SEARCHING FOR "THE SANE SOCIETY": ERICH FROMM'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIAL THEORY

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Abstract

More than fifty years after Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society* was first published, it remains an important work, surprisingly contemporary in scope, with particular relevance to scholars working in social theory and media studies. Fromm's primary emphasis is on evaluating the sanity of contemporary western societies, which he suggests often deny its citizens' basic human needs of productive activity, self-actualisation, freedom, and love. He suggests that the mental health of a society cannot be assessed in an abstract manner but must focus on specific economic, social, and political factors at play in any given society and should consider whether these factors contribute to insanity or are conducive to mental stability. Ultimately *The Sane Society* provides a radical critique of democratic capitalism that goes below surface symptoms to get to the root causes of alienation and to suggest ways to transform contemporary societies to further the productive activities of its citizens. Fromm envisions the refashioning of democratic capitalist societies based on the tenants of communitarian socialism, which stresses the organisation of work and social relations between its citizens rather than on issues of ownership.

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Initially heralded as "provocative and brilliant" (Beeley 1956, 172), an "eloquent, powerful and searching" analysis of western society (Schneider 1956, 182), Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society* offered a formidable critique of capitalist democracy that provided a fundamental contribution to the field of social psychology. At the time of its publication in 1955, Fromm was a leading public intellectual in the United States, a social theorist whose studies of the authoritarian personality, historical materialism, and the psychology of fascism "were hotly debated by sociologists, psychologists, and cultural anthropologists alike" (Brennen 1997, 5). He was a passionate social critic who combined psychological insights with social theory; his socialist humanist theoretical framework was informed by his childhood Orthodox Jewish training, and although he rejected organised religion after World War I, an understanding of the Jewish Messianic tradition continued to influence his work (Pietkainer 2004). Fromm earned a doctorate in Sociology from the University of Heidelberg and then trained in Freudian psychoanalysis opening his own psychoanalytic practice at the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute in the late 1920s (Smith 2002). From 1934 to 1939 he served as the head of the social psychology division of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, and in the 1940s he began to focus on conceptualising collective social structures of groups, classes, and societies.

During the post-World War II era, in hundreds of journal articles and more than twenty books, his radical ideas spoke to the middle class who embraced him as a "modern guru" (Coser 1984, 74). Yet, as Pietkainer (2004) explains, by the late 1960s, Fromm's agenda of radical humanism did not resonate with younger intellectuals and academics and they began to reject his theoretical insights. Today, while Fromm's reputation as a revisionist psychoanalyst remains strong, his contributions to social theory are no longer discussed and his work in this area is rarely sited. As a social theorist Fromm may now be seen as a "forgotten intellectual" (McLaughlin 1998); however, it is the contention of this essay that more than fifty years after *The Sane Society* was first published, it remains an important work, surprisingly contemporary in scope, with particular relevance to scholars working in social theory and media studies.

The Sane Society continues Fromm's argument in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) that totalitarian regimes often appeal to modern individuals who crave security, fear freedom, and therefore willingly submit to the demands of a dictatorial leader or state. Fromm explains that within totalitarian regimes citizens' rights are destroyed and they are taught to submit to the will of the ruler or state. Lacking power and feeling insignificant, the "absolutely alienated individual worships at the altar of an idol, and it makes little difference by what names this idol is known: state, class, collective, or what else" (Fromm 1955, 123). While in totalitarian regimes authority is exercised through direct control, fear, and intimidation, in capitalist democracies people "are governed by the fear of the anonymous authority of conformity" (Fromm 1955, 102). They feel secure when they are just like their fellow citizens and conform to the norms of their culture; craving the approval of others, they resist standing out or being different.

Incorporating insights of both Freud and Marx, in *The Sane Society* Fromm details fundamental concepts of humanistic psychoanalysis, which insists that basic human passions are not bound to instinctive needs but rather are rooted in the human need to relate to nature within the "specific conditions of human existence" (1955, viii).

Yet, he faults Freud for his insistence that the requirements of civilization are at odds with human beings' basic sexual instincts, in particular Freud's anthropological view that "competition and mutual hostility are inherent in human nature" (1955, 76). Fromm also takes issue with what he sees as Marx's lack of understanding of human psychological factors, which help to shape human character. He explains that Marx's assumption that the natural goodness of human beings would emerge once they were released from their "crippling economic shackles" is based on the naïve optimism of his era. Marx's insistence in the *Communist Manifesto* that "workers have nothing to lose but their chains" contains, according to Fromm, an important psychological error because: "With their chains they have also to lose all those irrational needs and satisfactions which were originated while they were wearing the chains" (1955, 264). Fromm suggests that while human beings can live under domination, subjugation, and exploitation, that eventually their basic humanity and sanity must deteriorate because of such conditions; he suggests that while on the surface democratic capitalism appears an improvement over totalitarian societies, that as it relates to the sanity of its citizens, that it actually offers just another escape from freedom.

