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## Fromm's Approach to Psychoanalytic Theory and Its Relevance for Therapeutic Work

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### 1. Fromm's Analytic Social Psychological Approach

Fromm's social psychological interest originated in his religious upbringing as well as in his academic interests; this is evident from his studies in sociology and his dissertation on Jewish law he finished in 1922 at Heidelberg university. Seven years later Freudian psychoanalysis permitted a new formulation of his social psychological interest, at that time, namely, in the language of Freud's instinct theory. His attempt to combine sociological and psychoanalytic theory has, in reality, hardly received any attention up to the present. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that there are few sociologists who have had training in psychoanalysis, and also that psychologists, because of their metapsychological theories, are hardly capable of sociological thinking.

If one takes seriously the basic sociological premise that there are forces and patterns that are rooted in society itself - a premise that is difficult for most psychoanalysts to accept - then the extremely fertile question can be raised as to whether or not there is something like an unconsciousness of society, and, if so, according to what patterns it develops and whether or not it can be investigated like the unconscious of an individual.

If one first accepts the possibility that society has an unconsciousness, which can be called the social unconscious, then the next step is to free oneself from a misguided understanding of society. Fromm emphasizes in his short but important contribution, „Psychoanalyse und Soziologie“ from 1929, that „the subject of sociology, society, in reality consists of individuals... Human beings do not have one 'individual psyche,' which functions when a person performs as an individual and so becomes the object of psychoanalysis, contrasted to a completely separate 'mass psyche' with all sorts of mass instincts, as well as vague feelings of community and solidarity, which spring into action whenever a person performs as part of a mass“ (1929a, GA I, p. 3). Rather, the individual must be understood as socialized a priori, and thus the psyche is to be understood as being „developed and determined through the relationship of the individual to society“ (loc. cit., p. 5).

The difference between personal psychology and social psychology is only a quantitative one. Social psychology, just as individual psychology, tries to comprehend psychic



structure from the individual's life experiences. So it proceeds according to the same methods: „Social psychology wishes to investigate how certain psychic attitudes common to members of a group are related to their common life experiences.“ (E. Fromm, 1930a in 1963a, p. 9).

The idea of the „common life experience“ is distinguished from the „individual life experience.“ In the latter it is important to know the sibling order or if someone is an only child; sicknesses and „chance“ occurrences of an individual sort are significant because of their strong influence on libidinal structure. On the other hand, the „common life experience“ of a group means mainly the economic, social and political conditions which determine the way of life for the group.

Still completely in the metapsychological concept of Freud's instinct theory, Fromm explained in probably his best-known essay by the title, „The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology“ (1932a in 1970a, p. 121) that „...the phenomena of social psychology are to be understood as processes involving the active and passive adaptation of the instinctual apparatus to the socio-economic situation. In certain fundamental respects, the instinctual apparatus itself is a biological given; but it is highly modifiable. The role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions. The family is the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts its formative influence on the individual's psyche. The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies - and their unconscious roots in particular - in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings.“

So Fromm takes over from the Freudian instinct theory the fundamental insight that there are dynamic forces that originate from the instincts and are usually unconscious, and that these instincts develop a certain libidinal structure. Which fate the instincts experience depends on the life experience of the respective individual. The principle that life experience determines libidinal structure is also valid for social dimensions.

Fromm's chief interest is the libidinal structure of the human being as a socialized being. So for him it is mainly a question of those passionate strivings and the unconscious of the socialized individual, as these factors make themselves evident when the unconscious of society is itself the object of study. Then there is a libidinous structure of society, which can be recognized as dependent from the socio-economic situation, since the life experience of the group is determined by the economic, social and political conditions, which are equally valid for it. Expressed in terms of the society, this means that it, the society, has not only a certain economic, social, political and intellectual-cultural structure, but also a libidinal one specific to it. Later Fromm called this libidinal structure of society according to Freud's concept of character the „social character“.

When Fromm embraced the idea of a socially molded unconscious or an unconscious of society by which each individual is predetermined, he defined the correlation of individual and society anew. After that it was no longer valid to say „here I am and there is society“; but rather, „my passionate strivings are primarily a reflection of society, in that my unconscious is socially determined and I therefore reflect and realize the secret expectations and wishes, fears and strivings of society in my own passionate strivings.“ In reality neither the real separation of society and individual nor the real separation of conscious and unconscious, nor the real separation of society and unconscious exist. Both dimensions are in the social unconscious of every single human being.

