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The Psychology of Fascism: Wilhelm Reich Et Al

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There are innumerable definitions and explanations of fascism in the literature of the social and behavioral sciences. This paper only explicates one: the concept of a fascist personality. It focuses on the early work by scholars in this area, beginning with the writings of the 20th century psychiatrist and student of Sigmund Freud, Austrian and American intellectual, Dr. Wilhelm Reich.

In the short story/essay that follows this article, allusion is made by the author — the late writer and United Nations staff member Shawna V. Tropp — to the circle which grew up around Wilhelm Reich. This was a significant presence in New York and other East Coast locations, especially, during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

Below, we begin by discussing two related concepts: “the Right-Wing authoritarian” and “the authoritarian personality.”

The former is seen as the incubator of fascism without the direct use of violence to achieve its goals. Four different terms are discussed in this paper:

- The concept of a Fascist Personality
- The Concept of the Fascist Character Structure
- The Right-Wing Authoritarian
- The Authoritarian Personality

These terms are presented in a historical order, beginning with Wilhelm Reich and then followed by Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, Herbert Marcuse, and finally the concepts of an authoritarian personality as developed by Theodor Adorno et al and the concept of right-wing authoritarianism as developed by Bob Altemeyer.

The broadest approach to understanding fascism is a historical-ideological one which interprets fascism as part of a long-standing tradition in Western Civilization. It forms part of the anti-enlightenment tradition. (Ziegler, 2021). Tamas Ziegler lays out in great detail the characteristics of the Enlightenment and the characteristics of the concomitant anti-Enlightenment tradition. This struggle has a long history, one parallel to the beginning of the Enlightenment arising in the 17th century and running to the present day.

According to Ziegler (Zeigler, 2021, p.24):

At the center of the anti-enlightenment lies the idea that humans are all different, should not be treated equally, should not be handled according to their deeds, and should not be respected as individuals. (This idea) stresses the determinate role of either the ethnic, religious or cultural background. The attack on the enlightenment revels in the denial of the unity of the human race.

It degrades the roles of freedom and individual human rights and promotes national myths and legends. For a nation state what is considered to be blood is more important than citizenship. This leads to a general attitude against immigration.

What Ziegler terms as Generic Fascism fits into the anti-enlightenment tradition. The characteristics of Generic Fascism may include identity politics; the creation of a nationalistic authoritarian state; the positive evaluation of violence; the extreme stress on masculinity; the exalting of youth over other phases of life; an attack on individual thinking and egalitarianism; and an authoritarian, charismatic style of leadership.

Both in the far right and in the particular form of fascism one finds the idea of the primacy of the group and the group's victimhood. Other similarities include the dread of cultural decadence and liberalism.

Reich

Although there is little contemporary support for Reich's later work revolving around energy and the orgone, there is much agreement that his writings on Character Structure and on the Psychology of Fascism, especially the latter, were prescient and fundamental to an integrated view of fascism as a specific product of one type of socialization of the child which produces an authoritarian and rigid character structure.

There is a general agreement among scholars as to what the essence of Reich's position was. Fascist ideology is the product of a particular psychological structure which is irrational and related to an authoritarian patriarchal family structure.

Central to the development of the authoritarian, according to Reich, is the patriarchal family which socializes the child through either severe physical or severe psychological punishment. This type of attachment to the parents leads to a weak concept of self and sometimes to high narcissism as a compensatory mechanism. A contemporary example of this is provided by the sister of Donald Trump, Maryanne Trump Barry.

The relationship between a person with an authoritarian personality and his father is described as one of both physical and psychological abuse.

Reich does not say that all patriarchal families *per se* produce a fascist personality; rather, he is describing the “ideal type” which is the progenitor of it.

Reich’s work entitled *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* was developed during the 1930-1933 period in Germany and published in 1933. The Nazi’s banned it.

Parts of the text of another of his works, *Character Analysis*, predate the publication of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* and ended up being published almost simultaneously with the latter, around 1933.

Both books can be seen as the products of Reich’s thinking from the mid-1920s until 1933. Further, both exhibit Reich’s early debt to the writings of Freud. The former book is more closely tied to Reich’s interpretation of Freud than is the latter one. *Character Analysis* is very much clinically oriented and itself does not directly connect any character type to the possession of an authoritarian personality and to amenability to the support of fascism.

Reich’s position was a holistic one, connecting the mind and the body. It predated the holistic position of Kurt Goldstein, whose book entitled *The Organism* was published in 1939. Reich felt that in order to avoid anxiety, to maintain the status quo of existence, and to minimize the threat of a neurosis, a person develops what he labeled “character armor.” This, he wrote, manifests itself at both a psychological and physical level.

