



Erich Fromm
Stiftung
EFS

Fromm Forum 30/2026



Times of Polycrisis and the Psychosocial

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Editorial

The now commonly used term »polycrisis« indicates that there are alarming developments at all levels, referring to a wide range of subjects, including climate change, the growing willingness to accept war as a political means, overtly nationalist movements that threaten democracy and lead to a splitting of social coexistence, and the loss of a person's subjective sense of self-efficacy as artificial intelligence threatens to undermine our *own* thinking, feeling, and imagining. There has hardly been a time in human history marked by as many disruptions and crises as in the present.

Following Erich Fromm, we must ask what reactions and developments these polycrises stem from and lead to, particularly from a psychosocial perspective. Can we really observe a resurgence of authoritarian tendencies in Western European countries and North America? How would Fromm interpret these developments from a socio-characterological perspective in particular? It should first be noted that Fromm himself only applied the terms »authoritarianism« and »fascism« to the historical phenomena of the 1930s. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941, p. 4, fn 1), he notes, »I use the term Fascism or authoritarianism to denote a dictatorial system of the type of the German or Italian one. If I mean the German system in particular, I shall call it Nazism.«

As early as the 1960s, Fromm himself identified a new psychodynamic at work in political and social interactions. This dynamic is not about exercising power and keeping others submissive (as is the case with the authoritarian character). People who feel threatened and powerless do not want to feel secure and powerful by submitting to authoritarian figures and by blindly obeying them.

From a psychosocial perspective, there are other ways to escape a crisis situation. The solution that Fromm identified 30 years after recognizing the authoritarian character is to orient oneself toward and identify with a *narcissistic fantasy of greatness*, in which one battles against anything that contradicts this fantasy or limits it in any way. Over the past 60 years, this mechanism for escaping feelings of threat, anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness has become so prominent that it has developed into a social character orientation – sometimes as dominant as the authoritarian character once was and still is in parts of the world.

The essays in this volume therefore begin with a recently discovered lecture that Erich Fromm delivered in the fall of 1964 under the title »Psychology of

Nationalism.« In it, he vividly describes the narcissistic psychodynamics of political nationalism, as can be observed particularly in contemporary right-wing populist movements.

The five papers that follow were all presented at a one-day conference organized by Lynn Chancer on March 20, 2026, at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The title of the conference was »Authoritarianism and the Psychosocial: Erich Fromm and the Current Crisis.«

The Erich Fromm Lecture, delivered by this year's recipient of the Erich Fromm Prize, Klaus M. Leisinger, also addressed the topic of the polycrisis. Leisinger attempts to identify key aspects of a productive approach to dealing with polycrises, as reflected in Erich Fromm's concept of love.

Finally, as our last contribution, we are publishing a historical study by Uriel Aiskovich that highlights the significance of Erich Fromm's writings for the Jewish community in Argentina that escaped the National Socialist policy of extermination.

At the end of this volume, we provide news about institutions that focus on Erich Fromm's thought and work, and we include a list of important contacts.

Martina Becker, Nils Bischof, Jan Dietrich, Rainer Funk, Helmut Johach
The Editors

Nationalism and Its Narcissistic Psychodynamics

ERICH FROMM
(1965p)

The following article is based on a lecture entitled »Psychology of Nationalism« which Erich Fromm delivered at the American River Junior College, Sacramento, on October 12, 1964. It was broadcast by KPFA on February 1, 1965. Martha and Cornelia Bergler of the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen have prepared a transcript, which is published here for the first time. Editorial addition and omissions were done by Rainer Funk and are indicated by [brackets]. (Rainer Funk)



Every man is a political man in Aristotle's sense of a *zoon politikon*. Every man lives in a group, has to be related to the group, and has some feelings, attitudes referring to the group. Of course, how he is related depends a great deal on the kind of group he is living in. We see that primitive man living in clans is related only to those who share the same blood. Different was a relationship of the member of a Greek city-state to other members of this state – those who were free and not the slaves. Another type of relationship was that of the Roman citizen, the *Civis Romanus* who felt part of a world empire. Again, different was a relationship of a member of the Renaissance city-state in Italy, of Venice or Florence.

The most recent form of group belonging, group sentiment, is that of nationalism. I see the most recent referring to the fact that nationalism as we know it today is essentially the product of the French Revolution and was from its very birth connected with the idea of freedom, independence, and the rights of the citizen to express himself rationally and freely.

