

# Fromm's Critique of Consumerism and Its Impact on Education

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*Abstract:* This paper presents some dimensions of Erich Fromm's analytical social psychology that can be related to consumer capitalism. In view of the limits of growth, the destructive consequences of the consumerist lifestyle are increasingly evident. A sane consumption is something we must develop. This new consumption would promote sustainable development as a counterweight to the commoditization of the consumer and of the world. The social character approach describes the social adaptation of the psychic powers of man to economic needs. At present this adaptive process has transformed education and learning, creating students who can be easily used by the economic system and who will be perfect consumers. To curtail a potentially meaningless life, production and consumption must be limited and cut to a reasonable level. More people must change their way of life. Erich Fromm's approach presents reasons why consumerism is a dead end for human development and he outlines life-saving solutions that involve change in our education systems.

## Introduction

I am going to discuss Erich Fromm's criticism of consumerism and its consequences for education. The relation between consumerism and education needs to be considered and studied from both perspectives. On the one hand, most members of the consumer society are educated in such manner

to be ideal consumers who will try to reach the standards set by the consumer society without questioning them. On the other hand, consumerism has such an effect on people that they voluntarily aim to acquire a certain type of education which strengthens the consumerist culture. The question is what causes people to overconsume? Fromm thought the concept of social character explains how the psychic powers of man draw him to fulfilling the social and economic needs and functional requirements of a consumerist society.

These issues are becoming widely discussed but, in my view, most recent publications concerning consumption and education do not offer deeper insights to those to be found in Fromm's writings from the 1940s through to the 1970s. In recent decades consumerism as a social phenomenon has increased therefore our understanding of what education and learning should look like and what their tasks should have been altered. Instead, education seems to be providing easily malleable workers who will smoothly fulfill their economic role. The development of neoliberal capitalism and the postmodern life can be easily criticized through the framework of analytic social psychology and the concept of social character and social development. Numerous authors as for example B. Benjamin Barber (2007), Zygmunt Bauman (2007) and Justin Lewis (2013), published extensively on the topics of consumerism and consumer capitalism (For a summary of selected aspects of mass consumption and lifestyles in consumer capitalism see: Bierhoff 2013.).

These contributions do not generally address Fromm's approach, but focus primarily on the topic of commoditization. These publications do not, however utilize the stance of analytical social psychology and do not propose an equivalent for the concept of social character, although they come to similar conclusions as Fromm did in the past. What matters to us is that Fromm's understanding of society is not out-dated and is still valid. For example Fromm's book *To Have Or to Be?* can be read as addressing the problem of climate change. The most complex social diagnosis done by Fromm can be found in *Escape from Freedom* (1941a), *The Sane Society* (1955a) and *To Have Or to Be?* (1976a). In these books Fromm has formulated his concept of the social character, he has analyzed the mechanisms of escape, studied the marketing character, and has asked the question regarding health and normalcy and has described the manipulation of regular

citizens by anonymous authorities. In his later work titled *To Have Or to Be?* (Fromm 1976a) he presents the contradiction of the having mode as opposed to the being mode as capturing the core of his studies.

## Consumerism as a Way of Life

Erich Fromm saw capitalist society as defined by two ways of life, in its non-productive variant life under capitalism is determined by alienation, passivity and destructiveness. In its productive variant it is characterized by reason, care, interest and love. The original element of his social diagnosis is that he turned his attention simultaneously to the social character of the members of society as well as to the socio-economic structure.

