Violence and Narcissism

A Frommian Perspective on Destructiveness under Authoritarianism

Leonidas K. Cheliotis

Queen Mary, University of London, UK

In his limited but influential writings on narcissism, Freud closely associated the concept with the supposed propensity of humans towards authoritarian domination, including destructiveness. This article offers a sympathetic appraisal of Erich Fromm's revisionist elaboration of Freud to account for narcissism, not just as an antecedent of authoritarian domination and violence, but also as being compatible with humanism. Rather than putting forth a new orthodoxy, the aim is to uncover an unduly ignored or undermined perspective of the unconscious and its relation to the outer socio-political world. Fromm is not alone in suggesting revisions to Freudian depth psychology (see further McLaughlin, 2001), nor are revisionisms to Freudian depth psychology the sole avenues into the social and political dimensions of narcissism (see, e.g., Benjamin, 1988; Chodorow, 1978). However, Fromm is distinct in painstakingly correcting and developing Freud's tradition in general, and his conception of narcissism in particular, against the background of theoretical insights and empirical findings drawn from political sociology, anthropology, and history (see further Cheliotis, 2011).[1]

For Fromm, narcissism is a constituent component of authoritarian domination, as this may simultaneously assume passive and active forms. Just as submission to external authorities stems from fear of failure and loss in the face of the dangers and responsibilities inherent in freedom, so power over others serves to reaffirm feelings of personal strength and superiority (Fromm, 1941/1994, 1973/1984). But what

renders people susceptible to authoritarian domination, Fromm clarifies, is not their narcissistic inclinations as such. It is rather the desire to uphold or improve one's social standing according to the requirements of given cultural milieus and the overarching 'meta-structures' of politics and the economy; indeed, Fromm applies this argument to governing elites as much as to the populace at large. As he also underscores, any individual supportive of authoritarianism is bound to encounter the narcissistic problem of maintaining a clear conscience, a problem which, as he explains, is resolved through the use of legitimation techniques that emerge from the same milieus and 'meta-structures' as those defining what comprises

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[1] For similar and more recent attempts to employ psychoanalysis (often, but not always, of Freudian inspiration) in social science, see, amongst others, Chancer, 1992; Craib, 1990; Scheff, 2006; Smelser, 1998.

social distinction. Crucially, the identification of socio-political environments as central to the growth of authoritarianism allows Fromm not only to theorise a resolution, but to do so by breaking with the conventional, pathologising conceptions of narcissism, proposing that the route out of states of domination passes through man's own need for narcissistic relatedness.[2] The Frommian vision is a world where individuals are bound together in harmony and love without compromising their individuality–a world where narcissism acquires benign forms.

With a view to highlighting the longstanding and continuing relevance of Frommian scholarship to a range of epistemological and substantive debates on authoritarianism and beyond, it is either contrasted or combined below with various pertinent writings of other thinkers. Whilst Fromm might not have found all that follows familiar, the hope is that he could have recognised it as being in broad accord with his perspective. After all, Fromm himself often treated his work as a *modus operandi*, a method by which to pose and solve problems in divergent temporal and spatial contexts, helping to discover general principles without disregard for specificities.

I begin by placing the discussion within the methodological debate over the analytic operations that are required for an adequate understanding of authoritarian violence, explaining why a psychoanalytic perspective is necessary. Next, I briefly examine Fromm's take on the Freudian concept of narcissism, before proceeding to explore in some depth his account of the symbolic mechanisms and contextual conditions that must combine in practice for narcissistic energies to be channelled into the emergence and sustenance of authoritarianism and violence. The focus in this regard is first on the populace and then on governing elites. The article concludes with a short exposition of Fromm's concept of benign narcissism, both in terms of its specific content and the conditions of its possibility.

Epistemological Reflections on Authoritarian Violence

Thematically speaking, this article is situated squarely within the age-old debate over how to explain that people, objectively failing their cherished moral values and even their basic material interests, consciously consent to the exercise of violence against given others under

conditions of authoritarianism. In line with Fromm (1941/1994), an authoritarian attitude is taken to entail both the 'masochistic' desire to submit to authoritarian regimes and the 'sadistic' urge to dominate over others–be it through submitting to, or enacting violence on the behalf of, authoritarian regimes.[3] A further question addressed in this article, albeit more briefly, concerns authoritarian elites and their own objective failure to meet personal and in-group standards of rationality and morality in their governing behaviour.

Both themes necessarily involve examining how individuals come to perceive themselves and their broader social world in ways that legitimate *prima facie* illegitimate social orders. This is because all individuals, regardless of their position within social space, continuously assess the rationality and morality of their actions; indeed, no action may be undertaken unless individuals deem it accordant with their principles of rationality and morality (see further Vetlesen, 1994). Accounting for misperceptions of factually illegitimate social orders as legitimate is essentially part of the broader project of accounting for the forces that deprive subjects of their very subjectivity in the sense of incorporating them ideologically (see further Cheliotis, 2010a). Yet the analytic operations one must perform to identify these forces are an issue fraught with disagreement. There is no consensus as to whether one should start from the fuzzy experience of life as lived and articulated by individuals, or, conversely, from the crude tangible indices of the world that surrounds and stifles them. Should one, perhaps, grant epistemological priority to some alternative standpoint?