Fromm's primary emphasis in *The Sane Society* is on evaluating the sanity of contemporary western societies, which he suggests often deny its citizens' basic human needs of productive activity, self-actualisation, freedom, and love. His understanding of mental health is based on a normative humanistic framework, which adheres to universal laws and characteristics of human nature and assumes that there are correct and incorrect judgments relating to human existence. Fromm differentiates between individual and societal mental illness suggesting that a person who has failed to attain independence or a genuine sense of self may be said to suffer a "neurosis," while if the majority of a members in a society lack these attributes it should be considered a "socially patterned defect" (1955, 15). Although a given society may be able to accommodate, or may even encourage specific socially patterned defects, he maintains that it is naïve to assume that just because many people share similar beliefs, ideas, feelings, or defects that they are somehow proper or valid; he insists that "consensual validation has no bearing whatsoever on reason or mental health" (1955, 14-15). It is important to note that Fromm's use of terms such as "sane society, "neurosis" and "mental health" are not meant metaphorically; he uses these terms literally, in a medical sense.

For Fromm, mentally healthy people have a strong sense of self and are productive and unalienated; they live by "love, reason and faith" (1955, 204) and respect both their own lives as well as the lives of others. He insists that in contemporary societies it is commonplace to encounter an individual who feels and acts like an automaton, who is incapable of experiencing real emotions, "whose artificial smile has replaced genuine laughter; whose meaningless chatter has replaced communicative speech; whose dulled despair has taken the place of genuine pain" (1955, 16). Far from being considered an individual pathology, he suggests that such symptoms now describe millions of citizens living in democratic capitalist societies, and as a result Fromm wonders if it is possible for a sane society to flourish within the contemporary political, cultural, and environment.

To understand the incidences of mental unbalance in contemporary societies and to support his concerns regarding the sanity of life within democratic capitalism,

in *The Sane Society* Fromm draws on incidents of alcoholism, suicide, and homicide in Europe and the United States. Combining rates of suicide and murder into what he terms "destructive acts" and comparing them with the rates of alcoholism, he shows that the most prosperous, democratic societies have the highest levels of mental illness. While Fromm concedes that the statistics do not prove mental illness, he maintains that at a minimum they raise questions regarding the social and cultural practices in western societies and he suggests that such practices may be harmful to the sanity of its citizens.

Current research supports Fromm's concerns and may be seen to illustrate an ongoing problem of mental illness in the United States: while the combined rate of murder and suicide has remained quite consistent over the past fifty years, the actual rates of murder have risen and suicide rates have declined. Unlike the first half of the twentieth century when information on mental illness was not systematically collected, there is research that now focuses directly on mental illness in the U.S. The American Association for Suicidology (AAS) directly links suicide with mental illness and notes that more than 90 percent of suicide victims have at least one mental disorder (AAS 2006). The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) finds that in any given year, more than 54 million Americans have a mental illness and that depression and anxiety disorders alone affect more than 19 million Americans annually. Approximately 15 percent of U.S. citizens with mental illness also have a substance abuse problem (NMHA 2006). In addition to statistics regarding illicit drug use, information is available on the number of prescription drugs currently used to treat symptoms of mental disorders. A 2005 report by the Department of Health and Human Services compares the number of prescriptions written by U.S. physicians for antidepressants during the years 1995-1996 with those written in 2002-2003. In the 1995-1996 period physicians wrote 14 prescriptions for antidepressants per 100 people while in 2002-2003 they wrote 26.6 prescriptions per 100 people – a near doubling of the number of prescriptions written for antidepressants over a seven year period. Of course this finding does not prove that more Americans are suffering from mental illness; it merely indicates that a larger number of people are being treated chemically for their mental disorders (Health, United States 2005); however it aligns with the NMHA's statistics on mental health and both findings may be seen to raise questions regarding the influence of modern culture on the health of its citizens. Fromm does not use statistics to prove mental illness but draws on this information to go below surface facts to address systemic issues and causes related to mental illness. He suggests that understanding larger issues and attempting to change root causes is fundamental to a truly radical reform agenda. More than fifty years after Fromm first raised these issues, the U.S. press routinely reports on a glut of surface statistics yet few attempts are made to go beyond these numbers in an attempt to answer fundamental systemic questions or to address larger societal issues connected with mental illness.

