

Fromm's Critique of Capitalist Society in the Sound Society

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Abstract: Erich Fromm offers a profound critique of capitalist society in his work *The Sane Society*, viewed as a continuation of his earlier books *Escape from Freedom* and *Man for Himself*. Integrating Freudian psychoanalysis with Maslow's humanism, Fromm explores the psychological and social issues afflicting Western society after the World Wars, highlighting the contrast between material wealth and spiritual impoverishment. He contends that capitalism, with its emphasis on "things over people," leads to widespread alienation, as individuals are increasingly distanced from the products of their labor, each other, and their inner selves. Fromm critically examines how the capitalist drive for profit, efficiency, and mass consumption fosters conformity, standardizes desires, and suppresses individuality. He asserts that both workers and managers become dehumanized, as labor is reduced to mechanical processes devoid of creativity, and bureaucratic structures treat people as objects. Furthermore, he critiques the alienation in consumer culture, where insatiable desires are cultivated by market forces, disconnecting consumption from genuine human needs. Through his psychoanalytic approach, Fromm ultimately calls for a new society where human growth and well-being are prioritized over profit, and where individuals live meaningfully, free from the systemic pressures of capitalism.

Keywords: Erich Fromm; Capitalist Society; Alienation

1. The Main Idea in the Sound Society

Erich Fromm (1900–1980) was a renowned humanist philosopher and psychoanalytic sociologist, as well as a first-generation member of the Frankfurt School, and a prolific author. According to Fromm, *The Sane Society* "is not only a sequel to *Escape from Freedom*, but to some extent also aligns with *Man for Himself*." Therefore, this work is a masterpiece of

"humanist psychoanalytic sociology." In it, Fromm systematically develops his perspective on the psychological state of Westerners after the two World Wars, using Freudian psychoanalysis. He attempts to reconcile Freud's psychoanalysis with Maslow's humanism, embodying a convergence of these theories with insights from other disciplines.

In Fromm's ideal of a sane society, "man is the center, and all economic and political activities are subordinate to the goal of human growth." People are active, creative, and vibrant, free but not isolated, and independent without being detached from others and the world. Fromm critically examines the deficiencies in the capitalist society he lived in. He observes that "the most democratic, peaceful, and prosperous European countries, as well as the most affluent United States, exhibit the most severe symptoms of mental disorders." [1] The socio-economic aim of the Western world is a comfortable material life, relatively even wealth distribution, stable democracy, and lasting peace. Yet the very countries closest to achieving these goals display the most pronounced symptoms of psychological imbalance. From this, he raises a fundamental question about modern capitalist society: "Isn't there something fundamentally wrong with our way of life and our objectives?" While critiquing the paradox of material abundance and spiritual poverty in capitalist society, Fromm poses a series of chain-like questions: Could it be that the affluent lifestyle of the middle class, after meeting our material needs, leaves us feeling profoundly bored, leading some to resort to suicide or alcoholism as pathological escapes from this boredom? Do these statistics strongly suggest that "man does not live by bread alone"? Do they indicate that modern civilization has not met our inner needs? If so, what are these unmet needs?

First, based on humanist ethics and the normative perspective of social psychoanalysis, Fromm analyzes human needs from the essence of human nature. He argues that a sane society

is one that meets human needs. To this end, he believes it is essential to define what human nature is and what needs arise from it. Moreover, we must examine society's role in human evolution, investigate the ways society promotes human development, and study the conflicts that arise between human nature and society, especially in modern society. [1]

Secondly, Fromm, in exploring the interaction between humans and their environment, attempts to transcend the "biological" and "sociological" approaches to defining human nature. He notes, "In transforming the surrounding world, man also transforms himself in the course of history. Man is, in fact, his own creation. But just as he can only modify nature according to the properties of natural materials, so too can he only change himself according to his own human nature." In the historical process, humans develop potential and transform it according to the possible directions for human growth. This view, he contends, is neither "biological" nor "sociological" but transcends this dichotomy. It emphasizes that the primary feelings and motivations inherent in humans are products of their entire being, some of which promote health and happiness, while others lead to illness and sorrow. Any social order will not create these fundamental emotions and motivations but determines which potential emotions can emerge or dominate, shaped by specific social conditions.

