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Psychoanalytic Characterology and Its Application to the Understanding of Culture

Erich Fromm
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Psychoanalytic characterology dates back to Freud's paper on „Character and Anal-Eroticism“, published in 1908. This paper marks the shift of attention from the neurotic *symptom* to the neurotic *character*. Freud and his fellow workers became increasingly aware of the fact that any symptom was embedded in a person's character; hence that in order to understand and to cure a symptom one has to understand the total character structure. They proceeded from the analysis of the symptom to the analysis of the character. They were led to this shift of emphasis not only by theoretical considerations, but also by the fact that many patients did not complain about isolated symptoms like a washing compulsion, hysterical vomiting, claustrophobia, etc., but about character difficulties which prevented them from attaining inner security and happiness.

Freud's theory of character was composed of two different sets of assumptions and observations. One was that Freud became more and more impressed by the dynamic nature of character traits. He saw that character traits were not mere habits of behavior acquired by early training and easily shed when new, patterns of culture emerged, but that they were *relatively permanent passionate strivings*, the „forces by which man is motivated“, as Balzac defined character.

He recognized behind the rationalizations which made it appear as if the character was nothing but an adequate reaction to external necessities, the rigidity and tenacity of the character trait even if under changed circumstances the character trait becomes useless or even harmful; furthermore he understood the gratification and pleasure which, often unconsciously, resulted from behavior in accordance with the character traits.

The second premise on which Freud's characterology was built was the assumption that all connative, passionate strivings, besides those of self preservation, have their roots in sexual, libidinous desires.

These two assumptions, (1) the passionate nature of character traits and (2) the sexual nature of passion result in a theoretical difficulty: How can one explain something as manifold and varied as character traits by the one factor, libido ?

Freud bridged this contradiction by an ingenious and brilliant construction. He pro-



ceeded from his broad concept of sexuality which comprised all physical sensations connected with pleasure (particularly the oral and anal libido) and explained various character traits as sublimation of (or reaction formation against) the various kinds of pre-genital libido. The libido was assumed to develop from primitive pre-genital forms to the mature genital orientation and the various character orientations were explained as outcome of those different phases of libido development.

Environmental factors were not neglected in Freud's concept but their effect was explained entirely in terms of the libido theory. Freud assumed that by the child's experiences with the significant persons in his early life his libido is influenced and moulded in certain ways; thus that the character development is determined by the *impact of environmental influences on the libido*. Clearly in this view early experiences, feeding, toilet training, the various forms of maternal care are considered the most significant data for the theory of character.

An increasing number of anthropologists and psychoanalysts recognized the significance of psychoanalytic characterology for the understanding of the problems of culture. If the character structure determines action, feelings and thoughts of an individual it must be a key factor for the understanding of cultural and social phenomena which are, after all, the products of so many individuals.

In this attempt to apply the findings of psychoanalysis to the problem of culture three main approaches can be distinguished :

The orthodox Freudian approach.

The modified Freudian approach.

The socio-psychological approach.

(1) The assumption underlying the orthodox Freudian approach was that social phenomena and cultural patterns are to be explained as direct outcomes of certain libidinal trends. Thus, for instance, capitalism was explained as a result of anal eroticism or war as the result of the operation of the death instinct. The method used here was that of explanation by analogy. One tried to discover analogies between cultural phenomena and neurotic symptoms of a patient and then proceeded to explain the cultural phenomenon as being „caused“ by the same libidinous factors by which the neurotic symptom had been explained.¹ While this method has receded in the background as far as psychoanalysts themselves are concerned it has been taken up recently by psychiatrists who do not belong to the psychoanalytic school. One of the outstanding examples of this recent development is R. Brickner's „Are the Germans paranoid?“ where a method of crude analogizing united with insufficient knowledge of factual data is used to prove the paranoid character of German culture.

