



THE LONG INTERVIEW

Erich Fromm in Humanistic Perspective: An Interview with Daniel F. Davis

Daniel F. Davis is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [RH]: Daniel, there are a number of figures in the history of psychoanalysis who have been very influential within Humanistic Psychology as well – and Erich Fromm is certainly at the forefront of this esteemed list. Can you tell us when and how you first became aware of Fromm’s work, and what in particular first attracted you to his writings and ideas?

Daniel David [DD]: I became aware of Fromm, on a psychological level, in relation to my own journey of self-awareness, and from a more objective perspective, via my interest in politics and economics. I was particularly taken by Fromm’s theory of Social Character (SC). This theory highlighted how the ‘base’, the Dominant Mode of Production (DMP) within a society, also produces and requires a complementary, general SC (Fromm, 2002, p. 76). Academically, Fromm’s work was seen as the ‘missing link’ between Marx and Freud (Ingleby, 2002, p. xxi), where a collective psychological SC structure, or

collective superego, is necessary to reproduce the DMP. As Fromm described, the system-character is a result of the dynamic interaction of system man and system society (Fromm, 1970, p. 11). The psychological effects and boundaries defined by the DMP seemed to me, at the time, to be a glaringly absent consideration within mainstream social science.

Fromm’s work crossed into my political and economic studies, and he highlighted the growing disciplinary separation within the social sciences that has continued to expand in this way. The resulting containment of disciplines has been essential for the preserving of certain theories, and the displacement of external critique. The birth of economics in the late 19th century largely dismissed psychological and sociological critique predicated on the causality of the dominant structure, and our current society is still grounded on its ontological assumptions. By normalising its own era-shaping economic assumptions of individual, ‘rational’

and marketised behaviour in what are now called the ‘neoclassical meta-axioms’ (Arnsperger & Varoufakis, 2006), the economic basis of the current DMP escapes investigation into its causal influence (Davis, 2019). In sum, a very basic economically based theory of human behaviour has emerged and continued to dominate our social relations. It is thus almost taken as given that capitalist social relations are natural.

Mainstream economics’ ever-more esoteric and complicated mathematical models have continued to shield the economics discipline from critique (ibid.). Fromm offered a holistic, open-system approach that included what I saw as a vital interdisciplinary examination of the underlying capitalistic economic structure, and its interactive and performative effects on individual and collective psychology.

His theory of the 20th-century dominated ‘marketised’ SC had certainly mirrored my own experiences of society, growing up in the emerging hyper-consumerist world of the 1980s and 1990s.

RH: I must confess I’ve not come across Fromm’s theory of Social Character before, Dan, but it does ring many bells. I think of Louis Althusser’s notion of ‘the ideological state apparatus’ (1971), and how any given society (mode of production) will require, and so call forth, a ‘superstructure’ that strives to guarantee the reproduction of that society and its prevailing configurations of wealth and power. And there’s also the work of writers like David Michael Levin (e.g. Levin, 1987); Tod Sloan (e.g. Sloan, 1995); Ethan Watters (2011); Maurizio Lazzarato and Joshua Jordan (2014); Jim McGuigan (2014); Paul Verhaeghe (2014); Ron Roberts (2015); Samo Tomsic (2015); Todd McGowan (2016) – and others, no doubt – each of whom, in their distinct theoretical way, has tried to articulate the generalised impact of

capitalism and/or neoliberalism on the human psyche. So Fromm is in good company here, and was clearly well ahead of the game.

Can you say more about how Fromm tried to forge the ‘missing link’ between Marx and Freud – how true might it be, for example, to say that Marx *needs* Freud, and Freud *needs* Marx, in order that their respective theories are complete? And can you also say more about how, according to Fromm, ‘the system-character is a result of the dynamic interaction of system man and system society’?.

And in what written works did Fromm pursue his ‘interdisciplinary examination of the underlying capitalistic economic structure and its interactive effects on individual and collective psychology’? – and in your estimation, how far did he get in producing a coherent and convincing analysis? Lots of questions there! – do just pick up on what you want to.

DD: It is very interesting to come across similar lines of thought that focus on Marx’s base and superstructure and individual and group psychology. Fromm had developed on Freud to incorporate Marx, such as to in many ways replace the libido theory with a socioeconomic structured analysis. This caused, and still causes, some objection, especially within the Frankfurt School, but I, of course, believe he was on to something. I think for both Freud and Marx, the other’s thoughts were again separated by the boundaries of discipline. Fromm brought what I believe were two of the most significant social scientific theories together, to understand how they are essentially interlinked and, indeed, do need each other.

