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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Adam Rittenberg for the Master of Arts
in History presented March 11, 1988.

Title: The Study of National Character in the Post-War Era: the
work of Erich Fromm, David Riesman, and David Potter.

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This thesis examines the study of national character through the work of the psychologist Erich Fromm, the sociologist David Riesman, and the historian David Potter. Above all I intend to provide a critical exegesis of the three thinkers. I will relate them to one another by discussing the interconnections in their thought, beginning with Fromm's social psychological theory of

character, turning to Riesman's theory of sociology and, finally, Potter's theory of American history. Each, I argue, must be studied in the context his time--above all the climate of horror and uncertainty at mid-century.

Fromm, a Jew, fled Germany in the 1930s convinced that he was witnessing a decline into a new age of barbarism. Thereafter, he struggled with the problem of good and evil in a world nakedly evil. Recurrent in his work is the theme of hope in a world beyond hope. Neither world war nor genocide could persuade him to give up hope and to succumb to pessimism. The task of his social psychology, then, was to explain the triumph of human wickedness in order to inspire faith in humanity. His theory of character did this. He explained human character, the determinant of behavior, as a purely social phenomenon. Thus, he was able to reason that the origins of evil were social. Society, not man, was the source of evil in the world.

Fromm was concerned with the character of modern man which he understood as social character. Remarkably, he did not single out the German character for condemnation in his analysis. He treated it, rather, as a manifestation of what was developing all over the world as a consequence of global socioeconomic development. He understood the rise of Nazism as one consequence of the modern man's conformist and ultimately destructive character.

Fromm's social psychology influenced Riesman's approach in his historically oriented inquiry into the American character. In many respects Riesman's sociology was Fromm's social psychology

Americanized. Riesman's principal concern, however, was not the fate of good in the world but, rather, the fate of individualism in McCarthy's Cold War America. By emphasizing individualism Riesman departed from the severity of Fromm's social determinism. Riesman's concept of autonomy celebrated individualism and suggested in terms of character the transcendence of time and place, something not imagined by Fromm. Riesman understood character as a product of society's influence against which individuals could mount resistance.

David Potter, influenced by Riesman's study of the American character, pursued the theme of Americanism. Potter's work expresses throughout his self-consciousness as an American. A Southerner born in 1910, Potter was aware of the contradiction, more apparent than real, involved in being both a Southerner and a American. The idea of character, linked as it was by Fromm and subsequently Riesman to socioeconomic conditions, enabled Potter to write about an American character that encompassed the South as well as the North. In his work on the American character Potter redefined the historical perspective of David Riesman.

THE STUDY OF NATIONAL CHARACTER IN THE POST WAR ERA:
the work of Erich Fromm, David Riesman, and David Potter

by

ADAM RITTENBERG

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requirements for the degree of

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The study of the national character was a central feature of post World War II intellectual history. It was a project involving all of the branches of social science--history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science. The focus here is on the work of three men--the psychologist Erich Fromm, the sociologist David Riesman, and the historian David Potter.

The modern study of national character blossomed in the late 1930s and began to bear fruit in the 1940s. Two forces, one intellectual and other social and political, converged to make this period ripe for the study of national character. From one direction there came an intellectual stimulus that would carry the study of national character into the decade of the forties and beyond. From the other came a sense of purpose. Intellectually, the 1930s witnessed the first graftings of psychological theory onto the anthropological study of national character. Morally as well as politically, the ascendancy of the great dictators, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin marked the period.

The specter of barbarism that hovered over the world, say, from 1935 to 1955 made the study of national character an urgent

matter. There was a desire to understand the rise of Nazism, the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Cold War with its omnipresent threat of nuclear annihilation. The obvious and understandable need to know one's enemies and one's friends was a key impetus for national character studies. But there were other motives as well. A strand of idealism was involved. Some hoped that a clear understanding of differences in national character would aid the long-term cause of peace among nations. There was also a feeling in the West that freedom was under siege. How better to deal with the threat of totalitarianism than to understand the psychology of the masses being convulsed by the times? Prominent among attempts to comprehend the nature of mass movements was Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*. But there were others such as the analyses of Theodore Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality*, Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the American psychologist Eric Hoffer in *The True Believer*. So, in part, the study of national character developed as a response to world crisis.

As Alex Inkles and Daniel Levinson observed, the study of national character stands at the "interface of individual psychology and the social sciences."¹ Traditionally, social anthropologists did most of the work in this field. Prior to the mid-1930s, the study of national character consisted mostly of descriptive studies of social norms and biographical sketches. It was assumed that

¹Alex Inkles and Daniel J. Levinson, "National Character: the Study of Modal Personality and Sociocultural Systems," *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 2nd ed., ed., Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1969), 418.

individuals "internalized cultural values," but for the most part "systematic psychological theory was ignored."²

By 1934 when Ruth Benedict published *Patterns of Culture* it was becoming clear, however, that the study of national character was undergoing change. Benedict, applying the concept of "psychological coherence," began looking into the psychological functions of whole cultures and the institutions comprising them. The psychological functions of institutions, according to the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, "are the basic data for the analysis of national character."³ The study of national character assumed that social and cultural institutions affect individual psychology. Benedict recognized that the institutions of a given culture functioned to the same end, the integration of individuals into society. Though lacking a developed theory of individual psychology, Benedict's work was the foundation of further inquiry into the link between culture and personality. Put simply, national character was understood to be the connection between culture and personality .

The basic problem posed by the study of national character, one left open to endless debate, concerns the degree to which social and cultural factors determine or condition the personalities of people. This shared personality that constitutes national character has been called a number of things, such as "social character,"

²Ibid., 419.

³Geoffrey Gorer, "National Character: Theory and Practice," *The Study of Culture at a Distance*, ed., Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953) , 66.

"basic personality," and "modal personality." I will use the term "social character" because Fromm, Riesman, and Potter did. The study of national character presupposed that people acquire in common a distinctive personality according to the time and place of their birth. To the extent that national, social, and cultural boundaries overlapped, national character was "social character." States which were conglomerations of nationalities such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia caused problems for this sort of analysis. Also, the idea of national character tested the notion of an American "melting pot." Does a nation of immigrants such as the United States acquire a distinctive character? I believe that the assumption of an American character proved fruitful.

The work of Fromm, Riesman, and Potter form three stages of a chapter in the story of the pursuit of the American character. Riesman and Potter in particular made direct and significant contributions to this inquiry. I begin with Fromm because his psychological theory of social character and his characterization of modern western man underlay Riesman's study of the American character. Potter's work, in turn, developed from Riesman's.

Erich Fromm had a significant influence upon the development of national character studies. He, along with others such as Abram Kardiner and Ralph Linton, developed theories of individual psychology that stressed environmental over biological factors and served as the foundation for national character studies. Fromm's definition of "social character," however, was stricter in terms of culture-personality nexus than either Linton's concept of "modal

personality" or Kardiner's concept of "basic personality." Fromm understood social character as a social necessity. Society required a certain type of character in order to function properly, and thus deviation from an established norm suggested social dysfunction. Linton's use of the the statistical concept of mode, as Inkles and Levinson noted in their concise summary of the study of national character, took into account the possibility of variety among individual personalities and "patternings in any society."⁴ It seems as though the existence of several statistically relevant personality types in a society would discount the very existence of a "national" character for that society. Likewise, Kardiner's idea of "basic personality" referred to the type of personality that was "most congenial to the prevailing institutions and ethos of the society."⁵ Thus in his understanding of social character as a functional prerequisite for a society Fromm carved out a distinct position.

On the basis of his understanding of social character, Fromm conducted a broad inquiry into the character of western man, believing that there was a consistent pattern of social and economic development throughout the West. His concern was always the plight of western man. Modern psychology, according to Fromm, revealed the central importance of "interpersonal relationships" in the formation of personality, and the study of the social basis of personality (the study of character) inferred personality from behavior. Fromm

⁴Inkles and Levinson, 424.

⁵Ibid., 424.

distinguished between the social and the biological areas of personality. He was concerned only with the social part of personality, and he discounted the importance of other aspects of personality. He labeled the social side of personality character, and he believed that behavior was reflective of character. Fromm devised several character orientations in order to show how different sorts of behavior were reflective of different characters. Fromm believed that by understanding how people related to others and also the world one learned about their character, that is who, essentially, they were. In terms of human conduct character, and character alone, was for Fromm ethically significant. Thus Fromm believed that the troubles of the world had social origins. It followed then that the source of man's problems was the organization of his society, and Fromm thought that psychology applied to the task of social organization could solve man's problems. At the time Fromm was writing the problems confronting man were war and genocide.

The beginning point of Fromm's "science of man" was his understanding of human nature, which he presupposed was "characteristic of the human species." Neither fixed nor infinitely malleable, human nature, he held, was adaptable. In retrospect it seems also to have been benign and ineffective. Man was a naturally good creature living in a dreadful world. But out of the necessity of having to adapt, man had become dreadful as well. Fromm went on to distinguish between virtuous and vicious characters as well as sane and insane societies, distinctions based upon his understanding

human nature. His only hope for the future was a transformation of the world. Paradoxically, it seems, man the victim was to become the shaper of a new world. Throughout, the subject of Fromm's inquiry was "man," and his emphasis was upon the urgency of his dilemma.

David Riesman was more interested in the plight of individuals than of mankind. Autonomous individuals were his heroes; and as Riesman imagined them, the autonomous were beleaguered in the modern, corporate, bureaucratized world of the twentieth century. A desire to understand his own times led David Riesman to contrast today's Americans to those of yesterday. Like Fromm, however, he believed that Americans could be understood along the same lines as other western peoples. This broader analysis was, in retrospect, almost superfluous to his handling of American character. Thus I regard his work as essentially a study of the American character.

The perception of a difference between what history told him about past Americans and what he saw in his contemporaries inspired Riesman's study of the American character. Frommian psychology, by linking character to social structure as it did, provided Riesman with a way of explaining differences he perceived between twentieth-century Americans and their nineteenth-century counterparts. Riesman was able to link the transformation of American society to the development of the American character. In sum, the differences between America as an industrializing society and America as a consumer society spelled out the changes in the American character. The change in the American character from "inner-directed" to

"other-directed" paralleled the transition of America from a society of production to a society of consumption. The point of reference for himself as well as his critics in his discussion of the American character was Alexis de Tocqueville, who from Riesman and others gained much currency in the 1950s. The revitalization of Tocqueville during this period was natural, given intellectuals' heightened concern with the American character. The theme of the American character, though it stretched back beyond Tocqueville to Crèvecoeur, was rooted in the former's discussion of *Democracy in America* during the age of Jackson.

Riesman's insightful descriptions of the American character at mid-century influenced David Potter. Beginning with Riesman's sketch of the twentieth-century national character, Potter sought to uncover its historical roots. He examined more closely the milieu in which the American character developed and elaborated upon Riesman's historical perspective. Potter, too, harkened back to Tocqueville, emphasizing abundance as a factor in the formation of American character. His thesis was that the American character had been conditioned by material plenty. Living in a spacious and bountiful environment Americans had developed attitudes and institutions that betrayed the luxury of living in a land of plenty. Americans, according to Potter, equated freedom and equality with opportunity. Americans cherished the opportunity to get wealthy as a birthright, and, he said, they did so at the expense of other values. Americans sacrificed security and the sense of belonging that comes with assured status in order to pursue their personal

fortune. They were outwardly conformist and inwardly distressed. Like Riesman's other-directed character and Fromm's consumer oriented character, the modern American in Potter's estimation was lonely and anxious.

Three chapters follow. Chapter one discusses Fromm's psychology and his study of character. Chapter two addresses Riesman's analysis of the American character. Chapter three deals with Potter's interpretation of the American character. I end with a conclusion about the place of their work in history.

* * *

CHAPTER II

ERICH FROMM

Erich Fromm spent his life trying "to understand the laws that govern the life of the individual man, and the laws of society-- that is, of men and their social existence."¹ In his approach he was part Cassandra and part Pollyanna. He described a present without hope while he anticipated a future without despair. It is as though he willed optimism in order to escape hopelessness, as though he was convinced that by refusing to concede reality he could alter reality. He was convinced that reality was wretched and modern man's existence insane, yet he placed man beyond reproach and believed him capable of perfection. At the center of Fromm's work was this conflict between pessimism and optimism. The urgency of his message arose out of this conflict. The pessimist told his readers they were dead while the optimist insisted they could overcome death.² Thus to understand Fromm one must realize that his

¹Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: The Courage to be Human, with a postscript by Erich Fromm* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1982), 3, citing Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Credo Series, 1962), n.p.

²Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart & Company Inc., 1955), 360.

thought was strung taut between two profound convictions, the ugliness of human existence and the sublimity of human nature. Somehow Fromm was able to disassociate the ghastly design from its architect and condemn society while lavishing man with praise. His analysis of the relationship between man and society developed around this good man-evil society paradox. As psychologist, sociologist, philosopher, and crusader Fromm sought to understand life's tragic experiences, to discover meaning in an age absorbed in the absurd, and most importantly to resolve the conflict between good and evil in favor of the good.

His ambition was no less than to save humanity. This is evident in his three most widely known books, *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Man for Himself* (1947), and *The Sane Society* (1955). I believe that the three books explore the same themes and elaborate a consistent philosophy. Therefore, I treat them as pieces of a larger work which offered a penetrating analysis of the problem of evil in the modern world. Psychology was Fromm's tool of analysis. Psychology, he argued, could explain the nature of evil and map the way to a world beyond evil. *Escape From Freedom* analyzed what Fromm perceived as modern man's hostility to his newly won freedom from the arbitrary rule of kings. With freedom came frightening responsibilities. Overwhelmed by anxiety, man, Fromm believed, was retreating into authoritarian systems. Plainly, Fromm was confronting the nightmare of Nazi Germany. Though he left Germany in the 1930s, it was impossible for him, a Jew, to shut out the macabre vision of Nazism. The book tried to explain the

socioeconomic origins of modern man's conformist and ultimately destructive character which he believed was responsible for the slaughter of millions and the destruction of civilization. In one sense *Escape from Freedom* can be understood as an account of how good men commit genocide, perhaps even as an apology for good men who perpetrate evil.

Of course it was never Fromm's intention to write apologetics, but it seems to have been inherent in the paradox of good men in an evil society. Six years after *Escape from Freedom* he published *Man for Himself*. This book explained in greater detail the nature of the human self and offered a more complex analysis of the corrupting effects of society. Here Fromm developed fully the link between man's psychic needs and socioeconomic structures in the formation of character. He also presented the humanist alternative, a philosophy of life attuned to basic needs of the self.