You might say that modern nationalism comprises various aspects. The first one is a specific sentiment of belonging together with those who share the same *language*. There are exceptions to that which are obvious, but by and large this,

as a definition, still holds true. A second aspect is the idea that these people who share the same language are organized in a *sovereign state* which represents them. Here I should like to emphasize that by the concept of sovereign, as it exists, we must refer to the fact that the state has a right to defend his interests regardless of any rules, legal or moral, which are above the state and could restrict his actions.

Thirdly, this sovereign state representing the members of the same nation is also unified by a *common economy*. The state supports the economy as the economy supports the state, and in the larger conglomerations, this leads to the fact that the large sovereign states or the large nations develop a great deal of physical power, that is to say, of *military power* which they may or may not use according to what to them seems to be the best interest of their nation.

These three aspects, the communion of people talking the same language and sharing the same history, the political aspect, the economic-military aspect, are characteristic for the modern state and the feeling which refers to it, that of nationalism. It seemed after the First World War in 1918 that nationalism had already reached its peak, by especially the creation of a number of new nations or national states which were to a large extent due to President Wilson's concept of national freedom and independence. However, those who were aware of the political events of 1918 would have dreamt that this was by no means the peak of national development.

Today we see that it is not only the small nations of Europe but even newly created nations all over the world for whom nationalism, in the threefold sense which I used, is the idea that which they are striving for. Unity of those who have the same language (and sometimes they don't have the same language), unity of those who have the same history (and sometimes they have no history at all), and there is the expectation that all this will lead to the industrialization of this new nation.

There is no doubt that there is a great deal of positive values in this new nationalism. If we mean by nationalism, perhaps better, a feeling of love or interest and concern for one's nation, then of course the values of this sentiment are clear. It's a value of freedom, of independence, of responsibility, of concern. Obviously, most people who speak of nationalism use the term in these positive aspects.

I'm afraid that time does not permit me to talk about the positive aspects, but I shall try to talk about the psychology of nationalism in its negative aspects. Nationalism not meant here mainly as love for one's nation, but as something for which jingoism would be one extreme expression. Or let me say, that kind of nationalism which should not really be, where the love for one's nation is in contrast to the love for humanity. If you want an analogy, it is just as you have

family feeling sometimes, love for one's parents which exclude the love for man. Sometimes you find men who love their parents so much, or their mothers, that they don't even love their own wife. Well, that is not the right kind of love either in personal relations or in the relations to one's nation.

Therefore, I shall talk about nationalism today only in this second and somewhat negative, and as I think, dangerous aspect. [...] The concept about which I shall talk, at first with regard to an individual, later on trying to show how this refers to nations and groups, is a concept which was although not first but mainly used by Freud in his system of psychoanalysis, and that is a concept of *narcissism*. [...]

Why Freud used this word is quite simple. There's a Greek legend of a beautiful young man, Narcissus. And there was an equally beautiful girl, Echo, a Nymph, Echo had fallen in love with him. But he didn't care, he did not respond because he was sitting all day looking at his face in the mirror of the lake. He was so preoccupied with looking at himself that eventually he fell into the lake and drowned. This is the sad fate of a man who gets enamored with himself, and this is why Freud used the word.

To give first the general picture of what is meant by narcissism, I can describe it in a very simple way and that is that for the narcissistic person [...], there is only one thing which is real and that is his own subjective experience: *my* thought, *my* fear, *my* sadness, while the world outside, if one isn't insane, is only real in the sense I see it: I see that you are sitting there. But, if I am a very narcissistic person, you have absolutely no weight. All I'm concerned now is with *myself*, with *my* lecture, with *my* feelings, and not with you at all.

Let me give you now some examples which will clarify that which I expressed in a somewhat general way. [...] The newborn infant has no interest whatsoever in anybody or anything outside, and any mother who thinks that the two weeks old infant loves her is rather misguided, let us say, or rather unrealistic. What the newborn infant is concerned with is hunger, thirst, coldness, and it doesn't even perceive the mother as a person over there. But really, the mother is simply part of his own system, which is the system of one's own needs and concerns. We all know that and take it for granted. And of course, it's not a pathological phenomenon. It's a normal biological phenomenon.

