my life and I took many pills; I had no one to tell what happened to me.

I attended school with broken shoes; I was ashamed to be looked at. I did not even have pencils. When the teacher asked questions, out of fear I did not respond. If my mom had been by my side, this would not have happened.«

This 34-year-old woman with four children was accused of crimes against peace, blackmail and threats; she was sentenced to ten years in prison. From a very young age she had developed a fearful and shameful attitude towards life, leading her to submit to her fate and to everyone and everything.

»During Mother's Day festivals, I looked at my classmates with their mothers and it hurt my soul that my mother had abandoned me. She left us when Bertha was 10 years old and I was only three months old. We were seven siblings.

My grandmother took care of us and the beatings began. She left and we lived alone until my father brought another woman to live with us. She had 3 sons and she spoiled them. For my brothers and for me there were only blows and words that hurt: »Your mother abandoned you like dogs because that's what you are; you cause pity and you bother, she told us.« Those words marked my life.

When I was five years old my father harassed me sexually. When I was seven, a 40-year-old man pulled me to his room and masturbated in front of me. Then my sister's brother-in law raped me. I kept silent. I feared no one would believe me. At that time I met a gang and I started to drink; from then on, I drank.«

Before being jailed, Rosa Elia's prisons were poverty, beatings, sexual abuses and abandonment. Faced with rape and multiple sexual harassments, she kept

silent. She always kept silent. She was frightened. Out of fear she didn't answer her teacher's questions. Out of fear she abided by her stepmother sentence. Fear was not the least of her prisons before she was jailed.

This woman recounts what happened to her without emphasis or shock. Only the abandonment by her mother shamed her, made her stand out in shame before her peers; about that, she dares to say that her soul *hurt*. The rest doesn't move her; as if her poor woman's lot was necessarily meant to include the absence of the father, humiliations and insults.

In a family led by a ten-year-old girl, Rosa Elia and her siblings lived in total abandonment. They spent days without eating. There were no hugs or kisses; no birthdays or Christmas celebrations. These seven children survived by keeping silent and obeying. Most of all, they survived by destroying themselves, like the children of Lord of the Flies. Their selves were broken before they knew them.

Rosa Elia has no other alternative. Her only choice is to face life based on that legacy, as well as on grievances, ignorance, alcohol, social indifference, impotence and its corresponding rejections; she must get ahead in life with the definition of herself and her own value that her stepmother tattooed on her soul: like a dog that bothers and causes pity.

Her sadomasochistic attitude towards life is already settled. It was already settled when her father, arbitrarily, marginalized her from school.

»Only my sister Carmen went to secondary school. My father had no money for all of us to attend school, so he chose her because she was the prettiest. When she was in second grade she met some slackers and ran away with them.

We found her inside an old car, smashed, drugged and sexually abused. She decided to go look for my mother. She found her, alone and with four more children, whom she had also abandoned.

Carmen paired up with Antonio, a friend of my mother's. She got pregnant. Antonio hit her and told her that he had taken her out of the dirt. When she found a man who swore to love her, she left Antonio and went with him.

We knew nothing about Carmen until we came across her in a market where she was selling herbs surrounded by children, all of them as filthy as herself. They lived under a tree surrounded by reeds and palm-tree branches. All slept and ate on the floor. The next day we were told that she had had an accident. We went to identify the body. There we found out that her husband had killed her.«

Rosa Elia learned at home that feminine beauty is worth more than any other attribute. Her sister Carmen has chosen by their father to study because she was tall and beautiful. Beauty and poverty didn't turn out to be a good combination for her sister. Neither beauty blended with ignorance in her favor. Rosa Elia shows no signs of having noticed her father's lack of respect when he disqualified her for not being pretty. Maybe she even considered his decision fair; after all, her sister Carmen was prettier than she was.

That same masochistic attitude is shown by her sister Carmen. When facing problems, she turned to the mother, despite her abandonment. In this second chance she chooses to give her mother, she finds humiliation and death. We don't know the circumstances of her murder. Was it due to her husband's jealousy, because she looked at another man? Or maybe because another man looked at her because she was beautiful?

Rosa Elia wanted to study nursing, maybe to learn how to cure her own ills. However, at age 17, an event—which in another culture would be banal—forever curtailed her ambitions: she had sex with her boyfriend and then had to run away because her father found out and wanted to force her to marry him.

When she returned, her chances of studying had vanished and, as an alternative, she began to have boyfriends; one after another. They all cheated, beat and abandoned her. At 19, she got pregnant by Alejandro and the mother of this young man takes away her baby. Alejandro sided with his mother and hit Rosa Elia savagely. She planned to leave him, as she once had planned to study nursing.

This time it was not her father who thwarted her decision but three magic words: »I love you.« When Alejandro said to her »I love you,« instead of abandoning him, she married him and had four more daughters. Then Alejandro got into shady business without her knowledge. Things went wrong and both of them ended up in jail. Rosa Elia was accused of complicity. She had the opportunity to go free through the efforts of a feminist lawyer. Alejandro threatened to divorce her if she left prison without him and she chose to stay with him, ignoring her children.

»It's incredible, she says in her autobiography, we always thought that my mother had been very bad with us when she abandoned us... and unintentionally, we all did the same thing.«

Sadomasochism is hard to eradicate.

### **Predestined to commit a crime**

Recent studies indicate that early sexual assaults make the women who are victims twice as likely to commit a crime and be arrested than those who have not been assaulted. This implies that women who are in prison today who report that they were sexually abused in childhood were predestined to commit crimes and to be behind bars.

Perhaps that first aggression set (at least to some extent) the tone of their future relationships, because from then on they were all of a sadomasochistic type, which affected all areas of their lives and not just love relationships. These women were never able to fight for their rights or to act against anything crushing them. For them, even the possibility of being free matters less than the threat of the sadistic man.

Although very few claim to have been raped, as a matter of fact rape is a frequent assault amongst them. Indeed, they only define rape as the imposed sexual relationship that led them to lose their virginity; they don't consider other forced relationships to be rape. It is as if they still feel an obligation to consent to the sexual demands of their partners regardless of whether they want to or not, even when there are serious impediments. This happened to a woman who was raped by her husband in front of her son when she had just given birth.

For these women, sexual relations are synonymous with pregnancies. It is as if there were no contraceptives. They hope for their men to react with joy when they announce that they will be fathers, but what they actually get is more blows, more aggression; or even death, as in the case of Rosa Elia's sister.

Pregnancies also come with the accusations of infidelity. That's what happened to Olivia, the woman I mentioned in the epigraph, remember? When her daughter was born, her husband became more jealous. He told her that without him, she is nobody; he hit her face with his fist until he smashed her nose and mouth, accusing her of cheating him and of making a fool of him in front of his friends. Any learning on the subjects of love or sexuality doesn't exist. The women eternally return to naivety or to fantasy, and they have a lack of awareness corresponding to that of a 6-year-old. The sequence of blows, rapes and grievances continues indefinitely in all areas and contexts of their lives.

Hundreds of women incarcerated in Mexican prisons have participated in the DEMAC program. They had never had such a reflection space, and they experience real illuminations during the process of writing their autobiographies. The testimonies they produce bring us closer to what their lives were before committing their crimes and also to the living conditions and cultural patterns of the lowest socio-economic strata of the population. Their texts are not easy

to read; these women must handwrite them and they have never before tried such an undertaking.

Nonetheless, their texts are clear enough to show us what their lives have been; what has moved them and, most of all, what they have lacked. The glimpses of academic interest that some may have had, vanished under the rule of patriarchal laws; the lack of cultural references and of leisure interests other than the consumption of alcohol is obvious in these texts, and as a result most of these women have not been able to gratify or sublimate their instinctive impulses because they lacked a way to channel them. It may be because of economic reasons but also because they simply ignore the free access they can have to certain cultural activities that their society offers them (cf. Anderson & Quinney 200, p. 137).

### **Teresa Ramos Moxo: To be born again as a baby**

Although most of the women confined in Mexican prisons are poor, there are some who, due to their extreme economic scarcity, suffer equally extreme social disadvantages. One of these women is Teresa Ramos Moxo (2012, pp. 9–15); she recounted her story verbally to the workshop coordinator who transcribed it.

Teresa is an indigenous woman who does not know how to read or write; she never attended school. She began to work collecting ears of corn when she was ten years old; she got married at sixteen. She always lived in the countryside and she doesn't speak Spanish.

»They brought me here because of some piece of land. They told me that I sold to a man a piece of land that wasn't mine because I had already sold it, and he gave me fifty thousand pesos. I don't deny it. I even told the judge. Yes, I sold it to him. [...] I didn't sell it to him out of choice and besides nobody lived there. They assaulted and beat my son ugly and he spent many days in the hospital. The medicines cost me five thousand pesos a day.«

One day, when leaving her house, some judicial agents grabbed her by the neck and snatched the money she had earned selling *gorditas*. With that money they bought cigarettes and beers that they consumed teasingly in front of Teresa; for her, that money meant a week's food. When she arrived at the prison, she didn't understand what they were telling her; even so, she put her fingerprint in the paper they put in front of her [...] thus accepting her guilt. She was sentenced to seven years and fifteen days in prison.

Teresa did not understand yet what happened, what she did wrong, or why she was in jail. She lived far away from the city and she ignored its laws. She did not consider it wrong to sell her land twice in order to save her son's life.

»I used to cry a lot. But not anymore. I forgot the nightmare. Since I arrived here I go to church more often; I attend the DEMAC workshop and I do more things. I feel calm. [...] Out there I lived alone and I thought: 'How am I going to maintain myself?«

I had seven children; two are dead and I still have five. None of those five come to visit me. Here I weave and I sew to kill time. [...] I wanted to study more, but it's difficult; I suffer from diabetes and my sight is already failing me a lot.

In this place I feel that I've changed. I'm going to be born again like a baby. I'm a new woman. I'm going to be a woman again.«

For Teresa, jail was a blessing. In jail, for the first time she stopped worrying about what she would eat the next day. For the first time she was listened to, and for the first time she has the opportunity to learn something and be someone. She will be born again. Again, she will be a woman. When did she stop being a woman? Has she ever been a woman? What does it mean for her to be a woman?