Going back to SC, Fromm defined it as a common bond, shared in general by members of a particular society, whereas he also detailed the (not to be confused) individual character types: the receptive, the exploiter, the hoarder, the

marketing, and the productive. The first four are 'unproductive' character types; and the fifth, the 'productive' character, is a foundation for healthy social relations, the realisation of individual potential required to fulfil Fromm's holistic perspective of human needs and interdependent commonalities: Transcendence via creativity, Rootedness, Identity and Frame of orientation (Fromm, 2002, pp. 28–64). The individual or 'system man' suffers from neuroses where negative thoughts and behaviours emerge from within their unfulfilled human needs. System-society and SC can also suffer from neuroses as in a(n) '(in)sane society', if it prevents or obstructs its members from being able to fulfil their 'human needs'. Like the neurosis of the unfulfilled individual there is also the neurosis of the unproductive and alienated SC (Fromm, 2002, p. 76). For example, our current SC that is encapsulated in a 'short-termism', accumulation and consumer culture in many ways ignores long-term social costs and potential destruction that is caused by neoliberal, unfettered monopoly capitalism. This may be seen as a neurotic drive towards detachment and death: 'The character traits engendered by our socioeconomic system, i.e. by our way of living, are pathogenic and eventually produce a sick person and, thus, a sick society.' (Fromm, 1976, p. 5)

To give a background on differing historical SC structures. Fromm described the SC of the 19th century as being dominated by exploitation and (anal) hoarding, being evident in class distinctions, industrialisation and its necessary methods of 'overt power'. Like Marx, Fromm understood the class structure of society. He identified the alienation and exploitation of the worker, where surplus value was, and is, extracted by the capitalist.

The 20th century continued this trajectory and gradually became dominated by the marketing

SC, where mass-production became ever-more abstract from individual productive creativity, and the influence and size of businesses and concentrations of capital increased, further alienating individuals from each other and individual creative capacities of work. Fromm described this process as 'quantification and abstractification' (Fromm, 2002, p. 107). The Fordist production method and growing globalised manufacturing were prevalent examples of this atomising process. Fromm's psychological perspective gave reason to how this process emerged and eventually became an individual and socially self-administering authority.

Individual relations were constrained and influenced by ubiquitous marketing SC traits. The social structure 'normalised' the idea of people/agents selling themselves, and regarding others and the environment as means to an economic end. In this way Fromm noted that the dominant economic system has moved from being a humanistic ontology – 'what is good for man' – to a socio-economic reality: 'what is good for the growth of the system' (Fromm, 1976, p. 4).

The Sane Society (1956), *The Heart of Man* (1964), *To Have or To Be* (1976), and *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (1970) cover SC in some detail, with the latter also elaborating on his particular methodology for amassing empirical validation of his theory.

RH: I think these will be comparatively new ideas to many people, Dan, including our readers; and I'm wondering about how they can help us to make sense of what's happening today in (dare I coin the phrase?) 'Late neoliberalism'. I know that one of the chapters in your dissertation (2019) is on the theme of 'Surveillance Capitalism' (another 'SC', just to confuse things!), and I'm wondering whether,

and if so how, Surveillance Capitalism fits into Fromm's SC approach. And is Surveillance Capitalism the latest manifestation and playing out of neoliberalism, or does it signal a new developmental phase of capitalism beyond neoliberalism? And what might be the predominant character type under Surveillance Capitalism, and what are its characteristic neuroses that today's therapists will be encountering in the therapy consulting room? In one interesting comment you made to me, you also said that 'The modern Social Character and its deviant, emergent behaviours [do], I believe, relate to the result of last year's general election'.

To the extent that the latter ramblings cohere into sensible questions (which I'm not fully confident that they do), I'd be interested in any responses you have, Dan – and especially in relation to outlining how you define and comprehend the phenomenon of Surveillance Capitalism.

