ON "CHARACTER": FROMM, RELIGION AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THOUGHT

Sam **HAN**

ABSTRACT: In this article, I discuss the work of Erich Fromm, in particular his engagement with psychoanalytic and religious concepts. I hone on the concept of "character," sometimes referred to as "social character" or "character structure, " explicating its development in relation to the intellectual concerns of the Frankfurt school, specifically its reading of psychoanalytic theory. I argue that investigating Fromm's conceptualization of "character," or "character structure," gains insight into the theoretical split between Fromm and the Frankfurt School, especially Marcuse, suggesting that it has to do with how Fromm conceptualizes religion in his ontological understanding of human being. I conclude with some thoughts regarding the applicability of Fromm for contemporary phenomena, especially in the realm of consumer culture.

SOBRE "CARÁTER": FROMM, RELIGIÃO E PENSAMENTO PSICANALÍTICO

Sam **HAN**

RESUMO: Neste artigo, discuto o trabalho de Erich Fromm, em particular seu engajamento com conceitos psicanalíticos e religiosos. Eu trabalho sobre o conceito de "caráter", às vezes referido como "caráter social" ou "estrutura de caráter", explicando seu desenvolvimento em relação às preocupações intelectuais da Escola de Frankfurt, especificamente sua leitura da teoria psicanalítica. Argumento que investigando a conceitualização de From do "caráter", ou da "estrutura do caráter", ganha-se discernmento acerca da cisão intelectual entre Fromm e a Escola de Frankfurt, especialmente Marcuse, sugerindo que ela tem a ver com como Fromm concebe a religião em seu entendimento ontológico do ser humano. Concluo com alguns pensamentos a respeito da aplicabilidade de From aos fenômenos contemporâneos, especialmente no reino da cultura de consumo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Erich Fromm, psicoanálise, religião, teoria crítica, estrutura caractural.

I

This article is a small contribution toward the larger study of the relationship of religion and psychoanalysis in critical theory, a conceptual entanglement that has received some attention but deserves more. In particular, it examines and treats Erich Fromm's concept of "character," which, I argue, offers insights into how the Frankfurt School incorporated, interpreted and reconstituted psychoanalytic thought. I do so for several reasons.

First, Fromm's earliest intellectual interest, even before his involvement with the Institute in Frankfurt included religion[1]. Although he was not the only figure associated with the institute to be interested in religion (Walter Benjamin was of course a major influence on Adorno and Horkheimer as were Bloch and Lukacs, who wrote on religion also), Fromm's interest in religion, perhaps due to his upbringing couched in the study of the Talmud, is more direct as compared to others. Secondly, Fromm is responsible, as many biographers and historians have noted, for the Institute's standard reading of Freud in the early days, having been one of the only ones to have received analysis and analytic training (with his first wife Fried Reichmann, a psychoanalyst). Moreover, Fromm over the course of his career, attempted to conjoin elements of psychoanalysis, Marxism and religion (broadly defined as he drew from Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism liberally). Thus, Fromm is somewhat of an obvious figure when trying to

---

[1] Braune, Joan. 2014. *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future.* Springer, 17-22.

understand how the Frankfurt School conceptualized religion alongside psychoanalytic thought.

Lastly, after his break with the Institute in the 1930s in New York City, Fromm, it is often noted, began to use a distinct intellectual vocabulary informed by neo-Freudianism, humanism and religious thought, that resonated greatly in America, becoming one of the most widely read intellectuals in the post-war period, but further separated himself from Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. This is often thought of as a "conformist turn"[2]. Yet, as more recent accounts of the Frankfurt School and works by Fromm scholars argue, Fromm's basic political and intellectual orientation shared a good deal in common with the other members of the Frankfurt School even in the period after the break. In fact, as I will return to at the conclusion of the article, Fromm's analysis of consumerism very much coincides with that of Marcuse, a fact most unusual due to Marcuse being one of the most strident of Fromm's critics during that time, with that particularly devastating takedown in Eros and Civilization.

From the outset, I wish to state that the main purpose of this article is not, however, intellectual history or recovery. It is not mean to "set the record straight" nor is it attempting to "bring back" the work of Fromm[3]. It is also not a comprehensive

---

[2] See Jay, Martin. 1996. *The Dialectical Imagination a History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research*, 1923-1950. Berkeley: University of California Press, 104-105.

