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AUTHORITARIAN ATTACHMENT DYNAMICS OF LATE-STAGE CAPITALISM

RETHINKING AUTHORITARIANISM FROM PERSONALITY TO ATTACHMENT WITH ERICH FROMM'S WORK

The relationship between the psyche, social conditions and authoritarianism has garnered significant attention in psychological and sociological research. Initially, the interplay of attitudes and authoritarianism was prominently explored by scholars associated with the Frankfurt School who conceptualized authoritarian behavior as an outcome of internal conflicts, socialization pressures and personality orientations. This construct of the authoritarian 'personality' encompasses psychological predispositions characterized by a propensity to submit to authority, endorse traditional values, engage in stereotypical and rigid thinking, exhibit sexual inhibition, engage in projection, and harbor hostility towards out-groups¹. While this perspective transcends the 19th-century psychoanalytic model of the self by emphasizing the role of social structures, the concept of 'personality' and its implicit adherence to drive theory might fall short in understanding social aspects in far-right populism: In the Freudian drive model and, by extension, the Frankfurt School model of authoritarian personality, the dimension of embodiment is reduced to sexuality and its repression, subsuming social emotions such as pride, envy, and shame to an underlying sexual core² while their inherent socio-hierarchic formation conditions are de-emphasized. As a consequence, the individual's emotional experience as an "introjection of an irrational

1 Adorno, T. W./ Frenkel-Brunswik, E./ Levinson, D. J./ Sanford, R. N. (1950): The Authoritarian Personality. Harper & Brothers. \ Löwenthal, L./ Guterman, N. (1949): Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator. Harper & Brothers.

2 Kaus, R.J. (1999): Psychoanalyse und Sozialpsychologie. Sigmund Freud und Erich Fromm; Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter; 125.

society"³ or 'malaise'⁴ fail to capture how individual-level impacts of social structures co-produce authoritarianism.

Beyond these limitations, contemporary scholarship links authoritarianism to social dislocation and individual psychological factors like fear, uncertainty, and socioeconomic instability⁵. In accordance, attachment theory approaches examine how these experiences shape attachment styles early in childhood, influencing levels of emotional well-being, self-esteem, compassion, and tolerance⁶. By prioritizing interpersonal dynamics instead of the individual psyche, attachment approaches illuminate the intersection of social cognition, emotion, behavior, and conscience as individuals are seen as components situated in dynamic social contexts that mold their internal representations of the social world⁷. In particular insecure attachment, linked to early-life stressors and lower socioeconomic status, can lead to a heightened experience of fear and doubt, insecurity and lack of belonging⁸. This, in turn, can strengthen the need for symbolic group affiliations⁹ or conspiratorial ideation¹⁰. Unsurprisingly, parental rejection correlate with avoidant attachment, idealized perceptions of parents, and authoritarianism¹¹. Emotional dysregulation stemming from early care-giving deficits can foster shame, aggression, narcissism, and other antisocial behaviors that correlate with reduced emotional regulation¹² and reduced somatosensory (bodily) cognition of affective states¹³.

These studies suggest a notable importance of both societal-structural causes on the one hand and insecure attachment and somatosensory-emphatic deficits caused in childhood on the other hand in shaping authoritarian behaviors. This underscores the limitation of emphasizing emotional states or repression isolated from social, somatosensory, and relational conditions of individuals in theorizing authoritarianism today. To reframe

3 Adorno, T. W. (1948): Remarks on The Authoritarian Personality. Unpublished, available online in the Max Horkheimer archive in the Universitätsbibliothek, Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main.

4 Löwenthal/ Gutermann 1949 (ibid.).

5 Altemeyer, B. (2006). The Authoritarian Specter. Harvard University Press. \ Hetherington, M. J./ Weiler, J. D. (2009): Authoritarianism and polarization in American politics. Cambridge University Press.

6 Jost, J. T./ Glaser, J./ Kruglanski, A. W./ Sulloway, F. (2003): Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin* (129): 339–375. \ Ainsworth, M. D. S./ Blehar, M. C./ Waters, E./ Wall, S. (1978): Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation. Hillsdale: Erlbaum. \ Hazan, C./ Shaver, P. (1987): Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (52): 511–524.

