

Article

Why Radical Change is Elusive: Rethinking Social Transformation

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Abstract: Widespread poverty, government incompetence, environmental degradation, and other social problems lead to persistent socio-political discontent. While we actively express our despair through critiques and protests, our society remains fixated on a routine cycle of unproductive and ineffectual social relations and institutional frameworks. It seems that we are trapped in a perpetual loop, leaving us questioning what prevents meaningful social transformation. This paper contends that our passive engagement in our socio-political affairs and our seemingly inhibited ability for radical change is fundamentally influenced by forces and patterns entrenched in our current socio-structural arrangements, which rechannels “social libidinal impulses.” I argue that deeply embedded patterns not only mitigate our critiques and grievances but also suppress our capacity for critical awareness, thereby hindering a thoughtful social transformation. To explore these issues, I first revisit Fromm’s concept of social character, showing how socioeconomic patterns condition collective behaviors and desires. Second, I present how emotional and psychological attachments are formed within the existing socio-economic framework that sustains social conformity and limits transformative changes in our society. Finally, I propose that our aspirations for meaningful social change are anchored not only in our capacities for rational discourses but basically in our emotional and libidinal attachments.

Keywords: economy, public discontent, social impulses social transformation

The disheartening conditions we face in our society today pose a formidable challenge. Certainly, some sectors are aggressive and critical towards structural inequities yet, despite the judicious attitude, the same socio-structural patterns and modes of social behaviors inhabit us.

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<https://doi.org/10.25138/19.1.a8>
https://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_36/pacquing_march2025.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330



We remain trapped in systemic cycles of inequality, facing daunting obstacles and adversarial power dynamics. The presence of these problems in our lives is even more compounded by multiple tasks to fulfill our overwhelming workloads in our relentless pursuit of financial stability and fulfilling personal and communal obligations. This observation also aligns with what Pacquing commented: convoluting our social relations is our passive reception of our government leaders' ineptitude and myopic capacities, whose elitist and oligarchic interests permeate the political spectrum.¹ These distressing daily affairs leave us helpless and indifferent to initiate fundamental reforms. The current situation we experience everyday compels us to be pawns amidst the inequities of power relations. It seems that to remain apathetic is the only alternative. No matter how some of us voice our criticisms for the betterment of the majority, it still remains unheard. Our resentments, protests, public discussions, and critical engagements in different social media sites seem to be trivial, if not totally irrelevant, to the very logic of our socio-structural arrangements. We remain to be of no importance to many, and the same systemic cycle continues to weave the very fiber of our daily lives. We are trapped and fixed in deep-seated successions of social and political impotence, and the only hope out of this social quagmire is to just surrender and accept these social perversions as the natural course of things. Be that as it may, we are then pushed to embrace an individually strategic means of finding the niche best suited for us. We cannot entrust our hopes and expectations to a decadent system bereft of any values for growth and development. We cannot rely on our political leaders either, nor lean ourselves into the wisdom and righteousness of some of our religious superiors, whose daily affairs are kept on emphasizing the state of heavenly bliss, seemingly insensitive to the concrete and mundane lives of so many. Moreover, Contreras laments how academia has shifted its focus from addressing human suffering and social injustices towards prioritizing metrics and rankings.² How about the civil society movement? One becomes skeptical about what motivates groups or civil societies regarding their claims on social justice and rights.³ More often than not, these people, as claimed by Freire, are driven by their unconscious desires, not toward *real* and *radical* change in society, but by their need to be the successor in the political

¹ See Ian Raymond B. Pacquing, "A Psycho-Social Reflection on the Patrimonial Culture in the Philippines" in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 23:2 (June 2022), 281–299.

² See Antonio Contreras, "The English professor is just one price we have to pay for turning higher education into a commodity" in *The Manila Times* (18 May 2024), <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2024/05/18/opinion/columns/the-english-professor-is-just-one-price-we-have-to-pay-for-turning-higher-education-into-a-commodity/1947222>>.