(2) The modified Freudian approach represented in A. Kardiner's work² differs from the orthodox approach by paying serious attention to the available anthropological and

¹ Cf. E. Fromm, „Die Entstehung des Christudogmas“, Psychoanalytischer Verlag, Wien, 1930, where I discussed the fallacy of this method

² A. Kardiner, „The Individual and Its Society“, Columbia University Press, New York, 1940, and „The Psychological Frontiers of Society“, Columbia University Press, New York, 1945.



social data and by studying methods of child training and their impact on the development of personality. But in spite of these merits Kardiner's approach has over the naive orthodox approach they are similar in important respects. Kardiner believes that „the basic personality“ is moulded by various methods of child training and in turn moulds the social patterns and institutions. By childhood training he understands the impact of parental influence on those primitive physiological functions which Freud called „erogenous zones“. Hence methods of nursing, toilet training, etc., are the paramount data for the understanding of culture.

That Kardiner's theory is essentially based on Freud's libido concept becomes particularly clear in one of his key concepts, that of maternal care. He explains differences in basic personality, hence in culture, by differences in maternal care. But while weaning and sphincter control are mentioned among the main characteristics of maternal care the concept of love is not even mentioned. On the other hand we find „constancy of attention“ mentioned without reference to the totality of the mother-child relationship. Quite obviously the constant attention of the loving mother has an entirely different meaning and impact from the constant attention of a possessive and dominating mother.

Kardiner considers certain socio-economic factors as causative for the development of the basic personality but unfortunately this emphasis is more apparent than real. He mentions, e.g. that in Alor women have to work in the fields and therefore do not give good maternal care to their children. Here a socio-economic factor is introduced but it is viewed only in its, as it were, technical effect on maternal care-constancy of feeding and attention. In a theory which is centered around the quality of interpersonal relatedness the most relevant datum would be that of the mother's attitude toward the child, i.e. her love, warmth, acceptance and so on; obviously the expression of love and warmth is not seriously interfered with by the mother's working in the fields just as the expression of possessiveness is not interfered with by regular nursing and „constancy of attention“.

(3) The socio-psychological approach which has been suggested in my own writings³ centers around the concept of the „social character“. By social character I refer to the nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture in contradistinction to the *individual character* in which people belonging to the same culture differ from each other. The concept of the social character is not a statistical concept in the sense that it is the sum total of character traits to be found in the majority of people in a given culture. It can be understood only in reference to the function of the social character which we shall now proceed to discuss.

Each society is structuralized and operates in certain ways which are necessitated by a number of objective conditions; such conditions are the methods of production and distribution which in turn depend on raw material, industrial techniques, climate, etc., furthermore political and geographical factors and cultural traditions and influences to

³ „Über Methode und Aufgabe einer analytischen Sozialpsychologie“ (On method and aim of analytic social psychology) , and „Die psychoanalytische Charakterologie und ihre Bedeutung für die Sozialpsychologie“ (Psychoanalytic Characterology and its significance for Social Psychology), in Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, Hirschfeld, Leipzig, 1932; „Escape from Freedom“, Rinehart & Co., New York, 1941; „Man for Himself“, Rinehart & Co., New York, 1947.



which society is exposed. There is no „society“ in general but only specific social structures which operate in different and ascertainable ways. Although these social structures do change in the course of historical development, they are relatively fixed at any given historical period and society can exist only by operating within the framework of its particular structure. The members of the society and/or the various classes or status groups within it have to behave in such a way as to be able to function in the sense required by society. It is the function of the social character to shape the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behavior is not left to conscious decisions whether or not to follow the social pattern but that *people want to act as they have to act* and at the same time find gratification in acting according to the requirements of the culture. In other words, the social character has the function of molding human energy for the purpose of the functioning of a given society.⁴

Modern, industrial society, for instance, could not have attained its ends had it not harnessed the energy of free men for work in an unprecedented degree. He had to be moulded into a person who was eager to spend most of his energy for the purpose of work, who acquired discipline, particularly orderliness and punctuality, to a degree unknown in most other cultures. It would not have sufficed if each individual had to make up his mind consciously every day that he wanted to work, to be on time, etc., since any such conscious deliberation would have led to many more exceptions than the smooth functioning of society can afford. Threat and force would not have sufficed either as motive for work since the highly differentiated work in modern industrial society can only be the work of free men and not of forced labor. The *necessity* for work, for punctuality and orderliness had to be transformed into a *drive* for these qualities. This means that society had to produce such a social character in which these strivings were inherent.