The example for narcissism as a pathological phenomenon, that is to say, for extreme narcissism, is one which is fortunately known to very few of you, and that is *insanity*. This is one of the great discoveries of Freud: he discovered that what is the essence of insanity, of psychosis, of craziness if you don't want to use scientific nomenclature, is that for the insane person the outside world hardly exists. In fact, let us say in many cases of insanity, it even puts out of function our sensory perception. A person has a delusion. A person hears voices, and

subjectively he hears and yet there is no sound, there are no voices. Because for him, the world outside is without color, without weight, and all that exists for him as reality, is he himself, his feelings, his fears, his desires.

There is a joke, which is a rather good joke, of what is the difference between a neurotic and psychotic. The psychotic says, »2 and 2 are 5.« And the neurotic says, »2 and 2 are 4, but it worries me.« This is as good a definition as you find in any textbook. Because for the psychotic there is no reality in which 2 and 2 are 4, and there's nothing that worries him because his reality is how he feels subjectively about it. While for the neurotic person, that is to say for most of us, more or less, there are all sorts of worries, but we are sufficiently aware of the reality to recognize the distance between what is real and what bothers me personally.

To make it still clearer let me give you one example of narcissism with regard to one mental illness, one form of insanity, which is not infrequent as insanity and rather frequent as half insanity. And that is paranoia. Let me try to be very concrete. Assuming I feel that some of you don't like me, don't like my views, will dislike my speech and I'm worried about it. Well, in that case, I'm a little neurotic. But I still know that's alright. That is reality as one has to expect it. But assuming I suffer from paranoia, then I'm not any more worried that you may dislike me, I'm convinced that all of you or some of you dislike me to the degree that you want to poison me today. And then I figure out this is an excellent occasion. Here's a glass of water. I don't know where it came from, but I'm sure it wasn't watched by the police or by anybody. So there was a very simple occasion to put some poison into it and to poison me, and it couldn't be found out who poisoned me.

Is that logically possible? Yes, perfectly, and in fact, paranoia is the only form of insanity which does not conflict with the laws of logic. Logically, it's perfectly possible that this happened. Is it realistically, substantially, likely or even practically speaking possible? Except logically, I would say no because experience with reality tells me that this is much less likely than having an automobile accident when I drive home. So on this basis, I drink the water.

What is the difference between the person who suffers from paranoia and a person who does not suffer from paranoia? It is simply that for the person who suffers from paranoia, his own subjective feeling that others dislike him is not any more checked by his sense of reality. He takes that which is logically possible for that which is realistically likely or to be concerned with, and therefore you cannot argue with him because reality does not have much weight for him. He is so impressed by his own desires, hates, fears, or whatever it may be, that that is reality.

They made a very interesting experiment in one veteran's hospital where they brought three men together, each of whom had the illusion he was Jesus Christ. Now, they thought it would be interesting to see how these three men will react to each other. And somewhat to the surprise of everybody, none of the three was

the slightest bit bothered by the fact that there were other two who had made the same claim on the contrary. They were all kind of decent and friendly men, and so everyone felt compassion with the other two who were so misguided to think that they were Jesus Christ. But there was not the slightest doubt about their own role because again, like in every psychotic person, reality has no weight.

While the rest of us, I hope, are aware of the difference [between what is real and what are] *my* feelings, *my* thoughts. The person who is extremely narcissistic is not aware of it. His feeling and thought are [the only] reality and therefore there is no argument because he's not impressed with [another] reality.

So far, I have mentioned extreme examples. Let me give you now a few examples which all of us experience. One is an example which any professional man experiences quite a few times, especially if he answers his own telephone. I have experienced it quite a few times. Somebody is calling me up and saying he wants to have an appointment with me, and I say, as the case may be, that I'm sorry, I cannot make it that day or tomorrow, but a few days later. And the man who calls up says, »But Doctor, I live only five minutes from your office.« And I say, »Well, that's all right, but that doesn't change the fact that I just don't have time today.« And he goes on arguing that it's so simple, it's only 5 minutes difference.

In that case, I have already made an important diagnosis, namely that I have dealt here with an extremely narcissistic person, very sick and likely to be near psychotic or psychotic. Why? Because that person was not able to distinguish between his reality and mine. If it is easy for him to come, my reality doesn't exist, that means it is also easy for me that he comes.

