

# **A Matter of Character: The relevance of Erich Fromm's work to Scitovsky's critique of the consumer society**

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## **Abstract**

In a series of works written in America in the forties and fifties, the German *émigré* socio-psychologist Erich Fromm developed a critique of western capitalist societies. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), he argued that the Protestant ethic had allowed the formation of certain character traits which contributed to the development of capitalism, though coming into conflict with fundamental human needs. He then followed with *A Man for Himself* (1947), in which he offered a description of the neuroses that develop when these needs are left unsatisfied. Subsequently, in *The Sane Society* (1955), he maintained that such neuroses were a defining feature of the social character of modern society. Later, in *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961), he summarized the argument by defending Marx's critique of the Protestant ethic and of the spirit of capitalism. While he was engaged on these books, another *émigré*, the Hungarian-born economist Tibor Scitovsky, was developing a critique of American consumer society and though he cited Fromm relatively little, he appears to have been subject to his influence. In this paper I suggest that Scitovsky took the relevant features of Fromm's psycho-social critique and reframed them in an economic context. Fromm's influence can, in fact, be detected in Scitovsky's work from the mid-1950s onwards, and culminated in his 1976 monograph, *The Joyless Economy*. In the latter, he identifies the main cause of consumer dissatisfaction in the welfare society as lying in the kinds of preferences encouraged by Puritan cultural attitudes. By emphasizing comfort over cultural and leisure activities, and by viewing work as directed solely towards profit, the Puritan view, he claims, contributed to spreading boredom, frustration and conformity in all spheres of society. By showing the relevance of Fromm's work for Scitovsky's critique of North American society, this essay casts new light on both the genesis of *The Joyless Economy* and the controversy it provoked.

## Introduction

During the twentieth century, several eminent sociologists tackled some of the critical issues concerning modernity. In early 1900 Simmel, for example, in *The Philosophy of Money*, offered prophetic insights into the processes of alienation and reification, in work and urban life, in the modern money economy. Almost half a century later Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) decried the dehumanizing effect of capitalism, while in 1951 Adorno's *Minima Moralia* put together a collection of disenchanting aphorisms on everyday existence in the "sphere of consumption of late Capitalism". Then, in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse condemned outright advanced industrial society for having subdued instinct and pleasure to productivist aims. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Tibor Scitovsky (1910-2002) launched their inquiries into the origins of modern malaises with questions more or less in the same terms. Fromm, for example, opens *The Sane Society* with: "Could it be that the middle-class life of prosperity, while satisfying our material needs leaves us with a feeling of intense boredom, and that suicide and alcoholism are pathological ways of escape from boredom?"<sup>1</sup> – a question that is still hanging twenty years later when Scitovsky says more or less the same thing. "Could it not be that we seek our satisfaction in the wrong things, or in the wrong way, and are dissatisfied with the outcome?", he asked.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Joyless Economy* (1976) Scitovsky's criticism of the American consumer is, indeed, very close to Fromm's observations on Western man (1941; 1947; 1955, 1961). Like Fromm (*A Man for Himself*, 1947), he argues that humans have innate psychological needs which, when unsatisfied, produce neuroses and frustrations, which Fromm classifies as the malaises of modern man. In Part 1 of *The Joyless Economy*, he turns to Fromm's psychological literature ('Is Man Lazy by Nature?' 1973) to classify the needs into two categories – the need for comfort and the need for novelty. Like Fromm (*Escape from Freedom*, 1941) Scitovsky sees the principal source of personal satisfaction in productive work and its prototype, art and craftsmanship. Following on Fromm's *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961) he claims that mass production and extreme specialization transform work from an activity potentially capable of yielding great satisfaction into a mechanical and repetitive gesture, so boring that it alienates the individual who carries on with it only for monetary compensation. The line of reasoning in Part 2 of the book is extraordinarily akin to that of Fromm on the role of social character (*The Sane Society*, 1955). Scitovsky holds that three forces of a socio-economic nature concur to form a "national temperament"<sup>3</sup> which induces consumers to prefer a comfortable lifestyle, however devoid of meaning. A mass-production economic system offers too many

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<sup>1</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

comfort goods and few moments of creativity, while a Puritan-type culture centers on production and rejects recreational and cultural activities as a waste of time and money. And, finally, an educational system feeds these forces and favors the spread of technical knowledge over a liberal art education. As for Fromm, he was moving away from a criticism of sociological relativism<sup>4</sup> in order to argue that the American lifestyle is the result of a process of adaptation set off by the culture of a society that induces individuals to desire what in reality they are forced to consume in order to satisfy the needs of modern capitalism. “One of the great efforts which every society makes”, Fromm declared, “in its cultural institutions, educational institutions, religious ideas, and so on, is to create a type of personality that wants to do what he or she has to do; which is not only willing but eager to fulfill that role which is required in that society, so that it can function smoothly”.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, Scitovsky identified the main cause of the modern individual’s frustrations in a society that imposes a code of behavior that depresses basic psychological needs. “For the conflict between our predisposition to do one thing and the outside pressures that make us to do the opposite thing may well create a feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction with our own behavior”.<sup>6</sup> Though criticized by the Frankfurt School for distancing himself from Freud,<sup>7</sup> Fromm received general acclaim from the academic world for being one of the first to have applied the psychoanalytical method to the socio-political analysis of society. He also found fame with the general public for having focused on certain pathologies that would be soon recognized as the malaises of modernity. By contrast, Scitovsky was attacked by professional economists whom he had tried to persuade, with a non-technical language, of the advantages of opening up to interdisciplinary studies, just at the moment in which they were working towards separating from social sciences (Backhouse and Fontaine 2010). He was charged with paternalism for expressing doubts hinge the principle of consumer sovereignty, the presumed linchpin of liberalism, and for having questioned the Puritan ethic and American lifestyle.

By showing the interconnections between the two critiques of American society, this paper casts new light on both the genesis of *The Joyless Economy* and the controversy it provoked. Section 1 presents the public and private events and experiences that lay behind the social criticism of both Fromm and Scitovsky. Particular attention is given to the role Fromm attributes to the ethic in the development of the personality traits of Western man today. Section 2 discusses Scitovsky’s

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<sup>4</sup> Sociological relativism promotes an ethic according to which is good everything that serves for the conservation and survival of a society, and it shows show conformism is functional to the purpose.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm (2010), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> See Fromm (1935).

criticism of the American lifestyle in the light of Fromm's theory of social character and puts forward some theories on the reasons for his controversial success. A brief conclusion follows.

### § 1. Two Mitteleuropeans in a Puritan society

Middle-class Fromm and landed *élite* Scitovsky both grew up in the dying days of the European *Belle Époque*, the cataclysm of WWI and the looming dangers of Totalitarian states, where their families had to choose whether to entrench themselves in past privileges or adapt to entrepreneurship and become future-looking high flyers. Fromm was born in an orthodox Jewish family in Protestant Frankfurt with a father, Naphali, the son and grandson of rabbis. A businessman (wine merchant) he valued study above money-making, a trait he passed to his son who admitted that he always felt out of place in a business culture. "I found it as a child very strange that people devote their life to making money and I was very embarrassed when a man had to admit in my presence that he was a businessman; [...] In that sense I was really not born in the modern era, because I just couldn't understand a world in which making money was or should be the main occupation of people".<sup>8</sup> Scitovsky came from a higher social class, as he was born into a rich Hungarian family of aristocratic descent,<sup>9</sup> completely immersed in a pre-capitalist life philosophy where money was there to be spent, not saved. His father, Tibor de Scitovszky, was a member of the Hungarian delegation that signed the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which broke up the country after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was briefly Foreign Minister for the ultra-conservative government of Count István Bethlen (1924-1925), and then became president of Hitelbank, one of the largest in the country. His Mother, Mme Hanna, boasted blood ties with the aristocratic family of La Rochefoucauld<sup>10</sup> and held Thursday afternoon "at homes" for the cream of Budapest society, occasionally attended by prestigious foreign guests, from Paul Valéry to Thomas Mann, Cardinal Pacelli / Pope Pius IX and the provocative Colette.