The Sane Society, finally, presented a socioeconomic alternative to both bureaucratic capitalism and bureaucratic communism. Fromm proposed a new order built upon the ideals of humanism, a community structured around the "Golden Rule." The society he envisioned was sane because it catered to man's psychic needs and thus ended the distortion of human nature by society. Man would be one with himself and sane. Man would flourish in a condition of love, freedom, and justice. The sane society would constitute the fulfillment of humanist ideals inspired by biblical prophecy. His humanism was rooted in the religion of his youth, Judaism.

Life began for Erich Fromm in Frankfurt am Main, Germany in 1900. His parents were Orthodox Jews, and he was a precocious child who began to study the principle texts of Judaism, the Old Testament and the Talmud, at an early age. The hopeful prophecies of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea in the Old Testament made a lasting impression on him.³ In the aftermath of the First World War he encountered Marx whose secularized messianism had a great influence as well, particularly in regard to his interpretations of history and religion. Marx, according to Bernard Tauber and Edward S. Landis, provided "the key to the understanding of history and the manifestation, in secular terms, of the radical humanism which was expressed in the messianic vision of the Old Testament prophets."⁴ Fromm studied briefly at the University of Frankfurt, and in 1919 moved to the University of Heidelberg where he studied under Alfred Weber, the sociologist and philosopher of history, Karl Jaspers, the existentialist, and Heinrich Rickert, the neo-Kantian philosopher.

After receiving a doctorate in philosophy in 1922 for which he wrote a dissertation on "the sociopsychological structure of three Jewish Diaspora communities: the Karaites, the Hasidim, and the Reformed Jews," Fromm moved to Munich where he studied psychiatry and psychology. He remained in Munich until 1930. There occurred two particularly significant moments in his intellectual

³ Funk, *Erich Fromm*, 1-9. Unless otherwise noted all biographical information for Fromm comes from this source.

⁴Bernard Tauber and Edward S. Landis, "On Erich Fromm," *In the Name of Life. Essays in honor of Erich Fromm* (New York: Holt, 1971), xi.

development. First, he came in contact with Buddhist philosophy which impressed him with its combination of mysticism and rationalism. Second, he read Johann Jakob Bachofen's sociopsychological study of patriarchal and matriarchal societies *Mother Right* which suggested to him, contra Freud, the prominence of social and cultural forces in the shaping of personality.

In the 1930s Fromm left Germany in order to escape Nazism. He arrived in the United States in 1934. He was employed as a professor of psychology at various universities and institutes around the country and established a worldwide reputation as a "neo-Freudian" psychologist, utopian social critic, and humanist philosopher. In 1949 he moved with wife Annis to Mexico on the advice of her doctor. Thereafter, he divided his time between Mexico and the United States until his death in 1980. His professional life was devoted to developing a workable synthesis of psychology, philosophy, and sociology. The product of this synthesis was a social psychology grounded in a humanist view of the world. It was a mix of rationalism and mysticism with strong doses of Marx and Freud.

One of his biographers, Ranier Funk, has shed light on the crucial role of Judaism as a source of Fromm's thought. The influence of Judaism is particularly interesting because Fromm abandoned the practice of conventional religion in his mid-twenties and thereafter espoused what Funk has termed "religious humanism." According to Funk, Fromm's later thought reflected his early exposure to two traditions of Jewish thought, rationalism and mysticism. Two thinkers, Moses Maimonides and Hermann Cohen,

figured prominently in Fromm's encounter with Jewish rationalism. Fromm was influenced greatly by the negative theology of twelfth-century philosopher Maimonides.⁵ Taking the ban on images as absolute, Maimonides denied the possibility of positive knowledge of God and maintained that descriptions of God were really only descriptions of God's effects. Knowledge of God's effects was supposed to lead man to perfection. God's conduct was supposed to be the model for human conduct. As Maimonides wrote in his *Guide of the Perplexed*,

the chief aim of man should be to make himself, as far as possible, similar to God: that is to say, to make his acts similar to the acts of God, or as our Sages express it in explaining the verse, 'Ye shall be holy': 'He is gracious, so you also be gracious; He is merciful, so be you also merciful.'⁶

In Maimonides, therefore, the important questions of religion, of the idea of God, thus become ethical questions in the Jewish tradition.

Also important to Fromm's understanding of Jewish rationalism was Hermann Cohen, who in the nineteenth century infused Maimonides with Kant. In books such as *Reason and Hope* and *Religion of Reason* Cohen argued that the essence of religion was morality. For instance he wrote in *Reason and Hope*, "Ethics would be demeaned and religion obscured if God's significance were to be found beyond the

⁵Funk, *Erich Fromm*, 183-94.

⁶*Ibid.*, 186, citing Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans., M. Friedlander (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), 198.

realm of morality. The ethics intrinsic to God's nature, and that alone, constitutes religion in Judaism."⁷ The terms religion and morality were, in fact, interchangeable, and religious knowledge, knowledge of God, was knowledge of God's moral attributes. In the tradition of Kantian rationalism Cohen interpreted religion as a construct of reason. Cohen argued that the idea of God was essential for the existence of a moral order. Therefore, the existence of a moral order affirmed the existence of God. Cohen's conception of religion as a "religion of reason" went a step beyond Maimonides' view of religion as "revelation understood by reason."⁸ Fromm went one step further than Cohen and excised God from religion. Cohen linked the existence of a moral order known only by reason to the existence of a "transcendent" God, an absolutely moral ideal. From Fromm's humanist perspective the logic of Cohen's nationalist theology negated God. Rather than affirm God, human reason affirmed the power of man. In a sense man became God, and the question of relationship between man and God dissolved into unity.

The unity of God and man existed also as a theme in the tradition of Jewish mysticism. Thus the nationalist teachings of Maimonides and Cohen mingled in Fromm's mind with mysticism. He encountered Jewish mysticism while a student at the University of

⁷Ibid., 189, citing Hermann Cohen, *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans., Eva Jospe (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), 221.

⁸Ibid., 188-94.

Heidelberg. Under the tutelage of the socialist Schneur Salman Baruch Rabinkov, Fromm absorbed the teachings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, who in the eighteenth century established a reform movement within traditional Hasidism called Habad Hasidism. Hasidism was essentially Kabbalism with deemphasized messianism. According to Kabbalist teaching the achievement of unity between God and man was completed by God. According to Hasidism it was not. Funk has written that in Hasidism "the ethical and the religious spheres are brought into unity by man's sanctification, which is based on the idea that it is through man's action that creation is perfected."⁹ In Hasidism, as in Kabbalism, God and man were united through the mediation of the Zaddik, the "devout individual." Habad Hasidism, however, rejected the role of the Zaddik as the learned spiritual leader in favor of the benoi, the "average man." The benoi, equipped with reason, could achieve sanctification. Put simply, Habad Hasidism democratized Judaism, and made God's grace readily available to all.

Kabbalism also taught that man possessed two souls, a divine soul and an animal soul. Hasidism and Habad Hasidism retained this belief. In Habad Hasidism it was believed that reason was sufficient for unraveling the mysteries of the divine soul through study of the Torah. The object of reason was to acquire knowledge that enabled man to imitate God and thus share in God's divinity. The animal soul was associated with evil, and importantly, evil

⁹Ibid., 198.

represented in Jewish mysticism, according to Funk, "a secondary phenomenon." In his essential nature man was good. The idea of evil as a secondary potentiality was a central feature of Fromm's thought.

Funk has described Habad Hasidism as "mystical psychology,"¹⁰ that is the study of the divine soul by reason. Fromm's belief that the human soul was subject to psychological inquiry seems by implication to have had its source in the "mystical psychology" of Habad Hasidism. Despite the fact that Fromm did not refer to Jewish mysticism as a source of inspiration for his humanism, Funk has demonstrated an impressive number of parallels between Fromm's "religious humanism" and Habad Hasidism. In addition to the distinction between primary and secondary natures and the idea that the human soul was comprehensible by psychology, Fromm's belief in human self-perfection, as well as his naturalism, appear to have have had their origins in Habad Hasidism. Fromm's humanism, however, had a different center for its faith than did Habad Hasidism. The latter revolved around a belief in God while the former a belief in man.¹¹

Fromm substituted religious humanism for theistic belief. One man replaced one God. Funk has explained that Fromm's concept of religious humanism was drawn from Marx. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* Marx wrote that "the question of

¹⁰Ibid., 203, citing Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954/1961), 341.

¹¹Ibid., 204.

an alien being, a being above nature and man--a question which implies an admission of the unreality of nature and of man--has become impossible in practice."¹² Fromm, following Marx, rejected theonomy outright as a contradiction of belief in human autonomy. Unlike Marx, however, Fromm did not see religious belief merely withering away as man escaped his socioeconomic bondage. Contra Marx, Fromm understood religious belief as answering a human need for an object of orientation and devotion. Consequently, Fromm saw humanism transcending theistic belief. Theistic belief existed historically as a compromise between man's religious nature and irreligious society. Man, Fromm wrote, "longs for a world in which love, freedom, and justice are rooted, and since such a world does not exist, he creates a separate institutions alongside society, religion."¹³ In Fromm's religious humanism man was to be his own object orientation and devotion. Society, in turn, would become the realization of man's highest aspirations. Humanism overcame the separation of the celestial city of God from the the terrestrial

¹²Ibid., 215, citing Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 357.

¹³Erich Fromm, postscript to *Erich Fromm* by Rainer Funk, 294-95. Fromm believed that his view of religion was essentially the same as Marx's: "For him, religion was an opiate for man because it tries to satisfy his profoundest needs by illusions instead of allowing him to pluck the living flower. Marx was not antireligious. He was profoundly religious and not an enemy of 'religion' for that very reason." Fromm believed that since Marx interpreted religion socioeconomically rather than psychologically, his humanism is misunderstood as antireligious (*Erich Fromm*, 213-16).

city of man, between religious principle and earthly reality. Man, no longer torn between God and Mammon, would become like God.

The rejection of theonomy and a belief in human self-perfection were the fountainheads of Fromm's psychology. Understanding man as his own object of orientation and devotion was its objective. He believed that psychology probed the depths of man's nature. He was convinced that he could show how man had degenerated into a lower, brutish form of life and how man could be reborn into a higher, divine form. The purpose of *Escape from Freedom* was, Fromm wrote, "to analyze those dynamic factors in the character structure of modern man which made him want to give up freedom in Fascist countries and which so widely prevail in millions of our own people."¹⁴ Fromm was concerned with the dangerous implications of the character structure of modern man. For Fromm psychology was built around the analysis of character. The question of understanding Fromm's psychology, therefore, becomes one of understanding what he meant by character.

In the most simple terms character determined how individuals got along in the world. The function of character in the human world was analogous to the function of instinct in other animals. Fromm thought of character as "the human substitute for the instinctive apparatus of the animal."¹⁵ People were not born with

¹⁴Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1941), 6.

¹⁵Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1947), 59.

character. Instead, they acquired it as they matured. Character was only one part of personality. Fromm understood personality to be "the totality of inherited and acquired psychic qualities which are characteristic of one individual and which make the individual unique."¹⁶ In essence Fromm divided personality in two. On one side were those psychic qualities acquired socially which comprised character and on the other those inherited biologically. Character was all important to Fromm because differences in character constituted "the real problems of ethics" while biological factors such as temperament held "no ethical significance."¹⁷

Whether correct or not Fromm's distinction between the ethically significant and insignificant portions of personality was crucial to his argument. Since he intended to preserve the dignity of man, he needed to keep the focus on character and thus society as the root of evil in the world. "The virtuous or the vicious character," Fromm wrote, "rather than single virtues or vices, is the true subject of ethical inquiry."¹⁸ He believed that since character was acquired after birth through social interaction virtue and vice had wholly social origins. He thought that by linking ethics to character he was in a position to show how man may decide for himself whether he is living rightly or wrongly.

Fromm was convinced that a thorough understanding of character would enable man to ascertain the good life. To put Fromm's view of

¹⁶Ibid., 50.

¹⁷Ibid., 50.

¹⁸Ibid., 33.

character in perspective it is helpful to contrast him to Freud. Fromm thought of his theory of character as a "dynamic" alternative to Freud's "static" theory. Furthermore, he saw his theory as an elaboration of Freud's initial insight into the importance of character. According to Fromm, Freud had been the first to recognize the complex relationship between behavior and character. Freud had showed that while behavior was a manifestation of character, it did not mirror character. In Fromm's words "Freud developed not only the first but also the most consistent and penetrating theory of character as a system of strivings which underlie, but are not identical with, behavior."¹⁹ For instance, courageous behavior could have been a consequence of a number of motivations, a desire for fame or an urge toward suicide to name two, but courage itself was not to be considered a character trait. Fromm believed that Freud had erred when he located the source of the strivings, which go to make up character, in the libido. Fromm made a succinct exposition of the difference between Freud's "biologism" and his own "social psychology."

Freud's essential principle is to look upon man as an entity , a closed system, endowed by nature with certain physiologically conditioned drives, and to interpret the development of his character as a reaction to satisfactions and frustrations of these drives; whereas, in our opinion, the fundamental approach to human personality is the understanding of man's relations to the world, to others, to nature, and to himself. We believe that man is primarily a social being, and not, as Freud assumes, primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others to satisfy his instinctual

¹⁹Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 54-58.

needs. In this sense, we believe that individual psychology is fundamentally social psychology, or in [Henry Stack] Sullivan's terms the psychology of interpersonal relationships; the key problem of psychology is that the particular kind of relatedness of the individual to the world, not the satisfaction of single instinctual desires.²⁰

Fromm revised Freud's explanation for irrational behavior and claimed that he had mistaken "the causal relation between erogenous zones and character traits for the reverse of what they really are."²¹ Fromm thought that erogenous zones were useful metaphorically, not diagnostically. Take for example the "oral" person. According to Fromm, he was a passive recipient of the world around, possessed of "the desire to receive everything one wants to obtain--love, protection, knowledge, material things. . . ."²² This type of person would often dream or fantasize about being fed, nursed, or otherwise orally stimulated. Freud concluded that such a person suffered from an "oral fixation" and that his fixation had resulted from excessive oral stimulation or deprivation during childhood. "Oral fixation," according to Fromm, was a particularly apt way for the individual to express his "receptive orientation" to the world. Likewise, where Freud understood "anal" behavior traits such as obstinacy, orderliness, and aloofness to arise from a childhood fixation on the anus, Fromm saw such a "fixation" as an expression of an orientation to the world he called "hoarding". Fromm's difficulty with Freud's position arose chiefly because Freud

²⁰ Ibid., 290.

