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Humanistic Transformation and the Ego-Oriented Social Character

Rainer Funk

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Abstract: This paper explores Erich Fromm's significant scientific contribution through his development of a theory and method that elucidates the representation of society within the individual through their psychic structure formation, termed the "social character." Initially, an outline of Fromm's theory and methodology is presented, highlighting his insights into the formation of various social characters and examining their alienating and pathogenic impacts as "socially patterned defects". Using the example of the authoritarian character conceived by Fromm, it is relatively easy to understand from a historical distance what the "socially patterned defects" consist of and how a *humanistic* transformation ought to look. This will be illustrated in a second part. Since the formation of social character is time-related, the third part uses Fromm's theory and method to analyze the effects of the digital revolution on the formation of social character. The "Ego-oriented social character" I have identified distinguishes itself from both the marketing character and narcissistic social character formations. This is reflected last but not least in the "socially patterned defects" of a pronounced ego weakness, which will be discussed in conclusion.

The most important source for Erich Fromm's theory of a *humanistic* transformation is undoubtedly his 1955 book *The Sane Society*, in which Fromm puts a whole series of theories and strategies of transformation to the test (see Fromm, 1955, pp. 270–352). Fromm sees their failure primarily in the fact that how the different "socio-economic, spiritual, and psychological explanations are interrelated, and how they interact" (Fromm, 1955, p. 271) is not recognized:

If I believe that 'the' cause of the illness is economic, *or* spiritual, *or* psychological, I necessarily believe that remedying 'the' cause leads to sanity. (...) Their results were almost complete failure. The preaching of the Gospel led to the establishment of



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the Catholic Church; the teachings of the rationalists of the eighteenth century to Robespierre and Napoleon; the doctrines of Marx to Stalin. (Fromm, 1955, pp. 271–272)

His starting point for a *humanistic* theory of transformation is described by the 55-year-old Fromm as follows:

Man is a unit; his thinking, feeling, and his practice of life are inseparably connected. He cannot be free in his thought when he is not free emotionally; and he cannot be free emotionally if he is dependent and unfree in his practice of life, in his economic and social relations. (Fromm, 1955, p. 272)

If *humanistic* transformation is the main interest, then the question of social character always plays an important role where changes in human motivations and strivings are concerned, which shall lead to a different way of thinking, feeling and acting. Fromm's social character theory can sharpen the view to recognize those deficits of the human and humanly possible and to name the special economic, work-organizational and social preconditions for their reactivation, so that a *humanistic* transformation does not remain only a nice thought, but is realized in the factual thinking, feeling and acting of the many people.

In a first part, I outline which theory and method Erich Fromm developed in order to do justice to the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and socio-economic conditions as a prerequisite for any kind of transformation.

1. Erich Fromm's social-psychoanalytical approach

Erich Fromm's decisive scientific contribution can be seen in the fact that Fromm can not only explain how the uniqueness of each human being manifests itself in psychic structural formations, which then leads to a particular thinking, feeling, and acting in this individual, but he can also explain how society is represented in the individual with their own psychic structure formation—the social character (Fromm, 1992 [1937]; 1941, pp. 277–299; 1962; see Funk, 2019, pp. 54–65; 2022; 2023).

This social character is the reason that a multitude of individuals displays similar patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting and that all tend to strive for what a particular society needs for its existence and functioning. The uniform will and striving of the many, made possible by the social character formation, thus psychologically forms the cement of a given society.

With the theory of a social character formation in every individual, Fromm postulates a psychological representation of the requirements of social coexistence in the individual, which is an expression of the primary sociality of the human being. The social character allows the mental impulses of a society to be explored in detail. With the concept of



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social character, Fromm does justice to the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and socio-economic conditions and shows that every transformation of human behavior requires a change in social character.

Let us ask a bit more precisely how Fromm arrived at such a social-psychoanalytic approach.

Two questions can be recognized that preoccupied Fromm throughout his life. The first question is: *What makes many people think, feel, and act similarly?* He already pursued this question in his dissertation from 1922 (Fromm, 1989 [1922]). Fromm asked what makes Jewish people who lived in the Diaspora—i.e., without protection and external support by national and state institutions—think, feel, and act similarly. Fromm identified the shared religious ethos as the reason for similar thinking, feeling, and acting. The basic idea that a certain life practice leads to internal strivings and behavior patterns already defined Fromm's thinking at a time when he did not yet know Freud's psychoanalysis—and long before he came into contact with the ideas of the Frankfurt School. (Therefore, anyone researching Fromm's social psychology should start with his 1922 dissertation).

