Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom, & Pseudo-Populist Authoritarianism

written by Scott Remer | January 31, 2022



In a sentence which might have been penned yesterday, Erich Fromm wrote in his 1941 classic, *Escape from Freedom*, that "the crisis of democracy…confront[s] every modern state."[1] Fromm was a democratic socialist, philosopher, psychologist, and a member of the Frankfurt School, a group of German-Jewish theorists who analyzed fascism and the pathologies of capitalist modernity. Forced to flee Germany, the Frankfurt School philosophers lived what they theorized. They suffered the Weimar Republic's collapse, the trauma of WWII and the Holocaust, and the alienating experience of American mass society. For them, deciphering fascism and unmasking the dangers lurking behind the placid façade of consumer capitalism was no idle academic exercise. It had life-and-death stakes. It was an effort to wrest meaning from the cataclysmic collapse of prewar socialist hopes. As Fromm wrote, "When Fascism came into power, most people were unprepared, both theoretically and practically. They were unable to believe that man could exhibit such propensities for evil, such lust for power, such disregard for the rights of the weak, or such yearning for submission" (8).

Much ink has been spilled in contemporary political periodicals in an effort to understand neofascism's ascendancy in Western Europe, the UK, India, Brazil, the Philippines, and the United States. Many commentators have looked to Hannah Arendt, who wrote extensively on existential homelessness and the crises of the 1920s and 1930s. I agree that Arendt's writings provide useful insights into the present.[2] But fewer commentators—with occasional exceptions here and there—look to Fromm.[3] This is a mistake. Fromm was one of the keenest observers of the psychology of fascism. Partially as a result of his experience leading *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, a 1929-1930 study that investigated blue- and white-collar workers' unconscious attitudes and assessed their authoritarian propensities, Fromm recognized the dangers of Nazism early on. At his urging, the Frankfurt School relocated to Geneva in 1930. The questions which enthralled him—whether authoritarianism and liberalism were directly connected, how capitalist modernity generates fascism, and how to defeat authoritarianism—remain all too relevant. Fromm's analysis of authoritarianism, specifically in *Escape from Freedom*, offers us a useful lens for evaluating today's new authoritarianism and acting accordingly.

The Psychology of Modernity

Fromm begins by observing that modernity unleashes freedom to a degree unique in the sweep of history. Capitalism enables individuation, dissolving the "distinct, unchangeable, and unquestionable place in the social world" that denizens of the Middle Ages enjoyed. In the premodern world, people were "rooted in a structuralized whole," grounded in traditions and obligations that provided "a meaning which left no place, and no need, for doubt" (41). Capitalism brought economic dynamism, but it also destroyed the stability of medieval society, replacing reciprocal obligation with

competition. People became alienated from their labor and interpersonal relationships.

Modern life is conducted on a large, mediated, abstract scale. Consequently, people feel alienated as citizens, residents of cities, and consumers, deprived of direct political and economic participation. As Fromm explains, by losing their place in a closed world, people lose the answer to the meaning of their lives; this results in doubts about themselves and the aim of life. They are "threatened by powerful suprapersonal forces, capital, and the market." Their relationships to other people, each "a potential competitor, has become hostile and estranged." Each person "is alone, isolated, threatened from all sides" (62).

People can't endure permanent insecurity and existential vertigo. Against the consciousness of our mortality and insignificance, we need roots. We can't withstand prolonged loneliness and isolation, bereft of community. Existential angst prompts people to seek methods of escape: "They cannot go on bearing the burden of 'freedom from'; they must try to escape from freedom altogether unless they can progress from negative to positive freedom" (134).

In the absence of life-affirming outlets for personal expression, freedom becomes "a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from" (6), giving rise to masochistic tendencies. The drive for individual annihilation and the drive for domination are two sides of the same coin: they are manifestations of a warped desire for genuine connection. Nationalism, religion, and submission to an authoritarian leader are common mechanisms of escape, "refuges from what man most dreads: isolation" (20).

The nation is a kind of surrogate family, an imagined community that provides shelter from loneliness (19-20). Nationalism provides a psychic income:

> Aside from the family, the national pride (in Europe frequently class-pride) gave him [the person without much property] a sense of importance also. Even if he was nobody personally, he was proud to belong to a group which he could feel was superior to other comparable groups (121).

