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Toward a Science of Social Character

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Erich Fromm grew up in a century marked by violence, and he used Freud's discoveries to increase our understanding of irrational human behavior. Fromm's work builds on Freud's pessimistic appraisal of the future in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, written right before World War II. As the U.S. and the Soviet Union threatened each other with nuclear weapons at the mid century, Fromm questioned whether humanity would prevail. Freud's hope was that before it was too late, *eros* would overcome the destructive instinct. But he did not say how this would happen. Fromm analyzed the socio-psychological causes of human destructiveness and described the social conditions that would strengthen the social character. Instead of *eros*, Fromm proposed the concept of *biophilia*, love of life, as the creative emotional attitude needed to save civilization.

I met Fromm in 1959 when we were both part of the movement in the U.S. to control nuclear arms and avoid war by promoting understanding between the U.S. and communist countries. In return for training me to be a psychoanalyst, I agreed to assist him in studying the social character of Mexican *campesinos*. Fromm considered this study a way of contributing something more to Mexico where a group of psychiatrists had invited him to found a psychoanalytic institute. In particular, the study sought to understand the roots of alcoholism and violence among villagers who had received ejido land after the Mexican revolution of 1910-20. Fromm hoped to discover ways to treat these

pathologies, social as well as individual.

I won't try to summarize our findings, which were published in *Social Character in a Mexican Village*. (1970, 1995) We did discover that the oppression of the past perpetrated by the hacienda system had formed a passive and fatalistic male social character, vulnerable to alcoholism and violence. We also learned that a combination of opportunity and psychoanalytic understanding of unconscious fears of becoming independent of irrational authority could strengthen the productiveness and self esteem of young men from these families.

During the past 30 years, I have continued to use and develop Fromm's methodology to study social character with a particular focus on its relationship to technology and work.

Social character is a difficult concept that crosses academic boundaries of psychology, sociology, anthropology and economics. In this brief paper, I want to focus on three aspects of social character that I believe need to be clarified, if we are to fully develop a science of social character. These are: the difference between individual and social character, how social character changes; and how social character develops.

Character and Social Character

Fromm used Freud's character types as building blocks for his theory of social character. However, Fromm left some confusion about the difference between individual and social character.



Let's start with Freud's *normal* psychological types. He calls these, in a 1931 paper, "libidinal types," but in fact, he describes them more in terms of object relations. Thus, Freud's erotic type who seeks loving relationships and is vulnerable to dependency becomes Fromm's receptive type. Freud's obsessive type (formerly the anal character) who is conservative and cautious with a strong moral attitude becomes Fromm's hoarding type. And Freud's narcissist who is aggressive and innovative becomes Fromm's exploitative type. None of Fromm's types contradict Freud's descriptions. However, they do elaborate on them.

Fromm (1947) added three new elements to Freud's normal typology, significantly enriching it. The most important, is the concept of *productiveness*, with roots in Spinoza's concept of activeness. The degree of productiveness modifies and transforms a character type. There is a major difference between the obstinate and stingy unproductive obsessive personality and the orderly, hardworking productive obsessive personality. (Fromm's concept of the productive character is more problematic, and ideal for human development rather than a type based on observation. For further discussion see Maccoby, 1996.) The second of Fromm's contributions is the concept of the socio-political relationship, especially, the authoritarian mode of relationship. The third contribution is a new personality type posited by Fromm, the *marketing* character.

The confusion comes when social character is described solely in terms of individual character. The peasant farmer and the bureaucrat may both be moderately productive obsessive - hoarding characters, but because their social contexts are different, their social characters are also significantly different.

