



On the Psychodynamics of Right-Wing Populism: A Frommian Perspective

Rainer Funk, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes right-wing populism according to Erich Fromm's social-psychanalytic approach and using his social-characterological insights on authoritarianism and narcissism. Right-wing populism can be explained much more plausibly if it is understood as an expression of a reactive narcissistic identity construction rather than as a return of fascism and authoritarianism.

KEYWORDS

Right wing populism;
authoritarianism; narcissism;
group narcissism; social
identity; need for certainty

Why a psychodynamic approach?

Authoritarianism and right-wing populism and nationalism are on the rise worldwide. It is happening in Brazil, the Philippines, in the USA under Trump, with Wilders in Holland, Le Pen in France, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), with Brexit in the UK, Poland, Hungary. Authoritarian regimes are also present in communist China, Russia, Belarus, India, the Mullahs in Iran, the Sheikhs in Saudi Arabia, or the super-authoritarian North Korea.

The sociological and socio-psychological explanation of these authoritarian shifts and right-wing populist developments is still strongly influenced along the lines of the concept of authoritarianism as developed by Adorno and the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950) in the so-called F-scale (Fascism scale) – see Fromm's critique of Adorno in (Fromm and Maccoby 1970, pp. 23–25). In contrast, Fromm's view of the authoritarian character, developed in the early 1930s (Fromm, 1936, 1941), sees basic character strivings as what determines character traits, attitudes, and behaviors. The authoritarian character is empirically inferred from certain basic attitudes – especially some forms of domination and submission.

This distinction is crucial from a psychodynamic point of view. To illustrate with an example: The behaviors, attitudes, and traits of rivalry can be based on very different basic strivings. To name just two: To be someone's rival can be an expression of self-assertion and self-interest, but it can also be an expression of a sadistic desire to put others down and torture them. Whether one or the other is the case can only be determined if the underlying character *orientation* is identified.

If we speak of authoritarianism and an authoritarian personality from a psychodynamic perspective, then we are primarily talking about the basic striving, i.e. the authoritarian character *orientation*. This basic orientation becomes manifested in various character traits, values, attitudes, but also in educational styles, political structures, modes of production and forms of work organization, and also in ways of thinking and in religious practices.

This contribution aims at assessing right-wing populism using the psychodynamic social character theory developed by Erich Fromm. The psychodynamic view leads to different social-psychological explanations of the phenomena and also to different conclusions for dealing with authoritarianism and right-wing populism than using a simple list of inferred attitudes based on Adorno's F scale.

Erich Fromm's theory of needs

The starting point for Fromm's social character theory is his different psychoanalytic concept of the human condition. Sigmund Freud saw human's thinking, feeling and acting as being governed by libidinous innate drives that have to be satisfied. For the purpose of co-existence these drives can and must be modified. They are partly repressed and defended against in order to be satisfied. In the end everything turns around libidinous drives which have to be satisfied. Erich Fromm also explains human thinking, feeling and acting in terms of forms of satisfaction, but he is not concerned with the satisfaction of libidinal drives, but with the satisfaction of the need for relatedness. From the mid-1930s on, Fromm conceives humans as relational beings whose main task is to develop their own forms of being related to reality, to other people and to oneself.

According to Fromm (Fromm, 1973) the reason for this is that humans are transformed by a new brain organization that replaces instinctual forms of being related by new forms of neuronal networks or psychic structures (character structures). These newly acquired neuronal networks enable humans to be related not only physically and through sense-perceptions, but by imaginative abilities and new existential needs, such as the need for a sense of identity and the need for a frame of orientation and devotion. Humans are able to connect their affects not only with sensual cognitions but also with ideas and imaginations and new ways of satisfying their needs of relatedness. Transformed by imagination these new forms of relatedness are partly mental and partly virtual. This makes humans an enormously creative animal that can create cultures in which they live. These cultures can create life loving forms of relatedness or they can develop destructive forms of relatedness, with desires to be cruel or violent to a degree unknown to any other species.

Some of the consequences that result from this different concept of the human being as a being of relatedness shall be made more explicit here:

The way of being related

The psychological core problem of humans is not only their relatedness, but also the *way of being related*. In regard to the kind of relatedness, humans can become more independent and free to the extent that they satisfy their need for relatedness with the help of their own physical, sensory, imaginative, cognitive and emotional powers. The more fully these capacities can differentiate during psychosocial development, the more individuals are able to relate to reality, to him or herself and to others in more rational and loving ways.

