



## Erich Fromm and American Individualism

Tomohiro Uozumi



**Abstract:** This paper shows that Fromm's discussion is curiously connected to the tradition of American individualism. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm suggests that authoritarianism derives from aloneness as a result of modern individualism and entrusts his hope in democracy for spontaneous activity and solidarity. But why is spontaneous activity and solidarity hopeful in democracy? The interesting thing is, this conclusion

is close to the discussion of Alexis de Tocqueville, who also regarded spontaneous relationships as an important foundation of democracy. Based on Tocqueville's insight, there is a tradition in sociology that argues for the relationship between democracy and individualism, such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* and Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*. This paper attempts to show how Fromm was influenced by the tradition of American individualism and discusses Fromm's impact on later American individualism studies.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, spontaneous activity, solidarity, democracy, Individualism, social character.

This short paper is part of my research project on the importance of »American individualism« in understanding Erich Fromm's thoughts, which are compatible with and influenced by American individualist thought. This paper comprises two parts: part one briefly introduces the tradition of American individualism, and part two discusses how Fromm's thoughts are related with the tradition and considers in what way Fromm's thoughts were influential.

Although Fromm's thoughts have been studied in many aspects, the examination of their relationship with American sociology or social thoughts is still



limited to some works of Neil McLaughlin<sup>1</sup>. McLaughlin (1998) reveals that Fromm was once very influential, however, today, he is a »forgotten intellectual.« Nevertheless, McLaughlin agrees that Fromm's social character theory has been inherited by some sociologists (McLaughlin 2001).

## What is American individualism?

American individualism is a tradition of thought, commonly seen in the works of American sociologists such as David Riesman (Riesman et al. 1950), Robert Bellah (Bellah et al. 1985), and Robert Putnam (Putnam 2001)<sup>2</sup>. These sociologists have examined and considered the changing social character or the cultural characteristics of American society based on insights from Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville 2000) illustrates the cultural climate of the American society where people constantly join together in groups, eager to establish voluntary associations. He regards this cultural character, spontaneous and active relationships between people, as an important basis for supporting democracy. Based on this insight, the abovementioned sociologists have discussed the changing character of American society. However, these researchers, particularly Riesman and Bellah, have further focused on the level of social character, expressed in many ways, such as ethos, mores, habits of the heart, or social character<sup>3</sup>.

In *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman directly refers to the influence of Fromm's theory and the concept of the »other-directed character« and analyzes the transition of American society's social character from an inner-directed character to other-directed character. The concept of the »other-directed character;« the key term in his analysis, is derived from Fromm's concept of the »marketing orientation« (Riesman et al. 1950, p. 23) and his basic methodology is based on Fromm's social character theory (Riesman et al. 1950, p. vi).

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah points out the changes in American cultural character. According to him, the character of American individualism has changed from the tradition of republican individualism, observed by Tocqueville, to that of utilitarian's individualism, by which people are egoistic and

- 
- 1 Some works like Wilde (2004), Durkin (2014) also discuss this question to some extent but it is not a main theme and their reference is limited.
  - 2 Elliott and Lemart (2004) refer to this American tradition of thought as »isolated individualism.«
  - 3 Putnam (2000) shares the theme of Individualism but his research method is based on statistical analysis of social capital and does not directly discuss social character.



withdraw into their own worlds, with no commitment toward public community (cf. Bellah et al 1985).

Riesman and Bellah share some characteristics. Both have attempted to describe changes in the American society and their discussions have focused on the levels of social character. Therefore, they have attempted to understand the common social characters through conducted active interviews with many people; in reality, Riesman's study became a model for Bellah, who stated that his research method for understanding character and society was inspired by Riesman<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, the aforementioned studies on character and society have been influenced by Fromm's social character theory.

### ***Escape from Freedom and individualism***

In this section, I present the following two reasons that I believe enable Fromm's theory to influence the above mentioned studies: First, Fromm's social character theory provides sociologists a useful methodology to discuss character and society. Second, since Fromm's discussion is parallel to the tradition of American individualism, it is applicable to these sociological studies; this point is discussed further.