²¹ Ibid., 291.

²² Ibid., 291.

did not satisfactorily explain social and cultural patterns of behavior. Fromm criticized Freud's theory, by noting that

as long as we assume, for instance, that the anal character, as it is typical of the European lower class, is caused by certain early experiences in connection with defecation, we have hardly any data that lead us to understand why a specific class should have an anal social character.²³

It is important to point out that Freud's perspective lent itself to dark views of human nature and human destiny. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) Freud argued that the demands of human nature and society were at odds. Apart from society man was a savage, within he was neurotic, lonely, and desperate. The building of a civilization, according to Freud, proceeded upon the suppression of instinct.²⁴ Fromm's view of human nature was irreconcilable with Freud's. When they looked inside man they saw fundamentally different beings. Freud saw a seething libido and Fromm something beautiful which he termed the self. Fromm rejected Freud's theory of "instinctual orientation" because he could not accept its conclusion. Freud's view led to a "profound conviction of the wickedness of human nature."²⁵ The disagreement between the two men was over the nature of humankind.

Fromm did not really reject instinctual theory completely. He identified one human instinct. Fromm's man was born with a benevolent inclination to get along in the world. For Freud

²³Ibid., 293.

²⁴Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 44.

²⁵Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, pg. 294.

character was essentially a well or ill trained libido. For Fromm it was a nurtured or abused self. Fromm's theory of character presupposed the good nature of man. Don Hausdorff has described Fromm's conception of the "self" as "the cornerstone of social character." Hausdorff has noted that "logically, the critics who are unconvinced about Fromm's conception of the self believe, as a consequence, that his whole theoretical structure collapses."²⁶ Fromm's harshest critic, John Scharr, charged,

The concept of the self as a substance, a notion which for centuries had been the strongest offspring of the metaphysical reason, was exposed by Hume as a bastard of confused and fevered imagination. Since Hume's exposure, the self has never been restored to full philosophical legitimacy.²⁷

Scharr questioned the philosophical legitimacy of Fromm's humanism, arguing that Fromm's theory relied upon already discredited ideas in philosophy. Fromm's formulation of the self, he wrote, "rests upon a pre-Humean conception of the self as a simple substance and upon an Aristotelian conception of potentiality as something inherent in matter."²⁸ Does Fromm have a meaningful conception of the self?

Fromm's understanding of the self was more spiritual than metaphysical. For Fromm the self represented human nature. The self was an article of faith for him, and he was convinced of its nobility. He deferred to the authority of Aristotle and of Spinoza

²⁶Don Hausdorff, *Erich Fromm* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), 47.

²⁷John Scharr, *Escape from Authority*, 66.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

in the formulation of what he called a humanistic science of man.²⁹ Fromm revived something akin to Aristotle's idea of final-cause. Aristotle had written, "Nature, like mind, always does whatever it does for the sake of something, which something is its end."³⁰ Nature pursued an end, its end being its final cause. Fromm shared with Aristotle a teleological view of human nature and wrote, "From the nature of man, Aristotle, deduces the norm that 'virtue' (excellence) is 'activity,' by which he means the exercise of the functions and capacities peculiar to man."³¹ Spinoza had defined virtue as "preserving one's being" and preserving one's being as becoming what one potentially is. Fromm concluded that "virtue is the unfolding of the specific potentialities of every organism; for man it is the state in which he is most human."³² Man would be most human when he had fulfilled himself or as Funk wrote, perfected creation. Fromm believed that the modern way of life was a perversion of creation and that mental illness was the consequence. He saw modern man's destructive and conformist character as evidence of his sickness. His judgment of the human condition depended on

²⁹Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 25-30. Bertrand Russell reported that Maimonides is regarded as an important source for Spinoza. This supports circumstantially Funk's argument that Maimonides influenced Fromm since he acknowledges his indebtedness to Spinoza. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 423.

³⁰*Encyclopedia of philosophy*, 1972 ed., s.v. "Psychology" by R.S. Peters and C.R. Mates, 3.

³¹Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 25.

³²*Ibid.*, 26.

his ability to determine what man actually was and what his needs were.

Hume had contended that perceptions were distinct and ephemeral and that it was not possible to establish connections among them, and, therefore, that the idea of a human self as a unity was fallacious.³³ He described the self as nothing other than a "bundle of perceptions." Fromm was suggesting on the other hand that belief in the human self was not unfounded. The progress of psychology lay, he wrote,

in the return to the great tradition of humanistic ethics which looked at man in his physico-spiritual totality, believing that man's aim is to be himself and that the condition for attaining this goal is that man be for himself.³⁴

Fromm believed that the study of unconscious motivation, which Freud had revolutionized, had established the groundwork for a philosophical revolution. "The drive to live is inherent in every organism," he wrote, "and man cannot help wanting to live regardless of what he would like to think about it"³⁵ Psychology revealed the nature of this inherent drive for life and thus was able to make distinctions between normal and abnormal psychological development. What was conducive to normal development was good and what was conducive to abnormal development was bad. He did not express a factual understanding of the self, and he was guilty of suggesting

³³ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1972 ed., s.v. "Psychology" by R.S. Peters and C.A. Mace, 13-14.

³⁴ Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

that he had evidence when he had none. Thus he left himself open to criticisms such as those made by Scharr. Fromm would have been better off if he had avoided the issue of a metaphysical self, but his failure on this count was not fatal. Faith is secure without metaphysics, and the whole of Fromm's thought rested upon the presupposition that evil acts were abnormal and contrary to human nature.

Fromm drew his conception of human nature, of the human self, from his estimation of man's existential condition. Fromm claimed to understand man's existential needs. In *Man for Himself* he introduced the idea of existential needs, and in *The Sane Society* he developed idea fully. Five existential needs predominated. There were needs for relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, an experience of unity, and an object of devotion.³⁶ Existential needs were consequences of what Fromm termed "existential dichotomies," and man experienced them because of who he was. Fromm called man "the freak of the universe." "Self-awareness, reason, and imagination," he suggested, "have disrupted the 'harmony' which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence had made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe."³⁷ The simple fact that man was aware of his own existence invited problems not experienced by other animals. He argued that man was confounded by two existential contradictions. First, consciousness haunted man. Since man was aware of himself, he was also aware of his mortality. The fact that throughout life

³⁶Fromm, *The Sane Society*, chapter 3.

³⁷Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 40.

man could anticipate death, Fromm believed, forced man into accepting defeat for himself. The second existential dichotomy was dependent on the first. Because death was imminent, man realized that he could not accomplish what his birth set him forth to do. "Man's life," he wrote, "beginning and ending at one accidental point in the evolutionary process of the race, conflicts tragically with the individual's claim for the realization of all of his potentialities."³⁸ Fromm was arguing that the facts of existence engender fatalism. A person could not hope to accomplish all that he was capable of achieving. To do so his lifespan would have had to equal that of humanity.

To draw the meaning of existential dichotomies more clearly, Fromm juxtaposed them to historical dichotomies. Historical dichotomies referred to the problems of history that were man-made. He considered instances of man's inhumanity to man in terms of historical dichotomies. Historical dichotomies posed special problems for man, but they were solvable unlike existential dichotomies. Because they were often confused with existential dichotomies, Fromm felt that problems with solutions went unresolved. The seeds of cruelty were not planted in human nature. Rather, as he wrote in *Escape from Freedom*, "the most beautiful as well as the most ugly inclinations of man are not part of a fixed

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

and biologically given human nature, but result from the social process which creates man."³⁹

Fromm's message was that man could not be indifferent to his own fate. He was convinced of the oneness of man. "One individual," he declared,

represents the human race. He is one specific example of the human species. He is "he" and he is "all"; he is an individual with his peculiarities and in this sense unique, and at the same time he is representative of the all characteristics of the human race. His individual personality is determined by the peculiarities of human existence common to all men.⁴⁰

Fromm devised a moral philosophy premised on his belief in the unity of man. Egoism and solipsism were impossible. "Love of others and love of ourselves, he wrote, "are not alternatives."⁴¹ Thus, following Aristotle and Spinoza, he offered what he termed as an "objectivist" approach to the problem of self-interest. He equated "seeking one's profit" with "virtue" and turned the problem of ethics into one of ascertaining what self-interest really was. "It follows," he contended,

³⁹Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 12. At this stage in his work Fromm had not developed the idea of existential needs. He believed that man had only physiological and historical needs. Because he was not thinking in terms of moral philosophy, existential needs were not essential to his argument. When he became concerned with humanist philosophy he encountered a problem of objectivity. He solved this problem by postulating human nature as his source of objectivity. The idea of man's existential self and its needs thus became crucial.

⁴⁰Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 44.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 129.

that man can deceive himself about his real self-interest if he is ignorant of his self and its real needs and that the science of man is the basis for determining what constitutes man's self-interest.⁴²

The "real needs" of the self were those which produced harmony. Man was to "seek his own profit," his profit being synonymous with the profit of others. Kant's command to "act so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" puts in a phrase what Fromm means by "seeking one's own profit." Kant would have objected to the idea of basing an ethical system on the principle of "seeking one's own profit," but Fromm echoed Kant's opinion that individuals be viewed always as subjects not objects, as ends not means.⁴³

Fromm believed that the insights of psychology validated his opinion of self-interest, and he produced a corollary to the "Golden Rule": "Whatever you do to others, you also do to yourself". "To violate the forces directed toward life in any human being," he explained, "necessarily has repercussions on ourselves."⁴⁴ This article of faith derived directly out of a belief in the human self, a belief in the goodness of the human soul steeped in the Jewish tradition.

Fromm based his theory of character upon his understanding of human nature. Character was a function of the self. Through his

⁴²ibid.,134. His discussion of "Selfishness, Self-Love, and Self-Interest" runs from 119- 141.

⁴³ibid.,121-24,143.

⁴⁴ibid., .225

involvement in the social process man tried to satisfy the needs of the self and acquired his character. In *Man for Himself* Fromm explained character as arising because of the self's need for relatedness. He mentioned the other four needs for transcendence, rootedness, unity, and devotion but in a context that suggested he considered them to be subsumed in a general need for relatedness.⁴⁵ "The fundamental basis of character," he argued, is seen in how "man related himself to the world." A person's character described how he was related to the world, and Fromm described this as a "character orientation." A single character orientation involved two processes of relating to the world. A process of assimilation determined an individual's relationship to the material world, and a process of socialization his relationship to other people and with himself. Fromm outlined five character orientations. In turn, he outlined five processes of assimilation and five processes of socialization. Thus he defined each character orientation by its processes of assimilation and socialization. He further distinguished each of the five character orientations as being either nonproductive or productive. There were four nonproductive orientations and one productive orientation. Nonproductive and productive were synonymous with unhealthy and healthy. Nonproductive orientations were unhealthy because they were perversions of human nature. In all because there were four nonproductive character orientations, there were four nonproductive

⁴⁵ibid., 43-7.

processes of assimilation and four nonproductive processes of socialization. In addition because there was one productive character orientation, there was one productive process of assimilation and one productive process of socialization. I will begin with the four nonproductive character orientations, discussing first their processes of assimilation and then their processes of socialization. This will prepare the way for understanding the productive orientation.

Fromm's scheme began with a detailed analysis of the elements comprising the four nonproductive orientations. The four nonproductive processes of assimilation were the receptive, exploitative, hoarding, and marketing. A receptive person felt that the source of all good was outside of himself. He looked to others for nurture. Knowledge was something others gave him, as was love. Decisions were things others made for him. He was typically "optimistic and friendly," and he had "a certain confidence in life and its gifts." He functioned well until his "source of supply is threatened."⁴⁶

The exploitative person was like the receptive in one respect. He saw the outside world as the source of all good. He did not however expect to be showered with gifts. His motto was "stolen fruits are sweetest." He appropriated the thoughts, love, and wares of other.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ibid., 62-3.

⁴⁷ibid., 64-65.

The hoarding person unlike the receptive and the exploitative saw the outside world not as the source of good but as where bad things lurk. They were miserly and possessive of love. He valued order and security. He believed that "there is nothing new under the sun," and "mine is mine and yours is yours."⁴⁸

In historical terms the receptive orientation was most prevalent in pre-capitalist, highly-structured, traditional cultures in which deference to authority was highly valued. In modern cultures it revealed itself in peoples' attitudes towards "experts" and "public opinion". People respected the person who could tell them what to eat, what to wear, and how to be happier. The exploitative and hoarding orientations referred to the prototypical capitalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They existed "side by side," the former as the ruthless free-marketer and the latter as his more conservative puritan counterpart.⁴⁹

The last, and most modern, nonproductive orientation was the marketing character. He was a protege of Dale Carnegie and had learned how to win friends and influence people. He was a product of the modern abstract and impersonal marketplace. His orientation was "rooted in the experience of himself as a commodity and of his value as an exchange value." He was an individual with a plastic identity and his motto was "I am as you desire me." For him equality meant sameness, and peculiar and

⁴⁸ibid., 66-67.

⁴⁹ibid., 79-81.

queer carried wholly negative connotations. His human relationships were superficial and his love, casual.

The four nonproductive processes of socialization were sadism, masochism, destructiveness, and indifference or automaton conformity as Fromm called it in *Escape from Freedom*.⁵⁰ He considered them to be "mechanisms of escape," and he distinguished them as either types of symbiotic relatedness or types of withdrawal-destructiveness.⁵¹ Sadism and masochism were symbiotic, and destructiveness and indifference were withdrawal-destructive. The psychological meaning of symbiosis was "the union of one individual self with another." "Both the masochistic and the sadistic strivings," Fromm wrote, "tend to help the individual escape his unbearable feeling of aloneness and powerlessness."⁵² Though they had the same source, a fear of freedom, masochism and sadism were considered opposite expressions of the same striving. The masochist's perversion was the "conscious and intentional enjoyment of pain or humiliation."⁵³ His need to submit made him willing to suffer almost any abasement. The masochist was dependent on his tormentor, but Fromm argued that

⁵⁰In *Escape from Freedom* Fromm discussed a "mechanism of escape," authoritarianism, which encompassed sadism and masochism, destructiveness, and automaton conformity. In *Man for Himself* he changed the name of "automaton conformity" to "indifference." In addition, he elaborated upon these and discussed four nonproductive processes of socialization. The analysis in the two books was essentially the same; however, in the former he went into greater detail, his motivation being Hitler and Nazi Germany.

⁵¹Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 107.