You find the same thing even more frequently, among people who fall in love with somebody. Let us say a very narcissistic boy falls in love with a girl, and she doesn't respond. It's very difficult for him to accept the fact that she doesn't respond. His logic is: if I love her, how could it be that she doesn't love me? And in some more pathological cases, nothing she can do will convince him. He will then have all sorts of rationalizations, that her parents don't permit it, or if he knows something about psychoanalysis, he will say that her very rejection proves that she loves him so much. [...] But the whole point is he cannot distinguish, like in the case of the man whom I just mentioned, between his reality and her reality. If he is in love, she is in love because in reality she doesn't exist for him except as a symbol upon which he transfers his own reality.

There is a joke, which many of you probably know, of a writer who talks to his friend, and after having talked for 15 minutes about his latest book he says, »Really, I talked a lot about myself. Let's talk about you now.« The friend says, »Alright.« And the writer then goes on and says, »How did you like my latest book?« Again, this is a milder form of narcissism. This is by no means on the borderline of psychosis, and every one of us knows such people who, if they are

brilliant, are very interesting because what they have to say about themselves or their own work is interesting. If they're not brilliant, they are the greatest bores because they never listen to anybody and go on and on and on talking about their latest operation and this and the other.

Let me give you one more example and that is a much better-known one, namely, let us say, the woman who sits for hours in front of the mirror to make up her face and so on and so on. Well, her only real interest is her body, her face. The world does not interest her. And there you get sometimes the kinds of beauties [...] where, to my way of looking at least, while the face is beautiful it's so dull because there is no human response. There's no aliveness. You can see this person is shut off from the world and all she cares for is how she looks or what man she gets, which is also part of her equipment, so to speak.

However, you find the same phenomenon in people [...], who suffers from what is generally called hypochondriasis, that is, let's say, from a morbid fear of being sick. Today she thinks she has cancer, tomorrow tuberculosis, the next day a heart ailment, and all these organizations to gather funds for the fight against these elements help a great deal to popularize the cause, and she's always concerned with being sick. On the surface, it sounds as if that is precisely the opposite than the woman who is so vain. But in depth it is the same. The hypochondriacal person is just as concerned with himself as a very vain person is. Only the one is concerned in what one might call a positive sense; the other person is concerned in a negative sense.

I just want to make one last distinction about narcissism in general and that is a distinction between benign and malignant narcissism. By *benign narcissism*, I understand the narcissism which a person has who is proud of something he has done. An artist, a scientist, a carpenter, any person who does something and has a narcissistic charge, you might say, on his work. I call it benign because by the very fact that he has a narcissistic attitude about his work, nevertheless, he prevents himself from being fully narcissistic because being an artist, doing something, forces him and makes it necessary for him to constantly being in touch with the world, that is to say, to transcend his narcissism.

What I mean by *malignant narcissism* is a person who is proud not of anything he does but of himself as he is: I am wonderful. Either I'm so brilliant or I have such God knows what. There are some men who fall into real depression when they lose their hair. Now there is nothing wrong with that, but that happens in those cases in which the object of their narcissistic attachment was their hair. And when they lose it, they feel as if they were lost.

I come now to the second part of this lecture and that is, after having explained what narcissism is, the transformation from individual narcissism, narcissism referring to my person, to what I would call *social or group narcissism*.

If I stood here and said, »Look! I am the most wonderful person in the world,« and maybe I would include my family, my father, my mother: »We are just wonderful. The rest are dumb, dirty, uneducated, inferior morally.« Well, you would know where to send me. But if I stood here and said, »My nation, my religion, my race, my political creed are far vastly superior to everybody else, and at best everybody else's nation and creed is, well, if they are wise, take us as an example.« Then many people, I hope not too many among you, will think that this kind of talk is very virtuous. I would seem to be a very religious man, or a very patriotic man, or a very loyal man to be so convinced of the supreme value of the group to which I happen to belong.

If I am an individual with great achievements, or great power, or much money, then all my employees will laugh about my jokes even if they are terribly stupid because they have to, and even they are impressed by them because a very rich man has to make very good jokes. But if I am a poor devil, I'm poor, uneducated, I have nothing, then I have to be terribly crazy to feel I am wonderful. But if I can feel that my group is wonderful, my religion, my race, my nation, my political party is so wonderful, then vicariously, by making the group the object of my narcissism, I arrive at the same narcissistic satisfaction which I have if I am only an individual narcissist.

Today you might say the main objects of group narcissism are nation, race, and political creed. In the 17th century, the main object of narcissism was religion. Today it's very difficult to understand for us how Catholics and Protestants could have suspected each other from poisoning wells, from being the agents of the devil, when we believe, well, there are certain differences, but the differences are not so vital. Today, religious narcissism is not so potent anymore, in fact, it's not potent at all, maybe partly because religion is not so potent anymore. But what is potent today is nationalist, racial, and political narcissism. In other words, the feeling of my group, whatever it is, is the most wonderful one.

