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## Society as Destiny Fromm's Concept of Social Character

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A clinical example may illustrate one facet of Erich Fromm's influence on analytic practice. Suppose that an attractive and educated thirty-eight-year-old woman consults an analyst because of concern and confusion about her own tendency to threaten her relationship with her husband and her children. Call her Emily. The husband is a personable, rising corporate executive to whom Emily has been married for fourteen years. Warm and generous to her and to their two pre-teen daughters, he consistently encourages Emily's ambivalent efforts to be recognized as a serious poet. For her part, she frankly admits that she resents what she experiences as his intense involvement in his own career. Emily realizes that she hampers his goals by refusing more than token social participation with his colleagues and their wives.

Not only the husband but the daughters, too, are upset increasingly by her curt, critical responses to his expressed desires and opinions. What precipitated Emily's decision to seek treatment was anticipation of their impending vacation alone with each other. From past holidays she knows that intensified contact heightens her sense of her husband as almost intolerably vapid. In genuine distress, she reveals her fear that her attitude may be destructive, since he has done so well in his work and is so widely valued by others.

From a Frommian perspective, the analyst might question whether the patient's self-blame is simply a matter of learned and assumed fe-

male masochism, or whether, perhaps, she also is intuitively disturbed by the value commitments of her family life. Is her confused acerbity a device to escape an inner sense that the emotional needs of the entire family are being violated by a marketing orientation? In short, is her distress about the „automaton conformity,“ into which they all are being pressured by her husband's socioeconomic position, and his further ambitions?

Fromm demonstrated impressively that socioeconomic institutions and conditions mold our personalities, and that our personalities, in turn, guide our destinies. Fromm would see this restatement of Freud's well-known dictum about anatomy as more rhetorical than complete. Destiny is the outcome of multiple influences - biological, societal - and how the complexity of phenomena designated by these abstractions interacts with still other events. Granting that, it remains true that psychoanalytic understanding has come substantially closer to a balanced picture of the human condition through Fromm's insights than had been the case previously. The intention here is to offer some further observations about Fromm's idea of social character, drawing on work of my own and on perspectives of the half-century beyond *Escape from Freedom*, his landmark statement published in 1941.

Not that Fromm was the first or only thinker so see a link between culture and personality. One need only consult any of a num-



ber of accounts of pre-Freudian and Freudian culture-and-personality studies to dispel any such notion (e.g. Harris, 1968; Klineberg, 1980). By 1941, a rich culture-and-personality literature had already been established in the social sciences and in orthodox psychoanalysis as well. Nor was Fromm the first among interpersonal writers, who included Sullivan and Horney. As Horney states in 1937, „emotional problems have been created by the specific life conditions existing in that culture. That they do not represent problems common to human nature seems to be warranted by the fact that the motivating forces and conflicts in other cultures are different from ours” (p. 34).

Before Fromm, however, that literature was largely focused on exotic cultures. Perhaps because those societies tended to be so different or so small and homogeneous, the accounts seldom achieved a specificity warranting detailed discrimination between subgroups within the culture. Fromm’s 1941 treatise was among the first to look at a Western society in comprehensive detail, going beyond child-rearing practices to the work life and other matters as themselves of impactful significance. The noteworthy appendix to *Escape from Freedom* was perhaps the earliest to formulate how class conditions affect psychology. It did so in a sufficiently sophisticated way to warrant the interest of psychotherapists as useful in their work. If its fundamental premise was no different from dozens of other emic treatises, it did go much farther in spelling out connections between specific social practices and their personality manifestations in a Western social class group. Yet it was not addressed to the particular technical tasks of the psychotherapist, being rather a psychopolitical examination of Nazism among the rentiers and white-collar workers of Germany.

Karl Marx’s seminal social ideas powerfully informed Fromm’s conceptualizations. Among the clinically useful results was a special alertness to social class differentiations. In actually calling attention to the influence of the adult work life, Fromm opened an area heretofore much neglected by analytic biologism (Grey, 1989). Not only did Fromm propose that occupational and status differences are associated with different kinds of socializations and hence with different

sorts of personality, but he went beyond that to spell out details of utility to clinicians. He observed, for example, that „people with a different kind of character structure would hardly understand what a person setting forth such aims of another social group was talking about even if they understood his language” (E. Fromm, 1941, p. 277).

This proposition linked the ideologies, the very cognitive style engendered by occupational activities to other aspects of people’s lives. It warned that one consequence is communication barriers between one status level and another. For an illustration of that we turn to Mirra Komarovsky’s 1964 account of her interviews with nonpatient blue-collar wives. She said:

„For me perhaps the most surprising aspect of the blue-collar world had to do not with manners and morals but with the cognitive style of the people ... the word „surprise” was usually taken to mean an unexpected present. The word „help” meant money or services, not help in the psychological sense. When you feel that way [low for no apparent reason] can your mother help you? The woman might pause for a moment, being puzzled by the non sequitur and say „No, she doesn’t have any cash to spare.”