So-called 'subjectivism' or 'constructivism', propounded most notably by Harold Garfinkel (1967) and Herbert Blumer (1969), suggests that we conduct open-ended inductions from individual patterns of thought. Namely, that we begin by looking at the ways in which people reflect upon themselves, and then proceed to examine how these reflections are indicative of particular social and cultural contexts. From this standpoint, for instance, political rhetoric is no more than a framework within which the individual thinks and acts–it is, in fact, the latter who lends meaning and life to the former, not *vice versa*. But, as Wacquant (1992: 11) com-

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[2] Fromm uses 'man' and the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. Outside quotations, I have chosen to use the male and female pronouns interchangeably.

[3] Whilst, as we shall see later, Fromm mainly has in mind the totalitarian regimes in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, he is primarily concerned with the symbolic mechanisms and contextual conditions that give rise to authoritarian sentiments, rather than the specific structural components of authoritarian regimes as such.

ments, to give voice to subjects as the initial step towards accounting for the breadth and 'weight' of impositions on the self violates the first and widely accepted principle of Émile Durkheim's 'sociological method': the systematic eradication of preconceptions, of 'the fallacious ideas that dominate the mind of the layman, the yoke of these empirical categories, which from long continued habit have become tyrannical' (Durkheim, 1893/1964: 32). Subjectivism, in other words, is unduly optimistic because overly agential in its conceptualisation of selfhood.

By contrast, so-called 'objectivists' or 'structuralists', from Durkheim to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962/1966), set out to define the structural forces that influence individual thought and conduct. To this goal, they study society 'from the outside', from the viewpoint of institutions and more or less separately from individuals and groups, as if the former wholly and permanently control the perceptions of the latter. Thus, if subjectivism exaggerates the agential powers of individuals, objectivism reifies structures 'by treating them as autonomous entities endowed with the ability to "act" in the manner of historical agents' (Wacquant, 1992: 8). At the same time, the objectivist perspective leaves us in the dark as to why particular subjects come to locate themselves in particular ways within particular rhetorics, political or otherwise.

More fruitfully, such thinkers as Pierre Bourdieu and Stuart Hall have promoted a synthesis of subjectivism and objectivism, constructivism and structuralism. Bourdieu argues that, whilst the objectivist rejection of individual preconceptions must always predate the apprehension of the world from the subjectivist viewpoint, one should not miss or underestimate the fact that individuals always play a role in the construction of reality–they 'make meaningful the world which makes them' (ibid.: 7). Thus, Bourdieu suggests, society should be studied as comprising a 'double objectivity': the '"objectivity of the first-order", which is constituted by the *distribution* of *material* resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and values', and the '"objectivity of the second order", in the form of systems of *classification*, the mental and bodily schemata that function as *symbolic* templates for the practical activities –conduct, thoughts, feelings, and judgments– of social agents' (ibid., original emphasis). Approaching the two types of objectivity as standing in a relationship of mutual constitution to one another, Bourdieu speaks of socially constructed perceptive 'dispositions' that emerge to obscure the arbitrary bases of inequality. What makes people susceptible to acquiring and enacting particular perceptive dispositions, even against their own interests and values, is that perceptive dispositions subtly express established positions within social space, which they thereby consolidate (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1989, 2005).

Bourdieu's model is echoed in the 'middle-ground' perspective suggested by Hall. To Hall, whilst symbolic mechanisms such as discourse help leave the imprint of power on individual thought and action –an observation which carries the methodological implication that they are best understood through the lenses of subordinates themselves–, the imperatives of symbolic communication provide much narrower and more substantive limits on individual thought and action than subjectivists would ever have us believe. Whence the need to start by adopting an objectivist perspective, soon followed by locating 'ourselves in the position from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus becom[ing] its "subjects" by "subjecting" ourselves to its meanings, power, and regulation. All discourses, then, construct *subject positions*, from which alone they make sense' (Hall, 1997: 56).

The problem with such syntheses of objectivism and subjectivism is that they fail to take count of the fact that particular perceptive dispositions or ways of sense-making are more desirable in themselves than others. As a consequence of this, they ultimately fail to explain why individuals in disparate social positions may be equally prone to share the same perceptive stance (see further Cheliotis, 2011). To put the point differently, Bourdieu and Hall do well in describing the social processes through which existing power dynamics are reproduced, but fall short of revealing the deeper, psychological reasons why existing power dynamics came to be produced in the first place or why mechanisms of their reproduction so often meet with success (Steinmetz, 2005, 2006). The emerging gap may only be filled through engaging with psychoanalytic insights into the innate human dispositions with which symbolic constructs need to resonate if they are to prove effective. Indeed, if instincts are, to use the fashionable phrase, what is always there already, they should be accorded chronological primacy in the analytic process, even though attention needs then to shift to their development under the influence of socio-political forces.

In lieu of an exhaustive excursus into psychoanalytic scholarship on the complex linkages between the individual, her society, and politics –an excursus that would at any rate be impossible in the space of an article (see further Layton *et al.*, 2006)–, I turn below to Erich Fromm and his theory of narcissism as it relates specifically to the emergence and sustenance of authoritarianism and violence.