No one visits her. It's not surprising, she's a woman. Men get a lot of visits and, at each visit, their women bring them homemade food. To their congenital social inferiority, women who are behind bars must add the stigma of being delinquents, something that makes them a disgrace for their families.

When Teresa's case became known after the publication of her writing, a university provided her with legal assistance and she was released before serving her complete sentence. Would she still be alive had she stayed in prison, the place where she would be born again?

Like Teresa, many other women confined in Mexican prisons say that being in prison opened their eyes to the fact that there were alternatives to the life they had lived. It is in seclusion where, due to the different cultural and self-help programs like AA, the DEMAC programs, and others of a similar type organized by the civil society, for the first time they hear words that have to do with a dignified life, with self-respect or with some kind of spirituality; here they come into contact with art. When one of these women saw her text printed in one of DEMAC's books, she burst into tears, saying that she had just realized that she was a human being.

These women don't know the meaning of respect as it applies to women. Their models are dictatorial grandmothers or battered and/or batterer mothers

who abandoned them to follow a man who ended up abandoning them. Through an analysis of the words they use when recounting their stories, we found that respect is not among the 100 most mentioned words, nor violence or rights. The most mentioned words are house, in the top place, followed by mom, life, dad, family and God.

To say that Rosa, Teresa, Olivia and Carmen are objectified, that is, treated as objects, doesn't do justice to their sufferings; it minimizes their dramatic condition. Objects lack feelings and what men—due to their sadism—look for is that they are human beings who feel, who suffer; human beings who feel pain when they beat them; who endure their psychological affronts in total submission; who humble themselves before them; who accept their condition as socially inferior beings; who behave as if they do not have a soul. It is as if the evolution and revolution of women had not occurred; as if these women could not even foresee it.

The only human contact that they have had since childhood are those early sexual aggressions and those occurring later, which follow the same pattern: sadomasochism everywhere in every relation, and not just with their mates. And yet, in the absence of other satisfiers, given the impossibility of sublimating their impulses, it is precisely these relationships that keep them alive.

Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that Frommian sadomasochism has one of its best expressions in the world of Mexican female delinquency.

30 - Nov - 2013

¡Hola! mi nombre es Teresa Una mujer como cualquier mujer que existimos en el mundo con defectos y virtudes con sueños e ilusiones por circunstancias del destino algunas mujeres tenemos que vivir historias terribles y dolorosas que nos marcan y nos cambian por completo la vida, los sueños y las ilusiones, Cada historia es diferente pero alaves entrelazadas como eslabones que forman una cadena, la cadena del dolor y del sufrimiento y solo nosotras mismas devemos de tener el valor y la fuerza necesaria para romper las ataduras ¡como! buena pregunta en primer lugar con amor, queriendo me yo, en segundo con fe amando a dios, tres dando cariño a los que me rodean amorlos y respetarlos, cuatro valorarlos y valorar el don de formar parte de esta tierra, este suelo al que si me caigo 7 veces me devo levantar ocho.

### The punitive criminal justice and the necrophilous and cruel Mexico

For Fromm, the punitive criminal justice system is not destined to correct the offender but to influence the social nature of the huge non-criminal population;

that is, it is not destined to protect the non-criminal population against the criminals, but to boost the liberation of the sadistic instincts of that population against those criminals (what suits the rulers so that those impulses are not directed towards them). And that has been very effective (see Foucault 2009).

A few days ago, Jaime Rodríguez, pre-candidate for the presidency of my country (Mexico), proposed to whip the criminals and to cut the hands of the corrupt people. Some days later, three individuals assaulted and amputated a hand of Ramón Figueroa Cantoral, former dean of the University of Tabasco. They tried to steal his belongings and, as he didn't have money, they attacked him with a *machete* (Pérez Marín 2018).

A short while after popular voices demanded the implementation of the death penalty. »Kill Jesus,« the multitude asked Pontius Pilate two thousand years ago. »Cut off the hands of criminals and kill them,« today Mexicans demand their rulers. Also, put more women behind bars even if they cannot read and don't understand what they sign.

Put more women behind bars even if they have weak conceptions of themselves, having always lived in submission to their men and have no other choice but to obey even when they induce them to commit a crime. How could Rosa Elia disobey Alejandro if she is nothing but a dog that gives pity and bothers? How could Teresa face the district attorney's agents if she doesn't know the language they speak and she is not »born« yet?

Despite the punishments and the threats, social violence in Mexico has worsened, reaching levels of unprecedented sadism: heads without torsos and dismembered bodies found in trunks of abandoned cars are commonplace. Today, human life counts very little here. What counts is the money to live with luxuries. And if expectations get frustrated, then everything goes. One can amputate a hand; one can torture; one can rob society; one can state that your goal in life is to be a mobster.

Marlem Belem Fragoso, nicknamed Loba (»She-wolf«), was tortured by the police when she was detained:



»They put me on the van and started kicking me. [...] Once in the heathland, they undressed me and hung me from my armpits. [...] They gave me electric shocks with a buzzer. [...] My mind was blank, I wanted them to kill me once and for all. [...] They covered my head with an ice bag many times and, in one of those occasions, I passed out. In the distance I heard one of them saying: We overdid it.« (Fragoso Cifuentes 2017, p. 207)

The wife of a former governor of the State of Veracruz filled entire pages of a notebook with the phrase »I deserve abundance.« There she also wrote down the number of bank accounts where she deposited the resources she diverted from the state's social programs.<sup>3</sup>

Through musical references and popular sayings, Karene Dafne Vázquez, a young Mexican high school student just 17 years old, has already defined her life goals (Vázquez Velázquez 2011):

»Fashionable and in good cars, [...] well dressed in a two-piece suit. Prada glasses and bright rosaries everywhere. [...] The pot you stole from me you're going to pay for dearly because you left me alive. Better you should have killed me; you won't finish it when I lock you up in the trunk. If everyone leads a mafia life, why not me?«

Sadomasochism and necrophilia have made our society their home.

### **Notes as a manner of conclusion**

The punitive criminal justice system at work in my country has been unable to reverse crime rates and reduce the sadist and necrophilous tendencies of our society. Women are getting the worst part of the situation as they are being unjustly committed to jail by not being judged with a gender perspective.

If we really want to reverse this situation:

- ▶ We must think differently about those who commit criminal acts. We need to look into their lives, into what happened to them before they committed their crimes and go to the root causes of their motivations.
- ▶ We must also promote socioeconomic mobility and rescue the biophilic values that have fallen into disuse.

That is, we need to look back at Fromm's proposals concerning a non-punitive criminal justice system in the light of the new world reality and, especially, of the dramatic current situation of women and their love relationships.

A first approach to the autobiographical texts written by women in the Mexican jails under these parameters has shown us that sadomasochism acts may very well be a survival resource for women who are currently confined in Mexican prisons.

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3 »Sí merezco abundancia dice la esposa de Duarte,« in: [www.debate.com.mx](http://www.debate.com.mx) (February 21, 2017).

Feminine delinquency can be understood, at least in a preliminary way, through:

- ▶ the women's sadomasochistic approach to life acquired in their early years
- ▶ their weak selves
- ▶ their submission to men
- ▶ the impossibility of their sublimizing their drives due to their lack of cultural and academic means
- ▶ the impossibility of their providing economic means for themselves.

Paradoxically, Mexican jails can act as promoters of women's empowerment and awareness through programs like DEMAC *Autobiographic Writing Space, cultural corners, reading sessions, spiritual talks and other programs of the same kind, organized within Mexican jails by the civil society*.

With these programs these women have the possibility to be born again like Teresa, realize that they have been acting like their mothers, as Rosa Elia suddenly did, or suddenly realize that you are human beings, as happened to Olivia when she saw her text published in a DEMAC book.

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**Dr. Amparo Espinosa Rugarcía**, Documentación y Estudios de Mujeres A.C. (DEMAC),  
President of the Espinosa Rugarcía Foundation (ESRU), Mexico City;  
E-Mail: [amparo.espinosa@demac.org.mx](mailto:amparo.espinosa@demac.org.mx).

## Problems of Cross-Cultural Social Character Research

Plamen Minchev



**Abstract:** The paper presents a study of the social character of 16 people with an adapted version of the social character questionnaires developed by Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) and Rainer Funk and colleagues (Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995). The difficulties during the analysis of the responses are described and the main cultural differences that are responsible for these difficulties are analyzed.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, social character, empirical research, cultural differences, zadruga.

The aim of the study is to apply Erich Fromm's method of studying the social character and to find what the social character orientation of the teachers is. We compare teachers from Bulgarian and Turkish origin (who were born and live in Bulgaria). There is also a comparison of the characters of the respondents by gender. Social character is

»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« (Fromm 1955a, p. 76).

Its function is to »mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society« (Fromm 1955a, p. 77). The social character is a mediator between the economic base and the superstructure (ideas and ideology in the society). It is not »statistical measure of the traits shared by a majority; rather, it is a functional concept to be under-

stood in relationship to the socio-economic system, particularly the dominant methods of production» (Maccoby 1982, p. 75). The family acts as an »agent« of the society and the main social character traits are transmitted to the child by it: »Though the social character can be determined by many factors, its roots are built into the child by his parents; since their character conforms with the »social character,« they mould the child's character accordingly. In this way, *»the family becomes the psychological agent of society«* (Fromm 1958c, p. 4, Fromm's italics). And it is important »that what the child in the family experiences is the reflection of the life of the society, that the family is not »the reason« for the formation of character but represents the mechanism for transmission of socially given traits to the individual« (Fromm 1992e, p. 37).

### **Methodology of the research**

The basis of the study is »analogy between a social and a personal psychoanalytic interview« (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b, p. 25). The aim of the interviews is to find out the main motivational forces of the individuals, and the essence of their character structures. The researcher attempts to understand the unconscious meaning of the phrases and words used by the respondent and the »meaning which he did not intend to express or is not aware of expressing« (ibid., p. 26). The respondents are not analyzed on their own, that is, at an individual level, but in relation to the social environment of which they are an integral part and without which they cannot be fully understood.

