



Erich Fromm and the Culture of Contemporary Capitalism

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Abstract: In the first part, the article reconstructs, through the idea of »pathology of normalcy,« Fromm's critique of the cultural foundations of contemporary capitalism. In the second part, it is carried forward through the concepts of »social character« and «alienation,« in order to understand how the late twentieth-century capitalism deepens an anti-humanist culture as never before.

Finally, in the conclusion, it seeks to demonstrate how Fromm anticipates some essential features of the critique of capitalist culture, later analyzed by critics of the »new« capitalism, such as Axel Honneth, Richard Sennett and Boltanski & Chiapello.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, pathology of normalcy, social character, alienation, capitalism.

It is doubtless that Erich Fromm is one of the most important social theorists of modernity. In this text, I would like to explore some aspects of his theoretical thinking aiming to demonstrate its importance in the constitution of a critique of the culture of contemporary capitalism. I will especially refer to his book *The Sane Society* (1955a), which is one of his main works. In his work, Fromm is willing to understand the predominant existential *malaise* in modernity, orienting his analytical scope to its political consequences (cf. the analysis of Fromm by Funk 1982).

The starting point for the discussion is that he baptized this project as a »humanistic psychoanalysis« (Fromm 1955a, p. 12). The main argument is

»that basic passions of man are not rooted in instinctual necessities, but in specific conditions of the human existence, in the need to find



a new relation between man and nature after having losing the primal relation, which was typical for pre-human stage« (ibid.).

This statement has a take on the Freudian theory which allows Fromm a double hermeneutical analysis: he »culturalizes« the basic passions of humanity and suggests that they can change according to a historical epoch, its economic and social context. In the first part of this theoretical analysis, he abandons the Freudian perspective in which our profound and deep passions are explained by our instinctual needs. In the second, he identifies the »specific conditions of human existence« as a base on which the content of our desires will emerge.

In this sense, I would like to propose a theoretical exercise through which this analytical stance of our human and cultural condition is going to be utilized to shed light onto the singularity of the behavior and the passions determined by the specific content of the culture of contemporary capitalism. Fromm's work reveals its relevance, amongst other good reasons, because it is able to grasp that the main pathology of our time is not individualized in people which do not suit the standards of the good behavior defined by the culture of meritocracy and success, but in a collective and objective pathology shared, in some extent, by each one of us. Especially in *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm seeks to go beyond his diagnoses. He sketches concrete suggestions for the functioning of a »sane society.« Fromm was convinced that »progress« can only occur when *simultaneous* changes in the economic, sociopolitical and cultural spheres are operated (Fromm 1955a, p. 2).

I will divide the text into two parts. Firstly, it will be important to understand what Fromm means by »pathology of normalcy.« Hereafter we will focus primarily on the rapport between social character and alienation. Finally, we will sketch a conclusion, which draws back on the affinity between Fromm's diagnosis and what contemporary authors like Richard Sennett and Axel Honneth call »new capitalism.«

The pathology of normalcy in the contemporary capitalist culture

It is not arbitrary that in *The Sane Society* Fromm begins his analysis with the fundamental question: Are we mentally sane? Fromm initiates his book delineating a general framework about contradictions in the political, economic and social cultural life. In the political field, we mostly admire statesmen for avoiding war without recognizing that they commonly are responsible for it. In the economic affairs, we restrict our agricultural productivity, for example, aiming to stabilize the market, although millions of people starve. The literacy



rates increased considerably, and also our access to the media and sources of information (Fromm 1955a, p. 19).

Confronted with this paradox, Fromm begins to structure his critique on a significant portion of the psychoanalytical theory and psychiatry, which refuses to admit that the whole society lacks mental sanity. His basic point of view identifies the problem of mental sanity in a society that cannot be reduced to the number of »deviant« individuals or »misfits,« but is rooted in the pathological culture. In other words, Fromm's basic theoretical concern centers itself not on the individual pathology, but on the »pathology of normalcy,« and specifically its background of the Western culture (Fromm 1955a, p. 19).

Fromm considers the assumption, according to which, in the present society, the high suicide rates directly reflect a lack of stability and mental sanity. It is clear that this circumstance is not the result of material poverty, considering that the poorest countries present the lowest suicide rates, according to the data in 1950s. He also notices that increasing economic prosperity in Europe was accompanied by the rise of suicide rates. Fromm was also convinced that alcoholism was a symptom of mental and emotional instability and knew intuitively that the causes were rooted in essential traits of the capitalist culture (ibid., p. 70: 24).