Social psychological phenomena are not comprehensible by analogy, by the trans-



ferring of individual life experiences onto social dimensions. Rather, they become accessible through an understanding of the common strivings based on the common life experience. Precisely this contention distinguishes Fromm's venture into social psychological thinking from other social psychologies of analytic origin.

## 2. The Significance of Fromm's Social Psychological Approach in Psychoanalytic Theory

Fromm applies the insights of psychoanalysis to the dynamics of the unconscious and to the phenomena of defense and resistance on a social scale. But he does it from a genuine sociological standpoint, in terms of which the passionate strivings of the individual are understood as being primarily a reflection of society, so that the social traits of an individual are not additional aspects of himself, but, rather, the opposite: the individual can only be properly understood as a modification of society.

The identification of psychoanalytic instinct theory with libido theory shifts the perspective to the recognition of the dynamics of the unconscious on a social scale. This finally leads Fromm completely to neglect Freudian instinct theory in order to avoid the temptation of giving an all-important position to insights into the regularities of this one libidinal structure, which is, besides, not at all relevant to the dynamics of the social unconscious.

Fromm's criticism and new formulation of psychoanalytic theory did not come about without experts and personal contacts. In the group around Georg Groddeck, to which, besides Erich Fromm and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and Karen Horney, Sandor Ferenczi also belonged, there was hardly any doubt of the insupportability of the Freudian formulation of the Oedipus complex as early as the late twenties. The thinking of Harry Stack Sullivan, with which Fromm got familiar from 1935 on, proved especially helpful to Fromm's formulation of psychoanalytic theory. At the end of *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) Fromm summarizes his new formulation with these words: „We believe that man is primarily a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his instinctual needs. In this sense, we believe that individual psychology is fundamentally social psychology or, in Sullivan's terms, the psychology of interpersonal relationships; the key problem of psychology is that of the particular kind of relatedness of the individual toward the world, not that of satisfaction or frustration of single instinctual desires.“ (1941a, p. 290)

It may appear as if Fromm would reject all instinct-theoretical thinking. But that is not his point. To be sure, the closer psychoanalytic theory came to being identical to libido theory, the more Fromm tended to formulate his criticism of the libido theory as criticism of Freudian instinct theory in general. Fromm's primary interest of study was also „instincts,“ namely, those which motivate the thought, feelings and behavior of humans as social beings. The application of Freud's instinct theory to social groups permitted Fromm to recognize the limited validity of the libido theory and in 1935 brought him to the recognition that basically two kinds of drives must be distinguished. He was aware that this distinction introduced a principal disagreement with Freud's instinct theory.

In an unpublished letter of December 18, 1936 to Karl August Wittfogel, the central idea of Fromm's re-vision of the instinct theory can be clearly discerned. He writes, „The central point of this fundamental disagreement is that I try to show that drives which



motivate social behavior are not, as Freud assumes, sublimations of sexual instincts. Rather, they are the products of social processes, or, more precisely, reactions to certain constellations under which the individual has to satisfy his/her instincts. These drives, which I divide into those having to do with human relations (love, hate, sadomasochism) and those having to do with methods of acquisition (instincts of receiving, taking away, saving, gathering, producing), are fundamentally different from natural factors, namely the instincts of hunger, thirst, sexuality. Whereas these are common to all human beings and animals, the former are specifically human products and not biological; they are to be understood in the context of the social way of life...“

Fromm's adherence to the perception that libidinal structure results from adaptation to life experience led him to a new conceptualization of the drive theory, according to which psychological phenomena are disconnected from their physical source, sex drive, and acquire independence as „psychological drives“ as opposed to „physiological drives,“ among which Fromm includes the drives of self-preservation as well as sexuality.

This re-vision of psychoanalysis also manifest itself in new terminology. Since Fromm used the concept of character for his social psychological insights, he called drive theory characterology; drive structure became character structure, instinctual impulses became character traits or simply passionate strivings; drive itself is conceptualized as psychological need, libidinal instinct is now called psychological or existential need (in contrast to instinctive or physiological needs); the libidinal structure of a society became the social character, and instead of libido, Fromm, similarly to Jung, now spoke of psychic energy.

### 3. Fromm's Theory of Needs as a Re-vision of Psychoanalytic Instinct Theory

If for Fromm not the sexual drives, but, rather, the „psychological drives“ which lie beyond the physiological needs and are peculiar to human beings - if these psychological needs are the fundamental forces which determine our thinking, feeling, and behavior, then the question arises of how they originate, in what way they appear and what their source of energy is.