Fromm suggests that the mental health of a society cannot be assessed in an abstract manner but must focus on specific economic, social, and political factors at play in any given society and should consider whether these factors contribute to insanity or are conducive to mental stability. In this way he suggests that it is possible to understand the "social character" of traits that are deemed desirable and are shared by the majority of members of a culture. The social character shapes

the behaviour of members of a society so that they function purposively within that society and they also find satisfaction in doing so. As Fromm explains: "It is the social character's function to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society" (1955, 79). In comparison with the nineteenth century social character of western societies that he describes as "competitive, hoarding, exploitative, authoritarian, aggressive, individualistic" (1955, 99), Fromm characterises the social character of twentieth century capitalistic democratic societies as embodying a receptive marketing orientation in which individuals experience themselves, in their economic role, as commodities to be sold on the market. As he explains:

> *Instead of competitiveness we find an increasing tendency toward 'teamwork;' instead of a striving for ever-increasing profit, a wish for a steady and secure income; instead of exploitation, a tendency to share and spread wealth, and to manipulate others – and oneself; instead of rational and irrational but overt authority, we find anonymous authority – the authority of public opinion and the market; instead of the individual conscience, the need to adjust and be approved of; instead of the sense of pride and mastery, an ever-increasing though mainly unconscious sense of powerlessness* (Fromm 1955, 99).

In 1955 Fromm suggested that the development of capitalism required co-operative individuals, with standardised desires and tastes that could be easily understood, influenced and manipulated and whose consumption desires were ever-expanding. More than fifty years later, this social character still resonates with the requirements of western capitalist cultures.

In *The Sane Society,* Fromm's analysis of individuals' escape from freedom in contemporary capitalist societies is centered on the concept of alienation. He defines alienation as the process of estrangement, in which people cannot relate to themselves as independent, unique individuals who create their own identities and experiences, but instead see themselves as impoverished things, dependent on outside forces and powers apart from themselves. Fromm details the history of the concept of alienation, discussing the thinking of Old Testament prophets who considered the creation of idols representations of human life in alienated forms, as well as Marx and Hegel's nineteenth century use of the term to represent self-estrangement. While he draws on these earlier understandings of alienation, as a psychoanalyst, Fromm ultimately defines alienation in medical terms and suggests that "the insane person is the absolutely alienated person" (1955, 124) who has lost a sense of self and cannot situate him/herself as the centre of his/her own experiences. Fromm suggests that as people become alienated, they lose their dignity and their understanding of themselves and do not see their experiences as being based on their own decisions, judgments, and actions. Rather than existing as unique productive individuals able to use reason to relate to the world, alienated people crave approval from others and fear being considered different because they see it as a danger that threatens their sense of security. Alienated people lead meaningless lives; they are estranged from themselves, others, and society.

Fromm considers alienation almost complete in modern capitalist societies, and explains that it pervades individuals' consumption habits as well as their relationships to their work, to their communities, to their fellow citizens, and to

themselves. An alienated person lacks a sense of reality regarding "the meaning of life and death, for happiness and suffering, for feeling and serious thought" (1955, 171). In a technological age, machines routinely replace human intelligence and citizens tend to manipulate symbols and other people rather than actively and creatively producing commodities. They are not invested in their work, and find it routine, boring, and dull, which further contributes to a sense of apathy and dissatisfaction with their lives. As Fromm explains, in contemporary society work often can be defined "as the performance of acts which cannot yet be performed by machines" (1955, 180).

Within alienated societies consumption is seen as both an individual's right and duty, creating an "orgy of consumption [that] dominates our leisure hours and fills our dreams of heaven" (Schaar 1961, 196). Individuals are consumption-hungry, receiving pleasure from the purchases they make rather than from the actual use of what they buy. Fromm insists that consumption now dominates and defines the culture of democratic capitalist societies. Citizens consume food, drink, news, and entertainment without any active participation or unifying experiences resulting from the consumption. In addition, a continuous, ever expanding need for consumption is encouraged by "artificially stimulated phantasies" (1955, 134) created by advertising and a variety of other psychological pressures that coax individuals into repeatedly buying as much as they can.

Fromm aligns with other Critical Theorists in his understanding of the abstractification and the commodification of things and relationships within contemporary western societies. He explains that an individual can relate to others or to an object concretely, seeing all its unique attributes and qualities, or a person can relate abstractly, focusing on only those aspects or qualities it has in common with similar objects. Rather than using abstractions only when useful and necessary, Fromm notes that in contemporary societies, everything, even ourselves has become abstractified; when individuals describe their possessions, they focus on their exchange value, rather than their usefulness or beauty. This aspect of alienation invades the interpersonal realm, and peoples' relations with others become that of "two abstractions, two living machines who use each other" (Fromm 1955, 139). Similarly, within the receptive marketing orientation of democratic capitalism, individuals see themselves and others as commodities, with a distinct market value that relates to their socio-economic role instead of their own experiences as thinking and loving individuals.

