



Modes of Authority and Social Character Research by Daniel Burston

A. Modes of Authority in Psychoanalysis

Freud's attitude toward paternal authority and its role in religion and culture was profoundly ambiguous, and invites multiple readings. In 1910, for example, Freud attributed Leonardo Da Vinci's astonishing precocity as an engineer and natural scientist to the fact that he had "escaped being intimidated by his father in earliest childhood", thereby linking the exercise of paternal authority to the habitual suppression of free and unfettered intellectual development in children, and later on, in adults. At this stage, Freud implied that rebellion against paternal authority may be an emancipatory process.

However, three years later, in Totem and Taboo, Freud linked the tendency to rebel against paternal authority with an intractable Oedipal ambivalence that is supposedly rooted in our phylogenetic inheritance, which underlies "the collective obsessional neurosis" he thought he found at the heart of religious dogma. On this reading, rebellion against authority is an unconscious re-enactment of a collective rebellion against a prehistoric tyrant that had long since lost any rational or adaptive function -- is, in short, a repetition compulsion, rather than a progressive or emancipatory movement. Freud never reconciled these contradictory views of rebellion against paternal authority, or even acknowledged their existence in his work (Burston, 1994).



At the outset, Freud attracted disciples who responded to the critical elements in his thought. Significantly, however, those who were most radical and uncompromising in their opposition to patriarchal authority were eventually thrown out of the IPA, and dismissed, vilified or ignored by the analytic mainstream, e.g. Otto Gross in 1909, Wilhelm Reich in 1933 and Erich Fromm in 1946.

Though recognized by Freud as a thinker of great promise in 1907, Otto Gross was basically an anarchist with strong irrationalist leanings. After bolting from his analysis with Jung in 1908, Gross rejected authority of any kind (Michaels, 1983). Following Gross, who broached the subject in 1916 or so, Wilhelm Reich expounded on the sado-masochistic or "patriarchal-authoritarian" character that informed Fromm's theory of irrational authority somewhat (Cattier, 1970). However, he differed from Gross by explicitly distinguished between rational and irrational authority, paralleling Freud's Enlightenment tendency to equate religion with irrationality and natural science with rationality per se.

Like Gross, Reich, and the earlier Freud, perhaps, Fromm thought that the ruthless repression of childhood sexuality is one way in which the authoritarian character reproduces itself (Fromm, 1947). Unlike Gross and Reich, however, Fromm did not grant a pre-eminent position to the repression of childhood sexuality in his theory of character and social character, nor believe that sexual liberation, so called, would inevitably dissolve structures of irrational authority in the individual, the family or society at large.

Moreover, unlike Reich, who discussed two different modes of authority, Fromm distinguished between *three* different types of



authority, which may co-exist in one and the same culture, or indeed, in one and the same person, and whose consequences for human development are exceedingly diverse. If Fromm was right, then respect for authority (or its opposite) means utterly different things depending on whether we are referring to *rational*, *irrational* or *anonymous* authority (Fromm, 1941, chapter 4, section 1; Fromm, 1947; Fromm, 1955).

B. Authority in Fromm and the Frankfurt School

Fromm's modes of authority are always discussed in conjunction with an analysis of social character, which typically includes wide ranging historical tableaux, economic and anthropological research, and probing reflections on theology and mass culture at various periods of Western history (and prehistory). Fromm shared this discursive, interdisciplinary approach with other members of the Frankfurt School, whose studies of authority during the late 20's and 30's were, like Reich's, focused on the cultural, religious and economic roots of fascism. In Horkheimer's case, they were also, like Fromm's, rooted in a critical appraisal of Freud's theory of culture and religion, which Horkheimer later dropped, but which Fromm retained when he finally severed ties with the Institute.

A paper of this length cannot do justice to all of Fromm's formulations, nor explore their manifold interconnections with the early work of Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin, Lowenthal and others. Even listing Fromm's formulations in serial order,



identifying their main characteristics, and the points at which they appear and reappear, develop, atrophy or disappear in his life's work, and why, is out of the question here -- though it would furnish the basis for an absorbing doctoral dissertation, sometime.