Character armor is formed as a chronic result of the clash between instinctual demands and an outer world which frustrates these demands. Character armor is created by repression, and this can lead to projective defense mechanisms.

In less jargon-laden language, we may sum it up as follows: negative feelings about oneself are projected against others. Anger against the patriarchal home is displaced onto the weakest group in society: in Germany, the Jews; or onto “the gays;” or against Roma people, and so forth. Reich’s psychological solution was to promote sexual and orgiastic freedom which would un-armor the defenses of a person.

In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Reich outlines his social-economic position for both the explanation and for the appeal of fascism. According to Asad Haider and Tomba Massimiliano (Haider, 2021), there is a contrast between the views of Reich and that of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, et al. For Horkheimer, fascism involves mysticism. Reich invokes the Marxist-Leninist idea of false consciousness as to why the working class would support fascism. Their support, thus, is not based on being confused by the mystical ideological assertions of it but by its determinants which are embedded in their socialization in a patriarchal system.

The authors of *The Authoritarian Personality*, both Adorno and Horkheimer, believed that fascist ideology could be countered by rational thought. Given the patriarchal trap, Reich saw this strategy as a false one.

Reich argued that “the exposure to superstition by scientific enlightenment did not succeed in eliminating religious morality, which was the effect of the social basis of the authoritarian family and sexual repression” (Heider, 2021).

Sexual repression is caused, he argued, as is the morality associated with it, as a result of the development of social classes and the institutions of private property — which is organized by marriage. Ideology of all types, including fascist ideology, is an individual process, part of one’s character, as well as a societal one

Reich summarizes his position in the next to last chapter, entitled “*The Human Struggle for Freedom.*” Here he makes eleven basic points:

1. Humanity is biologically sick.
2. Politics is the irrational social expression of this sickness.
3. Whatever takes place in social life is actively or passively, voluntarily or involuntarily, determined by the structure of masses of people.
4. The character structure is formed by socio-economic processes, and it anchors and perpetuates these processes. Man’s biopathic character structure is, as it were, the fossilization of the authoritarian process of history. It is the biophysical reproduction of mass suppression.
5. The human structure is animated by the contradiction between an intense longing for and fear of freedom.
6. The fear of freedom of masses of people is expressed in the biophysical rigidity of the organisms and the inflexibility of the character.
7. Every form of leadership is merely the social expression of the one or the other side of this structure of masses of people.
8. It is not a question of the Versailles Peace Treaty, the oil wells of Baku, or two to three hundred years of capitalism, but a question of our up-to-six-thousand-years of authoritarian mechanistic civilization, which has ruined man’s biological functioning.
9. Interest in money and power is a substitute for unfulfilled happiness in love, supported by the biologic rigidity of masses of people.
10. The suppression of the natural sexuality of children and adolescents serves to mold the human structure in such a way that masses of people become willing upholders and reproducers of mechanistic authoritarian civilization.
11. Thousands of years of human suppression are in the process of being eliminated.

The question of how it is being eliminated needs clarification.

Reich sees it being eliminated by what one could call a “utopian notion” of what he terms a “work democracy.” In fact, Reich provides little more than verbal encouragement as how to establish it in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. His approach is sometimes described as having affinities with an anarcho-syndicalist position. However, Reich denies that politics can help a society remove itself from patriarchal tyranny. This includes the anarchist approach which organizes people for support.

For Reich, the only possible escape from patriarchal dominance, sexual repression, and the ascent of fascist ideology and submission is by establishing a “work democracy.” This concept lacks conceptual clarity, and after reading the chapter on it, the reader tends to know more of what it is not than what it is. Reich describes it not as an ideology or a political movement but as a spontaneous collection of those people who have developed a “genital character,” having escaped from patriarchal domination.

Work-Democracy is seen by him as “the natural process of love, work, and knowledge.” Social production and consumption are naturally and organically interfaced with one another.

Fromm

Erich Fromm began empirical studies in Germany as part of his work at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research. Here he also developed many of his intellectual positions and concepts, including the concept of social character (Friedman, 2013). His study of German workers was conducted by the Frankfurt Institute beginning in 1929 and the data were interpreted by Fromm in 1937-1938. This interpretation had limited circulation and was not published in English until 1984.

Fromm entitled the manuscript *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study*. The purpose of the study was to gain access into the psychic structure of white collar and manual workers. According to Brunner, this work was a forerunner of the Adorno et al book *The Authoritarian Personality*, a work that was published in 1950.

Fromm’s research tended to validate some of the conclusions of *The Authoritarian Personality*. It emphasized other conclusions that were only addressed in a limited way in the book. Fromm connected the “authoritarian character” more closely to economic and family variables than did the Adorno et al work. He saw ideals and attitudes as being class-based.