In *Escape from Freedom* (1941a, p. 269), Fromm presents the argument of the book as follows:

»The future of democracy depends on the realization of the Individualism that has been the ideological aim of modern thought since Renaissance. The cultural and political crisis of our day is not due to the fact that there is too much individualism but that what we believe to be individualism has become an empty shell.«

Fromm recognizes the problem of democracy as a problem of individualism; his answer to the problems of democracy and authoritarianism is »spontaneous activity« (1941a, p. 259). However, a question to be examined is why is spontaneous activity the answer to the problem of democracy and individualism?

---

4 Additionally, Bellah also refers to Michael Maccoby, who was Fromm's co-worker during his social research in a Mexican village (Bellah et al. 1985, p. xii).



## Spontaneous activity and solidarity

Fromm's discussion of the concept and theory of authoritarian character in 1936 was still clearly under the influence of Freud's ego theory; therefore, in his article, he states that the answer to authoritarianism is the development of the ego or self against the super-ego (1936a, p. 159).

Also in *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) Fromm emphasized the development of ego or self-realization (or positive freedom), but the concept of spontaneous activity was first introduced. What is the meaning of this change? Why is spontaneous activity the answer to democracy?

According to *Escape from Freedom* the problem of authoritarianism is seemingly caused by »aloneness.« In the age of individualism, wherein individuals are free from the primary bonds of society, they must establish secondary bonds and solidarity with other people; spontaneous activity provides an important basis to create solidarity. Furthermore, solidarity based on spontaneous activity between people is considered to be the foundation of democracy in the age of individualism. Therefore, this discussion was based on the premise of human nature that relatedness with others is essential for human existence<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, I do not know whether Fromm was conscious about the tradition of individualism thoughts; perhaps, he did not read Tocqueville's text. Nevertheless, his theory following *Escape from Freedom* is similar to the American tradition of individualism that regards spontaneous relationships between people as the basis for democracy.

## Conclusion

In this short paper, I first introduced the tradition of American individualism and analyzed the works of Riesman and Bellah to elucidate the changing character of American society, in which Fromm's theory of social character plays an important role. Second, I explored why Fromm's theory was useful to these studies on individualism. I examined Fromm's discussion of spontaneous activity, identifying that his perspective on democracy is parallel to the tradition of individualism, which regards spontaneous relationships between people as an important basis for democracy.

---

5 Fromm's later theory of human nature (Fromm 1947a) connects to humanistic ethics in the tradition of Aristotle, Spinoza, and Dewey. These thinkers are in agreement with the thinkers on the topic of autonomy and individualism, listed in Steven Lukes' study on individualism (Lukes 1973).



Therefore, both Fromm's theory of social character and his analysis of democracy are useful for discussing modern individualism. Fromm's thoughts are crucial to and even inherited in American individualism studies. Although Fromm appears to be a »forgotten intellectual,« the topic Fromm has discussed is relevant even today in individualism studies. Further research of individualism studies is necessary to understand the relevance of Fromm's theory.

## References

- Bellah, Robert N., Madsen, Richard, Sullivan, William M., Swidler, Ann, and Tipton, Steven M. (1985): *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley (University of California Press).
- Durkin, Kieran (2014): *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm*, New York (Palgrave).
- Elliott, Anthony, and Charles Lemert (2006): *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*, Abingdon (Routledge).
- Fromm, Erich (1936a): »Studien über Autorität und Familie. Sozialpsychologischer Teil,« in: *Erich Fromm Gesamtausgabe in zwölf Bänden (GA)*, München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt and Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Vol. 1, pp. 139–187.
- (1941a): *Escape from Freedom*, New York (Farrar and Rinehart).
- (1947a): *Man for Himself: an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, New York (Rinehart and Co.).
- Lukes, Steven M. (1973): *Individualism*, Oxford (B. Blackwell).
- McLaughlin, Neil (1998): »How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual: Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm,« in: *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 13, pp. 215–246.
- (2001): »Critical theory meets America: Riesman, Fromm, and 'The Lonely Crowd,« in: *The American Sociologist*, Vol. 32, pp. 5–26.
- Putnam, Robert (2000): *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York (Simon & Schuster).
- Riesman, David, Glazer, Nathan, and Denney, Reuel (1950): *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, New Haven (Yale University Press).
- Tocqueville, Alexis de (2000): *Democracy in America*, Chicago (The University of Chicago Press).
- Wilde, Lawrence (2004): *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*, New York (Palgrave Macmillan).

Copyright 2019 by

**Tomohiro Uozumi**, The University of Tokyo, Sociology Department

E-Mail: t.u.sakana@gmail.com