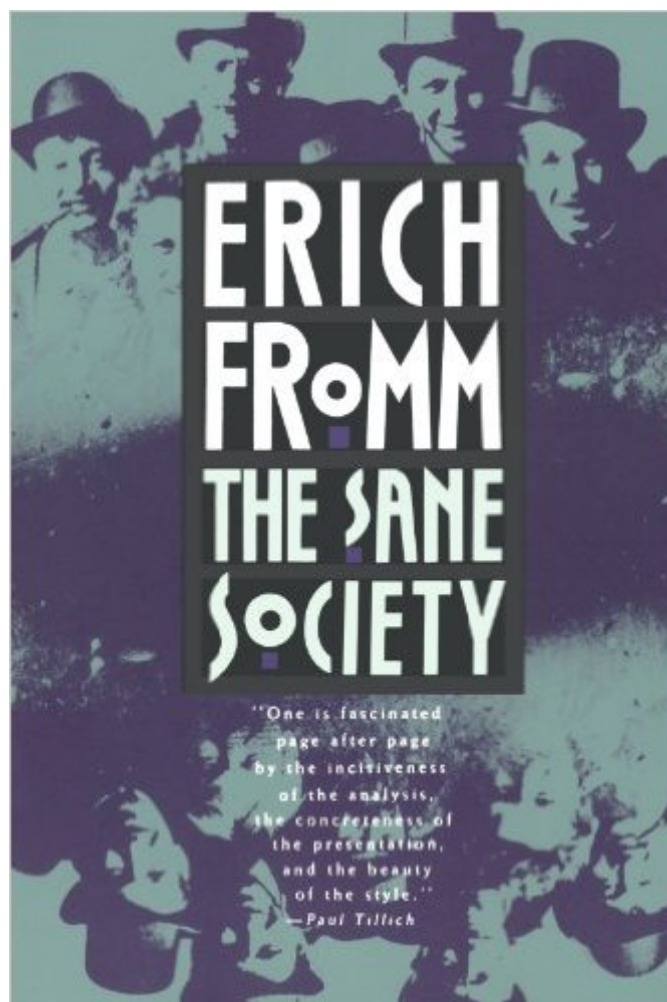


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The Sane Society



Synopsis

The Sane Society is a continuation and extension of the brilliant psychiatric concepts Erich Fromm first formulated in *Escape from Freedom*; it is also, in many ways, an answer to Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. Fromm examines man's escape into overconformity and the danger of robotism in contemporary industrial society: modern humanity has, he maintains, been alienated from the world of their own creation. Here Fromm offers a complete and systematic exploration of his "humanistic psychoanalysis." In so doing, he counters the profound pessimism for our future that Freud expressed and sets forth the goals of a society in which the emphasis is on each person and on the social measures designed to further function as a responsible individual.

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Customer Reviews

I have never found any author who has a firmer grasp on the human condition than Erich Fromm. Chapter 3 of *The Sane Society* is a masterpiece in describing what it means to be human and why we are foolish to expect never to be anxious and always to be happy and smiling. This book is an excellent analysis of the situation of modern man and frightening in that the characteristics Fromm cites have become even more ingrained in us. His thesis is that we are inherently anxious due to our consciousness. Unlike animals who have instincts to script their lives from start to finish, we are free to determine ourselves and this freedom without anyone/anything to tell us what choice to make is frightening. We are capable of joy and our culture is capable of being called a good one to the extent that our lives are a reflection of our individual abilities being given expression in our work, our

play, our social life and our government. We are happy to the extent that we realize ourselves, or as Fromm puts it, that we give birth to ourselves over our lifetimes. In order for this to occur our society must value the human over the inanimate (property) and that is the downfall of Capitalism. We are in service to the system of production and have become alienated from ourselves and others. We fashion ourselves to be appealing products on the personality market, becoming no more than objects for sale to others. "I am as you want me to be" is our personal creed and our work, our social life, our family life all are disconnected and increasingly unrelated to us in other than materialistic ways.

I had heard of Erich Fromm for some time but had not read any of his work and then decided I should have a look and see what all the fuss was about. To say the least Fromm does an excellent job of attempting a critique of modern society whether it be western capitalism or eastern communism. He considers the question: is current society sane? He concludes no and pushes aside the claims of most psychologists that a sane member of society is one who can adjust himself/herself to it. Naturally such a claim means that society itself must be sane. Fromm instead supposes that there are other more objective measures of sanity than the society one is a part of. Such measures were considered by Freud early in the 20th century and led to his idea of the libido which unless satisfied produces insanity and neuroses. Fromm himself studied under Freud in psychoanalysis but came to the conclusion that Freud's ideas, although basically correct in their aims, incorrectly based all of man's behaviour on the libido. Instead Fromm analyses current society, circa 1950's, on the basis of human nature which arises from the human condition, his whole existence. Fromm finds that man has, over the centuries, removed himself from nature (the metaphor of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden) which formed for him the womb and the spiritual connection needed by him. Instead man developed his own world which was formed through the creation of villages and towns and agriculture and some independence from nature as the provider and sustainer. The eventual extreme aspects of this alienation are found in both communism and capitalism as seen today where the individual no longer feels a relatedness to others in the society, an alienation which itself can lead to insanity.

The kernel of Dr. Fromm's analysis and the starting point for his further discussions is the definition of "human nature" - from the psychological standpoint. For him the human's psyche is not a computer (to use contemporary metaphor) on which society can install any programs of behavior it requires. If the social programs - norms of conduct and value judgments, i.e. what is good and bad,

what one shall strive for etc. - do not match the natural, evolutionary pre-defined needs of the human being, psychological defects and neurosis shall occur. The mentally healthy, i.e. sane person is thus the one who does not have defects and does not experience neurosis, who lives in a society that through economic, political and social channels promotes and furthers his harmony with requirements of his, human nature. For many of us it may be very surprising and even suspicious that somebody can question the sanity of western society and thus sanity of the majority of its individual members. How, after all, can people who have achieved such dramatic heights in the scientific thought, who have so rapidly progressed in mutual creation of such elaborated technologies, and who then make them work with an even-increasing efficiency, be not sane? The answer lies in the definition and the meaning of "sanity". For Fromm the term "in-sane" does not equal "idiot". An in-sane person is not necessarily the one who has abnormally low IQ (intelligence level), but the one who is not truly aware of himself and of his nature, whose reason (i.e.

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