The dynamic values or emotional attitudes shared by a group, the social character, can be understood as internalized culture, interacting with individual character. As a result of this interaction, we find different variations of a social character, for example the obsessive bureaucrat and the helpful, receptive bureaucrat. A crucial interaction has to do with the fit, or lack of it, between individual character and culture. Culture changes more slowly than the social envi-

ronment, and character changes even more slowly. A strong individual character which meshes with the social character and is firmly adapted to a culture will resist cultural change. This is particularly true for people with moderate to low productiveness; change upsets effective adaptation and causes them extreme anxiety and resentment. People in this situation become vulnerable to leadership which promises to reinstate the lost culture or provide a new one which reconnects their character. Fromm first described this interaction in relation to the Germans who supported Hitler. Fromm described a hardworking, frugal patriotic social character rooted in an obsessive-hoarding personality whose savings had gone up in smoke with the inflation of the 20s and who had been humiliated by defeat in World War I. For this group, Hitler offered a potent mixture of regaining German glory and a focus for resentment directed against the Jews. He offered to reconnect a social character that had lost its moorings to a new society.

In our study of campesinos, Fromm and I described the interaction between the male dependents of hacienda peons and the post revolutionary ejido. These submissive, fatalistic, unproductive receptive men lacked the independence required by peasant farming. They rented out their lands to the entrepreneurs (productive narcissists) and became heavy drinkers.

For some villagers, whose families had remained free of the haciendas, the social character needed for independent farming meshed with a productive obsessive individual character. But many of the villagers we studied, and others that my colleagues and I have interviewed during the past 30 years, were a mix of types. This was also the case for 75 percent of the German workers and white collar employees studied by Fromm in 1930.

Although only 10 percent of the Germans showed an authoritarian character, no more than 15 percent had the deep democratic convictions to oppose the Nazi's, once they were legally in power. Given revolutionary social conditions as existed in Germany, a relatively small group can change a culture, restructuring institutions that shape the social character of the future.



For most people, the social character is not deeply rooted in their individual character. Rather, it is an internalization of cultural norms that determine social attitudes and give meaning to social behavior. Most people go along with the prevailing consensus, and the more productive people of any type are best able to adapt to a changing social environment.

How Social Character Changes

In *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, Fromm and I introduced the concept of *social selection*. This describes a process analogous to Darwin's natural selection, in which people with a certain individual character type prosper in a particular social environment, particularly in times of social change and ultimately gain control of a society. This type is then able to change social institutions so that they shape the social character that supports the new institutions.

Thus, we found that productive exploitative-narcissist villagers used new capitalistic opportunities to increase their wealth and transform village culture. They strengthened schools and diverted funds from traditional fiestas to building new roads and instituting basketball and soccer, games that stimulated teamwork and a competitive spirit. The more productive traditional peasants, especially the younger generations, went along with the new leaders. The unproductive, unable to adapt, became unhappy cultural misfits.

Modern history suggests that a similar process of social selection has periodically caused changes in the social character. A century ago, in the U.S., productive narcissists emerged to exploit new technologies in steel, railroads, automobiles, electricity and oil. These industrialists, like Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and John D. Rockefeller crushed competitors and built great companies. Their companies became relatively stable bureaucracies which became models for government organization and schools. Families raised children to adapt to these institutions. The industrialists endowed foundations and universities to enshrine their names and also to develop the skills and attitudes required by the bureaucracies.

At the middle of the 20th century, the productive obsessive bureaucratic character dominated American institutions. However, the rise of a service society began to select and shape the marketing character. In the 60s, increased affluence and revolutionary social movements for civil rights and women's liberation and against the war in Viet Nam began to loosen up the conservative bureaucratic social character and challenge the legitimacy and authority of the established elite. In the 70s and 80s, the culture continued to move in the direction of service, which now comprises 75 percent of work. As women increasingly entered the workplace and became wage earners, the hierarchical paternalistic family was transformed.

These changes were intensified and given a new direction in the 90s as another revolution in technology transformed work and organizations. As in the past, productive narcissistic entrepreneurs, like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Steve Case and Jack Welch, to name the best known, created new industries, using the discoveries of information and communications technology. Those leaders and others like them are now shaping how people work, learn and how they define themselves.

Impatient with bureaucracies, the new productive narcissists downsized and automated work to cut costs, maximize flexibility and institutionalize continuous change. Loyalty and years of service no longer guaranteed life-time employment. It was also more cost-effective to contract out services, sometimes to small entrepreneurial firms or reduce labor costs by exporting work to Asia and Latin America. The model for information age work became Silicon Valley where managers and professionals reinvented themselves as "free agents" ready to change jobs if they could get a better deal. They identified themselves in terms of their skills and projects rather than as belonging to a company.

