

A Psychological Description of Societies and Revolution

A society can be thought of as the gestalt composed of its individual members, their organizations, economic relations, culture, and government. Viewed like this, it can be seen as behaving like a person. In periods of revolution, a society undergoes a psychic break in which its old personality is destroyed and replaced by a new one, the germ of which was in the revolutionary subculture. The revolutionary movement can be seen as a suicidal reaction by a society that no longer knows how to survive in the world.

This view of society as a person while obviously influenced by Plato's "Republic", is importantly different in most respects. The three main aspects of society in this view are different: people, social organizations such as companies and government, and technology. Everything in society is made of or made by people, with many of the most important units of society being made both "of" and "by" people. So people are primary, but they also come together to form things that are bigger than their members. Examples of these things are cultures, governments, corporations, and technologies; cultures are made of people but hardly by people, governments are consciously made by people but are also essentially made of people and their aims are at least supposed to be the aims of their members, and corporations are made primarily by people, but while they use people to fulfill the aims of their creators and directors, those aims are not necessarily in line with the people composing the corporation. Technology is produced by individual people, but also by the culture those people live in. It shapes the culture of society by creating its means, but is not truly a *social*

construction and its influence on psychology is limited enough that it will be mostly ignored.

The dynamics of society are thus created by the interplay of differently sized actors, limited by their means. It is trivially apparent that—since no two objects can have exactly the same aims—societies must have a multitude of aims. The most obvious and easily demonstrated is the need for survival, which will be shown to have different meanings and impacts at different levels of culture. However, there is a sense in which every society is only one thing, and in that sense it must have only one aim. Societies therefore are necessarily conflicted, always attempting to resolve their practically innumerable aims into one core aim. In this paper I will attempt to make this view persuasive and useful, first by less briefly describing this view of societies, then by showing how this model necessarily leads to psychic conflict in both the individual members of society and in its gross being, and finally by providing some implications of this model for people and society.

Society behaves like people because it is composed of people. When people come together to do something, the result is an embodiment of their wills and desires. That said, societies are com-posed of more than just the consciously formed organizations of their members, they are composed of their members themselves and their members' individual and collective cultures. By culture I mean the accepted norms of interpersonal interaction, this consists not only of etiquette but of the roots of etiquette: the shared view of human nature, of the natural order, of the social order and cultural hierarchy, prejudices of all sorts, morality and ethics, etc. Societies must necessarily have an overarching culture, but just as obviously they must be composed of ever-smaller subcultures; for the purposes of this paper the

“healthy” individual can be considered the atomic unit of culture, especially since the more different cultures a person has inside of herself the more difficulty she will have in coping with the world. A sane person is a kind of monoculture.

A sane society suffers from multiple personality disorder: it must encourage a multitude of internal cultures. Diversity and conflict are the source of a tremendous amount of cultural growth, both individual and group. Fromm spoke of the divide between our internal culture and various outside cultures as the source of isolation using the language of ties and bonds, I see the source of isolation more as a misalignment of cultures that grows as we develop and learn what distinguishes our culture from others. We are always trying to find a culture to belong, and simultaneously we are trying to make our participatory cultures match our experiential culture. Which is to say—because I have defined culture as primarily the norms of interaction—we are always trying to make the world behave as we think it ought to behave. I think that Fromm’s analysis of society in terms of the “authoritarian” (sodomasochistic) character trying to dominate or submit to the world, and the conformist character just trying to forget herself, loses the important moral and ethical aspects of experience. Avoiding speculation as to where his analysis comes from and acknowledging that he was writing primarily about how the Nazi movement could arise, I think that his analysis misses the fact that many of the ‘oughts’ of politics really *are* oughts. You don’t have to be an emotionally scarred wreck to want to impose your norms on the world, although it helps. To a certain degree *everybody* wants to shape the world in their image because, inasmuch as they have thought about it, everybody thinks that they’re right and that their culture is the best culture.

Certainly the scar-red individual can have a terrifying culture, and can be monomaniacal about making the world participate in it. And also, by the very fact that the world does not perfectly match the individual's culture it can be seen that living in culture is necessarily damaging, however this does not mean that Fromm's analysis is correct. His is too relativistic, his reasons for action never include right and wrong, they are always isolation and fulfillment; it is the traditional Freudian trap of thinking of man as nothing more than a collection of desires and stifled desires, ignoring worldview, or in the language of this paper: culture.

Another aspect of this participation in multiple cultures is the rate of change of each. The fundamental dilemma can be seen in the individual: she has both desires and culture, and it is unlikely that they match all the time. So she must either curb her desires or change her culture, either of which could be the correct response. The easy response comes when the desire is obviously bad, e.g. murder. Contrarily, a reanalysis of culture on an individual level has varying levels of painfulness associated with it: from realizing that stealing to feed a starving family isn't all that bad when it's your family that's starving, (not so difficult) to realizing that homosexuality isn't all that bad when you're a fundamentalist Christian whose son just came out. (Pretty difficult) No matter how difficult individual cultural change is, however, mass change is orders of magnitude more difficult. The example of the several hundred year old liberal movement's lack of penetration into such huge swathes of the overall world population is probably enough to make that point. However, people must live in larger, participatory, cultures. And so, as individuals interact with the world their cultures change, but the worldly experience of the cultures they participate in are mediated by their members. In

this case mediated also means dampened: it is hard to convey the experiential reality of a starving family to a culture of several tens, hundreds, or thousands of people. While the larger culture is affected by its members' experiences, with increasing numbers comes decreasing impact. While it is hard to draw any firm conclusions without actually studying these kinds of things, I would hypothesize that informal cultures as are being discussed tend to move at the speed of the lowest common denominator of the most people. The least experience of the majority. So they move fairly slowly, and yet people *do* need to belong to something bigger than themselves so they will have members with a wide spectrum of experience. This also means that as a culture must be less neurotic than some of its members, it must also place an upper bound on the potential progress of the individual. Socrates was killed by the most enlightened culture of his day. And so it seems as though even small cultures of several people must be neurotic, neurotic in the sense of the overall culture trying to hold on to an obsolete understanding of reality. Also neurotic against the trend of a healthy culture to have multiple personalities.

