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## Review Lauren Langman and George Lundskow *God, Guns, Gold and Glory: American Character and its Discontents*

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Lauren Langman and George Lundskow’s fascinating book shows the profound relevance today of the ideas of Erich Fromm and thereby demonstrates that Fromm’s work deserves to be rescued from the neglect that it has suffered within the academic discipline of sociology. Langman and Lundskow apply Fromm’s theory of social character in order to analyze the historical, cultural, and social-psychological roots of right-wing politics in America today. The book is timely, hot on the heels of Donald Trump’s victory in the Republican Presidential Primary election. The authors trace his appeal to deeply rooted aspects of national character. But the authors put forward a much broader claim that has wider sociological significance than just helping to explain Trump’s victory in the US Presidential election. Langman and Lundskow present a cogent argument that there is such a thing as an identifiable American national character as a distinct set of “values, mores, and reflexive narratives” that, indeed, *characterizes* a people (p. 61). But, they argue that what sustains these norms is their rooting in the individual psyches of Americans as shared social character: “the most common, most typical underlying, if not unconscious psychological constellation of often ambivalent motives, desires, memories, defenses, ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing the world” (pp. 61-62).

It is due to social character that there are shared *characteristics* of thought, behavior, and

action that members of a group exhibit. This creates congruity of behavior and expectations between them, producing an easy familiarity. While insiders to the group may not be aware of these characteristics as anything other than natural, until such time as they encounter an outsider, the outsider will be very aware that there is something that prevents them from ‘fitting in’ unless they attune themselves to these ways. Any non-American who has visited or lived in the United States is well aware that there are certain ‘American’ ways of thinking, talking, and acting that they are encountering as, to a certain extent, alien. Langman and Lundskow very sensitively and lucidly probe the historical roots and contemporary shape and significance of this shared social character. They trace the historical development of this character structure from three main sources: New England Puritanism, Appalachian mountain culture, and the patrimonial culture of the Antebellum Deep South. The book argues that the convergence of these cultural sources created a relatively stable and enduring American character. However, Langman and Lundskow’s most significant claim is that, while this social character enabled the dynamic capitalist development of the United States, it has now become dysfunctional and pathological.

Fromm’s concept of social character mediates structure and agency in a way somewhat similar to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. But the concept of social character has much greater



specificity. It is a psychological concept, but refers to psychological structures that reproduce social values and mores and, through these, political behavior and social structure. Social character is reproduced through child-rearing practices, such as the way in which children are punished, as well as through implicit and explicit cultural messages and prescriptions from family, school, church, politicians, and media that are internalized by individuals. Character is a structure of identity that the individual carries in mind and body (one thinks of Wilhelm Reich's stress on embodiment with his concept of 'character armor'). As well as having greater precision than habitus (which is so circuitous as to come dangerously close to being a mere tautology), social character is a far more dynamic concept. One of the accomplishments of this book is the way in which it draws together, but also goes beyond, Weber on the Protestant ethic and Tocqueville, Robert Bellah, and others on American individualism, in analyzing the dynamic historical formation, and susceptibility to historical change, of social character.

Social character is also a psychodynamic concept (rooted in psychoanalysis) capable of illuminating psychological (and social) ambivalence and conflict. Compared with habitus, the concept of social character provides a far more energetic conception of human psychology. Langman and Lundskow write that "social character manages individual drives" (p. 28). They point to the irrational mechanisms by which individuals reinforce their social character by filtering reality through motivated reasoning, denial, splitting and projection. Langman and Lundskow's book exemplifies the power of psychoanalytically-informed sociology to illuminate cultural processes and, in this way, makes a powerful case that the rekindling of interest in psychoanalysis would do much to revive sociological theory.

One way, however, in which Bourdieu's use of habitus does have greater specificity than Langman and Lundskow's use of social character is in relation to class. Whereas Bourdieu pays attention to the distinctness of class cul-

tures, Langman and Lundskow present American social character as a feature of individuals that is relatively standardized across classes. The authors are certainly under no illusion about America as a classless society; they stress the extreme level of inequality in contemporary America and class conflict is a key dimension of their historical analysis. They do differentiate social character by class in arguing that members of the capitalist elite are likely to exhibit social dominator, destructive, and narcissistic traits (pp. 11-14, 112-113, 138-152). "[M]ost of the top 1% didn't become rich and powerful because they gave away (or even invested) their money for the common good," the authors remind us (p. 11). This means that these elites are typically closer to one end of the "polarities" that run through American character. In their account of the present-day, it is clear that American social character is not homogeneous, but highly polarized, and that seismic changes are underway in the psychological-cultural makeup of the United States, carried by more sexually liberated and open-minded younger cohorts (pp. 256-268).

Nevertheless, 'American character' appears in Langman and Lundskow's account to transcend class, although the typical traits are displayed in extreme, and increasingly pathological, form at the top of the socio-economic ladder. The authors follow Philip Slater in suggesting that, at the opposite cultural-psychological polarity, Americans also carry a suppressed longing for collectivity. This begs the question of to what extent the cultural-psychological suppression of collectivism is itself bound up with class power, i.e. the suppression of working class-organization. The book addresses the history of trade unionism in terms of elite reactions (p. 111), but does not delve into to what extent, what Rick Fantasia calls, 'cultures of solidarity' within the working class have been sustained within social character. This reader looks forward with anticipation to the authors' next book, to be titled *A Sane Society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, which they tell us "will... focus on the inclusive, compassionate, and progressive side" of American character (p. xiii).