



Maccoby_M_McLaughlin_N_2019

Sociopsychanalysis and Radical Humanism A Fromm–Bourdieu Synthesis

Michael Maccoby and Neil McLaughlin

„Sociopsychanalysis and Radical Humanism: A Fromm–Bourdieu Synthesis“, in: Fromm Forum (English Edition – ISSN 1437-1189), 23 / 2019 (Special Edition), Tuebingen (Selbstverlag), pp. 45-57.

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Abstract: Mainstream social science has been blindsided by the rise of Trumpism and broader growth of authoritarian populism. We make the case that Frommian work is desperately needed inside the core of contemporary social science theorizing by examining social character theory up against and alongside the concept of habitus developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Both Fromm and Bourdieu were concerned with the human costs of social change and economic development, Fromm with his writings on advanced capitalism in *The Sane Society* (1955a) and on Mexican village life in *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (with Michael Maccoby, 1970b), and Bourdieu with his extended studies of peasants in Algeria during the French colonial war of the 1950s and early 1960s. We will compare and contrast the theory of social character developed in the Mexican study with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and discuss what Fromm's ideas can add to Bourdieu-influenced critical social science.

Keywords: Erich Fromm; Pierre Bourdieu; social character; habitus; Algeria; Mexico.

Mainstream social science has been blindsided by the rise of Trumpism and broader growth of authoritarian populism. Erich Fromm's ideas are needed now more than ever and we thus gather here in Berlin as committed proponents of humanistic social ethics, psychoanalysis and sociology. Some of us will be more focused on doing Frommian-influenced clinical work, social criticism and social theorizing. For those of us who see ourselves doing empirical social science, however, whether inside or outside the contemporary research university, we make the case that Frommian work is desperately needed inside the core of contemporary social science theorizing.

We will make this argument by examining social character theory up against and alongside the concept of habitus developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the dominant social theorist in contemporary critical social science. Bourdieu rose to fame and influence as a French sociologist in the twilight of Fromm's career; they did



not directly engage each other's ideas, so we must reconstruct what a conversation or dialogue between these two traditions might look like. As David Swartz puts it, »Bourdieu thinks of the practice of sociology as *socioanalysis* where the sociologist is to the ›social unconscious‹ of society as the psychoanalyst is to the patient's unconscious« (Swartz 2013, p. 10), a vision that has obvious links with Fromm's own combination of sociology, psychoanalysis and social criticism.

Bourdieu certainly did a better job than Fromm in developing a successful school of social science research and theorizing rooted in the modern research university. Fromm wrote insights from the margins of social science. This gave him an independence from social science orthodoxy that was priceless, but he also paid a price for his exclusion from the mainstream. The Frommian vision of a humanistic social science will only succeed if we gain more legitimacy for our ideas and research agendas within contemporary social science; thus we argue here for dialoguing more with mainstream social science, something that will be facilitated by engagement with Bourdieu's work.

To facilitate this engagement, we will first outline the basic contours of Bourdieu's social science career, comparing the reception of his work within mainstream social science with the more familiar story of Fromm's marginalization and contemporary revival. Both Fromm and Bourdieu were concerned with the human costs of social change and economic development, Fromm with his writings on advanced capitalism in *The Sane Society* (1955a) and on Mexican village life in *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (with Michael Maccoby, 1970b), and Bourdieu with his extended

studies of peasants in Algeria during the French colonial war of the 1950s and early 1960s. We will compare and contrast the theory of social character developed in the Mexican study with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and discuss what Fromm's ideas can add to Bourdieu-influenced critical social science.

Two Social Science Careers: Fromm and Bourdieu

Erich Fromm and Pierre Bourdieu were both trained as sociologists but their relationship to the discipline is dramatically different. Fromm did his PhD at Heidelberg in the early 1920s with the supervision of Alfred Weber, Max Weber's younger brother. Yet he was largely marginal to the core of discipline, especially in North America and English language social science (McLaughlin 1998). Fromm was not interested in being an academic, although he did empirical research in the middle to late 1920s on authoritarianism among the German working and middle classes while a member of the Horkheimer circle of critical theorist based in Frankfurt (Funk 1982; Burston 1992; Durkin 2014). Fromm made his living as a therapist, a teacher of psychoanalysts, and author of popular books, however, not as a sociology professor. Only occasionally did he publish in core sociology journals and he was largely uninterested in professional sociology.