### **Problems**

- ▶ Neither of the existing questionnaires is entirely suitable for examining the social character of the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Turks (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b; Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995).
- ▶ None of the existing questionnaires fit entirely for the purposes of study of teachers from Bulgaria (Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995).
- ▶ Another problem that needed to be solved was the difference between the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Turks. Although they live in the same country both ethnicities have different culture, different religion and different social background, since most of the Bulgarian Turks are descendants of the Turkish population that remained after the restoration of the Bulgarian state in 1878. The Turks were formerly the ruling nation since Bulgaria was a part of the Ottoman Empire. After the restoration

of the Bulgarian state most of the wealthy and ruling Turks left. The ones who stayed were poor and to one degree or another they shared the ubiquitous poverty of the Bulgarian population. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian population perceives them as descendants of the wealthy and ruling Turks and this creates specific attitudes toward them.

### **Solution of the problems**

These three problems were solved after numerous discussions with Rainer Funk about how to fit the questions to the social conditions in Bulgaria. After that was created a modified version of the social character questionnaire used by Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby in the study of the social character of Mexican villagers (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) and the questionnaire used by the Fromm-Society in the study of teachers from East and West Germany (Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995). Some questions were added and others were removed in order to fit it better to the social conditions in Bulgaria and to the life of the Bulgarian Turks (mainly the questions concerning religion). We used the same stories that Fromm and Maccoby used in the end of the questionnaire but we changed the circumstances a little. The final version of the questionnaire contains 79 questions and six stories.

During the initial analysis the problem arose of how to analyze the answers of the respondents. The problem was resolved by creating a structure to analyze each person's response. This structure has to do with how the individual relates to the others—relations with the parents, relations with the children (if they have any) and romantic relations.

The next problem arose when I was unable to determine the social character of 6 out of 16 respondents. There are a number of objective reasons for this. One reason is that in Bulgaria there is no other researcher who knows how to study the social character and the researcher had to do the analysis alone (at least most of the time).

To cope with this problem some of the answers from the interviews were discussed with Rainer Funk; others were discussed with my former academic advisor for my bachelor's thesis on Erich Fromm and Zen Buddhism, Assoc. Prof. Irena Levkova, PhD.

During the analysis there were difficulties with interpreting the answers from the interview according to the framework of the social character orientations described by Fromm. Rainer Funk advised me to consult the book *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) because Fromm and Maccoby were faced with similar problems during the analysis.

Actually, some parts of Fromm and Maccoby's categorization of the villagers in the Mexican study were very helpful, particularly *parental fixations* and the *social-political mode* in regard to *authoritarianism* and *traditionalism*. The parental fixations are common for all people and in some societies in Southern Europe there is a specific fixation to the mother. To distinguish between authoritarianism and traditionalism was helpful because many of our interviewees were born and raised in villages and their parents were most likely also born and raised in villages. This fact is of the utmost importance because it gives a framework for interpreting the interviews.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian society is still authoritarian which is partly a legacy of the communist regime and partly because it carries some of the old patriarchal traditions that are older than the communist rule. One peculiarity is that the structure of the modern Bulgarian family is rooted in a particular form of the extended family common for the South Slavs (Bulgarians and Serbians) called Zadruga (Vakarelski 1977, Kolev 1987). The Zadruga is an

»extended family composed of ten to twenty small families, related by blood, who lived and worked together, owned property jointly, and recognized the authority of a single patriarch. The extended family most often included four generations of men, the wives whom those men brought into the household through marriage, and the children produced through those marriages. Once a girl married, she would leave the Zadruga of her parents for that of her husband. No member of the Zadruga had any personal property other than clothes or the women's dowries.« (Kolev 1987, pp. 52 f.)

Another peculiarity is that the patriarch's wife also had many rights:

»The ›old man's‹ wife (or the senior woman if he were widowed) had similar authority over traditional women's activities such as tending the garden, observing holiday rituals, and sewing. The senior woman commanded similar respect from Zadruga members, but she was never allowed to interfere in functions designated for men.« (Kolev, 1987, p. 53.)

Today the Zadruga no longer exists but some traditional relationships between the members of the interviewees' families which come from the relationships between the Zadruga members continue to exist. In the table below are given the findings from the study of the social character of the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Turks.

TABLE 1: Results from the social character research					
#	sex	ethni-city	age	place of birth	social character orientation
1	m	B	29	city	Unclear with authoritarianism and productivity
2	m	B	33	town	Receptive social character with fixation to the mother
3	m	T	34	town	Traditional authoritarian character mixed with democratic traits
4	m	T	40	village	Receptive individual character, traditional authoritarian character
5	m	B	41	city	Authoritarian sadomasochistic character
6	f	T	36	village	Authoritarian sadomasochistic character
7	f	B	44	city	Unclear character with traditional elements
8	f	B	45	town	Unclear character with authoritarianism
9	f	T	50	city	Authoritarian traditional character with masochistic tendencies
10	m	T	61	village	Traditional authoritarian character
11	f	B	47	city	Unclear character with fixation to the mother
12	f	T	42	city	Productive character with conflict with traditional values
13	m	T	47	village	Traditional authoritarian character
14	f	T	44	town	Unclear character, strong anxiety
15	f	B	33	city	Unclear character with authoritarian tendencies
16	m	B	49	city	Authoritarian character with sadistic elements

## Summary

The respondents from both ethnicities have an authoritarian character which is similar to the character of some of the peasants studied in Mexico. However, when we consider the Bulgarian Turks only, this applies more to the men than to the women. The conclusion that was reached is that the individualization of the Bulgarian Turks is not as advanced as that of the Bulgarians, and that for the Bulgarian Turks »I« to a great extent still means »We,« the Others. In order for an adequate typology of the social character to be created the process of individualization needs to be more advanced than it is now with the Bulgarian Turks. In the Bulgarian Turkish women this traditional authoritarian character

does not appear, but rather masochism or conflict and rebellion against the traditional values. It can be said that this is due to their role in Turkish culture. Since the Turkish community in Bulgaria is still predominantly patriarchal, men have the traditional authority, while women are seen mainly as mothers and wives.

As socio-economic conditions change, women gradually start protesting against their role as objects that have certain tasks in their lives and cannot deviate from them—to give birth and to raise children. They no longer want to listen to authority, which in this case is embodied in the father. The researcher finds also that the teachers are strongly attracted to authority. Most of the teachers from the Turkish ethnicity have an authoritarian character which contains no sadistic traits (according to Fromm & Maccoby's categorization) and the teachers from the Bulgarian ethnicity have an authoritarian character with sadistic traits. In both groups of respondents (in the group of the Bulgarian Turks it is more clearly displayed) a patriarchal attitude to the family is found, especially regarding the role of women and child-rearing. Both men and women support, often consciously and more often unconsciously, the hierarchical structure of the family.

Many teachers lack faith in their own children and also in the children they teach at school. They raise their children in a very particular way that doesn't allow them to take responsibility for themselves and others, making them dependent: the boys are especially dependent on their mothers. When speaking about Bulgaria one must have in mind that there is a difference between what is patriarchal and matriarchal in Bulgaria and how these are understood in the US and Western Europe.

Precisely because of the fact that the contemporary Bulgarian families, especially in the villages, are descendants of the traditional relations in the Zadruga there is a difference in the father's and the mother's role. Whereas Fromm speaks about the favorite son who will inherit the whole property from the father if he obeys him, in Bulgaria in the Zadruga there was no individual property and the property was not divided between the brothers. In the Zadruga the father did not have a favorite son but there was the mother's favorite son (in most of the cases this was the youngest son). From here we can assume why most Bulgarian men are so symbiotically attached to their mothers. This is a psychological artifact which persists through the generations. Another characteristic of the Zadruga is that while the patriarch managed the work of the men, the oldest mother cared for the women and the children in the house.

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## Impacts for Therapeutic Practice

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### **Rethinking Erich Fromm's Analysis of Power Relations in Socio-Psychological Research and Through the Social Third in the Clinical Encounter**

**Catherine B. Silver**



**Abstract:** This paper explores Fromm's dialectic analysis of power relations as it applies to the dynamics of change at the societal and personal levels. First, the paper discusses the use of empirical research—system justification theory—to test the impact of socio-psychological and structural resistances to change. Second, it looks at the concept of The Social Third to illustrate Fromm's clinical approach around connectedness, subjectivity, narcissism, internalization of normative structures and the centrality of the concept of social character in shaping the dynamics of change.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, power, social change, empirical research, The Social Third, clinical dynamics.

**A**s a sociologist and psychoanalyst, I have for a long time felt a selective affinity to Fromm's ideas. They have guided my sociological research and clinical practice. In my presentation today I briefly examine Fromm's analysis of the socio-psychoanalytic ideas around power and power relations as they

apply to the study of social and psyche change through the relationship between sociology and psychoanalysis (Fromm 1929a, 1944a). I am not primarily focusing on the political dimensions of power and leadership with regards to authoritarianism and the rise of fascism. Many researchers have studied these issues brilliantly, starting with Fromm (1941a, 1963b, 1970a) and Adorno et al. (1950).<sup>1</sup> What I want to do today is to illustrate from a broader perspective how Fromm's interdisciplinary socio-psychoanalytic perspective has guided empirical research and my clinical practice.

### Fromm's definition of power and power dynamics

»The word power has a twofold meaning. One is the possession of power over somebody, the ability to dominate him (the authoritarian personality); the other meaning is the possession of power to do something, to be able to be potent. The later meaning has nothing to do with domination; it expresses mastery in the sense of ability. If we speak of powerlessness [...] we do not think of a person who is not able to dominate others, but of a person who is not able to do what he wants. *Thus power can mean one of two things, domination or potency.* [...] Power in the sense of domination, is the perversion of potency, just as sexual sadism is the perversion of sexual love.« (Fromm 1941a, pp. 160 f.—Italics C.S.)

It is important to remember that it was on the issue of power and authority relations that a major split occurred between Sigmund Freud and Erich Fromm, the latter putting the dynamics of power and authority above sexual drives in analyzing psychic development (Fromm 1944a, 1955a). Let me illustrate the various dimensions of power relations in Fromm's conceptualization.

