



Introduction

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The change of contemporary societies is on everyone's lips. It is evident in the mega-trends of digitization, globalization, and acceleration. Scientists from various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, political science and economics may view this change from different perspectives, but they largely agree that the structure of our

everyday lives is changing. Thus, public attention is increasingly focusing on the key question of the relationship between subject and society.

When we symbolically put society on the couch in this volume, we do so by reflecting on what is repressed and unconscious and what actually constitutes normality, subjectivity, or a productive life in the face of rapid change and numerous global threats. How can psychoanalysis and the social sciences help to identify pathways to a more humane society that will be more responsive to the experiential and expressive potential of human subjectivity?

In order to deal with these key questions of modern societies, there's no way around Erich Fromm's approach as a radical humanist and as a psychoanalyst of society. This is all the more important because the general public does not sufficiently perceive the potential import of the work of Erich Fromm for current debates on change and progress in contemporary societies. With this special issue, we want to contribute to closing this gap.

Erich Fromm's concept of the social character provides an important approach for the analysis of social megatrends and their effects on the formation of psychic structures and what is repressed socially. Fromm has constantly focused on social pathologies within seemingly normal—inasmuch as they are hegemonic—social constellations. This made room for an innovative and critical perspective within the social sciences. Building on this discussion, in



this special edition, we will pursue the following question: What implications can be drawn from Fromm's theories for research on contemporary processes of the internalization of social structures, and which methods are appropriate for examining these practices?

This issue is based on contributions from the 2nd Erich Fromm Research Conference that took place in Berlin in June 2018, bringing together international researchers engaged with the work of Erich Fromm, examining the actuality of Fromm's social-psychoanalytic approach, as well as exploring the potential for further development of this approach with regard to contemporary social developments.

This conference was made possible by generous support from the Karl Schlecht Foundation. It is a particular concern of the foundation to promote the significance of the work of Erich Fromm to the understanding of contemporary societies. In his welcome address Karl Schlecht himself pointed out how important Fromm's work was for his own life. Referring to the motto of the conference, he stated that, by putting himself mentally on the couch, he had reflected on his own career and once again become aware of how central Fromm's work had been for him. He had felt particularly personally enriched by Fromm when hearing him on a radio program in 1976 speaking on »vita activa.« In this context, Schlecht emphasized the importance of love as a central concept of Fromm's, which goes far beyond the field of private relationships. It is therefore especially important for an understanding of transformation processes of societies to deal with the potential of development based on the human capacity to love. This was underscored by Klaus Leisinger in particular, whose opening lecture we have already published in the 2018 issue of *Fromm Forum*.

Martin Teising, the President of the IPU Berlin that hosted the conference, stressed the importance of the possibilities of psychoanalysis for understanding societies. The scientific examination of Erich Fromm as the founder of analytical social psychology has to be considered an important contribution for contemporary psychoanalysis.

This special issue is structured into five sections, reflecting core themes that have been discussed during the conference:

In the first section, *The Frommian Approach to Society*, we show Fromm's contribution to psychoanalysis as well as to the social sciences by his social-psychoanalytic approach to the individual *and* to society. Manifold points of connection between Fromm's work and current debates about social change are discussed. It becomes clear that Fromm's work by no means should be regarded as outdated, but is on the contrary of central importance for a transdisciplinary understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. This is made particularly clear by looking at the relationship between psychoanalysis



and sociology and by linking social transformation processes to Fromm's concepts of social character and psychic productiveness. Links to contemporary feminist debates and a social-psychoanalytical connection to the concept of practice, as anchored in particular in the concept of Bourdieu's habitus, are important for further developments of the Frommian approach. Fromm is a central reference for a critical examination of developmental tendencies of contemporary capitalism, as well as for the understanding of such a central historical event as the Holocaust.

The second section focuses on *Alienation and Creativity in the Sphere of Work* as one of the central social territories that is challenged by change and in a state of profound upheaval. Fromm connects his normative concept of psychic productivity and work with a social critique of the organization of work. Alienation thereby is described as the process to satisfy basic human needs in a way that is directly or indirectly harmful for both individuals and society. There are several connected key questions: Which forms of alienation can be identified in contemporary contexts of work? What characterizes them? Which concrete practices and which forms of resistance are there? Simultaneously, we are looking for ways to make Fromm's contribution fruitful for a discourse on how human vitality and creativity can contribute to a restructuring of the sphere of work and organizations. Therefore we discuss which emancipatory approaches already exist and how we can rethink work and leadership by putting humans in the center, especially as we face processes of digital transformation.

In the third section, *Towards a »Sane« Society*, we expand the perspective from the territory of paid employment to society as a whole, taking up this train of thought about possible alternatives. Fromm advocated a socialist humanism, dedicated to promoting the development of human potential and the satisfaction of basic human needs alongside concepts of reason, work and love. In a Frommian understanding, a discussion of ways towards a »sane« society could span, among others, concepts like basic income, working time reduction, participation, democratization, or solidarity. How relevant is a humanistic concept in the tradition of Erich Fromm in our times? What difficulties and potentials lie in contemporary social designs like post-growth, transnational ethics or concepts of global social justice? In this section we discuss current political events like the ongoing rise of right-wing movements and nationalism, the discourse on refugees and post-truth politics, all from the theoretical perspective of a Frommian approach. This includes theoretical reflections on the relationship between subjectivity and society, by discussing individualism and the concept of individual liberation.

Social Character Case Studies are the focus of the fourth section. In order to understand individual examples, it is important to understand social charac-



ter orientations that are bound to specific socialization conditions in a world marked by inequality. In order not to make this unequal socialization invisible or to naturalize self-optimization narratives, in Fromm's view, alienation must be taken into account just as systematically as the examination of human potential as a normative reference for a critical examination. The aim is to uncover social processes that deform people and to understand mechanisms that favor the biographical arrangement with pathological normality. Case studies focus on de-industrialized working class communities in the UK, on problems of cross-cultural social character research based on a Bulgarian perspective, on developmental roots of productive and non-productive social character traits and on prisons of women predestined to commit crimes in Mexico.

Finally, in the fifth section we focus on *Fromm's Impacts for Therapeutic Practice*. In Fromm's therapeutic setting, the analysis of dominant social character orientations and the evaluation of the social and professional situation of the individual are of great importance. This becomes especially visible in the importance Fromm assigned to dreams within the therapeutic setting. What influence do Fromm's concepts have for contemporary psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic treatment? How have these concepts been subsequently used and developed within clinical practice? We point out clinical implications of Fromm's concepts, focus on power dynamics in the clinical encounter and discuss necrophilic tendencies in schizophrenia treatment. With the depiction of a necrophilic social character, Fromm described the tendency toward an objectification of the world, where all that can be counted and transformed into a lifeless thing is more attractive than what is vital and alive.

We would like to thank all authors for their commitment, which has enabled us to present this special edition and to make the individual contributions also available as PDFs on the website of the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin (efsc.ipu-berlin.de). Together with the documentation of the 1st Erich Fromm Research Conference of 2014, published in 2015¹, the books show how fruitful Fromm's work is for understanding the dynamics of modern societies.

1 Funk, R., McLaughlin, N. (Eds), 2015: *Towards a Human Science. The Relevance of Erich Fromm for Today*, Giessen (Psychosozial-Verlag) 2015. The individual papers are also available on the Website of the Erich Fromm Study Center: efsc.ipu-berlin.de. The contributions of the 2014 conference were also published in Spanish under the title: *Hacia una ciencia humana. La relevancia de Erich Fromm en la actualidad*, México (Demac), 2017.