While the middle class woman might be focused on intimacy needs, her blue-collar counterpart would be concerned with deprivations of a more concrete sort; for her, help means money.

Where previous investigators essentially had been either social scientists or psychoanalysts, each understandably myopic about considerations outside his or her own speciality, Fromm was at ease in both fields. If before him, the clinician was equipped diagnostically with conventional neo-Kraepellean perspectives on individuals as symptom syndromes *in vacuo*, now there was the promise of linking people to expanded reference frames. Communication barriers might betoken something beyond the mental deficits of one of them. Fromm defined social character simply enough. It is „that part of the character structure that is common to most members of the group ... Different societies or



classes within a society, have a specific social character” (Fromm, 1941, p. 280). But that definition clearly points to the connection between people and a wide vista of circumstances.

In his books and articles after 1941, Fromm’s insights into social character were amplified. He translated Freudian psychosexual classifications such as anal and oral personalities, into portraits of the hoarding and receptive orientations, rooting them in the sociological soil that he saw as generating them. But much about those psychodynamic profiles is speculative and even simplistic at times. For instance, for Fromm the so-called productive personality blooms in all spheres. A close look at real life instances of creative people reveals that typically their performance is quite variable in different settings, as H. Zucker (1991) called to my attention. Furthermore, although Fromm did not yield to the temptation to explain class differences on biological grounds, he sometimes drifted in that direction about gender issues (e.g. 1955, p. 38ff.). But its implications can be applied to a much broader canvas than the case of Emily or Komarovsky’s observations, or semantic misunderstandings. To appreciate the possibilities inhering in his views we might begin with an explicit statement of two of his insights:

- (a) Even within the same society, when two or more status groupings maintain divergent lifestyles, it can be expected that they have been socialized differently from each other in ways conducive to the maintenance of their respective roles, and:
- (b) As a consequence, even if they speak what is conventionally recognized as the same language, they will understand the import of what is said quite differently from each other.

### 1. The Social Class Study

These two ideas seemed so apt in describing what happens between patients and therapists in mental hospitals and clinics that they were adopted as basic hypotheses for a research project undertaken in 1949. For one thing, most mental health professionals, including social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists and sundry

other specialists come to their work with a background of lifestyle, social affiliations and education that is middle class (MC). To use Lloyd Warner’s system of status classification (1941), some are upper middle class (UMC), and others lower middle class (LMC). For another thing, a large proportion of the patients treated in public hospitals and clinics are lower class (LC), either upper lower class like blue-collar workers (ULC), or lower lower class unskilled workers and unemployed poor (LLC). If Fromm’s claims are accurate, then many patients can be readily identified as unlikely to understand their psychotherapists, even if both speak the same language.

On that basis three predictions were made for purposes of one study (Grey, 1949). They were:

- (1) MC mental health personnel regard and treat MC patients more favorably than they do LC patients.
- (2) The observed behavior of MC patients, as an aspect of their shared social character, is more consonant with expectations of MC hospital staff than is LC patient behavior.
- (3) There are significant differences between MC and LC patients in their recalled experiences as children and as adults. (For this aspect of social character, inquiry is focussed primarily on family life).

The study sample consisted of forty male patients, equally divided between MC and LC World War II veterans. Chosen on a „first come, first taken” basis when they fulfilled the selection criteria, their average age was 30 in 1949, when the study was done. Further control requirements included that each subject be at least third generation native born, Gentile American, with no marked ethnic features in his upbringing. Since most were either single or separated from their wives, that was made a requirement for all sample members. For social class determination, Warner’s Index of Social Characteristics measured the patient’s father’s status during the first twelve years of the subject’s life. In comparing the two groups, the criterion for the significance of any difference between them was statistical, with a minimum confidence level of .05.

The scene of the research was a *Veterans*



*Administration psychiatric hospital* near a large midwestern urban area. It is important to know that it was chosen not because of any deficiency as compared with other facilities. On the contrary, this institution provided a very wide array of resources for that time, and a most hospitable attitude toward the research effort. In fact, the „Convalescent Section,” as it was called, had no custodial functions. Its only mission was the treatment of legally competent veterans, two-thirds of them diagnosed as psychoneurotic, both in the sample and in the „Section” as a whole. All free to terminate their hospital stays at any time, they were encouraged to leave for intervals of up to several days while still patients. This policy of freedom and of emphasis on treatment attracted a somewhat higher proportion of MC veterans than is usual in free institutions.