Power relations as »dominating« (negative) energy	Power relations as »potent« (positive) energy
The authoritarian personality / Authoritarian character structure	Freedom »From« / Freedom »To«
The submission to fate/religion/the market	Ability to make choices
Feeling of aloneness	A sense of aliveness
Alienation of the self	A basic need for connectedness
Sado-masochist relations	Being rather than having

1 These questions have been further documented in great detail by Durkin 2014; Friedman 2013; McLaughlin 1998, 2000, 2006; Cortina and Maccoby /Eds.), 1996; Funk 2018.

Power relations as »dominating« (negative) energy	Power relations as »potent«(positive) energy
Victimizer and victim dynamics	linking intellect and emotions
Malignant narcissism	The search for oneness
Consumerism (market orientation)	Affective knowledge
Necrophilia	Biophilia
etc.	etc.
Process of transformation between positive/productive and negative/unproductive energies ← (Dialectic Thinking) →	

I am not stressing pairs of opposites; rather I want to emphasize how Fromm moved away from binary thinking by focusing on the *oscillation* between complementarities and contradictions as part of a *process of transformation* toward a »radical humanism« (Durkin 2014). Today, I want to illustrate such processes by using empirical research and my own clinical work.

### Empirical Illustrations

Erich Fromm used a socio-psychoanalytic model of inquiry around the following key dimensions:

- ▶ The contextualization of social action;
- ▶ The comparative method (comparing classes, communities, nations);
- ▶ The analysis of variation between groups;
- ▶ The interplay between social, economic, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the self;
- ▶ The impact of Social Character on individuals' mode of being;
- ▶ The creation of typologies;
- ▶ The internalization of normative and regulatory orders (socially patterned defect);
- ▶ Dialectic reasoning.

Fromm starts his work by asking questions and suggesting hypotheses that illustrate his sociological thinking:

»Which factors make for the greater or lesser awareness of the social unconscious? It would take a detailed analysis of many personal and

social factors to determine why some members of *minorities* or *exploited majorities* react with increased criticism, and others with increased submission to the ruling patterns of thought.« (Fromm 1962a, p. 96.)

Fromm's questions go back to Karl Marx's false consciousness: why do individuals vote against their own economic and social interests? A question that is still relevant today. Fromm gives us a partial answer by focusing on two socio-psychological processes: (1) The split between intellect and emotions; (2) The internalization of power relations, or what Foucault calls regulatory structures. Fromm illustrates this dynamic by showing the psychological vulnerability of the lower middle classes—positioned between the rich and the poor. His observations are insightful and timely in understanding Trump's loyal supporters who feel they don't belong anywhere and have been forgotten in a system that devalues their contributions as »true Americans« (see Fromm 1941a, pp. 181–183).<sup>2</sup>

Fromm uses historical and anthropological data creatively in his analyses (Frie 2014). He dislikes quantitative approaches, the use of professional jargon, symbols and statistical techniques (Fromm 1962a, p. 96). Yet, he did empirical research early in his career, studying the working class in Weimar Germany (Fromm 1980a) and later with Michael Maccoby (1970b) analyzing Mexican peasants' ability to adjust to socio-economic change. This complex and innovative research used a variety of methods to understand the outcomes of the challenges to social change. It led to defining different character types in terms of their modes of adaptation. But this focus on social outcomes and the creation of character types provided a limited analysis of the socio-psychological processes by which they were achieved on an individual basis. Combined with a lack of sophisticated methodologies at the time, the impact of this research stayed limited among psychoanalysts and sociologists alike. Writing in isolation, away from academic research and institutional support, Fromm was never in a position to empirically test his own hypotheses, something that is starting to happen today.

Looking to assess the spread of Fromm's ideas about power relations, I came across the work of a group of social psychologists that had been influenced by Marxist philosophy (Lukács), sociology (Habermas, Bourdieu), and socio-psy-

2 A study by the Pew Research Center of Trump voters shows that the lower middle classes, defined by income level, are over-represented among Trump supporters (Annie Correal and Emily Cochrane, *The New York Times*, August 10th, 2018). Authoritarian tendencies among lower middle classes compared to other groups are questioned by McLaughlin (2006).

choanalytic formulations from The Frankfurt School and Fromm's work. I met with one of the researchers, John Jost, teaching at New York University. He and his collaborators worked with thousands of observations using a multiplicity of data points combined into one meta-analysis. They formulated their results in *The Justification System Theory* (Jost et al. 2017). Their analysis address issues of ideology, false consciousness, political conservatism, and right- and left-wing authoritarianism, using a socio-psychoanalytic perspective. Their questions overlap with Fromm's queries.

Among them are: »How do we explain conformity by minority groups to a regime that destroys human values? How do we explain groups and individuals who vote against their own socio-economic interests?« *Justification system theory* empirically shows the workings of *social character*. Disadvantaged and marginalized groups, for psychological and ideological reasons, want to believe that the existing social system is good, fair and legitimate despite contradictory evidence. Fromm's work is mentioned at several points in their research. When I read these studies I was excited to see that Fromm's hypotheses were verifiable and supported by »hard data,« thus more likely to be taken seriously and read widely in professional circles.

While there are similarities between these two models—*social character* and *justification system*—there are some differences too. Both report a tendency to accept and adapt to existing social demands. Both are interested in analyzing the mechanisms of disruption and opposition to unjust and inhumane socio-cultural systems and ways to counteract them. For Fromm, social change toward a socialist humanitarian society takes on additional active dimensions. It can only occur through individuals challenging the existing socio-economic structures of inequality and injustice. Questioning and rejecting tyranny/subjugation means that power relations have to be confronted institutionally as well as deconstructed within the self. Saying »NO« to power can lead to freedom only in contexts that provide social, economic and psychic support in a non-authoritarian environment, or, to use Fromm's words, »to support the expression of man's sensuous, emotional and intellectual capacities« (2010a, p. 182). Unlike other psychoanalytic models such a formulation requires taking into account the totality of an individual's needs. I was intrigued enough by the research of Jost and his colleagues that I raised the possibility of doing some joint work to test further Fromm's ideas of character structure, especially the existence of a »lag« that is a mismatch between individual character and social character. They were open to my suggestion. Let me now turn to how Fromm's thoughts on power and authority guided my clinical work.

## The Concept of Social Thirdness

In my clinical practice I have adopted and adapted Fromm's ideas based on cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. Even though Fromm wrote little about his own work with patients, we have the testimony of several of his colleagues and supervisees, as well as documentation put together by Rainer Funk (2009) about Fromm's clinical approach.

Before I continue it is important to keep in mind Fromm's distinction between *power* and *authority* (Fromm 1941a, pp. 163–164). As a sociologist and a follower of Max Weber's methodology, Fromm distinguishes between power and authority and introduces a distinction between two types of authority: legitimate and inhibiting authority. Legitimate authority, such as between students and teachers, or between analysts and patients, is a source of learning, not of exploitation. Inhibiting authority, such as between parents and children or between taskmasters and their employees, is a source of alienation.

In my clinical practice I use a shared learning process around the *concept of thirdness*. »The Third« has been part of psychoanalytic thinking going back to Freud's Oedipus Complex and Lacan's Law of the Father. The concept has further been used to explore a psychic space, created by the joint unconscious of the analyst and analysand, first explored by the Barangers and Steve Mitchell. It is a space of mutuality that goes beyond the complementarities of two selves, providing shared emotional experiences without merging. The concept of thirdness is part of an inter-subjective psychoanalytic model based on mutual recognition and shared identification (Dimen 2011, Benjamin 2018). It stresses our sense of connectedness and responsibility for one another starting with a rhythmic third, that co-creates a space mediating between »I and thou« (Benjamin 2018).

Fromm had already emphasized similar mechanisms in the clinical encounter (Fromm 1993b, Funk 2009), but his insights were rarely acknowledged in the psychoanalytic world. Among interpersonal psychoanalysts socio-cultural factors are sometimes included (Altman 1995, Aron 1996, Benjamin 2018). Yet, the stress is on the »here and now« rather than on integrating it with the »here and then« and the »here and beyond.« Their analysis of the social unconscious as it impacts individual consciousness and the trans-generational transmission of values is limited. Institutional structures and their regulatory controls are not addressed directly. Thus interpersonal and inter-subjective psychoanalysts, by focusing primarily on the interactive process of the »here and now,« limit their ability to take into account the socio-cultural context of power relations experienced through an analysis of a shared Social Thirdness.

A Frommian approach to the clinical encounter goes beyond inter-subjective and interpersonal concerns of Sullivarians by focusing on the internalization

of the normative order and the danger of the »pathology of normalcy« (Fromm 1947a, 1955a). These psychic processes are shaped by the social unconscious integrating individual, psychic and socio-cultural factors (Funk 2009; Layton 2006, 2015). In this context critical thinking and affective knowledge shape the interaction between two subjects both embedded in societal forces in and outside of treatment (Fromm 1962a). Most importantly, social thirdness minimizes power differentials through the clinical encounter (Gojman 1996). In Fromm's words: »It provides an instrument for self-understanding that is to say an instrument for self-liberation, an instrument in the art of living.« (1991a, p. 46).

### **How to access the Social Third in clinical practice?**

My clinical work is shaped by my socio-psychoanalytic thinking around intersectionality of class, race, gender, sexuality and cultural differences in understanding the self. My approach is guided by Fromm's analysis of the interaction between the psyche and the social organized around his concepts of Character Structure and the social unconscious. In my work these central concepts take the form of contextualization that is a process by which socio-cultural factors like class culture have been internalized and shape self-identity. In that sense Fromm's understanding of power relations in therapy goes beyond the analyses of Ferenczi and Winnicott. Providing a holding environment and creating a partnership that minimizes power relations are important goals of treatment. Yet it should not obscure or prevent the difficult task of deconstructing the dynamics of power in the therapeutic encounter conceptualized by Layton as an »ethic of disillusionment« (2018). For Fromm, escape / liberation from oppressive power relations can only occur within institutional / organizational changes that can provide for the economic, emotional and spiritual needs of individuals. To some extent, we all have internalized societal norms and organizational controls. In the therapeutic process an active awareness of having internalized such power relations can take place through the use of techniques / parameters such as interpellation, redefinition, and questioning of the status quo. In my practice, I try to bring about a shared awareness of the impact of racist, sexist and patriarchal normative structures on the therapeutic relationship.

