



Mexican Time. Erich Fromm in Mexico: A Point of View

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The concept of time in Mexican culture goes beyond the hours marked on the clock and can usefully be considered part of the social character. The Mexican Consul in England (Wybo and Millan, personal communication 1969) once commented that his hope of improving relations between the Mexican residents and the larger English community was constantly being frustrated by the different notions Mexicans and Englishmen entertained about appointments. If he arranged a meeting from 7 to 9 pm, the Englishmen would begin to arrive a few minutes before the appointed time; by 7:05 they were all there and the meeting immediately moved into full swing. A few minutes before 9 pm, the English were already moving toward the door and by the stroke of 9 they had disappeared through it - unfortunately without having made the acquaintance of any of the Mexicans, since these were only now starting to arrive! The consul was finally driven to operate with two different time schedules, notifying the Mexicans that the meeting was from 5 to 9 pm. Thanks to this play, the meetings were held successfully.

In Mexico, exact timing is looked on with contempt. The expressions „today no, tomorrow yes” and „O. K., mañana” have that connotation. This probably implies an awareness that time is spent and consumed, so that delaying it is a victory for human resourcefulness. Thus we have lack of punctuality, general tardiness, frequent absences from work - „San Lunes” (Holy Monday) is statistically the day of the week with the most absences from work (the very choice

of nickname likens it to a day of obligatory religious observance. It has much to do with the necessarily imprecise scheduling of Mexican workers, and indeed Mexicans in general, whether in undertaking and finishing a job or in their daily living.

Work is taken literally as the Biblical curse and it is felt and experienced accordingly. So the person who works must suffer and really feel his expulsion from Eden. The majority continue to yearn for Paradise and maintain a collective illusion of still being there. And so each person does his best to while away the time as pleasantly as possible, each after his own fashion and banishing all thought that time is being consumed.

During the Mexican Fiesta fun comes into its own as life acquires a playful (ludic) dimension. Each year there are upward of 23 obligatory holidays (El Financiero, 1993) and „puentes” (bridges) - days which fall between these holidays and the weekend. There are 200 days of classes (El Financiero 1993) in the official school calendar, but hardly anyone sticks to it.

All this has a meaning that goes beyond the flight from adult responsibilities and places the time situation in a childhood condition of yearning for protection, of continuing to be protected, of remaining within the confines of the Garden of Eden (which are also the confines of the maternal womb). Cultural and family structures reinforce this, together with the presence of a tenacious maternity cult rooted in both religious and private spheres. Thus the strength of a



collective illusion, the illusion of being eternally protected, manifests itself in the form of a professed veneration for the mother. The worship of God - in the traditional religions normally decked out with male attributes - is displaced in favor of the idealized mother, who is considered, and experienced, as more powerful and influential than God Himself. In this dynamic, God is paradoxically relegated to being man's equal, while struggle, competition and jealousy, are accepted as the price of securing the love and protection of this exalted Mother-Goddess. This mother-oriented religion, with its cult of the Virgin, of the maternal, has staked out a dominant place in Mexican social structure.

This helpless condition of surrender - in order to be the object of protection - places the mother, at one and the same time, in a determinant interaction of mutual interdependence; for in order to continue in her role as mother, she must be bound to her children, which doubly reinforces the strength of the maternal fixation. Those who may attempt to separate from the family, from the maternal element, are neither individually and socially well received. They are considered traitors to the social condition; and the moral punishment for their attempt at independence and growth is symbolical condemnation, expulsion from Paradise. Authors such as Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos (1963) have given their own individual interpretations of Mexican time.

These same processes are frequently mirrored in analytic consulting rooms where attempts at independence are frequently accompanied by panic or mental confusion or behavioral disturbances; also observed are role enactments involving time, whether it be the time of work schedules, consulting rooms, or days previously set aside for appointments. Trying to take this route - or tunnel, as R. D. Laing called it, (quoted by Barnes, 1974) - is tantamount to undergoing rebirth; and, like being born, it is painful.