Once chosen for the study, the patient was interviewed by a clinical psychologist (either myself or a colleague) for three or four sessions, totaling from eight to twelve hours. A preset schedule of questions was asked, in flexible and open-ended fashion. Besides that, supplementary data were culled from the hospital records, from written questionnaires, and from interviews with those staff members who had worked with each subject. For those interested, a fuller summary of methodological procedures and of quantitative results was published in 1966, and a complete report is available on microfilm (1949). For present purposes the intention is to report major findings with a few illustrative specifics. Perhaps the best indicator of the reliability of the results is the plethora of later investigations into these same issues, like Hollingshead and Redlich's book nine years later (1958), which essentially reports a similar picture.

Since societies change, surely some specific findings also have changed in the past 40 years. It is the underlying theory, however, rather than any shifting details that concerns us in assessing Fromm's contribution. The central question remains whether the effects of social character are observable in staff attitudes, in patient behavior, and in the patient's recalled life experiences. In brief, so far as staff attitudes were concerned, they did differ markedly on the basis of the pa-

tient's social class. The sorts of treatment offered and the kinds of evaluations expressed distinctly favored MC patients, thus confirming the first prediction.

Among the specific results, significantly fewer LC patients received individual psychotherapy than MC patients (25% LC as compared with 65% MC). An interesting sidelight is that the assigning psychiatrist gave himself not a single patient of the lowest substratum (i.e. LLC). When they were given treatment, its duration was shorter for LC patients. Moreover, LC members were much less frequently regarded as improving (25% improving LCs versus 75% MCs). Similar significant differences were reported for the contacts offered by social workers and vocational advisors. That is, staff trained in what are regarded as social disciplines were no less biased than their medical colleagues. Moreover the negative attitude toward them was reciprocated by LC patients who removed themselves more rapidly from the institution. No LLC patients remained beyond a hundred days while about 60% of all others did stay longer.

The second prediction, concerned with patient behavior, also was confirmed. That is, LC patients more often failed to live up the hospital rules. This included what were regarded as serious infractions like bringing liquor onto the premises, returning from leave in a disruptively intoxicated state, being AWOL, or not fulfilling regulations for maintenance of cleanliness and order on the wards. It also was reflected in lesser ways, such as more frequent tardiness or absence from scheduled appointments.

As in the case of marital conflict, this evidence still is ambiguous in some respects. What contribution was made by the staff partners to this interclass conflict and what was contributed by the patients? Were the infractions evoked by culturally inappropriate staff expectations imposed on LC patient behavior? or by intended LC provocations? or is there a better alternative explanation? In answer to those questions, if there is a general tendency for lower class men to violate rules more often than do other patients, then LC character may be the explanatory key.

In fact, the sociological literature does tell us that in the military service, disciplinary infrac-





tion rates are higher for the less educated (Stouffer et al., 1949). Crime also is generally recognized as associated with poverty, low status, and poor education, in civilian life, but how much that is an artifact of class prejudices in governmental enforcement agencies is a much debated question (see e.g. Archer, 1985). Fortunately more direct evidence was available through interviews with sample subjects. For instance, such acts as physical conflict with peers intoxication, gambling, and extramarital sex, began earlier in the lives of the LC respondents and persisted as more integral to their lifestyles up the time of the interviews, facts they readily reported. An LC pattern of „acting out against society, their family and themselves” has been noted in other studies of psychiatric patients (e. g. Storrow, 1962).

Through the individual interviews the characterological meaning of such „acting out” was explored. It became apparent that „swift action without forethought,” as the term has been defined (Hinsie and Shatzky, 1940) was far less often a matter of their spontaneous impulsivity for these LC patients than a matter of conformity to a masculine social code. Perhaps there is a more urgent imperative to act assertively among those who are given lesser importance both in the home and outside of it. The recalled histories of the LC group, in fact, clearly reflected that they had been accorded less concern within their families as well as in the world, when compared with the MC group. Thus the third prediction was confirmed, namely that there were significant differences between remembered life experiences of the two status groups. Moreover, those findings appear to shed light on the respective social behavior of the two classes.

When such social status circumstances are overlooked, it becomes all too simple for each LC patient to be assessed in intrapsychic terms alone, one by one, and judged as somehow not very treatable. That actually was what happened in the hospital. By contrast, the social character perspective can alert clinicians to otherwise overlooked possibilities for understanding and treatment. A further look at the data will illustrate the point. Summarizing, one conspicuous aspect of LC childhoods was a meagerness of parental help and attention by contrast with

MC experience.

Larger families and economic pressures for mothers to earn money away from home, combined with a dearth of assistance from husbands or from hired caretakers often left LC youngsters much on their own rather early. They recalled far less assistance with educational and emotional needs than did MC respondents. Coupled with that, the LC disciplinary climate was authoritarian and punitive. This was especially true of paternal discipline which tended to be physical and based on perfunctory judgements more often than in MC homes. Seldom regarded as men to admire, fathers were experienced as indifferent and threatening rather than as helpful. Resulting MC insecurity about one’s worth as a person and as a male seemed to have encouraged the development of a need to demonstrate machismo and authoritarian pseudo-confidence. In the hospital, as we have seen, it led to a kind of transference-countertransference interplay between LC patient and MC therapist that proved quite discouraging to both.