[3] Others have done this well with respect to Fromm, in particular, recent book-length studies on Fromm, including Braune, Joan. 2014. *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future.* Springer; Friedman, Lawrence J. and Anke M. Schreiber. 2014. T*he Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet.* Reprint edition. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; Durkin, K. 2014. *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm.* Springer.

critique of Fromm's work on religion. More modestly, it is meant to be a critical-interpretive investigation of Fromm's concept of "character" in specific relation to psychoanalytic, religious and moral themes. I argue that investigating Fromm's conceptualization of "character," or "character structure," gains insight into the theoretical split between Fromm and the Frankfurt School, especially Marcuse. My suggestion here is that it has to do with how Fromm conceptualizes religion in his ontological understanding of human being. For Fromm, humans are innately religious in that they require a "frame of orientation" and an "object of devotion." While I will wade into the details of Fromm's ontological understanding of religion below, it is this position that leads Fromm to constitute a strategy to combat alienation and commodification in modern society that veers sharply from that of Marcuse and others. Alienation, for Fromm, is idolatry, the setting up of false gods. It is the end-result of a process of misguided sublimation, and a failure of the character structure.

The article unfolds in the following way. I begin by presenting a brief reading of Critical Theory's incorporating of psychoanalytic theory. While all too brief, my intention is simply to give some context of what Critical Theory's "Freud" looked like. Afterwards, I hone in on the work of Fromm, especially the concept of "character," sometimes referred to as "social character" or "character structure." I explicate the development of the concept of "character" in relation to Fromm's understanding of religion and religiosity. I conclude by attempting to see the feasibility of the "analytic of character" in

contemporary times, as it relates to rather unique phenomena in consumer culture.

II

The widely accepted reading of Freudianism in critical theory has held that the Frankfurt school's oeuvre "sought to integrate the study of the individual psyche within the analysis of cultural forms—an area long neglected by traditional Marxism"[4], as Anthony Elliott, a prominent voice in psychoanalytic social theory, puts it. In stating it this way, we see that psychoanalytic theory becomes a "supplement," in Derrida's sense, of Marxism. It functions to fill the gap left by an economistic understanding of the world, as vulgar Marxism does. In turn, psychoanalysis becomes garnish to an almost already complete Marxist social theory. This sort of reading of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Critical Theory is, of course, problematic but in spite of that, the grain cuts the other way as well. For the Frankfurt School but also their interpreters, Marxism becomes the solution to the problem of psychoanalysis' lack of historical perspective, as Russell Jacoby noted quite some time ago: "If subjectivism is the ill of conformist psychology, an anti-subject objectivity has cursed Marxism. The categories of the individual, psyche, subjectivity have been cast off as immaterial, figuratively and literally, to the material and objective analysis of society"[5]. One could

---

[4] Elliott, Anthony. 1999. *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition*. London ; New York: Free Association Books, 51.

[5] Jacoby, Russell. 1997. *Social Amnesia: a Critique of Contemporary Psychology*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 73.

argue that the project of the Frankfurt school was precisely somewhere between these two tendencies. On the one hand, traditional Marxism lacked a psychological dimension to explain the dominance of the capitalist mode of production beyond hackneyed concepts of "superstructure," "false-consciousness" and "ideology" but on the other, Freudian psychoanalysis also required rethinking in light of contemporary social and political developments.

Just as an example, the operational place and importance of desire in the work of Herbert Marcuse cannot be overstated. The entire concept of "repressive desublimation" relies heavily on the Freudian concepts of "repression" and "sublimation." Indeed, one could argue that Marcuse successfully operationalizes Freud to for a politics of emancipation suited for the time (the 1960s). Eros and Civilization and the more popular One Dimensional Man are still read as complementary volumes articulating the classical position of the Frankfurt School on psychoanalytic theory, contextualizing socio-historically the Freudian notions of "pleasure principle" and "reality principle."

For Freud, the pleasure principle is the name given to the ethos of drive theory. The individual seeks pleasure. It is driven by libido. The reality principle is what happens to libido as it is mediated by the rules and regulations of culture. Since social norms, decorum and injunctions against certain behaviors prohibit the seeking of pleasure in the way that the psyche, in its unfiltered form, wishes to, the ego, because it needs to latch onto some form of release, does so through institutionally accepted means. The reality principle, therefore, is the name

given to what Freud calls the process of sublimation—where the energy of unconscious desire is channeled to more socially acceptable forms of expression.