What you find is, in fact, that the groups which are the poorest one economically and culturally, in any country, are the one who show the greatest, most intense group narcissism. I shall take an example not from the United States but from Germany under Hitler. It is a fact that the group which supported Hitler was neither the middle class nor the working class, but was the old and dying and decaying lower middle class, who had been destroyed partly by the increasing development of the country's economy and society and partly by the defeat of the emperor and the loss of all those values which had been connected with the imperial system.

Generally speaking, you find that narcissism is a one great compensation for the cultural and economic poverty of a certain group and the poorer the group are, the more it compensates itself for by the feeling: »I am great because I belong

to the most wonderful group.« Whether that's called Whites, or Americans, or Aryans, or something else, what matters is not the contents. What matters is here the psychological attitude of transferring one's personal narcissism to the group.

Let me speak briefly about the *pathology of narcissism*. Among pathological narcissism, whether it refers to individuals or whether it refers to groups, several can be mentioned which are very clear:

(1) *The lack of judgment and reason*. Naturally, if there's only reality for me which counts and that is I, my feelings, my thought, I to the same degree have no reason, if we mean by reason the capacity of seeing the world objectively because precisely narcissism makes it impossible to see the world objectively, because I and the world are experienced in two entirely different forms

(2) *Narcissism is the greatest contradiction to love*. In fact, you might say that the essence not only of Christianity but of all great humanist religions, Buddhism, the Prophetic Jewish Religion, Christianity, this essence could be formulated as meaning: »Overcome your narcissism.« Love, as the Old Testament says, your neighbor and the stranger, and as the New Testament says, and love thy enemy. There is no greater expression of overcoming one's narcissism than the love of the stranger and of the enemy. If I love the stranger, then indeed, I have overcome this strange phenomenon which so often is plainly pathological, and that is of giving undue importance to myself.

(3) The most dangerous pathological symptom of narcissism is the *wound afflicted to narcissism*. You can see that, I'm sure, among your friends and acquaintances, and I hope not among yourselves, that when you have a considerable degree of narcissism, then criticism of that to which your narcissism refers is reacted to in two ways. Either by *extreme hostility and anger*. Now, you can't always afford to be hostile. If your boss wounds your narcissism and you start a scene, you lose your job. So, when you can't afford it, there's a second possibility and that is a *reaction of depression*. It is as if you were completely deflated, as if you were nothing because you filled yourself very strongly only in this inflated, narcissistic way. And if that inflated balloon is punctured, you are nobody because one is somebody only to the degree to which one is interested in the world, to which one relates to the world. If I'm only for myself, I'm nobody, and the narcissistic person is only for himself.

You find the same phenomenon among groups. Any very narcissistic group has not only this pathological overemphasis on its own group values, but it shows all the traits of fury and rage and destructiveness when anybody criticizes it. It tends to feel that others are no good. I am wonderful, and I have no mistakes and no shortcomings. This is actually greatly helped by a mechanism which psychologists call projections, in which I project all my defects on somebody else. And so, the enemy is all bad or I am all good.

I think that happens for instance when people largely get so excited about the godlessness of the Russians. Any genuinely religious person will have to agree that unfortunately we are rather godless. In fact, religious feelings are not an effective motivation for our actions. So, from a non-narcissistic standpoint, we would be quite concerned with our own spirituality, with our own, if you please, godlessness. But if we can project the whole problem, that we don't feel the values which we profess are really effective in ourselves, if we can project all that to the enemy, then, of course, we are safe, everything is fine. And we can continue with the narcissistic picture of our own perfection.

There actually are two movements which counteract narcissism. One is a true and authentic religious attitude. And secondly, it is science in the modern sense. Because a scientist can be a good scientist only if he is highly self-critical, if he does not over-evaluate his ideas because they are his, in fact, if he is constantly busy criticizing his own ideas. We should think that both the religious and the scientific development in Europe would have contributed greatly to diminish our narcissism. The fact is, as we all see, it hasn't. Religion has often become a source for narcissistic attitude toward one's own religious group, and science often has become to a narcissistic pride in the results of science, and that is technique. I'm therefore afraid that a good deal of our education is not truly scientific education but technological education, in which our pride is that we can travel to the moon soon or that we can even produce things which can destroy the whole human race.