Fromm's acquaintance with Freud's psychoanalysis later led to a first paradigm shift. The internalized ethos forms are now to be understood as psychic impulses, although these must not be blindly believed, according to Freud.

The possibility that irrational and dysfunctional strivings also determine human thought, feeling, and action even without the individual being aware of these impulses was the long-sought answer to another question that dominated Fromm's scientific thinking throughout his life, namely the question, "*How is it possible?*" (Fromm, 1962, p. 4)] The adolescent Fromm asked: Why does a woman commit suicide and want to be buried at the side of her recently deceased father? Or: Why did the Germans go to a deadly war in 1914 with such enthusiasm? What unconscious forces are at work here, and how do they develop?

The answer Freud gave with his drive theories impressed Fromm mainly because the repression of libidinous desires, strivings, and fantasies is not out of the world but recurs in disguised form in irrational, inhibited, self-harming strivings and behavior patterns. Freud's explanation that such impulses derive their drive energy from innate drives that seek satisfaction and, in so doing, come into conflict with the demands of society and culture so that they must be repressed was inconsistent with Fromm's idea that a particular life practice leads to internalized strivings, but this was not to become a problem for Fromm until the mid-1930s.

At the end of the 1920s, Fromm's fascination with Freudian theory led him to ask what possibilities existed for psychoanalytically investigating the thoughts, feelings, and actions of many people in order to be able to explain irrational reactions and behavior



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patterns of social groupings. Others at the Berlin Institute, where Fromm completed his training as a psychoanalyst, also pursued this question, for example, Siegfried Bernfeld, Wilhelm Reich, and—not to be overlooked—Theodor Reik, who in his treatise *Dogma und Zwangsidee* (1927) simply transferred neurotic phenomena in the individual to group phenomena and thus explained the behavior of the many.

The most important work for the development of Fromm's social psychology is not the famous 1932 essay in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* but the 1930 essay entitled "The Dogma of Christ" (1930, in Fromm, 1963, pp. 3–91). That Fromm himself considered this writing the most important of his early writings is evident from the fact that he had it translated into English as the first of his early writings and published it in 1963 in *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays*. This pivotal paper appeared in the same journal, *Imago*, in which Reik had published his essay. Fromm, who studied sociology, wanted to show that the psychoanalytic method used for social phenomena must differ from that used for explaining irrational phenomena in the individual; this is why he also critically dealt with Reik at the end of this study.

While Reik concludes the compulsive character of religion from the compulsory ritual performance of an individual, Fromm starts from the concrete life practice of the many Christians and shows historically in detail that the changes in the confession formulas about Jesus (as Son of Man, as Christ, as Redeemer, as Son of God, etc.) are always based on political and social changes of the people professing to be Christians. Fromm concluded from this that there must be a libidinous structure formation in each individual that represents the social life practice.

Fromm then elaborated his social psychological theory in 1932, still using Freud's libido theory to explain the structure formation: "The task of social psychology is to explain the shared, socially relevant, psychic attitudes and ideologies—and their unconscious roots in particular—in terms of the influence of economic conditions on libido strivings" (Fromm, 1932, p. 121). The formation of psychic structure already begins in early childhood, with the parents acting as the "*psychological agency of society*" (see Fromm, 1932, p. 117). With this approach to a particular psychic structure formation, the libidinous structure of a society can also be empirically explored in the many individuals.

Fromm made this attempt in 1930 with his first empirical study among blue- and white-collar workers, all of whom admitted to being politically left-wing but whose answers did not reveal a corresponding emotional-revolutionary orientation of their character structure. On the contrary, only 15% corresponded to the conscious attitude, while 15% showed an authoritarian and 70% an ambivalent motivational structure (see Fromm, 1980).

However, it did not take long for Fromm to realize that his social-psychoanalytic approach could not fully be reconciled with the libido theory favored by Freud to explain



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conscious and unconscious psychic strivings. There was a whole series of findings that made Fromm doubt the validity of the libido theory, for example, Bachofen's research on matricentric cultures or Margaret Mead's and Ruth Benedict's cultural anthropological research. They fed Fromm's critique of patriarchal aspects of Freud's psychoanalysis and therapeutic practice (see Fromm, 1935).