DD: To respond to your questions in turn, Richard. First, regarding *What is Surveillance Capitalism?* – Surveillance Capitalism is a term that was coined by Shoshana Zuboff. In her 2015 paper 'Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization', she details how the current *digital age* has been 'hijacked' by companies at the forefront of contemporary consumerism, such as Facebook, Amazon and Google (2015). While the consumer wishes to attain a product for consumption, the aim of big business is 'Big Data'. What is now sought is the consumer themselves (ibid.). Data that are compiled by companies wishing to form algorithms and predictors of typical consumer habits also have further indirect and undisclosed usages, as exposed in the Cambridge Analytica and the Vault 7 NSA revelations.

Regarding how this relates to Fromm, Zuboff uses the term 'Big Other'. Now this has been used before, in similar ways, for example by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Zuboff explicitly states that her idea of the Big Other is 'constituted by unexpected and often illegible mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control that effectively exile persons from their own behaviour while producing new markets of behavioral prediction and modification' (Zuboff, 2015, p. 75). Similarly, Fromm uses the term 'anonymous authority' to describe how individuals lose a sense of self and become part of a social authority by enacting a conforming performativity: 'I lose the sense of self, I become a "one", a part of the "It"' (Fromm, 2002, p. 149).

I think that Zuboff and Fromm's theoretical understandings have a similar connection to the causality of *capitalist social relations*, in as much as they both understand the unequal power and influence of wealth, and how accepted social norms and a general SC make any threat to dominant structures less likely. They are both looking to free individuals from the trappings of a dominant system, to become aware of the underlying authority. Of course what Zuboff describes are the 21st-century outcomes of the causal structure that Fromm describes at base.

Twenty-first century capitalist normalisation has continued to mystify the causal linkages to the dominant means of production and, therefore, has also mystified the ideology itself. Globally influential books, such as Fukuyama's *The End of History*, and economic 'advances' in ideas like 'behavioural economics' or 'game theory', have framed 21st-century normality in capitalist social relations. In general, the fundamental assumptions of neoclassical economics (the selfish and rational economic agent) are, perhaps unconsciously, taken as given, before a study is

made into societies' and individuals' well-being and neurosis.

Re Is Surveillance Capitalism the latest phase of neoliberalism, or replacing it? I believe that this is one element of the latest phase of neoliberalism. In fact, in relation to this, I have devised a new SC that symbolises our current socioeconomic reality: *The Hyper-Marketised orientation*. As we saw in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–8, neoliberalism and austerity thrived, private debt continued to rise, and the welfare state was under attack. The generalised embedded hyper-marketised SC may again support harsh austerity measures after the current, post-Covid-19, global crisis; i.e. it is possible now that austerity is a normalised public response to overt government expenditure (household economics fallaciously applied to the macro-economy). The onset of Surveillance Capitalism will only make it harder to discern the roots of anonymous authority.

Next, regarding your interesting question about what kind of 'neuroses' might manifest in the consulting room, I think we would expect similar, socially based alienated neurosis as we've seen in the twentieth century, but perhaps now at a hyper-level. We've seen how children are now experiencing neurotic symptoms formed, in some instances, from addiction to video games, most of which are now online and open to behaviour-monitoring technology. Akin to this, adults are also spending far more time on social media, or at work in the marketised state, away from essential human contact, individual productivity and creativity. We have an industry that is competing to take or buy our time, and with every day the technology learns to adjust to our instinctual, short-term wants. Again, the long-term objectives and deviance from marketised SC norms look further away. By this I mean the tilting of the scales weigh heavily towards the normalcy of market short-termism,

or 'just-in-time' business primacy. In contrast, objective human and/or environmental-centred discussion and planning seem to be pushed into the distance. I believe that in the case of 'the consulting room', as in many other areas of our society, I see a mirroring of this idealised market model, i.e. therapy with a price tag.

The much-talked-about 'democratic deficit' (Streek, 2016, p. 20), or the less-talked-about political 'cross-party cartel' (Katz & Mair, 1995), are examples of claims that cite a general lack of political and alternative ideological representation, and frame most aspects of our social relations.

RH: That's such a rich and informative answer, Dan – thank you. There are so many directions we could go in, but one that I guess we have to pick up on is how Surveillance Capitalism and your 'Hyper-Marketised orientation' might relate to the current (as I write) coronavirus crisis. Conspiracy-theoretic perspectives abound on the way in which, at the very least, the pandemic is being used by surveillance-capitalist interests to smuggle in all manner of alien and malign practices and technologies. Does Fromm's rich thinking, and your own development of it, have any light to throw on what's currently unfolding on a global scale? Thus, you write of 'adults... spending far more time on social media, or at work in the marketised state, away from essential human contact, and individualistic escapement' – something which of course has been massively magnified under lockdown conditions.

