



Alienation and »Productive Orientation« in Work A Contribution to Erich Fromm's Critical Analysis of Society

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Abstract: Erich Fromm had developed a dialectical approach on alienation phenomena in work. On the one side he criticizes today's poor working conditions and on the other side he shows productive orientation in work. In my essay I will discuss empirical and theoretical contributions of social-psychological research in this Frommian perspective.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, alienation, productive orientation, social-psychology, communities of work, democratization of work.

Erich Fromm had developed an independent critical social theory in which he combines psychoanalytical, sociological, social-psychological, political-economic, philosophical and cultural perspectives. Fromm's theory opposes the idea of the division of labor both in theory and practice, as it is being advanced in psychology and social research today. Fromm is one of those scientists and theoreticians who, guided by psychoanalysis, develops the critical impulse in research and thought.

Many social science studies rightly criticize today's poor working conditions. Fromm describes it as an expression of social alienation. In this perspective, I would like to discuss empirical and theoretical contributions from social psychological research. Furthermore, I would examine the »productive orientation« in work which can be seen as resistance against alienation. I will discuss empirical research and social psychological approaches in this Frommian perspective.



Alienation as a »Relationship of Unrelatedness«

In his book *The Sane Society* (1955a, p. 120), Fromm defines:

»by alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as alien. He has become [...] estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship.«

In today's modern society, as Erich Fromm perceives it, alienation is almost total. »Non-productive« forms of relationships that make real, meaningful, intense contact with the social environment difficult are dominant. In our alienated society a person is »out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person,« In alienation, humans experience themselves as things are experienced; »with the senses and common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively« (ibid., pp. 120 f.). Alienation pervades our relationship to our work, to the things we consume, to the state, to our fellow man and to ourselves.

In her study on alienation, *Entfremdung*, Rahel Jaeggi (2016, p. 329) has described alienated relationships as »relationships of unrelatedness.« People treat themselves and each other like things and do not feel at home in their social environment. Nor does the outside world offer them any possibility of this relation of »feeling at home,« »the social world« gives »no occasion for such identification and no possibility for appropriation« (ibid.).

Rahel Jaeggi's definition of alienation as the relationship of nonrelation describes a counterpart to the »productive orientation« in Fromm. It goes along with the feeling of powerlessness. It describes the experience of subject and object being separated from another. In his understanding of the »productive orientation,« Fromm is concerned with a productive relation of subject and object in which one can develop his own potentialities as a human being.

»Productive« and »non-productive« orientations

In his work *Man for Himself* (1947a) Fromm distinguishes between »productive« and »non-productive« orientations in how one re-establishes a relationship with the world and the society after recognizing that he is alone and separated. Erich Fromm argues:



»Human existence is characterized by the fact that man is alone and separated from the world; not being able to stand the separation, he is impelled to seek for relatedness and oneness. There are many ways in which he can realize this need, but only one in which his own powers unfold in the very process of being related.« (Fromm 1947a, p. 96.)

Only if one can experience oneself as separate from the world and humans, one can consciously decide to re-establish a relationship with the world and society. Man can relate to the world in a »productive« and »non-productive« way, but only in »productive orientation« does man remain as a unique and healthy human being in relation to the world and society. Only in »productive orientations« can man realize his human potential in the act of being related.

The »productive orientations« and the »non-productive orientations« are individual and social. The »productive orientation« and the »non-productive orientation« find their expression in the alienation phenomena in our society. Both »productive« and »non-productive orientations« symbolize a particular form of how man re-establishes relations to his environment, to things, and to his fellow human beings. The »productive orientations« stand for a socially desirable relationship to the world and »non-productive orientations« stand for the possibility of alienated relations, »relations of unrelatedness« to the world and society. Unlike in the productive, only in the alienation of the non-productive relationship to the world, man can lose contact with himself, things and his environment.