One's own bodily powers are a model for one's own mental and psychic powers in two respects: It is true for the bodily powers that the more we exercise, the more strength and movement we acquire. The same is valid for the cognitive and emotional powers: The more humans practice their own abilities, the better they can think for themselves, feel their own feelings, want something for themselves, develop interests and act out of their own strivings. Fromm called this way of being related "productive" and the corresponding character orientation a "productive character" (see Fromm, 1947, pp. 82–107).

Fromm views the tendency to want to develop one's own possibilities as innate capacities. This "biophilic" tendency (Fromm, 1964, pp. 45–48), shows up very impressively in the development of the bodily powers in the first 15 months of life. The dynamics observed here also apply in a similar way to the development of the cognitive and emotional powers, as illustrated by the desire for exploration. The development of these powers is strongly dependent on stimulating, caring, and containing relational experiences.

The need to be related to a social group and belonging

A second consequence that arises from Fromm's approach to the need for relatedness concerns the *need for relatedness to a social environment*. Fromm described a list of basic human needs in his book

The Sane Society (1955, pp. 22–65). Every human being must satisfy his need to be related to reality, to other individuals and to a social group (due to the *need for rootedness*). He also described the universal need for a frame of orientation and an object of devotion (Fromm, 1955, pp. 38–60).

For Fromm, this emphasis on the human being as a social being who cannot live without a real or imagined other was the result of the human socio-biological constitution. “For man as man” says Fromm in *Beyond the Chains of Illusions* (1962, p. 126), “the sense of complete aloneness and separateness is close to insanity.” Every human being must therefore feel a sense of belonging to a group and satisfy his need for a social identity. Such a need to be socially related also applies to highly individualized individuals, even those who purposefully distance themselves from any group affiliation. Psychologically, people who purposefully distance themselves from all social groupings continue to be concerned with their group membership.

The relevance of the need for social identity becomes immediately clear when people feel that they are forgotten and that they are devalued, written off, insignificant, without any success, made into failures and losers. They feel deeply threatened in their sociality and try to compensate for the madness of social isolation by belonging to groups symbolizing power, violence and/or superiority. Many empirical studies of right-wing extremist groups show that their adherents come predominantly from social classes and milieus that have slipped into the precariat and into a lack of social significance.

The need to be related to oneself and to our sense of identity

Fromm’s approach to the need for relatedness and the kind of relatedness proves to be particularly fruitful when it comes to the need to be related to oneself and our sense of identity. The need to be related to oneself has nothing to do with egoism, selfishness or narcissism, but with the fact that man can – and must – make himself an object of this need for relatedness. The satisfaction of this need presupposes that there are inner ideas and internalized images of who I am, who I want to be, who I don’t want to be, who I want to become, and how I can experience myself as worthy. Without such internalized images there is no positively or negatively sensing oneself, no sense of identity and self-esteem.¹

We are living in a time of globalization, in which everything is made more flexible, in which tolerance and multi-culturalism are the order of the day, and in which there are hardly any fixed exterior orders or settings, so that sensing one’s identity also has to be increasingly flexible: one is one person at work and another at home, one person when shopping or doing sports and another in the family, one in personal relationships and another in business contacts. The great challenge is not only to slip into roles, but also to *forget* who you are in order to sense yourself creatively and authentically as someone in one situation and as someone different in another situation.

No doubt, this “playful” way of satisfying the need for a sense of identity presupposes a high degree of individualization, autonomy and independence. It can hardly be expected from people who are overdependent on others, are hampered by inner constraints, or by people who need to mold themselves to the expectations and role attributions of others.

Reactive identity constructions in the face of increasing uncertainties

From a psychological perspective the socially favored *flexible* sensing of identity is a possibility to satisfy this need – and not a proof that the need for sensing one’s identity is a thing of the past. Only in rare cases does the playful handling of multiple identities and personalities lead to an actual psychotic identity diffusion.

¹With Freud’s theory of libido, Erich Fromm also rejected his structural model of ego – id – superego. What Freud tried to describe with the functions of the super-ego and ego-ideal in the structural model, Fromm largely explains with the need for a sense of identity.

Our sense of identity is coming under threat with the fluidity of roles, job insecurity, the climate crisis, refugee flows and personal calamities. Therefore there is an increased need for maintaining our sense of identity by what is known and familiar. In doing so there is a greater need to aggressively and self-assertively distance oneself from alien or non-definable identity constructions. All this is leading to an increase of reactive identity constructions. Three of the reactive identity constructions will be discussed here in particular.

A first reactive identity construction is *authoritarian in nature*. This is seen in *National Socialist, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic* symbolizations of domination and violence. It is characterized by an unquestionable faith and obedience toward authority, male supremacy, contempt for the weak, and rigid discipline. Mostly, the symbolizations point toward authoritarian psychodynamics.