The decisive impetus to recast his own social-psychoanalytic approach after emigration in 1934 undoubtedly came from conversations with Harry Stack Sullivan, who fundamentally questioned Freud's libido theory. The very fact that the most serious mental illnesses are psychotic distortions of relatedness to reality, to other people, and to one-self suggests that the question of relatedness is the basic psychic problem of the human being and not that of the satisfaction or denial of the sexual drive and its derivatives.

In the winter of 1936/37, Fromm took time out to make another paradigm shift, this time from a libido-theoretical to a relational-theoretical explanatory framework (see Fromm, 1992 [1937]). In a letter (to August Wittfogel, December 18, 1936, Fromm Archive), Fromm wrote: "I am trying to show that the drives that motivate social actions are not, as Freud assumes, sublimations of the sexual instincts, but products of the social process."¹

Fromm summarized the conclusions in 1941 in the appendix to his book *Escape from Freedom* (1941) (see also Fromm, 1949). The crucial point is that, for Fromm, psychological phenomena are largely the result of internalized relational experiences, partly personal and partly social.

The new approach also leads to a different understanding of the relationship between the individual and society: "We believe that man is *primarily* a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others in order to satisfy his instinctual needs" (Fromm, 1941, p. 288).

According to Fromm, the primary sociality of humans finds its expression in a separate

¹ Regarding the fate of this essay, which was crucial for Fromm's development of his theory, only the following should be noted here (see Funk, 2015): The detailed justification of why and in what complicated way a "social-typical" character formation occurs in many individuals in direct dependence on a certain life practice was to be published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, but was sharply criticized by Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Löwenthal. The reproach was that Fromm no longer grounded the psychic in the biologically anchored sexual drive. However, precisely this would be essential for the program of materialistic social science at the Frankfurt School. Adorno objected by letter and contributed to the refusal to publish Fromm's second social-psychoanalytic approach—which at the same time marked the waning of Fromm's collaboration with the Institute for Social Research.



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dimension of psychic structure formation, the "socially typical character" (Fromm, 1992 [1937], p. 58) or social character (see Fromm, 1962, pp. 71–87), as well as in the fact that there is also a social unconsciousness and repression.

Fromm's social psychoanalysis assigns an equally important role to economic, social, and cultural factors in the formation of psychic impulse structures, if not more so than to the very personal attachment experiences that manifest themselves as impulses in individual character formation. According to Fromm's social-psychoanalytic theory, with every individual and his social character, society is always on the couch as well, so to speak.

The concept of social character tries to do justice to the interaction between socio-economic life practice and psychic impulses because only when this interaction is taken into account in transformation processes will socially relevant changes actually occur. Therefore, anyone exploring questions of transformation with Fromm in mind cannot avoid dealing with those social character orientations that dominate personal and public thought, feeling, and acting today.

This is all the more true when it comes to *humanistic* transformation. It is known that in individual character formation, traumatic or repeated negative experiences can impede psychosocial development or even lead to destructive dynamics of development.

The formation of social character can also lead to the inhibition or repression of important human abilities, such as feelings of solidarity and empathy with others or being able to feel one's own interests or develop one's own fantasies. When such deficits can be observed in many people who generally do not suffer from them, Fromm speaks of "socially patterned defects" or a "pathology of normalcy" (Fromm, 1944; 1955, pp. 12–21; Funk, 2023a). They stem from social character formations and are a manifestation of a certain kind of alienation. The emphasis here is on a "particular kind" because the "socially patterned defects" differ from one social character orientation to another—so a *humanistic* transformation must focus on the defects and their formative determinants that are typical of a particular social character orientation (for example, when the marketing character feels pushed from within to be competitive in all relationships). In the following, however, we will focus on two other social character orientations.

Using the example of the authoritarian character conceived by Fromm, it is relatively easy to understand from a historical distance what the "socially patterned defects" consist of and how a humanistic transformation ought to look. I would like to deal with this only briefly and then turn to a social character that, in addition to the "marketing character" described by Fromm, increasingly determines private and public thinking, feeling, and acting. I have analyzed it over the past 20 years with Fromm's method and call it the "Ego-oriented character."