The *genesis* of the social character cannot be understood by referring to one single cause but by understanding the interaction of economic, ideological and sociological factors. Inasmuch as the political and economical factors are less easily changeable they have a certain predominance in this interplay. However, religious, political and philosophical ideas are not only projective systems. While they are rooted in the social character they in turn also determine the social character, and particularly systematize and stabilize it. Basic human needs rooted in the nature of man play also an active role in this interplay. While it is true that man can adapt himself to almost any condition, he is not a blank sheet of paper on which culture writes its text. Needs inherent in his nature like the striving for happiness, for harmony, for love, for freedom are dynamic factors in the historical process which when frustrated give rise to psychic reactions which in the long run tend to create conditions which are better suited for these basic human needs. As long as the objective conditions of the society and the culture remain stable, the social character has a predominately stabilizing function. If the external conditions change in such a way that they do not fit any more with the tradition and social character, a *lag* arises which often makes the character function as an element of disintegration instead of stabilization, as dynamite instead of a social mortar, as it were. Provided this concept of the genesis and function of the social character is correct we are confronted with a

⁴ There are essential points in common between this concept and Ralph Linton's Concept of the „status personality“.



puzzling problem. Is not the assumption that the character structure is molded by the role which the individual has to play in his culture contradicted by the assumption that a person's character is molded in his childhood? Can both views pretend to be true in view of the fact that the child in his early years of life has comparatively little contact with society as such? This question is not as difficult to answer as it may seem at first glance. We must differentiate between the factors which are responsible for the particular *contents* of the social character and the *methods* by which the social character is produced. The structure of society and the task of the individual in the social structure may be considered to be the cause of the social character. The family on the other hand may be considered to be the *psychic agency of society*, the institution which has the function of transmitting the requirements of society to the growing child. The family fulfills this function in two ways. First, and this is the most important factor, by the influence the character of the parents has on the character formation of the growing child. Since the character of most parents is an expression of the social character, they transmit in this way the essential features of the socially desirable character structure to the child. The parents' love and happiness are communicated to the child just as their anxiety or hostility. In addition to the character of the parents the methods of childhood training which are customary in a culture also have the function to mould the character of the child in a socially desirable direction. But indeed there are various methods and techniques of child training which can fulfill the same end, and on the other hand there can be methods which seem to be identical and which nevertheless are different because of the character structure of those who practice these methods. By focusing on methods of child training we can never explain the social character. Methods of child training are significant only as a mechanism of transmission and they can be understood correctly only if we understand first what kinds of personalities are desirable and necessary in any given culture. This application of psychoanalysis to culture is greatly furthered by a revision of Freud's libido theory. If character formation is caused by the impact of environment on the development of pre-genital sexuality then indeed the methods of childhood training are the *prima causa* of the social character. A theory however which sees the character molded by the kind of interpersonal relationship as it exists and must exist in a given social structure must be, to use H. S. Sullivan's term, a theory of *interpersonal relationship*. Freud's concept of man was in accordance with nineteenth century materialism. He saw the individual as an isolated entity, endowed with certain drives rooted in his inner chemistry. The theory of interpersonal relationship is relational; it explains human personality in terms of the relatedness of the individual to people, to the world outside, and to himself.

Let us take Freud's concept of the anal character as an illustration. He assumes that the various traits he found together in the syndrome of the anal character were either sublimations of, or reaction formations to, the anal libido. Parsimony he explained as a sublimation of the pregenital wish to retain the stools; cleanliness as a reaction formation to the pleasure of playing with feces; orderliness, punctuality and obstinacy as traits having their roots in the early battle of the child against the mother, who demands surrender in the field of toilet training. While, in my opinion, the description of anal character as Freud and others gave it, is correct clinically, and indeed one of the greatest contributions in the field of characterology, the theoretical explanation is not tenable,



unless we take it in a symbolic sense.