Bourdieu's relationship to professional sociology was very different. Bourdieu finished his graduate work in the late 1950s, thirty years later than Fromm, and in France, not Germany. The major difference between the two, however, is that Bourdieu was centrally identified and involved in professional sociology and was focused on producing theoretical and empirical



contributions to the field that he hoped would come to dominate the discipline. Bourdieu was a critical sociologist positioned at an elite French institution that allowed him the space and resources to produce an enormous amount of high quality social science research.

Fromm and Bourdieu, however, share much politically and intellectually. Both Fromm and Bourdieu viewed themselves as critical and left scholars and they each engaged the Marxist tradition in substantial ways without being orthodox Marxists. Each were deeply schooled in the classical sociological tradition, drawing on Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel. Both Fromm and Bourdieu were synthetic thinkers who rejected the simplistic agency versus structure dichotomy; they each articulated powerful critiques of American style positivism and were militant opponents of colonialism and American imperial dominance of the world. Moreover, both Fromm and Bourdieu were committed to political action outside of the ivory tower, although their careers as public intellectuals and public sociologists were very different. As Swartz puts it, »Bourdieu's sociology would be critical though not prophetic, theoretical though empirically researchable, and scientific though not positivist« (Swartz 2012, p. 26). As Maccoby has reminded us, there was a powerful prophetic voice in Fromm's intellectual vision, something Bourdieu was opposed to (Maccoby 1995; also see Braune 2014).

After Fromm's initial burst into fame and academic stature with the critically acclaimed *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941a), he was largely uninterested in sustaining a record and reputation as an academic social scientist until the last decade of his life. It was in this last period of

Fromm's life, when he returned to scholarly work with *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973a), an attempt to synthesize his Freudian-inspired social theory with new developments in neurosciences, archeology and historical anthropology/comparative sociology and, most importantly *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b), an empirical test of his social character theory written with Michael Maccoby.

Bourdieu, in contrast, rose to the very top of the French academic hierarchy with his election to the College de France in 1981 as the dominant empirical researcher in sociology of his generation because of his work developing a theoretical framework for a scientific sociology based on the concepts of fields, capital and habitus. It was only then that Bourdieu spent a decade writing more accessible books critiquing neoliberalism and American culture in France, offering his thoughts on gender inequality, attacking mainstream media and the French socialist party for their conformism and contributing his intellectual stature to the anti-globalization movement of the period.

While Fromm and Bourdieu were politically active as radicals, the nature of this engagement was similar but also quite different. Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941a) was a theoretical text with a political subtext—he was making the argument for the American entry into World War II to defeat the Nazi regime. Many other of Fromm's books had clear political intent and he was politically active in radical and liberal causes. In the end, however, Fromm's political activism was a sideshow to his major focus as a psychoanalyst, a writer and a social theorist. Fromm was aware that he was temperamentally not



suited to political activism and electoral politics.

The same was true with Bourdieu even though initial involvement in politics and scholarship were linked together during the French colonial war in Algeria. As a young man from a lower-middle class background, Bourdieu was in the military when the Algerian revolution against the French dominated politics in his nation, and he was sent to Algeria in a non-combat role because of his vocal opposition to the colonial war. After a couple of years of service, Bourdieu went back to start his career as a researcher and academic teacher in Algeria; his first publications were rooted in his anthropological observations of Algerian peasant life in the context of modernization and colonial violence. *The Algerians* (1962) was a fairly traditional work of anthropology as were his first series of publications on Kabyle society in northern Algeria. Bourdieu was primarily an academic social scientist intensely focused on preserving his scientific credibility—he never signed petitions, involved himself in protests or took sharp positions on political issues until the last decade of his life. Bourdieu did share with Fromm, however, an anti-colonial politics and their *The Algerians* (1962) (published in French in 1958) and *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b) represent the most directly comparable works they each did.

Social Character versus Habitus: Competing and Complementary Theoretical Traditions

The concept of social character was Fromm's most original and important contribution to social theory. Social character relates to what Fromm termed a character matrix, a syndrome of character traits that

has developed as an adaptation to the economic, social, and cultural conditions, common to that group. Distinct from national character theories, Fromm's social character theory has more affinity to Bourdieu's theory of habitus, with more psychoanalysis, less cognitive psychology and a different history and set of analytic goals. Fromm critically integrated what he viewed as core insights from both Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud while rejecting orthodox dogma from the theoretical systems of Marxism and psychoanalysis respectively. The core of the theory was expressed clearly in »The social and individual roots of neurosis,« in the *American Sociological Review* (Fromm 1944a).