⁵²Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 151.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 148.

the tormentor, the sadist was also dependent on his victim.⁵⁴ A sense of his own isolation and powerlessness compelled the sadist to seek a sense belongingness and importance through domination. Sadism and masochism were alternative manifestations of the same "symbiotic complex," and Fromm preferred to speak of the sado-masochistic orientation.⁵⁵

In *Escape from Freedom* Fromm used his analysis of the sado-masochistic orientation to explain the rise of Nazism in Germany during the 1930s. Nazism, he claimed, appealed to psychic needs of those dissatisfied with their declining fortunes in the post World War I era. He explained Hitler's appeal to the German lower middle class, the petit bourgeois, on the grounds that its status was most threatened by economic upheaval.⁵⁶

Destructiveness and indifference led to withdrawal rather than symbiosis. Sadism was destructive, but the goal of sadism was the incorporation of the object. The destructive orientation, however, aimed at its elimination. Fromm explained, "Sadism tends to strengthen the atomized individual by the domination over others; destructiveness by the absence of any threat from the outside."⁵⁷ The destructive person wants to be left alone by the world. When the world, intruded he lashed out. The automaton or indifferent was plastic. He gave up his individual self and became an automaton,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 158-59.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 216-17.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 179.

"identical with millions of others," and had no need to "feel alone and anxious anymore."⁵⁸

The processes of assimilation and socialization were associated. People tended to respond to things and people in similar ways. The marketing orientation was compatible with automaton conformity, the receptive orientation with masochism, the exploitative orientation with sadism, and the hoarding orientation with destructiveness.⁵⁹ In Fromm's eyes modern man was becoming an automaton, and his character was being conditioned in the marketplaces of goods and services(people) and of ideas. Fromm described modern man in terms of his "pseudo character, "pseudo-acts," and lastly, "pseudo-self."⁶⁰ Since man, according to Fromm, "acquires that character which makes him want to do what he has to do," the pseudo condition of modern man's existence presupposed that modern society was a pseudo society. The fate of the sane society and the fate of the productive orientation were inextricably linked. Until there was a sane society, Fromm did not believe that there can be truly sane people. The living by definition were insane.

The indictment of the mental health of individuals was an indictment of the mental health of society and vice versa. In *The Sane Society* he declared that "The cure of social pathology must follow the same principles [as the cure for individual pathology],

⁵⁸Ibid., 186.

⁵⁹Fromm, *Man for Himself*, see diagram on 111.

⁶⁰Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 185-206.

since it is the pathology of so many human beings, and not of an entity beyond or apart from individuals."⁶¹ Thus the cure of individual pathology and disappearance of nonproductive characters waited on a social metamorphosis. The productive orientation was a complete contrast to the four nonproductive ones. Its process of assimilation was "working," and its process of socialization was "loving and reasoning."⁶² The productive person did not see the outside world as either the source of all good or all bad. He related to the world and to people on the basis true self-interest and true self-love. Self-interest and self-love entailed the same thing for all individuals because they arose out of man's existential condition. Fromm wrote,

Human existence is characterized by the fact that man is alone and separated from the world; not being able to stand the separation, he is impelled to seek for relatedness and oneness. There are many ways in which he can realize this need, but only one in which he, as a unique entity, remains intact; only one in which his powers unfold in the process of being related. . . .⁶³

Fromm's vision of a world of love and reason, of harmony, of the brotherhood of man, is one whose beauty few would dispute. He offered some guidelines in *The Sane Society* for going about the restructuring of human existence.⁶⁴ Basically, he called upon man

⁶¹Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 273.

⁶²Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 110-11.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 96-7.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, Chapter 8.

to put into practice the principles most people already paid "lip service" to-- fairness, equality, and respect.

Faith was the key to understanding Fromm's utopianism. He described faith as a character trait. The word for faith in the Old Testament was "Emunah," and Fromm translated it as "firmness."⁶⁵ Faith was a confident attitude to Fromm. In the Jewish tradition faith was expressed by a confident attitude in man's relation to God. For the modern age when belief in God was no longer sustainable, Fromm felt that faith in mankind was indispensable. He argued that his religious humanism was the logical successor to the Judeo-Christian belief in God. "There is much less difference," he wrote,

between a mystic faith in God and an atheist's rational faith in mankind than between the former's faith and that of a Calvinist whose faith in God is rooted in the conviction of his own powerlessness and in his fear of God's power.⁶⁶

The heart of the matter was Fromm's faith in the regenerative capacity of man. Fromm's argument with his critics such as Scharr, who favored the orthodox position of Freud,⁶⁷ was in the tradition of the centuries old debate over the nature of man and sin. Centuries before, Pelagius and Augustine had argued over the nature of Adam's sin and its meaning for humanity. Augustine was judged the winner and Pelagius a heretic for his rejection of the idea of original sin. Fromm sided with Pelagius. "The battle was won by

⁶⁵Ibid., 199.

⁶⁶Ibid., 210.

⁶⁷Scharr, *Escape from Authority*, 79.

Augustine," he wrote, "and this victory was to determine--and to darken--man's mind for centuries."⁶⁸ In the end--despite his popularity--Fromm's view was not representative of the intellectual climate of the 1940s and 50s. He could contrast himself to Reinhold Niebuhr whose brand of "neo-orthodox" Christianity gained prominence in this period.⁶⁹ On the one hand, Niebuhr was less pessimistic about the present and on the other hand, less optimistic about future. Man, for Niebuhr, had a paradoxical nature, possessing both a capacity for evil and a capacity for good. He did not see evil, as Fromm did, as a secondary potentiality. Niebuhr warned against humanistic conceptions of man and argued that the "root of sin" was man's overestimation of himself, hubris. "Sin," he wrote in *Faith and History*, "is, in short, the consequence of man's inclination to usurp the prerogative of God [and] to think more highly of himself that he ought to. . . ."⁷⁰ He reproved utopians lacking of caution and exulting the powers of man, and he viewed utopian thought as a recipe for tragedy. In the aftermath of World War II the mood was cautious, and Niebuhr was a principal evoker of it. Fromm's optimism about human nature and confidence in the future stood out as a more hopeful prophecy. But it stood out in another respect, as well.

⁶⁸Fromm, *Man for himself*, 211.

⁶⁹Ibid., 212, note 67. Also see Richard Wrightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985). Fox believes that Niebuhr was "much closer in spirit" to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* than to Fromm's *Man for Himself*, 256.

⁷⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 121.

There was a dourness to Fromm's thought. At the outset I emphasized the tension between optimism and pessimism present in Fromm's work. There was a vivid contrast between lightness and darkness in his thinking. On the one hand it seems as though his mind was buried in the present, and on the other as though it was in full flight to future. The present, refracted through visions of death everywhere, was apparently beyond redemption. "In the nineteenth century," Fromm wrote, "the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead."⁷¹ The twin perils were "war and robotism." Yet by an act of human will the present would give way to the future.

The moral problem of the twentieth century, Fromm wrote, "is man's indifference to himself."⁷² The choice to do good was man's, and he continued:

Neither the good nor the evil outcome is automatic or preordained. The decision rests with man. It rests upon his ability to take himself, his life and happiness seriously; on his willingness to face society's moral problem. It rests upon his courage to be himself and to be for himself.⁷³

It is not clear, however, that man can choose to do good. Perhaps, only individuals can. I wonder whether the moral position of each individual is linked, as suggested by Fromm, with that of all other men? What if the moral failures of society were only reflections of the moral failures of individuals? Did he not know any sane or

⁷¹Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 360.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 248.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 250.

moral men. What, for that matter, about Erich Fromm? Certainly, he was not indifferent to the fate of man. Fromm used the study of character to find man, all men, innocent. He shifted the blame for war and genocide from Hitler and his henchmen to the social pressures that molded their characters. Fromm must have hated a world that could generate such evil, yet he loved man and made plans for his future and tomorrow's better world.

In chapter two we turn to the work of David Riesman. In his work the concept of social character became less fatalistic. He used the study of character to address a different problem. Whereas Fromm focused on the problem of evil, Riesman was concerned with individualism. He celebrated the autonomous individual who transcended his socially prescribed character. His concern for individualism was not unrelated to events that influenced the tenor of Fromm's work. The rise of totalitarianism brought to the fore among American intellectuals worries about the forces of centralization and bureaucratization in American life. John Scharr has remarked that David Riesman took "the middle from Fromm" but "refused both Fromm's premises about the human condition and his whole critical position."⁷⁴ Here Scharr nicely captures the general relationship between Riesman's thought and Fromm's. Fromm's psychology provided Riesman with a way of explaining the American character. Riesman admired Fromm, but try as he might he was

⁷⁴Scharr, *Escape from Authority*, 75.

uncomfortable with Fromm's view of man and did not subscribe to his utopianism.

* * *

CHAPTER III

DAVID RIESMAN

During the 1940s and 50s the dangers of political and economic agglomeration in the United States seemed unparalleled. A host of books detailing the plight of modern bureaucratic man appeared. Writers such as William H. Whyte, C. Wright Mills, Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, and David Riesman focused their attention on the problems of the individual in mass society. Riesman's work stands out for its theoretical analysis of character and historical perspective.

Riesman approached the problem of individualism from a sociological point of view. The central question of sociology is how the actions of people in a society are coordinated. Riesman adapted the study of character and addressed this question. Character, as it was defined by Fromm, functioned as a coordinating mechanism. The individual, he wrote, "acquires that character which makes him want to do what he has to do."¹ Thus, according to Fromm's theory of character, social coordination was achieved through the psychological indoctrination of individuals. By their very natures sociological analysis and the study of character raised

¹Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart & Company Inc., 1941), 60.

questions about individualism, in particular about its validity as a concept? The key question for Riesman, in this respect, was if individuals acquire the character that makes them want to do what they have to do, how can people be said to express themselves as individuals?

Riesman's concept of autonomy addressed the problem of individualism from within the study of character. Autonomy was one of three "modes of adaption." Modes of adaption expressed in terms of character how a person reacted to the socialization process. For Riesman a person could be anomic, adjusted, or autonomous. Riesman believed that the majority were either anomic (maladjusted) or adjusted (normal). Most were adjusted. A minority was autonomous, and they were heroic to Riesman. Despite the fact that Riesman's discussion of autonomy came towards the end of *The Lonely Crowd*, it was the key to understanding his theory of character. The concept of autonomy, in a sense though, stood above his analysis of character because the person who was autonomous represented an exception. He was unique and did not share with others the character of his time. To fully appreciate the importance of autonomy in Riesman's thought, it is first necessary to understand its place in his theory of character. Therefore, I will discuss autonomy now only in general terms and return to it later when I have laid out enough of his theory of character.

The autonomous defied characterological analysis. Riesman considered the achievement of autonomy to be an awakening to the reality of social conformity. The autonomous person was someone

whose "acceptance of social and political authority was always conditional," someone who could "cooperate with others in action while maintaining the right to private judgement."² He was someone who coordinated his own actions rather than had his actions coordinated for him. Thus for Riesman the study of character became one of assessing social pressures toward conformity. This suggests, of course, that he saw knowledge of them as their remedy, that he saw understanding of social character as first step toward autonomy. Riesman's historical study of character, *The Lonely Crowd*, can be understood in light of his individualism. The object of his study was to gain a better understanding of the modern setting by placing it in its historical perspective, that is to gauge the chances for autonomy in modern America against those in previous periods.

Riesman's emphasis upon individualism signaled the Americanization of Fromm's study of character. Fromm's focus was on the relationship between man and society. Riesman, however, zeroed in on the relationship between the individual and society. His concern for individualism placed him within a honored tradition in American letters. "The quest for the autonomous individual," Joseph Gusfield has written, "absorbed American social comment from Emerson to Riesman."³ *The Lonely Crowd* throughout reminds one of Emerson's

²David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, abridged edition with a 1969 preface (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950; Yale University Press, 1953), 251.

³Joseph Gusfield, "The Sociological Reality of America," *On Making Americans. Essays in honor of David Riesman* ed., Herbert Gans, Nathan Glazer, Joseph Gusfield, and Christopher Jencks (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 52-3.

dictum in "Self-Reliance:" "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who, in the midst of a crowd, keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."⁴ Like Emerson Riesman worried about the degree to which society limited individual imagination, thought, and action. Thus he was led to consider how individuals could free themselves of their socially prescribed character. He was much less prone than Fromm to confuse the destiny of a single individual with the fate of humanity. Riesman held out hope for an autonomous minority in an otherwise "insane society." Though he patterned his autonomous character on Fromm's "productive orientation," he found it "hard to imagine an autonomous society coming into being now, even on a small scale, or perhaps especially on a small scale."⁵ He considered the autonomous few to be the "saving remnant" of humanity. By their refusal to succumb to isolation and helplessness they showed that it was possible, even in the modern bureaucratic age, to live with "vitality and happiness."

Riesman, himself, has led a life of vitality and happiness. He was born in 1909 in Philadelphia where he grew up in well-to-do Jewish household. His feminist mother came from a prominent family, and his father was a respected physician. He studied chemistry at

⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays, First and Second Series, English Traits, Representative Men, Addresses* (New York: Hearst International Library Co., 1914), 36.

⁵David Riesman, "The Saving Remnant," *Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1954), 116-20.

Harvard and then switched to law. He clerked for Justice Brandeis and subsequently taught law at the University of Buffalo. It was not until 1946, when he joined the faculty at the University of Chicago, that he began the career in sociology that ultimately secured him a place in the intellectual history of the twentieth century. He was at Yale briefly during which time he wrote *The Lonely Crowd*, and today at nearly eighty he teaches at Harvard. Perhaps through all of this he has demonstrated the control over his own life characteristic of the autonomous man he championed. His colleague Peter Rose has described him in paradoxical terms as a "pro-Enlightenment, anti-Progressive, German-Jewish Philadelphia gentleman, Harvard don, and self-proclaimed autonomous man."⁶ His biography gives the impression of man who "rejected the map in order to grope his own way." Riesman described a person who chose to "grope his own way" as a "marginal figure," as someone who was uncomfortable satisfying the expectations of others when they conflicted with his own.⁷

In one of his earliest articles Riesman described his attitude toward life as an "intransigent refusal to bow to the inevitable."⁸ He believed that life involved each individual in a struggle to realize and maintain autonomy. In no real sense were any of us born

⁶David I. Rose, "David Riesman Reconsidered," *Society*, March/April 1982, 53.

⁷David Riesman, "Marginality, Conformity, and Insight," *Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays*, 166-78.