In light of how patients in each social class acted toward authorities, what they said about them may seem surprising. On the one hand, MC patients, who apparently had adjusted relatively well to institutional requirements, proved to be more critical and specific in their appraisals of rules and of personnel. The same was true of how they characterized their childhood homes and their parents. Usually, MC responses reflected an obviously sharp and angry awareness of dissatisfactions, along with what was appreciated. By contrast, the outwardly more rebellious LC patients were surprisingly bland and stereotypic in describing both hospital staff and parents. People were „okay” and „did their best.”

If this was to conceal hostility toward authority, it was more for their own comfort than to protect themselves from the interviewer, with whom they were quite frank about their rule-breaking and troubles with the law. Thus, although they had run away from home more often than had MC patients, LC interviewees were quite likely now to describe those same parents in affirmative terms. Typically, too, as adults they now socialized more within their kin groups than did MC patients. As in the hospital setting, they found direct verbal protest more



difficult than indirect behavioral infractions. They were far less verbal, too, than MC respondents in expressing desires for intimacy, but their actual loyalties bespoke a strong need for group affiliations.

## 2. Implications of the Study

Researches like my own, along with others like it, distinctly support Fromm's social character thesis. It was shown that adding the sociological dimension can provide leads about probable transference-countertransference problems, including likely communication difficulties. It also offers clues to how those patterns grow out of underlying personality orientations and life situations. In that sense, social character portraits are potential diagnostic tools, more consonant with the realities of contemporary psychoanalytic practice than are current neo-Kraepelinian labels. Obviously, social character is a construct that presents probabilities, not certainties. It is best used as an orienting device against which to view the actual person. It bridges the gap between what Sullivan called the „social psychology” of our work and more familiar clinical perspectives.

If differentiation according to ethnicity or social class challenges conventional views of democracy, the fact is that using empirically accurate portraits is far less prejudicial than relying on our own private and unacknowledged stereotypes. In considering the LC male, for instance, his social character profile reminds us that differences from the MC patient have grown out of cultural necessities. The result is an LC cognitive and expressive style that does not lend itself well to the typical analytic emphasis on introspection, verbalization, and minimal intervention. Under those circumstances, „The analyst must go where the patient is,” as Feiner has put it (1991, p. 240). It does not follow that no treatment methods will prove effective, but rather that we consider more appropriate approaches.

Progress in the treatment of LC authoritarian character difficulties could well involve the therapist in a more actively guiding and supportive parental role, at least in early stages of ther-

apy. It may even be that in addition to dyadic treatment, or instead of it, other remedial and preventive strategies are required for the most deprived. Closely tied to psychological insufficiency often are conditions of socioeconomic insufficiency, which also may call for correction as parts of realistic treatment and prevention programs.

Admittedly such tasks lie outside of our present roles and competencies. But more than a century of clear epidemiological evidence indicates that the human consequences of socioeconomic breakdown periodically are thrust upon mental health professional for patchwork repair, as if they were separate and isolated phenomena, unrelated to malfunctioning social processes (Brenner, 1973). Authority to develop effective prevention and treatment programs has never been bestowed by society on mental health professionals, nor sought by professionals themselves, and for very understandable reasons. The consequences for our social institutions and value systems almost inevitably could be greater than most of us would dare to face. That was not true for Fromm, who boldly tackled value issues and pursued his quest for a saner society. Not that I will venture to assess his proposed solutions here, but rather will continue examination of his factual assertions about social character.

While wholeheartedly accepting his main thesis that social institutions powerfully affect personality tendencies, I also believe that its adequacy can be improved considerably for clinical purposes by introducing two qualifications. The first emendation affords a more precise predictor than social class, a predictor actually contained within the class designation itself and tested out in extensive researches like those of Kohn and his associates (1983). I refer to one's occupation or more specifically to the actual tasks involved in the work role. For instance, middle class positions typically involve some exercise of autonomy and choice, while that is less true for LC work, which is lower in the hierarchy of power. At the same time, there are exceptions where the LC job does call for much exercise of judgment or the MC function is little more than a highly technical routine.

Under those atypical circumstances, Kohn's



group found that the psychological requirements of the job prove more indicative of the incumbent's character orientation than does social class. Moreover, they found evidence of adult personality changes in the direction of the work demands over a period of time. „The structural imperatives of the job - particularly those conditions that facilitate or restrict the exercise of self-direction in work - affect workers' values, orientations to self and society, and cognitive functioning primarily through a process of learning from the job and generalizing what has been learned to other realms of life” (Kohn et al., 1983, p. 297). That is, attention to everyday transactions is more informative psychologically than are more abstract socioeconomic factors like class, whose impact on the person, after all, comes only through concrete events. In the Convalescent Section study, MC patients are found to be more aware and critical in their private assessments about hospital staff, more attuned and adroit in how they decide to deal with them. It is an ability associated with and reinforced by the occupations typical of their social class. By the same token, for authority to be treated more stereotypically is more consonant with the group organization of many LC work and home situations. „In other words,” as Fromm puts it „the social character internalizes external necessities and thus harnesses human energy for the task of a given economic and social system” (1941, p. 284). One should emphasize here Fromm's interest in the impact of what is perceived as external necessities.