Signposts on the Concept of Narcissism

Narcissism, it has been said, is 'the metaphor of the human condition'–such is its centrality to everyday life, especially in contemporary Western societies, and so great its use as a descriptive term, even in lay parlance (Sugerman, 1976: 12). And yet, only rarely, if ever, are Fromm's extensive and insightful writings on the subject discussed in the literature, be it psychoanalytical or sociological, scholarly or mere pop (see, e.g., Jacoby, 1985; Morrison, 1989; Schwartz-Salant, 1982; Gaitanidis & Curk, 2007; Elliott & Lemert, 2006; Lowen, 1997; Sennett, 1977). Worse still, on several of those few occasions where Fromm's work does register, readers are presented with a highly distorted picture of its scope and depth. In his best-seller *The Culture of Narcissism*, for instance, Christopher Lasch refers to Fromm's *The Heart of Man* and the discussion of 'individual' and 'social narcissism' elaborated therein as 'appropriately published in a series of books devoted to "Religious Perspectives", [because it] provides an excellent example of the inclination, in our therapeutic age, to dress up moralistic platitudes in psychiatric garb' (Lasch, 1979: 31).

According to Lasch, that Fromm is 'eager to sermonise about the blessings of brotherly love' leads him to commit a series of fundamental analytical and substantive mistakes: from '[confusing] cause and effect, attributing to a cult of privatism developments that derive from the disintegration of public life', to '[using] the term narcissism so loosely that it retains little of its psychological content', to describing narcissism 'simply as the antithesis of that watery love for humanity (disinterested "love for the stranger")', to 'equating narcissism with everything selfish and disagreeable [thereby ignoring] historical specificity', to '[failing] to explore any of the character traits associated with pathological narcissism, which in less extreme form appear in such profusion in the everyday life of our age: dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings', to missing 'what might be called the secondary characteristics of narcissism: pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humour'. As a consequence of all this, Lasch tells us, Fromm deprives himself of 'any basis on which to make connections between the narcissistic personality type and certain characteristic patterns of contemporary culture, such as the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play

spirit, deteriorating relations between men and women' (ibid.: 31-33).

Sidestepping the fallacious attachment to the notion that theorising in the social sciences is possible *without* a moral perspective, it may be said that Lasch subjects the essence of Fromm's work to a Kafkaesque metamorphosis, as it were. This will become evident throughout the remainder of this article (and see also Maccoby, 1981: 43-46), but to start here with the obvious, as suggested in the very subtitle of *The Heart of Man –Its Genius for Good and Evil–*, Fromm's intention is to address as open-mindedly as possible the issue of whether humans are basically evil and corrupt, or, alternatively, good and perfectible. 'There is no denying that each man goes forward in the direction he has chosen: that of life or that of death; that of good or that of evil', he concludes (Fromm, 1964: 23); if we are adequately to explain why history continues to be written in blood, however, then we need to engage in an up-close analysis of the *situational* factors under the influence of which a majority of average men choose the direction of death and evil over that of life and good; why they proceed to act like hungry wolves towards their weaker fellow men, even if it is in their nature to behave like harmless sheep. That mass phenomenon of solipsism and xenophobia which Fromm terms 'malignant narcissism' may be the key here. Not that 'wars are primarily the result of psychological forces. [...] But just as one needs weapons in order to fight a war, one needs the passions of hate, indignation, destructiveness, and fear in order to get millions of people to risk their lives to become murderers' (ibid.: 22).

Narcissus, it may be recalled, was a legendary young man of renowned beauty who turned down the love of the nymph Echo. Such was his callousness that the Gods vowed to punish Narcissus by causing him to fall in love with the reflection of his very own image in the water of a mountain pool. His end was tragic: yearning to embrace the mirror image, he fell into the water and drowned. A phalanx of psychoanalysts, from Freud and Fromm to Kohut and Kernberg, have drawn inspiration from the tale of Narcissus to explore such distinct phenomena as love, creativity, castration fear, inferiority, shame, lack of empathy, rage, and sadism, and also for the understanding of mass psychoses, particularly that of consensual submission to authoritarian regimes. For his part, Fromm takes the theoretical lead from Freud and his distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary narcissism' in particular.

Primary narcissism, according to Freud, occurs when the libido is exclusively directed to the self. Infants, to instance an ideal-typical case,

are born in the delusion that the whole world revolves around them. Although narcissistic delusions never fully disappear, they may be reduced in the process of maturation to the socially accepted minimum. If, on the other hand, narcissistic delusions go unchecked, they may seriously distort rational judgment and give rise to overly favourable evaluations of the self, alongside extreme anxieties of being found weak and worthless. Such states Freud describes in pathological terms, as manifestations of 'secondary narcissism'. Fromm accepts the general premise of 'secondary narcissism' as developed by Freud, and elaborates that it should not be equated with selfishness or egotism. For, unlike narcissists, selfish or egotistical persons do not necessarily overevaluate themselves, nor do they always lack awareness of the social world (Fromm, 1964).

