

# Analyzing Authoritarian Narcissism

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Analyzing the contemporary struggle against the increasingly concentrated power of mega-corporations (and of those politicians who serve them) is actually a struggle against the pathologies of an international ruling class. In the most general terms, it is a fight for non-alienated self-realization, decentralization, and voluntary social relations, against individuals, institutions, and structures that are fixated on expanding the capacities for domination.

It is from this perspective that the radical and anarchist critique of globalized power and plunder could be further broadened by psychological insights. Lamentably, the studies done by the far left wing of the psychoanalytic movement remain largely unexplored and underutilized by today's intellectuals and activists. (1) Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and other proponents of radical Freudianism originally wrote their books in the context of fascist European dictatorships, but these works continue to provide very provocative and useful insights into threats to freedom posed by repressed, authoritarian personalities whose narcissism irrationally drives them towards fantasies of limitless domination and wealth-accumulation.

The renegade sexologist Wilhelm Reich had been an active figure in Germany's anti-Nazi socialist landscape; he believed that there was an interdependent and unbreakable bond between sexual repression and capitalism, and he concluded that any effort to curtail the most prevalent forms of human suffering needed to aim for complementary social and sexual revolutions. By April 1935, his writings were banned in Germany as "dangers to public security and order" and he was forced into Scandinavian exile, where he renewed his attacks on the Nazi Party, the counter-revolutionary bureaucratic despotism of the USSR, and the reactionary mindsets of European Stalinists.

His deep disillusion with Communism and the medical businessmen of psychoanalysis who had accommodated themselves to capitalism spurred his turn toward a Kropotkinesque concept of "work-democracy" and advocacy for the free growth of "natural self-regulation" (implemented by his friend A. S. Neill, in the English school Summerhill) (2). He earned the admiration of anarchists such as Marie Louise Berneri and Paul Goodman by his adherence to statements like: "Freedom does not have to be achieved— it is spontaneously present in every life function. It is the elimination of all obstacles to freedom that has to be achieved." (3)

Reich's 1933 opus, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, is an attempt to explain how sexual repression leads to dictatorships and why authoritarianism holds such a popular appeal for those who are most likely to be oppressed by it. Much more than a study of Nazi Germany, Reich's book is a chilling look far beyond the standard interpretations of fascism which centered around any one leader's demagogic charisma or the nefarious plots hatched by the politico-economic elites of the military and the capitalist classes. Such explanations were too superficial for Reich, and he offered instead an analysis of fascism rooted in social psychology. He felt that there were certain sets of character structures in modern life that were responsible for making the prospect of living under ruthless authority mystically attractive.

The key to this, wrote Reich, was the power dynamics of the typical lower middle-class family. The neurotically tyrannical patriarch controlled economic and political power within the family, and he demanded obedience and stiff emotional restraint. He was also responsible for fiercely repressing the sexual life of his children, a repression that extended to the quelling of curiosity, rebellion, and the faculties needed for critical thinking.

Reich found that the mechanisms for sexual repression in the psyche were also responsible for social and political submissiveness; as a “factory for authoritarian ideologies and conservative [character] structures,” the patriarchal family (and later, the school) reinforced the behavioral norms, forms, and attitudes that were most appropriate for perpetuating a repressive social order founded upon exploitation. (4)

Sexually repressed and psychologically scarred children inevitably extended their unquestioning subordination to parents and teachers into an “emotional identification with every kind of authority” later in life. Fear of sexuality and the fear of revolt were “anchored” in the character structures of the masses as mutually disturbing phenomena that one could avoid by clinging to “traditional values.” Those who felt the most choked in an atmosphere of guilt and anxiety over sex and rebellion tended toward dogmatic, moralistic religions which, not coincidentally, served the authoritarian impulses of the ruling class.

Subsequently, the existing systems of authority worked hard to protect and preserve the primacy of the patriarchal family in the social realm. Once internalized, these authoritarian constraints became “character armor,” a rigid psychical shell that blocks the flow of intense, spontaneous feeling and distorted natural impulses into secondary, sadistic behaviors. (5) According to Reich, the armored individuals who felt the most torn between the desire for freedom and the fear of freedom reveled in the obvious contradictions spouted by fascist leaders. In his *Escape from Freedom* (1942), Erich Fromm picked up where Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* left off.

Fromm clinically derived the “fascist” social character from the harsh, punitive treatment of children. Traumatized by parental cruelty (physical and/or emotional abuse), the victim may later become an enthusiast of military aggression and ethnic scapegoating.

The victimized child inverts the hierarchy of power through a potent “identification with the aggressor”; the authoritarian adult, once subjected to episodes of humiliating submission, now experiences a pathological pleasure in complete domination: “the world is composed of people with power and those without it. The very sight of a powerless person makes him want to attack, dominate, humiliate him.” (6) Alfred Adler, an early psychoanalyst excommunicated by Freud, had offered a complementary explanation: the child who experienced painful feelings of inferiority may “compensate” in adulthood through the compulsive drive for power.

For Reich, Fromm, and other neo-Freudian analysts of the pathology of power, “rationalized” (manifest) objectives conceal repressed (latent) motives. The political struggle for dominance is no more intrinsically rational (or sane) than the conspicuous “status-displays” of the wealthy described by Thorstein Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Emotionally crippled, armored individuals, afraid of natural impulses, find compensatory (sadistic) satisfaction in “life-destructive” law and order, military imperialism, mass destruction and genocide— all of which gets rationalized as “public safety” and “homeland security.” Even the total “release” of nuclear annihilation may be (subconsciously) desired— as a kind of tension-free nirvana or “cosmic orgasm”—by pathological rulers and technocrats such as Dr. Strangelove (the necrophilic scientist in Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film of that title).