⁸David Riesman, "The New Society," *The Atlantic*, January 1939, 96-7.

free. At birth each of us inherited a way of life with accepted standards of thought and behavior. Riesman argued that freedom was potentially ours, and he was certain that each individual had the capacity for uniqueness. He felt that

the enormous potentialities for diversity in nature's bounty and men's capacity to differentiate their experience can become valued by the individual himself, so that he will not be tempted and coerced into adjustment or, failing adjustment into anomie. The idea that men are created free and equal is both true and misleading: men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other.⁹

Riesman sensed that the cost of autonomy was too great for most people to bare. Exceptional individuals such as Bertrand Russell served as examples of what was possible.¹⁰ Society, however, acted to discourage autonomy through imposing social character on individuals. Few could resist the pressures to conform to the dictates of society, friends, and family, and even fewer could rebel successfully. Like Camus's rebel, Riesman's autonomous man insisted "on a right not to be oppressed beyond the limit that he [could] tolerate."¹¹ The individual, Riesman argued, must retain the right to say no. "His acceptance of social and political

⁹Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 307.

¹⁰Riesman mentions Russell in the *Lonely Crowd* and in a number other places as an outstanding example of an autonomous individual. Anyone familiar with Russell's career can understand why.

¹¹Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, A revised and complete translation of *L'Homme Revolte* by Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 13.

authority," Riesman declared, "is always conditional."¹² He possessed what he termed the "nerve of failure," "the courage to face aloneness and the possibility of defeat in one's personal life or one's work without being morally destroyed."¹³ The "nerve of failure" represented a recurring theme in Riesman's work, and it meant simply the capacity to endure rejection by one's peers.

The relationship between Riesman and Fromm's thought was complex. Riesman admired Fromm and was inclined to view his utopianism sympathetically. In "Some observations on Community Plans and Utopia (1947)," he declared that "a revival of the tradition of utopian thinking seems to me one of the important intellectual tasks of today." He defined a utopia as a non-existing but potential reality. It was rational in contrast to an ideology which was wholly irrational and, therefore, not a potential reality. Utopian thought, he wrote, was difficult and rare: "Few scholars achieve the kind of sensitive and friendly relation in reality which is necessary for utopian creation--a relation in which one respects 'what is' but includes in it also 'what might be'."¹⁴

Though the terms ideology and utopia were borrowed from Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, Riesman attached slightly different meanings to them. Riesman noted that he was true to Mannheim's idea of their "dialectical opposition," but Mannheim had characterized

¹² Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 251.

¹³David Riesman, "A Philosophy for Minority Living," *Individualism Reconsidered*, 55.

¹⁴David Riesman, "Some Observations on Community Plans and Utopia," *Individualism Reconsidered*, 75-77.

both ideology and utopia as irrational belief systems. For Mannheim, a zealous commitment to preserve the past was the heart of ideology, and a fervent desire for change was at the center of utopia. Between ideology and utopia was reality. The understanding of reality was a task for the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge aimed at solving the problem described by Mannheim as "the social conditioning of knowledge" through a sort of synthesis of ideology and utopia.¹⁵

Riesman, to the contrary, saw Fromm as a utopian not in Mannheim's critical sense but in the sense that Fromm was able to see "what is," "what ought to be," and also "what can be." Though he spoke of Fromm as a "more hopeful prophet"¹⁶ and drew upon Fromm's "productive orientation" for his concept of autonomy, Riesman's understanding of autonomy, in contrast to Fromm's, rested on an assumption that the conditioning of individuals could be overcome. Riesman explained,

The power of individuals to shape their own character by their own selection among models and experiences was adumbrated in our concept of autonomy; when this occurs, men may limit the provinciality of being born to a particular family in a particular place. To some, this offers a prospect only of

¹⁵Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), chapter iv and v. Also, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1972 ed., s.v. "Mannheim, Karl," by Werner Stark.

¹⁶David Riesman, "The Lonely Crowd: A Reconsideration in 1960," *The Sociology of Culture and the Analysis of Social Character: The work of David Riesman Reviewed*, ed., by Seymour Martin Lipset and Leo Lowenthal (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 458.

rootless men and galloping anomie. To more hopeful prophets, ties based on conscious relatedness may some day replace those of blood and soil.¹⁷

Riesman was working in an age in which the failures of Marxist and socialist utopias weighed heavily on the minds of intellectuals. The menace of totalitarianism was real for them. Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia were not distant memories, but contemporary events. As Richard Pells has argued, Riesman was genuinely ambivalent about utopian solutions in general: "[his] attack on conformity contained radical implications from which [he] drew back because the one alternative [he] could imagine--socialism--seemed responsible for the very collectivist attitudes they condemned."¹⁸ Riesman understood well the bleak history of utopias although he was convinced that without utopian thinking, without what he saw as realistic visions for the future, history would essentially stall. In a sense Riesman saw utopian thought as the motive force of history. "The status quo," he wrote, "proves the most illusory of goals." Riesman was interested in utopias as blue prints for the future, not messianic reveries. A utopian conception was "time-located in the future." It was a hypothesis, a conception of a "social order which has not yet been tried, though it is a realistic possibility, not a mere idle dream." He considered utopias to be rightful claims of the living for a better world.¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid., 458,

¹⁸Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (New York: Harper, 1985), 248.

¹⁹Riesman, "Some Observations on Community Plans and Utopia," *Individualism Reconsidered*, 70.

In *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman's most important work, he implored his readers to "realize that each life is an emergency that only happens once."²⁰ While his thesis in *The Lonely Crowd* had to do with a changing American character, his larger theme was the plight of individuals in the modern era. This theme was exemplified in his concept of autonomy.

Riesman's belief in autonomy recalled Alexis de Tocqueville. Riesman felt that the modern American "willingly takes up with low desires without daring to embark on lofty enterprises, of which he scarcely dreams."²¹ In fact, Riesman's entire study of the American character harkened back to Tocqueville and his classic study of the 1830s, *Democracy in America*. Some critics of *The Lonely Crowd* have used Tocqueville to dispute Riesman's thesis of a changing American character. Some have argued that Riesman and Tocqueville not only asked many of the same questions but also gave many of the same answers. From the start Riesman was well aware of his Tocquevilleian dilemma:

It is my impression that the middle-class American of today is decisively different from those Americans of Tocqueville's writing who nevertheless strike us as so contemporary, and much of this book will be devoted to discussing these differences.²²

With his theory of social character Riesman explored the

²⁰David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 297.

²¹Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 235. See also Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed., J.P. Mayer (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 632.

²²*Ibid.*, 15.

relationship between how people live and who they are. Riesman was most interested in Americans, although he believed that his theory was more widely applicable. He essentially tried to connect changes in how Americans lived to changes in who Americans were. No one disputed the fact that in the century after Tocqueville first described the equalitarianism of Anglo-Americans, great social, economic, and political changes had taken place which would have made American society unfamiliar to the Frenchman. Would the American people also have been unfamiliar to Tocqueville? This was the question raised by Riesman. His answer made him famous.

Riesman's argument in *The Lonely Crowd* ran a simple course. First, he took the differences between the mid-nineteenth century America and mid-twentieth century America to be self-evident. Second, he assumed that there was something called social character. Third, he defined social character as a product of the design or conditions of society. Suggesting that social character had material basis, Riesman drew upon Erik H. Erikson and claimed that social character satisfied "the largest needs" of society and was a result of "economic-historic necessities."²³ For him, Fromm had shown that types of character existed out of social necessity. "In order that any society may function well," Riesman quoted, "its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to

²³Ibid., 5, citing Erik H. Erikson, "Observations on the Yurok: Childhood and World Image," *University of California Publications in American Archeology and Ethnology*, XXXV (1943), iv.

act in the way they have to act as members of society."²⁴ Fourth, Riesman basically reasoned that since society had changed, society's needs must have changed, and, furthermore, that since society's needs determined social character, social character must also have changed. Riesman in essence turned Max Weber on his head by suggesting that the work ethic was a consequence not of ideology but of demographic and economic conditions.

In *The Lonely Crowd* Riesman identified three types of character, "tradition-direction," "inner-direction," and "other-direction." The three character types described three processes of socialization which, Riesman argued, corresponded to three stages of historical development. Riesman called them "modes of conformity." Each distinguished a historical relationship between individuals and society, that is between the character of individuals and society:

Thus the link between character and society--certainly not the only one, but one of the most significant, and the one I choose to emphasize in this discussion-- is to be in the way in which society ensures some degree of conformity from the individuals who make it up.²⁵

Each character type corresponded in theory to a period of history. Riesman identified these three historical epoches in terms of stages on a population S curve. He proposed a causal relationship between changes in population and changes in character:

I tentatively seek to link certain social and characterological

²⁴Ibid., 5, citing Erich Fromm, "Individual and Social Origins of Neurosis," *American Sociological Review*, IX (1944), 380.

²⁵Ibid., 5.

developments, as cause and effect, with certain population shifts in Western society since the Middle Ages.²⁶

High birth rates and death rates characterized societies at the base of the curve which were in the first stages of development. Such societies had what Riesman called "high growth potential." They were highly stable, tradition-directed societies. Inner-directed societies on the middle level of the S were said to be in a stage of "transitional growth," that is to say they had high birth rates but declining death rates. Consequently, inner-directed societies had burgeoning populations. Societies entered the final stage on the top of the S when birth rates began to taper off suggesting, Riesman said, "incipient population decline."

There was a close relationship between the demographic and economic characteristics of societies. The inclusion of economic factors in his analysis deserves added emphasis because subsequent to *The Lonely Crowd* Riesman abandoned his population thesis and revised his argument. At that point his work suggested an American character that resulted out of an interplay of ideology and economic environment. This argument, implicit in *The Lonely Crowd*, David Potter later developed in *The People of Plenty*. In *The Lonely Crowd* Riesman believed that "it would be almost as satisfactory" for him to categorize societies according to their stages of economic development as the economist Colin Clark had done by distinguishing among "primary," "secondary," and "tertiary" economic systems.²⁷

²⁶ibid., 7.

²⁷ibid., 9.

For example, in a society with "high growth potential," a tradition-directed society, people were occupied with the immediate problem of group survival so they hunted, fished, farmed, and mined. During the phase of "transitional growth" and of inner-direction they became involved in production in order to satisfy the demands of a growing population. During the phase of "Incipient decline" and other-direction people worked in trade, communication, and consumption. Because production levels remain high, demand had to be stimulated. Thus Riesman identified the development of a consumption-oriented society as the crucial factor in the transition from inner-direction to other-direction. Riesman believed that there was a historical pattern to how societies insured conformity which he linked to population levels. Accordingly,

each of these three different phases on the population curve appears to be occupied by a society that enforces conformity and molds social character in a different way.²⁸

Riesman's concepts of tradition-direction, inner-direction, and other-direction reflected the manner in which a society insured that its members were responsive to the needs of the group. Each explained a method by which a society coordinated the actions of its members. In a tradition-directed society, change occurred very slowly and children learned that things were as they had always been and always would be. In short, they learned to value social and cultural norms because they perceived them to have an existence over and above individuals. In contrast, an inner-directed society was

²⁸Ibid., 8.

marked by rapid change, and children internalized a set of core values that enabled them to function in an ever changing environment. Riesman likened the function of these values to a "gyroscope," in that they served to keep children balanced and on course. Children learned to value hard work, achievement, and thrift so that they would be able to survive in a competitive world, a world of scarcity. In an other-directed society, however, survival became less difficult. Scarcity was overcome. People needed to work less in order to feed, cloth, and house themselves and had more time to spend socially. Fashion arose to displace culture as the regulator of lifestyles. The other-directed confronted problems of a new sort. With more social time interpersonal problems became more common: "Increasingly, other people are the problem, not the the material environment."²⁹

People found themselves needing to know how to get along with other people. A "radar screen" replaced their "gyroscope." No longer single-minded in their pursuit of economic mastery, individuals needed to be sensitive to all the stimuli of their social environment. The "scarcity psychology" of inner-direction had given way to an "abundance psychology." For Riesman this explained in terms of character the difference between America in the nineteenth century and America midway through the twentieth century. America, according to Riesman, was moving toward what William H. White called a "social ethic" as opposed to a now

²⁹Ibid., 18.

outdated "Protestant work ethic." As Riesman stated in the first paragraph of *The Lonely Crowd*:

This is a book about social character and about the differences in the social character between different regions, eras, and groups. . . More particularly, it is about the way in which one kind of social character, which dominated America in the nineteenth century, is being replaced by a social character of quite a different sort.³⁰

While *The Lonely Crowd* was primarily a study of the development of other-direction in America, Riesman contended that it was applicable to man in general. "My analysis of the other-directed character," he wrote, "is thus at once an analysis of the American and of contemporary man."³¹ The general intent of his argument flowed from the causal nature of his population thesis which should have been broadly applicable. There were problems with this thesis, which others quickly pointed out. Oscar Handlin argued that the population explosion in the eighteenth century century occurred after the characteristics of inner-direction were already established.³² Also, the population thesis did not explain why the United States was ahead of Britain and France in the development of other-direction. Both of those nations, one would imagine, reached the stage of "Incipient- population decline" before the United States.³³ Furthermore, there was tension between Riesman's concern

³⁰Ibid., 3.

³¹Ibid., 19.

³²Oscar Handlin, "Toward a Personal Autonomy," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 3 March 1951, 14.

³³David Potter, *The People of Plenty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 61.

for autonomy and his population thesis. Could individuals really hope to alter the course of "economic-historic necessities?"

Riesman eventually changed his mind about the link he "tentatively" established between shifting population and changing character structure. For example, in a "reconsideration" written in 1960, he claimed that he had not been "suggesting that the shape of a population pyramid caused a particular social character to emerge."³⁴ Clearly, however, he had so argued and afterwards, in light of criticism, altered his position. He went on to say that he had given "far too little place to persistent American values and their impact on the social character."³⁵ Riesman was responding to directly to criticisms made by Seymour Lipset in "A changing American Character?"³⁶ Lipset had argued that Americans in the twentieth century subscribed to the same values as Americans in the nineteenth century and that this continuity in values implied continuity in character. While Riesman dropped his population thesis, he maintained that his perception of change was valid.

By contrasting Riesman with his critics we sharpen our view of him. Three of his more prominent critics were the historian Carl Degler, the sociologist Seymour Lipset, and the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn. They rejected Riesman's perception of change and argued

³⁴David Riesman, "The Lonely Crowd: A Reconsideration in 1960," *Culture and Social Character*, 422.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 422.