Against Freud, however, Fromm wishes to pay greater recognition to the social bases of secondary narcissism, as well as to extend its application beyond problems of the mentally ill. More specifically, Fromm's aim is to deconstruct the narcissism of 'normal' individuals, especially the social processes by which the narcissistic character becomes typical of many 'normal' people in their symbiotic relatedness; so typical, indeed, that normalcy itself becomes pathological on a mass scale (Fromm, 1991/2010).

Narcissism as an Antecedent of Authoritarian Violence

Implicit in Fromm's theorisation of human behaviour is the notion that narcissism forces individuals to constantly evaluate and try to ensure the legitimacy –namely, the rationality and morality– of their actions. However, following in the footsteps of Marx, Fromm suggests that the concrete standards by which actions are evaluated and to which they are adjusted usually derive from one's social existence (one's position within social space, as Bourdieu would put it) and the unfolding of the economic mode of production in particular. This means that the content of evaluations and the forms actions consequently take are anything but certain. Whilst, in other words, narcissistic urges inescapably set in motion the process of continuously assessing the legitimacy of one's own actions, there are no guarantees as to whether engagement in this process will bring about objectively rational and moral outcomes. Individuals themselves, of course, tend to believe the reverse by mere dint of engaging in continuous self-evaluation, but this should be taken to reflect the distorting effect narcissistic urges may have on human perception and action; it turns out that narcissism may contribute to diluting the very process of reflection it causes. Below I consider Fromm's view of the mechanisms and contextual conditions that combine to narcissistically distort self-evaluation in ways that legitimate acceptance of, and even participation in, authoritarian violence against designated others.

Fromm first focuses on discourse and its narcissistic appeal; namely, its potential to call for actions through which individuals can experience a sense of strength without compromising their conscience. Thus, authoritarianism as manifestly expressed against third parties is legitimated by reference to ideological constructs that divide society into pairs of extremes along the lines of moralism: '"We" are admirable; "they" are despicable. "We" are good; "they" are evil' (Fromm, 1964: 82). Indeed, the practice of violence may be framed in the pharisaic language of altruism, appearing to be a 'well-meant attempt' to bring victims closer to higher principles (ibid.). As Fromm is quick to recognise, however, stereotypes may only be validated retroactively. Just as 'for a sadist the fact that he can kill a man proves that the killer is superior' (ibid.: 86), so too collective violence against weaker others is taken to attest the moral disposition and superiority of the violent collectivity itself. The attentive reader will have noticed Fromm's shift of reference from individuals as such to their membership of exclusive collectivities. This is entirely compatible with his conceptualisation of narcissism, not only because he deems it possible that personal narcissism may be transformed into group or social narcissism, but also because he views this transformation as likely to further undermine rational judgement. '[W]ithin the favoured group', he writes, 'everybody's personal narcissism is flattered, and the fact that millions of people agree with the statements makes them appear as reasonable. What the majority of people consider to be "reasonable" is that about which there is agreement, if not amongst all, at least amongst a substantial number of people; "reasonable", for most people, has nothing to do with reason, but with consensus' (ibid.: 79-80).

Might it not be argued, however, that the basic narcissistic need to survive is first and foremost what forces individuals to attribute far greater importance to themselves than they do to others? Fromm anticipates this point when he writes that violence may take a defensive, 'reactive' form, which consists in biological 'preservation, not destruction. It is not entirely the outcome of irrational passions, but to some extent of rational calculation' (ibid.: 25). And if, Fromm elaborates, personal survival tends to be tied to the vigour of a given collectivity, from

a clan and an organisation to the state and the nation, this is because individuals can survive grave physical dangers only if they organise themselves in groups (ibid.: 73). What mostly interests Fromm, however, goes beyond the strictly corporeal dimensions of narcissism and the defensive forms narcissistically-driven violence may thus assume. He is rather preoccupied with the ontological facets of narcissism as they relate to 'irrational' forms of violence under authoritarianism, even though, as we shall see below, they may resemble rational defensive measures. How is it, Fromm asks, that people may come to support authoritarianism and its violence when it is objectively against their moral values and even out of keeping with their instrumental interests? The question takes on additional urgency in light of the historical fact that individuals may prioritise the importance of a group over that of their very own lives, as when they participate in deadly wars on the behalf of authoritarian regimes; reality may be transmuted into illusions that serve the idolatry of the authoritarian group, but this does not inherently preclude facing actual corporeal dangers and intense fears of loss (ibid.: 78).

To explain the paradox, Fromm suggests that we focus on the psychosocial climate within which the ideological constructs of authoritarianism are formed and communicated. Particularly susceptible to authoritarian ideology, Fromm explicates, are those segments of the population that are experiencing an ontological void in their lives, such as having limited foreseeable hopes of upward socioeconomic mobility. This is because the negative compulsion to escape an unbearable situation renders people 'unable to choose a line of action that could be a solution in any other but a fictitious sense' (Fromm, 1941/1994: 153). Fromm's preferred example is that of the lower middle-classes in antebellum Germany. Whilst a member of the so-called 'Frankfurt School' in the 1930s, Fromm undertook a detailed evaluation of previously gathered survey data on the political behaviour and consciousness of workers and employees under the Weimar Republic. (This, in fact, was the first public opinion survey ever to apply modern psychological methods to the investigation of political and electoral behaviour; Brunner, 1994). Fromm's research question was as follows: 'To what extent do German workers and employees have a character structure which is the opposite to the [then ascending] authoritarian idea of Nazism? And that implied still another question: To what extent will the German workers and employees, in the critical hour fight Nazism?' (Fromm, 1955/1992: 148). Much to his dismay, Fromm discovered a small degree of opposition to authoritarianism,

which he attributed to widespread socioeconomic insecurities, themselves the outcome of mass unemployment, hyperinflation, and a grave crisis in the stock market (see further Fromm, 1929/1984).[4]