Having once posed these questions, the author inquires: Can a society be sick? Taking this on, he tries to develop the idea of pathology of normalcy. Fromm positions himself against the dominant relativism of his generation. He alludes to the position of the majority of the sociologists who believe that society is normal in its functioning and that pathology can only be defined as the lacking of adjustment of the individual to the norms and the dominant lifestyle of the society (Fromm 1955a, p. 26). On the contrary, in his perspective, to talk about a »sane society« implies a completely different premise in comparison to sociological relativism. This only makes sense when we admit the existence of a society which *is not sane*. This presupposition implies the existence of a universal sane criterion for the whole of humanity. Only this criterion will enable the correct judgment of the level of mental sanity for each society. This would constitute the basic stance of his »normative humanism« (ibid.).

The humanity develops its potentiality, transforming it according to its own possibilities. He underlines that this stance is neither biological nor sociological, but transcends this dichotomy with the supposition that the basic human tendencies and passions are an outcome of the »total existence« of humanity. Some of them lead us to health and happiness, others to illness and unhappiness (ibid., p. 28)

Fromm identifies an important difference between individual and social mental disease. He suggests the distinction between the concepts of »defect«



and »neurosis« (ibid., p. 29). This leads us to a deeper reasoning about the idea of freedom. In Fromm's point of view, if a person fails to achieve freedom, spontaneity and genuine expression of the »I,« he or she can be considered as a bearer of serious defects, once he or she recognizes that freedom and spontaneity are goals to be achieved. If this goal is not achieved by the majority of the individuals in a given society, we stand before a phenomenon that can be defined as »a socially patterned defect« (ibid.). Someone may have lost some of their authentic feeling for happiness and their human fullness, as to be compensated by the safety of being in harmony with the rest of humanity, at least under the known way. In reality, even the defect may be considered a virtue by one's culture, providing a sense of success (ibid.).

The social defect patterned by the contemporary capitalist culture leads us to the condition of creatures which act and feel in a robotized manner, which never experience anything as authentically theirs, and which sense their »I« entirely in the way they supposedly think it is. As Fromm puts it, the artificial smile substituted the authentic one, blabbering substituted the communicative seminar and a deaf despair substituted the authentic suffering. In fact, for the majority of individuals, contemporary culture enables them »to live with a defect without becoming ill« (ibid., p. 30). Everything seems to work so that each culture provides the remedy against the externalization of manifested neurotic symptoms, as a result of self-fabricated defect.

At this stage, we begin to understand what a significant portion of the sociologists defined as »**deviance**.« In Fromm's perspective, the model provided by contemporary culture does not operate in benefit of a minority. Here, he means people, whose individual »defect« is more serious than the average, so that the remedies offered by the cultural industry do not suffice to avoid the burst of a manifest illness. (Fromm alludes to individuals who are highly motivated by the pursuit of power and fame). On the other hand, there are those whose character structure and internal conflicts differ from the majority in a way that the effective antidotes cause no positive effects. The German thinker situates this group of people as having more integrity and sensibility than the average. Precisely for this reason, they refuse to accept the »cultural opiate« whilst simultaneously, they do not find themselves sufficiently strong and sane enough to live well »against the stream« (Fromm 1955a, p. 31).

Briefly, Fromm defines this investigation explicitly leaning on his mentor—Freud—as the » *research into the pathology of civilized communities*« (ibid., p. 34). He addresses the idea that a sane society must be one, which corresponds to the needs of humanity, even considering that most pathological desires may be subjectively felt as something that someone needs the most. Fromm wants to draw our attention to the fact that societies must correspond



to what *objectively* constitutes humans needs, so that they can be determined by the inquiry on the »cultural« human nature. In the next section, we will take a step further with the appreciation of the concepts of social character and alienation as well as the identification of how the human condition is determined by 20th century capitalism in order to understand how it presents, most likely, the best example of »pathology of normalcy.«

Social character and alienation in the capitalist society

Social character and alienation are two key concepts that will guide the reconstruction of Erich Fromm's line of thought in this section. This appreciation will lead to an understanding of the insufficiency of the human experience within contemporary capitalist culture. Fromm believed that it would be necessary to achieve the idea of the »personality of the average man,« who lives and works subject to this culture. Even if incomplete and uncertain, this would be the correct path to the creation of the concept of »social character.« With this theory, Fromm wants to provide an account of »*the nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture*« which differs from the individual character, distinct to each person (Fromm 1955a, p. 86).