Among the non-productive character orientations, Fromm counts the »receptive orientation,« the »exploitative orientation,« the »hoarding orientation« and the »marketing orientation.« In his work *Ich und Wir*, Rainer Funk (2005) develops the »postmodern orientation« in relation to present days. All these orientations have in common that they are often far away from a development of a »normal, mature, healthy personality« the »fully developed character,« »that is the aim of human development and simultaneously the ideal of humanistic ethics« (ibid., p. 83) which Fromm also argues in his work, *Man for Himself* (1947a, p. 84):

»The »productive orientation« of personality refers to a fundamental attitude, a mode of relatedness in all realms of human experience. It covers mental, emotional and sensory responses to others, to oneself and to things. Productiveness is man's ability to use his powers and to realize the potentialities inherent him.«

Only »productive orientation« offers a way out for man from his fate of loneliness and alienation.



»Productive orientations« in work set impulses to freedom

Work in its essence is an active relation of humans to nature. In today's work environment, this nature of work has changed. Division of labor and the development of private property mean that workers can no longer fully experience their work as their own creation. Their work appears to themselves as something alien. Fromm understands our modern working culture, especially in large industrial organizations, as Jaeggi does, as an alienated working culture.

In *Beyond the Chains of Illusions* Fromm (1962a, p. 128) explicates that the individual usually »does not permit himself to be aware of thoughts or feelings which are incompatible with the patterns of his culture, and hence he is forced to repress them,« however, »the unconscious always represents the whole man.« In every culture, even in alienated working culture, man has all possibilities in himself. Man has in every culture the »capacity for reason, for love, for justice« (ibid.). When a person works in alienated conditions, there are »contradictions between the need for the full development of man and the given social structure« (ibid., p. 133). Such contradictions can be expressed as repression as well as possible freedom. Such contradictions indicate the effects of exploitation and ideology. However, these contradictions can bring about an impulse of freedom as represented by the »productive orientation.« Workers in an alienated employment often find their own strategies to enforce their »productive orientation« for themselves. Such »productive orientation« in alienated work is often kept a secret; such »productive orientation« in the work should not be exploited.

With the alienation in the »non-productive character orientations,« one can understand in which way one can relate to his environment in a »relationship of nonrelatedness,« as suggested by Rahel Jaeggi. With Erich Fromm one can understand how »productive orientation« shows in an alienated working culture. I understand these »productive« and »non-productive orientations« as ideal-typical terms, which Erich Fromm differentiates in case studies, such as in his analysis of the watchcase factory called Boimondau. Similarly, one can see how »productive orientation« can be played out in group discussions, as I will discuss later.

Boimondau—The Sane Society

Fromm was very keen in searching for examples of the »productive orientation« in work. He found the study called *All Things Common* by Claire Huchet-Bishop (1950). Bishop was a writer and she was interested in the communitarian



movement of France. In her work, *All Things Common*, she provides examples of »Communities of Work« that were owned by workers. The »Communities of Work« Fromm refers to was called Boimondau. Boimondau manufactured watchcases. Bishop visited Boimondau twice. The first time in 1946 shortly after World War II. The second time in 1950. During her visit in 1946 she noted (Huchet-Bishop 1950, p. 1):

»It was just a factory courtyard, a few low buildings around a rather muddy square. A small factory, I thought, like many others in France. [...] The watchcase factory I was about to visit was one of the largest, since it had 133 workers.«

Boimondau, in 1946, was not a fancy place. It was basic; the place was developing. But as you can see from the following statement of Bishop, workers seemed to be happy with their work in Boimondau:

»I waited in an unassuming office [...]. Outside there was the busy humming of machines. Men and women came in and out the office. They looked busy, carefree and free. [...] Apparently it was quitting time; but no one was leaving. The cleaning woman who came in looked as if she owned the place, in the sense that a housewife owns her home. She began tidying up the office as if she were tidying up her home. Then a sort of committee took charge of me. ›Too late‹ they said, with a smile, ›you won't see the machines running.‹ From the way they said this, I could see that they liked machines and were proud of their own.« (Ibid., p. 2.)