³ Cf. Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chain of Illusion* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 9–31.

landscape, the next boss in the bureaucratic hierarchy.⁴ The struggles that we need to overcome such as never-ending poverty, widespread inequality, corruption in the government, and the enduring political dynasties in our country often leave us helpless and lost in a repetitive cycle of despair. Take for example the rampant dissatisfaction in our society where we constantly protest government corruption and the domination of our political spectrum by elite oligarchic families, yet the same political power brokers rule the system thereby perpetuating cycles of nepotism and systemic injustice.⁵ Even our currency which is symbolized by democratic icons like Ninoy Aquino on the 500-peso bill, paradoxically represents a political elite lineage. Yet, it serves as a reminder of our unresolved historical struggles and the challenges we face for genuine social transformation. Nonetheless, despite these systemic issues that we have, we collectively yearn for a society guided by true democratic ideals—where aspirations and dignity can flourish. Though these could be our goals, I maintain, however, that they are just as elusive as they are. I argue that we could remain in a systemic loop because of the crucial role of the social character i.e., our emotional attachments and behaviors remain deeply intertwined with the socio-economic and political structures that sustain the status quo.

Relying on the Frommian notion of social character, I believe that as long as the dynamics of our socio-structural arrangements produce patterns or forces, i.e. social determinants that shape our desires or impulses to follow the same, we remain trapped in the systemic loop of social impotence. With the underlying power dynamics embedded within these institutional frameworks, the resultant social character readily captures, stabilizes, aligns, compensates, and conditions individual libidinal drives. Thus, despite the wanton problems we face, and the will to surmount them, we only repeat the same old systemic problem we wish to address. It is the social character that provides a sense of amelioration or pacification that maintains social equilibrium. Despite our critiques and protests, the very logic emanating from the institutional arrangements caters to a particular characterology that coheres to the underlying status quo. To elaborate further on this essay, let me start with how Fromm details the notion of the social character.

⁴ See Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 45.

⁵ See Pacquing, "A Psycho-Social Reflection on the Patrimonial Culture in the Philippines", 281–284.

The Social Character⁶

In *The Sane Society*, Fromm mentions that each society, to achieve its goals, must be structuralized to operate well. It must function following how social members organize and plan every requirement for the fulfillment of its goals and objectives. Certain conditions should be socially mandated and must be considered fundamental for the smooth operation and survival of its members. They need to act and behave following the precepts of their group, community, or society. Fromm then elaborately expounds,

Each society is structuralized and operates in certain ways which are necessitated by a number of objective conditions. These conditions include methods of production and distribution which in turn depend on raw materials, industrial techniques, climate, size of the population, political and geographical factors, cultural traditions, and influences to which society is exposed...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 the social system.* (italics mine)⁷

To accomplish social ends, we passively and actively adapt and assimilate for ourselves certain demands, tasks, or obligations mandated for social cooperation and survival.⁸ Similar to Durkheim's division of labor, we need

⁶ In my earlier work, "Neoliberalism and Our Precarious Culture," in *Kritike*, 11:1 (June 2017), I used Erich Fromm's concept of social character to argue that economic systems (Neoliberalism) redirect individual desires and impulses. In this current paper, I expand on this theoretical perspective by demonstrating that social character not only redirects individual drives but also fosters profound emotional and psychological attachments. These attachments transform our participation in established socio-economic structures into a moral imperative—without which survival and social recognition become unattainable.

⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (Canada: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1955), 77ff.

⁸ Solidarity is essential within the members of a particular tribe, group, or community. Durkheim expresses this union as "mechanical solidarity," where each social member must engage in *shared similarities* within a specific tribe or group, sacrificing some freedom to generate a collective good. Cf. Peter Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 2–5. The same is said in the philosophy of Rousseau when he explains that for us to survive, we need to shed parts of our freedom and "create, by combination, a totality of forces sufficient to overcome the obstacles resisting them, to direct their operation by a single impulse, and make them act in unison." See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and the Social Contract*, trans. by Christopher Betts (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 54. As social members, our identities as individuals are shaped by these social-structural arrangements.

to develop a comprehensive strategic plan that integrates social, political, economic, cultural, and religious aspects to create a social framework that ensures the survival of society.⁹ Fromm then asserts that as members of a particular group or community, a distinct product of the socialization process emerges. We internalize and reflect the values, beliefs, and behaviors of our group, community, or society where we belong. After all, we are “socialized a priori” i.e., we are socialized beings in the grip of dynamic forces within society. Fromm then says “Society and the individual are not “opposite” to each other. Society is nothing but living, concrete individuals, and the individual can live only as a social human being.”¹⁰ As we integrate and align with our environment, we are also molded and shaped ensuring that our drives and desires are regulated with what the system demands for its stability and reproduction. As such, in a highly technologically advanced modern setup, we are predominantly contoured by the necessity to produce and, in highly specific ways, fit into a specific historical situation of society.¹¹ Our libidinal impulses—rooted in the need for survival, recognition, and belonging—are rechanneled and shaped in ways that correspond with the system’s logic. In other words, as we are incorporated into a larger schema of how life works, the social characterology sways and conditions us that to produce and consume is a way to cope with the demands of the modern world. It becomes a moral imperative for us to fit in and survive.¹²