Fromm believed that members of the same society, the same social class and *status* group necessarily need to behave in such a manner that allows them to act in the required way by the collective. In fact, the function of the social character consists exactly in shaping the members' energies in a way that their actions and decisions are not questioned on a conscious level. There is no decision about whether to follow a rule or not, but only the desire to behave according the demanded standard, taking pleasure in proceeding in the culturally required way. Briefly, the function of social character is »*to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society*« (ibid., p. 87). As an example, Fromm argues that modern industrial society would not have achieved its goals, if it had not regimented the energy of free individuals willing to work with intensity never seen (ibid., p. 88).

Once more, we could consider the structure of society and the function of the individual in this culture as the determining content of the social character. In this context, Fromm considered the family as a kind of »*psychic agency of society*,« that is, an organization that aims to transmit the requirements of society to the growing child (ibid., p. 89). Considering that the character of most parents is an expression of the social character, the essential qualities of the »socially desirable character structure« are transmitted to the child (ibid.,



p. 90). Under such a circumstance, the educative methods can only acquire relevance as a transmission mechanism, and become correctly understood, if we above all link them to which types of personality are desirable and needed in a specific culture.

In an effort to understand exactly how the capitalist culture molded the social character of the 20th century, we need firstly to clarify the configuration of capitalism in the 19th century, according to Fromm. From his standpoint, it is extremely important to notice the role of modern market economy as »the central mechanism of distributing the social product« (Fromm 1955a, p. 94). For this reason this institution is the basis for the formation of human interactions in the capitalist society. Under this notion, the market is a vehicle of distribution, which automatically regulates itself, and which makes the division of social production unnecessary. This eliminates the constant urge to use force in society. The economic preservation of the market relies on the competition of individuals who want to sell their commodities as well as their labor force or their services on the labor market. The conclusion is tragic: in this struggle for success, the social and moral rules of human society crumbled, considering that the relevance of life is to be in the first position of a competitive race (ibid., p. 95). In this path, Fromm defines precisely the moral situation of capitalist society of the 19th century:

»What characterizes income distribution in Capitalism is the lack of balanced proportion between an individual's effort and work and the social recognition accorded them financial compensation. This disproportion would, in a poorer society than ours, result in greater extremes of luxury and poverty than our standards of morals would tolerate. I am not stressing, however, the material effects of this disproportion, but its moral and psychological effects. One lies in the under evaluation of work, of human effort and skill. The other lies in the fact that as long as my gain is limited by the effort I make, my desire is limited. If, on the other hand, my income is not in proportion to my effort, there are no limitations to my desires, since their fulfillment is a matter of opportunities offered by certain market situations, and not dependent on my own capacities« (Ibid., p. 97).

In an almost prophetic tone, Fromm anticipates the degrading moral condition that prevails nowadays, especially in the periphery of capitalism, like in Brazil. Besides that, he explains that the pleasure of property, independently of production and the search for profit, is one of the key aspects of the character of the middle and upper middle classes. The social character of the 19th century



is an assemblage between rational and irrational authority. It is an essentially hierarchical character, although not living in a feudal society, which was based on the divine law and tradition. Hierarchy sets itself by the possession of capital. Fromm's refined interpretation of the conflict between capital and labor lies on an even more important level than the struggle between classes and for the participation of the social production. It is the conflict between principles of valuation, that is, *»between the world of things, and their amassment, and the world of life and its productivity«* (Fromm 1955a, p. 101).

I will now keep on following Fromm's path by reconstructing the main changes on the moral and psychological level, in the capitalist society of the 20th century, as well as their effects on the individual experience (cf. Kühn 2017). In the 20th century, the most flagrant change is technical. The inventions of the steam machine, the combustion engine, electricity as well as nuclear energy were landmarks. Alongside these, the relevance of the internal market also increased. Every economic organization relies on the principle of mass production and consumption. This process leads to what Fromm calls the *»miracle of production«* and the *»miracle of consumption.«* Now, we are human beings who control stronger forces never seen, which are more powerful than nature ever offered. Theoretically, there are no traditional barriers, which restricted someone to buy what he or she wanted. Everything is reachable, can be bought and consumed.