Fromm defined the authoritarian attitude as one that “affirms, seeks out and enjoys the subjugation of men under higher external power, whether the power is the state or a leader, natural law, the past or God.

The strong and powerful are simply admired” whereas “the weak and helpless were hated and despised.” Sacrifice and duty, not pleasure in life and happiness, are the guiding aims of the authoritarian attitude (Fromm, pp. 209-210).

According to Brunner (Brunner, 1994, p. 629), “This definition prefigures some central elements of the Berkeley group’s (Adorno, et al.,1950) later definition of the authoritarian personality, which divides it into a syndrome composed of nine clusters. The second cluster, entitled “authoritarian submission,” is described as referring to a “submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup.” The third has to do with “authoritarian aggression” and the sixth comes closest to Fromm’s conception. That is, it describes “preoccupation with the dominance-submission, strong-weak leader, leader-follower dimension. It examines identification with power figures...and their exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness (Adorno et al, 1950. P.228).

The German worker study was highly empirical in nature. It analyzed the authoritarian personality using data, whereas Fromm’s later books such as *Escape from Freedom*, *The Sane Society*, and *The Anatomy of Human Destruction*” did not.

In *Escape from Freedom*, written in 1941, Fromm explicates escape from freedom. This involves the tendency to renounce “the independence of one’s ego” with someone or something external in order to find the power missing from the individual himself. Psychologically, such individuals are much more comfortable when their lives, their will and their minds are controlled by a totalitarian leader... (p.58).

Fromm maintained that the authoritarian “character” believes that “life is determined by forces outside of the individual’s control and leaves him with a sense of powerlessness.”

Fromm’s authoritarian character, finally, has the following characteristics:

- a) The need for authority, which can be both personal (political leader) and super-personal (corporation, party, nation, state).
- b) The conviction that human life is at the mercy of super-personal forces.
- c) The willingness to obey external dictatorship.
- d) An aversion to the idea of social equality; a belief in a hierarchal vision of a world in which the principles of domination and subjugation reign: a belief in Social Darwinism.
- e) Conformism: readiness to follow the group in everything, to reproduce in their worldview and social behavior the accepted worldview and activity stereotypes.
- f) Traditionalism of thinking.

- g) Xenophobia expressed in acute dislike and hatred towards all those who differ in their racial, national, ethnic and other characteristics from oneself and his or her social environment, (particularly) those whose intellectual level is superior to his or her own; anti-intelligentsia.

Maslow

There is an overlap in thought between Abraham Maslow's article titled "*The Authoritarian Character Structure*," published in 1953, and the work of Fromm.

Maslow was both familiar with the writings of Fromm and knew him personally. The idea of character as related to authoritarianism had already been discussed by Reich and then by Fromm. For Maslow, character structure was viewed as an interconnected set of characteristics which were deeply embedded in the mind of the individual and were less prone to change than personality characteristics.

The Authoritarian Character structure, according to Maslow, consisted of the following:

- 1) Viewing the world as a "dog eat dog" one. "Your gain is my loss." Zero sum reasoning
- 2) Believing that kindness is weakness
- 3) Exhibiting sado-masochistic tendencies
- 4) Containing intra-psycho conflicts and a sense of guilt that generates hostility
- 5) Manifesting a rigidity of thought

These "traits" lead to denigrating women and to the desire for a militarized, super-organized ideal and a desire to humiliate others.

Marcuse

Herbert Marcuse's position is more Marxist and more political than the views of either Reich or Fromm. He does not interpret authoritarianism at the psychological level but rather as a function of the economic and political realm. His position was enunciated in his 1964 work, *One Dimensional Man*.

Authoritarianism is advanced by the alienation of the dominating forces over the individual. "One dimensionality" is characterized by the movement in which there is a unification of all of the production units of a society into an integrated single unit. In this "one dimensional society" education, politics, and labor are integrated into a single totality that leads to the reproduction of the existing system.

For Marcuse “one dimensional” is homogeneity. It is seen in the now popular sociological phrase, “the McDonaldization” of Western society. A one-dimensional society that lacks any opposition to it becomes an easy prey for the development of an authoritarian and or a totalitarian state.

Research on The Authoritarian Personality

Probably more has been written about “the authoritarian personality” than on any other topic in the literature of Social Psychology. A search of the database of the library of the University of Maryland Global Campus brings up over 6,740 items using this entry term.

The “birth item” derives from the study titled *The Authoritarian Personality* reporting the research of the Frankfurt group by Theodor Adorno and the Cal-Berkeley group. The 1950 published work exceeded one thousand pages in length. It had undergone many changes over a ten-year period since the original work. It was part of a Studies in Prejudice series sponsored by the American Jewish Committee’s Department of Scientific Research.