Participation in a nation or an authoritarian movement submerges the individual in something larger, yielding a sense of connection and vicarious power that staves off "the unbearable feeling of powerlessness" and satisfies the human need to belong to "a bigger and more powerful whole outside of oneself" (155).

Fromm's Analysis of Nazism

The unique value of Fromm's analysis lies in his ability as a psychoanalyst to skillfully unweave the tangled skein of economic, political, psychological, and cultural factors. This is an understanding often missing from contemporary discussions of neofascism, resulting in immense (and unnecessary) recrimination on the Left between those who understand neofascism economically, as a manifestation of lower middle class frustration and an upper-class defense of class interests, and those who understand neofascism culturally, as a function of racism and xenophobia. Fromm is clear that this dichotomy is false: "Nazism is a psychological problem, but the psychological factors themselves have to be understood as being molded by socioeconomic factors; Nazism is an economic and political problem, but the hold it has over a whole people has to be understood on psychological grounds" (208).

Fromm distinguishes between three groups: Nazi fanatics, people who resigned themselves to Nazism, and those who exploited Nazism to further their economic interests. He categorizes most of the German working class and the liberal and Catholic bourgeoisie as passive collaborators. Fromm

explains this reluctance to resist by referring to the "state of inner tiredness and resignation" that the German working class and labor movement felt after a series of post-WWI losses (209), including the defeat of the Spartacist uprising, as well as the fact that the Nazis could exploit the bourgeoisie's sense of patriotism after they'd commandeered the German state apparatus (210).

By contrast, Nazism appealed emotionally to the "lower strata of the middle class, composed of small shopkeepers, artisans, and white-collar workers." The Nazi "spirit of blind obedience to a leader and of hatred against racial and political minorities, its craving for conquest and domination, its exaltation of the German people and the 'Nordic Race'" dovetailed with the lower middle class's traditional psychological values: "love of the strong, hatred of the weak" (211) and a scarcity mindset.

Even before 1918, the lower middle class's economic position had been declining, but its vicarious identification with a strong German monarchy and a conservative state and its self-assured faith in tradition and religion gave its members psychological ballast. After World War I ended, traditional certainties dissolved: defeat in war, the Kaiser's abdication, the founding of the democratic Weimar Republic, a rising working class, hyperinflation, and the Great Depression conspired to undermine the lower middle class's economic and psychological wellbeing. Thrift no longer made sense, vicarious identification with powerful authorities wasn't possible, and youth were economically stymied. Rather than understanding their suffering as a class, the lower middle class engaged in projection: they "thought of their fate in terms of the nation" and "project[ed] social inferiority to national inferiority." A similar projection occurred with "peasants [who] felt resentful against urban creditors to whom they were in debt" — many rural Germans were also diehard Nazis (216-17).

Filled with resentment at German national inferiority, rural denizens and the lower middle classes sought revanchist national regeneration. Hitler's sadism — his drive for domination over racial and political minorities — allowed him to achieve psychic fusion with his followers. His authoritarian character resonated with their craving for an authoritarian leader. The lower middle classes, who benefited little economically, derived "emotional satisfaction" from Nazi violence. Nazism, "an ideology which gave them a feeling of superiority," was "able to compensate them—for a time at least—for the fact that their lives had been impoverished, economically and culturally" (220).

Members of Fromm's third category—Nazi supporters motivated by self-interest—were instrumental in vaulting Hitler to power. Industrialists and aristocrats acquiesced to fascism to defend their property and profits. Confronted with the specter of communism, "representatives of these privileged groups expected that Nazism would shift the emotional resentment which threatened them into other channels and at the same time harness the nation into the service of their own economic interests" (218-19).

Hitler performed according to expectations: Nazism proved to be extremely favorable for big business and monopoly capitalism. Hitler unified lower middle class true believers and upper-class backers who simply sought protection of their prerogatives: he was "such an efficient tool because he combined the characteristics of a resentful, hating, petty bourgeois, with whom the lower middle class could identify themselves emotionally and socially, with those of an opportunist who was ready to serve the interests of the German industrialists and Junkers" (220).

