

The Sane Society [1955] – Eric Fromm

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This is a great book by sociologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. Fromm was from Germany and he moved to the United States.

Society is mentally ill

It deals with the concept of mental health, and reverses the idea that mental illness is the problem of specific individuals failing to adapt to society. He proposes that the reverse is true – the usual panaceas don't work for some people to help them adapt to a sick society.

It's a hard concept to get your head around, but Fromm has influenced many other thinkers and writers. I see him quoted and referenced all the time.

Humans do not serve society

One of the main points that stand out is Fromm saying that society should exist to serve human beings – but we normally view and treat it the other way around. He says society does not reflect the natural state of human beings but it is currently encouraging certain innate potential trends that we have.

He quotes the many high rates of suicide, homicide and alcoholism in Western industrialised society. His book is frequently critical of modern capitalism, and he points out that rampant consumerism is a departure from the capitalism of the seventeenth century.

Humanistic psychoanalysis

He argues that all human beings are born with natural desires that produce a state of mental health – the desire to belong, to love, to create and so on. He calls this concept "humanistic psychoanalysis", in contrast to the blank slate psychoanalysis that was

popular at this time.

Fromm argues that it's difficult for us to fulfil these innate desires. Although humans are by nature very adaptable to any conditions, a factor influencing our success as a species, having the wrong conditions produces suffering.

Instead of true fulfilment, society offers us various substitutes such as television and newspapers, consumerism, and alcohol. Fromm wrote this in the post-war industrial boom, around the time when people also had colour TV for the first time. He obviously had many reservations about this.

Innate human needs

Fromm provides a model of humanity as being born with some innate human needs that must be fulfilled as a prerequisite for mental health. This counters the idea that human beings are driven by only the sexual or destructive impulse, which was a popular notion at the time.

These needs are:

- Relatedness vs Narcissism
- Transcendence–Creativeness vs Destructiveness
- Rootedness–Brotherliness vs Incest
- Sense of Identity–Individuality vs Herd Conformity
- The Need for a Frame of Orientation and Devotion–Reason vs Irrationality

One of the most interesting points he made was that in order to be properly related to others, a person must first become an independent individual.

He argues that to be capable of genuine "love" (and he uses this word) someone must be complete on their own, or they are only capable of a selfish neediness that is not really love.

Truly revolutionary for his time.

An answer to Freud

Much of the book is an answer to Freud, who he argues has inaccurately reduced humans

to the sexual drive.

Fromm argues that the sexual instinct is one drive among many. I frequently notice Freud being criticised in other works by psychoanalytic theorists, notably also Karen Horney and Carl Jung. I think this concept presents a much more rounded picture of human nature, and answers some of the criticisms I have of psychoanalysis as a discipline.

Freud was an influential and revolutionary thinker, but we are nonetheless struggling against his legacy. I believe Freud is responsible for many mainstream misconceptions about psychoanalysis, and this stops many people benefiting from insights offered by psychoanalytic theory.

Final remarks

I find *The Sane Society* very illuminating. The text is extremely readable and Fromm communicates his meaning clearly. You can't help but be transfixed by the depth and breadth of his ideas. This book is still relevant in 2018 as it was in 1955, if not even more so.