The fact that psychological needs are only observable in humans suggests that they should be grounded in the special placement of the human being (his/her *conditio humana*), and not in the physically-anchored sex drive, which humans have in common with animals. (That does not mean that sexuality is not a very important physiological need for Fromm. But sexuality receives its particular significance because of the fact that sex drive can play an essential role in the satisfaction of the need for relatedness. It is therefore an expression of an ever different kind of object-relatedness and not the other way around, namely that object-relatedness is an expression of an ever different kind of sex drive.) What is the passionate striving of man the result of, if not of instincts rooted in the body? Empathy for the original psychological state of the human being makes the answer evident.

In contrast to instinct-guided animals, man is a contradictory being, characterized „namely by the dichotomy of existing in nature and being subject to all her laws and, at the same time, transcending nature“ through his reason, by means of his capacity for imagination and because of his self-consciousness (1977g, GA VIII, p. 244). This peculiarity of the human being creates existential dichotomies with which he must live and to



which he must try to answer, without ever being able to resolve the contradictions. Man is thrown into this world without any say and his life is usually ended without his say; he does not know where he came from or where he is going; in his life he always hangs behind what he can envision as better and more perfect.

These existential dichotomies are the source of psychological energy. They create psychological needs which are specific to man and for which each person must take responsibility. So for Fromm there are not only physical or physiological needs on the one hand and mental needs on the other. There are also independent psychological needs which are governed by their own rules and are therefore not reducible to physiological needs or drives. These psychological needs always have to be satisfied in some way. Their satisfaction replaces the lost instinct-relatedness to the world. To cite Fromm (1977g, GA VIII, p. 245ff.): „The specifically human interest in replacing the lost instinct relatedness to the world with new affective-intellectual forms of relatedness is just as vital as the interest in self-preservation and the sexual interest that humans share with all living beings; it follows from this that the various solutions for the existential contradictions are just as energy-loaden, i.e., passionate, as the manifestations of the ego drives and the libido.“

Fromm specified different psychological needs, most importantly, the psychological need for relatedness. The question as to which way a person satisfies this need, in a productive or a non productive way, essentially depends on what life experience he has had to adapt to and with which socio-economic structure he must identify. Even when a person adopts patterns of relatedness that hinder the development of his psychological possibilities, we are seeing attempts at solutions in which the person reacts to existential dichotomies and produces new patterns of relatedness to the human and natural environment. Even the psychotic, who hallucinates his world, nonetheless is satisfying the need for relatedness that is found only in human beings.

The question of the productive or non-productive orientation in the satisfaction of psychological „drives“ (needs) determines growth and development of psychological possibilities as well as psychological health or sickness. The alternatives of a productive or non-productive solution - or, as Fromm later expressed it, the alternatives of a biophilic or necrophilic, being-oriented or having-oriented, solution - determine the progression or regression of the psychological system. Psychological health or sickness depends on the orientation one identifies with. A person who has adapted well to the non-productive economic and social structure, who functions well and is capable of working and carrying a load, is in reality the one who is suffering from the pathology of normalcy, the one who is psychologically crippled.

Psychological „drives“ (needs) must be satisfied. The way they are satisfied is, however, socially conditioned and is internalized via the family as agent of society. Fromm expressed the alternative orientations in the satisfaction of needs in terms of respective types and named them according to their objectives.

The psychological need for relatedness can either be satisfied productively by a loving orientation or non-productively by a narcissistic orientation. All forms of non-productive relatedness are characterized by the fact that the person stays fixated on the primary ties (fixations) or regresses to them, whereas the loving satisfaction of the need for relatedness is characterized by the fact that the loving person increasingly becomes the actor in the relationship and creates relatedness to his human and natural environ-



ment from his own psychological energies.

A second psychological drive is the need for transcendence, by which Fromm does not mean anything primarily religious or otherworldly, but, rather, the unalterable urge „to transcend the role of the creature, the accidentalness and passivity of existence, by becoming a 'creator'„ (1955a, p. 37; GA IV, p. 30). If this need for transcendence is not creatively satisfied, then the individual tries to transcend by means of destructiveness: „If I cannot create life, I can destroy it. To destroy life makes me also transcend it.“ (loc. cit.)

A third basic psychological need of the human being is his passionate striving for rootedness. This drive, in its regressive gratification, aims for incestuous ties to the mother, ancestry, land, nation, church, nature, etc., while the productive orientation of rootedness strives for brotherliness and universal humanism.

Fromm also includes the need for a sense of identity among the unalterable psychological drives specific to all humans and to which each individual must respond. If the response is productive, then it aims for a sense of identity based on individuality, whereas the regressive response passionately strives for conformity and herd rule.