The specifics of this claim have been doubted empirically in recent years (see, e.g., Hamilton, 1986, 1996; McLaughlin, 1996, 2007), but this should not detract from Fromm's broader effort to highlight the centrality of the perpetual search for meaning and the desire for transcendence in human beings (McLaughlin, 2007). 'Psychological scarcity', Fromm ultimately proposes, compels man to hate, to envy, or to submit (Fromm, 1949/1986). Thus, states which fail to provide adequately for the majority of the populace manage to pre-empt the spread of dissatisfaction and necessitate attachment to their rule by cultivating a malignant type of narcissistic pride on a mass scale. Targeting weak or comparatively weaker out-groups as posing dangers to security serves to divert negative attention away from leaders and their role in generating or not resolving insecurities on the socioeconomic front, at the same time as providing the public with a concrete outlet onto which to transfer their anxieties, angers, and complexes. The latent function served by the vio-

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[4] Interestingly, Fromm's work was not published at the time, possibly because of its terminological allegiance to Marxism. The coming of the Nazis to power in 1933 had forced the Frankfurt School to emigrate to Columbia University in New York, and, according to Fromm's recollections in the mid-1970s, his former colleagues 'became so frightened after they had come to America of being considered radicals that they began … to suppress all words which sounded radical' (Funk, 2000: 101). An alternative explanation is that Fromm was not only pointing in his study to the embarrassing existence of an 'authoritarianism of the Left' (Burston, 1991: 110), but his attack on orthodox psychoanalytic theory and its deterministic obsession with the death instinct, the Oedipus complex, sexuality, and early childhood experiences had alienated the core leaders of the school. For them, to accept the centrality of the libidinal instincts was tantamount to affirming a built-in biological resistance to the repressive role of society. 'They felt strongly that if "culture" was held to be the determinant factor in social psychology, then that culture was so pervasively unfree that there was no possibility of developing an emancipatory consciousness' (Wilde, 2004: 10). It comes as no surprise, from this perspective, that they went so far as to criticise Fromm repeatedly and relentlessly as a 'revisionist' who 'compromised with the American demand for shallow optimism and "positive thinking"', who preached no more than adaptation to the *status quo* (Ingleby, 2006: *xxiii*). Under the pretext of financial shortage, Fromm's lifelong contract with the school was cancelled in 1939, whilst his reputation amongst the Left has yet to recover (Funk, 2000; see also Rickert, 1986).

lence which follows as a consequence Fromm calls 'compensatory' (Fromm, 1964: 31).

As we saw earlier, however, Fromm believes that individuals never cease assessing the rationality and morality of their actions, and that the yardsticks against which actions are assessed vary according to the particular circumstances of the moment. It seems likely, moreover, that the frequency and depth of self-assessment increase with the practical, psychological, and moral weight of the actions under scrutiny. The successive concessions implicit in authoritarian ideologies are just such weighty actions, from bestowing the mandate to rule on powerful authorities, to consenting to the violent exclusion of others, to even placing oneself in great corporeal peril. Thus, despite an initial stage of concurrence, concessions are inevitably liable to regular and thorough testing against the contrary calls of lived reality. Order is bound to begin shattering as soon as subordinates grasp the rational incongruity of subordination and the immoral nature of the authority at issue.

An obvious resolution, and one which would chime with Fromm's focus on the ontological facets of narcissism as they relate to the human search for a clear conscience, is that ideologies are too difficult to abandon once one is drawn into their fallacy (see, e.g., Zerubavel, 2006). But Fromm chooses a different path, contending that the ever-present frightful prospect of men waking from their 'customary half-slumber' (Fromm, 1968: 28) and breaking with the authority that controls them forces the latter to invent afresh 'stories about the nobility of their cause, about defence against the threat to freedom, about revenge for bayoneted children, raped women, and violated honour' (Fromm, 1964: 19). All the while, a strong narcissistic quality is conferred upon collateral losses, the fact of which may thus lend itself to retrospective validation of authoritarian ideology. Here Fromm instances the elevation to heroes of those who died on the battlefield during the various European expeditions of conquest (Fromm, 1976/2007: 115-117). Holst-Warhaft writes in the same spirit that 'mourning is not left to the bereaved, but taken over by the state as a national and civic duty'. The memorials and cemeteries of the First World War, for example, romanticised self-sacrificial submission in the form of death, associating it with martyrdom and resurrection. 'The belief that death in war imitated the Passion of Christ had a double benefit: it encouraged men to go to war, fearless of death (at least until they reached the front lines), and it helped fellow soldiers and families to accept the deaths of family members and friends' (Holst-Warhaft, 2000: 163).