Today, our work demands much of our time and energy and as our duties and obligations become complex, we feel that our daily routine turns to be exasperating. Balancing life like engaging ourselves with multiple projects, while simultaneously, meeting tight deadlines, and adjusting our time for our private and familial affairs can be overwhelming. As we expend more energy on fulfilling our daily routines, our libidinal impulses, says Mitchell, must express and maintain the socially mandated patterns through

As Dunn suggests, these arrangements are foundational for it is the bedrock for our legitimacy, moral, and even political claims. See Robert Dunn, *Identity Crisis: A Social Critique of Postmodernity*, (London: Minnesota Press, 1998), 24.

⁹ See Robert K. Merton, “Durkheim’s Division of Labor in Society” in *American Journal of Sociology*, 40: 3 (November, 1934), 319–323.

¹⁰ See Erich Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture” in Erich Fromm, *Beyond Freud* (New York: American Mental Health Association, 2010), 26ff.

¹¹ See Ranier Funk, “Erich Fromm’s Concept of Social Character and Its Relevance for Clinical Practice” in M. Cortina and M. Maccoby (Eds.), *A Prophetic Analyst. Erich Fromm’s Contribution to Psychoanalysis* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 7. See <<https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-Fromm/frontdoor/index/index/start/34/rows/10/sortfield/score/sortorder/desc/searchtype/simple/query/Rainer+Funk/languagefq/eng/docId/9974>>.

¹² Cf. Hartmut Rosa and William Scheuermann, *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity* (US: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), *Introduction*, 12.

which we relate to life and society.¹³ Hence, our desires, drives, or natural impulses must be conditioned and rechanneled into socially accepted behaviors. The social character diverts our energies to the extent that what we do, and how we should do must be patterned after what is demanded of us by the system. For instance, being productive at work, participating in organizational or community activities, and maintaining social relationships are all conventional social practices that are formed out of the logic of these socio-structural frameworks. Physically and emotionally, we need to regulate all our impulses to cater to their demands. However, Fromm warns that the more compelling the exigencies of living, such as striving for career advancement or maintaining financial stability, the greater the risk of alienating our true selves.¹⁴ This can manifest as a sense of disconnection from our passions and interests in life. Our disengagement could compel us to question and restructure the existing social relations. But we seem to remain passive and “incapacitated” to act. Why is this so? What immanent role does the social character provide?

The “Libidinized” Jobs

Fromm admits that regardless of the suffocating and alienating demands of modern living, we can freely choose what strategies we ascribe to fulfill our dreams and aspirations.¹⁵ Rationally, we persuade ourselves that working overtime or sacrificing personal time can lead to career growth, financial rewards, or job security. Certainly, we give importance, value, or utility to what we truly aspire to. It is at this point that we assign different plans of action for achieving them.¹⁶ We rationalize over time that our calculated approaches and actions assure us success and development in life. Our justifications ought to be the bedrock of why we must fulfill certain social tasks that could benefit us within the system. The idea of career growth, building professional relationships, and ultimately, financial security, could lessen the fear of disconnection or estrangements in our group or community.¹⁷ So, whatever would be our justifications, it absolutely can

¹³ See Stephen A. Mitchell, *Influence and Autonomy in Psychoanalysis* (London, Routledge, 2013), 66.

¹⁴ See Erich Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture” in Erich Fromm, *Beyond Freud* (New York: American Mental Health Association, 2010), 13.

¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ See Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁷ Fromm insists that if the conditions enunciated by our socio-structural arrangements are not conducive to the spontaneous activity of the individual, and as long as the demands for innovations curtail the psychic capacity for growth and development, we cannot strike a balance between stability and material production or innovations. See Erich Fromm, *Fear of Freedom* (US:

ensure that our efforts contribute to our personal and professional growth. Thus, says Damasio “reasoning strategies revolve around goals, options for action, predictions of future outcome, and plans for implementation of goals at varied time scales.”¹⁸ Further, our rational strategies for survival within our immediate environment require a vast repertoire of knowledge that needs our attention and must be held active by us.¹⁹