Faced by this alarming picture, Fromm poses a fundamental question: what type of people does the actual society need? What is the adequate social character of the 20th century? His answer suggests a deep reinterpretation of the capitalist culture. Now, the capitalism needs people who cooperate in large groups without greater resistance, who consume more and more, and whose tastes are standardized, predictable and easily influenced. It also requires that individuals feel free and independent, that they do not perceive their subjection to any authority, principle or consciousness, but desire to be commanded or simply to do what is expected, longing to adapt without adding any tensions to the social order (Fromm 1955a, p. 115)

Fromm adds a psychological dimension to Marx's concept of alienation, which is the guideline to his analysis. He initiates by pointing out two main characteristics of capitalism: quantification and abstraction. The transformation of *»concrete«* values into *»abstract«* developed itself beyond the mere economic incidents in the production system. The modern business man deals not only with millions of dollars, but also with millions of clients, thousands of shareholders, thousands of workers and employees in the office. All these people are a piece of the gigantic machine, which must be controlled. Its effects must also be calculated. Under such circumstances, each person is represented



by an abstract entity, cipher, and on such a database, economic risks and incidents can be calculated, tendencies can be predicted and decisions are made (ibid., p. 116).

In this scenario, the separation between proprietors and directors of big corporations, which already operated in the 19th century, becomes intensified. Workers are hired by institutions, in which directors are impersonal parts of the corporation and have no personal contact with those who hire them. The only one in contact with the product of a corporation (or a section) in its totality is the director. Nevertheless, the director's point of view confirms the product as an abstraction and its essence is its exchange value (ibid., p. 117). In this sense, the contemporary culture privileged its reference almost exclusively to the abstract qualities of people and things. People are now evaluated as incarnations of a quantitative exchange value. This abstraction process has deep roots in the origins of modern age, that is, the dissolution of a qualitative framework linked to the process of life.

Until the end of the 19th century, nature and society still preserved their concrete and precise character. The natural and social worlds were manageable, and had defined contours. On the other hand, the proportions with which we deal today are ciphers and abstractions. They stand beyond the limits of concrete experience. There is neither a manageable nor an observable structure of reference that is properly adaptable to human dimensions. While our eyes and ears receive impressions, which are based on human dimensions, our concept of the world has lost this particular quality and no longer corresponds to our own human dimensions. Science, politics and business lost all their humanly understandable foundations and proportions. For the reason nothing is concrete anymore, anything is possible, factually and morally. Indeed humanity was ripped off its defined position where it can manage and dominate its own life. We are now rapidly dragged by forces, which we created (Fromm 1955a, p. 124).

This explanation paves our way to understanding Fromm's concept of alienation. It alludes to the central question about the profound effects of contemporary capitalism on the personality. He understands alienation as an experience modus in which the individual feels as a stranger, alienated from himself or herself. The person does not feel as the center of its own world, creator of its own actions. The individual obeys and even adores his or her own masters. The alienated person is not in touch with the self and with other people (ibid., p. 124). The person mainly motivated by its thrust of power and money does not understand his or her human greatness and limitations, but becomes a slave of an inner partial impulse, which projects on external objectives. In Fromm's standpoint the common quality of various human phenomena—like the adoration of idols, the idolatry of God, adoration of a politician, of the estate, or



the cult of the exteriorization of irrational passions—is the phenomenon of alienation (*ibid.*, p. 127).

In such a framework, Fromm attributes an interesting role to the corporate directors in the alienation process of contemporary capitalist culture. It is true that they administrate the whole, not the part, but they are also alienated from their product as something concrete and useful. Their task consists of the profitable allocation of the capital invested by the shareholders. It is symptomatic that executives, who manage people and sales, acquire an increasingly important role in capitalism¹. Managers, and also workers, deal with gigantic impersonal procedures: the giant competitive corporation, the humongous internal and world market, the giant consumer public, which needs to be incited and administrated, giant unions, with a giant government. All those giants are alive and determine the role of the executives in the corporation (*ibid.*, p. 129).

It is no coincidence that Erich Fromm identified the centrality of the director's role in the reproduction of the alienated capitalist culture. The manager's role illuminates one of the most significant phenomena of this culture, that is, the process of bureaucratization. Both big business and the government operate through a bureaucracy. Bureaucrats are the specialists in administrating things and people. Due to the large scale of the organization to be administrated and its consequent abstraction, the interaction between bureaucrats and their public is totally alienated. This explains how a manager can be so cold hearted in dismissing, at once, millions of people with just a single signature. Subjected to the administration, the individual becomes objectified. Its management involves neither love nor hate; it is impersonal. Managers and bureaucrats must not feel anything for their professional activity; they must manipulate the people as if they were ciphers and objects. They are an essential component of the corporation: without them it would collapse, because nobody would know the secret that keeps it operating (*ibid.*, p. 129).