Perhaps another way of addressing this question might be – if Erich Fromm were alive today, what theoretical sense might he be making of what's happening with the pandemic, according to his worldview and preoccupations? And what might be the practical implications for concerned activists stemming from his insights? I'm almost

asking you to channel the great man there – most unfair of me! – but to the extent that it's a useful question, as a Fromm scholar you're as well placed as anyone to answer it, Dan.

DD: First, a general point regarding Covid-19. The introduction of surveillance 'apps' in China – the 'social credit system' – and the recent Covid-19 'health code' app, highlight questionable authoritarian concerns. Now, in the UK (and of course this is a rapidly unfolding story as I write), we are awaiting the possible introduction of an NHS contact tracing app that will allow the user to anonymously declare that they have been displaying symptoms of the virus, and pass this on to people with whom they've recently been in contact. This does have obvious beneficial merits, but we must be aware of the precedent that is being set in relation to the voluntary disclosure of private data. What will be the long-run societal normalisations that this kind of technology will advance?

I think Fromm would have had much to say on this. For the generalised hyper-alienated, assumed to be self-regarding, utility-maximising individual and the 'neoliberal-state', blame for the virus is easily shifted on to the externalised 'other'. It is a necessary element of our neoliberal social reality that we are in a state of subjective and objective psychological and socioeconomic dissonance. This is required for our contemporary mode of production to function, reproduce itself and deflect away from its own culpability in the recent and current crises.

Subjective social reality for many is a number of stages away, or abstract, from the objective reality of the factors that make it possible. These factors include the intricate web of global supply chains, global exploitation, neo-colonialism, inequality and environmental degradation. For Fromm, this was connected to what he called the

alienating process of 'quantification and abstractification' (mentioned above). This began in the early 20th century, and I maintain that we are now in an ensuing 'hyper' phase. The hyper-marketised individual *qua* economic agent, although they may have some awareness of the current wider social and environmental crises, are at the same time still confined to the anonymous authority of 'business-as-usual' as the assumed 'natural' state of things.

Our hyper-normalised social reality, as mentioned above, helps to mystify the interconnection of 'humans' needs' from the 'societies' needs' (Funk, 1994) – that is, social, psychological and environmental costs are generally removed from the causality of marketised reality. How this continues in the light of the destructive results of the 'profit motive' exemplifies just how successful the normalisation of market consumerism and governance has been over the past number of decades. For Fromm, the subjective psychological need for the individual to fit in with the group can be stronger than doing what is productive and/or rational to facilitate objective change. This was explained in his book *The Fear of Freedom* (Fromm, 2001).

The coronavirus crisis can be thought of as an extension of this dissonance. The origins of the virus have been, and are, contested, but the general consensual blame points towards the actions of externalised, uncivilised 'foreign' practices' – the 'other'. Internalised enquiries into the causal links of mass-produced food, globalised travel and trade, and the unprepared, underfunded and non-resilient health and welfare services are generally dismissed. It has, though, been a great tragedy and a pertinent point to be made that the two most neoliberal and thus market-centred countries, the UK and the USA, have experienced the highest levels Covid-19-related deaths in the world (at the time of

writing). The failure of these self-described 'small' governments to directly control their responses has left them to scramble for private acquired provisioning, in the suddenly highly competitive global market. The terrible reality has been the failure to provide the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) needed for doctors and nurses to safely care for patients.

As mentioned above, we are also observing the implementation of a new NHS app, which is to be run by the private company Serco. Of course nobody would claim that Serco, like any other private company, doesn't wish to make a profit from their business. It is fair question, then, to ask whether this is the best method of providing health and care services, the best place for surplus capital to head, and to also ask why we would want private companies to handle our sensitive and private medical information. These questions, and the privatisation of the NHS in general, are not directly presented to the electorate and citizens.