However, for purposes of our present inquiry, we must venture some broad generalizations about Fromm's studies of authority. First, not all of Fromm's analyses and assertions regarding social character types are backed up by empirical data or field research. And this is not grounds for reproach. After all, a twentieth century researcher can never interview a neolithic tribesman, a Pharisee, a medieval artisan or theologian, a Renaissance potentate or a Protestant Reformer to judge their attitudes toward gender roles, parenting, civil disobedience, foreigners and so on. To glean what their attitudes and unconscious orientation were, we can only interrogate their remaining texts and artifacts, and make inferences about them from their contemporary descendents or near-analogues in rustic settings, as a cultural anthropologist would compare contemporary Bedouin societies with ancient Hebrew herdsmen.

Obviously, we cannot dismiss this body of work as "merely speculative" or of purely antiquarian interest. On the contrary, Marx's historical materialism and Max Weber's historical sociology are both built on foundations like these, and those who do empirical-analytic social research can still glean much inspiration and insight from this non-empirical work, even as they make their own methodologies and instruments more precise, focused and relevant to contemporary issues and circumstances. Furthermore, a



desire to engage Fromm's *non-empirical* social character research might act as a useful corrective to viewing the dynamics of social character primarily through narrowly "presentist" lenses.

A second point is that Fromm's historical and theoretical constructions that are unsupported by actual field data attend closely to economic factors, but also focus heavily on the meaning of religious beliefs and dogmas and their corresponding notions of spiritual and secular authority, in the apparent conviction that religion and prevailing modes of authority both reflect and reinforce existing social character, and both herald or promote incipient transformations of social character in response to burgeoning economic and technological developments. This was consistent with the Frankfurt School approach.

By contrast, as far as I can tell, post-Frommian research on social character lays much more emphasis on technological and economic factors, to the apparent neglect of religion and authority as both mirrors of and as formative factors in contemporary social character. Obviously, this shift in emphasis reflects the decline of organized religion and the increasing secularization of the modern (and postmodern) worlds. However, the world-wide resurgence of religious fundamentalism, right wing extremism and the ever growing neo-Nazi and white-supremacist movements suggest that rekindling interest in these areas of may be vitally necessary to getting a handle on some of the more bizarre and inhuman events of our times, which will shape our future history in the course of the 21st century.



A third point is that one of Fromm's modes of authority, namely, anonymous authority, is supposedly a creature of modern market conditions, and presumably irrelevant to or of marginal importance in pre-capitalist societies. Its relatively recent appearance, according to Fromm, should make it amenable to socio-analytic research. However, despite the importance he attributed to it, in theory, Fromm never studied it empirically. I suspect that this neglect was inadvertent, or a product of the circumstances that drew him to Mexico, and away from the United States. Or perhaps Fromm felt that the middle-class American life furnished such abundant proof of his arguments that rigorous research was utterly unnecessary.

In any case, the fact remains Fromm's studies of German workers in the Weimar Republic, and of Mexican peasants in Chiconcuac, do not address anonymous authority or its offspring -- or perhaps its sibling -- the marketing character. Moreover, as far as I am aware, in social character research since 1970 -- in English, at any rate -- discussions of anonymous authority are sparse or non-existent, while the status and usefulness of the marketing character, with which it was closely allied -- for Fromm, at any rate -- has become controversial, more on which momentarily.

A fourth point worth noting is that Fromm's analysis of rational and irrational authority in pre-capitalist and early capitalist societies is inextricably intertwined with his evolving theory of matriarchy and patriarchy, of sado-masochism, alienation and idolatry, and with discussions of rational versus irrational faith, rational versus irrational doubt, humanistic versus authoritarian



conscience, solidarity versus slavish obedience. A schematic overview of this body of work yields the following orientations or syndromes.

Rational Authority	Irrational Authority
promotes	promotes
(<i>Syndrome A</i>)	(<i>Syndrome B</i>)
Love, Independence	Sado-masochism (symbiosis)
Rational Faith	Irrational Faith
Rational Doubt	Irrational Doubt
Humanistic Conscience	Authoritarian Conscience
Solidarity	Obedience
Self-realization	Idolatry, alienation

Please note that 1) I have not included matriarchy and patriarchy in this schematic bifurcation, because Fromm associated the negative attributes of the patricentric "complex" with irrational authority, while those of the matricentric orientation are supposedly linked with anonymous authority, which we address a little later. Meanwhile, let's review what actually Fromm means by rational and irrational authority before going any further.

Rational authority is a relationship between two (or more) people of *unequal* age, experience or status. For the sake of discussion, let us follow Fromm's prototype of the master-student relationship (1941; 1956). In his (or her) field of expertise, the master is authorized to set goals and standards that the student must strive to achieve as a result of his (or her) training or



experience. But in principle, at any rate, rational authority aims at minimizing or indeed abolishing differences in status, so that master and pupil can potentially relate as equals in the fullness of time.