I think this is a very serious problem and that unless we take a new step, we are in danger of losing the great achievements which the human race has made in the last 2500 years and which Europe has and America has made in the last few 100 years. We must critically appraise our own ideas, our own attitude to ourselves and to the group to which we belong by becoming aware of those narcissistic aspects which falsify our judgment. We must arrive at a new concept of humanism as it runs through from the Hebrew prophets, Christianity, Renaissance, Enlightenment to men in our day like Albert Schweitzer or Einstein. Humanism has always said that each one of us carries within himself all of humanity. Each one of us is a sinner and a thief and a murderer, although we don't act that way, but each one of us is also a saint and a good man. And as Terenz [Publius Terentius Afer, 195–159 BC] said, there is nothing human which can be or should be alien to us.

We are confronted with this alternative: Either we attempt to live up to what we preach, or we will eventually deteriorate by the narcissistic worship of ideologies and of the machines and gadgets which we create. This cannot be fulfilled, in my opinion, by a nostalgic return to the 19th century because never can any society return to the past. I think it can be achieved by looking forward and by

trying to achieve a revitalization, or if you please, a renaissance of those values on which our whole culture and society is based, and that is on reason and on the humanistic attitude towards our fellow man.

Only a new humanism can save us from the worship of new idols, namely that of race, creed, a nation, and technical gadgets. This new rationalism, however, differs from the rationalism of the 18th century by not being naive but by being utterly realistic, if you please, cynically realistic. Such a revitalization would indeed result in a paradoxical blend between faith and utter realism.

Why Clinicians Need Fromm Now

SANDRA BUECHLER



Fromm argued passionately for psychoanalysts' active involvement in politics. In *In the Name of Life: A Portrait Through Dialogue* (Fromm 1986, p. 116) he pleads:

»If we love our fellow humans, we cannot limit our insight and our love only to others as individuals. That will inevitably lead to mistakes. We have to be political people, I would even say passionately involved political

people, each of us in the way that best suits our own temperaments, our working lives, and our own capabilities.«

I believe that each of us must find our own way to rise to Fromm's challenge.

In a time that seems to be turning away from Fromm's humanistic values, how can we, as people, as clinicians, as citizens, hold onto hope? I want to suggest that without sufficient inspiration, we will not fight hard enough for the intrinsic value of every human life. Fromm deeply understood polarization, group narcissism, (where one's own nation or other group is valued as superior) and the pathology of normalcy (or, as Rainer Funk defined it, »a socially dictated common sense that impedes or thwarts the psychic capacity for growth« (Funk 2019, p. 164). Fromm advocated the embrace of the stranger both in other people and in our own unconscious aspects. He pointed to our inclination to escape our freedom, and toward idolatry, ascribing our own powers to the products of our inventions. He wanted to help us recognize the grave dangers of alienation, where we transfer our own powers onto another person. We then have to submit to that leader, or other, who may be only too glad to embrace the role of strong savior. Because Fromm understood all these grave dangers, I believe he has pre-

cious wisdom into the nature of the times we are living in today. We need the strength of strong convictions. Our institutes and all our educational programs should foster humanistic values.

Turning to the needs of the clinician, whether in private practice or a clinic or other setting, Fromm's messages are especially apt. You walk into your office, not knowing what the day will bring. Will you have to encounter the situation you, personally, dread more than any other? Will you face a mother mourning the sudden loss of her child, someone daunted by the recurrence of a devastating illness, the victim of a vicious rape, or a depressed, suicidal person, barely hanging on to life? Will you be called upon to make potentially fateful decisions, of whether someone should be hospitalized, whether hurtful behavior toward a child crosses the line into child abuse, whether to take into your care a person you intuitively sense could drain you? What does it take to cross that threshold, and what part can theory play? Beyond its capacity to organize experience, I will suggest that theory, and, especially, Fromm's thinking, can inspire crossing the threshold.

As I see it, clinical work calls on all our »equipment for living,« to borrow a phrase from H. S. Sullivan (Sullivan 1956). It is the task of each clinician to find the theory that most fully enhances the personal strengths they bring to the challenges of clinical practice. I will briefly mention some personal strengths I believe Fromm helps the clinician cultivate.