A second reactive identity construction is characterized by the development of patriotic and nationalistic fantasies of greatness. Its special characteristic is the idealization of the own group with simultaneous devaluation of everything that is different from the group one belongs to. Thus, identity is secured by a narcissistic idea of the greatness of one's own family, one's own group, religion, nation, and so on.

A third reactive identity construction takes *refuge in "internal cultures"* [in German "Binnenkulturen"], which shows features of a closed culture. It is especially seen in migrants who come from more traditional cultures and experience foreign and more flexible identities as existentially threatening. Psychologically people can only sense their own "I" in accordance with the "we" of the family, the clan, tradition, religion, or religious and political institutions. An autonomous individual life in independence seems to be just as dangerous as a self-determined, more flexible experience of identity.

For migrants, life in internal cultures often represents a psychological means of survival. The more collectively organized the internal culture is – i.e., oriented toward tradition, religion, family honor, etc. – the more difficult it is to take the step into the greater individualized environment. Conflicts arise between the generations when the younger generation dares to take a step out of the collective.

The three reactive identity constructions – the authoritarian, the narcissistic and the recourse to mostly collectively organized internal cultures – are clearly reactions to political changes as well as to modernization pushes in economy, society and culture. They are experienced as threatening by the persons concerned for different reasons. But what all three reactive identity constructions have in common is an overarching need to belong to a social group. Humans must develop a sense of belonging and a social identity if they do not want to become crazy.

Taking refuge into an internal culture reactive formation will not be explored in greater depth, but I want to consider in more detail the psychodynamics of authoritarian and narcissistic reactive identity construction. In doing so it is important to keep in mind the psychodynamic bases of identity-seeking mentioned earlier. For only when one has recognized the psychological distress that makes people receptive to extremist, nationalist, and right-wing populism can we develop ideas and programs that avoid an ultimately counterproductive activism. This activism exhausts itself and accomplishes nothing by taking a position *against* right-wing populism and xenophobia, nationalism, and group narcissism.

The authoritarian identity construction

Fromm speaks of an authoritarian orientation in economy, politics, society, but also in the psychological sense, in how individuals are related to others, to oneself, the environment, or to work. The authoritarian orientation is characterized by sadistic exercise of *domination* and masochistic *submissiveness*. Both aspects are symbiotically dependent on each other (see Fromm, 1941, pp. 141–179) and express themselves in being related to others and to oneself. The sadistic basic striving wants to exercise control over others in a variety of ways and also over oneself. The masochistic basic striving idealizes and submits to authority blindly and obediently. In the relation to oneself it ends in

a comprehensive self-degradation and selflessness, which strives for nothing of its own and is plagued by feelings of guilt.

With regard to the *organization of groups and institutions*, authoritarianism is characterized by a hierarchy of top and bottom as well as by a strong hierarchical differentiation, by a sophisticated command and obedience structure in the leadership of the group or institution. It is also characterized by rituals of superiority and proof of power on the one hand and by rituals of submissiveness, idealization and veneration (“Führer cult”) on the other.

The emotional dependency between the person exercising authority and the person that submits is decisive for the reactive identity formation. This is of course not admitted by the person exercising authority, but it is expressed all the more strongly by the submissive person in manifestations and rituals of surrender, gratitude, or dependence.

Fromm has provided a very plausible explanation of the psychological dynamics and identity construction that keeps the authoritarian system stable. It can be described thus: Under the pressure of the authority, the submissive person gets rid of any autonomous powers that would make him or her competent, wise, strong and independent and is willing to project these qualities onto the authority. The *authority* is now powerful, wise, elevated, strong, caring, benevolent, gracious, etc. What submission gains in return is a secondary share of the powers projected onto the authority. However, he or she can only feel good, valuable and powerful insofar as he/she is symbiotically bound to the authority, to whom everything is felt to be owed.

There, it is a need to blindly trust authority and defend it against hostility from third parties. Authoritarian governments reinforce this need for blind trust by building powerful monitoring systems that are able to nip any disobedience in the bud and build authoritarian systems that have the primary task of justifying and defending their own system. For example, communist countries fiercely defend the Marxist-Leninist dogma and get rid of any independent voice and the Catholic Church has historically fixated on dogmatic truths and has persecuted heretics.

Submissive individuals make themselves dependent on the dominant party, but also the individual exercising domination projects his own feelings of incapacity, his deficits, his feelings of powerlessness onto those who submit to him. This personification of everything that is weak is put in the other for which the authoritarian person has only contempt.