Meanwhile, the achievement of such equality presupposes effort, respect and discipline on the student's part. In order to master a skill or a body of learning, the pupil must follow the master's instructions, and practice diligently. Obedience of this kind entails a commitment, not to the teacher qua teacher, but to the craft or discipline, and the goal of becoming a skilled practitioner in one's own right. And ideally, the teacher derives satisfaction from the student's progress, because it confirms his knowledge and ability -- Erikson would say, his generativity. In the event that the student matches or exceeds the master's level of knowledge and proficiency, the friction of competing egos is presumably contained and diffused by a disinterested love of the craft that they both share.

To summarize, then, rational authority is based on competence, experience and mutual respect, and entails the possibility of equality, and perhaps, indeed, of friendship, depending on circumstances. By contrast, *irrational* authority is designed to perpetuate or intensify conditions of inequality through the use of force, or the threat of force, and/or the use of deception, secretiveness and/or the manipulation of interpersonal relationships. The prototype for this, as Fromm observed, is the master-slave relationship, where the "discipline" demanded by irrational authority is really a form of bondage that benefits the



authority himself. Though it is often disguised as benevolent paternalism, such authority is really motivated by greed, fear and/or the desire to dominate and humiliate others. Irrational authorities habitually distort the truth, and feel threatened by the prospect of equality, though they often enjoy a kind of sordid intimacy others -- sado-masochism or symbiosis -- to alleviate their loneliness and to consolidate their hold on power. In this context, obedience to authority entails a *lack* of respect for oneself, although this trait of character need not be conscious, particularly if it is accompanied by neurotic pride and/or compensatory tendencies to idealize the master. Conversely, defiance of irrational authority may be a healthy attempt to sunder the bonds of oppression that masquerade as paternalistic or disinterested care and guidance (1930; 1941).

As Fromm noted in The Sane Society (1955) and again in The Art of Loving (1956), rational authority is similar in character to conditional or fatherly love, and is as vital to the development of an alive and intact human being as is unconditional (or motherly) love. But just as motherly love can degenerate into overprotectiveness, infantilization, engulfment, and so on, so fatherly love can deteriorate into mere authoritarianism. In short, rational and irrational authority are the positive and negative, or life affirming and life diminishing aspects of the father principle -- or of the father archetype, if you prefer.

Meanwhile, as Fromm freely acknowledged, while they shape prevailing social character, rational and irrational authority are heuristic abstractions or typological fictions, which are seldom



encountered in "pure" form (1941, p. 188). So applying these schemata in a naive or dogmatic way can do more harm than good. A good example of this shortcoming can be found in Theodor Adorno's study, The Authoritarian Personality. Fromm reproached Adorno for failing to distinguish between the authoritarian (or proto-fascist) mentality and what he and Maccoby referred to -- somewhat confusingly -- as the "traditional-authoritarian" type found chiefly in peasant societies. The "traditional-authoritarian", they noted, is a productive hoarding type -- hard working, resourceful, religious and proud. These peasants are suspicious of less traditional, more entrepreneurial (i.e. exploitative) types, and generally scornful of their less industrious (i.e. receptive) counterparts, who are prone to immersion in a culture of drunkenness and violence.

In Social Character in A Mexican Village, Fromm and Maccoby noted that while traditionalists enjoin obedience to authority for survival's sake, unlike authoritarians, they are not sadists. In short, they do not enjoy or admire the wanton exercise of force, or derive pleasure from inflicting suffering or humiliation on others. Indeed, Fromm attributed the various defects of Adorno study chiefly to his insensitivity to this issue and its manifold implications. To this I would only add that traditionalists also tend to value a truth loving disposition, while authoritarians regard truth -- and other people -- as expendable, if it interferes with their personal or political agendas.

Other factors were also in play, however. In The Legacy of Erich Fromm, I suggested that Adorno's conflation of authoritarian and



traditionalist sensibilities may be attributable in part to the diminishing number of "traditional- authoritarians" abroad in the United States in late 1940's, and moreover, to his one dimensional view of organized religion as an anti-democratic force in society. The construction and scoring of the F-scale evince a tacit equation between strong ties to organized religion and anti-democratic tendencies that is simplistic and misleading, but not without precedent in analytic circles. Freud did not distinguish between rational and irrational authority as such, but like any follower of the Enlightenment, stressed that science is rational while religion is irrational. And in the same spirit, as noted previously, Reich argued explicitly that scientific religious authority is irrational, while scientific authority is inherently rational and democratic.