Resistance of the Weak and the Psycho-politics of Representation

Thus far, I have endeavoured to address the legitimation of authoritarian violence by reference to ideological constructs that resonate with the deep-seated narcissistic need for social distinction. Attention has also been paid to the socio-economic contextual conditions that boost the psychic appeal of authoritarian ideology, and to the legitimation of authoritarian ideology itself through evocation both of the violence already enacted in its name and the consensual support this violence enjoys amongst the public. In this section, the focus shifts to the ways in which the rational defensive actions of the targets of authoritarian violence –or, to be more precise, their rational defensive *re*actions– are represented in the public domain in such distorted ways as to bolster the apparent legitimacy of authoritarian ideology and of the violence that accompanies it.

Fromm argues that the targets of authoritarian violence often engage in acts of resistance, but doing so may only serve to reinforce the very stereotypes resistance is intended to upturn. In fact, overt struggles waged by the oppressed may work to increase the loyalty even of those not wholly identified with the oppressors. This is because defence and resistance are typically portrayed by the owners of the means of cultural production as irrational aggression, which in turn allows for the cloaking of authoritarian violence in 'necessary protective measures' (Fromm, 1941/1994). Not that praise for resistance to oppression is not relayed through mainstream channels of mediation. But it is comparatively scant and, what is worse, it may well operate to legitimate the powers that be (Fromm, 1955/1992). The formation of the Greek nation-state is a useful example. With a view to uprooting nationalist public sentiments, intellectual pundits and folklorists co-opted to romanticise the heroes of the Greek struggle for liberation from four-hundred-year Ottoman occupation as the living embodiment of valour and patriotism. This coveted taxonomic category, however, excluded 'those of their compatriots who continued to bear arms once that independence had been achieved, for by this time their activity was mostly directed not against the Turkish enemy but against the representatives of the Greek State'. In fact, much like battles with opportunistic motives, anti-state resistance was quickly connoted in official writings as brigandage. Perhaps the greatest irony is that guerrillas who might have challenged the authority of politicians but had died too early to pose grave and durable threats, could still be apotheosised. Although known to have sided

with the Turks in search for personal gratification and power, 'even that archenemy of the political establishment, Odhisseas Androutsos, appears on schoolroom posters to this day, resplendent in his Classical helmet' (Herzfeld, 1986: 60; see further Xenakis, 2006).

In any event, as Fromm notes, on most of those sparse occasions that praise for resistance to oppression occurs in the mainstream media of communication, it is only retrospective and resisters 'have been dead for a long enough time–safely and sufficiently dead, that is' (Fromm, 1955/1992: 159). The point here is far more complex than selective memory or deliberate amnesia, forgetting to remember or remembering to forget. Whilst ensuring the dead a place in the collective memory of the living, fitting the codes of heroic sacrifice for the general good, symbols of glorification such as works of art, memorials, and museums must bear no relevance to current affairs as such (see further Holst-Warhaft, 2000). Unless so wished and orchestrated by powers of a superior order, people must not be able to take the grand revolutionary images of the past and recast them in the more familiar terms of local, lived experience. In Freudian language, acts of remembrance should not necessarily entail the transformation of 'the impulsion to remember' into 'the compulsion to repeat', a transference relationship of continuity with yesteryear (see further Praeger, 1998). To this end, the necessity of resistant action is inextricably tied to the social particularities (indeed, curiosities) of a long-gone Zeitgeist. In the name of ethical thinking, whereby relativising the exceptionalism attributed to given forms and spaces amounts to an abhorrent stance, the possibility is quashed that people draw connections and make predictions themselves, that they realise the hegemonic nature of their submission and its evil consequences for the self and others (Scheper-Hughes, 2002). Ethical thinking becomes a euphemism for its own negation. At once mystified and exorcised, the past can hardly trigger nostalgic retrospection, self-doubt and guilt, or visionary exercises.

Narcissism and Authoritarian Leadership

Unless one subscribes to a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power as a 'kind of empty structure, stripped of any agents, interests, or grounding' (Garland, 1990: 170), then the question emanating from the preceding analysis concerns the underpinnings of authoritarian leadership. If, as Fromm suggests, the narcissistic need to align action with the requirements of a clear conscience is a universal constant, then how is it possible for elites to govern in an authoritarian manner?

Fromm is adamant that the most horrific facets of history are animated by material relations of power. Wars, he explains, commonly result from decisions by political, military, and business leaders for the sake of gaining territory, natural resources, and advantages in trade (Fromm, 1964). In his extensive psychobiography of Hitler, for example, Fromm identifies the infamous 'mad streak' of his analysand, but concludes that 'Hitler was sane enough to pursue his aims purposefully and –for a while– successfully' (Fromm, 1973/1984: 572). This is not dissimilar to the argument by historian A.J.P. Taylor (1961) that Hitler went to war, in good part, as a means by which to seek lost German territory, hence he was not so different from other political leaders of his time. (Indeed, fixing the guilt of the Second World War on Hitler's supposed madness may be viewed, in and of itself, as a political act underlaid with narcissistic motives, for it serves to obscure the evidence of genocidal precepts and practices in various parts of antebellum Europe, to conceal how the diplomatic blunders of Western statesmen themselves contributed to the outbreak of the war, to acquit the German people of the atrocities of the Nazi regime, to absolve Germany's former allies of blame, and even to idealise how the United States came to be involved in the warfare; see further ibid.; Mazower, 1998).[5]