In recent decades, the psychoanalytic concept of authoritarian character, no longer entirely adequate to explain the psychopathology of the power elite, has been complemented by the clinical description of pathological narcissism. Narcissism was initially defined by Freud as a failure of genuine social relatedness: the persistence— as one analyst noted— of a “pathologically immature relationship” to significant others, who are perceived solely in terms of their “need-satisfying” aspect. Pathological narcissists “have no empathy for others; other people exist only to serve their needs.” (7) Such deficiency-based motivation may be termed a “greed” for gratification and self-aggrandizement.

The byproduct of an impaired growth of the ego, narcissism may be viewed as the antithesis of humane sympathy—because perception of others is distorted through the lens of infantile self-inflation. As such, its self-serving, amoral opportunism is perfectly in accord with the norms of success in hyper-capitalist, consumer society: competitive self-interest, materialistic preoccupation with personal gratification, exploitative relations toward “subordinates” and customers, and so forth.

Of course, by reducing one’s fellow human being into an interchangeable commodity on the labor market, capitalism has for two centuries ideologically claimed that “society” is merely a marketplace of competing individuals single-mindedly pursuing personal gain. Narcissism, as a prison of egotistical calculation, is thus manifested in

the predominance of impersonal contractual relations over an authentic relatedness rooted in shared feelings and empathetic awareness of others.

The pathological narcissist is authoritarian in the sense that expression of power relations extracts “gratification” from others—in the context of contempt, sadism, or simply callous indifference. At the same time, because of his ego defects (and consequent deficiency-motivation), the narcissist is “terribly dependent upon admiration from others.” (8) The acquisition of wealth and social prestige “empowers” the individual to satisfy infantile impulses through excesses of sybaritic luxury and status-display. Unlimited cash offers a powerful temptation toward indolent self-indulgence, and such overweening self-satisfaction is fed by the obsequious “services” which such financial power can command. “Not only does evidence of wealth serve to impress one’s importance on others,” Veblen remarked, “but it is of scarcely less use in building up and preserving one’s self-complacency.” (9)

Because of a deep-seated incapacity for sympathetic identification with others, the wealthy member of the global ruling class indulges narcissistic self-satisfaction, the counterpart of which is generally an exploitative attitude toward the weak and powerless. Of course, capitalist ideology conveniently congratulates the rich and stigmatizes the poor. Over the centuries, the moral decadence of a ruling class has been paid for by the hardships of a “service class.”

In short, as countless historical examples would illustrate, the attainment of wealth and power is motivated by (and a compensation for) emotional disability and incapacity for loving relatedness. Instead of egalitarian social relations rooted in reciprocal respect and caring, wealth maintains an authoritarian social order of dominance and submission in which pseudo-intimacy is purchased and insatiable need-gratification acquired.

Tragically (for the history of civilization), authoritarian narcissists—driven by such underlying, irrational motivations scheme to “rule the world.” (10)

If today’s anti-capitalist radicals want to expand their critique of power to include psychological insights into authoritarian narcissism, then they need to continually make explicit the connections between capitalist domination and sexual prohibition and how codes of sexual satisfaction are being manipulated to serve the ends of capitalism. The only way to counter the pathologized sex-politics of fascism, Reich argued, was to offer an emancipatory sex-politics that spoke to the yearnings of the repressed.

William Manson has written *The Psychodynamics of Culture* (Greenwood Press, 1988), and most recently, “Biophilia: Towards Re-humanization” (FE #360, Spring 2003)

## Endnotes

1. It would be exciting to see anarcho-primitivists and other anti-civilization radicals engage with theories of Geza Roheim, such as his remarkable *The Riddle of the Sphinx* (1934).

2. See Neill, *The Free Child*

3. Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (third edition, Touchstone, 1970), p. 355.

4. *The Sexual Revolution*, 72

5. Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (third edition, Touchstone, 1970), p. 54. For a discussion of character armor, see Reich’s *Character Analysis*, Third Edition (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1949), Chapter 4.

6. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (Avon Books, 1965), pps. 196, 191. See also Fromm’s *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973); and Alice Miller’s *For Your Own Good* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983). For those interested in pursuing these ideas further, it is important to also study Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955), especially the book’s last chapter, “Critique of Neo-Freudian Revisionism.” Marcuse argues forcefully that Fromm is far too conservative and timid in his reading of the anti-capitalist and anti-civilization themes in Freud.

7. Otto Kernberg, “Narcissism,” in *Introducing Psychoanalytic Theory* (ed. S. Gilman, Brunner/Mazel, 1982), p. 128.

8. Ibid. See also Heinz Kohut’s *The Analysis of the Self* (International Universities Press, 1971).

9. Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Mentor, 1953), p. 42.

10. See, too, Theodor Adorno, Else Frankel-Brunswick, David J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*

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“Fascist mentality is the mentality of the ‘little man.’ This little man has studied the big man’s behavior all too well, and he reproduces it in a distorted and grotesque fashion. The fascist is the drill sergeant in the colossal army of our deeply sick, highly industrialized civilization. It is not with impunity that the hullabaloo of high politics is made a show of in front of the little man. The little sergeant has surpassed the imperialistic general in everything: in martial music; in goose-stepping; in commanding and obeying; in cowering before ideas; in diplomacy, strategy, and tactic; in dressing and parading; in decorating and honoring.’ The little man likes to give demonstrations of how he will not be out-classed by the ‘genuine’ big general.”

—Wilhelm Reich, 1942

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