The first crucial strength, from my point of view, is the sense of purpose. I think clinicians need to profoundly believe in treatment's potential to change lives. For myself, I had indelible proof of this from my personal treatment's effect on my own life. This experience left me with no doubt that treatment can change not just how we handle our lives, but how we experience our lives. Treatment can change how we perceive, not just what we perceive. It can alter the way we take in experience. I believe that with my whole heart, because I have known it as a patient and as an analyst. The sense of purpose can be augmented each time we help someone overcome an obstacle. I think it is built into us to feel joy when a child first walks, when my 6-year-old patient said her first word to me after two years of angry silence, when embracing life wins. Perhaps more than anything else, the sense of purpose can inspire us to choose life. Fromm quoted the Old Testament's challenge: »I put before you today Life and Death, Blessing and Curse and you choose life, so that you and your children may live.« (Deuteronomy 30:19). The clinician has countless opportunities to choose life, by crossing, and helping others cross real and illusory thresholds.

Clinical courage is the second crucial strength I will name. It takes a great deal of courage to be a clinician. Clinical courage sometimes entails voicing what I call »inconvenient truths.« Fromm emboldened the clinician by telling us to

»stick our necks out« (Fromm 2009, p. 36) and trust that the patient can hear our observations. Sometimes when we worry the patient can't hear something, we are really driven by our own timidity. I think courage in treatment can be contagious. Often our naming and facing challenging moments, out loud, can encourage others to do the same.

The third strength I will mention is integrity. Patients need absolute trust that we mean what we say and say what we mean. Integrity is a wholeness, a consistency of words and actions. Our way of working must be consonant with our values. If, for example, a supervisor recommends kindness but is unkind to the supervisee, they mystify more than they clarify. Discrepancies register as hypocrisy, and evoke distrust, disillusionment, and, sometimes, hopelessness.

The fourth and last quality I will mention that I think is necessary for the clinician is the cherishing of the truth, for its own sake, not instrumentally for any other ends, but for itself. As Fromm often noted, the truth can set us free. As individuals, as citizens, as a nation, the only path to freedom is through truth.

Here are some of Fromm's concepts that I have found to be directly applicable to clinical situations. In a passage I have quoted many times, Fromm declared:

1. »Because I have eyes, I have the need to see; because I have ears, I have the need to hear; because I have a mind, I have the need to think; and because I have a heart, I have the need to feel. In short, because I am a man, I am in need of man and of the world« (Fromm 1968, p. 72).

Our mental and emotional powers need exercise, just as our bodies do. In Rainer Funk's (Funk 2019, p. 77) words, »only to the extent to which they are used do they grow and remain available as one's own powers.« I hear these as two highly related points. Whatever is within us yearns for expression, *and* withers if it remains unused. Confronted with someone depressed or anhedonic I have thought of Fromm's concept and looked for unused potential as possibly both cause and effect of their emotional state.

2. Fromm's views on love have informed me as a clinician and as a human being. Here are a few quotes:

»If I truly love one person I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, ›I love you,‹ I must be able to say, ›I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.‹« (Fromm 1956, p. 46.)

«Productive love always implies a syndrome of attitudes: that of care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge...I look at him as he is, objectively,

and not distorted by my wishes and fears. I know him, I have penetrated through his surface to the core of his being and related myself to him from my core, from the center, as against the periphery, of my being.« (Fromm 1955, p. 33.)

Funk (Funk 2019, pp. 81–82) summarized many aspects of Fromm's view of the capacity for productive love, including seeing the common humanity in oneself and the other (rather than seeing the other as a stranger), wishing to share oneself, interest in everything and openness for everything that is unknown, the capacity to listen and be completely present and empathize with another, and the capacity to trust.

3. Fromm's concept of dissociation has significant clinical applications:

»If one uses the term ›repression‹ as it is usually used by Freud and as it is used in analytic literature, one thinks primarily of something which was conscious and then was repressed. While in my concept here I refer to that which is not conscious, i.e. both to that which has been conscious, and to that which we have never been aware of. Therefore, perhaps it would be better to word the concept ›dissociation,‹ rather than ›repression,‹ because in the concept ›dissociation‹ one can more easily comprise both: that which has emerged and that which has not emerged in awareness.« (Fromm 2009, p. 7.)

Three other statements supplement this definition in ways that I think have great clinical significance:

»our conscious mind represents mainly our own society and culture, while our unconscious represents the universal man in each of us« (Fromm 1964, p. 93).

»the unconscious is not conceived as a place with a certain content, but as a function. There is no such thing as the unconscious. There is only the function of ›being aware‹ of the reality which exists inside or outside of man« (Fromm 1977, p. 7).

