

Authoritarian Character Structure

The Negation of Imagination

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Radical psychologists Wilhelm Reich and Eric Fromm answered the question of why people submit willingly to authority

While most of us were watching the 2016 presidential election with disgust, someone I'm very close to, looked at me with a fiendish grin and announced, "I'm voting for Donald Trump."

This was perplexing. How could they be captivated by a racist, xenophobic, homophobic narcissist? Having starkly contrasting reactions towards the object of their affinity, I realized a lot of futile and draining arguments were likely to follow. Rifts, drama, and cut-offs between friends and family have become ubiquitous in American society over the past year, with many left bewildered by the resurgent appeal of authoritarianism.

During the Great Depression and World War II eras, influential and incisive books were written that aimed to decipher the reasons authoritarians were able to gain control over millions of people. In 1933, the year Germany's infamous National Socialist leader became Chancellor, Wilhelm Reich published *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

Reich (1897–1957), a radical Austrian psychoanalyst, wrote that character structure, the emotional make up of our personality, was the means through which authoritarianism was exercised and expressed. Eight years later, Erich Fromm, a German social psychologist and critical theorist, who fled the country following the Nazi takeover, published *Escape from Freedom* in the U.S. In it, he penetrates the character structure that enabled authoritarianism to flourish.

Fromm and Reich wondered: Why do people act in ways that clearly go against their own interests? And what underlies the mindset of those seemingly enamored by dictators?

Reich postulated that mystical/religious distortions of emotions, and the repression of bodily sensations, significantly contributed to the cruelty exercised by fascists. He noticed that pent-up tensions and sensations could be discharged in unnatural and indirect ways, namely through sadism.

Reich focused on the adverse effects of sexual repression, but the suppression of explorational, introspective, and expressive impulses leads to similarly detrimental personal and social results. The connection between self-repressive tendencies and an attraction to authority struck a chord, as my relative has been a long time, vocal supporter of body restricting religious morality.

Reich felt that unfulfilled social needs were also an aspect of why reactionary authoritarians were perceived as appealing. A sense of belonging arose when people joined a party that eclipsed feelings of insignificance that many experience in modern society. In his view, authoritarianism would not be a threat if society allowed interpersonal cooperation (rather than promoting isolative competition), and if individuals could acquire and develop substantial and useful skills.

He advocated for self-administered, what he labeled work-democracy (essentially socialism or anarchism) and the elimination of disparity between pleasure and vocation. So, not only do anarchists wrangle with existing authoritarians, but the implementation of anarchist principles like mutual aid, cooperative labor, and the honing of skills of sustenance, could preclude future developments of authoritarianism.

Fromm (1900–1980) saw unfulfilling social circumstances, religion, and suppression of the individual as involved in the development of tyrannical rule. Additionally, he wrote that educational systems, child rearing styles, conformity pressures, and techno-industrial society's obsession with work, contribute to producing personalities with the potential to become, or succumb to, authoritarians.

Digging deeply into a combination of masochistic and sadistic traits, he noticed that in the psychological constitution of authoritarians, maintenance of self-esteem is dependent upon identification with symbols of external power such as a flag, uniform or badge. Upon reading this description, I couldn't help but recall the times my relative would engage in hollow flag-waving activities dictated by a calendar or cultural ritual.

Rants about a degenerating present and a squeaky-clean past that my relative would advance always seemed curious and spurious—so, a light bulb turned on as I learned of Fromm's observation that authoritarians fetishize the bygone and dream of recreating a non-existent, idyllic yesteryear. A tendency which he felt corresponds with feeling powerless over circumstance and lacking a conviction that the future is malleable.

This connected with his more general discovery that an aptitude for copying and repeating, and an inability to originate, is characteristic of authoritarians. Between the two theorists' discoveries, we can presume that when instinctual sensations are perpetually suppressed or misinterpreted, imaginative potential atrophies.

Character damage is the product of conventional attitudes and expected emotions superimposed upon people during their formative years resulting in objectification/depersonalization and the valorization of mechanistic efficiency and productivity, a process euphemistically termed socialization. Damaged character distances people from each other, and perpetuates the idea that reality requires an ideological or mystical second reality to corroborate itself.

In short, damaged character is responsible for the sanitization, standardization, and deterioration of social and individual potential.

Marxists and various militant leftists often have repressed/ repressive character structures that are analogous to reactionary authoritarians, along with similar desires for strong leaders and the propagation of symbols of bureaucracy.

In present conditions, the propensity for a greater proliferation of authoritarianism is hard to miss. A significant part of the populace is atomized and lonely, and stuck in skillless, mind-numbing jobs, resulting in pervasive feelings of powerlessness and desperation. Hence, many of the anti-fascist ideas put forth in the early-mid 20th century, such as Reich's and Fromm's, are again applicable.

And though viewing panaceas from a psychological standpoint doesn't help overcome the cause and effect dilemma any more than looking from an economic or sociological one, helpful ideas have been put forth about what types of inter-community relations and philosophical perspectives correspond with minimizing the risk and spread of totalitarianism.

Possessing and utilizing skills of importance, and creating situations that provide tangible gratification, while rejecting pseudo-satisfaction (such as consumerism), is imperative for non-fascistic living. As is following one's own perceptions while resisting domination by experts and bureaucracy. Both Reich and Fromm voice a connection between constricted, atomized life and authoritarianism—and between intellectual/emotional/sensual expansiveness and the minimizing of violence and authority.

Reich cautioned against a quantitative view of life, as he felt eliminating fascism required understanding humans biologically, not mechanically.

In a similar vein, Fromm stressed the importance of the spontaneous expression of the total personality, including the elimination of artificial divisions between instinct and intellect. Ultimately, interconnected, horizontal relations without governance is the natural form of reality that unfolds when repressive character structure ceases to dominate.

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