International Erich Fromm Society

Erich Fromm Prize 2020

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Due to the corona pandemic, the public award ceremony
on 23 March 2020 in the Hospitalhof in Stuttgart had to be cancelled.
With the publication of the planned contributions on 23 March 2020
via the Internet and the media, the award ceremony is carried out "virtually".

Erich Fromm Lecture

Paul Mason

Seven Reflexes of Resistance
Radical Humanism in a Darkening World

Ladies and Gentlemen thank you for inviting me. I am honoured to receive the Erich Fromm Prize.

When I bought Fromm's book, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, in a second hand bookstore in the 1980s, I did so mainly because I liked the art deco font on the binding.

As I look back now, on the pencil marks I made in the book, I think I understood the basic point: that there were two kinds of personality on the left – one that embraced freedom and another that embraced authority, and that the latter made the KPD and its offshoots, during the regimes of Bruening and Von Papen, inadequate and confused fighters against Nazism.

At the time I thought: "OK, this has historical value, a warning from history". I did not expect that 35 years later I would be centrally consumed with the same basic questions as Fromm was in 1929: what do far right activists think? Why? How do we dissuade them? How do we stop politicians of the mainstream from feeding their deadly fantasies? How do we build an alliance of the centre and the left to fight them?

To answer these questions I want you to join me in an act of imagination: Imagine the Nazis had invented a time machine. And that, in the final days of the Second World War, they decided to send crack SS team into the future, to create a Fourth Reich.

What year do you think they would have aimed for?

Seventy-five years is a round number: well past the average life expectancy in Germany in 1945. So let us imagine that an SS unit materialises in April 2020. They overcome their shock at the ultra-liberalism of Western society; they marvel at our digital technologies; they discover to their horror that black American music has conquered the world. But then…

…they watch French riot cops fire gas shells into the faces of striking workers; and Hindu mobs in Delhi beating leftwing students with iron bars. They see the AfD scoring massively in Thuringia, and they see the CDU-CSU lean on them to depose the left. They read that three million Chinese Muslims are interned in barbed wire camps, and realise that nobody cares. They see the right of asylum suspended at Europe's borders.

Via the internet they discover there is a widespread underground nostalgia for the system they were part of. In Brasil tens of thousands of people openly identify as Nazis. In Greece the conservative government has called for "help" to repel the Syrian and Afghan refugees at the border in Evros: and right on cue the people who turned up to "help" were members of the far right underground in Germany.

Surveying this, what do you think our time-travelling Nazis would say? I suggest they would say:

Our mission has been wasted: the 21st century doesn't need an undercover team of Nazi time travellers to produce a Fourth Reich. *Fascism is coming back of its own accord.* Something else got there before us. But what?

In this lecture I will try to answer that question. And offer some suggestions about what action we can take, and about the human values that may carry us through this challenge.

For my generation, when we chanted “Never again!” at far-right skinheads in the 1970s, the assumption was that Nazism had been a one-off: a distillation of everything bad in Western society, but triggered by a unique mixture of economic crisis and hierarchical culture that we thought could never be repeated. With the rise of networked information systems, it looked impossible for today’s elites to manipulate popular consciousness in the way Hitler, Mussolini and Franco had done via the printing press, the movies and the radio.

The ultimate assurance against fascism was that we, the most educated generation in history, are forewarned about the dangers of it – through countless documentaries, movies, novels, memoirs and school history projects. The illiterate German woman in Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*, who is too badly educated to understand what she actually did wrong as a concentration camp guard, could surely never exist in the era of Wikipedia.

In 2008, Guiseppe Finaldi – a leading historian of Italian fascism – assured readers of his university textbook *Mussolini and Italian Fascism* that “fascism has little to say now and many of its obsessions seem not just absurd but incomprehensible”.

It is now clear that every one of these assumptions was wrong. Major democracies have plummeted down the freedom index. Narratives of ethnic supremacy have become the currency of the new authoritarian right, from Narendra Modi in India to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Donald Trump in the USA. Razor-wire fences are being strung across entire continents. And the information network, in the space of a decade, has become a machine for spreading hate and controlling people’s minds.