Fromm and Scitovsky were each an only child with parents seen as anxious and neurotic, who poured their own frustrations into the education of their offspring and heavily influenced their personal development. Fromm records his father as "very neurotic, obsessive, anxious"<sup>11</sup> and describes his mother as depressive, narcissistic and possessive. She was a housewife with no formal education, and focused entirely on her one son, "and for God knows what reason – I think because of Paderewski – I was sentenced to learn piano and so I had a great prejudice against piano".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Funk (2000), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> One of Scitovsky's ancestors, János Scitovsky (1785-1866) acquired a title of nobility and, with it, a piece of land called Nagy-Kér, when the emperor elevated him Archbishop of Esztergom, Prince Primate of Hungary, in 1853.

<sup>10</sup> She was, in truth, the illegitimate daughter of a French officer, a Duc of La Rochefoucauld by a Jewish girl.

<sup>11</sup> Funk (2000), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Funk (2000), p. 23. Ignacy Jan Paderewski was a celebrated pianist who became Prime Minister of Poland in 1919.

However, in an interview given shortly before his death, Fromm was able to view the difficulties of being brought up “by two very neurotic and anxious parents” in a more positive light. The advantage was that “having grown up in a very neurotic family” allowed him to become “more aware of what the irrationalities of human behavior really represent”.<sup>13</sup> Scitovsky, too, was fully aware of the influence of his parents on his development. He describes his father as “conservative, compassionate, honest, fair, invariably polite and kind”,<sup>14</sup> but at the same time unable to express any affection. His mother he described as “a complex person, charming but masterful, generous but demanding, kind and polite but short-tempered, superior and ambitious, secretive and prying, strong willed and not very choosy about the means to get her will”.<sup>15</sup> Her effect was to make Scitovsky particularly sensitive to “the implications of one person’s powers over others in whatever form or context”.<sup>16</sup> With an uncommunicative father and a mother at times so tyrannical as to reduce him to stammering, he was left with a stammer in Magyar all his life, while being fluent in other languages.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, Scitovsky grew up particularly reserved and timid and his only confidant was the family chauffeur, Antal Glitta, who entertained his afternoons with rousing tales of Hungarian socialism: “I owe to him my knowledge of things mechanical, love for exercising my manual dexterity on home repairs and, since he was a socialist, also my acquaintance with socialism and first introduction to economics through reading the first volume of Marx’s *Das Kapital*”.<sup>18</sup> When Lady Hanna De Scitovszky stored in her son’s bedroom all the books whose bindings conflicted with the style and pastel colors of a recently acquired Louis XVI library, the already solitary Scitovsky became a bookworm, passionately fond “of Hungarian novels and literature, translations of world literature, Stefan Zweig’s psychoanalytic biographies, etc.”.<sup>19</sup>

Following the paths chosen by their parents, both Fromm and Scitovsky started university reading law, the former at Frankfurt University (1919), the latter at Budapest (1929). Fromm began his process of emancipation from his suffocating parents by transferring after two terms to the Ruprecht-Karls University in Heidelberg, where he displayed an interest in mainly history and economics.<sup>20</sup> In the winter of 1920-21, he finally switched to the Faculty of Sociology and settled into his studies. As for Scitovsky, perhaps through boredom with his Hungarian professors, he quickly transferred to Cambridge where he soon became interested in economics and would spend

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs* (undated typescript, 1995 circa), p. 14. In Tibor Scitovsky Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, box 2 (henceforth, *Memoirs*).

<sup>15</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> See Di Giovinazzo (2012).

<sup>18</sup> Scitovsky (1995), p. 223.

<sup>19</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Fromm enrolled for the lectures held by Hermann Oncken on “The Economic and Cultural History of the Middle Ages”, Alfred Weber on “Political Economy” and Karl Jaspers on “A History of Psychology”.

five terms (1929-1931). There he met Maurice Dobb, who he admired so much as a lecturer, as well Joan Robinson, whom he would thank for having taught him to think in a critical way: “I had just started on economics a month earlier and did not even know there was a theory about money. [...] Joan read it [Scitovsky’s paper] while I watched her and waited with bated breath for her to deliver the verdict. There was no harm, she said, in listing what other people had to say about money but she looked in vain for my theory about it. So she suggested that I write the paper again, this time presenting my own ideas on the subject”.<sup>21</sup>

Fromm was twenty-two when he received his Ph.D in sociology. His dissertation, supervised by Alfred Weber, the brother of Max Weber<sup>22</sup> was an examination of the function of Jewish law in maintaining social cohesion in the three Diaspora communities, holding that Jewish social cohesion is made possible by that law-abiding ethos that unconsciously binds together Jewish communities world-wide. However, he needed to draw from Freudian psychoanalysis in order to realize that these manifestations of morality should be understood as psychological structures. It was only then that Fromm abandoned Orthodox Judaism for psychoanalysis. Instrumental in this move was Frieda Reichmann, twelve years older than Fromm, who was later to become his wife. She was a psychiatrist and introduced him to Freud, who fascinated him so much they decided to open a “therapeuticum” for Jewish patients. Yet even more important to Fromm was his acquaintance with Georg Groddeck, a friend of Frieda’s who was the director of the Marienhöhe Sanatorium in Baden Baden. Fromm was captivated by the way Groddeck understood illness, seeing it as the result of a lifestyle. However, Fromm arrived at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research through an old contact, Leo Löwenthal. He was then introduced to Horkheimer, who became interested in his attempts to combine psychoanalysis and historical materialism in a personal psycho-sociological theory. Fromm also developed an interest in Jakob Bachofen’s theory of two structural principles dividing societies. One he saw as matriarchal, with natural bonds as the ruling principles, the other as patriarchal, with the state, law and abstract concepts as its ruling principles. Fromm also followed Bachofen’s concept of parental love, distinguishing between a mother’s unconditional love for her children and a father’s conditioned love, exacting and needing to be earned. Such observations would be at the basis of Fromm’s critique of the Protestant ethic. In 1933, Fromm emigrated to the US after separating from his wife and spending a year in the mountain resort of Davos recovering from tuberculosis. The next year the Research Institute followed, together with Horkheimer. Before long, however, Fromm’s relations with the members of the Institute worsened

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<sup>21</sup> Scitovsky *Memoirs*, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Fromm was awarded the title of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg on September 1922 with a thesis titled ‘Jewish Law, A Contribution to the Sociology of Diaspora-Judaism’.

for various reasons, including Fromm's being one of the main critics of the patriarchal underpinnings of Freudian theory.<sup>23</sup> From this point, Fromm went on with his research alone.

After graduation from Budapest, in 1933, Scitovsky followed his father's will and spent a year in Paris to improve his French. Determined to carry on with his studies in economics, he began to attend lectures at *Sciences Po (École libre des sciences politiques)*. It did not take him long to discover what he called a "tremendous difference between theoretical Anglo-Saxon and institutional Gallic economics",<sup>24</sup> and therefore opted to simply spend the year perfecting his French. He enrolled at the Alliance Française and attended courses ranging from French grammar to composition, history and literature. The popular uprisings following the Stavisky *affaire* – the political/financial scandal that shook France in 1934 – awakened in Scitovsky a particular interest in mass psychology. He read Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* (1895), the famous analysis of crowd dynamics. In the following years, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, accounts of the Moscow trials and, above all, André Gide's (1936) desolate portrait of Stalin's Russia would contribute to drawing Scitovsky further away from communism. Observing social conformity on his visit to some *kolkhozes* Gide wrote ironically: "Le bonheur de tous ne s'obtient qu'aux dépens de chacun. Pour être heureux, soyez conformes".<sup>25</sup> It was always thanks to Gide that Scitovsky sensed what only much later motivational psychologists would seek to prove scientifically, i.e. how far variety and creativity are in reality essential for the satisfaction of the individual and for the enhancement of the quality of life. Remembering his reading of Gide, Scitovsky would later write: "he was repelled by the extreme ugliness and shabbiness of all products, by people's complete lack of taste, the impersonality of their homes, by an exhibition of modern painting on which he would 'not comment for charity's sake' and, above all by the frightening conformism of everybody he encountered, which he believed to be at the base of the cultural wilderness".<sup>26</sup>

Once back in Budapest, Scitovsky performed the military service in the Hungarian armed forces and, after completing it, he spent a period as a teller in the bank of the father. Thus, while Fromm was becoming famous as one of the most sought-after psychologist of the upper-class New York Jewish community, Scitovsky was emerging from a delayed adolescent crisis. Resenting his suffocating mother and apprehensive father, he became aware of the gulf between his privileged life in his "luxurious house" in the Castle district "with its platoon of servants" and "the miserable slums" of downtown Pest, "but even more the rigid social system that locked people into their places by making every job, every advance, almost every achievement depend on connections and

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<sup>23</sup> See Fromm (1935).