7 e.g. Boccato, G./ Capozza, D. (2011): Attachment styles and social groups: Review of a decade. *TPM-Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology* 18(1): 19–30.

8 De Wolff, M. S./ van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1997): Sensitivity and attachment: A meta-analysis on parental antecedents of infant attachment. *Child Development* (68: 4): 571-591.

9 Deci, E. L./ Ryan, R. M. (2000): The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry* (11): 227–268.

10 Green, Ricky/ Douglas, Karen M. (2018): Anxious attachment and belief in conspiracy theories; in: *Personality and Individual Differences* (125): 30-37.

11 e.g. Main et al. 1985 (ibid.) \ Hassen MK. (1987): Parental behavior, authoritarianism and prejudice. *Manas* (34): 41–50.

12 Lindquist, K. A./ Barrett, L. F. (2008): Emotional complexity; in: M. Lewis/ J. M. Haviland-Jones/ L. F. Barrett (eds.): *Handbook of emotions*; Guilford Press; 513-530.

13 Wainio-Theberge S./Armony JL. (2023): Antisocial and impulsive personality traits are linked to individual differences in somatosensory maps of emotion; in: *Scientific Reports* 13(1):675.

authoritarianism within a comprehensive theoretical framework, integrating sociostructural, somatosensory-affective, and relational conditions within a critical theory approach, Erich Fromm's insights emerge as pivotal. Departing from a narrow focus on biological drives, Fromm offers a differentiated understanding of human motivation, viewing both biological and social needs as shaped by societal structures and emphasizing the vital importance of meaningful belonging and healthy social attachment¹⁴. As a result, his perspective highlights how deficiencies in these areas, such as social narcissism and non-sexual sadism, shape both the personal identities and broader affective dynamics which constitute the conditions that enable and stabilize authoritarian tendencies¹⁵. This theoretical lens enables a deeper exploration of the psychological and sociostructural factors that either foster or hinder healthy relating in a broader social context. By applying Fromm's perspective, we can reexamine the complex interplay between individual psychology, societal dynamics, and social bonds inherent in authoritarianism and contemporary far-right dynamics and ideologies.

POTENTIAL AREAS OF INQUIRY

Social Attachment as Habitus

Fromm's perspective provides a foundation for approaching social attachment as an intricate interplay of social, political, and psychological elements, transcending Freudian concepts of the psyche¹⁶. As a result, social attachment emerges as a concept akin to Pierre Bourdieu's habitus¹⁷, elucidating the significance and corporeal nature of relational dynamics within social frameworks shaped by capitalism and pointing to the pivotal role of meaning and recognition as catalysts of social and political behavior¹⁸. However, Fromm's view lacks an analysis of how the topography of social hierarchies become embedded in individuals' psyche and their attachments through aspirational mechanisms of *illusio* — a “principle of perception, emotional investment, adhesion and belief, by means of which the agents affectively commit themselves to the asymmetric logic of the fields in which they participate”¹⁹. How might Fromm's humanistic psychology inform or misinform our understanding of the interplay or tensions between human needs and hierarchical social structures in the context of social attachment and habitus? What are the dynamics of recognition and *illusio* that drive and (mis)align social attachment, and how do they mediate between individuals' psyche-embodiment and their social realities with regard to their understanding for social belonging

14 Kaus 1999: 206-7; 211.

15 Fromm, E. (1969): *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon Books. \ Short, N. (2017): On the Subject of Far-Right-Wing Politics. *Critical Sociology* (43:4-5): 763-777.

16 Grillo, C.M. (2018): Revisiting Fromm and Bourdieu: Contributions to habitus and realism. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (48:4): 416-432.

17 Bourdieu, P. (1982): *Die feinen Unterschiede: Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft*. Suhrkamp.

18 Fromm 1969 (ibid.).

19 Vázquez Gutiérrez, J.P. (2022): Symbolic Power, Illusio and Affectivity in the Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. *Convergencia Revista de Ciencias Sociales* (29): 1-24.

and social position of self and 'the other'? What elements of (epistemic) power and social control become evident today in these modes of understanding and 'knowing'²⁰?