Fromm, who trained for the rabbinate before becoming an analyst, acknowledged the existence of rational and irrational authority in both the scientific and the spiritual domains -- and rightly so, I think. But his refusal to embrace this invidious dichotomy which Freud, Reich and Adorno espoused did not nullify the existence of his own dichotomous construction of what I've termed Syndrome A and Syndrome B, and the fact that the "traditional- authoritarian" type evidently combines elements of both syndromes in a seemingly paradoxical synthesis I'll call Syndrome C. At the risk of tremendous oversimplification, we'll sketch its salient features as follows.



Traditional-authoritarianism

promotes

(*Syndrome C*)

Positive Traits

Industrious, disciplined

Self-reliant

Proud

Non-sadistic

Negative Traits

Not terribly generous

Insular, wary of strangers

Resistant to change

Defers to Authority

In The Legacy of Erich Fromm, I argued that the term "traditionalist-authoritarian" should be replaced with the simpler term "traditionalist", so that this mentality which leans more toward Syndrome A, is contrasted more effectively with the authoritarian type, who is unambiguously centered in Syndrome B. I still hold this view, though I now understand why Fromm and Maccoby referred to this type as the "traditional-authoritarian" a bit better than before.

Moreover, I still think that the agrarian traditionalist needs to be sharply differentiated from the capitalist conservative and the religiously oriented neo-traditionalist (or often, perhaps, the *pseudo*-traditionalist), who espouses traditional or family values while embracing free-market principles and ideologies. Paradoxically, 19th c. liberalism, that goes by the name of "fiscal conservatism" nowadays, inevitably destroys traditional societies, where the rate of technological change and development is invariably quite slow. Moreover, it totally reverses the relationship between society and



the ethics of commerce that obtains there. As Karl Polanyi observed, in pre-capitalist societies, the market is always embedded in and regulated by society and tradition. Unfettered capitalism reverses this situation, by embedding social relations in the exigencies of the market, to the inevitable detriment of the common good. As a result, spheres of human activity and social interaction where norms of conduct were once semi-independent of market considerations, like medicine, education, the arts, even sports, become dominated -- and inevitably, debased -- by adherence to the proverbial bottom line. Once this fact, and its manifold implications, are grasped clearly, the uneasy but increasingly effective political alliance between free market enthusiasts ("fiscal conservatives") and religious fundamentalists ("social conservatives") assumes a new and puzzling significance -- one we haven't addressed satisfactorily, and need to think and theorize about more.

C. Anonymous Authority and Critical Thinking: Fromm & Asch

Though Fromm never said so in quite so many words, rational and irrational authority engage those affected by them in a more or less *personal* manner. This view is supported by Fromm's tendency to contrast anonymous authority not with rational or irrational authority per se, but with what he called external or *overt* authority, i.e. authority vested in a specific person. As Fromm noted in Escape From Freedom:



"In external authority is clear that there is an order and who gives it; one can fight against the authority, and in this fight personal independence and moral courage develop. But whereas in internalized authority the command, though an internal one, remains visible, in anonymous authority both command and commander have become invisible. It is like being fired at by an invisible enemy. There is nobody and nothing to fight back against (Fromm, 1941, p.190)".

Unlike external authority, where differences in power, knowledge and status are freely acknowledged, and sometimes rigidly insisted upon, *anonymous* authority -- which Fromm sometimes called invisible or alienated authority -- is diffusely present in groups of nominal equals, and is mediated by rumor, "common sense", public opinion and the impersonal structures of bureaucratic roles and procedures. As a result, anonymous authority is not backed up by overt demands, or by threats and coercion. It runs on the principle of conformity, not of obedience, though the lack of genuine solidarity and relatedness among group members that results feeds a pervasive fear of being isolated, or merely different.

The impersonal, levelling character of anonymous authority, and the consequent obstacles to identifying and defying it, render it



different from the other two modes. But like them, Fromm suggests, it is socialized in growing children by the example and the expectations of parents and teachers, for whom the group functions as a kind of collective censor or superego, even though people are nominally free to think or act independently. To sustain the illusions of freedom, individualism, and equality in a conformist milieu, the gap between ideology and practice must be bridged by self-deception and rationalization, with a corresponding decline in the capacity for rational doubt.