<sup>24</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoris*, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Gide (1936), p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 57a.

pull”.<sup>27</sup> Eventually he rebelled. “When in revolt, one fights one’s environment or flees from it. I fled, lacking the aggressiveness and ruthlessness of the revolutionary, foreseeing far worse to come in the shape of fascism, and also hoping to minimize the shock to my parents, for whom I retained great respect and affection”.<sup>28</sup> With his growing interest in economics, Scitovsky went for a specialization at the London School of Economics, under the direction of Lionel Robbins and Friedrich von Hayek. There, he was very much impressed by the “the elegant logic of the perfectly competitive model’s self-equilibrating mechanism, but equally disturbed by its unreality and apparent uselessness”.<sup>29</sup> He took an active part in Robbins’s seminars, asking loudly for a model that, instead of predicting perfect economic stability, could explain economic crises and the unemployment that was spreading through the streets of London.

When war broke out Scitovsky preferred to tempt fortune and emigrate to the States rather than go back to Hungary and fight on the side of the Germans. “One of the best decisions I have ever made”,<sup>30</sup> he would say on looking back. He had neither a visa nor the formal qualifications for being taken on in any American university and also felt very nostalgic for the intellectual atmosphere of Cambridge, London and Paris. “I feel very homesick for England”,<sup>31</sup> he confessed to his friend Káldor. Realizing he needed to publish quickly he set to and wrote papers on economic arguments for the press. “The first paper I wrote I still consider one of my most important, because it put into simpler and clearer language Keynes’s very hard-to-understand proof that the capitalist market economy is not always self-equilibrating and sometimes in need of monetary or fiscal policy to bring about equilibrium”.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately for him, the article was published in August 1940, shortly after the German invasion of France, and Scitovsky certainly could not blame his colleagues if they ignored his “esoteric paper on economic theory”<sup>33</sup> in such a moment of high international tension. He then decided to change strategy and composed a few simple, short but publishable papers. Within a very short time, he brought out the three that later opened up for him an academic

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<sup>27</sup> Scitovsky (1992b), p. 249.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 54. Scitovsky received his MS in Economics May 1938 with a thesis on ‘International aspects of the trade cycle’. Hayek, his supervisor, did not like the argumentation at all. To illustrate the difficulties in applying the theory of the trade cycle to the international market, Scitovsky had employed the Keynesian theory of the marginal investment. As Scitovsky recalls it, he was expecting a hard time in defending his thesis. But it did not come to that because the external examiner, Phelps Brown, opposed Hayek so that, with the one attacking and the other defending, Scitovsky had hardly a chance to say anything at his own examination (T. Scitovsky, interview with N. Shehadi, 1983, p. 11-12. LSE Library’s archives; ref. LSE/LSE History Project Box12).

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 67

<sup>31</sup> Scitovsky to Nicholas Káldor, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1939. In ‘The papers of Nicholas Kaldor’, King’s College Archives, ref. NK/3/30/197.

<sup>32</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 67. The article is “A Study of Interest and Capital” (1940), which he published in *Economica*. No doubt the paper was considered “esoteric” because it was concerned with “high theory” at a time when many were concerned with the war.

<sup>33</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 67.



career. One of them, “A Note on Welfare Propositions in Economics” (1941a), which is a critique of the Weak Káldor Compensation Criterion, would become Scitovsky’s most famous contribution.<sup>34</sup> In spite of these initial professional successes, Scitovsky was deeply depressed about the future of economics, which he felt was distancing him from his real interests, i.e. human behavior. As he said to Káldor: “Now that I am getting slightly better at economics I am having more and more doubts as to its future usefulness. I was shocked the other day to hear of a young and very talented Polish economist (Lange’s protégé) that he contemplated switching over to physics. Yet, if his pessimistic appraisal of the future turned out to be correct, that would be the only course left open for us – if it were left open. And to think that I used to grumble that economics is not enough of a social science and too much a branch of mathematics. It is still enough of a social science to be erased from a Hitler-ridden world”.<sup>35</sup>

### § 1.1 Existential needs and Protestant precepts

While Scitovsky was showing his frustration both with the US and economics, neither of which reflected his system of values, and trying to conform in order to be accepted, Fromm was acquiring international fame with *Escape From Freedom* (1941). Fromm here anticipated a theory of essential needs close to Scitovsky’s concept of comfort/pleasure in *The Joyless Economy*, i.e. that humans have some existential needs, i.e. the need of identity and the need of certainty, the need of rootedness and relatedness, the need to have a point of reference and an object of devotion, that have the same urgent call for satisfaction as physiological ones. In this same context, Fromm introduced the concept of the “social character”, to represent the character traits that individuals must possess in order to meet the requirements of the society they live in. “Automaton conformity” was the term he gave to the process of changing one’s potential self in order to conform to the demands of society. Like Marx (1843), he held that the different religions are man-made inventions for reconciling existential needs with the socio-economic ones of a society. He also held that during the passage from the ancient world to feudalism, Catholicism offered the value system that most contributed to maintaining an order of purpose. By assuming the role of the consoling mother before a severe father who willed humans to submit unconditionally, the Church acted as a comfort for those born in less fortunate social conditions and induced them to welcome with resignation the identity allotted them by the rigid rules of the feudal hierarchy. Fromm went on, arguing that the

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<sup>34</sup> Scitovsky (1941b; 1941c). But see also Scitovsky (1942).

<sup>35</sup> Scitovsky to Káldor, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1941. In ‘The papers of Nicholas Kaldor’, King’s College Archives, ref. NK/3/30/197. Most probably, the protégé was Leonid Hurwicz. Years later Samuelson is said to have confessed to Scitovsky that in the end he chose Hurwicz for the post (i.e. studying spectral analysis of business cycles) because according to Lange: “Leo needs the money more”. Samuelson to Scitovsky, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2000. In Tibor Scitovsky Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, box 1.

Catholic doctrine also had an equally important role in transmitting and spreading elements of the classical tradition of Greek/Aristotelian and Hebrew philosophies in that virtuosity meant excelling on earth by operating so as to give full expression to a God-given potentiality.

However, from the 12th Century onwards, Fromm wrote, as capitalism started to take over, society acquired an unprecedented dynamism. With the process of emancipation from feudal authority, individuals went for personal freedom where possible and lost that sense of certainty in identity guaranteed by the feudal system. Furthermore, given that in the new organization of power, the Catholic Church decided to back the well-off classes who could exploit the new opportunities offered by capitalism,<sup>36</sup> most people found themselves shorn of its protection. In this transit from feudalism to capitalism, it was the system of values represented by the Protestant ethic that allowed people to adapt successfully to the new socio-economic needs. Luther's Reform took on the protests of the poorer people who, fighting against the authority of the Church and resenting the new monied classes, were overcome by a feeling of powerlessness and individual insignificance.<sup>37</sup> In professing a return to the Old Testament, the reform also eliminated the maternal element from religion. Deprived of the unconditional protection of Mother Church, wrote Fromm, people found themselves up against a rigid, severe father's will, and could only hope in his mercy via a complete and utter surrender. For Luther the virtuous were not those who enjoy the fruits of creation by using them to develop their own qualities, but those who despised themselves and earthly things and concentrated all their energy on preparing themselves for the world to come. Complete submission to a God who has decided on the lot of everyone before they are born, and self-humiliation, were the price to pay for this new security.

Calvin's theology, Fromm continued, had the same characteristics as that of Luther both theologically and psychologically. Earthly mortification was preached in virtue of an afterlife of blessedness and the search for virtue for itself continues to be a sign of vanity. For both Calvin and Luther good works do not guarantee salvation, if not for the inscrutable judgment of God and only via unconditional submission can man still find a sense of security in capitalist society. The principle of predestination which Calvin integrated in the Protestant doctrine, would continue to furnish a sense of certainty in the social role that the individual lost with the break-up of the feudal system. A feature already present in Luther which became prominent in Calvinism was the

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<sup>36</sup> Fromm mentions the culture of Italy's Renaissance and the patronage of its courts as the most genuine expression of this new spirit of human dignity, will and mastery.