What Freud called the anal character can be understood as a particular kind of relatedness to the world. He is a person withdrawn, living in a fortified position, whose aim is to ward off all outside influences and to avoid letting anything from this entrenched position be carried into the outside world; on the contrary he wants as much as possible to be brought in from the outside and kept in this entrenched position, autarchically. For this character, isolation spells security; love and intimacy or closeness on the other hand spell danger. On the basis of this concept Freud's syndrome of the anal character to be understood in the following way: Stinginess is an attempt to fortify this person's isolated position, to make it as strong as possible, and not to let anything go out of this entrenched position. Cleanliness is to be understood as in many religious rituals as an attempt to ward off contact with the outside world, which is felt to be dangerous and threatening. Orderliness, in Freud's sense of compulsive orderliness, is an attempt to put things in their place, to ward them off. Things, so to speak must not have a life of their own; they must be put in their place so that they cannot intrude upon or overwhelm the isolated position of this „orderly“ personality.

What holds true for orderliness also holds true for punctuality. Punctuality is putting the world in its place in terms of time, while orderliness is putting it in its place in terms of space. Stubbornness is the expression of the same warding-off process in relation to people which punctuality or orderliness is in relation to things. It is the constant „no“ against any person felt to intrude, and from the standpoint of this isolated position any suggestion, demand or even hope is felt as intrusion.

While we have the theoretical concepts which permit the study of the social character, we have hardly started to apply psychoanalytic characterology to the study of culture. I believe that the reasons for this situation are to be found in the fact that many social psychologists avoid studying the problems that really matter. One of the reasons for this attitude seems to be the fetish of the „Scientific Method“. Social scientists have been greatly impressed by the success of exact science and try to imitate its method. Unfortunately their picture of scientific methods is more that of natural sciences which they learned in school twenty years ago than that of contemporary, most advanced types of science, particularly theoretical physics. Many social scientists believe that unless phenomena can be studied in a way which permits of exact and quantitative analysis they must not be studied at all. Instead of devising methods for the problems which are important, they rather devote their energy to less important problems in order to fit their concept of a scientific method. Our lack of knowledge, even of studies which tend to bring about such knowledge, is appalling indeed.

What, for instance, do we know about the happiness of people in our culture? True enough many people would answer in an opinion poll that they were happy because this is what a self-respecting citizen is supposed to feel. But the degree of real happiness or unhappiness is anybody's guess; yet this knowledge alone would answer the question whether our institutions fulfill the purpose they are devised for: the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Or what do we know about the degree to which ethical considerations and not plain fear of disapproval or punishment influence the behavior of modern man? From kindergarten to school and church, tremendous expenditures in energy and money are made to increase the weight of ethical motivation. Yet we hardly know any-



thing about the success of these efforts beyond mere guesswork.

Or to take another illustration. What do we know of the degree and intensity of the destructive forces to be found in the average person in our culture? While it cannot be denied that our hopes for peaceful and democratic development depend largely on the assumption that the average man is not possessed by intense destructiveness nothing has been done to ascertain the facts. The opinion that most people are basically very destructive is as unproven as the opinion that the opposite is true. Social scientists so far have done little to shed light on this crucial issue.

These problems of happiness, ethical motivation and destructiveness must be studied in the larger concept of the character structure prevailing in any given culture and in sub-groups of this culture. They must be part of extensive studies of the character structure typical of various nations, of their „national characters“. It must be emphasized again that such studies must be not focused on childhood training but *on the structure of the society as a whole*, on the functions of the individual in this structure. They must understand childhood training in the context of the social structure, and particularly as one of the *key mechanisms of transmission of social necessities into character traits*. Social psychologists with a knowledge of depth psychology and of sociology and culture, must go into the field as anthropologists have done for many years and work out methods for such studies. This is not a task without great difficulties but they are not insurmountable. However, the difficulties will be overcome only if social scientists become convinced of the necessity of tackling these problems and of devising methods appropriate to the problems rather than to focus on problems which fit the traditional method.