For Freud, sublimation was slightly better than repression in that it at least directed the libido toward something as opposed to burying it deeper into the psyche. Under late capitalism, and its increasingly technological social relations, however, the reality principle becomes the performance principle. The performance principle finds a position more palatable, and even more enjoyable, for the individual psyche because it offers not repression but something akin to expression. The example that Marcuse furnishes to illustrate this line of argument is the alienated nature of labor and consumption in late capitalism. The "polymorphously perverse" libido is "socialized" and largely desexualized into work. The "good job" uttered by the supervisor is experienced as pleasure as a result of the psychic restructuring inherent in contemporary capitalist social relations. The "horsepower" of a new car promises the thrill of sex but results in a car loan that requires us to return to the workplace in order to pay it off. This is the cycle of capitalist domination. What seems to be "desublimation," that is, the release of energy stemming from a seemingly creative, aesthetic decision about a car, at the same time, dialectically perhaps, "represses."

In the all too brief discussion provided above of a single neologism of Marcuse, we can see the clever intertwining of Marx and Freud, which demonstrates not only philosophical dexterity but serves to provide an appropriate framework for

understanding the culture of consumer capitalism. Jacoby, in his now classic study of psychology, called repressive desublimation an "effort to come to grips with the recent historical dynamic of the psychic dimension," which is "as fluid and historically variable as capital itself"[6]. Jacoby's well-known critique of the attempted synthesis between psychoanalysis and Marxism consists of accusing critical theory, as well as other efforts, of what he refers to as "sociologism."

Oddly enough, sociologism is not simply the sin of focusing too narrowly on objective social forces in understanding social reality but can also result from looking at the individual to too great a degree. "Critical theory," he writes, "sinks into subjectivity till it hits bottom: society." It is here where "subjectivity devolves into objectivity" as a consequence of being "pursued till it issues into the social and historical events that preformed and deformed the subject"[7]. In other words, psychoanalytic theory, in its incorporation by Marxist critique, functions in the negative. This is to say that it is a psychoanalysis that addresses the realities of the "era of synchronized capitalism; it is the theory of the individual in eclipse…under the impact of a massified society"[8]. In a bizarre twist of fate, psychoanalysis, in the hands of Marxism, contributes to the "end" of subjectivity, or so Jacoby argues.

In other words, what replaced subjectivity in critical theory was "character," which is also sometimes "character structure" and "social character." In Escape from Freedom (1941), one of

---

[6] Jacoby, *Social Amnesia,* 100.

[7] Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*, 79. Emphasis added.

[8] Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*, 80.

the most well known of his scholarly books, Fromm includes an appendix entitled "Character and the Social Process." Akin to the methodological appendix in many modern works of social science, Fromm gives a programmatic overview of what I consider to be the major conceptual project of the book, which the rather simple Freudian idea that reactions to external, that is, social and cultural environs form a psychic structure. As he writes, "The social character comprises only a selection of traits, the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group"[9].

But character also has the distinction of being how given society channels human energy to a particular mode of existence. This is done, Fromm suggests, through the building of an emotional matrix of the character structure[10]. The emotional matrix is how certain needs and anxieties are both produced and addressed by the given character structure. Social character, in other words, "internalizes external necessities and thus harnesses human energy for the task of a given economic and social system"[11]. More simply, psychological forces aid in cementing the social structure.

The function of social character, for most persons, leads him or her to act in accordance to the dominant social order as relayed to him or her by the character structure. It leads him or her to do what is necessary to live under the conditions of the culture. For instance, work in the late capitalism of mid-century

---

[9] Fromm, Erich. 1965. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon Books, 277.
[10] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 278.
[11] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 284.

America constitutes not a means of economic survival but also fulfills some existential meaning, which Fromm identified as "the intense desire for unceasing activity" rooted not solely in the desire for accumulation and wealth for its own sake but also as a response to "aloneness and anxiety"[12].

For Fromm then, character's relationship to the social process is a result of the ability of human beings to "dynamically adapt" to the structure of society but also society also producing a character structure that affects the satisfaction of certain needs or anxieties that are produced by a given social structure. Hence, we can see a dialectical relational sketch that he lays out between the given social structure and desire. The emotional matrix, unlike bio-materialist understandings of Freud, is not determined by drive theory[13]. As Fromm states in The Sane Society (1955), the "basic passions…are not rooted in instinctive needs but in specific conditions of human existence"[14]. "Specific conditions" of course implies that there is a historicity to the conditions of the mode of production. Thus, social character functions to "shape the energies" of members of a given society in so far as their behavior unconsciously accords to the dominant

---

[12] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 282.