In the course of his life, Fromm described in detail a number of social character formations and examined their pathogenic impacts. Fromm did this most extensively for



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the authoritarian social character (Fromm, 1936; 1941, pp. 141–179) and the marketing social character (Fromm, 1947, pp. 67–82; 1976, pp. 147–154). Other orientations include the hoarding (Fromm, 1947, pp. 65–67), the necrophilic (Fromm, 1964, pp. 37–45; 1973, pp. 330–368), the narcissistic (Fromm, 1964, pp. 62–94; 1973, pp. 200–205) and the productive social character (Fromm, 1947, pp. 82–107).

2. Humanistic transformation and the authoritarian character

Fromm speaks of an *authoritarian orientation* when the state of being related to others, to oneself, to nature, to work, etc., is a result of the *active* (sadistic) exercise of dominance and the *passive* (masochistic) exercise of submissiveness, whereby the dominant and the submissive are *symbiotically* related to each other (see Fromm, 1936; 1941, pp. 141–179).

The active (*sadistic*), domination-exercising aspect of this character aims to make and keep *others* submissive and dependent and patronize, exploit, or torture them. If this tendency is directed *against oneself*, then authoritarians display a high degree of self-control, self-discipline, and feelings of guilt. They then show signs of a rigid “super-ego,” which forbids everything pleasurable and frivolous.

Typical for the passive (*masochistic*) aspect of the authoritarian character are submissiveness under and blind obedience to authority and idealization of authority. All good things are expected to come from the authority. In *dealing with oneself*, the masochistic striving expresses itself in a renunciation of everything that is self-willed and self-confident, as well as one's own rights and wishes—and of all expressions of autonomy. The “selfless” is the ideal of the passive authoritarian.

Further, a central feature of Fromm's understanding of authoritarianism is that the person exercising authority and the submissive person are *symbiotically* dependent on and emotionally bound to each other. This symbiosis denotes the *psychodynamics* of the authoritarian character: The submissive person, under pressure from the ruler, *projects his own autonomous powers* onto the authority so that the latter has them at his disposal. However, since the submissive person is symbiotically connected with the authority, he can *secondarily participate* in his own powers projected onto the authority. In this way, the person exercising dominance and the submissive person are existentially related to each other, and a *strong emotional bond* is created.

The *socially patterned defect* in the authoritarian character manifests itself, on the one hand, in a coexistence and self-experience determined by violence, because authority is not legitimized by competence but by irrational domination, and on the other hand, in an emotional dependency on each other, in which the autonomous own powers of the human being suffer damage. Everything that could endanger the symbiotic dependence, i.e., the striving for independence and self-determination, is to be repressed or will be



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punished.

Foremost, this affects all of one's *own powers* that could be in competition with authority: *one's own thoughts, convictions, and ideas*, especially if they question the authority's claim to dominance (in business, politics, religion, culture, society, state, etc.).

However, all types of *self-determination* are dangerous, regardless of whether this refers to family or professional role attributions, religious rituals, the question of gender or sexual preferences, political freedom of expression, or artistic freedoms. Self-determination is understood as a *rebellion* against the grace, wisdom, care, and superiority of the authority, who always knows better what is good for those dependent on it.

The *pathogenic effects* of an authoritarian character are still familiar, at least to the older reader: Just think of the extent of *violence* used in education or by the state and its institutions of authority. Or think of the domination exercised by men due to the combination of authoritarianism and patriarchy. Or think of the fear of punishment or the feelings of guilt that plagued those in the submissive role and that were systematically reproduced by the dominators to keep people in dependency.

I have sketched the authoritarian character here as a contrast, so to speak, because with historical distance from the authoritarian character, we can more easily recognize the pathogenic effect of this social character.

And there is something else we should not forget: With the authoritarian social character, we have an idea that the omnipresent logic of exercising dominance and being submissive was something *natural, normal, and reasonable* for people at that time (and to some extent, this is still the case for people in authoritarian systems today). But this also means that the dominance of a social character orientation ensures that a socially patterned defect is difficult to detect for those affected because it is the most normal thing in the world for someone to tell one where to go and to have one willingly follow.

The example of the authoritarian character also indicates how important it is to start with the specific form of alienation and the psychosocial defects of a social character when considering the question of a *humanistic* transformation. *Humanistic* transformation can be specified in terms of content in the case of the authoritarian character: it must aim at the dissolution of authoritarian dependencies and the strengthening of autonomous own powers.