The particular ways in which a society functions are determined by a number of objective economic and political factors, which are given at any point of historical development. Societies have to operate within the possibilities and limitations of their particular historical situations. In order that any society may function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to act in the way they have to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to desire what objectively is necessary for them to do. Outer force is to be replaced by inner compulsion, and by the particular kind of human energy which is channeled into character traits (Fromm 1944a, p. 381).

One can see the Marxist roots of Fromm's social character theory in this quote, but he rejected the inattention to emotions, morality and human nature in orthodox versions of Marxism.



Social Character in a Mexican Village

Fromm initiated this study in 1957 after having lived in Mexico since 1950 when he had been invited by some of the leading psychiatrists to establish the Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis and to train these psychiatrists to be psychoanalysts. Although Fromm was often attacked as a mystical thinker or a radical polemicist and he was, at times, more of a prophetic intellectual than a social scientist, it would be a mistake to ignore his roots in 19th century utopian radicalism and the traditions within sociology concerned with designing a better society through the use of science.

Fromm had a fair amount of resources at his disposal for the Mexican character study, far more than Bourdieu did as young graduate student/junior scholar in Algeria also in the late 1950s. Fromm had the cooperation of the national and regional Mexican government, local elites in the village, Father William Wasson, the founder of a large orphanage in the surrounding area, some American Friends Service volunteers as well as volunteers from the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute he had founded, and he received funding from the Foundations Fund for Research in Psychiatry. Maccoby was funded by the National Institute for Mental Health. Fromm had selected a small village made up of 280 families that was typical of villages where some of the *campesinos* who had been *haciendo peons* were given *ejidos* after the revolution of 1910–20. By interviewing every villager over the age of 16 and half the children, using economic surveys, statistical analysis, psychological tests, and participant observation, Fromm and Maccoby sought to demonstrate with scientific rigor that the sociopsychanalytic concept of social character could explain relationships

between economic, social and psychological factors.

Fromm engaged a Mexican internist who was living in the village to interview adult villagers using a questionnaire that elicited responses that could be interpreted according to character types. Mexican psychologists administered Rorschach tests and TATs. From 1958 to 1960, two American anthropologists named Theodore and Lola Schwartz, who were linked to Fromm's old friend Margaret Mead, carried out participant observation and an economic survey of village families. There were conflicts between the Schwartz couple and Fromm, partly having to do with theoretical differences (Fromm felt they were not committed to the psychoanalytic theoretical frame for the study) and questions of ethics (Fromm wanted to preserve the confidentiality of the village while Lola Schwartz, in particular, wanted to use the data for her dissertation) (Friedman 2013).

In 1960, Maccoby joined the project, essentially as a replacement for the Schwartzes (although there was some overlap, as the young anthropologists left in 1961). Maccoby interpreted all of the questionnaire and projective text material in terms of social character types. At regular project meetings with Fromm, he discussed many of the interpretations and results. Maccoby, together with an anthropologist and psychologist studied the children. He also led an agricultural club for adolescent boys with help from the American Friends Service Committee. Maccoby organized the statistical analysis and wrote all the book's chapters that reported the study's results, and was responsible for the history chapter that framed the study in the context of the colonial destruction of traditional culture and the oppressive na-



ture of Spanish economic rule. It was unfortunate that there was an unpleasant professional conflict between Fromm and the Schwartzes that extended for some years after. If the Schwartzes had been more involved, the final study might well have provided more ethnographic data.

Results of the Study

The most important contributions of *Social Character in a Mexican Village* to knowledge about development concerns the relationship between social character and behavior and the interaction between economic, social, cultural, and psychological factors. At the start of the study, Fromm raised the following question: What happened to the *campesino* after the Mexican revolution? Despite the fact that they were given land, many *campesinos* failed to take advantage of their opportunities. Alcoholism appeared to increase, and there was a high incidence of violence. Why did this happen?

The study showed the importance of social character in explaining this failure of development. Those villagers brought up before the revolution in the culture of the semi-feudal hacienda lacked the self-confidence and the self-directed, hard-working character of successful peasants throughout the world. Their submissive, receptive, unproductive character, which was adapted to life in the hacienda, made them vulnerable to alcoholism and exploitation after the revolution. Furthermore, the children of these villagers were apt to share some of these character traits.

In contrast, the villagers who had been landowners did demonstrate adaptive productive hoarding traits. They farmed their land effectively, and they attempted to maintain conservative, patriarchal values

and traditions. Those few villagers with a modern outlook and an entrepreneurial character, the productive exploitative types, proved best able to take advantage of the new opportunities, and they also took advantage of the unproductive villagers. They opened small businesses, and they rented land from the alcoholics. They took the lead in transforming the culture, getting rid of costly fiestas, while building roads and schools.