Fromm's fundamental insight, one that applies equally to fascist *enragés* and ascetic capitalists—who, as Marx remarks, engage in "self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs"[4] simply to amass capital—is that destructiveness is the bitter fruit of thwarted desire. The "passion for destruction" (184) is what remains of *joie de vivre* when one's hopes have been frustrated time and again.

Implications for Today

First, a few caveats: history doesn't repeat itself, and I'm not claiming that Trump is Hitler redux (direct comparisons to Nazism are, with good reason, fraught). That said, Trumpism and other contemporary forms of neofascism resemble the original article. The context in which neofascism has arisen is similarly troubled: the 2008 crash and anemic recovery, soaring inequality, rising prices and declining wages, national defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan, and disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic. The white lower middle class feels threatened. Absent a materialist understanding of its plight, it seeks refuge in nationalism, focusing on supposed national decline and humiliation.

Like the German proletariat of yesteryear, the American working class—at least some segments of the white working class—hasn't been able to forcefully resist neofascism. According to Pew, non-college whites comprised 63 percent of Trump's 2016 electoral coalition.[5] Caveats about the repugnant choice on offer in the 2016 election notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that, despite millions of dollars in anti-Trump campaigning, the Democratic margin among union households dropped starkly: from an 18-point advantage for Obama in 2012 (58 percent-40 percent) to an 8-point advantage for Clinton in 2016 (51 percent-43 percent).[6] 56 percent of nonvoters in 2016 made less than $30,000 a year, according to Pew Research figures.[7] In 2020, the Democratic advantage among union households rebounded—Biden received 56 percent to Trump's 40 percent—but a substantial portion of those making below $30,000 a year (46 percent) or between $30,000-$49,999 a year (43 percent) voted for Trump, even after having seen the implications of a Trump presidency for four years.[8]

As in Germany, where some communist and committed socialist workers did resist, one part of the American working class—largely composed of people of color—has fought back. But as a whole, the American working class is disorganized and demoralized after suffering forty-plus years of neoliberalism, attacks on labor unions, and the frustration of Occupy Wall Street, the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016 and 2020, and Black Lives Matter protests. Although the Sanders campaigns helped politicize workers, and although labor militancy is on the rise, the working class is still weak and largely depoliticized, and the union movement is enfeebled, unable to organize its members to resist the Right's cynical culture-wars electioneering.

An examination of the partisan breakdown of union households' votes in presidential elections between 1976 and 2016, the forty years that roughly coincide with neoliberalism, reveals that between 30 percent and 40 percent of union households have consistently voted Republican for decades. In 2016, about 6 percent voted third-party or refused to answer), and 3 percent defected from the Democrats to Trump.[9] Even in late September 2020, after four years of broken promises to labor, union leaders attested to solid support among the rank-and-file for Trump in construction trade unions in swing states like Ohio and Pennsylvania.[10] NBC exit polls in 2020 found that a solid 40 percent of voters in households with a union member voted for Trump,[11] and Trump won Ohio union households by 12 percent despite unions spending millions of dollars on anti-Trump campaigning during the 2020 election.[12] The situation is similar in Europe, Brazil, and India: the Left has endured a long period of retrenchment internationally in the face of neoliberal assaults on social democracy, and worker organization has suffered, leaving workers vulnerable to the faux populist siren call of the far right.

As in Germany, the Trumpist coalition includes both an economically squeezed lower middle class and the über-rich, who have used Trumpism as a vehicle for massive corporate handouts, tax cuts, and a spate of deregulation. Trumpism has likewise benefited from sharp tensions between rural denizens and city dwellers. Trumpism is the misdirected expression of the rage of the lower middle

class, rural residents who feel neglected, and segments of the white working class.