Just as in the Weimar Republic, conservative parties have lurched rightwards, determined to stall the rise of the far-right by echoing its ideas. Just as in Mussolini's Italy, fascism is gaining intellectual traction among young, fashionable and educated people. And, just as in the 1930s, neither the left nor the liberal centre has yet found an antidote to the intoxicating drug of bigotry.

But we're only halfway through the meltdown. There is more to come.

If Donald Trump wins the 2020 general election in the USA, he will do so by stirring even more hatred, attacking the judiciary and the rule of law, abusing executive power. If he loses, I would expect all the forces currently restrained by Trump's tenure of the White House – the armed militias, the far right Troll farms, the white nationalists, the lone-wolf mass murderers – to move towards a phase of active resistance.

So the central political challenge of the 2020s is to understand: Why we are seeing – in completely different economic circumstances and in a society with much fewer hierarchies – the rise of anti-democratic tendencies within conservatism, the rise of authoritarian right wing populist parties, and alongside them genuine, new fascist movements?

In the face of these new facts, many of the theories of fascism originating in the 20th century don't fit anymore.

Let's start with the classic left theory – shared by Marxists and social democrats – that fascism was needed by the corporate elite in the 1920s and 30s to smash the workers' movements of Germany, Italy and Spain; it took its specific form – mass, violent movements with radical rhetoric –, because this was the only technique possible to defeat organised labour.

Well today, organised labour is strategically weak. And where it is not weak it works in partnership with corporations. You don't need a fascist movement to defeat it. Nor does is part of the left strong enough to post an existential challenge to capitalism.

What about all the nation-specific theories? When we see Hindu nationalist mobs mounting pogroms, or neo-Nazis marching through Washington, or the Greek fascist movement mobilising people to turn back refugees at the border... it's hard to remember that serious academics once thought fascism was a problem specific to Italy and Germany.

What about Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism? As I write in *Clear Bright Future*, it is not enough. She was right to observe the strong similarities between Nazism and Stalinism, and to search for their roots in the common experience of bureaucratic, industrialised societies.

But even in her own time Arendt avoided an account based on cause and effect. Tellingly, she believed there was something about America that left it immune to the forces that produced fascism. Today that claim would sound hollow.

Two figures working in the Marxist tradition made important contribution, moving beyond "psychological flaws" and trying to establish a materialist social psychology. One is the man we gather to celebrate today – Erich Fromm. The other is Wilhelm Reich.

It's easy to ridicule Reich, because he revised his own work according to metaphysical theories he developed during his exile. But the essential point Reich makes in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (3rd ed. 1946, p. IX-X) is worth revisiting.

That fascism is "the basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man of our authoritarian machine civilisation (…) the sum total of all irrational reactions of the average human character".

As such, said Reich, fascism cannot be specific to Germany, or to men with an Oedipus complex, or nations that have lost a war, or to economies suffering high unemployment – it is rather an extreme potential within all industrialised societies.

But Reich's theory remains, like the orthodox Marxist theory he criticised, a theory of left-wing failure. “The Nazis knew how to play on emotions and avoid rational argument, while we stuck to lectures on economics at the Berlin Sport Palast”, he wrote. Millions of people wanted a revolution and the Nazi version was more appealing than the communist one.

That might be a compelling description of late Weimar Germany but it is not a theory that explains what's going on today.

In this respect, Fromm's work is superior. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm brings social psychology back to the specifics: individualisation, a product of the Reformation and Enlightenment, creates a kind of semi-freedom. Without the ability to achieve real freedom, people seek escape routes back to the world of certainty and connectedness. As the economic crisis hits produces extreme feelings of powerlessness, fascism triumphs because it becomes a mass embodiment of our neuroses: destructiveness, authoritarianism, automaton-like behaviour.

Fromm, like Reich was convinced that fascism could happen in any time and place; and that the only defence against it was to encourage people to live an active life in pursuit of freedom.

But Fromm's work still begs the question: why here, why now?

Let's survey the problem we face today. It’s been obvious since the middle of the 2010s that behind the rise of authoritarian right-wing populist parties – like UKIP in Britain, the Front National in France, Pegida and then the AfD here, or Liga in Italy – lay the threat of real, violent, right-wing extremism.