Fromm has used the term consumerism as a synonym for consumer behavior, but without elaborating on it systematically. The following features of the consumerism can be found in his works:

- (1) Consumerism represents the socially desired high consumption (over-consumption) of goods and services in an economic system, which needs people whose major life target is to consume.
- (2) Consumerism generates in consumers the attitude of possessing the world in a passive and receptive manner; this attitude turns the world into a world of consumable objects. "What is essential for modern consumption is that it is perceived as an attitude or, to put it more correctly, as a character trait. (...) The world in its richness is transformed into an object of consumption" (Fromm 1990a, p. 83).
- (3) A specific feature of consumerism is a social character, which has, due to its traits, a penchant for excessive consumption. Its character dynamic drives the consumerist person to turn objects and people into consumable and replaceable objects, to turn the whole world into consumption articles.
- (4) The consumerism has its roots in the character traits like envy and greed, which lead to a forced consumption of objects and services. "There is a kind of consuming that is compulsive and that arise from greed, a compulsion to eat, buy, own, use more and more" (Fromm 1983b, p. 5).
- (5) Consumerism leads to an alienated experience and a limited view of

the world. Through consumption the human makes contact with the world of humans and objects but in an alienated manner. Thereby the consumer reduces the world to objects that match with his desires, in order to use them without being really deeply interested in them. As Fromm puts it, “Consumption is the alienated form of being in contact with the world by making the world an object of one’s greed rather than an object of one’s interest and concern” (Fromm 1990a, p. 83).

- (6) Consumerism has used the sexual satisfaction in order to make people lose the attitude of dispensation. At the same time, consumerism has submitted sexual behavior to marketing in order to increase sexual attractiveness and the saleability on the personnel market. As a whole, the permissive sexual behavior stimulates directly and indirectly the need for consumption. From argues that “The present sexual behavior is part of general consumerism” (Fromm 1991a, p. 48) and “Historical development has shown that sexual liberation served the development of consumerism and if anything weakened political radicalism” (Fromm 1979a, p. 135).
- (7) Consumerism leads to a pathogenic syndrome of boredom, chronic depression, fear and loss of consciousness, associated with the desire for belonging through demonstrative consumption, self-improvement and image cultivation. At the same time, consumerism weakens the engagement for political actions in the community, makes people passive and determines them to an optional contact, which protects against closeness.
- (8) Consumerism is like a drug, although compared to the abuse of alcohol and other drugs, it does not limit people’s ability to work and their social obligations. While consumerism determines a compensatory shopping, its increase in compulsive buying can be considered an addiction not related to substances.

## **Pathologies of Consumer Capitalism**

Erich Fromm considers the capitalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as ruled by consumerism. Even if Fromm has never used the term “consumer capitalism”, the designation matches the Frommian perspective. Fromm wrote: “Twen-

tieth-century capitalism is based on maximal consumption of the goods and services produced as well as on routinized teamwork” (Fromm 1976a, p. 5). This capitalism has been designated as consumer capitalism. Undoubtedly it has its roots in the consumerist structures of mass consumption with greed and insatiability being major traits helping to create and expand markets for the sale of mass-produced goods.

Two features of capitalism Fromm considers to be typical: (1) the disciplined work with its assembly lines and the bureaucratic routine and (2) the emergence of leisure time in which people consume products of the consciousness industries and consumer durables. Both are connected in a dialectical unity. Since Fromm wrote these contradictions have further developed and the transition to the knowledge-based society and the nature of work has changed. This change is considered by Fromm to be a very significant one. In the current era, especially since the World War I, a radical hedonism has penetrated our modern way of life. One of the major goals of people is to experience “unlimited pleasure”. This strengthens the pervasiveness of the consumption of commodities and services. The consumer lifestyle is based on a contradiction: rigorous work discipline and an ideal of laziness. This way of alienated disciplined work is made bearable with the receiving of a salary, which is the condition for free consumption. During the consumption process people are compensated and calmed for experiencing limitations in their work life. In order to participate in the constant consumption patterns and to continue buying, a pressure is created to ensure that an individual will show up to paid work.

In *The Sane Society* (1955a) Fromm compares this situation to the pathology of normalcy. Fromm understands a social defect as a non-productive attitude and perception that is shared and practiced by most members of a society, who usually do not realize the pathology of conformity and the limitation on personal growth that it imposes. If all members of a society have the same psychological limitations, then these are ignored in the common social context, but they are perceived as normal and apparently healthy. One of such social defects is the visibility of competition oriented behavior, which is considered to be normal by the so-called dog-eat-dog society. Such a defect is, in general, not connected to suffering, but is seen as diffusing non-well-being and as allowing people to escape from compensatory activities. Such character traits that are shared by the most consumers

are considered by Fromm as a pathogenic way of life and in this case he speaks about a sick human being in a sick society.