<sup>37</sup> Luther gave expression to the rage of small merchants against the monopolies in his pamphlet "On Trading and Usury" (1524): "They have all commodities under their control and practise without concealment all the trick that have been mentioned; they rise and lower the prices as they please and oppress and ruin all the small merchants, as the pike little fish in the water, just as though they were lords over God's creatures and free from all the laws of faith and love". *Works of Martin Luther*, A.J. Holman Company, Philadelphia, Vol. IV, p. 34.

development of frantic activity and a striving to do something: “the individual has to be active in order to overcome his feeling of doubt and powerlessness”.<sup>38</sup> The apparent contradiction between the precept of predestination and the madding crowd caught up in the ordinary business of life, in Fromm’s terms, is to be seen in the compulsive quest for certainty determined by the irrational doubt which springs from a feeling of isolation and powerlessness.<sup>39</sup> From an activity enjoyed as a realization of one’s own productive ability, work became alienated in the worship of God and an expression of the internal compulsion to look for signs of salvation. Success in business becomes a sign of salvation, failure the sign of damnation. The market became the Day of Judgment for the products of human effort and the fact that capital assumed a decisive importance means that a supra-personal force was determining the individual’s economic activity and thereby his fate. Fromm’s attack on the Protestant ethic in *Escape From Freedom* is therefore direct but thanks to his English, as simple and elegant as his German and thanks to his sagacity in quoting as far as possible American thinkers like Emerson, Thoreau and Dewey, he managed to win over the American public.

In *The Joyless Economy*, Scitovsky traced back the origin of the modern consumer’s frustrations to the Puritan behavior for having developed a preference toward comfort and against culture.<sup>40</sup> But beforehand he did not seem to have much time to dedicate himself to any readings outside the limited field of economics. In the U.S., he was in fact still in a precarious financial position, unemployed and maintained by his wife, a fellow student of the LSE days who, like Scitovsky showed sympathies for socialism. As she was the daughter of I.G. Farben,<sup>41</sup> head of the German chemical industry conglomerate, she was suspected of “Nazi communism”.<sup>42</sup> Scitovsky was himself classed as an enemy alien, and feared being sent back to Europe with the label of “premature anti-fascist”, i.e. a communist.<sup>43</sup> Three days before appearing in court, he was however called up in the American Army (1943). Thanks to his good knowledge of German and French, he was sent to

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<sup>38</sup> When writing of the differences between Lutheranism and Calvinism, Fromm points out that while Germany in Luther’s time was in a general state of upheaval, Geneva was a relatively calm and prosperous community. Calvin’s adherents were recruited mainly from the conservative middle class who, as a group, were threatened by the rise of capitalism.

<sup>39</sup> Fromm (1941), p. 111.

<sup>40</sup> See Scitovsky (1992), Ch. 8: ‘Our Disdain for Culture’, p. 224ff.

<sup>41</sup> Baptista and Travis (2006), p. 202, footnote 64. The I.G. Farben director was Hans Aickelin, whose daughter, Anne Aickelin, was Scitovsky’s first wife, whom married in 1942.

<sup>42</sup> The accusation originated because of Scitovsky and his wife’s socialist sympathies. “But how can a person be both a Nazi and a communist?”, Samuelson asked himself in retrospect. Paul Samuelson to Scitovsky, letter December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2000. In Tibor Scitovsky Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, box 1.

<sup>43</sup> Samuelson is informing Scitovsky that when he was organizing a unit on post-war planning for the National Resources Planning Board, he read by chance the referee statement on Scitovsky where it was written: “I believe this man is a Nazi and should not be hired by the U.S. government”. Paul Samuelson to Scitovsky, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2000. In Tibor Scitovsky Papers.

Europe as a truck driver and then seconded to the U.S.S.B.S. (United States Strategic Bombing Survey) together with Nicholas Káldor, Kenneth Galbraith, and Ernst F. Schumacher.

Once the war was over, Scitovsky was finally called to Stanford University (1946). Becoming professor in a foreign country helped boost his self-esteem. He enjoyed the academic routine, the constant mental stimulus in “having to lecture, participate in conferences, answer students’ occasionally very penetrating questions”.<sup>44</sup> He was relatively unproductive: “I had no intention to sacrifice any part of my interesting and varied life for the sake of rising higher on the professional or economic scale”.<sup>45</sup> Having gone through Budapest’s resuscitation of the *Belle Époque* in the twenties, the intellectual atmosphere of Cambridge, Paris and London in the thirties and then the experience of a war-torn Europe, Scitovsky now found himself catapulted into postwar California. There, the economic boom was seen to be reducing man to the single dimension of a consumer; one whose liberty, as Marcuse would later observe (1964), would soon be at the level of merely opting for one product or another.

Fromm, on the contrary, was in this period particularly productive. In 1947 *A Man for Himself* was published, representing a continuation and enrichment of the ideas in *Escape from Freedom*. He felt that if, in order to secure the satisfaction of their psycho-physiological needs, individuals decide to submit and conform not so much to a religion as to any ideology, they can never be master of their own lives, can never be themselves. In this work, in fact, Fromm clarified the psychological difference between satisfaction and pleasure. *Contra* Freud, but unwittingly in line with Scitovsky’s theory of comfort/pleasure,<sup>46</sup> he claimed that pleasure can not consist of merely a relief from painful tension: “this term, from *satis-facere* = to make sufficient, seems to be most appropriate for this kind of pleasure”.<sup>47</sup> Thus, he explained his idea of “true pleasure”<sup>48</sup> or happiness as the full realization of personal potentiality. Like Aristotle and Spinoza, he conceived of happiness as the experience of productive living, directed towards the discovery of the self. In open criticism of ethical hedonism, pleasure v. pain, he replaced pain with boredom, which leads to alienation, understood as the “paralysis of the individual’s productive powers”.<sup>49</sup> Since “happiness and joy”, Fromm claimed, “are not the satisfaction of a need springing from a physiological or psychological lack; they are not the relief from tension but the accompaniment of all productive activity, in thought, feeling and action”.<sup>50</sup> Though more succinctly and less introspectively, years

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<sup>44</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 90.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> See Di Giovinazzo (2013).

<sup>47</sup> Fromm (1947), p. 186.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 186ff.

<sup>50</sup> Fromm (1947), p. 192.

later Scitovsky too, in *The Joyless Economy*, would link happiness to action and not result: “in man’s striving for his various goals in life, being on the way to those goals and struggling to achieve them are more satisfying than is the actual attainment of the goals”.<sup>51</sup> Against utilitarianism Fromm linked pleasure not with the result of an action but the process, and identified in artistic expression and work as an act of creation, the main sources of human satisfaction.<sup>52</sup> Again, in a very similar way, Scitovsky too would emphasize work and artworks as a major source of human satisfaction, pointing at utilitarianism as the main fault of a puritan ethic, for its “disapproval and distrust of pleasure is not against all enjoyment, but only against activity and expenditure specifically and exclusively aimed at providing or enhancing enjoyment”.<sup>53</sup>

While obtaining great success with the general public, colleagues summed up Fromm’s theory on essential needs as speculative and impressionistic, not based on hard data (Burston 1991). Fromm himself was criticized by Marcuse (1955) and Birnback (1961) for the dogmatism and naive method of enquiry of his social criticism. In 1949 Fromm moved to Mexico, partly because of his wife’s precarious state of health.<sup>54</sup> Here he found the cultural distance needed in order to be able to consider critically the industrial society of America. Six years later, he published *The Sane Society*, in which he outlines the features of “marketing character”. The cause of boredom and alienation and the origin of frustration in modern society were again the center of his attention in *Marx’s Concept Of Man*. Here he openly defended Marx’s criticism of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, which by suggesting as the only motivation of human action the wish for greater material gain and comfort, deprived the human being of his principal source of personal gratification, i.e. work. Karl Polanyi wrote and congratulated him from Canada: “your Manifesto is the first coherent sustained voicing of this universal complaint underlying our present condition”.<sup>55</sup>

### § 1.2 *The pathology of normalcy in Western society*

Fromm’s claim in *The Sane Society* is that 20<sup>th</sup> century Man has adapted himself to the needs of a capitalism that needed, no longer an ascetic spirit to accumulate capital, but a consumerist

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<sup>51</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 62.