An important function of social thirdness is to keep in check narcissistic tendencies stemming from the structural features of the therapeutic »couple« (Chodorow 2010). Narcissism in the clinical setting encourages mutual idealization and hides the workings of power (Kirsner 2000). It stifles the imagination and the creativity of its members and trainees (Kernberg 1998). Furthermore, the isolation of psychoanalytic institutes from institutional structures like

universities and research centers strengthen their social isolation and supports defensive narcissism (McLaughlin 1998).

I will now share with you some vignettes of how I work.<sup>3</sup> A middle-aged professional woman from a poor, dysfunctional Italian family, »Lily,« came to see me because of generalized anxiety. Her father had committed suicide when she was a young teenager and she blamed the mother for the »accident« that she only discovered, as being a suicide, as an adult. The deep anger and rejection of her mother had been turned inward and was consuming her. During therapy she came to realize that she was displacing her anger and resentment unto her colleagues at work, and to some extent projecting it onto me. Furthermore she realized that her self-accusation and sado-masochistic tendencies were being re-enforced by the discriminatory and sexist nature of her workplace reviving her early feelings of having been exploited and lied to.

After years of work Lily recognized that organizational structures also helped shaped her self-identity as an adult. She became aware that she had internalized power relations in the traditional/patriarchal family that made her inclined to accept the status quo and conform to organizational expectations. This new awareness led to re-defining how the socio-economic deprivation that molded her family life growing up had impeded her mother's ability to take care of her and the family when she was a child. This realization lessened the intensity of her rage toward her mother and the self-punishing guilt that ensued. Lily succeeded in turning self-deprecation into a longing for justice, and the desire to fight for greater equality in the workplace. She started defining herself as a »feminist thinker.« Her awareness of the links between her childhood emotional needs and present socio-economic constraints led to a transformation of Lily's superego from a tyrannical negative internal power into a productive and embracing positive energy fighting for social responsibility around ethical considerations (Carveth 2015).

For example, class shame, as a reflection of power relations as mediated through »bodily emotions« to use Bourdieu's formulation, can illustrate the connection between the psyche and the social. Feelings of class shame go unanalyzed in most therapies and are not discussed during training. Several of my patients came to me with the feelings of being illegitimate, fake, and a burden to themselves, all of which create a sense of alienation from the »true self,« and a sense of powerlessness. Such feelings were the result of a variety of factors such as sexual frustration, parental disapproval, traumatic memories, etc. But in my experience these feelings are combined with unacknowled-

3 All personal information has been changed to protect confidentiality. If you want to read about an example of a case see Silver 2017.

edged class shame (Sennett 1972, Layton 2018). There are many groups that feel socially or culturally unrecognized and economically marginalized. Class shame can be found among new immigrants and/or first-generation college students. Fromm paid special attention to the lower middle classes that felt vulnerable and powerless carrying around unrecognized class shame that was acted-out in its associated conservative and/or authoritarian tendencies (see Fromm 1963b, 1964a).

Let me illustrate class shame with two vignettes. One is the case of a young professional woman from a lower-middle class background, »Amy.« Despite her professional success she constantly felt inadequate, and a fake, unable to show herself fully to colleagues and friends. While there were several reasons for this state of affairs, her resentment toward her uneducated, unsophisticated immigrant family led to the rejection of her own class history making her feel vulnerable and wanting to disappear. Through therapy Amy came to recognize her suppressed feelings of class shame. She came to realize that her sense of being a failure combined with self-denigration went beyond internalized guilt, but reflected the trans-generational and unconscious burden she was carrying around her family's class culture and history. These insights helped Amy to feel freer, moving away from a sense of self-oppression and thoughts like »It is all my fault;« »I am not good enough;« »I am a failure;« etc. The broadening of her frame of reference minimized the shame of feeling ashamed of herself (Sedgwick 1995) and lead to a lessening of her guilt and feeling of loneliness.

Class shame can affect patients differently depending on their own family history. »Kim« was raised in the »hood« (a term used to describe poor and violent urban ghetto communities in the US). She first experienced class shame through the clash of two cultures: the ghetto culture and the middle class culture that she had, however, successfully entered. She dealt with the clash by splitting the two worlds. Kim referred to herself as an »oreo cookie« black on the outside white on the inside. Gradually, unlike the previous example, she stayed emotionally attached to her roots in the ghetto culture. She learned to move back and forth between them without a sense of ethnic shame, yet with an awareness of class differences that she nonetheless experienced with a sense of despair. Her ability to identify with middle class white culture without having to reject her own, protected Kim from a loss of identity, providing some emotional continuity and a sense of security. When feelings of class shame are shared in therapy patients undergo a »lightness of being,« to use Kundera's formulation, enabling them to take on greater emotional and professional risks in expressing their needs for connectedness and a quest for freedom.

Another arena where social thirdness can provide a psychic space to integrate the psychic with the social is the exploration of the victim / victimizer dy-

namics around sado-masochistic relationships of dependency (Chancer 1992). In my clinical work I try to go beyond the duality in order to break off repetition compulsion tendencies. My goal is to create the possibility of a vision of shared responsibility (Benjamin 2011) despite ethnic and cultural differences.

For example, Gloria is a successful African American professional woman who was sexually abused as a child and grew up in an economically deprived community and experienced violent outburst in the family. She came to treatment because of bad relationships with her adult children. Her professional success had given her a sense of power over others, including family members whom she controlled financially and emotionally. However, she felt guilty about having left the Black community behind.

In therapy we could not address the issue of victim/victimizer relations directly. We first had to detour into history and religion to provide an emotional and intellectual Social Thirdness, transitional space, where she could explore her emotions through the discourse of others' narratives of victimization and victimizing such as Memmi, Fanon, and Baldwin. We talked about slavery, racism and colonialism. With my active listening as a witness Gloria could experience her own hurt and shame. Gradually, she realized that in some ways she had been reproducing the dynamics of a slave/master relationship with her own children. That realization led her to search for connectedness to a collective history through the spirituality and emotional support of Black churches. Recognizing the role of mysticism in creating connectedness and a sense of oneness (Fromm 1960a), I encouraged her to become more active in these domains. Later in the treatment she became involved in organizations for social justice and engaged in what Jessica Benjamin called »restorative action.« The nature of Gloria's relationships with her children changed. Their relationship no longer reflected a sado-masochistic dynamic of power but led to greater connectedness between them. After years of therapy Gloria came to define our work as a »partnership.« At that point, when the chains and illusions of social power and dependency had weakened, I knew that she was ready to be on her own.

These vignettes illustrate how social power can be part of the therapeutic discourse and how power relations can be analyzed and lessened. Using a Frommian interpretation of traditional tools of the trade—transference, counter-transference, resistance, and projective identification—combined with Freudian radical insights, I incorporated theoretical ideas about social character, the social unconscious, the role of emotions, ethical concerns and critical thinking.<sup>4</sup> Without Fromm's clinical model of radical and existential humanism

4 I should mention that there are differences with Fromm in the way I work with patients

with deep Jewish roots, I could not have become the analyst I am now. I am grateful for his legacy and thankful for its impact on my personal vision of trying to be a psychoanalyst with a social conscience.

### **Conclusion: »Truth« versus »Power«**

Fromm's legacy has become increasingly relevant under the weight of history—authoritarian tendencies, right wing governments, dictatorships, neo-liberalism—combined with the spread of New Age philosophies, Far Eastern spiritualities and ethical/environmental concerns among younger generations. The impact of globalization and the changing needs of ethnically and sexually diverse groups are challenging therapeutic institutes and academic communities that are becoming more inclusive. Fromm provides models that are cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary and ethically/politically engaged. It is important that Frommian ideas become once again recognized, part of the larger intellectual discourse especially among psychoanalysts<sup>5</sup> and that they recapture the attention of journalists (Golberg 2018), public intellectuals and policy makers. I want to thank the organizers Dr. Rainer Funk and Dr. Thomas Kühn and their assistants, as well as Dr. Martin Teising and Prof. Karl Schlecht for their support in bringing together this exciting and timely second international Fromm conference at the IPU in Berlin that contributes greatly to the vibrant interest in Fromm's legacy.

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around timing of interpretation, degree of interaction and length of treatment, differences that I will elaborate in another paper.

<sup>5</sup> I am offering a seminar on Fromm's legacy in the spring semester of 2019 at a psychoanalytic institute in New York City (NPAP). This seminar may be one of the few courses on Fromm's ideas since Fromm's involvement at the White Institute.

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## Clinical Implications of Fromm's Concepts

Sandra Buechler



**Abstract:** In this paper I examine the clinical implications of three of Fromm's key concepts: social character, love, and the sane society. I compare his thinking with the beliefs of H. S. Sullivan, another important contributor to the Interpersonal analytic tradition.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, sanity, social character, love, sane society.

In his witty, seemingly casual but deeply thoughtful way, Adam Phillips pinpoints a problem in our era. We don't have a widely agreed upon conception of psychological health, or sanity. How can the clinician and patient conceive of the treatment's goals without it? Or, in Phillips' (2005, p. xix) words, »sanity—if it is something we aim at—has to be aimed at without a target.« But, perhaps more than any other writer, I think Erich Fromm gives us worthy goals, which I see as enhancing the clinician's sense of purpose, courage, and capacity for dedicated practice.

In this paper I address the thorny issue of conceptions of health implicit in Erich Fromm's writing. I am aware of the dangers of this way of thinking. Can any standard of health be universal? Don't cultural and temporal factors, and individual variability, make it impossible to broadly define health? Historically, haven't psychiatry and psychoanalysis fallen into quagmires trying to dictate universal standards for healthy sexuality, blinded by prejudices of which they were unaware? Haven't we learned from H.S. Sullivan, and all the Interpersonalists, among so many others, that the observer affects the observation, making applying standards unrealistic? Haven't I heard of the post-modern turn? Most significantly, isn't it against the very spirit of Fromm, himself, to create a Procrustean bed for human beings to fit ourselves into?