Marketing Orientation and Social Narcissism

Fromm argues that capitalism leads to escalating alienation as individuals are reduced to passive consumers and commodify themselves for personal success²¹. This 'marketing orientation', characterized by the ethos of '*I am as you desire me*,' reflects a fixation on acquiring possessions and status as markers of self-worth, reducing relationships to objects of exchange value²². As consumerism becomes a primary source of fulfillment, it amplifies narcissism and alienation, reducing authentic experiences, emotions, and knowledge²³ to superficial, manipulable commodities in games of social and symbolic distinction²⁴. What alternative attachment models and social characters emerge in response to evolving economic paradigms and the respective evolution of symbolic distinction? On social media, personal identities are increasingly commodified and monetized, as they function as an affective and relational product geared towards maximizing audience engagement²⁵. What are the implications of this era of 'prosumers' and 'edited selves'²⁶ for identity construction and social attachment to online communities? What new limitations and challenges of political activism online arise from these implications?

Nonsexual Sodomasochism as the Root of Authoritarian Attachment Dynamics

The rise of far-right populism has capitalized on structural shifts that fuel existential anxiety, insecurity, humiliation and alienation, offering nativist narratives of security, identity and belonging in response²⁷. This mobilization and manipulation of collective emotions ('emotional governance'²⁸) regulates adherents' affective experiences by fostering identification with a leader and a 'chosen' group²⁹. Fromm views this as group narcissism,

20 Fricker, M. (2007): *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*: Oxford Academic. \ Arendt, H. (2000): *Labor, Work, Action*; in Baehr, P. (ed.): *The Portable Hannah Arendt*; Penguin: New York.

21 Fromm, E. (2013): *The Sane Society*. Routledge. \ Adorno, T. W./ Horkheimer, M. (2002): *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press. \ Marcuse, H. (1964): *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Beacon Press. \ Fromm, E. (1947). *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc.

22 Fromm 1947: 69; 75 (ibid.); cf. Honneth, A. (1996). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts* (J. Anderson, Trans.). MIT Press.

23 Sakurai, Takamichi (2021). The Socio-Theoretical Relevance of Erich Fromm's Psychoanalytic Conception of Narcissism. *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* (68:166):1-30.

24 Illouz, E. (2017, ed.): *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity*: Routledge.

25 Maly, I. (2020): *Metapolitical New Right Influencers: The Case of Brittany Pettibone*; in: *Social Sciences* 9 (7); URL: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/9/7/113/htm> (31.07.2023).

26 García-Rapp, F./ Roca-Cuberes, C. (2017): *Being an Online Celebrity: Norms and Expectations of YouTube's Beauty Community*; URL: <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7788/6331> (10.08.2023).

27 Mudde, C. (2019): *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge: Polity. \ Muller, J.-W. (2016): *What Is Populism* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

28 Kinnvall, C./ Svensson, T. (2022): *Exploring the populist 'mind': Anxiety, fantasy, and everyday populism*. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (24:3): 526-542. \ Giddens A (1991): *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

29 Leeb, C. (2018): *Mass hypnosés: The rise of the far right from an Adornian and Freudian perspective*. *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 2(3): 59–81. \ Fromm, E. (1964): *The heart of man: Its genius for good and evil*.

where individuals derive a sense of omnipotence and satisfaction through this type of identification³⁰. This tendency of group narcissism is rooted in an orientation defined by non-sexual sadomasochism, potentially operating within capitalist societies³¹. Due to this orientation, an individual only perceives their own needs, feelings, and social imaginary as real, while others are viewed intellectually — yet not affectively — as human beings³². Masochistic tendencies and hidden feelings of inferiority then lead to submission to a powerful leader or group, while sadistic and aggressive impulses are directed towards ‘inferior’ out-groups³³. To what extent does Fromm's perspective on group narcissism and sadomasochism correspond with current psychological insights regarding characteristic attachment patterns in authoritarianism and far-right orientations? How does the concept of non-sexual sadomasochism relate to common distinction strategies in current social hierarchies and economies? Apart from the far right, do other actors utilize these underlying affective dynamics? How could a nuanced understanding of these attachment dynamics inform strategies for countering the influence of far-right populism?