<sup>52</sup> Fromm holds that pleasure cannot by itself be a criterion for the formation of value judgements and is equally skeptical about linking happiness even to a conscious state of mind. In contrast to Spencer’s means-ends relationship, (1902), according to Fromm, psychoanalysis had shown that the subjective feeling of satisfaction can be in itself deceptive. The masochistic perversion is an example of conscious pleasure from a neurotic craving. Fromm (1941), p. 288ff.

<sup>53</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 206.

<sup>54</sup> Fromm’s second wife, Henny Gurland, committed suicide in 1952. The next year Fromm married Annis Freeman, and they lived in Mexico until 1976. There Fromm established the psychoanalytic section at the medical school of the National Autonomous University in Mexico City. There is no evidence that Fromm was affected by McCarthyism – on the contrary – Fromm took part in his electoral campaign. See ‘Why I am for McCarthy’, in *St. Petersburg Independent*, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1968, p. 9-A.

<sup>55</sup> Polanyi to Fromm, April, 23<sup>rd</sup> 1960. In Polanyi archives, Concordia Univ., Container 55.

approach to renew its stockpile. Science has replaced religion in guaranteeing complete certainty about a destiny that economic freedom has already made less secure. Individuals looking for a new identity find it by submitting to new authorities such as Fascism and Stalinism, or more simply by merging into the masses and adopting entirely the kind of personality offered by the cultural patterns. To explain this masochistic surrender desire Fromm chose a passage from *The Brothers Karamazov*: “no more pressing need than the one to find somebody to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, that gift of freedom which he, the unfortunate creature, was born with”.<sup>56</sup> Work, no longer in veneration of a God but money, has become itself alienating. “Boredom” Fromm repeats, “is nothing but the experience of a paralysis of our productive powers and the sense of un-aliveness”.<sup>57</sup> In this new democratic order however, for Fromm, managers are just as alienated and anguished as the workers on the factory floor. With the disappearance of the culture-creating *élite* the managerial class uses the same antidotes against boredom in the consumption of fun “to repress any awareness of unhappiness”.<sup>58</sup> “Dissatisfaction, apathy, boredom, lack of joy and happiness, a sense of futility and a vague feeling that life is meaningless, are the unavoidable results of this situation”.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the individual is no longer free to enjoy his leisure in that “his leisure-time consumption is determined by industry, as are the commodities he buys; his taste is manipulated, he wants to see and to hear what he is conditioned to want to see and to hear; entertainment is an industry like any other; the consumer is made to buy fun as he is made to buy dresses and shoes”.<sup>60</sup> The process of consumption becomes therefore as alienating as the process of production, in that it is dedicated to the consumption of goods imposed by mass tastes, and consumers express their “uneasiness” for having lost or given up their identities in trying to look good according to the dictates of fashion.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Fromm recognizes that all societies can nourish a particular legitimate interest in conformity in the interest of survival. The good functioning of a warrior society, for example, requires all its members to be warlike and aggressive, while an agricultural society calls for its members to be pacific and cooperative. If a warrior ended up in a society of farmers, not only would he feel out of place, but he would also be treated by the group as an outcast, for his behavior would be

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<sup>56</sup> Fromm (1941), p. 173.

<sup>57</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 179. Unlike Marx, Fromm does not conceive of alienation as being solely a product of the modern era, but identifies it whenever Man is estranged from himself, through either idolatry or ideology.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 258.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

<sup>61</sup> Fromm finds an immediate example of the need for distinction between individuals in their desire to have personalized products, like initials on shirts, handbags or portable radios. Fromm (1941), p. 281. Already in 1905, Simmel had noted how dependence on fashion indicated poverty of personality. For a modelization of how desire to stand out can generate conformist behavior, see Di Giovinazzo and Naimzada (2012).

a serious threat to the good functioning of an agricultural society. It is therefore legitimate to think that all societies promote certain characteristics which act on individuals and make them fall in with social requirements. It is also true that the development of humanity also depends on the will and determination not to fall into line – otherwise we would still be living in caves and practicing cannibalism.<sup>62</sup> Indeed Fromm identifies in conformity a very dangerous element for society in that it does not only favor the development of totalitarianisms but also the emergence of tyrannical majorities in democracies, in the moment in which the individual feels he has to vote according to public opinion rather than form a personal opinion. From here the insidious doubt: “The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane”.<sup>63</sup> In his *Memoirs*, collected when he was in his mid-eighties, Scitovsky too was very aware of the possibility of a democracy to degenerate into an ochlocracy because of people’s too-easy inclination to conform. “Since I am old enough to remember Hitler’s acting on the theory that a lie unsparingly repeated gets accepted as truth, I get especially disturbed when people repeat a rigid position parrot-like in lieu of reasoned discussion, because I never quite know whether they deliberately refuse to enter into a reasoned discussion or just lack the necessary information or mental agility”.<sup>64</sup> Despite being biologically alive, and even hyper-active, Fromm concludes, the modern individual is mentally dead. In choosing to conform with a lifestyle imposed by modern capitalism, individuals may well adapt to the new socio-economic needs, but at the same time they contribute to consolidating the code of behavior that transforms them into automata, producing and consuming in the illusion they are self-willing individuals. When individual neuroses reach the point of being shared by an entire community, they turn into the pathology of normalcy of a society which can reasonably call itself sane, to such a point that it recalls Huxley’s *Brave New World*: “in the modern society everybody might consider himself happy nowadays”.<sup>65</sup> So individual happiness in the economy of abundance is really nothing but an illusion created by “social character” to face up to the needs of consumer societies.

Notwithstanding the continued success of *The Sane Society*, the critics were still hostile to Fromm for his lack of a scientific basis for his theories. Thus, he went on to find scientific

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<sup>62</sup> See ‘Mental Health in the Modern World’, a lecture delivered at the New School for Social Research, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1953, published in Fromm (2010), p. 16ff.

<sup>63</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> Scitovsky, *Memoirs*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>65</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 177.

evidence to support his intuitions in the experiments of the neuropsychologists and motivational psychologists working on the cause of boredom and motivation behind acting. In the essay with its interrogative title: 'Is Man Lazy By Nature?' (2010),<sup>66</sup> Fromm gathered the results of experiments carried out in neurosciences (Lindsley 1964; Heath 1964; Livingston 1967), animal psychology (Hebb and Thompson 1954; A1963; Berlyne 1960) and social psychology (Mayo 1933; Bexton et al. 1954) in order to contest the claim that humans are lazy: "Does not man in all ages and cultures show a need for excitation and stimulation? Does he not seek it in art, drama, literature, ritual dance, and in our culture by "the man on the flying trapeze", automobile accidents, reading about crime, illness? Does he not do everything he can to avoid boredom?"<sup>67</sup> To contest the common assumption that people are lazy and apathetic by nature Scitovsky will also observe in *The Joyless Economy*: "People get a lot of satisfaction from participating in dangerous sports, watching horror movies, and reading crime stories. They also enjoy watching and find beautiful a thunderstorm from under a shelter, the waves of the sea from the shore or from on board of a good ship, and a fire in the fireplace or at a safe distance".<sup>68</sup> Psychologists had in fact proved that pleasure has its own neurophysiologic basis; that the brain is built to be active and all it needs is adequate nutrition; and that if it is not kept busy in some activity, the individual irremediably gets bored. Equally Fromm contested the claim that man is greedy and destructive by nature and repeated his theory that such accusations were really expedients invented by religions and institutions to instill in the population an atavistic sense of guilt and make it more easily governable. While, for Scitovsky, institutions may well be the cause of some neurosis, since "man's desire for stimulation and excitement he can get from limited danger are blocked in too many directions by regulations and safeguards imposed by an excessively protective society, he will seek its satisfaction in areas where it is less blocked, or less effectively so, and that may well mean seeking an outlet in violence".<sup>69</sup> Fromm held these experiments to be of fundamental importance, in that they removed any further doubts about the inconsistency of the whole Freudian scaffolding linking the complexity of human desires to the satisfaction of physiological needs and conceiving of pleasure as the absence of excitation. By proving the falsity of the neo-behaviorist psychological theory, which reduced human action to the automatism of the stimulus/response principle, the above experiments, for Fromm, also proved the inconsistency of the psychological presupposition that only for wages or some

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<sup>66</sup> Written by Fromm in 1973 with the idea of using it for *To Have or To Be* (1976), the essay was published posthumously only in 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Fromm (2010), p. 113.