The process of abstractification eventually dissolves all concrete frames of reference that help individuals make sense of their society. As Fromm laments:

> *There is no frame of reference left which is manageable, observable, which is adapted to human dimensions. While our eyes and ears receive impressions only in humanly manageable proportions, our concept of the world has lost just that quality; it does not any longer correspond to our human dimensions* (Fromm 1955, 119).

Without material frames of reference, nothing remains understandable or real; science, industry, politics, and economics mean little apart from their statistical abstractions, and everything becomes morally and factually possible.

In *The Sane Society* Fromm suggests that elements of popular culture now serve as cultural opiates for the socially patterned defect, providing escape from the

acute anxiety that the process of abstractification creates in alienated individuals in modern societies. He fears that if Hollywood films, television, radio, sporting events, newspapers, and other forms of popular culture were unavailable for even a month that neuroses would immediately become manifest in many citizens. Yet Fromm is clear to distinguish between the productive activities associated with reading, listening, and watching various forms of material culture from the alienated form of consuming elements popular culture. He explains that when an individual is genuinely related to and productively participating in an activity, that person is changed by the experience, but within alienated consumption, an individual passively consumes leisure activities without gaining any actual pleasure. Alienated individuals' leisure-time consumption is often manipulated by "powerful propaganda machines" (Fromm 1955, 339), which condition them to purchase and consume entertainment in just the same way that they buy food and clothing. For Fromm, tourist's snapshots provide a striking example of alienated pleasure consumption. Tourists see nothing without the intermediary vision of the camera; they push the button and the camera provides an alienated memory of the trip through a collection of snapshots that substitute for the authentic visual experience.

Fromm would reject current postmodern thinking that individuals create their own realities, insisting instead that alienated individuals who passively receive information and opinions lack the reasoning skills necessary to penetrate the surface of the "facts" and therefore are unable to establish a clear sense of reality. People who do not see themselves as powerful active participants in the democratic process cannot distinguish between authentic and manufactured information, needs, beliefs, and desires nor can they evaluate behaviour ethically, because ethics requires the ability to make value judgments based on reason. Fromm notes that people are unable to express their convictions because their opinions are manipulated, just like their product consumption choices, and they do not have any opinions or convictions of their own: "They are listening to the drums of propaganda and facts mean little in comparison with the suggestive noise which hammers at them" (Fromm 1955, 186). Citizens are poorly informed about important national and international matters that they need to understand in order to make informed voting decisions as to who will represent them in the political arena. Fromm explains that the press portrays the entire world as a series of abstractions; readers confront huge, almost incomprehensible numbers without any correspondence to human proportions: billion dollar spending, multi-million dollar deficits, millions murdered or dead from disease, and for individuals who have no frame of reference to make sense of these figures, the issues they represent are impossible to understand.

Today, partisan political spin is routinely issued from a U.S. government administration that in 2004 spent a record $88 million for government-funded public relations campaigns (Stewart 2005), and that proliferates misinformation on international, cultural, religious, economic, and political issues. In addition, the field of contemporary journalism in the U.S. provides pointed examples reinforcing Fromm's concerns regarding the inability of citizens to distinguish between authentic and manufactured information while illustrating a climate where authentic information seems to be losing its relevance to American society. On Friday, September 8, 2006, the *Miami Herald* reported that ten journalists, including two members of their own Spanish-language newspaper, had received more than $300,000 from the U.S.