The immediately obvious solution to informal neurotic cultures is to formally create cultures to counter the neurosis, by this I mean governments and similar humanitarian organizations. This only makes sense for the enlightenment that actually have first principles that they were founded upon. However, the formal attempt to mold cultures and society must be part of an overall culture and so cannot fully escape inherent cultural drag, the upper bound imposed by society. But that is not seen as a problem by the culture, since it is the culture's drag that is slowing down the progress of culture, etc. In addition, the fact that a government

is the product of *any* culture means that it must inherit the neuroses of that culture, invisible as they may be to people used to living under its obscuring influence. What's worse, while the best justification of government is to encourage the flourishing of its charges, it must still accomplish this with the curtailment of certain rights and the conscious modification of culture, and so whatever neuroses are built into the new government will be built into an organization *designed* to shape culture. Even with the best intentions, a government must eventually become a neurotic force in society.

Societal neuroses are similar to classical psychological neuroses. They are a reaction to mutually incompatible but simultaneously held beliefs, they result in anxiety and sometimes psychosis, and they give rise to phobias and incongruous defense behaviors. In short, a neurotic society does not act like itself. The societal neuroses come from all gradations of culture, or rather as described previously, from the interactions of different societal subcultures with varying rates of change. A subculture here still meaning either a group's or an individual's subculture. We can take the psychological formation of a revolutionary subculture as a hypothetical example to make these concepts concrete.

The culture of revolution exists everywhere that a subculture's norms are do not work to the continuation of society as it is. Thus, an attitude of "abortion is OK" is revolutionary in certain religious societies, "theft is OK" is revolutionary in capitalist societies, "disobeying the police is OK" is revolutionary in governmental societies, and "murder is OK" is revolutionary in most human societies, etc. Hopefully these examples make it clear that revolutionary culture is not intrinsically good or bad, merely that it will cause the larger society to react with hostility

and self-defense. However, hopefully they will also make it clear that these cultural attitudes can have no effect unless they are adopted by subcultures. If that claim is accepted in combination with the claim that cultures are always and exclusively composed of their subcultures, then it becomes clear that a revolutionary subculture necessarily implies a macroculture that is trying to destroy itself. This makes revolution a suicidal desire for every culture participating. Subcultures are not just trying to destroy the evils that they see in the world, they are trying to destroy the evils that they see the society has forced into them and theirs. If the revolutionary culture is suicidal, then what about the counter-revolutionary culture? Since the revolution is a subculture—wholly part of the larger societal culture—the society's reaction against it is also suicidal, although not in the same way. If the revolution is a struggle for dominance, for the creation of a new culture by the destruction of the old, the society's defense is a neurotic suicide: an attempt to stay comfortable and hang on to the old and avoid expanding into new, scary and isolating territory. Stifling a revolution is the killing off of the potential of a subculture, and by that the whole culture, to fully grow into itself.

This is all easy to say with regards to a positive revolution, but what about one that is negative, such as one that is in favor of murder, or xenophobia, or otherwise seem to contradict the language of flourishing. Or neurotic revolutions that are themselves reactions against the flourishing of the larger culture? It is still easy to talk in the same language without convulsion, the psychological roles are merely reversed. The neurotic reaction is now smaller than the overall society, but it is still a suicide reaction against the evils that it perceives in the world and is spawned by a desire to limit the world. And the larger societal

culture in this case is taking the role of the revolutionary culture in the previous revolution example, that of killing the *more* neurotic part of itself. The defense against the regressive revolution is still a neurotic reaction that can cause the larger culture to behave in ways with which it does not identify.

There is an observation that can be made here about the relationship between neuroses, individuals and culture. Since culture, and more interestingly cultural organizations, are made by people there is a real sense in which they must inherit the neuroses of the people forming them. As mentioned earlier, governments are formal cultures, cultural constructs really, that are designed to shape the overall culture for an indefinite period of time. Perhaps, being consciously constructed and much more easily observable than the informal cultures that make up most society, they can overcome to a certain degree the irrationality of human experience. However it seems almost im-possible that they could overcome all of them if for no other reason than that they must still have a drive for self-preservation if they are to be meaningfully long-lasting, and this very drive is the source of many neuroses and when part of a larger society serves to magnify the individual prejudices of its member cultures.

Talking about revolution in terms of dynamic psychological reactions of the member cultures of society seems to provide a useful model for understanding the fears and pains involved in the process of revolution, and explains why revolutionary cultures and societies containing revolutionary cultures both act in ways that go completely against their principles and self-image. In fact it predicts that in all revolutions both sides will behave against their

principles. More than just providing a useful language to talk about revolution, it appears the language of neurosis also provides criteria for evaluating the values of a revolution.

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