Furthermore, Fromm proposes criteria for diagnosing mental health from the perspective of social psychoanalysis. He asserts that the measure of mental health is not a standard that assesses whether an individual can adapt to a particular social order. Instead, it is a universal standard applicable to all humanity, one that can provide a satisfactory answer to human existential questions. However, societal conventions often lead to misconceptions about the mental state of social members, rooted in a "mutual confirmation" of ideas. Due to widespread adherence to particular thoughts or feelings, these thoughts and feelings are assumed to be valid—a notion that Fromm finds naïve. Common bad habits do not become virtues simply because many people share them, nor do widespread errors become truths. Likewise, widespread mental pathologies do not make those affected healthy individuals. Fromm, from the dialectical perspective of anthropological critique, highlights the dual

effects of reason: "Reason is both a blessing and a curse for humanity. It compels man to endlessly solve unsolvable problems." In this regard, human existence differs from all other organisms, constantly in a state of unavoidable imbalance. Humans must actively live. At the same time, humans are the only creatures troubled by existential dilemmas, feeling exiled from paradise. They alone recognize their existence as a problem they must solve. Unlike animals in harmony with nature, humans cannot return to a pre-human state; they must instead develop their reason until they become masters of nature and themselves. [1]

On this foundation, Fromm, drawing from the perspectives of ontogeny and phylogeny, further points out that "the birth of humans is a negative event." Lacking instinctual adaptation to nature and physical strength, humans are the least self-sufficient at birth among animals and require prolonged protection. Human evolution is based on the fact that humans have lost their original home—nature—and can never return to it. Instead, they must search for a new home, a home of their own creation, transforming the world into a human world to truly become human.

From this multi-layered analysis, grounded in the theoretical presuppositions of humanist ethical social psychoanalysis, Fromm establishes the basis for critiquing capitalism's value system.

2. How Was the Capitalist Principle of "Priority of Things over People" Formed

Erich Fromm examines the historical development of capitalism, focusing on how socio-economic conditions from the 17th to the 19th centuries shaped the values, behaviors, and mental health of people in Western societies. He explores the rise of industrial capitalism, its emphasis on productivity and profit, and the resulting cultural shift that prioritized material wealth and competition over human welfare and relationships. Fromm's analysis sheds light on how capitalism's focus on efficiency and economic growth fostered a mindset that values "things over people." [1]

Fromm uses a humanist ethical, social, and psychoanalytic lens to argue that capitalist values emerged alongside the shift to industrial production and the expansion of markets. The development of capitalist economies redefined society's values, placing importance on

accumulation, consumption, and competition. He notes that early capitalist society encouraged individuals to seek personal gain through economic productivity, and over time, this economic focus became an ethical standard. Success was defined by material wealth and social status, leading people to prioritize tangible assets and financial success over personal fulfillment and interpersonal relationships.

In Fromm's view, the capitalist principle of prioritizing things over people grew out of the unique socio-economic conditions of the industrial age, a period characterized by rapid technological progress, urbanization, and mass production. As industrial capitalism transformed society, the relationships between people and their work, as well as between individuals, began to change. Work became increasingly mechanical and impersonal, with people seen as instruments of production rather than as unique individuals with intrinsic worth. This shift led to a widespread sense of alienation, as individuals were separated from the products of their labor, their coworkers, and even their own sense of purpose. [2]

Fromm argues that this alienation was reinforced by the capitalist "greed society," where accumulation of wealth became a central societal goal. This environment fostered a culture of competition and individualism, discouraging empathy and collaboration. [3] As people focused on accumulating wealth and status, they often treated others as obstacles or tools for personal advancement. Human relationships were commodified, becoming transactional rather than meaningful or supportive. This commodification extended to all aspects of life, from the workplace to the home, as people were valued not for their humanity but for their utility in the economic system.