Such a social terrain and cultural living conditions were rather a challenge to Erich Fromm as a thinker than an inconvenience and alienating factor to him as foreigner. In particular, it motivated him to engage in social research. It was in this Mexican terrain that he was able to

carry through the pragmatic verification of his Freud-Marxist theory. The resultant socio-psychoanalytical study of „social character“ (Fromm and Maccoby, 1970) was an outstanding contribution to psychoanalytic theory (Fromm, 1972).

In Mexico, the polarities of life-death, family fixation-freedom, and family narcissism-individuality, (Fromm, 1964) offer a vast field of study. If we Mexicans are to meaningfully investigate them, we have to transcend our dominant ideological condition and social alienation patterns, not to mention our social character-emotional responses favored by tradition and custom. Fromm, a German emigrant, did not have to overcome this frame of reference. He was punctual, methodical, and disciplined, apart from being gifted with an open mind and an appreciation of music, of good food - in a word, of life. Thus, beyond a doubt, Fromm could draw on a favorable constellation of factors, of which he then made good use during his time in Mexico. A „psychoanalyst is like a gardener“, he told Raoul Fournier (1980). When going into analysis Fournier used to say: „I am going to see my gardener“. Fromm defined his gardening techniques as follows: „He pulls out the weeds, speaks to the plants, trims what must be trimmed, and stimulates them to give of their best“. That too is what a psychoanalyst should be like. The very contrast between his German social character and the conditions of day-to-day living in Mexico might have meant trouble for almost anybody else. But I would judge that it was his tenacity, as well as a certain voracity for understanding the human phenomena, that made him stay on in Mexico - as not only an alert but also an enthusiastic participant. Perhaps it was these social contrasts that help explain why, in his philosophy of human nature, it is precisely the contrasts or contradictions that invariably loom largest.

Hence it is that the ingrained national sense of life as an „eternal yearning for return“ constitutes a major part of the Mexican understanding of life. This is a powerful presence in the social character, incidentally also expressed in tales from the oral tradition ultimately going back to myths of human origins that derive from the Aztecs, the founders of Tenochtitlan, (see Molina,



1993) now Mexico City. These invariably announce that life begins in Mictlan only to return there after death. Thus, Mictlan turns out to be the timeless space of eternal well-being.

How did Fromm deal with Mexicans as a psychoanalyst? With whom did he relate? Whom did he stimulate? How was he able to set in motion a Mexican style of psychoanalysis? How were practical problems faced and solved? How were the minimal conditions for work established, i.e. an established place, a fixed time, a time limit? And how did the psychoanalytic innovation of the „50 minute hour“ operate?

This discipline, and for that matter any other, was inevitably conceptualized by many Mexicans as „authoritarian“. The authoritarian principle, in its Mexican variant, states that he who has the authority can give an order, but it is up to the other person whether he obeys or rebels. As a condition this casts light on the Mexican character. Time scheduling is seen as an attempt to claim authority, to which one either submits or rebels. Or else the problem is solved by invoking the narcissistic principle: one simply invents one's own time. How, then, was it possible to launch a Mexican psychoanalysis?

Doubtless the human condition must have taken pride of place - as „the object of analysis.“ Perhaps a trade-off was effected between, on the one hand, the German character itself (authoritarian, disciplined, punctual, hard-working, dependable, endowed with definite life plans and every intention of carrying them out) and, on the other hand, the light hearted Mexican social experience of *joie de vivre* and *fiesta*, of immersion in the ephemeral and hazardous, of imprecise use of time or even overlapping times (for what is the past or the present if one can live in the future?), of creative imagination and its colorful projections, of a yearning to communicate with mother nature and to live as brothers and sisters of the gods.

Twelve Mexicans and Erich Fromm, (Millan and Gojman, 1983) spent ten years moving around Mexico City - from private consulting rooms to university medical classroom and the department of philosophy, where the psychology school under Guillermo Davila was located. Seminars, classes, and meetings for the training of psychoanalysts were held in all these venues.