And yet, *contra* C. Wright Mills (1962) and his otherwise 'masterful' analysis of conscious manipulation for private and in-group gain, Fromm holds that the elites are not consciously driven by an overwhelming greed for power and pay. 'To be sure, such motives exist, too; but the people in whom this is the all-consuming motive are the exception rather than the rule' (Fromm, 1962/2006: 83). For Fromm, inherent to the acquisition and exercise of power is the universal narcissistic need to keep one's own conscience satisfied, which is why governing elites tend to legitimate their position and power to themselves and to their immediate staff at least as much as to the masses they govern. To take

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[5] A recent example of the politicized application of psychological profiling to Hitler and other, contemporary leaders can be found in Post (2004). In a chapter devoted to 'Narcissism and the Charismatic Leader-Follower Relationship', Post applies his genealogy of narcissistic destructiveness to the relationship between, on the one hand, such 'mirror-hungry' leaders as Adolph Hitler, Fidel Castro, Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden, and, on the other hand, such 'ideal-hungry' followers as the Germans of the Nazi era, and the Cuban people and the Arabs of our days. America, by contrast, is presented as a nation of rightful aggressors led by 'reparative', as opposed to 'destructive', authorities.

the example of Hitler again, a careful reading of *Mein Kampf* reveals not only his 'conscious' effort to manipulate the people by presenting them with an oversimplified image of the one great Enemy, but also his own passionate immersion in the lore so created (see further Fromm, 1973/1984; also Žižek, 2004). Crucially, in its effects, having and retaining a good narcissistic conscience is also a matter of practical convenience, for it provides authoritarian elites with 'the certainty and freedom from doubt which is so impressive to the average person' (Fromm, 1964: 76). By way of a feedback loop, moreover, popular success furthers elites' self-perceptions of righteousness (ibid.).

As in the case of lay people, Fromm elaborates that the standards by which elites gauge the legitimacy of their ruling follow directly from their socio-economic existence.

> 'They consider their way of organisation and the values that are implied in it as being in "the best interests of man"; they have a picture of human nature which makes this assumption plausible; they are hostile to any idea or system which questions or endangers their own system; they are against disarmament if they feel that their organisations are threatened by it; they are suspicious and hostile of a system in which their class has been replaced by a different and new class of managers. Consciously, they honestly believe that they are motivated by patriotic concern for their country, duty, moral and political principles, and so on. … The motivating factor is that their social function forms their consciousness, and hence their conviction that they are right, that their aims are justified and, in fact, beyond doubt.' (Fromm, 1962/2006: 83)

Fromm's theory of elite narcissism has inspired recent attempts to theorise leadership of conglomerates and other large corporations (Maccoby, 2003), as well as the politics of criminal justice policy-making under conditions of neoliberal capitalism (Cheliotis, 2009, 2010b), with attention being drawn, for example, to the tendency amongst elites to ignore opinions and even expert evidence that point to the destructive nature of their decisions. That said, Maccoby (2003) has drawn inspiration from Fromm also to demonstrate that narcissistic leadership need not necessarily be authoritarian or otherwise damaging. Whilst this observation falls beyond the scope of this article, it raises the broader question of how Fromm theorises the possibility of channelling narcissism into objectively positive pursuits.

Concluding Remarks: 'Benign Narcissism'

Against the orthodox Freudian conceptualisation of narcissism as innately fixed towards the actualisation of distinction through authoritarianism and destructiveness, Fromm argues that it is possible to divert narcissistic cathexes into a common normative commitment to human solidarity.

Fromm calls for what he names 'benign narcissism'. In this case, the object of narcissistic attachment is focused on achievement, or, more precisely, on the effort made to achieve a given goal. This is because industry facilitates connection to external reality and solidarity with one's fellow human beings. In particular, '[o]ne who has learned to achieve cannot help acknowledging that others have achieved similar things in similar ways–even if his narcissism may persuade him that his own achievement is greater than that of others' (Fromm 1964: 77). Fromm makes a similar case with regard to social or group narcissism, suggesting that the collectivity may help individuals maintain a narcissistic equilibrium and direct their passion towards the pursuit of progressive ideals and aims. For instance, '[i]f the object of group narcissism is an achievement … [t]he very need to achieve something creative makes it necessary to leave the closed circle of group solipsism and to be interested in the object it wants to achieve' (ibid.: 78).

Fromm's initial idea is that the process of striving for achievement is 'benign' in its narcissistic effects, for it works to reduce 'the biologically necessary degree of narcissism … to the degree of narcissism that is compatible with social co-operation' (ibid.: 73). Eventually, however, Fromm deems it futile to try to impose quantitative controls upon the 'narcissistic core', an observation that forces him to posit benign narcissism as subject solely to a prior qualitative change in the object of attachment. 'Even without reducing narcissistic energy in each person, the object could be changed', he writes (ibid.: 90). The immediate question, at any rate, is how to ensure that the object of narcissistic attachment be reoriented towards the 'benign' process of striving for achievement, whether individually or collectively.