<sup>68</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 40.

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, p. 220.



other extrinsic reward was the individual prepared to undertake work or perform an action. By opposing a society-oriented concept of mental health, which considers sane an individual who adjusts to an insane society, a man-oriented/humanistic concept of mental health, which is determined by criteria inherent to humankind – the pleasure of joy, aliveness, interesting things, attractive works – Fromm did not simply open up a criticism of a value system he considers the cause of the malaises of modernity,<sup>70</sup> but casted doubts on the soundness of a scientific approach he felt in service to the reasoning of a production system.

## § 2. *Rerum causas cognoscere*

Scitovsky began to publish again with a certain regularity in the fifties, but no longer on the standard subjects of welfare economics. His correspondence with Káldor, which had been fairly regular until his arrival at Stanford suddenly came to a stop. As a Central European, living in the California of the forties made him sensitive to the socio-cultural implications of an economy dedicated only to the growth of GDP. In “Ignorance As a Source of Oligopoly Power” (1950), Scitovsky claimed that, in the face of ever-increasing advertising for goods that technological progress has made all the more complex, increasing consumer ignorance has increased producer collusion in offering products of a quality consumers are unable to recognize. The influence of Fromm appeared especially in ‘What Price Economic Progress?’ (1959), where Scitovsky quoted the former’s works and the way the neo-Freudian school of psychologists link the present state of society to Protestantism, “America [...] means not only a high standard of living but also excessive conformity, a hectic life, an atmosphere unfavorable to intellectual and cultural pursuits”.<sup>71</sup> The issue of Protestantism is always there, and Scitovsky underlined the unfavourable impact of the latter’s hierarchy of values on the American way of life. And again, in “A Critique Of the Present and Proposed Standards” (1960), he built this time on Galbraith’s mistrust of the consumer’s judgment as a guide and arbiter of resource allocation in order to develop a critique of the principle of consumer rationality. In “On the Principle Of Consumer Sovereignty”(1962), Scitovsky claimed that the increasing neglect of an informed minority’s preferences by the mass production system may have undesirable effects upon the development of majority preferences as well.

Following the 1966 divorce from his first wife and his marriage to Erzsébet Vida, also of Hungarian origin, Scitovsky entered a period of personal reflection which led him to meditate on the real components of the quality of life and personal wellbeing. After twenty years of an almost uninterrupted stay in California, he left the States and gave up the high salary of Head of

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<sup>70</sup> Fromm (2010), p. 81ff.

<sup>71</sup> Scitovsky T. and Scitovsky, A. (1959), p. 210.

Department at Berkeley in order to go back and live in Europe for some time. He accepted a lower temporary research position at the O.E.C.D. (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) in Paris, where he later reported he was happy in spite of his lower income. As Mexico had stimulated Fromm, so Scitovsky's period in Paris provided him with some distance from North America and allowed him to better apprehend the cultural divide between the Europe in which he had been raised and the America that had adopted him. From a professional point of view, it was a very critical moment. Showing that money does not make for happiness, Scitovsky proved personally the contrary of what was traditionally held by the economics of wellbeing, i.e. that private incomes and national inflows are the only benchmarks to denote the state of wellbeing in a country. Thus, after his time out, Scitovsky decided to dedicate his activity as an economist to a search for the solutions to his personal paradox. "That made me turn from the technically oriented writings of my colleagues to the broader and more philosophical perspective of previous generations of economists brought up on the classics and to the extensive, experimentally based scientific work on motivation of physiological psychologists".<sup>72</sup> His attention was then attracted by discoveries made by (Hebb 1955; Berlyne 1960; Hunt 1963) about boredom and motivation to act. They were the same experiments that Fromm had used to demonstrate that humans are neither lazy or violent by nature.

In the same year in which Fromm wrote "Is Man Lazy by Nature?" Scitovsky published an article on 'The Place of Economic Welfare in Human Welfare' (1973) in which he rejects two psychological ideas, though deeming them to fit in well with the utility function in economics (stimulus reduction being achieved through utility-maximizing, or "optimizing", behavior). The first is that the organism is inert unless some disturbance or deprivation generates a drive leading to activity in order to eliminate the disturbance (i.e. the drive theory in psychology). The second is that pain is related to an increase of tension and pleasure to the easing of it (i.e. the Freudian "pleasure principle"). There was little left by then of the standard welfare economist who never published without asking Káldor for advice. With *The Joyless Economy* Scitovsky found his place in his profession.

### § 2.1 Conformity, comfort and the Puritan attitude toward culture

Using the same psychological insights which led Le Bon, Gide and Fromm to conclude that the masses are too easy prey to charismatic dictators, *The Joyless Economy* opens with a radical criticism of economists who assume that the consumer is sovereign. Such an assumption – Scitovsky held – presupposes that the consumer is a simple rational subject, not open to influences

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<sup>72</sup> Scitovsky (1992b), p. 253.

from external variables and guided by the search for the maximum grade of utility with the minimum effort”.<sup>73</sup> He feels the mainstream’s spreading of this tenet ends by convincing all economists that the simple observation of consumer preferences is enough by itself to reveal what consumers find most satisfying. According to Scitovsky, instead, in a mass consumption society consumers are neither sovereign nor perfectly rational. Indeed, they are easily influenced by choices imposed either by producers or the masses, so that a conflict may arise between what consumers choose and what best satisfies them, so that the principle of revealed preferences – and consequently the whole neoclassical set up – ends by being totally unrealistic. While Fromm observed that the American is “the slave of an economical and moral tyrant”,<sup>74</sup> in a free market economy, Scitovsky claimed that consumer sovereignty is a plutocracy, the rule of the rich, where consumer influence on what is produced depends on how much is spent. Thanks to the technology of mass production, the things most sold are produced more cheaply than those bought only by a few. Therefore, in the mass production system individuals find their tastes well catered for if they are conformist enough to share their tastes with millions of others, because the things they then want are profitable in mass productions terms and in the same terms are offered at lower prices. One of the main goals of advertising, Scitovsky observed, is to promote consumer consensus so that it is far from being an expression of their sovereignty. Harmony between consumer preferences and production patterns may simply indicate the adaptation of tastes to the rigid requirements of the productive system. And that may well sacrifice consumer tastes for the sake of lowering costs and exploiting the advantages of mass production.<sup>75</sup> All this limits the economy’s ability to cater to the variety of consumer tastes and discriminates against minority consumers who find it difficult, costly and occasionally impossible to satisfy their tastes. The loss is not only theirs, claimed Scitovsky, but the whole community’s, because minority consumers are often those who could guide the majority towards something new and better. Like Fromm, Scitovsky felt an anti-conformist impulse was needed to help society evolve: “the yearning of new things and ideas is the source of all progress, all civilization; to ignore it as a source of satisfaction is surely wrong”.<sup>76</sup> However, just like Fromm, Scitovsky recognized that individuals tend to conform out of a spirit of survival: “Status seeking, the wish to belong, the asserting and cementing of one’s membership in the group is a deep-seated and very natural drive whose origin and universality go beyond man and are

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<sup>73</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. *xii*.

<sup>74</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 190.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>76</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 11.

explained by that most basic drive, the desire to survive”.<sup>77</sup> And again like Fromm he recognized that this instinct can also be a source of great anxiety if individual desires enter into conflict with the requisites of a society: “losing status and losing rank can be a source of suffering and the fear of losing them a source of anxiety. Indeed competitive pressures, the tensions of modern society, usually refer to the anxiety due to the ever-present dangers of such loss”.<sup>78</sup> Similarly to the evolution Fromm observed in the social character to fit the requirements of modern capitalism, the Puritan attitude toward culture was mainly responsible for a consumer diet that induces the individual to line up with a life style which aliments consumer phenomena and holds back social development. It comes as no surprise therefore that Scitovsky was harshly attacked by economists (Friedman 1976; Peacock 1976; Aufhauser 1976; Zikmund 1977; Ballard 1978) and accused of early senility by his colleagues.<sup>79</sup> In the introduction to *The Joyless Economy*, he had in fact criticized the standard neoclassical theory for being “unscientific”<sup>80</sup> and declared that psychology was better able to identify the dynamics of consumer behavior. He had criticized the free-market economic system for being illiberal and had indicated the Puritan ethic as responsible for the frustrations of the individual, for having encouraged him to conform to a consumerist life style which alimented economic progress but held back social development. Yet all Scitovsky had done was to take significant elements of the psycho-social critique advanced by Fromm and reframe them in an economic context.