Already in 1976 Fromm after looking at the data he was surprised that no direct measures were taken by policy makers to tackle the situation of passivity: “While in our private life nobody except a mad person would remain passive in view of a threat to our total existence, those who are in charge of public affairs do practically nothing, and those who have entrusted their fate to them let them continue to do nothing.” (Fromm 1976a, p. 10) Today (2014), the situation has further sharpened socially and ecologically all around the world. No reforms have been proposed or decisive actions have been taken to alter the existing state of affairs. No radical decisions have been made either with regard to alleviating poverty and hunger in the world or in relation to tackling depleting resources and our rapidly changing climate. Fromm calls for “*a radical change of the human heart*” (ibid.). The crisis can only be resolved through “drastic economic and social changes” (ibid.).

On the basis of theoretical considerations and empirical findings as well as everyday observations, Fromm sees very clearly that radical hedonism cannot lead to happiness and well-being. Fromm argues: “We are a society of notoriously unhappy people: lonely, anxious, depressed, destructive, dependent – people who are glad when we have killed the time we are trying so hard to save” (Fromm 1976a, pp. 5–6).

The reasons for ignorance lie in the lacking of carefulness, and indifference towards life and disinterest in the well-being of other people. Through the compensatory self-deception and the permanent intervention of cultural antidotes like television and computing, people are put into a state of malaise and of the pathology of normalcy. Their vitality and initiative is being stolen from them. Since their character becomes indifferent and passive, they are activated by marketing superficially for activities that do not turn into productive activities.

## **The Primacy of the Economy and Its Consequences**

In the first place Fromm mentions the radical change of economic behavior, which “became separate from ethics and human values” (Fromm 1976a,

p. 7). The economy seemed like an autonomous machine that served for its own logic of the exploitation of work forces and for the generation of profits, without considering the human will and the human needs. The economic system did not develop according to the question Fromm asked: “*What is good for Man?*”, but subordinated the human well-being to economic growth. Until today the economic complex is governed by the question: “*What is good for the growth of the system?*” (ibid.).

People are submitted to this system as work force and consumers and form a social character that is determined by “egotism, selfishness and greed” (Fromm 1976a, p. 7). According to Fromm, these traits are determined by the life conditions and cannot be considered as natural, innate drives. The current economic system with the way of life it generates “is based on the principle of unlimited consumption as the goal of living”. (1976a, p. 6) Social progress is measured by quantity: the more produced, the better.

In *To Have Or to Be?* Fromm highlights the difference between two modes of existence: having and being. The having is oriented to quantities. Also the consumption in its widest form is based on having. “Consuming has ambiguous qualities: It relieves anxiety, because what one has cannot be taken away; but it also requires one to consume ever more, because previous consumption soon loses its satisfactory character. Modern consumers may identify themselves by the formula: *I am = what I have and what I consume*” (Fromm 1976a, p. 27). The forced consumption is considered by Fromm to be a pathological phenomenon, which he compares with being an alcoholic and a drug addict. The difference consists in the fact that the consumption of alcohol and drugs affects the social functioning, but the purchase and consumption belongs to the desired cultural activities and averagely leads to no limitations of the social functioning.

In human relations the having mode of existence leads to competition, social isolation, man against each other and social fear, fear of loss, greed, insecurity, and inability to build lasting relationships. Basic greed, an unsatisfied need for affection, for getting presents and entertainment can be stimulated at any time with inter-human comparison (what does he have and what do I have) or by advertising. This greed is a socially generated attitude, which allows to produce more and more, in order to maintain the mass production through an expanding line of products with an artificially generated demand.