³⁶Seymour Martin Lipset, "A Changing American Character?" *Culture and Social character*, 136-171. Lipset subsequently developed his argument more fully in *The First New Nation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963).

instead that the American character had shown remarkable stability. Degler, for instance, argued that the evidence led to a conclusion opposite of the one Riesman drew:

There may be some accentuation of certain aspects of it in our time, but what Tocqueville designated in the 1830s as "democratie" is essentially what Riesman means by other direction. Rather than a changing American character, the evidence suggests a remarkably stable one, at least since the early years of the nineteenth century.³⁷

What Degler said was tantamount to arguing that there was a difference between Americans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but not enough of one to constitute a change in character. It was as though he conceived of the American character as an inviolate hand-me-down passed from generation to generation. Degler's position suggested that the character of a people had no relationship to external conditions, that life could change but people would not.

Clyde Kluckhohn made a similar assessment of the status of American character when he suggested that Americans had matured since Tocqueville's day. Kluckhohn further ventured that the differences that existed between the present and past were exaggerated in the 1950s because of stressful world conditions:

The changes in American values during the past generation are in part consequences of processes steadily affecting all "advanced" industrial societies, in part the result of more temporary political and economic currents playing upon the

³⁷Carl Degler, "Sociologist As Historian," *American History and the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 519-530.

whole world.³⁸

Both Degler's and Kluckhohn's arguments seemed to be that, while the strength of the American inclination toward mediocrity and conformism was stronger than ever, it was still the same inclination, and, therefore a change in character had not occurred. Their position denied the possibility of change on the basis of similarities between generations. The change identified by Riesman did not discount similarity.

In *The First New Nation* Lipset tried to explain the uniqueness of the United States as a consequence of the persistence of certain values. He argued that the commitment of the American people to two basic values has been sustained for over a century and that these values had influenced the course of the material and technological change that Riesman suggested had altered the American character. Lipset was clearly truer to the idealist position of Max Weber, something he pointed out and Riesman acknowledged in the "reconsideration." The two values that Lipset pointed out were "achievement" and "equality," and he argued that the dialectical tension between them had defined the course of American history. "Both strands," he wrote, "the equalitarian and the achievement-oriented, remain strong, but changing conditions sometimes fortify one at the expense of the other, or alter the internal content of each."³⁹

³⁸Clyde Kluckhohn, "Have There Been Discernable Shifts in American Values during the Past Generation," *The American Style* (New York: Harper, 1958), 145-217.

³⁹Lipset, *The First New Nation*, 147.

In Lipset what Riesman called other-direction was really an indication of equalitarianism holding sway. Lipset claimed that other-direction was "an epiphenomenon of the American equalitarian ethos."⁴⁰ Lipset's analysis, however, was vague and the American commitment to the values he identified inconstant, suggesting that the fortunes of ethos of achievement and the ethos of equality seemed to be related to the material and technological conditions that Lipset wanted to deemphasize. The point is that Lipset unintentionally buttressed Riesman's case. What Riesman described as a shift in character, Lipset called a shift in value emphasis. Perhaps this difference was explained by the fact that Lipset was not disheartened by the rising tide of other-directedness. He agreed with Kluckhohn, who wrote,

Today's kind of "conformity" may actually be a step toward more genuine individuality in the United States. "Conformity" is less of a personal and psychological problem--less tinged with anxiety and guilt. . . . If someone accepts outwardly the conventions of one's group, one may have greater psychic energy to develop and fulfill one's private potentialities as a unique person.⁴¹

In contrast to Kluckhohn and Lipset, Riesman clearly was worried by the fact that people did not seem to mind being indistinguishable from others, and it was the attitude that saw conformism as a good thing that he thought was indicative of the new age and the modern character. William H. Whyte similarly identified

⁴⁰Ibid., 150.

⁴¹Ibid., 158. Also Kluckhohn, "Have there been Discernable Shifts . . . ," *The American Style*, 187.

this difference as a new "social ethic." The chief point of Riesman's analysis of other-direction, however, was not that it was conformist. He did not challenge outright Tocqueville's characterization of democratic people. He thought that the tendencies Tocqueville had keenly observed had become "the more automatic outcome of a character structure governed, not only from the first but throughout life, by signals from the outside."⁴² There was a difference between those having the same internalized values and acting so as to get along and prosper and those not really having values and being regulated by the "cues" of others. Correctly, Riesman did not believe that Tocqueville was implying other-direction. Also, it has to be remembered that Tocqueville was writing with an eye to the future of France so his descriptions of America were at the same time extrapolations of it. This helps to explain, I think, the apparent timelessness of *Democracy in America*.

What Riesman noted about the other-directed person was his attitude toward himself and life. As opposed to the inner-directed, he was content merely to get along. Riesman wrote,

They [the other-directed] are not eager to develop talents that might bring them into conflict; whereas the inner-directed young person tended to push himself to the limit of his talents and beyond.⁴³

The material ambitions of the inner-directed may not have been lofty, as Tocqueville thought, but they were ambitions all the same. In conclusion, Riesman's character types were not as distinct as

⁴²Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 256.

⁴³Lipset, *The First New Nation*, 234.

some critics have suggested. Change was gradual, and it was not dramatic, and, Riesman could have said, easily overlooked. The change in character, Riesman implied and Potter eventually argued, hinged on the development of the United States into a consumer society. Inner-direction and other-direction were different but not opposites. Both were the appropriate characters for the nature of their time and place in history. Neither were autonomous.

Autonomy described only one way--for that matter, Riesman argued, an exceptional way--in which people may adapt to society. In all there were three "mode of adaption" which Riesman said were universal types. According to how a person adapted to society, he was either anomic, adjusted, or autonomous. Like "modes of conformity" "modes of adaption" were descriptive. Used together Riesman was able to describe society and the relationships individuals have with society. For instance, in the nineteenth century a typically inner-directed person was adjusted. In 1950 an inner-directed person was likely characterologically untypical and, therefore, anomic, meaning he did not have a character appropriate for his time and place. Riesman explained the relationship between modes of adaption and character structure succinctly:

The "adjusted" are those whom for the most part we have been describing. They are the typical tradition-directed, inner-directed, or other-directed people--those who respond in their character structure to the demands of their society or social class at its particular stage on the curve of population. Such people fit the culture as though they were made for it,

as in fact they are.⁴⁴

In his general understanding of the relationship between society and individuals Riesman added nothing to Fromm's theory. Though his typologies were original, Riesman saw individuals in terms of their character as products of society. Adjusted individuals, he said, were "made" for society. Since they were not making themselves, society must be making them. Society, itself, was an "economic-historic" necessity, and Riesman suggested that he could locate a society's relative historical position by its demographic traits.

Autonomy was, however, the hopeful exception to this viewpoint. An autonomous person was not typical in his character. He was not tradition-directed, inner-directed, or other-directed according to the norm in a society. He was a character type all his own, not a historical type. He resembled the anomic: "For autonomy, like anomie is a deviation from adjusted patterns, though a deviation controlled in its range and meaning by the existence of those patterns [of other direction and inner-direction]."⁴⁵ But, unlike the anomic, the autonomous represented the possible transcendence of place and time in terms of character. For the autonomous conformity was always selective and tentative. Thus in the 1950s the autonomous could appear at times to be other-directed, in concert with society, and at others at odds with it. "His acceptance of social and political authority," Riesman wrote, "is always

⁴⁴Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 242.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 249.

conditional."⁴⁶

The anomic, adjusted, and autonomous were possible during any of the three historical periods. Riesman believed that there was little chance for autonomy in traditional societies because they were so static. Riesman actually felt that the greatest possibilities for autonomy were in modern, other-directed societies because affluence permitted people with the opportunity to change directions and adopt new lifestyles. He cautioned, however, that "the very fact that his (the autonomous person's) efforts at autonomy are taken as cues by 'others' must make him conscious of the possibility that the effort toward autonomy might degenerate into other-directed play-acting."⁴⁷ The possibility for "other-directed play-acting" may explain why countercultures in the sixties turned into rigid communities.

There was tension between Fromm's concept social character and Riesman's hopes for autonomy. Riesman's conception of personal autonomy was not shared by Fromm. To Riesman, while the influence of socioeconomic conditions may be extremely powerful, they could not be determinative in Fromm's sense. The difficulty existed, perhaps, because he was persuaded of the usefulness of the methodology of Frommian social psychology and the adroitness of its descriptions while at the same time he clung to his individualistic beliefs.

Riesman stressed the roles of utopian thinking and of autonomous

⁴⁶Ibid., 260.

⁴⁷Ibid., 258.

characters in history. His emphasis on ideas and individual action was incompatible with the Frommian concept of social character. It was possible to imagine the necessity of a particular social character to have been de facto, not de jure. It was something to which people surrendered. Riesman suggested that this was the proper interpretation when he referred to "the power of individuals to shape their own character," and it was why the idea of autonomy may be rightly understood to represent a fourth, though indeterminate and non historical, character type. Fromm, however, had explicitly cautioned against this approach when he stated "that the relationship between society and the individual is not simply in the sense that cultural patterns and social institutions 'influence' the individual." Riesman's interest in the individual was not shared by Fromm, and the mixture of Fromm's concept of social character with Riesman's concept of autonomy was awkward.

I noted earlier Joseph Gusfield's belief that Riesman's concern for autonomy sounded a traditional theme of American letters. The concept of autonomy ran counter to the trend in modern social science by positing what Gusfield called a non-sociological self.⁴⁸ The sociological conception of man, according to Gusfield, discounted the individual and viewed a person as a "group product," "class character," and "institutional role."⁴⁹ Clearly Fromm's theory of character rested upon the assumption of a sociological

⁴⁸Gusfield, "The Sociological Reality of America," *On Making Americans*, 52-3.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 52.

self. Thus when Riesman drew upon Fromm's study of character he mixed two contradictory perceptions of man, one sociological and the other non-sociological.

There is a venerable history to the thought that informs the sociological view of man including the likes of Marx and Durkheim. Marx may have done more than anyone to shape this conception. "It is not the consciousness of man that determines their existence," he wrote, "but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."⁵⁰ Historical man for Marx was no more than a reflection of a class role in society, itself a consequence of "material productive forces." He and Engels discussed ideas as "the phantoms formed in the human brain [which] are also, necessarily, sublimities of the material life-processes, which are empirically verifiable and bound to material premises."⁵¹

In the twilight of the nineteenth century Durkheim published his study of suicide as a "social fact." He described suicide as a social phenomenon linked to a pathological (abnormal) condition of society.⁵² Durkheim argued that increasing suicide rates in his day were tied to rising levels of egoism and anomie, conditions resulting from either a lack of integration into society or a breakdown of social norms that provide guidance. The fault lay in

⁵⁰Ibid., 53.

⁵¹Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The German Ideology," *The Marx Engels Reader* (New York: Norton Books, 1978), 154-55.

⁵²Gusfield, "The Sociological Reality of America," 53. Also Robert Alan Jones, *Emile Durkheim* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986), chapter 4.

the failure of society's institutions to integrate or guide individuals satisfactorily. The point is that Durkheim, like Marx, saw individual fates as consequences of objective social and historical realities. Gusfield has called this development in sociological thought "the objectification of society," a view of society that assumes a social organization exists which is real and has "the power to move levers that shape . . . events."⁵³

Fromm's concept of social character assumed that socioeconomic forces predominated in the formation of personality. Riesman's concept of autonomy, however, protested against this ingrained sociological view of man. From Riesman's perspective the existence of an identifiable social character testified to the weakness of most men. Riesman was skeptical about the chances for achieving autonomy, but he believed autonomy from the pressures of society was possible. The concept of autonomy was the vital difference between Riesman and Fromm. It arose because they had different concerns. Riesman focused on the relationship between individuals and society while Fromm emphasized the relationship between man and society. In Fromm's thought social character became the key for understanding the regeneration of man. The transformation of man was to follow upon the transformation of society as though a city designed for angels would necessarily house angels. Man was sick because society was sick. There was no room in Fromm's world for the exceptional because no one transcended his socioeconomic condition. Fromm

⁵³Gusfield, "The Sociological Reality of America," 53.

wanted to exonerate man from responsibility for the evil in the world. Therefore, the possibility that man might be autonomous of society could not be. The exception counted most for Riesman. He denied Fromm's premise and conclusion for the sake of individualism. Ironically, he ended using Fromm's egalitarian concept of social character to establish the existence of great individuals. He postulated a non-sociological self for the crucial very few.

Without the burden of its population thesis Riesman's analysis offered an intriguing view of the American character. He indicated that the change from other-direction to inner-direction was clearly involved with the development of a consumption oriented society in America. Because Riesman's analysis ended up being specifically about the American character, his work suggested the existence of a unique American identity. The idea of "American exceptionalism" interested historians in the 1950s. Taking his cue from Riesman, David Potter inquired into the origins of the modern American character.

* * *

CHAPTER IV

DAVID POTTER

In 1950 The Walgreen Foundation invited the historian David Potter to write a series of lectures on the influence of American economic abundance on the American character. When he began his research, he discovered that the work of a vast number of anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists was related to his proposed study of the American character.¹ In his work he acknowledged the influence of several these "behavioral scientists," most notably Margaret Mead, Karen Horney, and David Riesman. The last of these, David Riesman, had the greatest influence on Potter's study of the American character, *The People of Plenty*. For Potter, Riesman showed how the development of the American character was connected to the development of a consumption-oriented society. "One of Riesman's chief contributions," Potter wrote, "is in tracing the effects of the change from an environment that motivated the individual as producer to one that motivates him as consumer."² Potter believed that Riesman's population thesis had complicated the matter of understanding the economic factor in the American

¹David Potter, *The People of Plenty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), vii.

²Ibid., 57.

character, and he proposed to explain producerism and consumerism as expressions of American abundance at different stages of development. Thus Potter's made explicit a thesis left implicit in *The Lonely Crowd*.