[13] In fact, the "split" between the Frankfurt School and Fromm became deeper as each side championed a different reading of Freud. For Fromm, drives were socially determined through the constitution of character structure. For Marcuse, and also Horkheimer, this amounted to "revisionism" and a rejection of drive theory altogether. For more detailed discussions of this dynamic, see, McLaughlin, Neil. 1999. "Origin Myths in the Social Sciences: Fromm, the Frankfurt School and the Emergence of Critical Theory." *Canadian Journal of Sociology/ Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 109–39; Jacoby, Russell. 1997. *Social Amnesia: a Critique of Contemporary Psychology*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 13-15; Friedman, Lawrence J. and Anke M. Schreiber. 2014. T*he Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press,197-198.

[14] Fromm, Erich. 1991. *The Sane Society*. London: Routledge, xi.

social order. As Fromm writes, it is "not a matter of conscious decision" but rather acting as one has to and "at the same time finding gratification in acting according to the requirements of the culture"[15]. The "strivings become inherent" as he says[16].

What's striking about this sort of this socialization or historicization of the character structure is that it is rooted in the same basic premise of Marcuse's Freudo-Marxism. In fact, one could read the description of Fromm's argument regarding character structure in The Sane Society and think that it comes very close to "repressive desublimation." Yet, what differentiates Fromm from Marcuse is precisely what "history" means. For Marcuse, as mentioned above, history is the history of the capitalist mode of production. The successive waves of the mode of production operated on the drives in different ways with the result being what Adorno and Horkheimer referred to as the extension of production to the realm of consumption. For Fromm, however, history is the history of relatedness, which begins with religiosity and includes the history of capitalist mode of production[17].

> In the nineteenth century the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead. In the nineteenth century inhumanity meant cruelty; in the twentieth century it means schizoid self-alienation. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots. True enough, robots do not rebel. But given man's nature, robots cannot live and remain sane, they become "Golems," they will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand any longer the boredom of a

---

[15] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 77.
[16] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 78.
[17] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 78.

meaningless life[18].

One could see this as Fromm arriving at the same place as Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer but through a different route. For Fromm, the history of character structure is closely tied to religion. As early as The Dogma of Christ (1930), he suggests that religions offer libidinous satisfactions that fulfill a consolatory function for the "privations exacted by life"[19]. With the reality principle, human beings, while they naturally strive for pleasure, are forced to renounce these impulses but society, in turn, tries to "compensate" for these through "other satisfactions" that are "harmless" to the social order, in most cases, collective fantasies, with religion being the oldest[20].

In modernity, Fromm goes on to argue, there are decreasing opportunities for humans to engage in "meaningful rituals" of such collective fantasies. The "impoverishment of devotional aim"[21] and the subsequent "search for security"[22] were spurred by the Enlightenment, not the capitalist mode of production, which taught humans how to "abolish the conditions of existence" without providing a replacement, at least not an effective one. The Enlightenment, even in Man For Himself, functions as the wellspring of the spiritual/ethical crisis of modernity. As he writes:

> The ideas of the Enlightenment taught man that he could
> trust his own reason as a guide to establishing valid ethical

[18] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 352.

[19] Fromm, Erich. 2004. *The Dogma of Christ: And Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture.* London: Routledge, 17.

[20] Fromm, *Dogma of Christ*, 17.

[21] Fromm, Erich. 1967. *Psychoanalysis and Religion.* New York: Bantam Books, 107.

[22] From, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*,, 4.

norms and that he could rely on himself, needing neither revelation nor the authority of the church in order to know good or evil...The growing doubt of human autonomy and reason has created a state of moral confusion where man is left without the guidance of either revelation or reason... He reverts to a position which the Greek Enlightenment, Christianity, the Renaissance, and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had already overcome. The demands of the State, the enthusiasm for magic qualities of powerful leaders, powerful machines, and material success become the sources for his norms and value judgments[23].

Here, we see how Fromm frames the Enlightenment as responsible for the growing isolation of the individual. Without grounding, the human being ends up reaching towards institutions such as the State and charismatic leaders to fulfill his needs and desires according to the character structure, leaving him or her ultimately alienated.