The IMPAC was inaugurated in 1963, first as a society and later as an Institute of Psychoanalysis. Its presence and activities should be seen in this perspective of Mexican time and mixed social character. Fromm, in his inaugural speech, found himself speaking, and not by chance either, of a „humanistic psychoanalysis“ (IMPAC, 1993). The psychoanalysis Fromm had in mind was the product of intense relationships, of human interactions, of social contrasts. It went well beyond Freud's notion of psychoanalysis as the repetition of childhood in the presence of the analyst.

It is also a fact that, on the university campus, Fromm stimulated figures like R. Fournier, then head of the College of Medicine, who carried out a revolution - now hailed as historic - inside the universities, laying down new guidelines about how medicine was to be taught and re-orienting it toward humanism (Millan, 1990). Humanizing the teaching of medicine meant returning the person to center stage and not treating patients as „pathological cases“, or „bed numbers“, or „medical file entries“.

By 1963, Fromm „the analyst“ and his group of twelve „psychoanalysed“ Mexicans had successfully faced down resistance and were well launched on their creative work. This original Mexican group had already trained by 1970 four generations in the study of psychoanalysis (see Reyes, 1988). Those of us who learned our psychoanalysis at the feet of these Mexicans directly trained by Fromm have, of course, imbibed the standard rules of psychoanalytical technique. Thus we had few illusions about how difficult the process was (and indeed still is) when we wanted to make an appointment with someone, or fix an appointment, or hint at payment for time made available - for any Mexican worth his salt was (and is) capable of giving an unexpected answer. So if the orthodox rules stipulated a time for the analytic spade-work, and another time for the occurrence of transference, and another time again for analysing the resistance aroused by these processes - to these natural times had to be added the importance of „Mexican time,“ at least when working with Mexicans.

In the sixties, during the cultural euphoria awakened in Mexico by Fromm, a university re-



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searcher who was a friend of mine (Mercado, 1992), attended a lecture at the Goethe Institute, the German Language teaching center in Mexico City. Coming out of the lecture theatre on the fifth floor, a group of students jostled around Fromm as he headed for the elevator, the only way down. When the elevator door opened, they respectfully let the „maestro” enter first before all crowding in themselves after him. Fromm uttered a cry - offright, protest, or alarm? - because they were all squeezed in an elevator that carried a sign stating clearly, „capacity 8 persons.” The Mexicans kept silent. Was Fromm on that day in the Goethe Institute briefly overcome by his German feeling for order, by his cultural origins? Years afterward this same investigator told us: „I think that what he was getting at was that the elevator was not made for the ten or twelve of us who had crowded into it. But we wanted to be near him and perhaps he did not understand our lack of discipline. We all piled in in order to travel with him”. Certainly Fromm protested because the elevator’s weight capacity had not been respected - but, in the final analysis, he managed to travel for 25 years on a voyage of discovery with Mexicans surrounding him.

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Zusammenfassung: Mexikanische Zeit. Erich Fromm in Mexico

Die Art, wie in Mexiko mit der Zeit umgegangen wird, unterscheidet sich beträchtlich von der westeuropäischen oder nordamerikanischen: Der Mexikaner „hat” oder „nimmt sich” mehr Zeit; die in der Ländern der protestantischen Arbeitsethik hochgeschätzte Tugend der Pünktlichkeit ist ihm fremd. In der „mexikanischen Zeit”, zu der viele Feste gehören, bekundet sich eine dem matrizentrischen Komplex zugehörige Art von Gesellschafts-Charakter. Man lebt unbekümmert in den Tag hinein, erwartet, dass immer genug zum Leben vorhanden ist, und sucht das verlorengegangene Paradies wiederzufinden.