Tempting answers may be found, amongst others, in Hannah Arendt's well-known treatise on political action. Starting from the premise that the 'urge to self-display' is fundamental to human nature, Arendt uses the example of the ancient Greek city-state (the *polis*) to illustrate that, under the ethos and the laws of participatory democracy, phenomena such as council participation, civil disobedience, and even revolution can essentially be read as manifestations

of a politically healthy or benign narcissism on the part of the individuals involved. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt suggests that the aim of the *polis* was to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame', i.e., to allow one to show in deed and word who he was in unique distinctness.

> 'The organisation of the *polis* … is a kind of organised remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men[.] … According to this self-interpretation, the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the "sharing of words and deeds". Thus, action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it' (Arendt, 1958/1998: 197-198).

In other words, insofar as the existence of an open public sphere depends upon the human condition of plurality it itself purports to promote and preserve, then it also enables individuals to satisfy their natural narcissistic tendencies, whilst at the same time preventing them from relating to others as idealised self-objects (see further Brunner, 1996).

One cannot help stressing at this point that the emergence as well as the benefits of narcissistically-driven political action are inherently precarious. Arendt herself accepts that the open public sphere of Athenian antiquity could hardly be seen as a mathematical constant across spatial and temporal spans. As a matter of fact, it is doubtful even whether the paradigm of the *polis* has ever practically been as inclusive and participatory as often historicised in scholarly analyses and folk parlance. 'Although all men are capable of deed and word', Arendt writes, 'most of them –like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the labourer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world– do not live in [the open space of appearance that is the *polis*]' (Arendt, 1958/1998: 199). Whatever hope for interrupting or diverting the chains of unfortunate events, she eventually concludes, seems to rest not so much with the socio-political habitats already in place, but with 'the one miracle-working faculty of man' to ebb away unexpectedly from almighty regimes and make new beginnings (ibid.: 246).

Yet spontaneity and unpredictability should not be overstated, either. The existence and significance of human individuals are hard to distinguish fully from the social and historical context in which they are created, and of which individuals themselves are parts. For example, one should expect people to be more likely to oppose powerful regimes insofar as doing so serves the best way of validating the self in the eyes of 'significant others' with whom they interact. Or, to put it differently, the occurrence of narcissistic resistance is contingent upon the existence of unconventional significant others. For one's narcissistic urge to be channelled into the avenues of a resistance pursuant to the *objective* needs of society and of individuals themselves, however, significant others must also espouse truly progressive values and beliefs. As Fromm himself observes, significant others are only the representatives and agents of broader authority structures–including, of course, exclusive narcissistic groups (see further Fromm, 1932/1978).

It is with this in mind that Fromm proceeds to revisit the preconditions and the meaning of the idea of achievement as the object of benign narcissism, situating them outside the ethical spheres of private individuals, the family, particular cohorts of the general population, or localist political systems. Fromm now recommends the all-inclusive principles of the moral philosophy of humanism, which allow for freeing oneself from 'the ties of blood and soil, from his mother and his father, from special loyalties to state, class, race, party, or religion' (Fromm, 1955/1992: 165). 'If the individual could experience himself primarily as a citizen of the world, and if he could feel pride in mankind and in its achievements, his narcissism would turn towards the human race as an object, rather than to its conflicting components' (Fromm, 1964: 90). This should not be mistaken for a plea for uniformity. Rather, Fromm views the foundation of a 'richer and broader human culture' as consisting in the accentuation of difference in the sense of cultivating the positive sides of individual peculiarities (Fromm, 1943: 114-115; quoted by Wilde, 2004). This analytical move allows him to level one final criticism against the Freudian conceptualisation of secondary narcissism, particularly against the 'almost mechanical alternative between ego-love and object-love'. Whereas, according to Freud, 'the more love I turn towards the outside world, the less love is left for myself, and *vice versa*', Fromm contends that '[i]f it is a virtue to love my neighbour as a human being, it must be a virtue –and not a vice– to love myself, since I am a human being, too. There is no concept of man in which I am not included' (Fromm, 1956/2000: 54; see further Cheliotis, 2010c).

In a period of global economic crisis and rising tensions in societies across the world, Fromm's account of authoritarianism and his vision of the safety valve of humanism are particularly pre-

scient and deserve a new audience.

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Leonidas K. Cheliotis is Lecturer and Deputy Director of the Centre for Criminal Justice at the School of Law, Queen Mary, University of London, UK. He is an Associate Editor of the *European Journal of Criminology*, and the editor of *The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance and Empowerment* (2012), *Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Greece: International Comparative Perspectives* (2011, with Sappho Xenakis), and *Roots, Rites and Sites of Resistance: The Banality of Good* (2010). He is currently working on a monograph provisionally entitled *The Punitive Heart: Neoliberal Capitalism and the Psychopolitics of Crime Control*, where he is building on Erich Fromm's 'materialistic psychoanalysis' to explore the political economy of state and public punitiveness under conditions of neoliberal capitalism in the US and the UK.