However, Fromm warns that relying simply on the *rationale* or justifications of our actions would be insufficient. To remain steadfast in our jobs, for instance, does not only involve our rational justifications of *why we are doing this*. There must be something more that attracts us. For Fromm, the externally necessary must be absorbed and become internally satisfying.²⁰ Subjective satisfaction, i.e., emotional relief, is needed for us to perform our individually mandated tasks. Without the impetus of emotional relief, internal frictions arise. What we do then must have an alluring—affectual element, from which our subjective or emotional dimension is pacified, and thus, an internal gratification of our desires. The idea of career growth within the organization or the allurement of financial security that goes with it, gives us a sense of emotional stability. It is here that we need to consider how our emotions and desires play an active role in the justifications of our actions. As we approach the world, our expected roles in the network of social relations are not just matters of cognitive or rational mappings, but internal satisfaction as well.²¹ Take for instance job-related tasks. No matter how strenuous they are, we find relief in the financial security it entails, i.e., our jobs could provide modest means to survive. It appeases our desires by luxuriating ourselves with the comforts of the modern world. And, after expending all our energies for years, we probably anticipate and compose our fears through the economic benefits we receive upon retirement. Thus, through our actions and reactions to our immediate necessities, we anticipate outcomes with bodily

Farrar & Rhinehart, 1941), 221. Fromm also mentions that the development of the modern world which resulted in high-speed culture has demeaned humanity and forced the individual to transform his life into a collector and user and thus the lesser he thinks and feels himself as “I am.” See Erich Fromm, *On Being Human*, edited by Rainer Funk (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 1999), 7ff.

¹⁸ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994), 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,” 27.

²¹ Cf. Thomas Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain: The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018), 177; see also other works of Fromm – *The Art of Loving*, 1957.

feelings, and in this process, Kassab implies, we forecast affectual stances that serve as pivotal factors for our rational decisions.²²

Our appraisal of how things are, whether they may be political, religious, or economic, as argued by Kingston and Ferry, always involves our subjective-emotional stance, i.e. fascinating, alluring, captivating, or alienating, and thus disadvantageous for our well-being.²³ This is also intimated in Kassab's opinion when she explains that the affectual approaches toward the world determine our actions, responses, preferences, sets of reactions, and public opinions.²⁴ Hence, as mentioned by Fromm earlier, this internal (subjective) satisfaction is merged with our rational justifications so that our evaluations always integrate rational and emotional elements of how best we could resonate with our natural and social environment.²⁵ As Szanto and Landweer put it, "Our very *being-in-the-world* is always and already a way of being affectively attuned to oneself, others, and the world."²⁶ Indeed, what we value most in society involves the interplay between our cognitive and emotional capacities.²⁷ The subjective satisfaction of what we do determines our responses and consequent actions, thereby widening our preferences and opinions about the world. Fromm then asserts that our rational strategies for survival, work, and daily routines are intertwined with emotional elements; without this integration, we would fail to navigate life successfully. How we understand and interpret our spatiotemporal slots, act, and react to them are inseparably linked with affectual qualities.²⁸ As asserted by Fromm himself, we need then to emphasize that the dialectic between our justifications and internal satisfactions (reason and emotion) are concrete manifestations of approaching the world, encompassing not only physiological survival but also the emotional dimensions that drive our life processes.²⁹ Thus our engagements and actions with the world contain a modicum of "libidinality", i.e. emotional resonance - an inherently satisfying value, without which, we relegate or neglect our actions as something alienating. Thus, for Fromm, the satisfaction that we get through our actions and reactions points to our

²² Cf. Hanna Amir Kassab, *The Power of Emotion in Politics, Philosophy, and Ideology* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), *Introduction*, 2

²³ Cf. Rebecca Kingston and Leonard Ferry (eds.), *Bringing the Passion Back In* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2008), 5.

²⁴ See Kassab, *The Power of Emotion in Politics, Philosophy, and Ideology*, 5.

²⁵ See Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 27.

²⁶ Thomas Szanto and Hilge Landweer (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on the Phenomenology of Emotions* (London: Routledge, 2020), 9.

²⁷ Cf. Kassab, *The Power of Emotion in Politics, Philosophy, and Ideology*, 3.

²⁸ See Erich Fromm, *Fear of Freedom* (US: Farrar & Rhinehart, 1941), 211.

²⁹ See Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 19.

psychic qualities from which our emotional libidinal capacities lie.³⁰ Without these internal fulfillments, our experiences and accommodations in the world become naught.