The validity of this analysis is confirmed by the fact that, in the 20th century, the relevance of big businesses became increasingly bigger in its normative significance to our culture. At this stage, Erich Fromm recurs to Peter Drucker's writings, the well-known corporate guru. For the latter, corporations grow as determining institutions of lives, even for those who do not directly participate of their activities (Fromm 1955a, p. 131). As a consequence, the owners of these big corporations entertain an alienated relationship with them. Their property consists in a sheet of paper, which represents a certain monetary quantity. They are not at all impelled to maintain a concrete relationship with them.

1 I am currently developing an empirical research with executives in Brazil that confirms Erich Fromm's arguments.



The example of corporate managers permits us to understand some of the basic aspects of Fromm's basic theses. He highlights that, in contrast to the majority of the societies in which social rules are based on tradition and political power, capitalism does not make its rules explicit. Capitalist societies root their principles on the fact that the struggle of each individual for their own interests on the market will result in the common good, and the consequence will be order and not anarchy. This alienating process leads to the loss of general social bonds, which characterized medieval and pre-capitalist societies (ibid., p. 141).

The »alienated personality,« which puts itself on sale in the market of personalities, must necessarily lose a good deal of the sense of dignity that was so characteristic in pre-capitalist cultures. It ends by losing of all »sense of self, of himself as a unique and induplicable entity.« The feeling of being one's self must be aroused by being the subject of one's own experience as well as one's own judgments, thoughts, feelings, decisions and actions. It presupposes that the experience is exclusively individual and not alienated. So long things do not possess a self. »Things have no self and men who have become things can have no self« (Fromm 1955a, p. 144).

To conclude, Fromm articulates the relationship between the alienated social character, fabricated by the capitalist culture, and problems of meritocracy and suicide. For him, the modern individual faces a new challenge: to ponder on which life is worth living. As an outcome, it deals with the possibility that life might be a failure or a success. Those ideas base themselves on a concept of life as an enterprise, which must enable the accumulation of some profit. In this sense, life is thought to be the bankruptcy of a business, in which losses exceed the gains (ibid., p. 150). The interpretation of life as commercial enterprise is one of the pillars of the increasing suicide rates in contemporary Western societies.

Conclusion

Under the influence of contemporary authors like Axel Honneth (2015), Boltanski & Chiapello (2009) and Richard Sennett (2006), we can notice the value and significance of Erich Fromm's writings. These authors belong to a previous generation that tried to explain the main shifts of capitalism since the 1970's. They basically elected normative and cultural factors. A good portion of what Erich Fromm and other immensely significant sociologists like Wright Mills (1951) remarked was updated by this new generation.

For example, the idea of alienated social character, as described above, can be an important instrument to analyze the »flexible capitalism« described by



Richard Sennett (2006) as well as the »third spirit of capitalism« by Boltanski & Chiapello (2009), and the »new capitalism« highlighted by Sennett (2006) and Honneth (2015). In reality, all these perspectives are unfolding the cultural aspects of capitalism, which are, in great deal, seen in Fromm's writings. By the way, the idea of an alienated social character serves as a fundamental base for the comprehension of a certain »corporate habitus,« set as a norm and as an expectation nowadays in big corporations.²

Contrary to all promise of happiness, recognition and plenitude in the present corporate world, which presents itself as a moral avant-garde of the capitalist culture, the corporate *habitus* suggests exactly what was described by Fromm: total sacrifice to the labor system, incessant search and sublimation of all needs of consumption. It is also worth mentioning the loss of idle time and of the meaning of life. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2009) put it, the work executed by the main managers and executives, that is, the conscious making and reproduction of a class domination, which is even more invisible and oblique than in previous periods, is demonstrated in the comparison between the decades 1960s and the 1990s.

We may conclude that Erich Fromm is responsible for a deep critique on the capitalist culture, an understanding of it as the production of human suffering shaped by a deep malaise. The contributions of the theorists of the »new capitalism« like Richard Sennett (2006), Boltanski and Chiapello (2009) and Axel Honneth (2015) resemble those made by Fromm a lot. The main example in Sennett's analysis is the farce of teamwork as well as the »new spirit of capitalism,« which corresponds to the effort in covering social domination. Axel Honneth (2015) tried to show how the present »market morality,« through pathological forms of interaction, do not allow us to reach social freedom, which is seen as an inescapable need of modern individuals. In an unconscious or conscious manner, these authors advance the inestimable contribution of Erich Fromm's critique in an effort to enhance the critical capacity of our own experience beyond the imprisonment of alienation.

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2 I am developing the idea of corporate *habitus* based on the empirical research mentioned above, with various managers of various levels in Brazil. A relevant aspect of this *habitus* corresponds to the lifestyle and the »abilities« found in the middle classes and the elites, like the ability to »give orders« and to be a »leader.«



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