It is also an upper-class phenomenon. As an excellent analysis by *FiveThirtyEight* detailed, 2016 primary exit polls showed that the average income of a Trump voter was $72,000, well above the median income.[13] In a careful accounting in *Jacobin* in 2017, after examining additional polling data and statistics on the class composition of the American workforce, Kim Moody convincingly concluded that "Trump's victory was disproportionately a middle-class, upper-income phenomenon."[14] In another 2016 postmortem, Mike Davis concurred, writing, "Endlessly cited have been exit polls that demonstrate Trump's extraordinary popularity among non-college white men, although the same polls indicate that he ran up his highest margins in middle-class Republican constituencies."[15] Once he was in power, many of Trump's appointees were drawn from the ranks of Wall Street and the echelons of corporate America.[16] Tellingly, in 2020, the only income bracket that Trump won resoundingly was the $100,000-$199,999 a year: 58 percent versus Biden's 41 percent.[17] Without collaboration from establishment Republicans and the rich, Trumpism wouldn't have reshaped the political landscape.

We don't have to select a single motivation: neofascism is psychological *and* economic. These motivations interact. The lower middle class's genuine pain and economic desperation leads them to visit this unhappiness on others. Trumpism offers them an outlet for sadism, racism, and xenophobia. It has given them a psychic income, even as it reduced their quality of life by heightening inequality and mauling the social safety net. They enjoy a vicarious connection to Trump, and they can express revanchist nationalism through Trump's rhetoric and the notion that his movement will "Make America Great Again." Meanwhile, Wall Street has laughed its way to the bank even as it disdains Trump's déclassé vulgarity.

Some of Fromm's observations ring especially true. Trump's lack of a coherent ideology beyond favoring capitalist interests mirrors Hitler's "radical opportunism" and lack of "genuine political or economic principles" (220). Fromm wrote of Hitler that "he never fought against established strong power but always against groups which he thought to be essentially powerless" (232), and the same could be said of Trump and his propensity for picking on the weak. Additionally, Fromm notes of Hitler that

> He and the German people are always the ones who are innocent and the enemies are sadistic brutes. A great deal of this propaganda consists of deliberate, conscious lies. Partly, however, it has the same emotional 'sincerity' which paranoid accusations have. These accusations always have the function of a defense against being found out with regard to one's own sadism or destructiveness (228-29).

Such a comment could easily be transposed to Trump.

Fromm's approach to political analysis—his catholicity in examining economic, political, social, and psychological causes—is worth emulating. So is his appreciation of the fact that "destructiveness is the outcome of unlived life" (184). Socialists must point out the bait-and-switch that pseudo-populists use to seduce the lower middle class and segments of the working class. Nationalism and anti-urban animus distract from real causes of suffering. Anti-Semitism and xenophobia are the socialism of fools. We want to give people the real thing. If we improve material conditions and give people a chance at genuine happiness, destructive passions will abate and hopefully dissipate in time. The more we—without condescension—unmask the cynical manipulations that Trump and his ilk use to substitute nationalism for class politics, the more successful we will be at building a multiracial, cross-class coalition strong enough to create a world worth living in.

Fromm's Solution: Hope as a Revolutionary Force; Democratic Socialism as Escape to

Positive Freedom

Fromm perceived a direct connection between the contradictions of liberalism and monopoly capitalism and the rise of authoritarianism. The same feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and alienation that spawned Nazism exist in liberal formal democracies, where members of the middle class are menaced by "the power of monopolies and the superior strength of capital" (39) and society is organized on an inhuman scale. Economic and political conditions don't allow for the "active solidarity" and fulfilling "love and work" (36) that people need to transcend loneliness.

People need security, autonomy, community, love, and meaningful relationships. Democratic socialism—which Fromm defines as characterized by cooperation, democratic control, a balance between top-down economic planning and decentralized, bottom-up mass participation, and the intelligent administration of social resources—would resolve the powerlessness and anomie which epitomize capitalist modernity (271-76). Winning democratic socialism would liberate the individual. Thoroughgoing economic and political transformation will free us to realize our intellectual, emotional, and social potential. Fromm writes convincingly and passionately on this point:

> Only if man masters society and subordinates the economic machine to the purposes of human happiness, and only if he actively participates in the social process, can he overcome what now drives him into despair — his aloneness and his feeling of powerlessness. Man does not suffer so much from poverty today as he suffers from the fact that he has become a cog in a large machine, an automaton, that his life has become empty and lost its meaning. The victory over all kinds of authoritarian systems will be possible only if democracy does not retreat but takes the offensive and proceeds to realize what has been its aim in the minds of those who fought for freedom during the past centuries (276).