Much of the earlier version’s Marxist language was tempered in the later version or eliminated. The results of the study were explained through the lens of psychoanalytic thinking.

The study consisted of two parts: (1) a research survey consisting of a set of standard questions and (2) a clinical interview conducted with a subset of the population. The validity of the sample is today highly questioned.

As a result of the analysis of the data, four psychometric scales were created:

- 1) The Anti-Semitic Scale
- 2) The Ethnocentrism Scale
- 3) The Political and Economic Conservatism Scale
- 4) The F scale, which identified people susceptible to Fascist propaganda

The personality characteristics of those scoring high on the F scale were:

- a) Conventionalism: Adherence to conventional values.
- b) Authoritarian Submission: Toward in-group authority figures.
- c) Authoritarian Aggression: Against people who violate conventional values.
- d) Anti-Intracception, that is opposition to subjectivity and imagination.
- e) Superstition and Stereotype: belief in individual fate, thinking in rigid categories.

- f) Power and Toughness: Concerned with submission and domination; assertion of strength.
- g) Hostility against human nature or seeing human nature as basically being evil and competitive.
- h) Projectivity: Perception of the world as dangerous; tendency to project unconscious impulses.
- i) Sex: Overly concerned with modern sexual practices.

There have been major criticisms of this study involving sampling, including statistical ones and others related to the prejudices of the authors. See, for example, the following: (Brown, 2004), (Lasch, 1991), (Christie & Cook, 1958), and (Altemeyer, 1981).

In spite of the validity of many of the criticisms, the description of the Authoritarian Personality closely matches those of Reich, Maslow, and Fromm. The socialization practices that produce an authoritarian personality syndrome are also in line with the previous-named authors.

Bob Altemeyer and Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Since his early writings in the 1970's and the publication of his first book in 1981 entitled *Right Wing Authoritarianism*, Altemeyer has been explicating and enunciating the dangers of what he has termed right-wing authoritarianism. He is aware of left-wing authoritarianism but does not conceive of it as being as dangerous in the United States to the preservation of democracy.

His 1981 book consists of an exhaustive review of the 1950 book *The Authoritarian Personality* and the criticisms of it. His 1988 book, *Enemies of Freedom*, continues as exposition of Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

Altemeyer does not employ the psychoanalytic perspective of *The Authoritarian Personality* but rather a social learning one in which a child imitates the attitudes and harsh disciplinary practices of his parents with his own children. He agrees with what Reich described as the socialization experiences, seeing these to be an underlying cause of a fascist mind. However, he does so not utilizing psychoanalytic concepts.

Right-wing authoritarians are highly generally punitive of what they believe is deviant behavior that violates their moral conceptions. According to Altemeyer, this is because of belief in their moral superiority and their concern for "moral disintegration."

Altemeyer presents to his readers a scale that avoids the statistical errors of the authoritarian personality study. This is a thirty item RWA scale, developed through much trial and error to be able for it to reach a high degree of validity and reliability.

Altemeyer conceptualizes right-wing authoritarianism as a complex system which is a determined and socially-learned cluster of attitudes with three key components: authoritarian submission, conventionalism, and authoritarian aggression.

The first component according to Altemeyer is authoritarian obedience. Here, Altemeyer seems to be incorrect, because he describes this as obedience to established and legitimate authority. The January 9th insurrection is a prime counterfactual to this. Obedience to authority is the domain of a person, an in-group or an institution which “trolls” the value set of the RWA.

The second component, conventionalism, involves a reverence for traditional beliefs regarding such matters as patriotism, gender roles, religion, and sexuality.

Third, the final component, is aggression. This “involves a willingness to harm or punish those who deviate from not established authority.” It is directed, as Altemeyer says, again towards those who do not hold the values of the RWA.

Altemeyer differentiates RWA from those that have been traditionally labeled as conservative. He sees right wing authoritarianism as being socially learned. It is a modifiable attitude and not the deep personality syndrome as described by Reich, Maslow, Fromm and the majority of researchers on the authoritarian personality.

Conclusion

Not all right-wing authoritarians are fascists nor are all authoritarian personalities, but both in the contemporary United States are prone to conspiracy theories and those who are zealous may take direct actions against a democracy. Many of the insurrectionists entering the Capitol in January of 2021 and taking part in the demonstration outside of it resemble the right-wing authoritarians as described by Altemeyer and the personality syndrome as described by Reich and Fromm.

The right-wing authoritarian personality poses not just a conflict for America but also a crisis for Western Civilization, as it is exhibited by far-right political parties and their supporters in France, Germany, Hungary, Austria, and Norway.

This article has briefly covered the long attempt by intellectual leaders, scholars, to describe fascistic and right-wing authoritarian thought. The question is: What is to be done?

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