But academics were insistent: right wing populism and fascism are different things. Some mainstream politicians assumed that, if they could only steal and dilute the racist ideas fuelling the new right parties, those parties would go away. Meanwhile the left consoled itself with the fact that the classic conditions for fascism were not present – because the left, itself, was so weak.

Stage by stage, these assumptions have been undermined. First there was the economic crisis. Through state bailouts and central bank intervention, the economic system was kept on life support. *But you cannot keep an ideology on life support. The human brain demands coherence.*

People could see not only that their children would be poorer than them – a phenomenon not seen since the early 1930s –, but that the ideological justification for the small state and the free market was gone. So there was an immediate ideological crisis of neoliberalism.

Then there was a period in which networked technology and a new, socially liberal and optimistic consciousness combined to create a *spirit of revolt* all over the world: from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Puerta del Sol in Madrid to Zuccotti Park, and then Ferguson, Missouri, and then Kiev, Sao Paolo, Istanbul.

Between 2011 and 2013 the progressive movements offered those in power a glimpse of the future – but they said "no, thanks". The lesson of that moment is clear: if you say no to the future, and the present is unstable, you open the door to the past.

In Poland three years ago, I did a seminar with feminists, democrats, small left parties and I asked: "why would the Polish business class, which benefits massively from the European Union and from outward migration, go nationalist and xenophobic, risking their status inside the EU?" They looked at me as if it was a stupid question. They said: "because that's what they did in the 1930s".

So what we have today is a "nationalist international", composed of all factions within the business elite who want to see the multilateral global system fail. And they are mobilising the failed and disillusioned sections of the middle class; farmers who cannot accept climate science; men who cannot accept the equal status of women; white people who cannot accept the arrival of refugees. Arendt's description of this is totally accurate: the temporary alliance of the elite and the mob, seeking "access to history" – that is the rollback of history, in this case to pre-1968 conditions – "even at the price of destruction".

Though academics are right to insist on separate categories for fascism, right-wing populism and its conservative allies, they have completely underestimated the danger of these three forces consciously, and with great subtlety, feeding off each other.

As a result it is rational to fear the return of real fascism. And we therefore need to improve our definition of it.

I now believe that fascism was not rooted in the specific class dynamics of the 1930s, nor the psychological dynamics of 20th century alienation, nor – as Aime Césaire assumed – is it simply "colonialism done to Europe". If fascism can be produced both by the 1931 banking crisis and revive in a period of central bank money creation and high technology, it probably means fascism is a general and recurrent feature of capitalism. But we should look beyond the collapse of markets, or defeat in war, or the threat of communism as the triggers for fascism.

Fascism, for me, is *a generalised symptom of system-failure in modern societies*, driven as much by the evaporation of coherent narratives and ideologies as by unemployment or bank failures.

Unlike all previous societies, industrial capitalism has to be sustained by *active illusions* – in nations, institutions and economic systems. Fascism is what happens when the illusions vital to a certain form of capitalism evaporate. Its return today is rooted in the crisis of the system on free markets, globalisation and financial power. The dreams that sustained that system have begun to die just as the dream of German greatness died between 1919 and 1933.

In *Clear Bright Future* I call this the "crisis of the neoliberal self". The typical character that emerged in the 1990s – individualist, multi-faceted, mercurial, highly attuned to market forces, and highly fatalistic in the face of market forces – is in crisis.

Arendt once said, when confronted with anti-German narratives which claimed fascism was "part of the German character" replied: fascism was in fact caused by *the disintegration of the German character*. I believe what we are seeing now is the disintegration of the neoliberal character: it is confused; it needs answers; the liberal centre cannot give those answers

and the great freedom movement of 2011 failed.

As result, every major culture in the world sees itself gripped by nationalist nostalgia. The individualism, nihilism and irrationalism that simmered beneath the bland technocracy of the neoliberal era have bubbled to the surface.

The Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman, who wrote an eyewitness report from the liberated Treblinka extermination camp, pleaded with humanity to ask itself, again and again, *what caused fascism*? His own answer goes to the heart of what is happening now:

"What led Hitler and his followers to construct Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec, Auschwitz and Treblinka is the imperialist idea of exceptionalism – of racial, national and every other kind of exceptionalism."

A better word than exceptionalism today would be "supremacy" – of white people over non-white people; men over women; Christians over Muslims; of the "native" population over immigrants. But today, the price of surrender to such supremacy myths is going to be a lot higher.

In 2018 I visited Majdanek, a former concentration camp near Lublin, Poland, where at least 80,000 Jews, Poles, Russians and others were murdered. What struck me was the flimsiness of its construction: some rough concrete posts a few inches thick, a double barbed wire fence and a few wooden watchtowers. Five hundred people escaped from Majdanek.

Nobody would escape a facility built for the same purpose today. A 21st century Majdanek would use face-recognition, biometric tags, electrified razor wire, and a panoply of non-lethal weapons – from tasers to sound cannon – to keep its inmates under control. Its boundaries could easily be patrolled by drones and robotic cannon, not security guards with dogs and rifles.

It would probably be run as a private business, with its own PR department, a gift shop for visitors and staff – just as exists at Guantanamo Bay – and a certificate to offset its carbon emissions.

In fact, all it would need to turn a modern American penitentiary, or a Greek migrant detention centre, into a death camp is the addition of what the Nazis brought to places like Majdanek: *a theory of dehumanisation*.

The danger is great. Majdanek was liberated by the Red Army. But where would the military force arise to liberate a modern Majdanek? From Trump's America? From Putin's Russia or the anti-democratic empire of Xi Jinping?

No. This time around the only thing that's going to stop fascism is the anti-fascism of ordinary people. But what should anti-fascism mean?

I spent part of my youth as an anti-fascist activist – in the Anti-Nazi League and Anti-fascist Action. In the end, all we did was to force fascism to make a detour into electoral politics, so that today the ideas associated with the British National Party and National Front in the 1970s are now mainstream in Facebook and WhatsApp Groups read by ordinary people.

As a child, in the 1960s, I played in disused air-raid shelters whose walls were still scrawled with anti-Nazi graffiti from the war. In the 2019 election, in those same streets of my

hometown, I heard men my age fantasising openly about the ethnic cleansing of Romanian migrants: "lock them in a van, together with their children, and drive them to Dover" was the demand.

All the bricks, bottles and abuse we hurled against the far-right in the 1980s and 90s did not stop the mental garbage of white supremacy and violent misogyny flooding back into people's brains. To stop fascism we need to answer the same questions that confronted democrats and progressives in the 1930s.

How do we unite the left and centre against this new alliance of the super-rich and ultra-poor? How do we defend the rule of law and the state's monopoly of violence as informal militias far-right street gangs undermine them? How do we de-programme young men radicalised by hopelessness and the romantic desire for violent actions against minorities? How do we revive democracies that are so disgustingly corrupt that they seem, in the eyes of many poor and dislocated people, pointless?

None of the answers are easy – because every one of them involves we, ourselves, doing something that *risks our status within the social order we're trying to defend*.

Surveying the memoirs of those who fought fascism in the 1930s and 40s, I've come to the conclusion that what emerged back then was something more than "class consciousness". It was, in fact, an *anti-fascist morality* – a determination to risk or even abandon their own status.

You can find it in the thoughts and actions of figures as diverse as Violette Szabo, the British secret agent; Hal Wallis, the Hollywood producer who made *Casablanca*; and Zalman Friedrich, a fighter from the Jewish Bund who escaped the Warsaw Ghetto to gather evidence at Treblinka; and of course among the youth of the White Rose movement here.

Fascism was defeated because millions of ordinary people found within themselves the willingness to live for – and in some cases die for – a higher purpose.

In the 1970s Michel Foucault published a half-ironic moral textbook for progressives, echoing the seven virtues of St Francis of Sales, which advised progressive people to live a non-fascist life. It was, in its own way, a form of secular quietism: how to suppress the inner fascist inside you and live peacefully, inside the capitalist system, without anger.

I think the new danger requires a more active set of virtues.