Yet, in light of Fromm's innovative emphasis on the psychological power of the economic life, it is interesting that he did not clearly see the possibility that character can be modified during adulthood and by the work experience. Addressing this very directly in *Escape from Freedom*, he asked „how then can we understand that the child who - at least in our culture - has little contact with the life of society is molded by it?” (1941, p. 287). Note the implicit assumption that character is finally fixed in childhood. His own answer was that parents „apply educational patterns of the society they live in” and beyond that, „in their own personalities they represent the social character of their society or class” (1941, p. 287). No matter how

carefully his answer is studied there is a lacuna. His words never reveal how parents come to apply the educational patterns of the society when those patterns have changed from those of their own childhood. Nor does he look beyond the classical nuclear family to consider the child's other exposures as characterologically formative. The first qualification, then, is that his exposition of the acquisition of social character is incomplete in significant ways (Grey, 1989).

The second qualification is that Fromm's portrait of the personality characteristics of the two social classes under consideration tends to reverse their actual attributes, in a curious way. Equally curious is the fact that although he sees that there is a consonance between work requirements and personality he still misreads status types. The misjudgment begins with how he perceived those class-related occupational functions. In his own words, there is a „difference between people who manipulate other people” (i.e. the middle class) and „people who create things ... through their role in the process of production” (i.e. blue-collar laborers) (1955, p. 143). Here his biases are reflected in choosing the psychologically pejorative word „manipulations” to describe middle class activities, and the positively toned „create” to refer to the achievements of the lower class. Whatever the value judgements to which one might subscribe, it requires a mental leap to view assembly line routines as more creative than the white-collar tasks of designing what is produced and arranging for its production and distributions.

In any case, Fromm concluded that middle class people are more alienated, by which he meant „out of touch” with themselves (1955, p. 120), especially their feelings. This assertion reverses the findings not only of blue-collar therapy studies but even of Karl Marx. Fromm is quite explicit here:

„There is only one correction which history has made in Marx's conception of alienation. Marx believed that the working class was the most alienated class, hence that the emancipation from alienation would necessarily start with the liberation of the working class... If anything, the clerk, the salesman, the executive, are even more alien-



ated today than the skilled manual worker” (Fromm, 1961, p. 56).

This statement recalls the case of Emily and her executive husband, whom she might very well have felt to be „alienated.”

For Fromm, like Marx, the term was a key concept, so that a discussion of his ideas on social character is hardly complete without it. „The concept of alienation seems to me to touch upon the deepest level of modern personality,” ... „it is the most appropriate if one is concerned with the interaction between the contemporary socioeconomic structure and the character structure of the average individual” (1955, pp. 110-111). It was not that, like Freud, he saw society as inherently repressive of man’s nature. On the contrary, he could envision a world which „further human solidarity and not only permits but stimulates its members to relate themselves to each other lovingly” (1955, p. 276).

Fromm’s message was that our modern society more actively violates human needs than did past cultures. Furthermore, the contemporary middle class which sustains and most exemplifies our present society is also a reflection of its worst, most alienated attributes. „The alienation of work in man’s production is much greater than it was when production was by handicraft and manufacture” (Fromm, 1961, p. 51). Thus, the lower class, as closer in spirit to the days of traditional handicraft, is less alienated in Fromm’s view, and, similarly, he would expect to find traditional cultures less alienated than modern ones.

### 3. Contemporary Society and the Hallowed Past

The idea that technology and modernism are alienating is hardly unique to Fromm. An impressive array of writers has seen the continuing development of technology as a kind of pact with the devil in which we gain material advantages at the cost of emotional and spiritual well-being. To assess the popularly held belief that modern societies are more alienated than those of before, we might well begin with a careful scrutiny of just what that concept is intended to mean, especially as Fromm understands it. He

sees alienation „as a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien ... out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person.” To make the meaning even more explicit, he goes on to explain that in an alienated state one knows oneself only as „things are experienced, with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively” (1955, pp. 120-121).

This statement contains a noteworthy internal contradiction in that the same subjective state of alienation is characterized in two different ways which are mutually exclusive. One of them is that the individual under consideration is seen as not experiencing himself any more than if he were an object, but at the same time he does experience the absence of subjective experience, an awareness quite beyond the capacity of inanimate things. While that may seem a small matter, it inevitably will cause confusion in actual application, for it fails to discriminate between two significantly different modes of psychological functioning.