That *humanistic* transformation means something else altogether for a different social character I will show in a third section regarding the Ego-oriented character.

3. The Ego-Oriented Social Character and the Question of a Humanistic Transformation

For about three decades now, a new social character has been evident. An empirical study on the Ego-oriented character conducted by the SIGMA Institute in Mannheim



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(see Frankenberger, 2007, for a summary) showed that dominant traits of this Ego-orientation could be detected in almost 20 percent of adults in Germany as early as 2006. Additionally, many researchers have identified and described how people have come to a new internalized way of relating to reality, to other people, and to themselves, and this is reflected in concepts such as “risk society” (Beck, 1992), “protean self” (Lifton, 1993), “experience-driven society” (Schulze, 1992), “corrosion of character” (Sennett, 1998), “interactive character” (Maccoby, 1999), “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000), or “postheroic personality” (Dornes, 2012).

I have analyzed this new way of being related with Fromm's social-psychoanalytic method and called it the "Ego-oriented character" (Funk, 2005; 2011; 2019, pp. 129–143). Above all, Ego-oriented people want to be creative in their conscious experience and construct reality in a new and different way, independent of and free from all natural handicaps or social restraints—playfully, so to speak.

They are concerned with a freedom that does not want to accept any "laws" ("nomos"). They are not concerned with auto-nomy—i.e. with a self-imposed nomos (law)—instead of hetero-nomy—i.e. with restrictions imposed by others—but with a self-determined—arbitrary—autonomy and a boundless and unbounded freedom, with a freedom that is "regardless" in the literal sense of the word. Ego-oriented people want to be connected without experiencing themselves as bound.

Its emergence as a social character orientation is due to the achievements of digital technology, networking technology, and electronic media and the socio-economic conditions that have changed as a result. A great deal of what previously seemed limited by technical, natural, and social constraints is suddenly possible. With its fantastic computing, staging, and simulation techniques, the digital revolution has opened up unimagined possibilities for creating reality in a new and different way, physically and virtually—and even without limitations and bonds.

The new possibilities and requirements lead to one's own inner striving to *delimit* and *unbound* everything. This leads to a new ego construction with other forms of relatedness and attachment. This ego construction seems egoistic or narcissistic, but psychologically it is a different kind of ego emphasis: the ego wants to be completely *self-determined* in relation to others and (in contrast to the egoist and narcissist) grants this aspiration to everyone else.

There are two versions of Ego-orientation, one active and one passive. The *active* Ego-oriented person wants to *reinvent* himself and his environment, his lifestyle, and his world of experience and creates his own delimited realities, feelings, and experiences; The passive Ego-oriented person, on the other hand, wants to participate in such newly constructed realities in a *self-determined* way and chooses the environment, lifestyle, brand, and music style that suits him.



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The most important traits of the Ego-oriented character can only be briefly outlined here (cf. Funk, 2005; 2019, pp. 131–132): In addition to the already mentioned striving for the dissolution of boundaries, it shows a passion for producing something new, for managing and controlling, or—in the passive version—for experiencing everything that is made, staged, and simulated. Feelings are important, even if not one's own. Everything gets emotionalized, and the passive Ego-oriented person is attracted to everything emotionalized and wants to sympathize with it. In the active version, the Ego-oriented person does everything to make himself an experience; in the passive version, he is particularly receptive to all offers of experience.

The Ego-oriented character is highly contact-oriented as long as he does not enter into any obligations as a result. He is also open to everything foreign, different, and innovative but shows indifference or intolerance towards all who are not so open and flexible. His hypersensitivity to anything that might limit and bind him also means that negative perceptions of himself or others are taboo and replaced, at least in the public sphere, by simulated positive thinking, feeling, and acting.

The elimination of boundaries and ties by means of digital technology, networking technology, and electronic media in science, research, production, and communication and, above all, in coping with everyday life is a great blessing. However, striving for the dissolution of boundaries becomes problematic when it comes to the limitations of mental abilities and inner bonds based on one's own psychic structural formations.

Such mental reconstruction of the personality is also possible today with the help of suggestion and simulation techniques. Using those techniques, one then acquires a new personality, learns soft skills, and creates a simulated (as-if) personality according to one's own ideas, with which, for example, one can always be friendly, no longer feels any aggression towards others, is self-assured, is beyond doubt, no longer feels any anger and is always in a good mood. Precisely because the personality that is developed and molded by inner powers of relatedness and feelings also confronts one with one's own negative traits and feelings, it is replaced by a simulated one trained for success, pleasure, and competence. The decisive factor here is that one no longer realizes anything negative, contradictory, aggressive, or doubtful in one's own behavior.