The first is: *to reject performative behaviour*. In a chain coffee shop, the hardest way to get a cup of coffee is to engage the server in a spontaneous conversation as a human being. It is easier if you go through the script of pleasantries, smiles and card-swipes dictated by their draconian management rules and your lack of time. Neoliberalism required us to perform to a script whose subtext is that everything is a market interaction.

The result is mental stagnation. If we wake up every day determined to be authentic human beings, not automata, we will become the kind of human being Fromm wanted us to be: free, self-active, critical.

The second reflex I want to advocate is: *resist machine control*. If you want to know what an algorithmically controlled society would look like, think of an airport. As you enter the security gate you are willingly subjecting yourself to algorithmic control – that is, for decisions about you to be taken by rules and data stored in a machine. As more of everyday life be-

comes like the airport security gate, I think we should rebel: make jokes, get angry and become unpredictable – within limits: demonstrate practically that we are not, as Fromm said, willing to become automata.

A third reflex I want to nurture is to *optimism towards the future.* The Italian philosopher Franco Berardi noticed that, from the dawn of the freemarket era, all concepts of the future had become subject to "slow cancellation". For 30 years everything stayed the same, only at lightning speed. Fatalism took hold among us not just because the great thinkers of the era said history was over, but because neuroscience and systems theory combined to squeeze all belief in agency out of thinking.

If you have read the manifesto of the neofascist killer in Christchurch, you will see he has a very clear vision of the future. The new far right believe they are "seeing through the lies of history" and resisting the degeneration of civilisation. Every part of the progressive alliance – liberalism, the green parties, the left, feminist movements has to become unafraid to describe the future.

A fourth reflex is *toughness*. My comrade, Ash Sarkar, a young Asian woman, was confronted live on the BBC's *Question Time* programme by a supporter of the far right. This elderly far right woman poured out her grievances, the injustices she had suffered, the myths in her head that made her hate foreign people and the left. The normal reflex would be to say "there, there" I feel your pain. Ash Sarkar simply said: "the facts don't care about your feelings". That is what I mean by toughness. The ability not to sympathise with fascists.

The aim of the authoritarian right is to push its adherents beyond reason and empathy. The echo chamber of Breitbart, Fox, and rightwing radio and TV shows everywhere is aimed at producing politicised zombies, their minds always prepared to retreat from truism to truism in order to escape the proposal that the climate is changing, or that women are entitled to reproductive rights.

The only thing that's going to convince them they are wrong is to see the illusions shattered by the decisive actions of their opponents. So as we take the actions required, a fifth reflex that should be useful is *audacity.*

A sixth reflex I think we're going to have to revive is *to tell each other meaningful stories*. During the freemarket era something weird happened to the dynamics of the narratives that engulf us: they became inconsequential. The classic TV drama series is now a "story without an ending" – whose characters are trapped in a fate they cannot escape at all. Carrie Mathieson in *Homeland*, doomed by bi-polar disease to save the world while destroying herself; the black kids of Baltimore, whose struggles to break out of criminalisation in *The Wire* always lead to the renewal of the criminal system; above all, *Game of Thrones*, whose characters are moved to kill, maim and rape simply by the forces of fate.

By contrast, what is noticeable about the progressive movies of the 1930s and early war years, is that in response to fascism they moved from themes of fatalism to redemption. Bogart in *Casablanca* is redeemed of cynicism so that all of America can fight the anti-fascist war. This era needs its *Casablanca*.

All virtue systems – and that's really what I am describing here – are products of their time. Aristotle's system was written for the just but warlike elites of city states. St Francis of Sales' was the product of a Catholic life lived on the violent frontier of the Reformation.

Ours will have to last only a short time: until we have defeated the new, networked anti-humanism of the right, solved climate change and stabilised the global system.

But there is a seventh anti-fascist virtue: *to believe in the power of human beings to solve problems through imagination, collaboration and reason*. That is what Erich Fromm believed in, and it was not a blind faith: it was based on observation and practice. A radical defence of the human being is the baseline from which we can defend democracy, truth, open-ness, tolerance. And the radical defence of the human being starts with you.

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