And yet, over the years I have been persuaded that Phillips is right. As a clinician, my choice is whether or not to be *aware* of my underlying concep-

tions of health, and not whether or not to have them. I can't help operating with beliefs, however unformulated they may be, about healthy and unhealthy ways of life. Can I listen to the patient who spends three hours every morning washing his hands and body without envisioning a better future? Can I hear the woman whose young adulthood was consumed in eating and vomiting without hoping for change? Can I witness ongoing, sleepless suffering without, on some level, envisioning something better? Can I partner people addicted to alcohol or sunk in depression without picturing other possibilities?

My heart says »no,« and I need my heart to be engaged in my work. Also, I am aware that if I refuse to bring to light my conceptions of health they will not dissolve. They will just go underground, but, in sessions with patients, they will still shape what I choose to focus on, take for granted as ordinary and fail to notice, remember next session, quickly comment on, tense bodily and frown about, and so on.

When I am looking for a way to understand health it is natural for me to turn to Fromm. I am confident he will not sway me to ignore cultural and individual factors, but, rather, he will help me integrate the social with the idiosyncratic, the universal with the gloriously particular. Time and space limit me to considering how just three of Fromm's concepts guide me: the social character, love, and the sane society.

## **Social Character**

»That part of their character structure that is common to most members of the group [...] we can call [...] *social character*« (Fromm 1941a, pp. 277). »By adapting himself to social conditions man develops those traits that make him *desire* to act as he *has* to act« (l.c., p. 283).

I find it interesting to compare this with Sullivan's concept of sublimation. His definition is »unwitting substitution of a partial satisfaction with social approval for the pursuit of a direct satisfaction which would be contrary to one's ideals or to the judgment of the social censors and other important people who surround one.« (Sullivan 1956, p. 14). The contrast between Fromm's concept of social character and Sullivan's concept of sublimation is extremely interesting to me. Both describe ways that society influences our motives and shapes our behavior. Although Sullivan groups sublimation in the category of defenses, he is clearly describing a necessary piece of our equipment for living. Fromm's social character is also an inevitability, but with significant differences. Sullivan is saying that sublimation won't work if it is made conscious. It is as though,

if we were aware of the bargain we were making, we would not make it. But I think Fromm's message is different. He very much wants us to know about the bargains that society has influenced us to make.

In my own language, both sublimation and social character may allow us to avoid some obsessive conflicts between what we are supposed to do and what we want to do. The classic expression of this conflict is something like, »I should do my homework but I want to play baseball. I don't know what to do.« Much energy can be wasted in deciding whether to go to the right or the left, in countless variations of this dilemma. Both sublimation and social character, it seems to me, describe how we conform to society's needs without feeling we are sacrificing our own. But I think Fromm worries more about the price of the blind adaptation that can result. Perhaps another way to say this is that Sullivan sees conformity in a more positive light than Fromm does. His work with schizophrenics and others who couldn't fit into society may play a role in this attitude.

Fromm's work is valuable to me when I think about one of my patients, who conforms to my society's prizeing of consumerism. She is on a mission to travel to every part of the world. She must see it all. She is the most ardent consumer, needing to swallow the globe. She has to see the countries farthest away now, for fear she won't be able to reach them if she becomes less mobile with age. She needs to tick them off her list, as though, if she sees them all, she will have lived a fulfilled life. Her value, to herself, is measured by her list of tours completed. When she travels she must take so many pictures, to show where she has been, that she has little time for actual experiences. Fromm has given me a context for thinking about her inner emptiness, alienation, and the individual and cultural factors that contribute to her way of life.

Fromm wrote of our individual character, a product of personal experiences, and our social character, which is created by experiences shared by a social group. Both of these are internalized. Conflict can occur between the dictates of conscious vs. unconscious individual character, or conscious vs. unconscious social character. Conflict can also develop between the dictates of the individual vs. social character. Thus, if, from our culture, we internalize values that radically oppose the values we learn from our individual interpersonal experiences, profound conflicts will develop. In other words, if our society inculcates, let's say, prejudices that we internalize, but in personal relationships, we internalize values that are diametrically opposed to prejudice, we will be in conflict with ourselves. To me, this means that the analyst can't afford to look aside from the dictates of society, since they are likely to be a significant aspect of our patients' conflicts.

## Love

»This desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man. It is the most fundamental passion, it is the force which keeps the human race together, the clan, the family, the society. The failure to achieve it means insanity or destruction-self-destruction or destruction of others. Without love, humanity could not exist for a day.« (Fromm 1956a, p. 18.)

For Fromm, we can't truly love another person without loving all of humanity. As he put it in *The Art of Loving*: »If I truly love one person, I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, ›I love you,‹ I must be able to say ›I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.« (Fromm 1956a, p. 46.)

One of Fromm's definitions of love from this book is »the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love« (Fromm 1956a, p. 26). In my opinion this does not differ in spirit from Sullivan's definition (Sullivan 1940, pp. 42–43): »When the satisfaction or security of another person becomes as significant to one as is one's own satisfaction or security, then the state of love exists.« Much later Harold Davis (1988, p. 163) defined love as »the relatedness of two selves, which allows each to grow.« Unlike early Freudian theory, in which it was assumed that we each have a limited supply of cathexis, so that the quantity of self-love takes away from the quantity of love of another, Fromm, Sullivan, and Davis see love of the self as compatible with love for another.

This has enormous clinical implications. For example, as we listen to a patient describing his relationship with his partner, what assumptions guide our focus? When he complains that his selfish wife doesn't love him, I believe that how we understand love will affect what we don't notice, because we take it for granted, and what we question, associate, remember later, and so on. Love is, literally, at the heart of our own lives and our patients' lives, and how we understand it will affect how we hear a session. What do we readily engage as problematic and worthy of clinical exploration? What do we easily see as therapeutic progress? How do we each think about love?

## The Sane Society

»[In the sane society] no man is a means toward another's ends but always and without exception an end in himself; where nobody is used,

nor uses himself, for purposes which are not those of the unfolding of his own human powers; where man is the center, and where all economic and political activities are subordinated to the goal of his growth.« (Fromm 1955a, p. 276.)

Fromm's dream for society was reflected in what he called the »messianic idea:«

»It was to establish a new peace that was more than just the absence of war; it was to establish a state of solidarity and harmony among individuals, among nations, between the sexes, between man and nature, a state in which, as the prophets say, man is not taught to be afraid. [...] In their eyes, that would be a time of abundance—not of luxury, but of abundance in the sense that for the first time the table would be set for everyone who wanted to eat at it, for everyone who, as a human being, had the right to sit at that table and join in the shared meal with all other human beings.« (Fromm 1975d, pp. 137 f.)

In his paper on »Psychoanalysis and Human Values« Funk (2000, p. 6) said that for Fromm »it is axiomatic that the good is what is good for human beings (and this may differ from what is good for society or for being successful in an economic sense).« Further on, he says that for Fromm:

»Whatever furthers the growth of our own powers by means of which we relate to the outside world and to ourselves in a loving, sane and creative way—that is morally good. Morally bad, on the contrary, is whatever hinders or thwarts this primary tendency toward growth and individuation.« (Funk 2000, pp. 6–7.)

In »On My Psychoanalytic Approach,« Fromm stated that,

»When the social structure is too contradictory of human needs, or if new technical or socio-economical possibilities emerge at the same time, the previously repressed character elements will arise in the most advanced individuals and groups and help transform society into one more humanly satisfactory.« (Fromm 1990d, p. 5.)

This gives me hope that change will come and, some day, my own country (among others) will stand for decency, for the truth, and freedom, and all the human values that, to a tragic degree, at this point in our history, we have abandoned.

Does Fromm tell me what to say to my 8AM patient? Fortunately he does not, although I think some of my students wish Fromm, or Buechler, would give them more explicit directions. But, does Fromm reinforce my motivation to see that 8AM patient? Absolutely! When I need a reminder that I am here to promote life passionately, I have only to pick up one of his books. When I am tempted to slide through an hour without fully living it, my inner Fromm tells me that won't do. When my patient and I seem to be going nowhere, I can almost hear Fromm saying »it is the paradox of hope to expect the Messiah every day, yet not to lose heart when he has not come at the appointed hour.« (Cf. Fromm 1968a, pp. 9–13.)

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## **Necrophilic Tendencies in Schizophrenia Treatment: Destroying Our Humanity One Behavioral Plan at a Time**

**Meredith Lynn Friedson**



**Abstract:** Fromm's necrophilous character is evident in state and governmentally run psychiatric hospitals in the United States. Rigid over-reliance on behavioral interventions can be seen as defensive posturing against the terror of uncertainty when confronted with psychosis. Clinical vignettes with institutionalized schizophrenic adults are presented. A plea is made for clinicians to work from a position of respect and love to fight the dehumanization that can result when a psychoanalytic mindset is abandoned.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, schizophrenia, institutionalization, necrophilous, psychoanalysis, annihilation.

*Our »normal« »adjusted« state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities, that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adapt to false realities.*

*(R. D. Laing 1959, p. 12)*

### **Introduction**

This paper is about Life and Death. It is about the insidious insinuation of necrophilic proclivities into the field of mental health, and a call to all who value their basic humanity—and the humanity of their patients—to the essential fight against this. In order to salvage the remnants of compassion and vitality from the necrotic forces that seek to metastasize them, we must fight to remain alive. In this paper, I will provide an indictment against certain attitudes that have been embraced in modern day institutions, and society in general, that are often exclusive of the psychoanalytic stance. More specifically, I will focus on

this within the context of treating Schizophrenic patients and those with other forms of psychosis in an inpatient setting. I will apply Fromm's concept of the necrophilous character to standardized attempts at treatment to demonstrate the ways in which they are deadening.

In *The Forgotten Language*, Fromm speaks of the problems inherent in the need for certainty, and the absence of wonder. He states:

»If it is true that the ability to be puzzled is the beginning of wisdom, then this truth is a sad commentary on the wisdom of modern man. [...] Everything is supposed to be known—if not to ourselves then to some specialist whose business it is to know what we do not. [...] In fact, to be puzzled is embarrassing, a sign of intellectual inferiority.« (Fromm 1951a, p. 3.)