When authoritarian systems come to an end, identity construction becomes fragile and submissive personalities start to become disobedient and rebel. The symbiotic structure is then in danger: The person exercising domination realizes how dependent he/she is on the goodwill and obedience of his followers. Authoritarian leaders will do everything possible to force obedience and make greater demands for submissiveness. At present, this can be observed particularly impressively in Belarus and Russia, but also in how China – in its own authoritarian way – deals with the democracy movement in Hong Kong.

Even if the latter phenomena indicate that democratization and individualization processes are bringing down the authoritarian identity construction, right-wing extremist and also some right-wing populist movements currently show that it is still attractive for certain people. However such attractiveness can only be maintained in countries in which there are still strong authoritarian tendencies stemming from the time of the very authoritarian actually existing socialism.

The narcissistic construction of identity

For most right-wing populist movements in Western Europe, the U.S., and some other countries, a narcissistic identity construction increasingly dominates but it is based on a different psychodynamics. A narcissistic identity construction can occur reactively when self-regulation – that is, one’s own way of relating to oneself and feeling a sense of belonging to a social group – is threatened, for example, by an overly comprehensive flexibilization of all aspects of life. At least some hints shall be given here to why people increasingly feel threatened in their individual and social sense of self.

As always, there are very personal reasons that have to do with individual deficits in identity development – such as a largely non-empathetic mother. Of greater interest are factors that many people feel threaten their sense of self and self-esteem and make them receptive to narcissistic identity constructions. These include the changes in the world of work, professional life, and social security that accompany globalization and digitalization, but also the insecurity caused by terrorism, climate change, migration flows, uncontrollable financial capitalism, and anti-democratic developments in politics.

From a social-psychoanalytical perspective, quite different threats to self-experience can be identified. They have their origin in other social character formations. For example, today's omnipresent marketing orientation manifests itself in the striving to be successful. This usually leads to a selling out of the self. To sell oneself successfully the internalized images of oneself play a minor role in constructing an identity. If recognition from outside and from others fails, the threat of a loss of self is protected through a narcissistic self-idealization.

A new social character orientation is increasingly becoming dominant that also favors a narcissistic identity construction. I have called it the "Ego-oriented character" (Funk 2005, 2011, 2019, pp. 129–143). The basic motivation is to create reality anew without the limitations created by dependence on others. Hence the Ego-oriented character wants to make everything new and different, including one's own personality and perception of identity. Constructing a self through simulation techniques usually leads to the "de-activation" of cognitive, imaginative, and emotional capacities.

More people are responding to these unconsciously felt deficits and sense of self with a narcissistic character formation, in which the marvels of technology become idealized self-objects. These idealized "self-objects" become part of one's own self through devices which enable a feeling of one's own greatness. Terms like "i-phone," "i-pad," "i-tunes" etc. express this fittingly. The flip side, however, is the anxious question: Who am I without my i-phone?

These brief remarks should suffice to suggest that contemporary social character orientations contribute to a loss of self that reactively favors a narcissistic construction of identity. Let us now look into the psychodynamics of a narcissistic construction of identity and self-esteem.²

Unlike the authoritarian solution, where salvation is sought in a submissive emotional attachment to a powerful authority, narcissistic identity construction results in an inflation of one's own ego or in the idealization of aspects of one's own self. At the same time there is a strong distancing from everything that does not mirror or complement the grandiose self. Social groups who feel socially ignored and devalued solve the problem of not feeling recognized either through fantasizing themselves as great with the help of digital technology and electronic media, or they identify with a person, group or institution fantasized as great to be able to feel themselves great – thus participating in a form of *group narcissism*. At the same time they project everything that they might perceive negatively about themselves onto other groups of people who they perceive as being different. Groups of people who are seen as strangers and different from themselves are declared enemies.

The following *features* of narcissistic identity construction result from the *psychodynamics of narcissism* when dealing with oneself and with others:

- All forms of narcissism follows the *logic of idealization and devaluation*, usually of overestimation of oneself *and* disregard for people who are seen as different and inferior. Thus, a genuine self-love and healthy love or patriotism for one's country can be immediately distinguished from a narcissistic love and a narcissistic patriotism by whether the love of one's own country or group includes a devaluation, hostility or even demonization of groups of people who are seen as foreign or different.

²For the following, see Fromm, 1964, pp. 62–94; Fromm, 1991 [1962], pp. 86–93; Fromm & Maccoby, 1970, pp. 254–256 as well as the account of the narcissistic social character in Funk, 2019, pp. 110–129.