Fromm first discussed anonymous authority in 1941, and noted that this, and not the fascist mentality, was the socially patterned defect characteristic of industrial democracies. While preferable to fascism, of course, it still compromises human integrity. One salient consideration is the way anonymous authority erodes our capacity to think critically. By critical thinking, Fromm meant the capacity for rational doubt, and not intelligence as measured by I.Q. tests. On the contrary, according to Fromm, a person can be highly intelligent, I.Q.-wise, and still lack the ability to question or consider matters deeply, freed from conventional prejudices and beliefs. In fact, Fromm noted, highly intelligent people generally come up with cleverer reasons for distorting reality than less intelligent people do. Intelligence as measured by conventional methods has little to do with the ability to reason critically. It may be a help or a hindrance. The first and primary prerequisite of critical reasoning is an *emotional* willingness to question prevailing beliefs and practices, which requires the courage of conviction and a willingness to court disapproval or punishment (1955).



Fromm was not alone in his concerns. As Solomon Asch demonstrated immediately *after* World War II, anonymous authority really does erode a person's judgement. Asch wanted to determine what percentage of the general population were capable of exercising independent judgement in 1949. Accordingly, he set up a situation where an experimental subject was invited into a room with ten or so others (who were colluding with the experimenter), and then asked to declare which of two lines on a graph was closer in length to a third line on the same graph. This was not a difficult call to make. One line was visibly closer to another in length, even for someone whose vision was slightly impaired. Nevertheless, Asch's confederates had been instructed beforehand to falsify their replies, and say that the *other* line was longer, and were called on to answer before the test subject was.

To the astonishment of Prof. Asch, 80%, or 4 out of 5, falsified their responses in keeping with the majority's perception of events. Only 20% -- or slightly less, as he later confided to me -- proved capable of defying the group consensus and stating the lengths of the lines accurately, and many of those who did disagree with the majority were visibly distressed as a result. Asch reasoned that, consciously or unconsciously, the vast majority of middle Americans circa 1950 allowed their judgement to be biased by prevailing attitudes and perceptions, and were therefore incapable of exercising independent judgement (1956). To avoid anxiety, they literally *took leave of their senses* rather than experience or express rational doubt about the prevailing consensus, even though many of them, as patriotic Americans, would no doubt have



espoused an conscious attitude of robust individualism. This is *exactly* what Fromm meant by the effects of anonymous authority.

D. *Anonymous Authority and the Marketing Character*

Fromm's discussion of anonymous authority in Escape From Freedom predates his depiction of the marketing character by six years. But Man For Himself leaves little doubt that *he* thought the two phenomena are intimately intertwined. In Man For Himself, Fromm cited Karl Polanyi's observation that the modern market is not a place of meeting, where producers and consumers often know each other, negotiate directly, and where goods and services are appraised and exchanged principally in terms of their use value. In truth, the modern market is not even a place, but an utterly impersonal mechanism in which commodities and services are bought or traded on the basis of their *exchange* value, which is determined by the vagaries of fashion, of chance and the machinations of multinational conglomerates.

In Man For Himself, Fromm also stressed that anonymous authority proliferates where, regardless of their ability (or lack of it) people must market themselves aggressively to avert failure and unemployment, and where the tendencies to abstraction, quantification and alienation accompanying the headlong advance of technology promote a tendency to experience oneself and others as commodities, or as bundles of attributes that are bereft of any intrinsic value, and therefore desperately dependent on others to



bestow meaning and direction to their increasingly hollow and aimless existences.

By the mid 1950's, the post-War economic boom was in full swing, and some new features emerged in Fromm's discussion of anonymous authority. In The Sane Society, for example, the section on anonymous authority in chapter five is followed by a section on what Fromm called the "principle of non-frustration" -- the non-productive receptive orientation he characterized as a debased matriarchalism in The Art of Loving and elsewhere. Henceforth, Fromm would frequently link the prevalence of anonymous authority and marketing trends with this consumeristic orientation in his analysis of contemporary social character.

Reviewing these glosses on anonymous authority in sequence, then, we find that the idea is first introduced in Escape From Freedom, where it is not yet linked to the marketing character, even though a constitutive element of the marketing mentality -- the experience of oneself as a commodity -- was already much on Fromm's mind. In Man For Himself, the link between anonymous authority and the marketing character is palpable, and by The Sane Society, is accompanied by an emphasis on non-productive receptive (or consumeristic) tendencies. In short, by 1955, Fromm believed that anonymous authority promotes conformity, consumerism and, by implication, all the negative traits associated with the receptive and marketing orientations spelled out seven years earlier.