I begin here because wonder is vital for the respectful treatment of all patients, particularly those with psychosis. To understand our patients, we must begin from a position of curiosity and possibility. All our experience and knowledge will be useless if we cling rigidly to a position of certainty, or of needing to control. Attachment to facts, as far as any can be determined, will not bring us nearly as close to true understanding, or wisdom, as allowing for possibilities to develop over the course of each clinical, human encounter.

### **Dreams, psychosis, language, and meaning**

Let us now examine Fromm's wisdom on the universal language of dreams and the symbolic. What he says of our resistance to understanding dreams can also be said of our refusal to try to understand psychotic people. In the following statement, let us replace the word »dreams« with »psychotic person« and this point is made clear. He says, »Rather than be confronted with such an overwhelming proof of the limitations of our understanding, we accuse *the dreams* of not making sense« (Fromm 1951a, p. 9, my emphasis). When thrust into depths beyond their comprehension, many who work with psychotic individuals accuse them of being nonsensical. Psychosis, by definition, does not »make sense« in the same ways non-psychotic communications do. But this does not mean it is devoid of meaning or that it lacks internal logic. It merely requires someone willing to try to decipher it, and for that person to earn the trust of the patient so that s/he may be deemed worthy of being allowed to understand what the patient is saying. When approached in this manner, treatment is an enlivening process, not a deadening one.

Many of the schizophrenic people I have worked with experience a profound schism between their minds, their bodies, and the external world; what has been described as a position of »ontological insecurity« (Laing 1959, Sass 2004), or a »self- or ipseity-disorder« (Sass 2001, p. 253), results in a disembodied existence, which contributes to the dream-like quality of their lives. For example, my patients believe they are not who the government says they are; their families are impostors; the spirits of demons, tyrants, and celebrities have inhabited their bodies and family trees; they can communicate telepathically, and read people's thoughts through their footsteps, facial expressions, and gestures that are coded communications meant specifically for them. Even thoughts occur and are expressed simultaneously and intertwined, with no clear delineation of or regard for the distinctions of separate ideas, events, or subject matter; what we call »word salad« is a series of condensed tendrils of thoughts occurring simultaneously which, if followed, each communicate something significant when combined.

One morning, one such patient approached me jovially in the hallway and asked, »Miss Meredith! Is this real?« Thinking back to a question posed to me by a professor in my undergraduate studies I replied, »I'm not sure. How can we be certain we're not dreaming?« He said, »You mean this could all be a hallucination?« I responded, »Well, we'd both have to be hallucinating because we are having this conversation together.« The interaction ended by way of necessity, but I look back at it with fondness because it is characteristic of our work, in which he and I examined these possibilities collaboratively.

Fromm characterizes the symbolic language of dreams as one »in which inner experiences, feelings and thoughts are expressed as if they were sensory [...] events in the outer world« (Fromm 1951a, p. 7); he says it is subject to »a logic in which not time and space are the ruling categories but intensity and association« (*ibid.*). The same is true of psychosis. In my work, I have found that if anything reigns in psychotic states, it is intensity, affect, and association. The process of analytic reverie, through which the clinician can be free enough to explore a shared psychotic space, involves tapping into our own capacity for psychotic thinking. It means allowing ourselves to play with the boundaries of reality. It involves delving into uncharted territory in the hopes of communing with our patients there. This is a scary prospect when often our patients are terrified of very real and omnipresent persecutory threats of annihilation. We are in fact speaking about a matter of life and death, because psychotic flight from reality and annihilation go hand in hand. Our patients can only psychologically survive if we combat the root of annihilation, which is the impossibility of connection in the first place. When we refuse to attempt to make this connection, to join them in their worlds, we are essentially trying to necrotize

them. It is therefore not a huge leap in logic to say that schizophrenic people, in what may seem psychotic ramblings, are protesting the society that would rather see them locked up and forgotten, thrown into hospitals, prisons, homeless shelters, or the streets, and medicated or sedated into silence, than listen to their truths and treat them with compassion, as fellow human beings with a valid perspective on existence that, while divergent from the accepted group narrative, has its rightful place within human society. None of this accounts for the actual threat of physical and sexual violence that takes place in these settings, or the fact that countless deaths have transpired without acknowledgement. But that is an issue beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Necrophilic treatment:**

#### **Destroying our humanity one behavioral plan at a time**

My experience has led me to believe that psychiatric institutions of mental health—specifically state and governmentally run hospitals in the United States who endorse the latest »golden standard« of »evidence-based treatment«—serve as prisons run by deathkeepers. With each mandate to approach therapy primarily in terms of measurable goals, concretized interventions, treatment plans, and other attempts of proving that what we do is effective (in meeting our own goals, rather than our patients’), our understanding of complex problems such as schizophrenia, trauma, depression, loss, and the human condition, becomes diluted. Attempts to »objectify« and simplify what our patients present merely reduces their dynamic lived experiences and communications into caricatures that we cannot hear, see, or understand. This dynamic allows treatment providers to impose their own goals, values, and sense of reality on patients in an attempt to eliminate symptoms without taking the time to understand their origins. Those in a position of power then implement their expectation that patients conform to their demands, instead of listening first to what patients are saying they think, feel, and need. This tendency in treatment providers can be seen as an embodiment of what Fromm describes as the necrophilous character, which is reflected in and reinforced by the larger institution (Fromm 1973a).

In an effort to justify psychoanalytic work to administrators who often don’t have the training to comprehend it, nor the investment to support it due to conflictual financial motivations, the act of treatment becomes so bastardized that it evolves into a self-congratulatory attempt at murder. This perhaps eases the minds of treatment providers, but does little to aid patients in healing. Mackie (2016) describes this as stemming from »a conceptual vacuum that has

been filled with bureaucratic attempts to define the kind of work that is done with psychotic patients» (p. xxvi).

The result can be seen as enacted sadism, which Fromm describes as »the passion for unrestricted power over another sentient being« (1973a, p. 6). There is no greater example of this than trying to control or change what another person thinks, feels, believes, says, and does, all the while striving to be the sole interpreter of the validity of that person's perceptions and the meaning of their experiences. The argument exists that someone who lacks insight, exhibits poor judgment and dangerous behaviors, and ceases to function in a society that collectively determines what is true, is in need of a dose of reality. However, if sanity can be restored to the point that these individuals are able to rejoin society, it will not be imparted by us, »The Authorities,« unto them, »The Patients.« Furthermore, the goal of rejoining a society that often functions in pathological ways and requires an untenable sacrifice of subjecthood involves a grave assumption that participation in that society is a superior way of engaging in the world, as opposed to a valid refusal or rejection to abide by the insanity that contributes to its toxicity.

Let me be clear: I am not romanticizing psychosis or proposing an absolutist relativism in which all reality is subjective and no truths can be concurred upon by a collective group. Within any society there is sound logic, and thinking that is clearly illogical. Both are not equally true in a societal sense, but both are equally valid in terms of how they influence each person's experience of being alive in the world. Furthermore, I have seen all too frequently a rush to condemn psychotic realities, even when they are benign and do not impair functioning; for example, one patient was convinced that he was a famous basketball player when in fact he was not. The unit psychiatrist kept emphasizing the need to eliminate this delusion, as it signified his ongoing psychosis, and was therefore an impediment to being discharged.

I felt that this delusional belief would not significantly hinder the patient from engaging successfully in the world. The patient's belief must serve some purpose to him that we did not fully understand. Who were we, then, to try to rob him of this aspect of his identity? I am not suggesting that we should avoid trying to alleviate distressing symptoms; if we are able, we should. But unilaterally denying a person's subjective experience, deeming it invalid because it is obviously psychotic, and focusing solely on the symptoms is not the way to successfully achieve this goal. I cannot count the times when various mental health providers tried to »reason« with their schizophrenic patients, in a coercive bid to get them to recognize that their understanding of reality is wrong and that of course, the rest of the world that is telling them they are crazy, is right.

## Fear of uncertainty leads to psychological murder-suicide

While mental health providers are ostensibly drawn to the field in part because of a wish to alleviate suffering, and have a professional and ethical mandate to do no harm, the failures in empathy inherent in refusing to understand our patients' plights actually lead to the antithesis of this calling. When used rigidly and defensively, behavioral plans, manualized treatments, and the new fad of objectifying complex therapeutic dynamics as »evidence-based,« are the mechanism through which we destroy our capacity for understanding in favor of pretending to know. All these tactics can be and often are implemented as a phobic reaction to uncertainty. The goal is to ward off the indigestion and discomfort of not knowing how to deal with the chaos and mess of human suffering. And while there is perhaps comfort in a reified world of certainties, this world blinds us to the nuance of human experience and severs our connection with our patients' existential struggles. This is a process of defensive self-preservation, but we are not the ones at risk of being annihilated, at least not by making ourselves open to our patients. This approach fails to benefit our patients and ultimately leads to our own spiritual demise.