We live in a world where it's easy to lose hope, where socialism seems like a distant dream. Fromm argued that the loss of hope promotes political resignation, "physical or spiritual extinction."[18] It turns people into "well-adjusted members of the herd," inducing them to "reduce their demands to what they can get."[19] The perception that genuine social transformation is foreclosed is tremendously destructive for radical politics.[20] Hopelessness engenders political defeatism. Speaking directly to our present, Fromm warned of "the danger that the sense of powerlessness which grips people today — intellectuals as well as the average man — with ever increasing force, may lead them to accept a new version of corruption and original sin."[21]

Fromm's declaration that "to hope is an essential condition of being human"[22] was a direct response to this self-defeating tendency on the Left. Hope is a revolutionary force. Faith, provided it isn't passive and quietist,[23] is essential for our survival.[24] As Fromm wrote, "If people have reasons to believe that they are marching towards a better future, they can move mountains."[25]

In one of his last books, Fromm presciently warned that "even the remnant of democracy that still exists is doomed to yield to technocratic fascism…unless the giant corporations' big hold on the government (which becomes stronger daily) and on the population (via thought control through brainwashing) is broken."[26] The prospects for halting the world's downward spiral appear remote. But as Fromm reminded us, "In matters of life — be it of the individual or of a society — it does not matter whether the chance for cure is 51 percent or 5 percent. Life is precarious and unpredictable, and the only way to live it is to make every effort to save it as long as there is a possibility of doing so."[27] Armed with Fromm's keen analysis of fascism, confident that democratic socialism is the only true bulwark against barbarism, we must do our utmost to escape from fascism and achieve true freedom.

Notes

1. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969, p. 5. All parenthetical page numbers come from this book.

2. See my articles “Arendt and QAnon,” *Counterpunch*, Sept. 12, 2021; “Donald Trump and the Banality of Evil,” Open Democracy, Oct. 27, 2020; and “A Radical Cure: Hannah Arendt & Simone Weil on the Need for Roots,” *Philosophy Now*, Iss. 127: Aug./Sept. 2018.

3. “Erich Fromm and the Mass Psychology of Fascism: An Interview With Kieran Durkin,”

Jacobin, Apr. 16, 2021; Kieran Durkin, “Erich Fromm and the Revolution of Hope,” *Jacobin*, Aug. 18, 2020

4. Karl Marx, “Human Requirements and Division of Labour Under the Rule of Private Property,” in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), trans. by Martin Milligan.

5. “For Most Trump Voters, ‘Very Warm’ Feelings for Him Endured: An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters,” Pew Research, Aug. 9, 2018.

6. Kim Moody, “Who Put Trump in the White House?” *Jacobin*, Jan. 11, 2017.

7. “For Most Trump Voters, ‘Very Warm’ Feelings for Him Endured: An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters,” Pew Research, Aug. 9, 2018.

8. “Exit Polls 2020,” NBC News.

9. Moody, “Who Put Trump in the White House?”

10. Holly Otterbein and Megan Cassella, “Rank-and-file union members snub Biden for Trump,” *Politico,* Sept. 22, 2020.

11. “Exit Polls 2020,” NBC News.

12. Mindy Isser, “The Union Members Who Voted for Trump Have to Be Organized—Not Ignored,” *In These Times*, Dec. 28, 2020.

13. Nate Silver, “The Mythology of Trump’s ‘Working Class’ Support,” *FiveThirtyEight,* May 3, 2016.

14. Moody, “Who Put Trump in the White House?”

15. Mike Davis, “The Great God Trump and the White Working Class,” *Catalyst*, vol. 1, no. 1 (spring 2017).

16. Public Citizen, “Trump’s Corporate Cabinet: How Trump turned over the U.S. government to corporate insiders.”

17. “Exit Polls 2020,” NBC News.

18. Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, 4th ed. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1963), vi-vii.

19. Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 20.

20. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, 22.

21. Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (London: Routledge, 1965), 21.

22. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, 58.

23. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (London: Routledge, 1949), 209; Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 153.

24. Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, vi.

25. Erich Fromm, *May Man Prevail? An Inquiry into the Facts and Fictions of Foreign Policy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), 238.

26. Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), 180-181.

27. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, 141.