Subsequently, in the 19th century, alienation consists of the market becoming the prime regulator of all social life, freeing up all the traditional elements that came before it. We have, what Fromm calls, the "hoarding orientation." The hoarding character is practical, economical, careful, reserved and cautious. It is a world entirely made up of things and an ethos driven by their amassment[24]. In the 20th century, the character structure consists of everyone buying as much as they can. Influenced by advertising among other things, the "marketing orientation"[25] is one who cooperates well and consumes, "whose tastes are standardized and can be easily

---

[23] Fromm, Erich. 1947. *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethic.* New York: Rinehart, 5. Emphasis added.

[24] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 89, 92.

[25] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 96.

influenced and anticipated"[26].

The problem emerges as the social character fails, however, to provide genuine joy and happiness. As Lawrence Wilde summarizes it, when the character structure goes from being "productive" to "non-productive" the individual's orientation goes from the "being mode" to "having mode"[27]. The experience, Fromm argues, is commonplace. In modern times, men and women feel increasingly "uneasy and more and more bewildered"[28]. While becoming a "master of nature," the human being has become a "slave of the machine"[29]. Humanity is the creator of his own acts but these acts have their own consequences[30]. Fromm likens this to idolatry[31]. Humanity spends energy and artistic capacity on building an idol and then worships it, despite the fact that it is of their own making. This is precisely "reification" or "thingification." The idol is simply humanity's own "life-force," or Eros, but in alienated form. By submitting to power (in the sense of domination), humanity loses power (in the sense of potency)[32].

Thus, for Fromm, alienation, character structure, and religiosity/morality are interrelated concepts. Alienation emerges when the character structure can only satisfy the "individual's character-conditioned behavioral needs" but not

---

[26] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 96.
[27] Wilde, Lawrence. 2001. "Against Idolatry: The Humanistic Ethics of Erich Fromm." Pp. 71–94 in *Marxism's Ethical Thinkers*, edited by L. Wilde. Palgrave Macmillan UK, p. 76.
[28] Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 4.
[29] Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 4.
[30] Fromm, *The Sane Society,* 117.
[31] Fromm, *The Sane Society,*118.
[32] Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 246.

the human being's "inherent religious needs," meaning "a frame of orientation and an object of devotion"[33]. Alienation for the individual becomes a moral problem as it translates, on the social level, to commodification.

> Our moral problem is man's indifference to himself. It lies in the fact that we have lost the sense of significance and uniqueness of the individual, that we have made ourselves into instruments for purposes outside of ourselves, that we experience and treat ourselves as commodities, and that our own powers have become things and our neighbors have become things[34].

Fromm's account of this growing indifference is, therefore, an "ethico-psychological account of what commodity fetishism does to human relations and mental health"[35].

It is what Paul Tillich, who coincidentally was also associated with the Frankfurt school[36], would identify as the loss of "the ultimate concern" associated with anxiety or dread[37].

III

Fromm's understanding of the interimplication of character, psychoanalysis and religiosity/morality drives what can be called Fromm's "project" of "humanistic ethics." As Wilde sympathetically describes it, "Fromm, in effect, is appealing for an end to the worship of false gods"[38]. So what sort of proper gods would replace the false ones of the "having

---

[33] Fromm, Erich. 2013. *To Have or To Be?* London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 135.

[34] Fromm, *Man for Himself,* 248.

[35] Fromm, *Man for Himself,* 250.

[36] Carey, John Jesse. 1984. *Theonomy and Autonomy: Studies in Paul Tillich's Engagement with Modern Culture.* Mercer University Press.

[37] Tillich, Paul. 2009. *Dynamics of Faith.* New York: HarperOne.

[38] Wilde, "Against Idolatry," 76.

mode," namely, "the pursuit of money, prestige and power," which prevents us from recognizing the interests of our real [selves]"?[39] What deities would orient us to towards "being"? What would be the new frame of orientation and new object of devotion?

Fromm provides a rather tricky answer. In line with his position on humanistic ethics, he suggests that the religion of "New Man"[40] could not resemble "authoritarian religion, in which the emphasis is on submission to an all-powerful deity" such as the patriarchal form of Christianity established under Luther nor the industrial religion of capitalism. It must only approximate "humanistic religion, in which the emphasis is on the empowerment of men and women." If indeed, Fromm were calling for nothing short of a "religious-like reverence for humanity, for what makes us truly human, our capacity to love and create"[41], what would that exactly look like? Moreover, as he so rightly pointed out, other phenomena so easily attempt to satisfy these religious needs of human beings. In point of fact, the many non-productive orientations that Fromm speaks of, including the hoarding and marketing orientations, are precisely examples of such.