One element of this also brings us back to the question of surveillance capitalism and data usage, with the NHS now included in this. The 'efficiency' drive in the NHS, the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 which greatly increased the move towards a business-model conception of the NHS, has in many ways led the money-saving procedures that decreased the precautionary expenditure on preparatory pandemic planning (Pilger, 2020). Much of this background policy activity is 'hidden' from the public, and when implemented it is presented in alienated form that promotes developments like facilitating new 'speed' and 'eases of use' to appease 'customer expectations' in brochure form. The idea of human care has been further disconnected from its human basis, and the many deaths in the UK's privatised care homes have highlighted this in the most awful way.

Fromm, I believe, would have seen this as a glowing example of the primacy of economic precedence over human need, and how individual and societal norms under neoliberal dominance have furthered 'pathological-normalcy' (Fromm, 2002, p. 12).

This being said, I look for positives that can be taken from the crisis. Like Fromm I believe that the human spirit will eventually prevail against social and psychological pathology. The progressive benefits that have emerged over the past 100 years, in the face of capitalism's ubiquity, have been through the perseverance of the human will for equality.

Time spent in lockdown may have given us an opportunity to evaluate the essential importance of each other's non-commodified company, the inherent value of all humans, and the environmental need for localised production. I hope for a psychosocial redirection towards the needs of humans over the needs of a socioeconomic ideology. It seems as absolutely necessary that these links are formed quickly, as an impending social and/or environmental catastrophe seems to be on the precipice. Social upheaval, in particular, may be accelerated with the reality of impending post-crisis mass unemployment.

A general SC will always need to exist in a society – therefore a viable alternative deviant SC, that aims to reaffirm humanity over an economic model, needs to be available for a human-centred, progressive, activist and self-questioning 'revolutionary' character to find consensus. Otherwise, I see two other possible trajectories. One: akin to the post-financial crisis, we can expect the 'socialisation-of risk', austerity, more justification for surveillance capitalism and a continuation of neoliberalism. Two: we could see an accelerated rise in right-wing national and authoritarian

character populism, a SC that is based on the perceived group links of some and the extant fear of the ‘other’.

RH: That’s a great piece of quasi-channelling, Dan! – thank you! One of the things we humanistic psychologists are wont to say is that the world today needs Humanistic Psychology (HP) perhaps more than ever before (see, for example, the Conclusion to House et al., 2017); and one of your options above – ‘...a viable alternative deviant SC, that aims to reaffirm humanity over an economic model’ – sounds very much akin to what we stand for in HP. One thing I do take from what you say above is that the future is by no means inevitable and determined – but rather, that our human future will be forged through the balance of class, environmental and cultural struggle, and the way those struggles play out – and *on which we can all therefore have an influence* through the life-choices we make.

Biographically speaking, was Erich Fromm an activist who engaged fully in struggles for progressive change in his lifetime? – or did he merely write and theorise about them? I ask because I think the choice of being an ‘arm-chair theoretical radical’ (if I can coin a phrase) is rapidly becoming less and less of a justifiable option, as the direction of our human future is increasingly in the balance – and with at least two of the possible future trajectories you outline above being unthinkable for social and political progressives.

And can I finish this stirring interview by sharing something that’s been sitting on my mantelpiece for some decades now. Many, many years ago, I came across a quotation by Erich Fromm that spoke to me in a way that I don’t think I fully understood at the time – yet I just *knew* I had to keep it and display it on my mantelpiece! I’m afraid I don’t have its source –

but it simply says: ‘**Man today has a fundamental choice... between robotism and humanistic communitarian socialism**’. This would of course have been written many years before the all-engulfing tidal wave of Information and Communications Technologies had even been thought of. I wonder how this quotation – which still makes my skin creep – might fit in with what you’ve been saying in this interview, and with your own reading of Fromm’s *oeuvre* and its contemporary importance?

DD: Answering your questions in turn, Richard: Fromm was actively involved in various anti-war peace groups, the American Socialist Party, the American Friends Service Committee, and in Amnesty International, where he was a co-founder of the Committee for SANE Nuclear Policy (Friedman, 2013, p. 184). Further to this, at one time Fromm became a quite prominent advisor to the American government. In Lawrence Friedman’s biography of Fromm (2013, pp. 209–11), he explained that President Jack Kennedy was influenced by Fromm’s book *The Escape from Freedom*, 1941 (UK title, *The Fear of Freedom*, 1942), and Fromm’s article, ‘The case for unilateral disarmament’ (Fromm, 1960). Friedman details how Kennedy contacted Fromm in 1963, and he suggests that Fromm’s work may have influenced the president’s cold war strategy of détente and nuclear disarmament (2013, pp. 209–11).