The study thus demonstrated that although the revolution left the villagers in a state of equality, a class system emerged partly because of differences in social character. One of the most significant findings of the study is the relationship between character and the actual farming behavior of the *campesinos*. Those who were psychologically more productive as interpreted from the questionnaires were also economically more productive. They planted the major part of their land in cash crops such as rice and vegetables which demanded much care and hard work. While some of the psychologically receptive unproductive landholders rented out their land, the others farmed it with sugar cane which produced a much lower profit but greater security. Cane required fewer days of work and less care. The difficult, dirty job of harvesting the cane was done by migrant workers who occupied the lowest class in Mexican rural society and were hired by the sugar refinery, the »cooperative,« which took on the paternalistic role of the old hacienda. Some landholders who tried to escape the control of the cooperative found their crops ploughed under. The most astute villagers planted a small percentage of their land in sugar cane, just enough to satisfy the cooperative, gain its benefits (scholarships for their children, health care, low cost loans) and avoid



trouble, while optimizing their income.

Fromm and Maccoby's *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970b) was a remarkable piece of work for its time that succeeded in its core goal of providing an empirical test of social character theory, but it was largely ignored in the academic literature. There are a range of reasons for the marginalization of *Social Character*, including being caught between the competing intellectual logics and research methods of economics, psychology, anthropology and sociology. One additional factor, however, is that its co-author, Michael Maccoby, never entered the academic profession but went on to develop social character theory outside the university in a series of best-selling and carefully researched works of applied social science directed at business leaders and executives (1976, 1980, 1988, 2004, 2007, 2015). There was also a small network of Mexican scholars and psychoanalysts (Cortina 2015; Gojman de Millán and Millán 2015) and a German based international Erich Fromm Society led by Fromm's former assistant Rainer Funk who did work on social character (Fromm Society 1995), but all of the major promoters of social character theory were marginal to the modern research university.

Theory of Habitus

Bourdieu's equivalent theoretical construct parallel to Fromm's notion of social character is »habitus,« a key part of his conceptual framework alongside »capital« and »field.« For Bourdieu does not focus so much on cultures as anthropologists do or on societies as sociologists tend to, but on fields. As Swartz puts it, fields are: »Arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by

actors in their struggle to accumulate capital.« (Swartz 2013, p. 35). There are various forms of capital in Bourdieu's theory, primarily economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, and there are various ways in which individuals can accumulate, exchange and transform each form of capital into one of the other three.

This constant competition within fields for gaining capital is mediated and facilitated by what Bourdieu calls an internalized habitus. As Swartz describes it, »Habitus derives from the predominately unconscious internalization—particularly during early childhood, of objective chances that are common to members of a social class or status group.« (Swartz 2012, p. 104.)

Habitus, as Swartz put it, »transforms social and economic necessity into virtue« by leading individuals to a »kind of immediate submission to order« (Swartz 2012, p. 54), or as Fromm would put it, people learn to want to do what they have to do, in order to survive and prosper in the particular society they live in given their own class position.

Bourdieu's concern with understanding Algerian underdevelopment has significant overlap with the Fromm/Maccoby concern with the Mexican case. As Steinmetz puts it, »In his earliest publications, Bourdieu blamed Algerian underdevelopment not on the Algerians' own shortcomings but on the »shock effect of a clash between an archaic economy and a modern one (1958, p. 55).« In *Sociologie de L'Algeria*, he asked how different groups of Algerian reacted to this »clash of civilizations« (Bourdieu 1958, p. 119).« (Steinmetz 2013, p. 37.)

In the early Algeria work (1960), Bourdieu defined habitus as »a system of durable, transposable dispositions which function as



the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices« (Bourdieu 1979, p. vii). A later definition in 1980, which is the more commonly used one in the current literature in the sociology of culture and education suggests that the habitus is:

»a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them« (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53).

In various other places in his massive output of scholarship, Bourdieu, as David Swartz has documented, had used the wordings of »cultural unconscious,« »habit-forming force,« »set of basic, deeply interiorized master-patterns,« »mental habit,« »mental and corporeal schemata of perceptions, appreciations, and actions,« and »generative principle of regulated improvisations« to designate his key concept (Swartz 2012, p. 101). Yet Bourdieu relies on sociological and cognitive frames, downplaying an explicit psychoanalytic analysis of emotional attitudes, the core strength of Fromm's social character theory.