As Fromm stated, while religion is simply the oldest of collective fantasies that emerged in order to provide the character structure, there are other expressions of collective fantasies such as "poetry, art and philosophy"[42] that emerge

---

[39] Ibid., 76,.

[40] Fromm, *To Have or To Be?*, 168.

[41] Wilde, "Against Idolatry," 76.

[42] Fromm, *Dogma of Christ*, 17.

to provide a frame of orientation and object of devotion to the human being. Indeed, one of the major points of criticism delivered by Marcuse is precisely on this point regarding Fromm's humanism, which he saw as deficiently emancipatory. While I do not share the degree of Marcuse's charge, there is clearly a question of how one can tell the difference between what is a virtuous collective fantasy and what is not. He states himself:

> The question is not one of religion or not? but of which kind of religion?—whether it is one that furthers human development, the unfolding of specifically human powers, or one that paralyzes human growth[43].

Religion is a "character trait" of human beings. Thus, it is not a matter whether we can do without religion but a question of which religion we adhere to. As Rainer Funk writes:

> Whether the need for a frame of orientation an object of devotion is satisfied by an institutionalized religion or by other important ideological, political and social entities is just as much a question of economic and social conditions (which have great influence on the method of satisfying psychic needs) as is the question of which religion or general religious direction is favored…Religion or politics, social change or the experience of God are only two different approaches to the same phenomenon: the fact that psychic needs are satisfied through the furthering of certain passionate strivings, according to the socio-economic environment[44].

This matter becomes especially thorny when considering all that is out there "competing" with humanistic religion for satisfaction or renunciation. Phillip Rieff, in defining culture,

---

[43] Fromm, *To Have Or To Be?*, 135.

[44] Funk, Rainer. 1988. "Biophilia and Fromm's Criticism of Religion." Pp. 215–22 in *Incontro con Erich Fromm*, edited by P. Eletti. Edzioni Medicea. Retrieved August 29, 2016 (https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-Fromm/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/9879/file/Funk_R_1988c.pdf).

uses language similar to that of Fromm's "character." Culture is "a design of motives directing the self outward, toward those communal purposes in which alone the self can be realized and satisfied"[45].

Consumer culture, which Fromm mentions often, is a rather obvious example of this. The act of consumption, he writes, satisfies artificially stimulated fantasies. It gives us what he calls "push button power feeling"[46]. You do nothing but you do not have to know anything, as he puts it. This attains a compulsive quality as well where consuming is detached from pleasure. This form of consumerism can be seen as having religious qualities to it, meaning that the system of orientation and objective of devotion become newer and better commodities.

Therefore, one wonders whether consumerism does indeed result in alienation, as Fromm seems to suggest. Paolo Virno argues that the "emotional situation" of contemporary capitalism and "so-called advanced technologies" do not provoke alienation but rather nihilism[47]. Franco "Bifo" Berardi argues that nihilism today affirms the primary force of money in today's form of "absolute capitalism." It is absolute because it is emancipated from all limitations, especially moral ones. Nihilism then is a positive and constructive implication of this moral freedom that characterizes contemporary consumer culture[48].

We see evidence of this in the South Korean phenomenon

---

[45] Rieff, *The triumph of the therapeutic*, 4.

[46] Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 133.

[47] Virno, Paolo. 1996. "The Ambivalence of Disenchatnment." in *Radical thought in Italy: a potential politics*, edited by P. Virno and M. Hardt. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 13-16.

[48] Berardi, Franco. 2015. *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*. New York: Verso, 89-90.

of mukbang, live broadcasts of people eating enormous amounts of food while interacting and chatting with an audience watching from home on their computers or out and about on their smartphones. Mukbang is a portmanteau of the words "to eat" and "broadcast." On Internet platforms such as Afreeca TV and Naver, which provide peer-to-peer online streaming services, these "BJs" (broadcast jockeys) eat, in the case of one very famous BJ who goes by Diva, four large pizzas in one sitting. Scholars have suggested that the cultural emphasis on eating together in Korea has made mukbang so popular. As one expert says, "For Koreans, eating is an extremely social, communal activity, which is why even the Korean word 'family' means 'those who eat together'"[49]. Therefore, in an era where the number of single households is on the rise in Korea, the chance to watch and interact with someone eating is one that somehow alleviates that loneliness[50]. This analysis would certainly hold up if not for the significant fact that the live streams consist not of individuals watching each other eat but rather binging on food. In fact, another mukbang BJ on Afreeca TV named Fairy has said that she has eaten three large pizzas and three whole fried chickens in a day[51]. Mukbang is clearly as much

[49] Cha, Frances. 2014. "South Korea's Online Trend: Paying to Watch a Pretty Girl Eat." CNN. Retrieved August 28, 2016 (http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/29/world/asia/korea-eating-room/index.html).