However, rather than rehearsing his enumeration of traits in Man For Himself, in The Sane Society, Fromm depicted the effects of



anonymous authority in the community of Forest Park, Ill. Fromm gleaned his data from a story by William H. White entitled "The Transients", which appeared in the May through August editions of *Fortune* magazine in 1953. We could summarize Fromm's analysis as follows. According to Fromm, the residents of Forest Park -- and by implication, much of middle-class America -- suffered from 1) an excessive craving for acceptance, due to lack of self-acceptance, 2) a fear of being alone, and of facing the inner emptiness occasioned by their lack of individuality and genuine relatedness to others, 3) a tendency to stigmatize privacy, or the search for privacy, as anti-social, 4) an indiscriminate sociability, 5) a low-brow standardization of tastes and opinions, issuing in anti-intellectualism, and ignorance of (or indifference to) classical music, 6) a superficial tolerance for all points of view, which masks a wariness of any deeply held convictions, and 7) a propensity for empty chatter, and for trivializing and evading inner and interpersonal conflict through excessive and/or inappropriate self-disclosure. Let us call this type of social character Syndrome D.

Anonymous Authority

promotes

(*Syndrome D*)

Conformity

Consumerism

Negative receptive traits

Negative marketing traits



Fromm's analysis of Forest Park tells us as much about him as it does about his subject matter. Despite his calm, discursive writing style, Fromm was clearly baffled and revolted by the account of one male resident who was considered odd for having expressed a vivid appreciation for Mozart's "Magic Flute", and resolved not to speak about classical music to his neighbors as a consequence. Likewise for a woman who was stigmatized by her peers after a neighbor accidentally discovered her reading Plato. Similarly, Fromm was incensed at a school teacher who characterized a young child as "maladjusted" because he preferred the company of one or two close friends, or perfect solitude, to the more gregarious and game-oriented activities of his peers. Beneath his theoretical analyses of alienation and conformity, one senses that Fromm was simply disgusted by the weird combination of cliquishness, the lack of privacy and the endless and "indiscriminate talking about one's problems" the residents indulged in, hinting that emotional voyeurism and exhibitionism *en masse* have usurped the place of "core to core" relatedness.

Despite some grudging concessions in Man for Himself, where he enumerated some positive traits associated with the marketing type, in The Sane Society, Fromm freely expressed what he really felt: that anonymous authority produces nothing of value, humanly speaking. Fromm's preference for the dignity and self-possession of the traditional-authoritarian type -- when he finally gets around to describing it, more than a decade later -- is too obvious to be missed.



Moreover, judging from the themes he selects for analysis, any reasonably thoughtful person would guess that Fromm himself was a cultured middle-class European who valued privacy, discretion, good books and classical music, who expected to find anti-intellectual and leveling attitudes among working-class people, but was shocked at their appearance among middle-class Americans. And though this is not as obvious from context, of course, he was also a Marxist of sorts, who detested the avid and unabashed pragmatism and utilitarianism of the residents of Forest Park.

Without embracing the more relativistic extremes of contemporary social theory, let us acknowledge that Fromm's construction of the fruit -- or the by-product -- of anonymous authority, the marketing character, is partly a function of his *own* social character, and by implication, his own bias. This is not necessarily grounds for reproach. Fromm gave every indication of being fully conscious, if not proud of his bias. And on reflection, I would venture, the social character of a social character researcher is inevitably implicated in the way he experiences and interprets his data, whether he or she is aware of it or not.

Let us also acknowledge that Fromm's construction of the marketing type was at least partly a response to material/historical circumstances that no longer obtain. In The Sane Society, for example, he wrote:

Speaking of the economically most
progressive country, the United States, the
exploitation of the masses has disappeared to



an extent which would have sounded fantastic in Marx's time. The working class, instead of falling behind in the economic development of the whole society, has an increasing share in the national wealth, and it is perfectly valid assumption that provided no major catastrophe occurs, there will, in about one or two generations, be no more marked poverty in the United States. Closely related to the increasing abolishment of economic suffering is the fact that the human and political situation of the worker has changed drastically. Largely through his unions, he has become a social "partner" of management. He cannot be ordered around, fired and abused, as he was even thirty years ago (p.95).