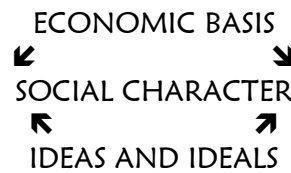
Among the drives resulting from the contradictions of human existence also belongs the need for a frame of orientation and an object of devotion, which address the search for sense as well as the phenomenon of religion or the necessity for a world view and a way of thinking. This drive can also be gratified in different ways: by rational or irrational answers, by an orientation to reason, or by a regressive response, an orientation to irrationality.

#### 4. Essence and Role of the Social Character

Life experiences determine libidinal structure. This insight, which Fromm adopts as the core of Freudian instinct theory, also determines his method of analytic social psychology, according to which the unconscious of society itself is the subject of study: „If one is concerned with psychological events, not in the individual but in society, the method must remain the same. Here, too, the task is to interpret the socially relevant psychic attitudes held in common from the common life-fate of the group to be investigated.“ (1931b, GA I, p. 32)

The common life experience of social groups can be seen in the social and economic situation that is typical for these people. Analytic social psychology must attempt to interpret „socio-psychological phenomena from the socio-economic situation“ (loc. cit.). Fromm assumes from the beginning (I quote from the essay „The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology,“ 1932a, GA I, p. 56) „that every society has its own distinctive libidinal structure, even as it has its own economic, social, political and cultural structure... The libidinal structure of a society is the medium through which the economy exerts its influence on man's intellectual and mental manifestations.“ While this quote speaks of the libidinal structure of a society, Fromm later expresses it as social character, at a time when he no longer conceives of psychoanalytic theory as libido theory but as the theory of forms of human relatedness, i.e. as character theory.

The social character is the intermediary between the economic basis and the ideas and ideals, and is therefore an independent entity between the basis and the superstructure that can never be disregarded:



Thus the validity of the statement „that ideologies and culture in general are rooted in the social character; that the social character itself is molded by the mode of existence of a given society; and that the dominant character traits in their turn become productive forces shaping the social process“ (1941a, p. 296f.; GA I, p. 390). Fromm repeatedly demonstrated this interrelation between economic and social structure, social character and culture. He thereby made social changes plausible in that he conceptualized the unconscious of society as an independent entity in the social process.

If we assume that character has the subjective function for each person of leading that person „to act according to what is necessary for him from a practical standpoint and also to give him satisfaction from his activity psychologically“ (1941a, p. 283; GA I, p. 382f.), then we can maintain that, by function, „the social character internalizes external necessities and thus harnesses human energy for the task of a given economic and social system“ (loc. cit., p. 383).

The individual likes to behave the way he must according to economic and social necessities and expectations. If an economic system that is directed toward maximization and quantitative growth ever has to make new investments by which new products are created in order to safeguard its functioning, then this system needs the individual who loves to consume. What he enjoys doing and what his common sense undoubtedly tells him is reasonable to do - for example, to buy the best bargains at the supermarket and at going-out-of-business sales - that is what he really must do.

„As long as the objective conditions of the society and the culture remain stable, the social character has a predominantly stabilizing function. If the external conditions change in such a way that they do not fit any more with tradition and social character, a lag arises which often makes the character function as an element of disintegration instead of stabilization, as dynamite instead of social mortar, as it were.“ (1949c, p. 6; GA I, p. 211)

In researching social character independently from economic and social necessities, essential passionate strivings of man, even unconscious ones that thus originate from the social unconscious, can be recognized and put to profitable use as means of social change.

## 5. The Significance of Fromm's Social Psychological Approach in Psychoanalytic Therapy

Social character is to be interpreted as a syndrome of conscious and unconscious passionate strivings and forms of relatedness. Social character is the key to the understanding not only of social groups and society, but of the individual as a *a priori* social being. Thus psychoanalysis as theory and its clinical use in therapy must direct its attention first and above all to the study of the social character, which is to be understood „as the core of the characteristics most of the people of a society or class have in common“ (1977g,



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GA VIII, p. 250). However much he may suffer from problems with his personal situation and constitution, the individual and patient is primarily determined by his social character.

With some statements I would like to show the significance of Fromm's social psychological thinking for therapy.

(1) Fromm's concept of socialized man clarifies how the mass occurrence of psychological phenomena and illnesses has come about. The fact that classical neuroses hardly appear any more in therapy has to do with the social removal of the taboo on sexuality and the fact that sexuality no longer serves the function of better mastering needs for relatedness.

