

# Social Character and Social Unconscious

## Erich Fromm's Discovery and the Problems of Today

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*Abstract.* In the Soviet Union Fromm was primarily known as a social thinker. He was highly appreciated for his adherence to socialist principles, his interpretation, in Marx's spirit, of ideology as "false consciousness" as well as his creative reformulation of Marx's concept of man. Furthermore, Fromm's concept of social character gained a lot of attention in the USSR. Through elaborating the idea of social unconscious Fromm warned his readers against modern democracy, consumerism and the power of technocrats. Unfortunately his warnings were ignored by the Soviet and Russian leaders. Nevertheless, Fromm's ideas remain valid today.

I will look at Fromm's work from the familiar to me point of view of a Russian scholar. In the Soviet Union Fromm's works became popular in the sixties, the period when I first became exposed to them. At the time, however, Fromm's books were not translated into Russian from English. I, among many others, read them in the original language at the library.

Although Fromm was well-known as a neo-Freudian psychoanalyst he was considered a social thinker first of all. His elaboration of the socio-psychological mechanisms of modern society in Marx's spirit and more importantly his creative interpretation of Marx's concept of man, made him popular among Soviet and Russian scholars. At the time Marx was officially recognized in the Soviet Union as a political economist who had worked out the revolutionary theory of overthrowing capitalism. Marx's concept of man was in the background but according to Fromm it deserved far more

attention especially its social aspect, that is, man's connection with society. Thus, inspired by Marx, Fromm developed a theory seeing man as a social product. He developed the concept of social character playing a role of an intermediary between the economic base and the ideological superstructure. At the same time, Fromm drew readers' attention to the humanistic aspect of Marx's theory. I was one of those readers.

It doesn't mean that I fully agree with Fromm. I find contradictions in the view of human nature that he presents as potentially existing in all of us. It does not seem to go together with the concept of social character, in my view. However, I admit that dialectically speaking contradiction is a source of development. My subsequent intellectual development was affected by this contradiction on the one hand, and the achievements of Fromm's social and socio-psychological thoughts, on the other hand. Fromm's works seemed to have reviewed well-known theories. His ideas gave the reader a chance to look more analytically and critically at the changing world. What made his ideas so attractive was that they were rather flexible and easily applicable to the new circumstances. What seemed very relevant was that he encouraged examining ideological postulates from a humanistic angle.

Although Fromm harshly criticized the Soviet Union's policies and ideology, his criticism was not ignored. One of the reasons for that was that he also criticized the United States' policies and ideology just as severely. Another reason was that his criticism concerning Russia coincided to a considerable extent with the internal criticism existing within the country. In spite of the widespread opinion that the Soviet frame of mind was ideologically homogenous, the public recognized the flaws of the Soviet style of life and voicing such opinions during discussions on the social and human problems was usual. It does not mean that critical attitude to some aspects of Soviet life turned the general public into the enemies of the Soviet system. The purpose of this criticism was to improve the situation in the country in order to make further advancements in the areas of social justice and social security as well as creating more employment opportunities and a universal access to higher education. Fromm's books presented a similar vision of what social betterment should look like. He embraced socialist principles at the same time objecting when they were violated. He saw these principles as being more socially constructive in comparison with bourgeois values.

The views of Soviet scholars on ways to improve the world situation

differed from Fromm's position but his theories were still very useful and instructive, especially his interpretation of ideology as "false consciousness" following Marx's ideas. Marx's diagnosis of the causes of world socio economic problems was well known, but it was difficult to realize that in the Soviet Union there was a discrepancy between the socialist principles declared and the actual Soviet ideology. At the same time the idea of replacing the Soviet ideology with the ideology of liberalism was met with opposition. Soviet intellectuals differed in opinions. Some among them were those who repudiated socialist principles and accepted the ideology of liberalism. They became dissenters. Others insisted that the ideology of liberalism did not fit the Soviet Union and the socialist principles should be strengthened. I joined the second trend in accordance with Fromm's adherence to the idea of socialism.

Fromm's work helped us better understand the dangers of confusing the ideological system with actual real life as it was lived in society. Fromm helped to differentiate between the official ideological system as a sort of "false consciousness" and the set of ideas as an expression of the distinctiveness of a particular society. The concept of "false consciousness" refers to the consciousness of the elites who consider "their way of organization and the values that are implied in it as being in 'the best interests of man'" (Fromm 1962a, p. 116). The ideas defining the nation that Fromm talks about are a manifestation of real spiritual and intellectual social life of the nation.

Fromm demonstrated that when two opposite ideological systems operate side by side none of them could be entirely correct. The reason for this was that ideologists from each camp presented their point by distorting the facts and arguments made by their opponents. Under such circumstances mutual understanding was and is impossible.

Following Marx, Fromm rejected all ideologies. He preferred Marx's radical point of view which suggested "go[ing] to the roots" in order to grasp what constitutes a human being and what is humane. At the same time Fromm showed that going to the roots was very difficult if not impossible because social alienation does not allow people to embark on such journeys of self-scrutiny. Nevertheless, Fromm did his best to show how the modern situation, more precisely the alienation of contemporary societies, can be overcome. He started by criticizing American democracy, demonstrating

that modern democracy had turned into an official ideology and degenerated into a form of human deprivation.

Fromm was not the first thinker in the European tradition who critiqued democracy. Oswald Spengler regarded democracy as a feature of the so-called “civilization” that he considered to be a culture in decay. Spengler showed that the democracy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created a system in which money meant getting access to political power. That stood, of course, in stark contrast to what democracy was supposed to be. Modern democracy, as Spengler stressed, is destroyed by the money-power connection.