Wie kam Fromm mit dieser Art von Lebenseinstellung zurecht? Anfangs galt er - der aus Deutschland emigrierte Psychoanalytiker, der in den USA praktiziert und gelehrt hatte - bei vielen seiner Schüler als „autoritär”. Schon die Forderung nach pünktlichem Beginn und die Begrenzung der analytischen Sitzung auf 50 Minuten galten ihnen als unannehmbar. Mit der Zeit kam jedoch ein fruchtbarer Austausch



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zustande: Seine Schüler erlernten von Fromm nicht nur die psychoanalytische Technik, sondern sie waren auch zutiefst von der dahinterstehenden Persönlichkeit beeindruckt. Umgekehrt sind Fromms ganzheitliche Sicht des Menschen und seine biophile Grundhaltung nicht ohne die Erfahrungen, die er während seiner langjährigen Tätigkeit in Mexiko machte, zu verstehen. So trug die „mexikanische Zeit“ viel zur Entwicklung der „humanistischen Psychoanalyse“ bei.

Riassunto: Il tempo messicano. Erich Fromm in Messico

Il rapporto che si ha col tempo in Messico è molto diverso da quello europeo occidentale o da quello nordamericano. Il messicano „ha“ o „si prende“ più tempo; la virtù della puntualità, così apprezzata nei paesi dell'etica protestante, gli è estranea. Nel „tempo messicano“, al quale appartengono molte feste, si manifesta un tipo di carattere sociale che appartiene al complesso matricentrico. Si vive alla giornata senza preoccupazioni, ci si aspetta che ci sia sempre a disposizione quanto basta per vivere, e si cerca di ritrovare il paradiso perduto.

Come si trovò Fromm con questo tipo di atteggiamento verso la vita? All'inizio, egli - lo psicoanalista emigrato dalla Germania, che aveva praticato e insegnato negli Stati Uniti - sembrava „autoritario“ a molti suoi allievi. Già la pretesa dell'inizio puntuale e il limite di 50 minuti alla seduta analitica risultavano loro inaccettabili. Per quanto riguarda il tempo, però, si arrivò ad uno scambio fruttuoso: i suoi allievi non soltanto impararono da Fromm la tecnica psicoanalitica, ma vennero anche profondamente influenzati dalla personalità che vi stava dietro. D'altro canto, la visione globale dell'uomo da parte di Fromm e il suo atteggiamento biofilico di base non si potrebbero capire senza le esperienze da lui fatte durante i molti anni della sua attività in Messico. Pertanto, il „tempo messicano“ ha molto contribuito alla „psicoanalisi umanistica“.

Resumen: El tiempo mexicano. Erich Fromm en México

La forma en cual se maneja el tiempo en México se diferencia notoriamente de aquella europea occidental o norteamericana. El mexicano „tiene“ o „se toma“ más tiempo. La virtud de la puntualidad, tan apreciada en los países con una ética de trabajo protestante, le es extraña. En el „tiempo mexicano“, al que pertenecen muchas fiestas, se denota una forma perteneciente al complejo matricéntrico de carácter social: se vive sin mayor preocupación en el día y se espera que siempre haya suficiente para vivir y de reencontrar el paraíso perdido.

Cómo logró Fromm adaptarse a esta forma de vida? Al principio contaba él, como psicoanalista emigrado de Alemania y que había practicado y enseñado en los EEUU, entre muchos de sus discípulos como „autoritario“. La simple exigencia de comenzar puntualmente y de limitar la sesión a 50 minutos les parecía inadmisibile. Con el tiempo se llegó sin embargo a un intercambio fructífero: sus discípulos no sólo aprendieron de Fromm el psicoanálisis sino que también fueron profundamente impresionados por la personalidad que se ocultaba detrás de esto. Por otro lado no se puede entender la visión global del Hombre y su posición biofílica, sin las experiencias que él hizo durante su larga actividad en México. De esta manera contribuyó „el tiempo mexicano“ en gran medida al desarrollo del „psicoanálisis humanista“.