Boimondau was established in 1941 by Marcel Barbu. Marcel Barbu was a watchcase craftworker. He had an idea of establishing a factory »in which the distinction between employer and employee shall be abolished« (ibid., p. 186). He went to the streets and asked workers to join him, buy a ground and a fabric and start working together. He would show them his craftsmanship. They started living together on the same ground and developed their fabric together. Their aim was not to get rich together, »but to liberate oneself more and more and together, in order to liberate others« (ibid., p. 190). They developed a variety of rules for living together in a good democratic way. Those rules touched all kinds of social togetherness such as working ethics, religion, neighborhood work and good salaries. Every question that arose of a good social experience was discussed democratically within the group. Their goal was to »make watchcases in order to make men« (ibid., p. 186). That is, men



who are free and creative. »Companions should remember the Community as a place where they were happy« (ibid., p. 189).

In 1950, when Bishop visited Boimondau a second time it gave her the following impression:

»It has grown materially, even in its outward appearance. Gone the muddy yard and the makeshift door. A beautifully designed doorway, a paved courtyard, an assembly hall, new buildings, new machines, music in the workshops to relieve the monotony of tasks [...]. A restaurant where meals are excellent and abundant, and where you can read the newspaper of your choice while sipping your coffee [...]. Medical service, library [...].« (Huchet-Bishop 1950, p. 191.)

In that time Boimondau made a market share of 20 percent of the French watchcase production. But the most impressing for Bishop was how the fabric had handled the severe French crisis of 1948 in which a lot of the regular French watchcase factories had to shut down their production. In this time Boimondau workers decided to »work for nothing« in Boimondau:

»How could they live? The woman took work outside to feed the family [...]. Everyone worked to the maximum and with a will to save the Community. All together, they did save Boimondau, without any outside help, and without selling one machine or one ounce of raw material. And all the 140 Companions [...] where still there when they finally emerged from the struggle.« (Ibid., p. 185.)

The workers saved Boimondau with their »moral capital and their work« (ibid., p. 187) It seems that Boimondau, as an example of a »Community of Work,« was functioning well. In 1950 Boimondau had already financially helped four other Communities to get started and it had also »given a friendly financial push to ten Communities at times when they were stuck« (ibid., p. 198).

Informal Communities of Work

In the Community of Work, as Fromm describes it with Boimondau, the »productive orientation« is institutionalized. It is formally organized. Also, in today's industrial companies there is something like a formal and an informal »productive orientation.« In a group discussion, Thomas Leithäuser organized with automobile workers on the assembly line, and there was a lot of discus-



sion about such concrete forms of human relationships at work, which one can consider a Frommian phenomenon of resistance to the alienation of the assembly line work. In these concrete human relationships assembly line work shows »productive orientation.« At first it may seem paradoxical that assembly line work can have forms of »productive orientation.« I understand it here as an attempt to cope with the physical effort, plague and stress in the monotony of a timed work with the assembly line.

The first text passage from the group discussion organized within a project titled »Which moral values influence my thoughts and actions in everyday life and at work?« deals with solidarity within the teamwork of the automobile workers. A key sentence, in which the »productive orientation« of assembly line work shows, is: »We are lucky, we really are a team.«

»We are lucky, we really are a team«

The experience shown in this key sentence of the group discussion is further explained by the assembly line workers:

»You are rushed from every side, whether it is your master, whether it is at home, whether it is the school, the tax office or the authority or something! No matter what, you're just rushed! Then you bring this with you, whether home or to the company. We are lucky we really are a team, which has been together for a long time that we also support each other at work. If one is just living in divorce, then she can really cry out in our team. In the team we have the opportunity to talk about our problems, whether it is during the break or when working side by side, we have the chance to communicate with each other. But otherwise, outside—socially—not.«

The technical side of the work can be massively alienating as in the case of assembly line work, but one can come to terms with it and find comfort in the social contexts in which they are integrated through the work. The workers, in the group discussion, are always oppressed; they feel constantly rushed in their lives, whether at work by their master, by institutions such as schools of their children, the tax offices, which asks for evidence for the taxes paid, or from the authority from which one may expect child support. Everywhere one has to provide services, whether it be physical or mental. Everyday life is like an assembly line that needs to be kept running that should not come to a halt under any circumstances. The worker is kept in constant anxiety, what if a