To become more productive and satisfy customers, the bureaucracies began to redesign work. New modes of work required not only new skills but also new values. A new organizational ideology emphasized innovation, interactive networks, customer responsiveness, teamwork, and flexibility. The economic organizations creating the greatest wealth had to become



interactive instead of bureaucratic. They had to manage intelligence rather than energy. Instead of the paternalistic bureaucratic manager, the interactive managers were expected to be coaches of empowered individuals and teams, of young employees who knew more about technology than their elders.

To summarize this shift, consider the chart: Organizational Social Character. It summarizes changes in socio-economic base, the social character, and the ideals, ideology, or social self rooted in the bureaucratic and interactive social characters.

Social Character and the Life Cycle-Bureaucratic vs. Interactive

Fromm's concept of social character lacks a developmental framework. The social character does not appear full blown in childhood but is formed throughout the life cycle. Fromm never tried to describe this process. However, in *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, I described how work, schooling and play contributed to forming the social character.

To go further, I have used Erik H. Erikson's eight stages of life to explore social character and social self development in the United States. Erikson based his stages on the idea that people had to respond to the challenges of both their bodies and cultural expectations at different ages. How they met these challenges or accomplished these life tasks formed their competencies, values, emotional attitudes and sense of identity or self.

What Erikson first wrote in 1950 and revised in 1963 now seems dated and sexist. This is because the different cultural roles Erikson describes for men and women fit the bureaucratic, not the interactive era. Furthermore, the idea of psychosocial developmental stages can be misleading. First of all, Erikson, like most social scientists, uses the concept of development without defining it. What do we mean by development? Is it just maturation? Or growth? Maturation is a biological process that occurs in all living organisms. Growth can be either positive or chaotic as in cancerous growth. I would prefer to define human development as growth of

competence, *a process in which individuals increase their ability to both determine and satisfy their needs*. In terms of this definition, human development implies increased awareness and ability to frustrate compulsive needs that weaken a person, while reinforcing those needs that are consciously embraced and are strengthening. For the bureaucratic and interactive social characters, both the positive developmental outcomes and the typical psychological problems are different. (Maccoby 1999).

Optimal individual development for any social character requires a supportive community and ideals. Those ideals which best support human development emphasize values of freedom, love, and creativity in work, self-expression, and intimate relationships. These are the values of the great humanistic religions and philosophies. While no individual can fully realize them, the effort to live these values and with others to infuse them in society provides a deep sense of meaning and self esteem.

Secondly, while I find Erikson's eight stages a useful construct to think about psychosocial life tasks, these stages should not be considered mechanistically as though one moves through life on a track, stopping at fixed stations to wrestle with these challenges. I see development more in terms of complexity theory, as determining operating principles that direct a complex self organizing system to adapt continually to both its environment and its biological maturation.

Although success in mastering a life cycle task increases the chances of success at the next level, failure at a particular stage does not mean that an individual has forever lost the chance to develop. Some people master psychosocial tasks or challenges despite early failure, with help from others. Correspondingly, the stresses of life may undermine development. The individual may be driven by unconscious needs and forced to wrestle with old issues.

With these cautions in mind, I have applied Erikson's framework to compare the bureaucratic and interactive social characters throughout the life cycle in terms of both positive developmental outcomes and typical psychological problems. The differences between these social characters have significant implications for psy-



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chotherapy and psychoanalysis. The traditional psychoanalytic method based on bureaucratic rules is being replaced by a more interactive approach emphasizing shared learning and mutual development.

In conclusion, Erich Fromm, building on Freud's insights and discoveries, gave us the concept of social character. Of course, other social analysts had described national traits, notably Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* and Karl Marx describing of French peasants and communards in *The 18th Brunaire of Louis Napoleon*. However, Fromm not only described character; he presented a theory of how social character is shaped, and its function for society. He also developed a method to study social character through an interpretative questionnaire. As we clarify and expand on this theory and methodology, we stand on his shoulders just as he stood on those of Freud.

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