In *The Joyless Economy*, Scitovsky cites the same experiments by Hebb, Hunt and Berlyne mentioned by Fromm – to prove that Man is not lazy by nature – to show that humans have an equal need for comfort and novelty. They like beauty but are also attracted by anything curious, unusual and bizarre.<sup>81</sup> Scitovsky held that thanks to the economy of scale, the modern economy manages to satisfy more completely the need for comfort by supplying at low cost and great number the goods which remove discomfort and at the same save time, like ready-prepared food and household appliances.<sup>82</sup> The need for novelty, however, is neglected in a mass production economy, where work is boring and repetitive to the point of becoming alienating and the innovative contribution of a product finishes in standardization: “mass-produced objects are not inherently inferior to hand-made ones as sources of visual stimulation; they accumulate the inferiority of

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<sup>77</sup> Ibidem, p. 115. The economic opportunity of the Joneses effect was already noted by Vance Packard, in his book *The Status Seekers* (1959) where he argued that the use of consumer goods as status symbols was a deliberate strategy imposed by advertisers, or “merchants of discontent”, who took advantage of the upgrading urge that people felt.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem, p. 132. The theory of the opponent process was developed by the psychologists Richard L. Solomon and John D. Corbit in 1974. Scitovsky was among the first to introduce in economics this psychological law.

<sup>79</sup> Scitovsky (1995), p. 234.

<sup>80</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> For an extensive description of Berlyne’s experiments, see Di Giovinazzo (2013).

<sup>82</sup> Scitovsky takes over Hawtrey’s terminology (1925).

boring sameness only gradually, as more and more people acquire the same similar items and so increase the frequency with which an individual possessor of an item encounters its identical twins”.<sup>83</sup> While Galbraith accuses producers of deception, Scitovsky blamed the average American for ineptitude, for not recognizing that the apparently new car model masks the same old product. Like an inexperienced diner facing a menu in a Chinese restaurant, who – as Scitovsky ironically observes – gazes at the long list of dishes without realizing the same ingredients are turning up under different guises.<sup>84</sup> Though the continuous search for novelty in comfort goods is a consumption practice which nowadays encourages consumerism, – “[A]nother and much costly one [expenditure on consumption] is that quick succession of fashions which compensates for a lack of contemporaneous variety” –<sup>85</sup> quite paradoxically it is a legacy from the Puritan system of values. Stigmatizing consumption as time subtracted from work, the Puritan ethic has induced individuals to save time in buying comfort goods rather than invest in the development of the consumption skills which would allow them to avoid the traps of consumerism: “the frugality and worldly asceticism of Puritanism, its disapproval of spending on superfluities, cultural goods, and just about everything beyond the necessities of a plain and sober life, according to Scitovsky, could not have been better calculated to deprive of prestige task of house-holding, and the spending of money, along with cultural interest, aesthetic values, and all concern with the enjoyment of the good things of life”.<sup>86</sup> For Scitovsky it was such a puritanical reluctance to take pleasure straight, undiluted by practical utility to favor over time the development of an aesthetic preference for simplicity which favored the spread of mass-production standardized objects.<sup>87</sup> For example, when Fromm raised the matter of the advertising rationalization for the alleged laziness of consumers where “a package of breakfast cereal is being advertised as ‘*new—easier to eat.*’”,<sup>88</sup> Scitovsky criticized an addicted American consumer’s “predilection for pre-sliced bread, pre-ground coffee and spices, vanilla extract, garlic salt, dehydrated onions and potatoes, pre-cooked rice, pre-mixed powders for gravies and dressings, and pre-cooked, packaged meals is motivated by a desire to save time and effort”.<sup>89</sup> According to Fromm, fun consists in “going to the movies, parties, ball games, listening to the radio and watching television, taking a ride in the car on Sundays, making love, sleeping late on Sunday mornings, and travelling, for those who can afford it”.<sup>90</sup> For Scitovsky, “the main sources of stimulation in the United States are watching television, driving for pleasure, and shopping—all of

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<sup>83</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 252.

<sup>84</sup> Ibidem, p. 149.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem, p. 255.

<sup>86</sup> Ibidem, p. 206.

<sup>87</sup> Ibidem, p. 257.

<sup>88</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 163.

<sup>89</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 189.

<sup>90</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 178.

which are sources of stimulation requiring no skill [...] going to a colorful market or shopping center, browsing in a good bookshop, reading a Sears catalog, looking at the latest fashions in elegant department stores or inspecting next year's models of automobiles can all be fun".<sup>91</sup> Since their flow of novelty is limited they soon bore consumers, and push them to seek novelty in more stimulating activities, to the point of giving way to violence, in the attempt to keep themselves busy and amused in an environment which large-scale consumption makes less and less stimulating.<sup>92</sup> By moving the attention from work as an activity directed at the meaningful expression of energy to its result, Scitovsky claimed that the puritan ethic also alienated individuals from their products and consequently deprived them of their most important source of satisfaction. Quoting Marx but at the same time interpreting him in Fromm's terms,<sup>93</sup> Scitovsky held that "only in being productively active can man make sense of his life".<sup>94</sup> So as for Fromm, scientific discovery, artworks and craftsmanship are the main activities that give expression to this existential need. Like Fromm, Scitovsky also recognized that the precepts of puritan ethic in the modern society had lost any contact with a spiritual dimension. However, he held that they remain at the basis of the American lifestyle in that over the course of time they have been laicized in an education system emphasizing science and technology rather than the humanities. "There is plenty of evidence that the profound changes in the curriculum of our schools and colleges in the 1910's and 1920's were greatly influenced by the needs of our industry and business. Ever since then, economic forces have continued to press for the progressive crowding out of a liberal, humanistic education by the requirements of science and technology".<sup>95</sup> "Our high schools and colleges – has in fact has already said Fromm – continue with the task of providing their students with the knowledge they must have to fulfill their practical tasks in life, and with the character traits wanted on the personality market".<sup>96</sup> The civilizing function of a liberal education, Scitovsky continued, did not lie simply in furnishing an efficient antidote to violence, for he saw it as a vehicle of democracy, too. Since, according to Fromm, "very little, indeed, do they [high schools and colleges] succeed in imbuing them with the faculty of critical thought",<sup>97</sup> just like John Stuart Mill (1859), Scitovsky saw in the instrument of reasoned discussion preceding a deliberation the function of protecting minority

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<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, pp. 232-233.

<sup>92</sup> Like Schumacher (1973), Scitovsky noted how by making the ambience uniform, mass production influences negatively the identity of a society which loses part of its cultural heritage with its environment. Again like Schumacher he denounced the psychological and environmental spillovers caused by all appliances replacing human effort – "house and garden pests, packaged products and throwaway but durable (i.e. not biodegradable) objects whose containers and carcasses cover our beaches and countrysides in ever-increasing density". Scitovsky (1992), p. 144.

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, p. 90, footnote 4.

<sup>94</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.

<sup>95</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 229. In 1963, Scitovsky was a member of the research committee working on updating school programmes in the area of San Francisco.

<sup>96</sup> Fromm (1955), p. 299.

<sup>97</sup> Ibidem.

interests and preventing a majority from turning into a compact, unilateral force. “The big question”— Scitovsky says in conclusion – “is how to motivate people to prefer benign to malignant activities and make such choices on their own initiative—how to induce that ever larger segment of the population, which has more time and energy on its hands than it knows how to use, to devote its excess time and energy to music, painting, acting, sports, or some other benign occupation rather than to drugs, rowdyism, cruelty, and violence”.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the well-known critiques of paternalism.