For instance, consider those LC patients who describe their parents as „okay” and as „loving” and who continue to be rooted in the family circle, without affective awareness of any major conflicts between their own personal needs and those of the mother and father against whom they frequently have rebelled since childhood. Such people function quite differently from the MC patients who do experience their own discontent and helplessness while still pursuing a token submission to the social forms of the hospital or the home. The differences between them might be likened to what occurs between Emily, the unhappy poet and her executive husband.

A key to the difference lies in the extent of self-awareness. The LC examples are conformists who are alienated from self and the MC examples resemble certain college students aptly described by Keniston. The latter are „uncommitted,” aware of themselves but estranged from others (Keniston, 1965). Please note that both Emily and her husband belong to the middle class although she is presented as uncommitted and he as an „automaton conformist.” That should make it very clear that there is no inten-





tion here to imply that all members of either social class automatically fit into one category or the other.

What is required, then, is that we depart from Fromm and speak of at least two types of alienation, namely noncommitment and overconformity. Noncommitment is a form of alienation in which the individual does not have a sense of estrangement from others, particularly from those who actively maintain the prevailing social order. Although he or she is aware of his or her own inner experiences, the uncommitted person makes no serious effort to satisfy the requirements of others or even to achieve his or her own fulfillment. Studying such students on an American University campus, Keniston noted that

„To an outsider these youths do not appear extraordinarily self-estranged; indeed, it could be argued that they are in closer touch with their ‘real selves’ or ‘creative potentials’ than most young men of their age. Yet they have a strong sense of ‘self-estrangement’ ... [and of] the loss of a compelling positive vision of the individual and collective future” (Keniston, 1965, p. 475).

When a distinction is made between noncommitment and overconformity as two kinds of alienation, there is a basis for seeing Fromm as both correct and incorrect in how he assessed the qualities of higher and lower status groups. He was correct in that the middle class with its more modern lifestyle proves more prone to its particular sort of alienation, the uncommitted variety, with its feelings of being out of touch with oneself and with others. On the other hand, he misperceives in seeing it as an overconforming type of alienation, since the people he is referring to are certainly not without self awareness nor are they unquestioning in their conformity.

Note, however, that this latter pattern is what both Marx and Fromm had in mind when they feared that people in our own society are becoming more like automatons, similar to the machines which serve us. And quite in accord with Marx's expectations, but counter to

Fromm's, the LC group character coincides more with the depiction of people who are typically unaware of their own feelings and, even in their code of seemingly rebellious masculinity, are rather uncritically conforming to their own social class and family values.

In short, each status group proves prone to its own variety of alienation, but the unaware overconformity, with which Fromm is particularly concerned, appears more pronouncedly where he did not expect it, in the more traditional lower class. In that case, it also may be that he misjudged the larger trends in our society as a whole. That is, the United States, as a representative modern culture, actually may be less prone to overconformity than is a traditional culture like India. That country is chosen for comparison both because it ranked thirty-eight out of forty-five countries in its degree of industrialization, behind Northern Rhodesia during the time when I studied it (Reissman, 1964), and also because it is a complex traditional society with which I am somewhat familiar through having lived there for two academic years (Grey, 1975).

To put the matter succinctly, Fromm did indeed misjudge the relation between overconformity and modernity, if India is a reasonable example. Overconformity is far more characteristic of India, to judge by my own experience and by reliable scholarly sources. What repeatedly struck my attention in contacts with Hindu university students was their difficulty in identifying their personal feelings. Should I ask an Indian informant about his or her reactions to parents, the question was likely to prove confusing. „How is that?” he or she might respond. „Do I talk about personal matters to my father or mother? Of course, I do! they are my parents, aren't they?” Parental status, not the quality of relationship, set the answer. Yet the respondent might later say, „Nobody speaks of such matters with parents.” Lest one suspect that such reactions are deliberate concealments it should be added that while feelings were not readily reported, disapproved behavior might well be discussed, even a tale of incest.

Nirod Chaudhuri, who grew up as a Hindu, depicts such dissociations as quite characteristic of Indians in an award-winning study, called



*The Continent of Circe* (1965). The title implies that his countrymen are under a spell which dulls their awareness. Chaudhuri calls the phenomenon „double consciousness,” and finds it typical of spousal relationships. Thus one partner may suddenly erupt into such violent condemnation of the other that „one would naturally imagine that a resumption of married life could not take place... But in actual fact no such calamity comes about” (p. 277). This can be understood as a kind of safety valve, necessitated by the strictly ordered family life, in which the closeness of traditional bonds requires a self-subordination that precludes sustained intimacy or awareness (see e.g. Ross, 1961).