However, the more pressing question I think that we need to address is despite these thrilling and spilling of modern living as argued by Frosh,³¹ and the helplessness and powerlessness they entail, why does modern society seem still to be intact and keep on replicating itself? What happens to our critical capacity as self-determining agents to change our society for the better? Fromm in his 1937 lecture clarifies these when he says

But if the exacted occupation or manner of conduct is alien to him, externally imposed, then this satisfaction must come by way of developing a character structure on the basis of which *the socially necessary becomes something satisfying to the individual, something he strives for and accomplishes.*³²

The Role of the Social Character

As the foundation of his psychosocial philosophy, Fromm asserts the social character as the unconscious forces and patterns within society that redirect individual desires and energies towards specific objectives to achieve societal goals. How socio-political and economic structures are designed and consequently coordinated and implemented, generates specific patterns or power dynamics. Accordingly, certain values and beliefs are developed as a matter of survival and recognition.³³ And vital in the constitution of social character is the role of the socioeconomic paradigm. Once the need for survival is ascertained, all other values and needs imperative for the sustenance of society follow. He expresses this thought in *The Sane Society*, from which he points out the importance of the socioeconomic paradigm.

The task of survival implies that man has to produce, that is, he has to secure the minimum of food and shelter necessary for survival, and the tools needed for even the most rudimentary processes of production. The method of production in turn determines the social relations

³⁰ See Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture" 27. (Italics mine)

³¹ Cf. Stephen Frosh, *Identity Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and the Self*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1991), 6–7. See also Erich Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1963), 12.

³² Fromm, "Man's Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture," 27–28. (Italics mine)

³³ See Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 78. (Italics mine)

existing in a given society. *It determines the mode and practice of life.*³⁴

Accordingly, the economic structure, as the foundation of our daily subsistence, creates or regulates other ways that define how we must live. For instance, our choices, no matter how liberal and rational they may be, are prompted by the very characterology of the existing status quo. Our decisions on our needs and activities such as schools, housing, transportation services, health insurance, employment arrangements, or family dynamics are all shaped by the existing economic structural status quo. However, beyond material survival, the social character also deals with our attachment to the system, which is also deeply emotional. Social character does not merely dictate economic behavior, it also arranges and shapes how we feel about our place in society, creating a powerful affective bond to the status quo. Once the socioeconomic patterns satisfy the modes of survival, our emotional and instinctual drives naturally align with them. The sense of characterology that arises from our choices contributes to the formation of shared psychological attributes, values, and beliefs. Shaped by socioeconomic conditions and cultural norms, the social character leads to distinct modes of social interactions, i.e., how we approach others and the world in the pursuit of survival, recognition, and belongingness.³⁵ As stressed by Abromeit, the social character then of a particular group, community, or society is considered an emotionally charged phenomenon redirecting our impulses and desires to align with the existing status quo.³⁶ Take for example the market industry. The social character that emanates from it does not only cater to the survival of its members. More than this, the immanent character sways us to form values and beliefs, that align with the system. It leads to the development of behavior and attitudes that sustain the structural alignments. As initially expressed by Fromm the economic dimension which has something to do with one's survival,³⁷ the social character does not mean meeting the basic necessities in life only, but more than that, it conditions us unconsciously to participate in the economic system—being productive, consuming, and achieving success as demanded by the market. Our mental as well as emotional capacities are swayed and redirected so that productivity, consumption, and economic progress are now considered principles and ideals that stem from the characterology of the market industry. It is in this sense that our engagements and actions within the ambit

³⁴ See *Ibid.*

³⁵ See Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, 110.

³⁶ Cf. John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 206–207.

³⁷ See Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 76.

of the market characterology form emotional attachments. As Funk commented how we adapt and assimilate things for survival immensely modifies individual libidinal drives.³⁸ Abromeit also discloses this observation of Funk by narrating that the social character speaks primarily of those libidinal impulses that bind social members unconsciously to existing social relations.³⁹ Thus, the social character becomes a powerful force that allows our society to cohere, thrive, and bolster its structural edifices. As noted by Wilde, it “cements” society together for it involves an “emotional matrix” embedded in particular social relations.⁴⁰ Hence, Fromm describes this when he says.