[50] Chun, Sung-woo and Hunny Jeong. 2013. "Home Alone: Growth of Single Households in Korea." *The Korea Herald*. Retrieved August 28, 2016 (http://news.asiaone.com/news/asia/home-alone-growth-single-households-korea).

[51] Geary, Belinda Grant. 2015. "South Korea's Binge Eating TV Stars Eat Enough Food to Feed a Family in One Sitting | Daily Mail Online." *Daily Mail Australia*, October 20. Retrieved August 28, 2016 (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3280245/Meet-South-Korea-s-binge-eating-TV-stars-Thousands-mukbang-viewers-tune-watch-young-women-eat-food-feed-family-one-sitting.html).

about excess as it is about dealing with loneliness.

If mukbang is an example of amoral nihilism in the form of spectacular excess, then the phenomena of the KonMari method embodies the nihilism of a different style. An organizational consultant from Japan, Marie Kondo has taken the US by storm with her method of tidying up. Advocating a spiritual approach to organizing our stuff, Kondo encourages us to go through every object we own and ask why we own that particular object. Does the item "spark joy," a key phrase in the KonMari nomenclature? Does it embody tokimeku, a word that in Japanese means flutter or throb? If not, you thank the item for what it has done for you thus far and let it go.

> Just as the word implies, mementos are reminders of a time when these items gave us joy. The thought of disposing them sparks the fear that we'll lose those precious memories along with them. But you don't need to worry. Truly precious memories will never vanish even if you discard the objects associated with them … No matter how wonderful things used to be, we cannot live in the past. The joy and excitement we feel in the here and now are most important[52]

As these words from her New York Times best-selling book The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up suggest, the KonMari method is an exercise is mental clarity. It is, as she insists, a means to an end not an end in itself. By decluttering our things, we are able to spend more time on our true "mission in life."

On the surface, Marie Kondo's method reflects a spiritualized ethic of conservation, that is, keeping what you really like.

---

[52] Kondō, Marie. 2015. *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying*. Random House UK Limited.

However, in the last analysis, her method produces a good deal of waste. With the already high global demand for fast fashion keeping wages deplorably low and resulting in "starvation conditions" for those who work in CMT (cut-make-trim) factories in India, Bangladesh and Cambodia[53], the KonMari method seems to mirror mukbang's sweet ignorance of what their actions may mean.

While mukbang and KonMari may embody the disposability that is at the heart of consumer culture today, for many involved, both mukbang and KonMari seem to entail an earnest attempt at intimacy and resistance. Both mukbang and KonMari are articulated as attempts at overriding contemporary social trends—in the case of South Korea, loneliness and in the case of the United States, hoarding. This idolatrous, non-productive collective fantasy, as Fromm would put it, still does something at the level of the psyche.

When Virno, rightly, suggests that "inauthenticity" and "artificial experiences" have been integrated into the core of production, which has occurred through the continual integration of the worker into the general context of capitalism, he is not only speaking to Marx's notion of "real subsumption"[54], he is also speaking in the tradition of Fromm, who clearly saw how consumerism was the sublimated effect of the alienated and commodified character structure of the 20th century capitalism. One is left but to wonder whether the experience

---

[53] Siegle, Lucy. 2010. "Britain's Appetite for Fast Fashion Is Pushing Workers into Starvation Conditions." *The Guardian*, August 8. Retrieved August 28, 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/08/fashion-sweatshops-lucy-siegle-comment).