Actually, this mental reconstruction of the personality leads to an “unbounded self” (Funk, 2014). The reason for this is an increasing “de-activation” of those own abilities (to think, feel, judge, be active from within, etc.) that have been identified as neuronal and psychological prerequisites for human creativity, freedom, and autonomy. As an example, the de-activation of one's own impulses and emotional powers of relatedness will briefly be mentioned here (see Funk, 2011, pp. 106–138; 2019, pp. 135–139 for more details).

Much of what makes us active and creative of our own accord, what intrinsically



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motivates, animates, and interests us, hardly has a chance to keep up with the thrilling, inspiring, and stimulating effects of staged and virtual experiences, leading to less and less practice of our own impulses. As a consequence, one must often first be "animated," motivated, inspired, and become interested in order to be able to feel one's own interest, one's own activity, one's own liveliness, provided that no agonizing boredom is to arise.

Regarding his *own feelings*, the Ego-oriented character finds himself in a dilemma: On the one hand, it is precisely his own feelings that make his limitations and constraints clear to him, so he wants to leave them behind. On the other hand, feelings are something highly individual, alive and vitalizing, and an extremely effective way of self-determining reality, establishing contact and communication, and being connected with others.

The Ego-oriented character solves this dilemma by "going all out for 'emotion.'" In doing so, however, he usually does not rely on his own feelings. Instead, he actively enacts or simulates completely different feelings or passively feels the feelings offered at every turn instead of feeling his own.

In this way, especially negatively experienced (hurting, painful) feelings towards others, but also negatively experienced own feelings, largely fade out—i.e., are repressed and denied. As a result, the ability to deal with conflict and criticism also suffers, and—for example, in professional contexts—a kind of compliant obedience to the demands of the "corporate culture" occurs despite the predominant striving for self-determination.

There is an obvious striving in the Ego-oriented social character to replace the practice of creative cognitive, emotional, and imaginative own powers by applying technical creativity—i.e., by means of tools, apps, simulation techniques, algorithms, or artificial intelligence. This, however, leads to a progressive "de-activation" of our own thinking, feeling, and fantasizing and an increasing *dependence on technical creativity*. This is exactly the "vision" of the pioneers of a life with algorithms and artificial intelligence. With their Big Data, they can replace our own thinking, judging, feeling, and wanting with "tailor-made" solutions and open up new markets for themselves (see Schmidt & Cohen, 2013; Zuboff, 2019).

Google advertised its search engine on German television some time ago with the slogan: "Every search will take you further." A young woman beams at a young man, and the text of the search line reads: "How to confess your love." The viewer is assured, "Every search will take you further." Yes, it is true: every search takes me further. However, it is also true that it also takes me further away from myself, my own powers, and my own creativity, so I become increasingly dependent on outside sources of power.

As Fromm has already shown in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), creativity, independence, and freedom depend on the practice of people's mental own powers (see Funk, 2022a).



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Precisely because cognitive, emotional, and imaginative capacities must be *practiced* to be effective, their increasing *replacement* causes them to atrophy as own powers (as the muscles of a leg put in plaster atrophy when they are no longer practiced). Thus, in the Ego-oriented character, there is a more or less strong *existential dependence on technical creativity*. It is therefore with good reason that creative technology à la Apple is called an i-Phone, i-Pad, i-Cloud, i-Tunes, etc., because they are to be experienced as part of one's own self. One's own thinking, feeling, and acting become that of the i-technology.

At the same time, there is an increased need to control everything and have everything (self-determined) at one's disposal (which is why I speak of "Ego-orientation") in order not to feel this existential dependence. *From a psychodynamic perspective, the striving to determine everything by oneself in an Ego-oriented way is an increasingly dominant attempt in our society to avoid the unbearable feeling of powerlessness that accompanies the increasing loss of human creativity and self-efficacy.*

Whether we do, in fact, still have access to our creative own powers is relatively easy to find out: You just have to imagine—or maybe even test it out in real life—spending a weekend without electricity, or even battery electricity, so there is no mobile phone, no music, no whodunit TV shows, no WhatsApp, no TV, no video, no emails, no calls, no Spotify, no internet, no creative chatGPT, and so on. If the ceiling does not fall on your head in such a situation, and you still know what to do with yourself and others, then you are still living from your own physical, sensual, cognitive, emotional, and imaginative powers. You experience yourself creatively without being dependent on technical creativity.