Nowadays, more than forty years after these words were written, Fromm's prediction that poverty would disappear, barring some unforeseen catastrophe, seems quaint, to say the least. Not only have unions and workers suffered massive setbacks and reversals, but poverty has been steadily increasing since the late 1970's, and the middle class itself is shrinking dramatically. The conditions of relative affluence and stability that the middle class enjoyed in the fifties and sixties are a thing of the past, and in all probability, will never return.



Moreover, leaving comfort and stability aside, between 1955 and the present, the complacency and uniformity of the American middle class was rocked by the emergence of anti-War movement, the civil rights movement, the counter-culture, the feminist movement and gay movements, and the ecology movement, which left indelible imprints on the collective psyche. These movements, which arose in response to socially patterned defects like militarism, racism, sexism and environmental degradation spawned their own varieties of conformism and extremism, and as a result, potentiated a powerful right-wing backlash that is still in full swing, and whose long term consequences still cannot be predicted with certainty.

In any case, at the present time, the assertion that we live in a consumeristic culture that palliates the inner emptiness occasioned by the progressive attenuation of core to core relationships with the promise of affluence and safety is hopelessly dated. Instead of deepening complacency in a cybernetic matriarchy, which is more or less what Fromm anticipated, the pattern for the future appears to be escalating poverty and a profound polarization of society. The likelihood that this will produce a stable culture based on consumeristic conformism -- a *Brave New World*, a la Aldous Huxley -- is slim indeed.

The question then arises -- what relevance does the marketing character have to the U.S.A. today? Has it outlived its usefulness? And was it entirely accurate to begin with? The first of Fromm's students to question the realism and usefulness of the marketing concept were David Riesman and Michael Maccoby. They argued



that Fromm's depiction of the marketing type is excessively moralistic, and lacks a realistic appreciation of the productive potentialities unleashed by contemporary economic conditions. For example, they concede that deep and authentic relationships are rarer in a highly mobile, market-driven society. But marketing (or "other directed") individuals, though shallower in their emotional ties, are much more open to and tolerant of strangers in their midst than their rural counterparts and precapitalist predecessors.

This is indisputably true, and incredibly strange, if you pause to think about it. Nowadays, the *stranger* is less feared and reviled than was generally the case, at least in many strata of society. But as a result of decreased emotional involvement, our own spouses, children and close friends may be more *estranged* from us, and we from them. How does one assess this trend in a calculus of human solidarity -- supposing there was such a thing? Is this a net loss or a great gain, or both, in some measure? And if both, can we really claim that societal gains in tolerance and diversity -- such as they are -- outweigh the loss of genuine intimacy and authenticity in human relations? (And if so, on *whose* authority?).

These are undecidable questions, whose answers are dictacted at least as much by one's personal experience and point of view as it is by objective trends. Here total objectivity is as elusive as the proverbial philosopher's stone. Similar issues of perspectivity bedevil us elsewhere. For example, Riesman and Maccoby have noted that among urban dwellers, the growth of abstract thought -- and the corresponding impoverishment of affective ties, and at the expense of reliance on direct, personal observation -- creates a



greater willingness to adapt to changing social, technological and economic realities. The idea here is apparently that adaptability is -- by and large -- a good thing. But is it, really? Doesn't that depend on the nature (and/or the rate) of the changes in question?

Admittedly, in contemporary life, adaptability is vital for personal survival. And survival, in turn, is a basic and non-negotiable prerequisite for productive living. But doesn't the struggle for survival often compromise us in various ways? Are we merely making a virtue of necessity? Is it possible that adaptability is actually a *neutral* trait, neither good nor bad in itself, and that by assigning a positive value to it we are also betraying a bias -- one different than Fromm's, but a bias nonetheless?

Traits like tolerance and adaptability are only two of the more important traits under consideration. I don't have, or ever expect to have, definitive answers to these questions. But these questions -- and others like them -- are worthy of further reflection and study. Wherever these reflections may take us, eventually, the fact remains that the ideas of Riesman and Maccoby vis a vis the marketing character do have merit. At the very least, they underline the historically conditioned nature of Fromm's ideas, and put Fromm's Eurocentric bias in bold relief for our continuing appraisal and scrutiny. They also offer alternative interpretations for contemporary trends, and that too is a useful service. After all, Fromm brought a proud and self-consciously European perspective to bear on American social realities. What right have we to privilege the ideas of a foreign expert, however learned, humane or



perceptive, over an indigenous perspective? Don't both deserve an equal hearing?