With regards to this thesis Potter can be seen as a logical successor to Riesman in the same manner that Riesman's work followed logically from Fromm's. Like Riesman, as well as Fromm, personal considerations underlay Potter's interest in the study of national character. Fromm's motivation stemmed from his experience with evil--the rise of Hitler and the decline of Germany. Riesman, a champion of individualism, used study of character to assess the fortunes of his individualistic ethos in the modern bureaucratic-corporate climate. Potter was concerned with his identity as an American. A Southerner born in 1910 in Augusta Georgia, Potter was sensitive about his southern identity, as well as a proud American, in a time when patriotism was a great concern in America. During the years of the Second World War and the Cold War he was driven by a desire to understand, and integrate, his Southern and American identities. When he died in 1971, his colleagues' in "A Memorial Resolution" aptly described him as a "native Southerner who transcended his southern heritage but never disclaimed it. . . ."³

Potter's specialty was southern history and the Civil War. Through his work he tried to show that there was no contradiction to

³Don E. Fehrenbacher, Howard R. Lamar, and Otis A. Pease, "David M. Potter: A Memorial Resolution," *The Journal of American History*, September 1971, 301-10.

being both a Southerner and an American. He did not think that the two identities had been antipathetic prior the Civil War, nor after it. He argued that the war between the states had not been an "irrepressible conflict" between divergent cultures, but rather the result of conflicting interests. This was the basis for his challenge to the historiography of the Civil War and its aftermath. In addition to the disunion of North and South, he insisted, the historian of the Civil War had to explain their reunion. Too often, he held, the historian's discussion of secession overlooked the restoration of national sovereignty from 1865-1900.⁴ He argued that the dissolution of the Union did not imply any basic incompatibility between South and North. In fact, he maintained that the North-South split occurred in spite of their growing "homogeneity," and that the restoration of the Union was swift and easy because of this. "Once the mistaken assumption of mutual exclusiveness is accepted," he wrote,

the false conclusion follows that sectional distinctiveness can serve as an index of deviation, and by the same token that loyalty to the section can become an index of disloyalty to the union.⁵

In Potter's work the cultural factor and the role of interest were not unrelated, but the fact remained that "within an integrated culture acute conflicts of interest may be generated, and between

⁴David Potter, "The Nature of Southernism," *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 76-78.

⁵*Ibid.*, 78.

diverse cultures strong community of interests may develop."⁶ By explaining the origins of the Civil War in a context of conflicting interest and not as an "irrepressible conflict" between ways of life, understanding reunion after the defeat of the South became less of a problem for Potter. It is clear that his observations about the Civil War were not unrelated to his concern for the study of the American character. He saw the Civil War as a war between Americans, and for him, a southern American, understanding the American character--Southern as well as Northern--held special significance.

Americans, according to Potter, were a people of plenty. The thesis of *The People of Plenty* was that economic abundance--plenty--had conditioned the American character. He devoted most of the book to developing this thesis. The book also addressed a methodological point. He believed that the study of national character had to be interdisciplinary, and he hoped to bridge the gap between history and the behavioral sciences-- psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The behavioral sciences, he believed, grounded the study of national character on theories of human and social development. Without the behavioral sciences history lacked "any means for analysis of the chief factor with which history deals," namely man.⁷ History offered an understanding of the conditions for change. Thus Potter argued that

⁶Ibid., 79.

⁷Ibid., xii.

history can learn much about the nature of man and society from the behavioral sciences; the behavioral sciences can learn much about the 'external forces impinging upon man,' and about the nature of social change, from history.⁸

He felt that as a historian he could contribute to understanding of the larger economic forces that influenced the development of the American character. *The People of Plenty*, then, analyzed the transition of society in the United States from a production orientation to a consumer orientation--in David Riesman's terminology from inner-direction to other-direction.⁹

Potter drew upon the behavioral sciences to explain the meaning of national character.¹⁰ He followed the "neo-Freudian" line of thinking developed in the work of Fromm, Karen Horney, Abram Kardiner, Ralph Linton and others. It is helpful to recall the discussion of Erich Fromm's theory of character in chapter one because his definition of character helped to shape Potter's: Potter drew directly upon Fromm's point that

in order that any society may function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to act in the way they have to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to desire what objectively is necessary for them to do. Outer force is to be replaced by inner compulsion and by the particular kind of human energy which is channeled into character traits.¹¹

⁸Ibid., xvi. Potter was discussing and quoting from Caroline Ware's *The Cultural Approach to History* (1949).

⁹Ibid., 59, 69-70.

¹⁰Ibid., 32-72.

¹¹Ibid., 11. This was material that Fromm incorporated in *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1947). On page 60 of *Man for Himself* Fromm makes the same point.

Furthermore, Fromm defined personality as "the totality of inherited and acquired psychic qualities which are characteristic of one individual and which make the individual unique." What Potter proposed for the subject of national character studies was that part of personality Fromm had said was composed of acquired psychic qualities. For Potter, like Fromm and Riesman, distinguishing between man's biological heredity and his social heredity was crucial. Social psychology forged a link between the study of personality and the study of society by revising (or rejecting) Freud's biologism. Culture was "the medium" and personality "the receptor."¹² The rather sensible assertion that how we live affected how we responded to the world led to the assertion that people who shared a way of life should respond in similar ways to the world, suggesting the existence of a "basic personality structure."

Potter was impressed by the linking of personality to socialization in the anthropological studies of people such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. To Potter the development of "culture and personality analysis," a synthesis between the fields of psychology and anthropology, was one of the "epic advances of modern social science."¹³ In the United States "culture and personality analysis" had opened new doors to the study of the American character. Thus, for example, Potter accepted Riesman's placement of the inner-directed and other-directed character types in American

¹²Ibid., 37.

¹³Ibid., 37.

history and did not try to devise his own character types. As we shall see, Potter felt that Riesman did not explain the reasons why the era of inner-direction had given way to the era of other-direction. In fact, he argued that "culture and personality analysis" conducted solely from the perspective of behavioral scientists failed to understand causal factors behind changes in character.

Potter believed the concept of abundance could explain why the character of a twentieth century American differed from the character of a nineteenth century American. In societies of scarcity and moderate abundance, Potter argued, "the social imperative has fallen upon increases in production" because societies have either an insufficient or a barely sufficient supply of goods to satisfy extant desires. But in a society of abundance, production of goods outpaced consumption and therefore consumption had to be stimulated. "The most critical point in the functioning of society," he argued, "shifts from production to consumption, and, as it does, the culture must be reoriented to convert the producer's culture into a consumer's culture."¹⁴ According to Potter when producers acquired capabilities in excess of demand the historical relationship between supply and demand reversed itself: "the limitation has shifted to the market, and it is selling capacity which controls his [producers] growth."

¹⁴Ibid., 173.

The People of Plenty ended up more or less clarifying the historical context of *The Lonely Crowd* by emphasizing the factor of abundance instead of population. Potter also tested his theory on Margaret Mead's and Karen Horney's analyses of the American character because he felt that they, along with Riesman, painted the same portrait of modern American character. Potter used Mead and Horney along with Riesman to frame a synthetic description of the American character. "Drawing these three interpretations together," he concluded, ". . . we have three treatments which agree, or may be construed as agreeing, that the American character is in large measure a group of responses to an unusually competitive environment."¹⁵

Potter developed his synthesis along these lines: In *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York, William Morrow & Co., 1942) Mead argued that the American character was geared toward the achievement of success, not status. In the drive for success a premium was placed upon mobility and change. Since success was measured against the past, success, itself, represented a break with the past. People could no longer resort to the traditional ways of doing things--for instance raising children--so instead they looked to their peers for guidance. Mead understood pressure toward conformity as a consequence of a success oriented society. She suggested that the immigrant origins of the American population explained the American character. She described Americans as behaving like third-

¹⁵Ibid., 60.

generation immigrants. The first-generation immigrant typically clung to traditional ways, the second rejected them consciously and tried to assimilate, and the third assimilated freely. In Potter's words the third generation American succeeded by "perfecting his conformity to American ways and in winning the approbation of his neighbors." Potter believed that Mead's description of the American character was accurate, but he doubted whether her generational thesis could alone explain its development.¹⁶

Riesman tried to place the modern character in a historical context by linking changes in character with changing levels of population. Potter faulted Riesman's population thesis because it did not explain why the French and English who, he believed, had begun experiencing "incipient population decline" much earlier than the United States were not the leaders in the characterological evolution toward other-direction. And lastly, in *The Neurotic Personality in Our Time*, Karen Horney argued that there was a cultural basis for neurosis and that competitive societies bred rivalry, fear of others, and fear of failure. Her's was not a study of character at all, but an analysis representative of the "neo-Freudian" approach which Potter found useful in establishing the link between personality and the social process. He could have used Fromm to explain both the nature of social character and the social cause of neurosis.

¹⁶Potter did not believe that Mead's theory held true for other immigrant populations, such as those in Quebec and Costa Rica, who did not appear to share the American character.

Potter believed that Mead, Riesman, and Horney shared common ground. The analysis of each, he suggested, emphasized "the effects of the spirit of competition." Competition, he argued, was inherent to the "success cult." If American culture and character were success-oriented, as Mead argued, then competition must figure prominently in American society. "Mobility, he averred, "says that the competitive race shall have no finishing post [and] conformity requires the individual to show his belief in the competitive system not only by embracing its goal but also by embracing all the physical impedimenta and behavior codes. . . ."17 Potter was a perceptive reader of Riesman. He realized that Inner-direction and other-direction were not 180 degree opposites and that both were competitive orientations. One pursued economic gain while the other went after social success. Potter wrote,

In an earlier time, when most men worked for themselves and were concerned with subduing the environment, the traits of the inner-directed man--stamina, determination, unremitting industry-- were at a premium in competition. But in a society where the majority now work for others, where service bulks large in the economy, and where wealth is gained more readily by manipulating other men than by further raids upon nature, the traits of popularity, persuasiveness, attractiveness--"personality," as it is called-- have become essential competitive equipment, and the 'other-directed' man has forged to the front.¹⁸

Noting that Horney's analysis of modern neurosis was premised upon the deleterious effects of competition, Potter arrived at his synthetic statement about the nature of the American character. To

17 Ibid., 59.

18 Ibid., 59.

repeat, Potter felt that the American character was "in large measure a group of responses to an unusually competitive environment."

Potter felt that the agreement among Mead, Riesman, and Horney about the nature of the American character justified his undertaking a study of the American character and defined an approach for his inquiry to take. He thought that there was a common denominator in the analyses of Mead, Riesman, and Horney. ". . . It may be worthwhile," he stated,

to consider as a determinant the factor of economic abundance--not the abundance of locked-up natural resources to which man lacks the technological key but the abundance of usable goods produced from these resources-- which the people of the United States have possessed in far greater degree than any other national population.¹⁹

Potter argued that the concept of abundance was well suited to Mead's theory because the measure of advancement in American society was economic success. Without an expanding economy characteristic of a society of abundance, personal failure, not success, would be the norm. For Horney, Potter claimed that abundance explained the motivation underlying the competitive drive she found was a cause of mental illness. "The enticements of potential abundance, Potter said, "tempt us to abandon the system of status, with its social bargain to trade opportunity for security, and then the absence of

¹⁹Ibid., 67.

security sets up the anxieties which Horney regards as characteristic."²⁰

Potter thought also that his abundance theory was implicit in Riesman's analysis. Potter noted correctly that Riesman associated inner-direction with a psychology of scarcity and other-direction with a psychology of abundance and showed how the transition from one character type to the other had paralleled economic developments in the United States. "But once abundance is secured," Potter wrote, "the scarcity psychology which was once so valuable no longer operates to the advantage of society, and the ideal individual develops the qualities of the good consumer rather than those of the good producer."²¹

Rid of its demographic aspect, Riesman's analysis still differed from Potter's. Riesman's shifts in population were allied to shifts in levels of technology. While technological development was a factor for Potter in the creation of abundance, it was a function of what Potter called aptitude, which in combination with natural wealth produced abundance. Potter never explained the source of this aptitude though at one point he referred to the American people's "notorious addiction to hard work." By aptitude Potter may have meant Weber's Protestant work ethic, but he was never specific. What is clear is that for him aptitude, as a cultural factor, emphasized progress and success.

²⁰ibid., 71.

²¹ibid., 70.

Potter's abundance thesis recalled Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Potter, however, saw Turner as a crude environmentalist and criticized his tendency to "dwell upon the primary or physical environment and upon such factors in it as geography, climate, and natural resources, to the neglect of man-made conditions that surround us."²² Turner, according to Potter, misconstrued the meaning of abundance by focusing too narrowly on a particular manifestation of it, the farmer's frontier. He explained,

If abundance is to be properly understood, it must not be visualized in terms of a storehouse of fixed and universally recognized assets, reposing on shelves until humanity, by a process of removal, strips the shelves bare. Rather, abundance resides in a series of physical potentialities, which have never been inventoried at the same value for any two cultures in the past and are not likely to seem of identical worth to different cultures in the future.²³

Put simply, Potter did not believe that Turner took sufficient notice of the expanding frontiers of science and industry--the bases for creating abundance.

Potter's position assumed that the environment was always potentially bountiful. How a people went about realizing this potential was of central importance. Potter interpreted Turner's thesis to mean that the frontiersmen pushed west, accepting a temporary lowering of civilized standards and weakening of social institutions, for the sake of progress in the future. Life on the

²²ibid., 23.

²³ibid., 164.

frontier in turn stimulated individualism, democracy, and nationalism. To survive the frontiersman had to be capable of self-reliance, but also in the long run he needed the assistance of the national government to extend civilization westward; democracy more or less followed as a matter of course because men who saw themselves as equals were inclined to favor democracy over other forms of government.²⁴

There were fundamental problems, according to Potter, in Turner's thesis. First, industrialization and urbanization were prominent features of the American landscape long before the last western lands were settled. Second, if Turner was right about the role of the frontier in American history and its significance to the American character then the end of the frontier signaled a revolution severing the past from the present. Potter expanded the meaning of the frontier in order to make Turner's thesis useful in explaining industrialization and urbanization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As one frontier had given way, others had risen to prominence. Potter argued that

by failing to recognize that the frontier was only one form in which America offered abundance, he [Turner] cut himself off from an insight into the fact that other forms of abundance had superseded the frontier even before the supply of free land had been exhausted, with the result that it was not really the end of free land but rather the substitution of new forms of economic activity which terminated the frontier phase of our history.²⁵

²⁴Ibid., 152-55.

²⁵Ibid., 156.

A belief in progress underlay both Potter's and Turner's frontier theses since it was for the sake of progress that the quest for frontiers takes place.²⁶ The idea of progress was central to understanding how Potter understood abundance. He defined abundance as "partly a physical and partly a cultural manifestation." He felt that abundance resulted from the interaction of man with his environment. "For America, he wrote, "from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, the frontier was the focus of abundance, physically because the land there was virgin and culturally because the Anglo-Americans of that time were particularly apt at exploiting the new country."²⁷ For a time the quest for progress took the form of western expansion, but over time mastery of the environment began to be realized through industrialization. Essentially, however, agrarian expansion and industrial expansion were two sides of the same coin:

But this change in focus itself perpetuated and reinforced the habits of fluidity, of mobility, of change, of the expectation of progress, which have been regarded as distinctive frontier traits.²⁸

It would seem that the habits of fluidity, mobility, and change would have been derivative of the drive for progress. Both the agrarian and industrial phases reflected the drive to transform "natural wealth" into tangible "social wealth." It was the "aptitude" of a people for transforming natural resources into

²⁶Ibid., 154-55.

²⁷Ibid., 164.