[54] Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment," 29.

of commodification even registers today in the nihilist social character of that of the 21st century. For Fromm, the crafting of a humanistic ethics that allowed human beings to be empowered and develop the capacity to love required some form of unease or dissatisfaction at the state of affairs. This assessment may have been too hopeful. But there is no doubt that his work stands as an important resource for understanding contemporary phenomena like mukbang and KonMari, which seem detached from sort of "devotion" except to itself. Eating eventually begets a greater appetite, and the "departing" with clothing begets more shopping. In our supposedly secular age, to speak of these phenomena as "religious" in a real sense, is significant in understanding them in their totality. Perhaps the lesson of Fromm is that religion is still very much part of our all-too-human worlds.

References

Bell, D. (1978). The Return of the Sacred: The Argument about the Future of Religion. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 31(6), 29–55.

Berardi, F. *Heroes: mass murder and suicide.* New York: Verso, 2015

Braune, Joan. *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future.* Springer, 2014).

Calhoun, C., Mendieta, E., & VanAntwerpen, J. (2013). *Habermas and Religion.* John Wiley & Sons.

Carey, J. J. *Theonomy and Autonomy: Studies in Paul Tillich's Engagement with Modern Culture.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984.

Cha, F. (2014, February 3). South Korea's online trend: Paying

to watch a pretty girl eat. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/29/world/asia/korea-eating-room/index.html

Chun, S., & Jeong, H. (2013, November 24). Home alone: Growth of single households in Korea. Retrieved from http://news.asiaone.com/news/asia/home-alone-growth-single-households-korea

Durkin, K. *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm.* Springer, 2014.

Elliott, A. *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition.* London ; New York: Free Association Books, 1999.

Friedman, L. J., & Schreiber, A. M. *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (Reprint edition). New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Fromm, Erich. *Man for himself: an inquiry into the psychology of ethic.* New York: Rinehart, 1974.

Fromm, Erich. *Escape from freedom.* New York: Avon Books, 1965.

Fromm, Erich. *Psychoanalysis and religion.* New York: Bantam Books, 1967.

Fromm, Erich. *The sane society.* London: Routledge, 1991.

Fromm, Erich. *On Being Human.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997.

Fromm, Erich. *The Dogma of Christ: And Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture.* London: Routledge.

Fromm, Erich. *To Have or To Be?* London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

Funk, Rainer. 1988. "Biophilia and Fromm's Criticism of Religion." Pp. 215–22 in *Incontro con Erich Fromm*, edited by P. Eletti. Edzioni Medicea. Retrieved August 29, 2016 (https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-Fromm/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/9879/file/Funk_R_1988c.pdf).

Geary, B. G. (2015, October 20). South Korea's binge eating TV stars eat enough food to feed a family in one sitting | Daily Mail Online. Daily Mail Australia. Retrieved from http://www.

dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3280245/Meet-South-Korea-s-binge-eating-TV-stars-Thousands-mukbang-viewers-tune-watch-young-women-eat-food-feed-family-one-sitting.html

Habermas, Jürgen. *Modernity—an incomplete project.* In H. Foster (Ed.), Postmodern culture (pp. 3–15). London: Pluto Press, 1985.

Habermas, Jürgen, & Mendieta, E. *Religion and rationality: essays on reason, God, and modernity.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press., 2002.

Jacoby, R. *Social amnesia: a critique of contemporary psychology.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997.

Jay, M. *The Dialectical Imagination a History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Kondō, M. The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying. Random House UK Limited, 2015.

McLaughlin, N. Origin myths in the social sciences: Fromm, the Frankfurt School and the emergence of critical theory. Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie, 1999, 109–139.

Palladino, V. (2016, April 29). Mukbang and Hauls: The rise of super-indulgent eating and shopping videos. Retrieved August 28, 2016, from http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2016/04/mukbang-and-hauls-the-rise-of-super-indulgent-eating-and-shopping-videos/

Rieff, P. T*he triumph of the therapeutic: uses of faith after Freud.* 1966.

Siegle, Lucy. 2010. "Britain's Appetite for Fast Fashion Is Pushing Workers into Starvation Conditions." The Guardian, August 8. Retrieved August 28, 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/08/fashion-sweatshops-lucy-siegle-comment).

Tillich, P. *Dynamics of Faith.* New York: HarperOne, 2009.

Virno, P. The Ambivalence of Disenchatnment. In P. Virno & M. Hardt (Eds.), *Radical thought in Italy: a potential politics.*

Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Wilde, L. Against Idolatry: The Humanistic Ethics of Erich Fromm. In L. Wilde (Ed.), *Marxism's Ethical Thinkers* (pp. 71–94). Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2001.

Wilde, L. *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity.* Springer, 2016.