Finally, Michael Maccoby has voiced another cogent objection to Fromm's analysis of the marketing character. He notes that peasants are also highly conformist, and not merely *obedient* to higher authorities on pragmatic grounds. Anonymous authority, which Fromm thought characteristic of late capitalist societies, is also found in pre-capitalist milieus, where market norms and practices are solidly embedded in traditional forms of life. This raises the question of whether or not conformism is simply *more* prevalent in the late capitalist societies than in tribal and peasant milieus or not -- though testing this hypothesis in a global village, where even the remotest tribal settlements feel the impact of the international markets in their day to day existences, might be difficult indeed.

Leaving aside all the practical and financial obstacles to conducting this research, one way of resolving this question might be to study the structure of authority relations in our schools and universities more carefully. The study of the individual or the family alone can only take us so far, particularly in the "information age", the so called "postmodern" era, where the overall influence of the family on individual and social character has diminished, and that of schools and the media increased. Studying the social character of teachers is vital, of course, but so are careful *in vivo* observations of teacher student interactions over extended periods of time, and the way students themselves appropriate or ignore the overt and implicit messages about authority, survival and success that they get in the classroom. Universities should also be studied,



because our society effectively prolongs adolescence much longer than is biologically necessary -- indeed, healthy -- to train its workforce: a fact of profound importance that is missing in Fromm's analysis.

Still, if Fromm was right about the marketing character as a distinctively modern phenomenon, then the relative decline of irrational authority and the rise of anonymous authority (alongside rational authority) should be empirically observable as particular modes of interpersonal relatedness between teachers and students at all levels of the educational system. The key is to formulate the appropriate methodology, observational techniques, and so on, and to compare different regions and social classes within the United States and Europe, and compare those, in turn, with schools in more "backward" regions of the world, that are less affected by technology and market forces.

In the absence of this kind of empirical research, we can only guess at the prevalence of marketing tendencies in the population at large. Personally, I think that marketing tendencies, though still powerful and pervasive, are probably on the wane in the U.S.A., though why, and for how long, is anybody's guess. One interesting bit of evidence for this is the following. When Solomon Asch's conformity experiment was replicated in the late seventies and early 80's, researchers found that fully 40% of their subjects could both experience and express rational doubt about the group's perceptions. That is double the percentage of previous sample -- a substantial decline in submission to anonymous authority.



But while this is quite heartening, no doubt, perhaps the more significant finding is that the *remaining* 60% still could not experience or express rational doubt, which suggests that the majority of Americans are still remarkably conformist, and frightened of exercising independent judgement. Further evidence for this interpretation can be gleaned from the response of the American electorate at that same period of history to former Presidents Reagan and Bush, whose clandestine roles in the manipulating the Iranian hostage crisis, promoting Iran-Contra dealings, and all kinds of drug-traffic and state sponsored terrorism in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Columbia and elsewhere in Latin America are now more or less a matter of public record. Very few people could bring themselves to doubt the official lies and propoganda, to "see" what was really going on, and to act accordingly.

In general, then, in re-assessing Fromm's concept of the marketing character, we need to discuss and explore whether or to what extent anonymous authority really supplants deference to rational and irrational authority in the transition from feudal to industrial and post-industrial society, and why. The way Fromm depicts this transition, from Escape From Freedom to The Revolution of Hope, one gets the impressions that old-fashioned particarchal authority is obsolete, because it is out of step with the spirit and requirements of an increasingly cybernetic and market-driven social order. Fromm was obviously on to something important, but in his enthusiasm for his new discovery, and his distaste for what he observed around him, he may have exaggerated somewhat.



After all, irrational authority, and its offspring, fascism, still flourishes in even the most "advanced" societies.

Prior to Fromm, the analytic literature from Freud to Reich (and beyond) focused heavily on the father imago as the locus of authority, rational or otherwise. Fromm evidently thought that the social transformations wrought by the decline of traditional religions, of the old-fashioned patriarchal family, the rise of consumerism, bureaucracy, and so on, necessitate a new way of envisioning authority relations that mirrored emerging social relations -- and rightly so, I think.

However, if anonymous authority is found in pre-capitalist societies, it cannot be purely a creature of modern market conditions. The phenomenon in question is clearly older and more complexly determined than Fromm thought, though it may be profoundly intensified by prevailing economic realities. For that very reason, it is probably here to stay, regardless of efforts to transform or humanize society. All the more reason to understand it better.



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