### § 2.2 *A matter of character*

Fromm and Scitovsky developed very similar critiques of Western society. They both identified the disease of modernity in the boredom of individuals who were alienated from their own lives; they both traced back its cause back to the Protestant ethic, and they used the same psychology to support their statement. On a theoretical ground Scitovsky had criticized the scientific nature of the neoclassical model in the era of economic imperialism, while Fromm had subjected to analysis the Freudian theory of needs in the moment in which it was spreading on the other side of the Atlantic. Methodologically, Scitovsky was as critical as Fromm of Freudian and behaviorist psychological theories, which trace human action to the reduction of discomfort, a view that also served the reasons of mainstream economic theory.<sup>99</sup> Fromm went even further, since he had criticized the scientific nature of all fields, positioning the criterion of normality not on what is good for the individual but the society. From a political point of view, both Fromm and Scitovsky questioned the goodness of a free market economy as a democratic system promoting individual freedom. On cultural grounds they both criticized the American way of life which, based on money as the benchmark of personal capacity and on the concept of work as a necessary sanction for earning money to spend for show, let the contradictions of an entire system of values emerge very clearly. As far as policies for welfare are concerned, Fromm and Scitovsky both dare to declare that economic growth does not necessarily imply an increase in wellbeing. On the contrary it can influence negatively the quality of life, in a moment in which the political economy of “the growth men of the kingdom of Solovia” (Boianovsky and Hoover 2013) held strong. Fromm explained the co-existence of material prosperity and individual unhappiness by means of the theory of “social character” which induces the individual to desire what is really required by socio-economic needs. Scitovsky saw the paradox of consumer dissatisfaction in the economy of wellbeing caused by

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<sup>98</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 296.

<sup>99</sup> “Human beings and higher animals, in addition to performing such brief acts, also engage in a variety of more sustained and complex acts that are equally hard to explain in terms of drive theory and need satisfaction”. Scitovsky (1992), p. 17.

individuals neglecting their own wellbeing to act in conformity with a code of behavior directed towards satisfying what is required by a mass production society. The idea of “productive work” as a major source of satisfaction represents a *retrò* concept of happiness which resonates with Hannah Arendt’s notion of a *vita activa* (1958) and Schumacher’s “good work” (1979). It is receptive to the possibility that all theories considering happiness as positional and adaptive, best to be measured with quantitative methods, may themselves be a particular feature of market society. According to Fromm and Scitovsky, boredom, violence, anxiety and frustration were the features of Western man in the era of consumer capitalism. For Fromm it was a matter of a social character coming up against some existential needs. For Scitovsky, it was a matter of comparing two cultures in the pursuit of the art of living well in a mass consumption society: Mitteleuropa, sophisticated and perhaps a little decadent, offers a liberal education which “seeks status by showing off consumer expertise”<sup>100</sup> as a mark of distinction, and puritanical middleclass America, straightforward and dutiful, which promotes a functional education finalized in production and ends up by conforming in a search for distinction. Fromm offered the thesis of a scientific humanism which brings man back into the center of its interest and can cure a sick society.<sup>101</sup> Scitovsky first asked for the education system to be reviewed, since he held it to be of primary importance in that it is responsible for the transmission of a tradition of values.

Fromm was immediately acclaimed on an international level. *Escape From Freedom* was a wartime tract on the development of Nazi ideology which initiated his line of successful studies on the totalitarian character. *A Man For Himself* and *The Sane Society* contributed to increasing American social criticism on cultural conformism and alienation (Riesman 1950). *Marx’s Concept of Man* was welcomed as a cultural manifesto by the emerging New Left. Thanks to numerous informal contacts that he kept via various cultural circles, his works were reviewed by the most eminent American intellectuals of the period, including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Dwight McDonald and Ashley Montagu (McLaughlin 1996). His conflict with American pragmatists (Bell 1977) and convinced Freudians (Goodman 1945; Marcuse 1955; Kardiner 1961) contributed to increasing Fromm’s fame as a European scholar of a traditional culture. On the contrary, when it first came off the press, *The Joyless Economy* did not cause the reverberations that Scitovsky expected. As a matter of fact, Scitovsky was pleading for interdisciplinarity when “growing conservatism in social thought (following the radical 1960s) was being accompanied by some

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<sup>100</sup> Scitovsky (1992), p. 211.

<sup>101</sup> Fromm (1941), pp. 284-285. Fromm identifies two dimensions in the concept of freedom, which go back to the those developed by Mill (1859) and Berlin (1969). The first is emancipation from traditional authorities which have freed man but left him alone, and alienated from himself and his similars. The second positive freedom is the full realization of human’s potentialities, individually and socially.



hardening of methodological inertia in economics”.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, his book’s popular style saw him lose status among academics. As Scitovsky acknowledged in retrospect: “I sent it to the wrong address. It was addressed to my fellow economists and they did not know what to do with it”.<sup>103</sup> *The Joyless Economy* had in fact disorientated Scitovsky’s colleagues. From being a standard welfare economist Scitovsky suddenly turned into a radical opponent of the mainstream. Not only had he criticized the effectiveness of the neoclassical model of consumer behavior at a time in which it was all the rage, but he had belittled the forces of modern capitalism by comparing its wellbeing to a Chinese menu, labeled the American consumer as ignorant for not realizing that his wasteful lifestyle could harm his own wellbeing and also suggested the education system be reviewed.<sup>104</sup> Personality and character traits also matter here. For, while Fromm was extrovert and communicative, capable of relating to both the general public via articles in international dailies and experts, Scitovsky was introversive and reserved, with a particular love for his role as lecturer and the routine of academic life in the States. He was a relatively old-fashioned individual, whose social reserve and lack of charisma prevented him from developing a following of graduate students committed to spreading his ideas within the profession. As he was so reserved, to the point of lacking any charisma in public, he would never have been able to defend his position.

The message contained in *The Joyless Economy* started to be taken seriously only after the publication of the second edition in 1992. Since then, its popularity raised until having being classified one of “The hundred most influential books since World War II” by the *Times Literary Supplement* on 6 October 1996. This is all the more significant given that Scitovsky revised the preface alone and left intact the rest. Thanks to the experimental work on rational choice theory by behavioral psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979), economics was slowly opening to interdisciplinary research, and, thanks to the investigations of Richard Easterlin (1974), the economics of happiness was already being viewed as a new, promising approach to the study of welfare. Scitovsky is now cited as a forerunner of happiness studies in economics (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Easterlin 2003) and sustainable development (Alcot 2008; Baumgärtner and Quaas 2010), given his sharp critique of American consumers’ behavior. Interestingly enough, today, while Scitovsky is beginning to be cited in a cursory manner in essays on welfare and wellbeing, Fromm’s critique of the Western man is relatively forgotten. Indeed, as the years passed, he lost his appeal, partly because he distanced from the New York intellectual institutions and networks that had made

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<sup>102</sup> Sen (1996), p. 481.

<sup>103</sup> Scitovsky (1991), p. 268.

<sup>104</sup> In the words of Kenneth Arrow, a colleague and friend since the times at Stanford: “I do think that Scitovsky’s views were paternalistic. [...] *The Joyless Economy* was perceived as an aristocratic or paternalistic interference with the free expression of the people’s tastes” (K. Arrow, e-mail to author, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

him so famous and partly because by the mid-sixties he no longer fitted into the intellectual climate of the times (McLaughlin 1998).

## **Conclusion**

Scientific theories are almost always the product of far-sighted minds particularly receptive to the needs of a society undergoing change. They are often the result of historical contingencies and, at times, of an inspiration that comes from personal experience. Both facts are true when it comes to Fromm and Scitovsky. A stifling relationship with excessively conservative parents sparked off in both a deep aversion towards any kind of totalitarianism. Their intolerance awoke in both a strong desire for emancipation. While Fromm took distance from his Jewish community, Scitovsky rejected a career as a banker to follow a course of personal research, and both became scholars of international fame. Their innate curiosity about human behavior dynamics pushed them to look beyond the barriers of a subject blind to the evidence of facts, for a convincing answer to the evident contradictions of a society that to survive led to illness. Both noticed *la maladie du siècle* in the human becoming alienated from humanity. Both identified a possible solution reconciling economic progress with social development in a humanistic culture which could awaken a critical spirit and restore independence of thought. Their controversial success shows how the fortune of certain theories can depend on historical and sociological factors, political or cultural consensus, just as the reputation of scholars can depend on character or a charismatic presence. The extraordinary affinity of the social criticism that two very different characters offered on the American lifestyle is a clear example of the clash between the intellectual formation of European cultural circles in the inter-war years and the highly specialized pragmatism imposed by science in various subjects in the post-war States. Fromm's works are the result of a long-term project carried out with method and system, which, as the very similar quotations show, certainly helped Scitovsky reinforcing his intuitions and organizing them into *The Joyless Economy*. And this interestingly is the result of a personal revolution carried out against a profession which Scitovsky judged as having lost the subject of its research and a lifestyle he never really managed to fall in with.

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