By expressing and then ignoring one’s own protests, each person can find relief without leaving the protective cocoon of family and caste. By ignoring the protests, the person can continue to honor rules and rituals which magically safeguard him or her in this world and afterward. Indeed, the protection of family membership is more than magical in the traditional world. Life without such affiliations would be impossible in a feudal village. The mark of self-estrangement is everywhere. As Shils observed, „in literature, the novel which requires prolonged dwelling in the minds of other persons is poorly developed, biography is likewise in a rudimentary condition and empirical sociology which depends on empathy is practically non-existent” (1961). Static social units with tight internal networks demand great conformity for their maintenance.

Examples might be multiplied and more social science sources added to our reference list, all of which support the generalization that traditional Hindus are far more committed to authoritarian practices, to conformity, and to denial of personal feelings than are Westerners (e.g. Fischer and Fischer, 1963; Minturn and Hitchcock, 1963; Whiting, 1963). Studies of other countries present a similar theme (e.g. Inkeles, 1983; Lerner, 1964). India for instance, provides small comfort for the Marx-Fromm thesis. There is some evidence about whether Hindus who have migrated from the traditional countryside to urban centers are more subject to mental illness. It is based on the psychometric indicator used by Inkeles and his associates in

their ten year investigation of the psychological effects of modernization in six developing countries. They report that:

„In five of the six countries there was no visible pattern of any kind. India was the only country which showed a statistically significant pattern, but there each step of increased exposure to modernizing influences brought with it a *decrease* in the number of psychosomatic symptoms. The one clear-cut result, therefore, argued that if exposure to modernizing influences had had any effect, it was to *improve* personal adjustment” [italics are the author’s] (Inkeles, 1983, pp. 273-4).

This finding is another indication that there is no simple universal relationship between modernization and psychological reactions to it. For some industrialized societies, like Japan, the link between technology and character does not follow the American pattern (Lifton, 1961). Nor is there homogeneity in the types and frequencies of the forms of alienation, with various kinds to be found in many places. While economic conditions do influence psychological orientations, more than a simplistic generalization is required to determine how matters are working out in any one instance. This is not to suggest the futility of any quest for understanding the interaction between social institutions and those who participate in them. Rather, the potential value of solid research makes it indispensable.

#### 4. Concluding Comments

For all of its inaccuracies, Fromm’s conceptualization of social character provides a brilliant and potentially powerful tool for integrating psychoanalysis more effectively with social science. To say that it has great promise for further understanding and improved treatment of psychosocial disorders is to accord his ideas no more than their due. Whether that promise will be realized, however, will depend greatly on whether the core concepts are taken beyond the level of impressionistic discussion to that of disciplined investigation. Those ideas already have



proven themselves worthy of such attention. At this point there is no adequate substitute for empirical studies and insofar as their findings warrant, for appropriate improvements in our professional strategies and practices.

The issues raised by the theory of social character are urgent. They strike social scientists, like Inkeles, in much the same way as they did Fromm the sociological psychoanalyst. For Inkeles, the real choice no longer is whether to take account of the influences of modernism. The question, instead, is whether we will accept a modernity based on „tyranny or a modernism restrained by humility and tempered by humanism” (1983, p. 322). I see more hope for the uncommitted of today than for the overconformists of yesteryear. They are not merely different from the overconformists, they are more aware.

They are aware of existence in a pluralistic urban society with alternative ways of living and believing. They see yesterday’s mores dissolving before their eyes. They know that if man-made culture can be changed it also can fail, because there is no sacred magic to guarantee progress. The noncommitted have discovered helplessness. Perhaps some will resist the search for new magic formulae for relief, devices like fascism or astrology. They seem less tempted in such directions than the overconformists of the past, and have greater promise for turning to responsible and open-minded efforts at humanistic solutions.

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### Zusammenfassung: Gesellschaft als Schicksal. Fromms Begriff des Gesellschafts-Charakters

Die Feststellung Fromms, dass sozio-ökonomische Faktoren die Charakterstruktur prägen, wird im vorliegenden Beitrag mithilfe der soziologischen Schichtungstheorie weiter differenziert. Soziale Unter- und Mittelschicht unterscheiden sich nicht nur im jeweiligen Sprachverhalten, sondern auch in tieferliegenden Einstellungen und Lebenserfahrungen, was nicht selten zu Vorurteilen und gravierenden Kommunikationschwierigkeiten führt. Anhand einer von ihm initiierten Untersuchung in einer psychiatrischen Klinik (1949) weist der Autor z. B. nach, dass Patienten aus der sozialen Unterschicht durch das Mittelschicht-Personal eine kürzere, weniger spezifizierte Therapie erhielten und in ihren Heilungschancen als schlechter beurteilt wurden als Patienten aus der sozialen Mittelschicht, ohne dass man sich der Mühe unterzog, auf den jeweils spezifischen Lebenshintergrund genauer einzugehen.