Authoritarian Attachment as Socio-Affective Assemblage

Similar to Fromm, Guattari and Deleuze reject the traditional psychoanalytic model, offering a rhizomatic approach that views desire as a fluid, generative force operating across diverse social, economic, and technological spheres³⁴. In this paradigm, the individual is not self-contained and autonomous, but a dynamic and evolving entity shaped by a constellation of forces and flows (desires, power dynamics, social structures, linguistic systems) intersecting within social, cultural, and political landscapes. Here, the psyche and its attachments emerge as a complex assemblage of biological, psychological, political and social elements, continuously evolving within the broader social context in a dynamic process of self-relating, interpersonal connections, and engagement with the elements of the social world³⁵. Thereby, Deleuze and Guattari challenge the hierarchic mind-body dualism that is embedded in the psychoanalytic approach. Instead, they point to a more contemporary view of rationality: thinking and rationality emerge as mediated through emotions and affective intensities (as embodied and psychological phenomena) which then in turn are impacted by rationality and thinking. Their view aligns with current insights on how the peripheral nervous system influences involuntary affective responses, psychological states, and thinking. As authoritarian attachment is associated with adverse childhood experiences affecting individuals' nervous

New York: Harper & Row.

30 Fromm, E. (1979): *Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought*. London: Jonathan Cape.

31 Fromm 1969 (ibid.). \ Kellner, D. (2016): *American nightmare: Donald Trump, media spectacle, and authoritarian populism*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

32 Fromm, E. (1973): *The anatomy of human destructiveness*. New York, Chicago and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. \ Sakurai, Takamichi (2021). *The Socio-Theoretical Relevance of Erich Fromm's Psychoanalytic Conception of Narcissism*. *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* (68:166):1-30.

33 Fromm 1969: Chapter V.

34 Guattari, F. (2011 [1979]) *Machinic Unconscious*, trans. Adkins T. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. \ Deleuze, G. (2001 [1968]): *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Patton P. New York: Continuum. \ Deleuze/ Guattari 1987.

35 Duschinsky, R./ Greco, M./ Solomon, J. (2015): *The Politics of Attachment: Lines of Flight with Bowlby, Deleuze and Guattari*. *Theory, Culture & Society* (32:7-8): 173-195.

systems, their sense of self, and relations to others (see above)³⁶, it is important to theorize the authoritarian manipulation of affective states with neurological and somatosensory aspects in mind.

How does the interaction between cognitive representations of the social world and neurological embodiment co-produce authoritarian emotions or anti-democratic attachments and how can respective theorization be connected to existing works on political emotions (e.g. Eva Illouz, Sara Ahmed)³⁷? In what ways can a rhizomatic approach to socio-affective dynamics enhance our understanding of the attachment phenomena observed within far-right movements today? How do somatic aspects of gender and sexuality factor into authoritarian attachment?

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The workshop is aimed at early career researchers in political science, social sciences, and philosophy who are interested in the connection of Erich Fromm's thought to the mentioned and other theorists. Expenses that may be incurred by participants during the workshop can likely (funding not yet confirmed) be partially covered. Interested individuals can submit an abstract (not exceeding one page) to Agnes Wankmüller (wankmu01@ads.uni-passau.de) and Mareike Kajewski (kajewski@uni-hildesheim.de) by October 7th 2024. The workshop will take place at the University of Hildesheim from 2 p.m. on Friday, December 6th to 3 p.m. on Saturday, December 7th 2024.

36 Herman, J.L. (1997): Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. Basic Books. \ van der Kolk B./ Roth, S./ Pelcovitz, D./ Sunday, S./ Spinazzola, J. (2005): Disorders of extreme stress: The empirical foundation of a complex adaptation to trauma. Journal of Traumatic Stress. (18:5): 389–399.

37 cf. Illouz, E. (2023): The Emotional Life of Populism. How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy: Wiley & Sons. \ Ahmed, S. (2014): The Cultural Politics of Emotion (NED-New edition, 2): Edinburgh University Press.