Human energies appear in social life not in some general form, but are, so to speak, guided into those channels that make them useful to the functioning of a certain society. Character seen from this point of view is the definite form in which psychic energy appears as a productive force in the social process. Or, expressed differently, the socially typical character is a part of the whole social machinery without which it would not function, or not sufficiently.⁴¹

Thus, how we think, act, and feel, within a given social system,⁴² and, how we derive meaning and purpose from things we acquire for our growth and development are certainly interjected with attachments and, thus, with emotional significance. In other words, the social character introjects tranquilizing capacities to overshadow any form of resistance to the prevailing dominant social paradigm.

As an emotional matrix that binds individual libidinal drive and the present social relations, the social character manifests itself in our yearnings, fears, expectations, and strivings.⁴³ As we navigate economically for our subsistence, the determination of what to *produce* and *how to produce* must be sufficiently and emotionally satisfying, ensuring the maintenance of psychic equilibrium within, i.e. without friction. Similarly, the socio-structural

³⁸ See Ranier Funk, “Erich Fromm’s Concept of Social Character” in *Social Thought & Research*, 21: 1–2 (1998): 215–228. www.jstor.org/ustlib.ust.edu.ph/action/doBasicSearch?Query=Rainer+Funk.

³⁹ See Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*, 209.

⁴⁰ See Lawrence Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 20; See also Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*, 209.

⁴¹ Fromm “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,” 30.

⁴² Cf. Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, 239–240.

⁴³ See Funk, “Erich Fromm’s Concept of Social Character,” 222–223.

arrangements (social, political, cultural, economic, and even religious) must provide and sustain the requisite psychological energy necessary for the fulfillment of our responsibilities and obligations as social agents. In other words, Fromm explains that the socio-structural arrangements need to generate forces and patterns that hold society together and this comes in the form of a characterology arising from the dominant economic and social conditions.⁴⁴ Take for instance the fashions and trends rooted in the market industry, coupled with its power dynamics. All of these push us to develop particular psychological characteristics and social values that mitigate and regulate how we think, act, and feel within the system. Hence, it affects individual emotional drives. The characterology of the market interweaves our deeper emotional and psychological needs assuring us that our fears, desires, or expectations are all aligned with the established rules and regulations provided for. In this sense, survival is not only meeting the essential commodities in life. More so, our participation in the logic of the industry also leads to recognition and respect. Our aspirations for acknowledgment and recognition within our group or community are tied to success, status, or material wealth, which are in themselves products of the prevailing characterology.⁴⁵ In other words, the social character of a particular group, community, or society does not deal only with values or norms that we need to adopt for our survival. More than this, the characterology speaks of the alleviation and consolation of our psychic drives and emotional needs as we assimilate and adapt to our environment. As such, Heine implies the fact that our psychic drives for approval, for instance, or the fear of exclusions are emotionally charged social relations that fuel our need to conform to the existing social character.⁴⁶ As an emotional bedrock, social character permeates *how we think and act* just to preserve, sustain, and maintain our slot in social relations.⁴⁷ For Fromm, however, the social character as an architectural design of our psychic drives, is, nonetheless, culturally, and socially processed.⁴⁸ Although culturally constructed, the power of the social character cannot be overlooked in social analysis for it shapes our emotional attachments and connections as a matter of social recognition and survival. It sways our impulses to the extent that each of us must act, produce, and behave accordingly. Hence, *what to produce, where to produce, and how to produce* are linked with those forces and patterns instituted

⁴⁴ Cf. Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ*, 18–30.

⁴⁵ See Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 107.

⁴⁶ See Steven J. Heine, *Cultural Psychology*, 3rd Edition (London: W.W. Norton, 2016), 29.

⁴⁷ Cf. Teresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affects* (London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 51.

⁴⁸ Fromm explains how a patricentric mentality has produced behaviors that are economically and culturally viable within the capitalist system. See Erich Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1970), 108.

by the existing social system. What kind of work is valued, how tasks are performed, and the expected professional behavior within the social system? In this sense, we need to function following the expectations of the socio-political and economic parity. This is the reason why we highly rate values such as individualism, competition, consumerism, and productivity for they resonate with our psychic-emotional drives for survival, recognition, and belongingness, which in turn, are existential human needs. Hence, through the ubiquitous nature of the social character, we develop symmetrical relations between our physical, emotional, as well as psychical relations. Fromm describes this when he says,

As long as the circumstance of this labile equilibrium exists, the character tends to strengthen inwardly the existing social relations, especially the class relations. It is, so to speak, the cement that holds the given social structure together. It supplies the impulses that drive the people to do what is bidden, to avoid what is forbidden, and to find a certain degree of satisfaction in conforming to existing relations.⁴⁹