²⁸Ibid., 165

useable things that made abundance a reality. Thus, according to Potter,

it is safe to say that the American standard of living is a resultant much less of natural resources than of the increase in capacity to produce and that this was the result, directly, of human endeavor--the ventures and struggles of the pioneer, the exertions of the workman, the ingenuity of the inventor, the drive of the enterpriser, and the economic efficiency of all kinds of Americans, who shared a notorious addiction to hard work.²⁹

Through ingenuity and hard work the American people created a secondary environment of enormous wealth. The first settlers in the new world obviously had requisite character traits for realizing the economic potential that abounded. The result of the interaction between the American people and their environment was manifest, but the consequences for the American people in this process was not so evident. What have been the specific affects of abundance on the American character? To understand how abundance shaped the American character, it was necessary to relate abundance to changes in social structure because Potter--like Fromm and Riesman--understood character as a function of society.

Potter accepted Fromm's definition of the relationship between character and behavior. "In order that any society may function well," he quoted, "its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them want to act in a way they have to act as members of the society or of a special class within it." Accordingly character should be defined as a social phenomenon. It followed then that the

²⁹ibid., 89.

influence of abundance on character should be inferable from any changes that abundance had wrought on the social structure.

Potter began assessing the influence of abundance on the American character by discussing the effect abundance had had upon American values, "the forming and strengthening of the American ideal and practice of equality." Abundance had enabled Americans to see equality in terms of opportunity and not condition. As Tocqueville had noted, there was an almost natural condition of equality in America. In fact, Tocqueville had believed this to be the most distinctive feature of American society. Opportunity abounded for everyone in the form of land. By associating equality with opportunity it became essentially synonymous with a conflicting value, liberty. Citing Riesman, Potter argued that both equality and liberty had come to mean the "freedom to grasp opportunity."³⁰ "In short," Potter explained, "equality came to mean in a major sense, parity in competition. Its value was as a means to advancement rather than as an asset in itself."³¹ The importance of this, according to Potter, was that Americans had been comfortable accepting great inequality while believing themselves faithful to the value equality. Americans had depended upon social mobility to fulfil their dreams for equality. Echoing Tocqueville, Potter went on to suggest that the success of democracy in America could be attributed to abundance:

³⁰Ibid., 92. See David Riesman, "Equality and Social Structure," *Journal of Legal and Political Sociology*, 1, 1942, 14.

³¹Ibid., 92.

He [Tocqueville] meant that a boundless continent enabled them to fulfil the promise of mobility. Democracy made this promise, but the riches of North America fulfilled it; and our democratic system, which, like other systems, can survive only when its ideals are realized, survived because an economic surplus was available to pay democracy's promissory notes.³²

Potter here argued that democracy had promised equality and that abundance had allowed for enough social mobility to satisfy the demand for equality.

It is clear that Potter traced his concept of abundance back to *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville had warned that democratic peoples "want equality in freedom, and if they cannot have that they still want equality in slavery."³³ Tocqueville's warning, of course, was addressed to his European audience. He had felt that democracy loomed in Europe's future, and he worried that democracy there would create problems which Americans due to their circumstances had been fortunate to avoid. The main circumstance that allowed American's to remain both free and equal was the natural endowment of North America. "Their fathers gave them a love of equality and liberty," Tocqueville had claimed, "but it was God who, by handing a limitless continent over them, gave them the means of long remaining equal and free."³⁴

³²Ibid., 93. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed., J. P. Mayer (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 279.

³³Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 506.

³⁴Ibid., 279. Potter quotes this passage out of a different translation which he does not cite.

To sum up: Potter's theory of abundance was an elaboration of two old ideas, Tocqueville's and Turner's. Potter engaged in sweeping generalization when he spoke of the American people as a people of plenty. The distribution of wealth in America had always been far from equal. He acknowledged this but contended, nonetheless, that "America has had a greater measure of social equality and social mobility than any highly developed society in human history."³⁵ The exclusion of blacks and native Americans, for instance, did not deny for Potter the fact that opportunities for social advancement had existed for the majority of Americans, Tocqueville's Anglo-Americans and subsequently other white males. The existence of opportunity, according to Potter, became the basis in fact for the apocryphal claim that America was a classless society. "The myth of equality," he wrote, "held that equality exists not merely as a potentiality in the nature of man but as a working actuality in the operation of American society--that advantages or handicaps are not really decisive and that every man is the architect of his own destiny."

Foremost, abundance enabled the majority of people to live comfortably. Abundance allowed for "outward uniformity," that is it became possible for the physical differentials of traditional class distinctions to be abolished. "The factor of abundance," he said, ". . . has constantly operated to equalize the overt differences between various classes and to eliminate the physical differences

³⁵ Potter, *The People of Plenty*, 95

between them."³⁶ Thus American society had an aura of equality that was more fiction than fact.

In traditional class society, Potter believed, even the lowliest status, conferred membership in the community and a sense of the belonging upon the individual. Abundance, however, by eliminating overt distinctions among people burdened them with more galling covert distinctions. "Whereas the principle of status affirmed that a minor position may be worthy," he announced, "the principle of mobility, as many Americans have construed it, regards such a station both as the penalty for and the proof of personal failure."³⁷ While Americans may unfairly view those who are out of work or employed in menial tasks as personal failures, it is far from certain whether the bonds of community were ever tight enough to bestow dignity upon the serfs, peasants, and beggars of earlier times. It was really unnecessary to debate which condition has resulted in greater psychological damage, the hopelessness of the past or the false hopes of the present. A worse case does not make a bad one better. Potter observed that a balance needed to be struck between the principle of mobility and the principle of status. "Abundance," he concluded, "destroyed this balance by making a good standard of living available for any man, while perpetuating a low standard as usual for most men."³⁸ More likely, abundance reversed the imbalance rather than destroyed the balance.

³⁶ibid., 102.

³⁷ibid., 105.

³⁸ibid., 109.

As had Riesman, Potter linked the change in character from inner-direction to other-direction to the development of a consumer society. He argued that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century American society was speedily transformed itself from a production-oriented to a consumer-oriented society. Potter felt that the desires of consumers were irrational. In so far as our appetites are subject to manipulation by others, Potter was correct when he said that social effect of advertising has been even greater than its economic effect. As he wrote,

If the economic effect is to make the purchaser like what he buys, the social effect is, in a parallel but broader sense, to make the individual like what he gets--to enforce already existing attitudes, to diminish the range and variety of choices, and, in terms of abundance, to exalt the materialistic virtues of consumption.³⁹

If Potter was right, the choice that Americans were deprived of by advertising was the choice to say no. He did not discuss at length the character orientation of a consumer society because it was unnecessary, the topic already having been covered amply by several writers, in particular David Riesman.⁴⁰

The critical implications of Potter's analysis of the American character are obvious, though they seem to have been largely ignored. Richard Pells, voicing a commonly held view of Potter, has argued that his central message was that Americans could rest easy, that "America enjoyed a historic exemption from the ideological and

³⁹ibid., 188.

⁴⁰ibid., 172.

class convulsions of Europe."⁴¹ This incorrectly interprets Potter. He did not suggest that life in America was without serious problems. Actually, he implied that social life in America was deteriorating. On close reading one cannot but conclude that *The People of Plenty* demonstrated the ill-effects of capitalism on the American character. One can fault Potter for not drawing his conclusion forcefully. He was hesitant about "attempting to bring in a verdict on the free-enterprise system."⁴²

In "The Roots of American Alienation," written in 1964, Potter did go further, expressing Durkheim-like concerns about the implications of a consumer society.⁴³ He found a profound sense of alienation among Americans and argued that the situation was worsening because the soil that nurtured intimate human contact had eroded. "Traditionally," he wrote,

our society maintained this capacity so effectively that it was almost taken for granted, but from the profound social changes of the past century or more, one of the many problems that have emerged is the impairment of many of the social contexts within which human relationships were nurtured, and the resulting psychological isolation, or alienation, as it is called, of those who can no longer form adequate relationships.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in A Conservative Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 149.

⁴²Ibid., 88.

⁴³David Potter, "The Roots of American Alienation," *Essays of David M. Potter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 304-33.

⁴⁴Ibid., 306.

Along these lines he identified three factors exacerbating alienation. All three, he said, were consequences of the machine economy and specialization. First, he believed that the pattern of social organization had changed. Primary groups which fostered meaningful personal relationships such as family, neighborhood, and church no longer played the important roles they once had. Second, he felt that economic concentration and interdependence had robbed work of the meaning it once held. Third, he argued that relationships had become rationalized, that is indirect and fragmented--in sum, depersonalized.

Potter held that American values of equalitarianism and individualism were an important source of alienation because they inspired distrust of society. While conservatives and liberals may have defined differently the threat posed by society, they agreed that society was a menace to some rights of the individuals. "Thus all parties," he contended,

have joined in celebrating the individual, whether as a go-getting exponent of the free enterprise economy or as dissenting exponent of minority rights. And accordingly all have distrusted the group. The liberal, in the tradition of Rousseau, regarded society as a source of corruption, while man apart from society was innocent. The conservative regarded any heavy emphasis upon the welfare of the group as 'socialism' or 'collectivism'.⁴⁵

Potter, as historian and as student of the American character, cared deeply for his country and its citizens. His work was neither an undue celebration nor a mindless criticism, but, rather, a carefully

⁴⁵ibid., 330-31.

constructed portrayal of the American people. Potter, like Riesman and Fromm, wrote from a personal perspective. Worried--horrified in the case of Fromm--by what they saw in the world, all three sought answers for their troubled worlds. Fromm hoped to sustain the stricken masses with a utopian vision. Riesman hoped to encourage the beleaguered individualist. And Potter hoped to draw the bonds of community more tightly. With differing views of the world, though sharing a method of analysis, these men together represent an enduring moment in the intellectual history of this century.

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The task of this thesis has been to examine the study of national character through the work of the psychologist Erich Fromm, the sociologist David Riesman, and the historian David Potter. I have tried to provide a critical exegesis of the three thinkers and to relate them to one another by discussing the interconnections in their thought. I began with Fromm's social psychological theory of character, turned to Riesman's theory of sociology, and ended with Potter's theory of American history. Each I argued had to be understood in the context of his time, a period of history marked by war, death camps, Hitler's national socialism, and Stalin's communism.

I began with Fromm because he provided a theoretical structure from which it was possible to approach David Riesman's ideas about the American character. In turn Riesman served as a springboard to Potter, because Potter's work on the American character elaborated upon Riesman's model.

Fromm, a German, Jewish emigrant, used psychology to reconcile himself to a world he believed was consumed by evil. A leader in the development of "neo-Freudian" psychology, he tried to save the world with psychology. His hatred of the world around him was

coupled with a boundless faith in the goodness of man. The task of his theory of character was to explain the social origins of evil and, thus, show his audience that it was possible for man to alter the course of history. Man would return to his natural, uncorrupt state, according to Fromm, when society was transformed into community founded upon principles of love and fairness. Thus in Fromm's thought there was a utopian theme joined to a method of analysis which explained the psychological bond of man to society.

Fromm's method of analysis proved useful to Riesman. The link between man and society was character, and through the concept of character the analysis of society became a study of personality. Thus social analysis provided a model of the personality or character of a people. A concern different from Fromm's motivated Riesman's interest in the study of character. The fate of individualism in Cold War America, not the fate of good in the world, worried Riesman most. Riesman developed the concept of autonomy to address the problem of individualism. Autonomy suggested that it was possible for the individual to free himself of his socially prescribed character. To assess the chances for autonomy he devised a historical model of the American character. Importantly, Riesman linked the transition period to economic developments. He associated the change from "inner-direction" to "other-direction" with the development of the United States into a consumer-oriented society.

David Potter, influenced by Riesman's study of the American character, elaborated upon the economic orientations of "inner-

direction" and "other-direction." He proposed the thesis that the economic abundance of North America had influenced the development of a unique American identity. The then popular theme of "American exceptionalism" ran through in his work. The concept of economic abundance harkened back to both Tocqueville and Turner whose works were viewed with renewed enthusiasm by scholars during the 1940s and 50s.

The idea of "American exceptionalism," consciously cultivated by Potter, lay beneath the surface of Riesman's analysis of the American character, as well. While Riesman tried to associate the character of Americans with the character of other Western Europeans through his population thesis, *The Lonely Crowd* really suggested the nature of "American exceptionalism," as it was developed by Potter. In fact, the study of the American character proceeded upon an assumption of "American exceptionalism." This, I think, helps to explain the short-lived popularity of such studies. By the late 1950s as American intellectuals began to rethink the politics of the Cold War, they began to rethink also the idea of "American exceptionalism." Writing in 1959, John Higham exclaimed,

In contrast [to progressive history] the new look of American history is strikingly conservative. More than at any other time before, historians are discovering a placid, unexciting past. . . . As Tocqueville did more than a century ago, today's historians are exhibiting a happyland, adventurous in manner but conservative in substance, and --above all-- remarkably homogeneous.¹

¹John Higham, "Homogenizing our History," *Commentary*, February 1959, 94.

The study of the American character was a casualty of the political controversies in the 1960s. Consciousness of blacks, other minorities, and women and their absence from theories and studies of national character made these studies offensive to many.

Higham, however, eventually muted his criticism. By 1970 he had decided that "the idea of an American consensus enabled us to take seriously the concept of national character, which had been unjustly denigrated for several decades."² He was right, but still there seems to be little interest in the work of Potter and Riesman on this score. Recently, Richard Wightman Fox has argued that a reappraisal of Potter's work is overdue. Fox, noting that Potter emphasized the ideological center of culture, suggested that at present historians pay too much attention to groups within society and overlook the "values ideas, and practices that all [these] social groups share in varying degrees."³ He added that Potter tried to show that American culture was a process which "holds Americans together, even as it enforces a stark differentiation of status and wealth."⁴ I think that Fox is right about Potter, and I am led to draw an ironical conclusion about American society and the American people. The heterogeneity of America is more apparent than real, and the appearance may stem from the extreme homogeneity of the American ideology. The emphasis placed upon group identity may

²John Higham, *Writing American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 159.

³Richard Wightman Fox, "Public Culture and the Problem of Synthesis," *The Journal of American History*, June 1987, 113.

⁴*Ibid.*, 113.

well be an expression of American ideology. "Groupism" may well be how Americans grasp at liberty and equality, how Americans grasp at opportunity. It was, after all, Tocqueville's opinion that Americans were predisposed to "groupism" and had a special talent in "the art of association." "As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world," Tocqueville wrote, "they seek each other out, and when found, unite."⁵

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⁵Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed., J.P. Mayer (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 516.

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