Der „Sozialcharakter“ wird nicht nur durch schichtspezifische Sozialisation in der Familie, sondern vor allem durch die Arbeitsorganisation und dauerhafte Erfahrungen am Arbeitsplatz geprägt. Angesichts der in kapitalistischen Betrieben immer noch vorherrschenden hierarchischen Arbeitsorganisation unterliegt es keinem Zweifel, dass Selbst- und Mitbestimmung am Arbeitsplatz mit sinkender Qualifikation abnehmen und damit die Entfremdung zunimmt. Die gelegentlich von Fromm geäußerte Auffassung, dass Angehörige der sozialen Mittelschicht „noch entfremdeter“ seien als „Facharbeiter“ (E. Fromm, 1961a, GA V, S. 375f.), wird in diesem Zusammenhang einer Kritik unterzogen, ebenso wie seine Annahme, dass „Herdenkonformität“ ein Spezifikum der Mittelschicht sei. Auch im interkulturellen Vergleich zeigt sich vielmehr, dass größere Freiheit der Lebensgestaltung und Alternativen zum herrschenden Lebensstil eher von gehobenen Berufspositionen und nicht-konformistischen Gruppierungen der Gesellschaft zu erwarten sind.

### Riassunto: La società come destino. Il concetto frommiano di carattere sociale.

L'osservazione di Fromm che i fattori socioeconomici influiscono sulla struttura del carattere viene ulteriormente differenziata in questo lavoro con l'aiuto della teoria sociologica della stratificazione. Gli strati sociali inferiore e medio si differenziano non soltanto nel rispettivo comportamento linguistico, ma anche in atteggiamenti ed esperienze di vita più profondi, che portano spesso a pregiudizi e a notevoli difficoltà di comunicazione. Sulla base di una ricerca da lui intrapresa in una clinica psichiatrica (1949), l'autore indica, ad esempio, che i pazienti dello strato sociale inferiore ricevevano dal personale dello strato medio una terapia più breve e meno specifica, e che le loro possibilità di guarigione venivano giudicate minori di quelle dei pazienti della strato sociale medio, senza che ci si prendesse la briga di indagare più in dettaglio sulla rispettiva storia specifica.

Il „carattere sociale“ non viene formato soltanto attraverso la socializzazione nella famiglia, specifica dello strato sociale, ma soprattutto attraverso l'organizzazione del lavoro e le esperienze durature sul luogo di lavoro. Dal momento che nelle aziende capitalistiche vige tuttora un'organizzazione gerarchica del lavoro, non vi è dubbio che l'autodeterminazione e la partecipazione alle decisioni sul luogo del lavoro diminuiscono con l'abbassarsi del livello di qualificazione, e che in proporzione aumenta l'alienazione. Il parere espresso ogni tanto da Fromm che i membri dello strato sociale intermedio siano





„ancora più alienati” degli „operai specializzati” (E. Fromm, GA V, p. 375 segg.), viene sottoposto a critica a questo riguardo, così come la sua supposizione che „il conformismo di gregge” sia specifico del ceto medio. Anche dal confronto interculturale risulta piuttosto che una maggiore libertà nell’impostazione della vita e le alternative allo stile di vita prevalente sono più da aspettarsi da parte delle posizioni professionali elevate e dei gruppi non conformistici della società.

### **Sumario: La sociedad como destino. El concepto de carácter social de Fromm**

La comprobación por parte de Fromm de que los factores socio-económicos impregnan la estructura caracterial son diferenciados más ampliamente en el presente trabajo con ayuda de la teoría sociológica de capas. Las capas sociales bajas y medias se diferencian no sólo por comportamientos idiomáticos específicos, sino que también por actitudes y experiencias vivenciales más profundas, lo cual conduce en no pocos casos a prejuicios y graves dificultades comunicativas. En base a un estudio iniciado por el autor mismo en una clínica psiquiátrica (1949), demuestra éste de que los pacientes de la capa social baja fueron tratados por personal de la capa media de manera menos específica y que sus posibilidades de curación fueron consideradas como menores a aquellas de la capa media, sin que se tomara la molestia de considerar de forma más exacta los contextos de vida específicos.

El „carácter social” no es sólo impregnado por la socialización familiar de la capa social específica sino que sobre todo por la organización de trabajo y las experiencias permanentes en el lugar de trabajo. En vista del predominio aún existente de la organización de trabajo de tipo jerárquico en las empresas capitalistas no hay duda alguna que la autodeterminación y el derecho a determinación junto a los otros disminuyen paralelamente con la calificación y que con esto aumenta la enajenación. Se critica aquí la opinión expresada en algunas ocasiones por Fromm de que los miembros de la clase media „están más enajenados” que los „trabajadores cualificados” (E. Fromm, 1961a, GA V, pág. 375 y sgte.), así como la suposición de que „la conformidad de rebaño” sea un rasgo específico de la clase media. También en una comparación intercultural se muestra que una mayor libertad de la organización de vida y de alternativas al estilo de vida dominante es más bien de esperar en posiciones profesionales altas y en grupos inconformistas de la sociedad.