government to undermine Cuba's communist government in their news reports. This was not an isolated incident: in 2005, the Pentagon paid Iraqi newspapers and a consulting firm to plant favourable news articles about the rebuilding efforts and the Iraq war (Wides-Munoz 2006). Federal agencies also paid newspaper columnists to promote marriage to unmarried couples, particularly those having children, and to support the "No Child Left Behind" legislation (Steward 2005). The co-optation of broadcast news by economic interests has resulted in a blending of news and entertainment into infotainment on a local and national scale (Anderson 2004) but now newspapers also are running afoul of traditional distinctions between news content and advertising. The 1999 *Los Angeles Times*, Staples Center profit-sharing scheme, through which the newspaper published a special magazine, sold advertisements with the help of the Staples advertising staff, and planned to split the profits, showcases the blurring of boundaries between news and advertising and raises significant questions regarding the role of the press (Elder 1999). More recently, after Jeff Probst, host of the CBS reality television show *Survivor* announced on the *CBS Early Show* that *Survivor: Cook Islands* participants would be grouped by race, newspapers, web and broadcast outlets throughout the U.S. carried it as national news. Rarely did the coverage frame the story as a promotional marketing effort and articles instead focused on the possibility there might be racial profiling on the prime-time show. In fact, the Thursday, August 24, 2006 issue of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* chose the *Survivor* announcement as its lead front page article and showcased the news with a banner headline that read: "Survive this: A new hue to CBS competition" (Barrientos and Campbell 2006). At the *Inquirer*, the survivor story trumped a variety of other news reports including a potential stem-cell breakthrough, the first year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, hostages being released in Nigeria, a suicide bombing in Baghdad, Iran's increased nuclear efforts, and the escalating conflict in the Middle East. Overall, the previous examples may be seen to offer more than governmental and newsroom misdeeds; they showcase the manipulation that happens in a thoroughly alienated culture when its citizens are unable to distinguish fact from fantasy.

In a post September 11 climate security is a fundamental national concern showcased and perhaps even exploited by U.S. media and government alike. Interestingly, in *The Sane Society* Fromm finds an increased emphasis on the concept of security as an essential aim of human life as well as a factor fundamental to mental health. He notes that one reason for this belief might be tied to a Cold War mentality following the end of World War II. However, he suggests that a more important reason for an emphasis on security might stem from alienated individuals' desire for conformity, which makes them feel increasingly insecure. Fromm finds the need to emerge as a reasoning individual "from bondage to freedom" (1955, 27) often conflicts with the desire to return to the security of nature and to the known and he notes that within contemporary capitalist societies that over the years people have begun to feel that they should have no problems, no concerns, or doubts and that if they do not take risks that they should feel secure. He questions this belief and maintains that just as active and engaged people cannot avoid sadness or pain, that the goal for thinking individuals, "is not to feel secure, but to be able to tolerate insecurity, without panic and undue fear" (1955, 196). Fromm warns that alienated citizens increasingly abdicate their own responsibility regarding issues

of security and become ignorant regarding domestic and foreign policy which may help to explain the general lack of outrage in the U.S. regarding the current administration's international and national policies.

Ultimately *The Sane Society* provides a radical critique of democratic capitalism that goes below surface symptoms to get to the root causes of alienation and to suggest ways to transform contemporary societies to further the productive activities of its citizens. Fromm explains that all of the twentieth century variants of totalitarianism created the dehumanisation of society and with it a greater risk of insanity among its people. Similarly, democratic capitalistic societies have increased the alienation and automatization of its citizens, which has resulted in them becoming servants to the "idol of production" (1955, 277).

Fromm envisions the refashioning of democratic capitalist societies based on the tenants of communitarian socialism, through which "every working person would be an active and responsible participant, where work would be attractive and meaningful, where capital would not employ labor, but labor would employ capital" (1955, 283-284). Rather than focusing primarily on issues of ownership, communitarian socialism stresses the organisation of work and social relations between its citizens. Although money, prestige, and power are the main employment incentives of contemporary capitalist societies, Fromm maintains that the satisfaction derived from active participation in purposeful work can provide a sense of collective and personal fulfilment that may help to create a sane society. His vision of communitarian socialism works toward ending the alienation of its citizens, decentralises work and power, envisions shared governance, and the development of manageable communities where individuals will no longer need to escape an atomised society into the security of robotic conformity.

Instead of fixating on nationalism and racism, which Fromm refers to as the "idolatry of blood and soil" (1955, 57), he urges the development of a humanistic global identity. Anticipating current concerns regarding the growing disparity in the quality of life between western and developing nations, he insists that industrial nations must limit their unnecessary consumption in order to share limited resources. At a time when millions of people are dying each year from AIDS because they cannot afford medicines to prolong their lives, and when millions of children are starving while excess produce rots in American fields so that prices remain artificially high, rampant consumerism should be challenged. The previous examples illustrate the mental insanity of a consumerist orientation, which encourages an unending craving for new and unnecessary things along with a constant need to buy more and more new things, even though there may be no actual need or desire for the product.

When first released, reviewers applauded Fromm's "biting diagnosis" (Nettler 1956, 645) and recommended cure, but noted that alienated consumption was enjoyable for many people and questioned if the creation of sane society was a realistic and desirable goal. More than a half a century later, the alienation of democratic capitalist societies seems complete and his fear that human beings may become robots who destroy their world because they do not find value in a meaningless life seems a frightening but realistic prediction. It's time to reconsider Fromm's vision of communitarian socialism as a realistic road to a sane society.

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