- The narcissistic construction of identity *produces stereotypes of the enemy*: Those who feel threatened by an “axis of evil” (G. W. Bush), by “Jewish financial capitalism” (the National Socialists), by a “hostile takeover” by Islam (Islamophobia) or by “rogue states” and the drug mafia of Mexico (Trump) show that they need enemy stereotypes in order to be able to feel great about themselves.
- Narcissists *split reality*: There is no “both/and,” but only an “either/or,” only completely good or completely bad. The logic is: Whoever is not for me is automatically against me and must be eliminated.
- Narcissists are *destructive toward everything that is different* and not their own. This is evident not only in hatred of everything strange, but also in right-wing extremist acts of violence. The enemy is to be destroyed.
- The main characteristic of narcissistic and group narcissistic dynamics is the claim to *greatness*. This can be seen in the preferred use of superlatives or, for example, in the fact that every second sentence by Trump contained the word “great” or “greatness.” His program of “make America great again” got almost 50% of U.S. voters to vote for him – a very frightening fact.
- Narcissism is always accompanied by a *distorted perception of reality*. A distortion of external reality and of other people, but also an internal distortion of one’s own self. “Post-truth” and “post-factual world” are primarily narcissistic phenomena.
- Finally, two more features of narcissistic identity construction are worth mentioning. First, the *inability to be self-critical* and the *inability to tolerate the criticism of others*. Second, violent *rage reactions* when someone dares to attack and offend the claim to greatness of narcissists and narcissistic groups. Violated narcissism always leads to intense fury and to a great readiness to use violence against those who express criticism and question their grandiosity.

The attempt to psychoanalyze right-wing populism and right-wing extremism can be explained more plausibly by proposing that many current political phenomena can be understood as expressions of a reactive narcissistic identity construction, rather than as a return of fascism and authoritarianism.

From this perspective the increasing deficits in feeling of self and self-esteem are causing more people to take refuge in identity constructions based on a narcissistic social character formation. I do not share the concerns of critical social scientists about a new authoritarianism or a return of the old forms of authoritarianism. On the contrary, I am convinced that their analyses, in the tradition of Adorno, overlook or misinterpret essential psychological facts, and that the political counter-strategies they propose are more counterproductive than purposeful.

Conclusions

The analysis presented here does not make suggestions for politically adequate counteraction any easier. The features of narcissistic identity constructions are characterized by a high vulnerability, so that any kind of criticism is perceived as an aggressive attack and responded with a fierce counter-aggression. This analysis suggests more fruitful ways to tactically counteract narcissistic identity constructions:

- Any change in narcissistic identity constructions requires a high degree of *empathy* for the deficits in self-experience and self-esteem of narcissistic individuals and groups. Lack of empathy leads to pathologizing and demonizing those affected.
- It is equally essential *not to react* to the aggressive and provocative actions of right-wing extremist and right-wing populist groups *with counter-aggression* as long as there are no acute and life-threatening dangers emanating from these movements.
- It is important to *personally sense* the devaluations, injuries and humiliations that lead people to try to save their identity and self-esteem by identifying with collective narcissistic fantasies of greatness.

- It is important to address narcissistic injuries by not using *suggestive methods* that try to bolster positive self-esteem. As long as the deep devaluations and insults caused by precarious social or work situations or by reactionary cultural conditions are ignored, nothing changes in narcissistic identity constructions.

To “sympathize” with narcissistic people does not mean to justify their hostile actions. It is very important to not allow oneself to be provoked by them, because provocative actions usually trigger an aggressive defense in the provoked and the capacity for understanding is blocked. Only those who have experienced and know what it means to feel humiliated or written off can understand why right-wing populists and right-wing extremists try to find ways out of their situation by being lured by grandiose ideas espoused by narcissistic leaders and by organizations that support this reactive identity formation.

The strategic way out, according to Fromm, is on the one side to eliminate devaluing conditions in economy, society and politics and on the other side to establish more productive ways of being related in one’s own work situation, social, and personal relationships – ways which allow more practice of one’s own physical, sensual, cognitive, imaginative and emotional abilities and hence are conducive to an authentic and independent self-esteem.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Rainer Funk, Ph.D. (1943), psychoanalyst and Erich Fromm’s sole Literary Executor, is living in Tübingen (Germany). He is editing Fromm’s writings and is the director of the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen that houses Fromm’s library and literary estate as well as a huge collection of secondary literature on Fromm. In addition he is the co-director of the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin. His own publications mostly refer on social psychological topics. In the last decade he analyzed a new social character orientation that is enthusiastic of constructing reality anew but suffers from an unconscious unbounded self. His last book publication in English is an introduction into the life and work of Erich Fromm. It was published 2019 with Bloomsbury under the title “Life Itself Is an Art”.

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