However, those who are in danger of losing the ground under their feet during such an experiment feel the effects of the socially patterned defect in the Ego-oriented character: on the *cognitive* level, he experiences himself as powerless, disoriented, and perplexed, in a certain way without consciousness; on the *affective-emotional* level, he experiences himself isolated, cut off, "abandoned by all good spirits," without interest and emotional commitment, depressed and listless; on an *imaginative* level, he experiences himself lacking phantasy, without imagination and ideas of his own.

If one understands human creativity, or what Fromm called "productive orientation" and "humanistic values," not only as an artistic quality but as the ability to draw from one's own mental powers and to experience oneself as self-effective, then the socially patterned defect in Ego-orientation can be understood as an increasing loss of *human* creativity and a (mostly unconscious) experienced threatening factual Ego-weakness, which Ego-orientated people with their striving for self-determination can keep in repression as long as they have *technical* creativity at their disposal.

In contrast to the authoritarian orientation, where the pathogenic effects can be



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recognized more easily from a historical distance, the socially repressed defects in the Ego-orientation require crisis experiences to even feel the defects generated by them. In the authoritarian orientation, the sense of one's own autonomous powers is repressed through submissiveness to an irrational authority. In Ego-orientation, the passion for determining everything by oneself continuously represses the weakness of the ego and the loss of *human* creativity in thinking, feeling, and acting.

Conclusion

The outlined psychodynamics of alienation in the Ego-oriented social character indicate from a social psychological perspective what *humanistic* transformation means in a world that emphasizes technical solutions and technical creativity everywhere. In principle—as we have seen—the use of technical creativity does not exclude the practice of cognitive, emotional, and imaginative own powers. The prerequisite, however, is that these own powers continue to be practiced.

This is exactly the approach for a *humanistic* transformation: we do one thing—namely, use the fantastic possibilities of digital technology and electronic media—and at the same time specifically *activate and practice our mental own powers* so that we can feel ourselves in our human creativity and an authentic self-efficacy.

Concerning the physical own powers—muscle power and movement—we noticed relatively quickly: the more we neglect the exercise of these physical own powers by using the technical means of locomotion, the more important the fitness center and additional movement become. I cannot yet see a comparable development on a broad scale in mental own powers, even though awareness of this is growing among many awake people.

The same is true for the neuronally determined, creative abilities of thinking, feeling, and fantasizing; they must be practiced in order to be available—"Use it or lose it," say neuroscientists. However, their fading is not as obviously perceptible as with the physical own powers. Thus, many unresolved questions remain in the room concerning a humanistic transformation with a dominance of the Ego-oriented social character:

Will we even notice that our own capacity to think, feel, fantasize, and judge is fading? What would the "gyms" and mental practices have to look like in order to exercise our own, albeit modest, mental powers? But above all: How would an economy have to be organized that does not want to take away people's own thinking, feeling, and creative design with ChatGPT, perfect emotionalization, and "tailor-made" algorithmic solutions for problematic mental and psychological situations? How can we set limits to the capitalist exploitation of our own mental powers?

Even though Fromm's social psychological theory and method were developed many years ago, his concept of social character still seems to be a useful tool. It enables us to



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explore how the socio-economic possibilities and requirements of a particular time are represented in the psychic structural formations of many people and determine their thinking, feeling, and acting; at the same time, it does justice to the psychoanalytic insights on the social unconscious and the repressed.

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Author

Rainer Funk (*1943) wrote his dissertation on Erich Fromm's social psychology and ethics (*Erich Fromm: The Courage to Be Human*, New York 1982), became in 1974 Erich Fromm's assistant in Locarno, Switzerland, and after Fromm's death his Literary Executor. Trained at the Stuttgart Psychoanalytic Institute he practiced as psychoanalyst and is living in Tübingen (Germany). He is a co-founder of the International Erich Fromm Society and now the director of the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen that houses Fromm's library and literary estate as well as a huge collection of secondary literature on Fromm. In addition he is the co-director of the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin that organized the Third International Erich Fromm Research Conference 2023.