It seems that Fromm took Spengler’s conclusions into account while analyzing the world situation after the WWII. In his book *The Sane Society* (1955) Fromm stresses that “the functioning of the political machinery in a democratic country is not essentially different from the procedure of the commodity market” (Fromm 1955a, p. 166) and that the professional politicians use the method which looks like the method of high pressure advertising. No wonder that his estimation of such features of democracy as universal suffrage is not purely positive. He writes in *The Sane Society*: “Under these circumstances universal suffrage becomes a fetish” (Fromm 1955a, p. 165).

These passages were written in the middle of the previous century. Now it seems pretty obvious that democracy has become a fetish, or I would even say “an idée fixe” just as is the idea of human rights. I spoke about these questions at the XVII International Forum of Psychoanalysis held in Mexico-city in 2012. I would like to stress that this transformation of democracy took place because of the “socially conditioned filter” as a mechanism of social unconscious enumerated by Fromm in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (1962a, p. 125). The idea of democracy, just as with the idea of human rights, was ideologically transformed into a dead framework. Now both frameworks are recognized as legitimate and uncritically accepted. Life manifestations must fit these frames to be recognized as real or true otherwise they will be artificially forced into them. This situation will probably remain the same as long as alienated society exists and until the elite of the globalizing world regards its own interests as the best interests of the humanity.

So we can ascertain that Fromm warned us against modern democracy as a manifestation of an alienated society. Unfortunately during the so called

“perestroika” (reconstruction), Soviet authorities yielded the temptation to appear democratic and liberal. Following the advices of their American counselors, Soviet and then Russian leaders tried to establish a democratic government by placing national resources at their supporters’ disposal. However, the vital problems of the country were ignored. As a result the country experienced destruction rather than the reconstruction of the nation’s social life. New social institutions that can be considered foreign to Russian society were established but they don’t function properly.

To tackle these problems authorities resorted to promoting the ideology of consumerism combined with liberalism. Fromm warned us against consumerism beforehand. He pointed out the negative consequences of this phenomenon, especially its destructive impact on the human psyche. He criticized the Soviet Union of the sixties as a “have” state based on the “possession” principle. Fromm considered this principle to be bourgeois and criticized the Soviet government for deviating from Marxism.

I fully agree with Fromm’s evaluation of consumerism. But we must distinguish between consumerism as a style of life and as a mode allowing people to satisfy their needs. In the sixties there was a conviction among the Soviet people that certain needs haven’t been met and that they need to get access to more basic goods. Thus, an introduction of the “have” principle into the Soviet life was to some extent relevant. Unfortunately, the following Soviet leaders didn’t take Fromm’s warning into consideration. During the “perestroika” the basis of consumers’ society was established. After the collapse of the Soviet Union this tendency was strengthened. The corresponding type of social character developed in Russian society side by side with the establishment of the free market and “democracy”. So we stepped back from the declared socialist ideals to bourgeois ones. Instead of developing more progressive principles promoted by Fromm we stepped back to the principles of the past that were already very well developed in capitalist countries. This retreat was officially explained by the fact that Russia was technologically less advanced and technological development required the capitalist approach to the means of production and to the productive forces. People as a new productive force had to be equipped with computers and to be capable of using them.

The socio-psychological problems arise: what kind of social character corresponds with a computerizing world and does this type of social

character promote the humanization of the world? These are the burning problems that the world is currently facing. There are no ready answers in Fromm's books but his ideas give us a good starting point.

Fromm was worried about the seemingly ruling principle of the modern world fetishizing technology according to which everything must be done using technology if it is possible. The consequences of following such a principle seems not to worry the technocrats even if subscribing to such technologically fixated life might lead to the annihilation of humanity. Fromm insisted that technology itself is not bad, it has to be used responsibly and should serve human beings. Both economic and technological development must be the means of human development.

The wide availability of computers around the world makes this problem far more urgent than it was in the late sixties, when Fromm wrote *The Revolution of Hope* (Fromm 1968a). One wants to ask if a modern person serves a computer that symbolizes here technology or technology is serving people. Fromm would answer in a humanistic voice that a computer must help people to develop themselves and do so while maintaining contact with other people. In fact the situation is more complicated. We encounter a problem of a new social character corresponding to the computer reality. I propose to call this type of social character the "information character". A person of this character is capable of perceiving, processing and sending information without digesting it as if a person is not a subject of the process but a means of transmission. This means that subjectivity is lacking and social alienation is deepened in the era of globalization.

According to Rainer Funk's conception (Funk 2006) modern social character can be called a "I-am-me orientation" and it is characterized by a "kaleidoscopic" perception and thinking. A person of such character needs permanent outer stimulation and outer integrators. This description confirms that subjectivity is lost nowadays.

The world situation is uneasy and today humanism appears to be old-fashioned. The Russian government follows the world tendency of de-humanization. It pursues the liberal course of the economy destructive of the country and the people who live there. Fromm's legacy is appreciated highly by supporters of socialism but they are not the ones who determine current policies. Even the system of education in Russia is oriented towards consumerism. There is no room for Fromm's humanistic views in contem-

porary Russian education. Nevertheless, those who share Fromm's ideals do their best to bring his ideas to the young generation. The most famous books by Fromm are translated into Russian and published and thus, are available to a wider public, including students. This is vitally important, because Fromm's concepts of social character and social unconscious are still valid and useful for analyzing modern society and cultural changes taking place in it.

## References

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