To bring the discussion back to the present day – yes, I agree that activism is probably even more vital now, to counter the modern dominant ideological cartel and the looming destructive forces of advanced capitalism. Twenty-first century activism, I believe, needs to take a slightly new form. To very briefly discuss this here, I note that the monopolised production and dissemination of mainstream, narrowly framed news, and the separations between the social-

scientific disciplines, are a massive blockage to widely penetrating and inclusive, alternative socio-economic discussion. To add a further barrier, the myriad negative effects of neoliberalism are being simultaneously mystified by a politics of intra-class division. Various socially divisive and pseudo-scientific opinions have been given public voice on popular internet video channels. In particular, I think here of the growing right-wing political movements across the globe.

In this time of crises, I think that there needs to be a ramping-up of left-wing counter-argument to deal with the seemingly persuasive populist, 'alt-right' arguments that are building a significant following on social-media sites and also in the mainstream. This will necessarily mean that social media is, and will continue to be, an essential platform of political debate for 21st-century democracy.

Liberal capitalism claims negative freedoms from external constraints, but as Fromm saw it, it curtails the positive freedom to orientate humanist psychic energy towards meaningful and life-affirming self-governance. Fromm saw positive freedom as being under threat from capitalism, where the individual has become detached from a sense of purpose / meaning. Considering this absence, he understood that individuals may be more inclined to submit to authoritative structures, a 'fear of freedom', a fear of each other, and to identify with its institutions above themselves, such as in nationalism: 'This masochistic and submissive individual, who fears freedom and escapes into idolatry, is the person on which the authoritarian systems – Nazism and Stalinism – rest' (Fromm, 1957, p. 4).

Fromm explained how fascism and authoritarian tendencies are prevalent in what he called the 'necrophilic' character. This character is defined

by the static and the drive towards death, the past and 'malignant aggression'. Opposed to this is the 'biophilic' character that can be defined by a love of life, character growth and creative productivity (Fromm, 1964). A progressive 21st-century theoretical, counter-mainstream narrative can hopefully unite the underlying energy for change in times of crisis, and direct this towards biophilic humanism; whereas fear-induced authoritarianism indulges the necrophilic regression.

The political left has been split for too long by 'minor' differences in theoretical minutiae. Past theoretical notions of progressive politics have been tarnished, in the mainstream, by perceived examples of past socialist failures, for example in the Soviet Union. I believe that a simplified theoretical template that distinguishes the real lines of power and the objective costs, and which portrays a democratic means for effective change, could be the basis of the progressive counter-mainstream movement. I understand this as a challenge of placing the correct pieces of the jigsaw back into place; to remove the ideological mask that hides the unequally rooted hierarchical structures of the dominant mode of production that is easily recognisable and psychologically desirable. This is the direction in which I see 21st-century activism needing to head. That is, it has to refocus on the causality, and not the symptoms.

A glaring reason for this is to unify and give hope to the young. The next generation will have to deal with the long-term effects of unsustainable neoliberalism. That is, the young will require a framework on which to build a society that responds to human and environmental needs, rather than the needs of the dominant economic model. For example, they will need to think of ways in which to equalise the absurd costs and disparities of fully marketised housing, dealing with the effects of

short-termism in town planning, and the ensuing floods, traffic and pollution costs, solving private debt, and to find new ways to locally produce food and materials due to the long-term environmental costs. For those born in current times, these market failures will quite likely be the vital issues. I hope that a progressive and responsible revolutionary SC can start working towards creating a new theoretical and activist framework now, as the alternative is misplaced fear, anger and continued destruction.

As to your other question, yes, the quotation on your mantelpiece is very relevant to our hyper-marketised reality. It actually appears near the end of his book *The Sane Society*, where Fromm earlier defines his theory of SC. Here it is in its original form: ‘Man today is confronted with the most fundamental choice; not that between Capitalism or Communism, but that between robotism (of both the capitalist and the communist variety), or Humanistic Communitarian Socialism’ (Fromm, 2002, p. 354).