## “Being” as a Solution?

In the being mode greed and envy are missing since the identity of a person does not depend on having or private property. Wanting to have or possess something is not precondition for enjoying something. What Fromm means becomes clear when one perceives the difference between material and immaterial needs and their satisfaction. I can enjoy nature without possessing it. I can relate to other people and enjoy common activities which Fromm calls a “productive activity” and “shared enjoyment” (Fromm 1976a, p. 91, 115). Fromm also asks about the barriers that prevent this lived orientation towards the being. Here the character structure must be analyzed, namely the marketing orientation described by Fromm, to find a productive way to cope with the reality.

From Fromm’s point of view, change character can take place from two perspectives. The change can be stimulated through economic needs and survival problems, which in order to be faced need new character orientations. Another route is through changes in human relatedness and a consolidation of the community life with manageable decentralized structures. Fromm considers the need to subordinate the economy to the needs of people, since the limitlessly aggressive expansion of consumption threatens the human surviving. It must be integrated again in a relation that serves to the human well-being. Such a change also supports a reasonable and sustainable consumption, which leaves the meaningless life of overconsumption behind. In summary, Fromm’s argumentation goes along the following principal lines:

- “to subordinate economy to the needs of the people, first for our sheer survival, second for our well-being” (Fromm 1976a, p. 164)
- “production must serve the real needs of the people, not the demands of the economic system” (ibid., p. 160)
- “a radical change in the economic system is necessary: *we must put an end to the present situation where a healthy economy is possible only at the price of unhealthy human beings.* The task is to construct a healthy economy for healthy people. *The first crucial step toward this goal is that production shall be directed for the sake of ‘sane consumption’*” (ibid., p. 176)
- “Sane consumption can take place only if an ever-increasing number

of people *want* to change their consumption patterns and their lifestyles” (ibid.)

➤ the goal is to overcome “the empty life of consumption” (ibid., p. 198)

## The Importance of Education

The question of change also centrally concerns the education process. Education is a function of the society through which the social character is formed, which matches the given social conditions and structures. The educational system is not only a reflex of social relations but it is also a field where actors are reflexively creating new forms of education. The former education of the machine era, learning through technology and the following of authoritarian instructions will not secure the future. If affection and empathy grow in the human relations and during the education process, the changeability of human relations and dynamics of the self-consolidation can occur and spiritual bases of a new society can be built.

In an authoritarian society that is determined by dominance and submission, a character is functional, which is inhibited, controls its impulses and shows obedience when it is on the side of the powerless mass. In a consumer society individuals are freed from external limitations. Consumption should allow the expression not only of prosperity but also of individuality. However, the individuality is generated according to the patterns of commoditization. While in the authoritarian state the individual flees to the protection of authorities in order to avoid feelings of powerlessness and insecurity, in consumerism the individual seeks refuge in the experience of conformity. The economic conditions and functional requirements lead on the psychological level to pressure, uncertainty and powerlessness. The powerlessness of the individual

leads either to the kind of escape that we find in the authoritarian character, or else to a compulsive conforming in the process of which the isolated individual becomes an automaton, loses his self, and yet at the same time consciously conceives of himself as free and subject only to himself (Fromm 1941a, p. 240).

The field of education has been explored in terms of analytical social psychology only in a rudimentary form. This is not the place to reconstruct Fromm's approach in detail. A special feature of Fromm's approach is that he does not describe education as the "cause" for the formation of character. Education only imparts given necessities of the economic and social structure into the character of the children by educational methods and educational practices.

In this sense, education is to be understood as a social function:

The social function of education is to qualify the individual to function in the role he is to play later on in society; that is, to mold his character in such a way that it approximates the social character, that his desires coincide with the necessities of his social role. (Fromm 1941a, p. 284).

Man is not only determined by the requirements of economic and social conditions, but also by what Erich Fromm calls "human nature". This nature, however, is not infinitely adaptable because it is not biologically determined. As Fromm puts it: "While it is true that man is molded by the necessities of the economic and social structure of society, he is not infinitely adaptable" (Fromm 1941a, p. 285) – "(...) *although character development is shaped by the basic conditions of life and although there is no biologically fixed human nature, human nature has a dynamism of its own that constitutes an active factor in the evolution of the social process*" (ibid., p. 287).