document is missing to prove that one is in need? Will the status of neediness then be lost? What if a proof for the tax cannot be provided in time, then one does not get the additional payment? The rhythm of life is inexorable and requires constant mindfulness, which can be exhausting. Compared to the daily struggles of life, the work on the assembly line is still the most manageable. On the assembly line, one can share one's worries with one's colleagues, who have quite similar life situations to deal with, and get emotional support from them. One can share one's worries, for instance, what should happen if children, spouses or relatives do not work the way the strict daily routine demands. What if there is a parent talk at school or a meeting with a divorce lawyer, but there is no time for it? During these unpredictable circumstances the assembly line workers can be loyal in their support for each other. It poses no further challenges than to be kept running. For the participants in the group discussion, the place that seems »social« to them is not the »outside,« the world outside the factory. It seems that the automobile workers within the factory, within their work, are more familiar with one another's lives inside the factory than the often unpredictable life outside the factory. On the assembly line or during the break time they can »really cry out,« they can organize themselves; they can support each other in solidarity. They know and understand one another's problems, so their individual problems may seem less burdensome. Their workplace becomes a place of communication and solidarity about the hardships of life.

»I'm lucky, I see the finished product«

Not only in the social side of work can people in alienated employment relationships experience a mitigation of alienation. The involvement in the work process itself, as a feeling of being involved or having an overview of the entire work process, mitigates the alienation in the assembly line work. In another example from the group discussion, the assembly line workers reported of such experiences in the work:

»I am lucky, I see the finished product, I am now in quality assurance and I take off the finished vehicle. That was luck. Right at the beginning of my work here in the factory eight years ago, I landed on this workstation. I'm lucky because I have an overview of how to work. I even jumped around. I was a jumper. I helped out at the assembly line if someone was missing there. We had an occupancy rate of over 94 % every 67 seconds. This is awesome!«



For the worker, it is fortunate that she can see the finished product, the car she was involved in creating. The worker does not seem insignificant, as a small screw in the transmission. She belongs to the transmission; she can overlook the entire transmission. She knows what she does her job for. She knows if she joins in, then the car can be made quickly. She works in a productive rhythm. She and her colleagues manage »an occupancy rate of over 94 % every 67 seconds.« On good days they play together, they are like a good piece of music. Then the work is easy. Then the work is fun, and she feels great happiness at work. Unmistakable here is also a pride in working, which refers not only to the workplace and an acceptable work for them, but also to the whole product in whose production they were involved. The workers feel that they are an important part of making the car. This pride is directed against and mitigates the alienating experience of the assembly line work. Assembly line work is actually not a heaven on earth, but its consequences and experiences can be mitigated by the productive orientation in the work.

The motives and the productive orientations, as expressed in the group discussion, are widespread, as the works of Marie Jahoda, Konrad Thomas, Philippe Bernoux, Fritz Böhle, Thomas Leithäuser, Birgit Volmerg and Eva Senghaas-Knobloch show. Such productive motives and orientations that emerge in all industrial work are a resistance to the alienated organization of labor that turns people into things and make the world of work a »relation of unrelatedness.« Such motives and productive orientations can be found as the basis of Boimondau and similar experiments.

The way out of alienation, as the way of »freedom to«

Today there is much criticism on such projects as Fromm had in mind as places of development and promotion of »productive orientation.« With the example of Boimondau, Fromm shows democratic ways of working together. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941a, p. 270) he argues:

»The victory of freedom is possible only if democracy develops into a society in which the individual, his growth and happiness, is the aim and purpose of culture, in which life does not need any justification in success or anything else.«

Fromm was committed to a social transformation and forms of peaceful living together. He criticizes the criticism that such ideas are repeatedly brought against. Fromm insists in *The Sane Society* (1955a, p. 321) that the



»the glib condescension implying the futility and lack of realism of all these experiments is not any more reasonable than was the first popular reaction to the possibilities of railroad and later of aeroplane travel. It is essentially a symptom of the laziness of the mind and then inherent conviction that what has not been cannot be and will not be.«

The »productive orientation,« as Fromm has worked out socio-psychologically on the background of his Marx-oriented alienation theory, shows the way to recognize alienation phenomena, and to master it in solidarity.

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Empirical Study

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