I have sat in »treatment planning meetings« countless times and felt the encroaching pressure of being forced to suppress my humanity and clinical instincts in favor of mechanized, robotic, purportedly »objective« measures that, because of their concreteness and limited scope, reduce the idea of treatment to meaningless acts that promote the progress of no one. The relationships I work hard to cultivate with my patients cannot be demonstrated or maintained with neat bullet points in bureaucratic paperwork. They require respect and mutual vulnerability, and with each concretization of our patients' existence, we as treatment providers become further distanced and detached from all that is required for such human connection. As my mind goes numb with the madness of these futile attempts to document »progress«—which is entirely disconnected from the people I am privileged enough to treat—I often find myself wanting to scream, as my patients do, that *these are human beings we are talking about!*

I am here reminded of Charlie Chaplin's inspired speech in *The Great Dictator*, where he says:

»Soldiers! Don't give yourselves to brutes—men who despise you—enslave you—who regiment your lives—tell you what to do—what to think and what to feel! Who drill you—diet you—treat you like cattle, use you as cannon fodder. Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men—machine men with machine minds and machine hearts! You are

not machines! You are not cattle! You are men! You have the love of humanity in your hearts! You don't hate! Only the unloved hate—the unloved and the unnatural! Soldiers! Don't fight for slavery! Fight for liberty!« (Chaplin 1940)

The ways in which this speech mirrors psychiatric units is chilling: patients are told when to wake up, shower, shit, and eat. They are told what to eat—and it is usually disgusting, unappetizing slop. They are told when to take their medicine and that they have to take medicine; otherwise they will be held down, restrained by multiple people, and given an injection in their rear, pants down, exposed. They have no actual right to refuse neuroleptic drugs most of the time because the court systems will legally mandate compliance. They are told what bed to sleep in and whom their roommate will be, as well as to not have sex, masturbate most of the time, or touch or hug or request a handshake. They are told what to wear (which often does not fit), where to sit, to stop talking or to talk more or to say different things than what they are presently inclined to say. When they wail loudly in agony they are told to be quiet and go away and when they remove themselves from this madness, they are told they are withdrawn, isolative, and guarded—clearly mentally unwell. People who are merely struggling to survive are treated as subhuman and often take on the fight against being enslaved with a heavy sigh, their spirits beaten down after so many years of being told, »you are irrelevant.«

I could read Chaplin's (1940) speech to my patients and it would resonate, and in reflecting on the sentiment that only the unloved hate, I wonder whether it is the patients or staff members who are seeking love and validation, a cure to the human predicament. Perhaps it is we who hate what they represent; maybe we resent the fear and pain they induce in us when we get any closer than completely detached. We develop machine hearts and machine minds when we allow psychoanalytic treatment to become poisoned by mechanistic attempts to justify what we do—a profound act that, while it does in fact have evidence and can be explained in such a way, is more an art form to me, and when implemented in this way becomes so constricted and suffocating that it and its participants risk death.

Fromm suggests that the way to combat this pull towards deadness is by embracing a more biophilic position (1973a). He says, »Genuine freedom and independence and the end of all forms of exploitative control are the conditions for mobilizing the love of life, which is the only force that can defeat the love for the dead« (1973a, p. 10). If our patients fear they are dying, dead, being poisoned, are under siege, decaying, and atrophying every day they are held in an institution against their will, isn't the logical conclusion to try and restore

their sense of vitality and agency through any means possible... including listening and trying to understand them?

### **Clinical vignette**

There is a man who has spent the majority of his life—over four decades—institutionalized in the hospital. He is extremely intelligent and reflective, sensitive, articulate, funny, and well read. Unfortunately, he is also chronically suicidal, impulsive, and aggressive when he encounters memories of multiple traumas he sustained in his youth. A multitude of things set him off, including sensory overstimulation, as he has Asperger's Syndrome. He consistently has enuresis and occasionally encopresis, which contributes to him waking in a foul mood. He often screams homicidal threats and begs to be put out of his misery through death. His plight is made worse because of his intelligence, his acute awareness of his struggle, and his pronounced hopelessness. I have thought about this man as someone for whom the trauma of being alive is too great to bear, in part because his pain is the result of multiple people throughout his life exerting their necrophilous urges upon him.

As a result, he has taken the next logical step and embraced the Frommian necrophilous character within himself and strives to embody this in his daily life. His original passions having been destroyed, he protects the shell that remains by idolizing tyrants with untempered power, and he reveres those who can annihilate completely. This is a man who wants to one-up Satan, and who feels he embodies the villains from his comic books. Dictators who have exerted their power ruthlessly to enact their destructive urges appeal to him because maybe if he had had their power as a child, he could have saved himself. Perhaps this is my own wishful thinking in an attempt to create rational meaning as an explanation for sociopathic impulses in a man who calls himself a sadomasochist, and who would take pleasure in raping me and »kick(ing) (me) in (my) pussy,« as he is so fond of telling me he would like to do. But Fromm's writings on this topic are useful because this is a man whose life is based upon the exploration of meaning in human existence. He is not one-dimensional and actively struggles with striving to understand his experiences within the context of the society in which he is located. The only means he has is to utilize his mind for this exploration, as he is unable to move beyond the four walls of what has now become his home, and prison. He debates the nature of mankind and god(s) alike, questioning, are they good or evil? Merciful or merciless? As if the answer would reveal something about his core self.

### **The necrophilous character of psychiatric institutions**

Mackie (2016) describes institutionalization as »the application of inflexible systems of control in the treatment of vulnerable people that lead to the stripping away of whole areas of identity« (p. 9). When patients enter an institutional setting, we rob them of their names, their clothing, their belongings and connections to the world; many are not recognized as individuals who are rooted within a familial lineage, history, and culture. Unfortunately, after decades in an institution, families often cease to be present, reinforcing this idea of namelessness; our patients are no more living, breathing fellow human beings, but inanimate entities to be manipulated according to our whims. Fromm suggests that emotional distance reduces our ability to identify and empathize with others (Fromm 1973a, p. 121). We create this distance by using linguistic distinctions as a means of justifying our cruelty; a person named James, upon being admitted to a psychiatric ward, becomes »The Patient,« with the preceding article added for further emphasis of his objectification. People are reduced to categorical groups of the Other so we don't have to care about the ways we hurt them, or indifferently watch as they suffer. Hospitalization done this way underlies the core of human destructiveness, aggression, and necrophilia of which I speak.

We otherize all the time. Diagnosis and categorization are too often used to dehumanize; when malignant predilections are left unchecked, terms like immigrant, Jew, Black, transgender, and atheist can be wrongly translated to connote ideas like vermin, property, abomination, and immorality. In the field of mental health, »schizophrenic« and »borderline« too often become justifications for dismissal. This is how genocides slip into action. Tutsis become »cockroaches,« Muslims become »terrorists,« and suddenly it becomes fathomable to meet eugenics with silent complicity, as we refuse to acknowledge what we have allowed ourselves to become.

Those unfortunate enough to end up stagnating in state-run psychiatric hospitals become victims of institutional necrophilia; their will, vitality, and autonomy are stifled by a system that deems their subjectivity wrong, pathological, and irrelevant to their own recovery. In addition, as an employee of such a machine, I am required to set aside my clinical judgment, emotional heart, and empathic spirit, in order to adhere to a set of rules and regulations so constricting that in the process of trying to survive such a climate, I find myself thinking that the institution wants me dead, or is trying to kill me. Survival becomes doubtful because it means killing off parts of myself, and this induces in me a parallel experience of the »paranoid« and »delusional« ideation my patients express all the time. R. D. Laing says,

»It is [...] possible to have a thorough knowledge of [...] the psychopathology of schizophrenia [...] without being able to understand one single schizophrenic. Such data are all ways of *not* understanding him. To look and to listen to a patient and to see »signs« of schizophrenia (as a »disease«) and to look and to listen to him simply as a human being are to see and to hear in [...] radically different ways.« (Laing 1959, p. 33.)

The reason my heart was broken in the pursuit of my work is because of the institution's necrophilous orientation, which is a direct affront to my biophilic approach to clinical work, relationships, and my love of patients, life, and play (Fromm 1964a). Like Plato's (1943) prisoners in *The Allegory of the Cave*, those of us with biophilic orientations to Life would prefer to be freed from the safety of our shackles and to ascend into the startling—and at first—uncomfortable light. Rather than trust in shadows on the wall because that is what we are told from day one is the truth, we are open to the possibilities and growth—indeed, the aliveness—that comes with exploration of the unknown. Uncertainty is life giving and life affirming, but too often we perceive it as annihilatory.

Let us now return to my patients who believe that some one or some thing is trying to kill them. Banging their heads against a wall in an effort to die becomes the manifestation of this cruel, soul-crushing, necrophilous oppression. I sometimes feel that in this act, they are doing exactly what the system has asked of them. Then we intervene and tell them they are not allowed to harm themselves, and we will strap them down to prevent this expression. One such patient has told me I am his torturer: neither allowing him to kill himself, nor assisting him in the elimination of his painful memories, I am the constant reminder of the demand that his suffering continue interminably. The irony of preserving such an existence and calling it Life is neither lost on him nor me, and being unable to offer any alternative to his prolonged agony, it becomes less and less tenable that there is only one sadist in the room.

## Conclusion

Eigen says, »The rage of a psychically dead person can be terrifying« (2004, p. xxiv). Could it be that schizophrenic people are actively grappling with states of existential deadness that treatment providers would rather deny in themselves? That making contact with such a person induces in us similar terror and we are shocked by being confronted with the possibility of also experiencing death? To know death intimately, to carry it in one's psyche and body, and

to continue existing despite this, means that many schizophrenic people are fighting like hell to become alive again. In some respects, the awareness of this plight and concurrent struggle means they possess more vitality, in that they are actively struggling against it. Being so acquainted with deadness means that these individuals can recognize it in others, and it must be maddening to encounter the familiar in those designated to treat them, only to have it disavowed instead of used as a tool for recognition.

I don't have a cure for schizophrenia. There is much I can't control. What I can do is try to be the best human I can be in the presence of these other humans who are suffering. And to deny compassion when they are in this frightening state is cruel—and inhumane. When faced with the terror of what our patients bring with them when they enter the room, we try to cure ourselves and say we are curing them. Only by recognizing this can we begin the honesty of genuine treatment.

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»Quite aside from the fact that I am not the founder of a school but, rather, a psychoanalyst who has attempted to further Freud's theory by making certain revisions, my orientation is a sociobiological one in which the development of personality is understood as the attempt of man, having emerged at a certain and definable point of evolution of animal life, to survive by dynamic adaptation to the social structure into which he is born.«

Erich Fromm, »On My Psychoanalytic Approach« [1969], in: The Revision of Psychoanalysis, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, p. 9.

This issue of *Fromm Forum* is based on contributions from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Erich Fromm Research Conference that took place in Berlin in June 2018, bringing together international researchers engaged with the work of Erich Fromm. The conference examined the actuality of Fromm's social-psychanalytic approach, as well as explored the potential for further development of this approach with regard to contemporary social developments. The conference was made possible by generous support from the Karl Schlecht Foundation.