Bourdieu and Feelings

The major difference between Fromm's concept of »social character« and Bourdieu's theory of the habitus revolves around their relationship to psychoanalysis. Fromm's analysis of both Nazism and Mexican peasant life was grounded in an understanding of how internalized oppression and irrationality can shape political,

economic choices and their emotional attitudes. Social character theory was created and designed precisely to help us understand how our social analysis must give an adequate weight to authoritarian impulses, feelings of humiliation and despair and passions for control and destructive revenge as well as feelings of love and compassion, and desires for transcendence, solidarity and productive living. It is precisely with respect to these emotional dynamics where Bourdieu's theory of habitus falls short.

There is a deep ambivalence in Bourdieu with regards to psychoanalysis. Throughout most of his career, Bourdieu was known to be a strong and unyielding critic of the psychoanalytic tradition, viewing it as unscientific and insufficiently sociological. The core flaws in Bourdieu's theory of the habitus is thus something that Fromm's theory of social character can help address. There is a need for a theory of self-destructive-/undermining character traits that can complement a structural theory of oppression-exploitation that would put emotions centrally into the dynamics of the habitus.

It is understandable, of course, that Bourdieu did not want to emphasize how the social psychology of the Algerian peasants played a role in their own oppression as Fromm carefully attempted to do with Mexican peasants in *Social Character in a Mexican Village*. Bourdieu was sent to Algeria as part of the French military, he did not speak the local languages and he was studying the region during a brutal colonial war. But the theoretical issues cut deep. Bourdieu did not believe there was much value in exploring the concept of internalized oppression and he was openly dismissive of Franz Fanon who is the most important theorist of this idea along with the



Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire. Bourdieu felt that Fanon's ideas were »false and dangerous.«

The habitus internalized by the oppressed in Bourdieu's theory leaves actors unfamiliar with the rules of the game they need to succeed in the particular field they are competing in. It provides a mental map and perceptual frame that makes it harder for the lower classes to move through and up the class structure and it results in a social and cultural deficit that is difficult to overcome relative to the position of advantaged elites. Bourdieu's theory of habitus, however, says little about how feelings of low self-worth, fatalism, emotional passivity created by society and existing family dynamics or how comfort with/adaption to unhealthy and exploitative emotional relationships can make it difficult for the oppressed to overcome their disadvantages. Fromm and Maccoby's *Social Character* study explicitly addressed and showed how social character factors, partly rooted in historical economic relations of oppression, shaped rates of alcoholism and violence against women. There are dynamics that generally have not been addressed by Bourdieu's habitus theory that tends to downplay the emotional mechanisms created in families and fields and almost exclusively highlights the role of structures and elites with little attention to these kinds of internalized and then externalized forms of oppression.

This kind of research is extremely sensitive and the kind of research done by Fromm and Maccoby done by outsiders to the communities runs the risks of been weaponized to »blame the victims« of oppressive structures or attacked as white or colonial and/or male social science. This is especially true in our social media age

where the results would quickly enter circulation in decontextualized ways that lose the nuance and care that would be required to contribute real insights not just recycle platitudes and stereotypes. The obstacles to quality work are immense.

Towards a Social Character and Habitus Synthesis

The most practical use of a social character/habitus synthesis will thus not likely come from research on the descendants of those colonized, invaded and enslaved, but research projects that look at the emotional dynamics of modern nationalism, populist authoritarianism of both the left and right and the psychological consequences of digital and social media on the emotional life of the middle and professional classes. Bourdieu's habitus theory has little to say about the emotional and irrational aspects of nationalism although his structural analysis of fields and his focus on different forms of circulating capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) provides a framework that Fromm's social character theory could sharpen and improve. While Bourdieu had little to say about actual violence (Cheliotis 2011), Fromm shows how the social character that is a social cement in normal times can become social dynamite when it no longer connects to a changing world. The sociologist Michael Mann has pioneered the sociological study of fascism, Stalinism and ethnic cleansing but produced a theoretical framework that has little to offer with regards to the social psychology of genocidal-violent leaders as Fromm did in his studies of Stalin, Hitler, Himmler and Mao (Fromm 1973a; Mann 2004). In less dramatic contexts, a synthesis of habitus with social character theory offers a way into understanding the appeal of both Trumpism on



the right and the shallowness of what Maccoby has called the »interactive« character in modern societies that is undermining progressive liberalism and social democracy internationally.

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