The central question for the social tasks of education seems to be whether a socially initiated liberal development could actually be stopped and dismantled through following educational activities. When parents and teachers in the process of education increasingly develop empathy, is the result a developmental dynamism towards further changes in this direction? What are the social conditions under which ideas and abilities can become an autonomous change factor that exceeds the compulsive conformity and offers a way out of the destructive culture of having?

Even if man can not be completely described with the marketing orientation, where do the transformational impulses in the character structure come from? Fromm argues that "The marketing orientation, however, does not develop something which is potentially in the person." (Fromm 1947a, p. 77) Fromm may be wrong here, because the skills that are carried

to market are more than pseudo-skills and exceed their monetary value. Certainly Fromm is right when he says about the marketing orientation: "(...) the very changeability of attitudes is the only permanent quality of such orientation. In this orientation, those qualities are developed which can best be sold" (ibid.).

To this the special combinations of productive and non-productive traits in the character orientations are added, which are also to be taken into account. The marketing orientation like the other character orientations can be described as an ideal type and is not representative for the individual characters. Overall, the marketing orientation shows an emptiness, "which can be filled most quickly with the desired quality" (Fromm 1947a, p. 77). Elsewhere Fromm admits that the marketing character can change more easily than, for example, the hoarding character, because it is a character not as strongly tied to possession.

As pointed out in the earlier discussion of the "marketing character", the greed to have and to hoard has been modified by the tendency to merely function well, to exchange oneself as a commodity who is – nothing. It is easier for the alienated, marketing character to change than it is for the hoarding character, which is frantically holding onto possessions, and particularly its ego. (Fromm 1976a, p. 200.)

Lloyd deMause, who was appreciated by Fromm, has described changes in the educational structure that have taken place in modern times. The so-called "individualized psychoclass" has spawned a new educational mode, which he described as "empathic" and "helping" – and not as merely "socializing". His program for the change of education is: "What we need now is *some way for the more advanced psycho-classes to teach childrearing to the less evolved parents*, a way to end child abuse and neglect quickly enough to avoid the global holocaust that is awaiting us" (deMause 2002).

DeMause pleads for

a vast world-wide program to end child neglect and abuse and raise all our precious children with respect (...). Only by reducing dissociation to a minimum through empathic parenting can we avoid inflicting the self-destructive power we now have available to us. (...) Free universal training centers for

parents may be a radical new notion, but so once was the idea of free universal schools for children. Our task is clear and our resources sufficient to make our world safe for the first time in our long, violent history. All it takes now is the will to begin (deMause 2002.)

I think Erich Fromm would have agreed with this statement.

In my opinion it is essential to promote human productivity by changing the way of life – away from consumerism to awareness and simplicity on the basis of downshifting. This culture change needs to be connected to transformations in education that move us to prioritize empathic care and unconditional affective attention.

## **Educational Reform and Productive Relatedness**

In his introduction to the book by Father Wasson *You are my brother*, Erich Fromm described the educational concept of the orphanage, which was run by Wasson. Fromm first emphasized that these children are burdened by the circumstances:

they are orphans; their background is one of extreme poverty and broken homes; and they live in an institution. I would say that was enough to make very maladjusted children out of them (Fromm 1975f, p. 6).

It is all the more amazing that these children do not fit into this scheme. So there must be special conditions in the organization of life in the home and in the concept of education.

Erich Fromm pointed out that there were the following four principles in his view that enabled the success of Father Wasson: “the principle of absolute security and at the same time of realistic responsibility; of self-management; and of stimulation (Fromm 1975f, p. 7).

The special feature Fromm mentioned is that the old principles of education are not simply replaced by new ones, but a new system was established, with new patterns of relationships with loving relatedness and without bureaucratic attitude. Fromm emphasized

that the important point here is that Father Wasson has not tried to change one factor but that he has brought together a number of principles which, in their conjunction, make it possible for his family of more than 1,000 children to react as it does (Fromm 1975f, p. 8).