This symmetrical relation provides a certain “degree of comfort, enabling us as individuals to function on a day-to-day basis.”⁵⁰ Indeed, ours is not a matter of conscious decision as to whether or not to follow the social pattern, but *one of wanting to act as we have to act and at the same time finding gratification in acting...*⁵¹ Nevertheless, if social conditions could no longer provide sustenance for the pacification of our libidinal drives, a lag in our social relations arise. Once the socioeconomic and political platforms are unable to sustain basic requirements for survival and recognition, emotional friction emerges. Thus, Fromm warns

as long as the objective conditions of the society and the culture remain stable, the social character has a predominantly stabilizing function. If the external conditions change in such a way that they do not fit anymore with the traditional social character, a lag arises which often changes the function of character into an

⁴⁹ Fromm, “Man’s Impulse Structure and Its Relation to Culture,” 29.

⁵⁰ Cf. Lauren Langman and George Lundskow, *God, Guns, Gold, and Glory: American Character and Its Discontents* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 5.

⁵¹ See Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 77. (Italics mine)

element of disintegration instead of stabilization, into dynamite instead of a social mortar, as it were.⁵²

Thus, as a psychic intermediary between the existing social relations, the social character serves as the equilibrium where we fulfill socially mandated tasks and find internal satisfaction from them. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that, despite our protests and expressions of dissatisfaction with the current socio-political order, we are unable to break free from the same systemic cycle, regardless of how problematic it may be, as long as the dominant characterology offers psychological and emotional stability. What real impact can our protests and criticisms have if we remain neutralized, balanced, and in equilibrium within the existing power dynamics of society? Therefore, as previously stated, the power of social character cannot be understated, as it helps us understand why passivity persists despite the social chaos we have.

Conclusion

As mentioned, social character is the social libidinal impulses that sustain a group, or society to perform its task in line with its objectives. Fundamental to this is the role of the socio-economic arrangement where society needs to realign individual energies as a matter of survival. As such, we need to pattern our daily affairs towards the attainment of those social objectives.

However, unknown to many is how the socio-structural arrangements, together with the implementation of economic policies, create forces and patterns that evolve into social conditions. The logic that emanates from these confluences is what we call the social character. It manifests itself through the psychological traits, values, and behavior that arise from the interconnections of the socio-structural order. These traits, shaped predominantly by how socio-structural patterns are implemented, guarantee that our desires, fantasies, dreams, and ambitions are all aligned with what the social status quo demands for its stability and reproduction. In other words, the social character soothes and pacifies individual emotions and impulses to the extent that our psychic drives, rooted in our need for recognition and survival are channeled and shaped in ways that need to align with the system. As I argued, under the logic of capitalism, survival is not only meeting the basic commodities in life. Survival is attached to how we are recognized under the system. It is not only procuring food, but we might as well produce, consume, and compete, which are principles and beliefs

⁵² *Ibid.*

programmed by the inner logic of the system itself. Thus, our behavior that follows deals with deeper emotional and psychological needs that are manipulated and exploited by the system.

For Fromm, aside from the material survival that we need to fulfill, other existential human needs, such as relatedness, belongingness, and rootedness, need to be satisfied. However, I believe that such requisitions are also tied to the social character of the current social order. Social relations and recognition, for example, are tied to success, and material wealth, which are valuable traits along with the logic of the capital. Conforming to what is demanded by the capital like consumer trends, achieving professional success, or gaining social status, is a must, and we need to abide by it if we want to be recognized, related, and belong in the modern world. Through the advertising media, the networking of our socio-structural patterns stokes the drive for recognition by associating it with status symbols, consumption, and competition. Hence, the inner satisfaction that we get because of the professional success we achieve, points to those psychic qualities from which our emotional and libidinal impulses depend. The more we align with this pattern, the more we internalize it as part of our social character.

Since the social character deals with deeply seated emotionally charged ways of our daily affairs, how we are related to the world is a matter of existential concern.⁵³ Our encounters, no matter how trivial and minute they may be, speak of our joys, desires, or the struggles and fears from which we progressively respond or inactively recede.⁵⁴ As Tenhouten observes, human beings are not motivated entirely by rational calculations of their environment. More importantly, they are inspired by their emotional commitments to norms, values, and beliefs.⁵⁵ Thus, recognition and survival “is not a matter of conscious decision as to whether or not to follow the social pattern, *but one of wanting to act as we have to act and at the same time finding gratification in acting*”⁵⁶ Conforming and submitting to the social status quo provides that labile equilibrium, where inner satisfaction, i.e., subjective satisfaction provides a degree of comfort, and thus allows us to exist despite our daily struggles in life.