The "priority of things over people" thus reflects the underlying structure of capitalism, where capital (or accumulated wealth) takes precedence over the well-being of individuals. Fromm contends that capitalism's emphasis on profit maximization leads to exploitation, as the pursuit of wealth often requires the devaluation of human labor and the treatment of workers as disposable resources. In this system, objects—whether they be products, money, or other forms of capital—are prioritized over the human beings who produce them. Fromm

describes this process as inherently dehumanizing, as it forces individuals to compete for resources and positions rather than fostering a sense of community and mutual support. [1]

3. How Does Human Alienation and the Alienation of Management and Consumption Arise

Fromm argues that the characteristics of 20th-century capitalism are mainly as follows: First, feudal traits have vanished, industrial production has surged, capital is increasingly concentrated, and businesses and management have expanded in scale. More and more people manipulate numbers and human resources, and ownership has been separated from management. People no longer believe that one person is inherently superior to another due to factors like birth, divine will, or natural law. Everyone is free and equal. If one person is subject to another, it's because the superior has purchased the other's labor or services in the labor market, forming a contractual relationship. [4] As long as transactions are fair, everything is deemed "efficient." Secondly, people experience the miracles of production. They now control forces that are thousands of times stronger than nature once provided. Steam, oil, and electricity have become servants, like beasts of burden. People can traverse oceans and continents, first measured in weeks, then days, and finally in hours. They seem to have conquered gravity, soaring freely in the skies. Deserts have been turned into fertile fields, and rain can be created without prayer. This miracle of production has led to a miracle of consumption. Thus, no traditional ideas prevent people from purchasing whatever they like, as long as they have money. Increasingly, wealthy people seek not true value but rather illusions: cars that look like luxury brands but are ordinary, cheap clothes that appear expensive, and cigarettes smoked by both millionaires and ordinary workers. Everything is within reach, available for purchase and consumption. Such phenomena have never existed in previous societies. [5]

Thirdly, people work together in large groups. Millions flow into factories and offices—by car, subway, bus, or train. They work together in sync, following the rhythms and methods prescribed by experts, each person just one part of the whole. In the evening, this "flow of people" retreats. They read the same

newspapers, listen to the same broadcasts, and watch the same movies. People from all social strata, the smart and the simple, the educated and uneducated, engage in the same activities. Production, consumption, and all pleasures are synchronized and unquestioned—this is the rhythm of their lives. [6]

Thus, Fromm critically asks, through the lens of his humanistic ethics and social psychoanalysis: "What kind of people does our society need? What is the 'social character' suited to 20th-century capitalism?" Fromm finds that modern capitalist society needs people with certain characteristics: first, individuals who can cooperate smoothly within large groups, who desire to consume ever more, whose tastes are standardized, who are easily influenced, and whose needs are predictable. Secondly, those who feel free and independent, yielding to no authority or principle, yet willingly submit to control, do as others wish, and conform to the social machine without friction. However, such people experience alienation between their actions and goals, with a transformation in their sense of social responsibility and conscience. Fromm illustrates this with modern warfare's destructive methods. A person might hesitate to slap a defenseless individual, let alone kill someone. In specific contexts of violence, their conscience responds normally, yet in modern warfare, pressing a button that annihilates thousands elicits no such reaction. They feel disconnected from the thousands they have doomed, as if their button-pressing bears no real link to those lives lost. In connection, science, commerce, and politics lose all meaningful human foundations. People live among numbers and abstractions, exiled from tangible, graspable life and society, driven by a force they initially created but which now pushes them ever faster. In this mad whirl, they think, calculate, and toil for abstractions, becoming increasingly distant from concrete life. When designers, micro-movement researchers, and scientific managers further strip workers of thinking and free action, work becomes ever more repetitive and brainless. Life is negated, with curiosity, independence, and creativity suppressed, leading workers to retreat, resist, or even regress psychologically. Moreover, the role of managers has also become alienated. Although they manage the entirety of a business rather than just parts, they too are alienated from the concrete, useful products of their labor. Unlike

traditional profit-sharing management, modern management is more focused on operational efficiency and expansion. However, the goal remains to profit from others' investments. The unique trait of this management style is that those responsible for labor relations and sales often overshadow those handling production technology within companies. Like workers, managers contend with impersonal giants such as competitive conglomerates, vast markets, numerous consumers, powerful unions, and strong governments. These giants appear to have lives of their own, dictating managers' actions and influencing workers' and employees' tasks.