It is worth noting how Fromm understands the lack of individual freedom that was caused by both the marketised structures of capitalist society, and the authoritarian structures that were prevalent in the pseudo-Marxist reality of Soviet Union Communism. Both of these structures were formulated, and relied upon, a pliant and mirroring SC that allowed the top-down structure to reproduce itself. The overt authoritarianism of the Soviet Union was eventually overcome not only by international ideological pressure, but also by the individual and social will for an end to explicit social failures.

The implicit authority of modern capitalism is a tougher enemy to confront. As I have mentioned above, its authority is largely intangible, and its modern form of hyper-exploitation is hidden in

the global periphery, or misappropriated to individual causality. It is the bureaucratic anonymous authority of normalised social structures that appeal to personal, material gratification, to the detriment of humanist relatedness, community and environmental concern. The UK, in particular its modern form of governance, is very effective in this method of cultural hegemony, as acknowledged in the global soft power rankings (Duffin, 2019).

With regard to the idea of humans as robots, in both Soviet authoritarianism and capitalist hegemony we may discern a historically common trend, i.e. the existence of a will towards a mechanised way of life. This resulted from the industrial revolution, and the latter technological revolution’s drive for material progression eventually became an end in itself. That is, the economic imperative for material growth and capital accumulation replaced that of a human-centred imperative: ‘He ceased to use production as a means for a better life, but hypostatized it instead to an end in itself, an end to which life was subordinated’ (Fromm, 2002, p. 347).

Into the early 20th century, predictions of the human-centred positive potential of mechanisation were exclaimed in political discussion – ideas which described how humans could in the future be freed from alienated work. An example of this was the highly influential and era-shaping economist John Maynard Keynes’s predictions of the future leisure time that mechanisation could provide. Keynes imagined a future in which, on average, we would only need to work for 15 hours a week (Elliot, 2008). By the early 21st century, it was clear that these predictions had not come to fruition. Indeed, metaphors that cited the dystopian fictional tales/warnings of the robot-like lives of the characters in a ‘brave new world’ (Huxley, 2007), and the images of ‘Big

Brother'-like control that Orwell had envisaged (Orwell, 1964), were more comparable to modern capitalism's individualistic alienation, gig-economy, neo-colonialism, mass surveillance and anonymous control.

In the late 20th century and into the 21st century, the era of neoliberalism has been a time of greater individual and social disconnection, fear, environmental degradation, military conflict and 'mental health crisis' (Ferguson, 2017, p. 15). The alienated nature of work has been further enhanced where surveillance capitalism has encroached and reduced work for many, more towards Fromm's fear of robotic-like monotony – what Fromm saw as 'cybernetic man' (Fromm, 1997, p. 467). I see the breaking of these ties as a possibility that will have to emerge via bottom-up deviant SC structures. The wealth-based beneficiaries of capitalism and its anonymous structures will not fall aside without an immense struggle, but it is essential to unmask how their legitimacy lays in the dominance of its SC.

RH: Dan I started out this interview with only a hazy understanding of why and how Erich Fromm's work is of relevance to Humanistic Psychology. Thanks to your clear and incisive articulation of Fromm's ideas and insights, his relevance is now very clear – and there is perhaps even some urgency that we really grapple with his relevance, and how it can inform progressive struggles for a better human future. As a leading Fromm scholar, you'll be at the forefront of these developments; and I for one greatly look forward to your future writings on Fromm's great contemporary relevance. Thank you on behalf of our readers for undertaking this great interview.

Notes

- 1 The heterodox economic arguments that debunk this are myriad, but are not for this discussion. It is worth reading the work of Steve Keen or Michal Hudson for a modern post-Keynesian perspective on this.
- 2 Again, a detailed economic appraisal is required here. I note that a heterodox economic perspective would aim for fiscal stimulation and more government intervention as a response to Covid-19. Institutionalised economic theory and the 'crowding out' of private enterprise is the generally accepted response to the heterodox academics.

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About the contributors

Daniel F. Davis



I have previously worked as an engineer, and this work gave me experience of modern work practices and piqued my interest in social and political structures, and the nature of being. Erich Fromm's work has been extremely influential to me on this journey. Furthering my interests academically, I studied for a PPE Degree and, under the tutelage of Professor Steve Keen, a Master's Degree in Political Economy. My dissertation is due to be published soon. Subject to securing funding, I will have commenced my Ph.D. at the University of Warwick in October. My Ph.D. will apply Fromm's theories to current Political Economy.

Richard House edits *Self & Society* and its sister online magazine.