Other authors such as Stanley Greenspan and Barry Brazelton emphasized a series of seven needs that must be met for optimal child development (see Brazelton/Greenspan 2000):

- (1) stable caring relationships
- (2) physical protection with security and stability
- (3) stimulating experiences that correspond to the individuality
- (4) developmentally appropriate experiences
- (5) experience of limits, clear structures and reasonable expectations
- (6) stable supportive communities and cultures
- (7) protecting the future.

The new education program refuses to structure education solely on the basis of economic efficiency. Education is not the promotion of economic productivity and economic growth. This destructive productivity based on quantification and commoditization, ends in destruction. The promotion of human productivity relies on criteria such as developed by Wasson, Fromm and Greenspan. Particularly important is the combination of unconditional affection in the maternal love and paternal requirements and encouragements. And there should be no suppression of spontaneity and vitality of the child so that his productive forces can grow. Education can help to bring forth a free man.

The problem to be solved in the education structure is to establish stable and irreversible changes that match the social-economic conditions. In reciprocal intensification a more productive education with attention and empathy for human development is accompanied by supportive structures. The theoretical starting point is an understanding of education as not merely a response to social conditions and functional requirements, but involving a relative autonomy with its own dynamics of development. The social context in which people act is always a socially constituted framework. The human responses that are found in the confrontation with social norms and values are changing this frame.

This process of change can be described with the concept of social character. The social character is a descriptive concept that concerns the dimensional compatibility of man and society. Its function is to bring people in accordance with society, so that the human energies can be used in the social contexts, for example, in the industrial work process or in the symbol-processing activities of the knowledge-based society. Social character is socially productive insofar as it establishes the humans as productive forces. This productivity, however, is socially immanent and not system-exceeding productivity. The human productivity that Fromm sees connected with the nature of man or that results from this nature is to be understood as a productivity beyond the existing limitations of a given society.

While the social immanent productivity can be described by the social character, human productivity that exceeds the established reality is assigned to individual characters and is to be understood as social-transcending. As long as only small changes occur in a society with a stable environment there is no pressure to develop inventive solutions. This is quite different in a society that is undergoing rapid changes.

In the globalized world, there are serious survival problems faced by human being associated with the risk of exterminism. Exterminism means the destruction of liveable structures in a final stage of the industrial civilization all over the world, including environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity. It describes the danger of the extermination of our ways of life and cultures and indeed of humans themselves by the consequences of the ecological crisis. Detraditionalization creates space for new views of the problems that are at first in the background, but then emerge and are dealt with. The direct view to the changing reality of situations and configurations evaluates them as problematic. With Fromm also can be said that the existing social character in times of change and crisis becomes fragile and is transformed from the cement of the social relations into an explosive. In a situation of radical change the social character is no longer functional and can no longer guarantee the further development of social relationships within the present socio-technical and socio-economic structures. A dramatic societal situation of upheaval can arise.

Such a social situation can prefigure new character traits which previously stood in the background. In such situations, new attempts will take place to find solutions and ways of life which in turn may be reflected in a

new or at least modified social character. Since the social character fulfills a predominantly integrative function, the emerging character traits – in the framework of social character – are redirected to the predetermined structures of social order. In the framework of the individual character, it is not about adaptive social integration, but the development of the personality in the sense of autonomy and relatedness. The meaning of this understanding of the education and the upbringing of children and adolescents should be described in the following three ways.

First, there are situations that are paradigmatic and set new standards. These innovations result from the special nature of productive individuals who create new educational concepts on a practical level. As examples, Alexander S. Neill and Father Wasson can be mentioned, who have built new unusual institutions. Other examples of unusual conceptualizations are Albert Schweitzer and Erich Fromm who have reached the hearts of the people presenting effective approaches as the biophilous ethics, which is connected to the joy of growth, and loving human relatedness, empathy and mindfulness, reason and love, comprehending knowledge and helping care. In addition to the disillusioned mode of experiencing the reality and to the willingness to truth and self-reflection there is an active engagement at its core.