The fact that there is an increase in narcissistic disorders, an increase in destructiveness and in apathy towards life can be shown to be just as plausible as results of identification and internalization processes, with the guiding values and patterns of relatedness that are really lived out in our economic and social system with its corresponding system of work organization. In spite of all claims to the contrary, the guiding values that are really lived out and the patterns of relatedness mean a complete devaluation of the active individual, the destruction of all individuality and spontaneity and widespread apathy towards life.

(2) The significance of Fromm's re-vision of psychoanalytic theory is, among other things, that it formulates independent psychological drives or drive aspects which are relevant for clinical and therapeutic questions. It is also significant that he, in the formulation of alternatives in satisfying these drives, also sets goals for therapy that are not exactly based on socially desirable values and norms, but rather on individuation, thus on promoting or inhibiting psychological growth. Fromm attempts to free psychoanalytic theory from unreflected social determinants largely by taking seriously the influential power of the socio-economic situation and interpreting man's strivings as a reflection of this situation.

This interrelation of formation has consequences for the methods of therapy. The main point is that therapy for the individual can't be viewed as independent of the dominant social character traits in the individual and in the therapist. Therapy has to do with the concrete discovery of an alternative to the non-productive social character, in the process of which it is important that this alternative be directly experienced in the loving relatedness between therapist and patient.

(3) The social character as key to the understanding of the individual's unconsciousness applies to the patient as well as the analyst. Both represent social character orientations. The less an analyst recognizes his own social character traits and maintains critical distance to the dominant social character orientation, the more presumable it is that analyst and patient both unconsciously suffer from the same non-productive social character orientations, are therefore victims of the „pathology of normalcy“ and dismiss the disorder by rationalizing.

The pathology of normalcy can be seen in the fact that what society demands is accepted as „what everyone is doing,“ „good common sense,“ „the most normal thing in the world,“ „objective obligation,“ or „scientifically proven knowledge.“ This is how a





„sick society“ fully in the sense of Freud's „communal neurosis“ (in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Stand. Ed., Vol. XXI, p. 144) can come about. The sick society, however, doesn't generally suffer from this defect, rationalizing it instead as „normal.“ Thus Fromm suggests calling this unconscious suffering with society a „socially patterned defect“ (1955a, p. 15) as opposed to the individual neurotic disorder suffered, more or less, by the patient.

(4) The characteristic quality of Fromm's psychoanalytic „technique“ is not to be understood along with object psychology, but, rather, by the sole means of Fromm's own social characterology. In therapy the pattern of relatedness must be a biophilic one, but it can only be or become such if the analyst recognizes his own social character orientation and lives a biophile orientation in contrast to the dominant social character. This biophilic orientation is also reflected in the setting, but it is not insured by questions of technique and setting. Much more central is the question of the adaptation of the analyst to society, the dominant theories, professional principles, health policies, etc. The more the analyst lets himself be made into the tool of a non-productive society (by giving in to professional policies, the expectations of the orthodox representatives of medical associations and the health insurance system, and by determining his therapy goals according to the expectations of industry and health policy-makers, thereby making his patients adjusted and productive once again, instead of letting their socially undesirable energies grow), the more he succumbs to the dominant social character and the pathology of normalcy.

(5) The goal of therapy is to become aware of the alienating social character in the analysand and to practice a biophilic social character orientation which helps unfold the person's own psychological energies in the process of transference and counter-transference. This presupposes that the analyst has discovered his biophilic social character orientation and tries to practice it not only with the analysand, but in all his life relations (in his relationship with himself and in his family, cultural, economic and political relations). The emphasis in therapy work itself should not be historic-genetic research into childhood experiences and the facilitation of a regression to the most archaic possible instinct manifestations. It should be, rather, a merciless counter-transference perception of one's own and the transferred social pattern of relatedness and the promoting of all the personal energies of the analysand.

(6) Even if the significance of the social character for therapeutic use has only been approximately described by the above-named aspects, an equally important aspect of the social character should be mentioned in concluding. It concerns a new understanding of mass psychological phenomena based on social characterology. If people today are suffering increasingly from narcissistic disorders and tend towards narcissistic depression, if addiction and psychosomatic suffering is widespread and increasing, then these phenomena must be linked to current economic, work organizational and social requirements, and therapy must make alternative social character experiences possible.

It is clear that such alternative social character experiences cannot be provided by the ivory tower of classical psychoanalytic technique. Social-critical political activity to overcome alienating forces must not be separated from therapy work on the social



character.

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