Why do we keep on repeating the same systemic loop? Why is there so much passivity and despite our radical critiques of the system, we find ourselves in the same pattern time and again? It is because, I believe, the role

⁵³ See Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship with the World*, trans. by James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 23.

⁵⁴ See Ian Raymond B. Pacquing, “Reclaiming the World: Hartmut Rosa’s Theory of Resonance” in *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, 24: 2 (June 2023), 275.

⁵⁵ Warren D. Tenhouten, *A General Theory of Emotions and Social Life* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xi.

⁵⁶ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 77. (Italics mine)

of the social character where our ways of survival and recognition are unconsciously rechanneled, and manipulated by how the socio-structural arrangements are designed and enacted. The degree of satisfaction felt by the poor once they align and adhere themselves with the elite as a matter of survival and recognition does not only concern their rational capacities, but more than that, it is their psychic qualities that are consoled. Voting for undesirable candidates, for instance, after receiving a meager amount of payola, as reason dictates, is wrong! But have we considered how they find relief, alleviating their fears and struggles in an unforgiving environment? Have we considered how they are recognized once they are aligned, and attached, like leeches to powers that be?⁵⁷

Since the social character deals with psychic drives, our desires, fears, struggles, and ambitions have something to do with emotive or affectual engagements with the world. This is the reason why our critiques, protestations, and grievances, no matter how rationally justified they are, remain to be ineffective. As Wilde narrates, "thinking is not an exclusively intellectual process and that it is bound up with the entire character structure. Doctrines, ideals, or even individual concepts have an "emotional matrix" rooted in the character structure of the individual..."⁵⁸ The socio-structural arrangements that we have bind us emotionally to the system. As the system promises us survival and recognition, or a sense of belongingness, its very character taps into our deeper desires and emotional relations making us most likely to conform and become passive spectators. In this sense, the social change that we all radically envisioned, discussed, and debated is just, like that, a critique that failed to recognize social actors' daily and concrete experiences.⁵⁹ It is in those real and concrete daily encounters with the world that we perceive emotive or affectual relations. Since the social character deals with values and beliefs for survival and recognition, the quality of our relationships is always affectual.⁶⁰ It provides us with a direct evaluation of how things are in the world. What allures us, fascinates us, drives us, or makes us curious and approach the world? What disdains us, terrifies us, and thus, separates us from the world?⁶¹ All of these are matters of emotionally

⁵⁷ See Ian Raymond B. Pacquing, "A Psycho-Social Reflection on the Patrimonial Culture in the Philippines" in *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, 23: 2 (June 2022): 282–297.

⁵⁸ See Wilde, *Erich Fromm and the Quest for Solidarity*, 20.

⁵⁹ See Bjorn Schiermer, "Acceleration and resonance: An interview with Hartmut Rosa. Four Generations of Critical Theory," in *Acta Sociologica* (2020), 1–7, <https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/ASJ/Acceleration_and_Resonance.pdf>.

⁶⁰ See Ian Raymond B. Pacquing, "Affectual Relations Reconsidered: The Primal Bond as a Lens for Social Transformation" in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 26:1 (January 2025), 70–84

⁶¹ See Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions. The Myth and Nature of Human Emotions* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Doubleday, 1976), 3.

charged drives which is tied to the characterology of our group, community, or society.⁶²

Thus, I maintain, that if we want to challenge the existing social order, we must not only fixate our energies on the rational or cognitive elements for social transformations. More than this, we need to deal with the emotional ties that strengthen and bind us to it. We need to look at the underlying social characterology so that we can integrate emotional resonance with our intellectual critique. We need to consider the dominant characterology, from which our emotions play a crucial role. It is the social character that emotively attaches us, aligning our dreams and aspirations to the systemic loop, that we want to change.

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⁶² Cf. Rodolfo Leyva, "On the Psychology and Libertarian Socialism of Erich Fromm: Towards an Empirically Based Psychological Retrofit" in Seyed Javad Miri, Robert Lake, and Tricia M. Kress (eds.), *Reclaiming the Sane Society: Essays on Erich Fromm's Thought* (Rotterdam: Sense Publisher, 2014), 5.

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