Fromm observes that managerial alienation reveals one of capitalism's most important cultural phenomena: bureaucratization. Bureaucrats manage large corporations and governments, acting as experts in managing people and objects. Because of the size of these organizations, the relationship between bureaucrats and the people is one of total alienation. Bureaucrats treat people as objects, with no affection or hatred—devoid of human feeling. Managers and bureaucrats should act without emotion, treating people as numbers or objects to be manipulated. Given vast organizations and extreme labor division, no individual can see the whole, making bureaucratic management essential. Additionally, consumer alienation leads people to never feel satisfied. Fromm points out that this kind of consumption is not based on real, concrete needs but on endlessly expanding desires, driving larger-scale consumption. Although an increased need for goods may be reasonable as human culture advances, consumption should ultimately lead to a happier, more satisfying life. However, now, people's desire for consumption has become divorced from real human needs, consumption becoming an end in itself. This endless need pressures us to keep striving, making us dependent on those who satisfy our needs. In capitalism, the alienated relationship extends to social forces that shape society. People feel powerless before these forces, especially in times of social disasters, like economic depressions or wars, which they view as inevitable accidents, akin to natural disasters, though they are actually human-made. Fromm critiques the capitalist principle that self-interest alone generates collective good, as an "invisible hand" steers the

market. Though every person pursues their self-interest, the market, seemingly guided by a divine will, exists beyond individual control. [7] Unlike earlier societies where laws were grounded in authority and tradition, capitalism operates on the assumption that if everyone strives for self-interest in the market, a balance will emerge. However, people live under these economic laws yet lack control over them. Fromm reveals this as one of capitalism's most obvious forms of alienation: we are governed by forces we neither wish to nor can control. Large nations and economies now lie beyond anyone's control, their leaders mere riders on runaway horses. In capitalist society, not only are humans alienated from society, but the relationship among individuals is also alienated. Employers exploit employees, merchants exploit customers, each seeing the other as a commodity. Superficial friendliness masks distance, coldness, and subtle distrust. This leads Fromm to conclude that capitalism is, fundamentally, an unhealthy society. [8]

4. Fromm's Ethical Critique of Capitalism

Fromm's critique of capitalism from an ethical dimension offers the following theoretical contributions and characteristics:

First, Fromm applies a humanistic ethics perspective rooted in social psychoanalysis, drawing on Freud's psychoanalysis and Maslow's need theory. He synthesizes insights from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history, and religion to explore human nature and mind, criticizing capitalist society. Second, he builds on previous critiques of capitalism, providing sharp and profound analysis, arguing that capitalism has regressed humanity, replacing self-constructiveness with dependency on approval from others. Fromm ultimately seeks to transcend the unhealthy society we currently inhabit and explore "the path to health." [1] He asserts that change must simultaneously occur across economic, political, and cultural domains. However, Fromm's humanistic ethics and socio-psychological approach may overemphasize the irrational aspects of emotions and psychology in his critique. [9] For example, he criticized the original for not fully recognizing the complexity of human emotions and underestimating the interplay between human psychological and economic forces. In essence, the fundamental difference of Fromm's criticism lies in the

different starting points. Originally, it starts from the reality of man in society, but Fromm's humanistic ethics constructs man based on idealized nature and stays within the humanistic ethical framework. [10]

5. Conclusion

Erich Fromm's critique of capitalism is a profound exploration of the psychological and ethical flaws in modern capitalist societies. He argues that capitalism's focus on material wealth, competition, and efficiency leads to widespread alienation, mental health issues, and a loss of human dignity. By commodifying human relationships and fostering a transactional approach to life, capitalist society undermines individuals' ability to form genuine connections and achieve inner fulfillment. Fromm's work challenges readers to reconsider the values that underpin modern capitalist societies and to imagine a world where human growth, community, and well-being are prioritized over profit and material accumulation.

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