On the other hand, there are cross-institutionalizations, concerning, for example, the promotion of peace and the respect for human rights. Institutions are acting against social and educational occupations and irrational authorities, which are often associated with forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence. Child protection centers and refuges for victims of violence are to be mentioned. The parenting centers described by Lloyd deMause are part of it. They are to be understood as institutionalized assistance for distressed families and individuals and can be expanded to protection-seeking children, advice-seeking parents, old people, asylum seeking people, sick persons, the homeless, at all marginalized people in precarious situations that threaten life or human dignity.

While these two levels of ground-breaking *initiatives* of especially productive people who are pioneering, and human support-giving *institutions* are already established and indispensable to the spectrum of the helping social structure, the third level is still underdeveloped. This level of change would act structurally against the conditions of material and educational

poverty, includes measures of the political and economic system, and encompasses the corporate management and the areas of science, technology and work, as well. There are approaches that try to link the social structures to humanistic values, but their success is minimal, because at this level the power and capital concentration is greatest. In addition, the sphere of maintaining power and system integration is not within the reach of the actors of the everyday world. In contrast, the other two levels of initiatives and institutions are part of the sphere of influence available to everyday actors.

## Conclusion

The way out from consumer capitalism can only be successful if people freely decide which needs they want to satisfy. Will people choose the needs that keep people in the rat race of the forced consumerism as opposed to the needs which, if satisfied, make people more active, more alive, more happy and free and which contribute to the well-being and to the human growth? Steps to freedom are also supported by work which gives working people room to decide and to act responsibly, allowing them to build a decent society and active community. As compared to this, a monotonous and boring work makes people subaltern and drives them to compensatory consumption activities. The same applies to unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Transfer incomes preventing poverty will be necessary to protect people against different risks. If there is not enough paid labor as a reliable source of regular income there are still lots of public interest activities in the community that are useful to acquire a peaceful and meaningful atmosphere for human encounters and unconditional love and support for outcasts, women, children and elderly people at material and non-material levels. On an overall basis system of prevention, family-supporting services, and parenting centers are to be implemented in every community to attain these goals. Education plays an important role in building lasting relationships with the care and affective support of the family, other groups and individuals. In a time of great transformations the need for new educational ideas increases that encourage humane behavior and civil commitment in the community. People will then become more and more susceptible to

ideas which stimulate their involvement in the community life and encourage to enjoy a full and rich life. The current social character does not yet offer any solution for survival in a post-growth society. So people have to create alternative forms of interaction, work and education by themselves in order to survive.

Research and theory on social character has to call for the emergence of new traits and character orientations, which are formed by the individuals in the personal examination on life and to create a new balance between our own standards and the economic and social requirements. The current consumer-oriented social character inhibits the confrontation with the ecological crisis by calming down people in virtual worlds or in efficiency-oriented cultures of learning, working and doing business so that they experience exploitation and alienation. We find in this area, a hidden discipline that makes the thinking and action conformist – a multioptionality which can easily be confused with freedom, but ultimately does not mean much more than arbitrariness. In addition, social character research has to consider the changes in the socio-economic and technological basis of the society, which can promote ideas and alternative concepts of life, accompanied by new demands on the people as a productive force.

Finally it is not possible to simply dismiss the impression that in the last decades a great number of new topics and ideas arise that form a counterweight to the consumer capitalism and neoliberalism and reconsiders the way of life in the so-called affluent societies with a shift to communality and sustainability combined with the will to establish a hierarchy of universal norms of social justice and integrity of creation. The people, however, can only decide on a sane consumption and a sustainable way of life if they are inspired by a new vision, for example, of a “sustainable prosperity” (Duane Elgin). They must then take advantage of the possibilities that science and technology will offer to develop the productive forces in production and consumption to reduce precariousness and to promote a life in harmony with the love of nature, conservation of biodiversity and the well-being of all creatures. This is just the kind of sane society Fromm called for, and we have much work to do to make it a reality.

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