»The admission of certain contents of experience to consciousness is in the first place socially conditioned and only marginally by individual childhood experiences. This is so because an experience is admitted to consciousness only if it can pass through the social filter.« (Fromm 1977, p. 7).

Thinking of unconsciousness as a function, not a place, and as socially conditioned has directly affected my work. The idea that society shapes what we can and cannot be aware of widens the scope of how we hear the material in a session. Before I studied Fromm, I assumed that whatever was not conscious was relegated to a kind of subterranean space, below consciousness, because it has caused personal internal conflict. Fromm's conception of dissociation facilitates our looking at what a culture discourages its members from registering.

4. I have already mentioned the concept of alienation. Rainer Funk gave us a succinct definition of it:

»By alienation I project an experience, which is potentially in me, to an object outside of me. I alienate myself from my own human experience and project this experience onto something or somebody outside and then try to get in touch with my own human being, by being in touch with the object to which I have projected my humanity.«(Funk 2009, p. 12).

I have thought about this concept in countless situations, both clinical and elsewhere.

5. Fromm saw the clinician as a physician of the soul and not a tool promoting adaptation to society's dictates. He described a pathology of normalcy: »The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane.« (Fromm 1955, p. 15.)

6. As to the role of the clinician, here is one of Fromm's statements:

»Then I do not think about myself, then my Ego does not stand in my way. But something entirely different happens. There is what I call a central relatedness between me and him. He is not a thing over there which I look at, but he confronts me fully and I confront him fully, and there in fact is no way of escape.« (Fromm 1950, p. 18.)

Expanding this idea, I (Buechler 2012; 2017) wrote about the analyst's non-narcissistic investments in the patient's well-being. Here is how I described that investment:

»We should be responsive to the needs and feelings of the patient, but

we should not have a personal stake in the patient's life-style choices. We should not be narcissistically invested, that is, worried about how the treatment makes us look to ourselves. We shouldn't need a ›success‹ with this patient to prove ourselves as clinicians. So, from a narcissistic point of view, we are neutral and not dependent on any particular outcome. But, from a human point of view, the outcome cannot be a matter of indifference to us. Passionate engagement in treatment is a genuine investment in life itself. (Buechler 2012, p. 17.)

Fromm enabled me to bring my whole self to my work. I didn't have to leave my literary, or curious, or fierce, or passionate self at home. They were all welcome in a Frommian framework. Fromm inspires us to choose life. His words have been with me for a long time and continue to inspire me in every walk of life.

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Capitulation and Displacement: How Psychoanalytic Institutes Have Responded to The Rise of Authoritarianism

ILENE PHILIPSON



The United States today is confronted with an historically unprecedented assault on our democracy. We face a rapidly increasing ascent of authoritarianism, bewildering incompetence at the federal level, and little politically and strategically organized opposition. How do we respond both as individuals and as members of various organizations, associations, and institutions to what seems like an unraveling of democracy itself? Where do we turn to find guidance, inspiration, hope? As a practicing psychoanalyst and a sociologist, I often attempt to understand the present through examining the past. In previous historical periods, how did others respond to similar situations, find solutions, navigate the unimaginable?

Given my professional embeddedness in the world of psychoanalysis as it is practiced and organized in the United States today, I find myself turning to the history of my field, specifically to how psychoanalytic institutions responded to the rise of authoritarianism in the twentieth century in order to gain insight and understanding that might be of service in the current period. As perhaps is obvious, this history is extremely rich given that psychoanalysis was founded in Vienna and then flourished in Germany, the very heart of the world's most consequential authoritarian project to date. What can we learn from a study of this period, from an interrogation of how psychoanalysts and the institutions they inhabited responded to the ascent of the Third Reich? For this inquiry, I wish to explore how the Berlin Psychoanalytic Society, and the British Psycho-Analytical Society reacted to Naziism, and then turn to a contemporary example from the United States that mirrors certain tendencies from this past.

Capitulation

In 1910, Karl Abraham and Max Eitingon founded the German Psychoanalytic Association and the Berlin Psychoanalytic Society as well as a training institute for aspiring analysts. By 1919, they had opened a free clinic, the Berlin Polyclinic for Psychoanalytic Treatment of Nervous Disorders. This followed on the 1918 congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), during which a resolution had been approved directing members to develop walk-in clinics in which »treatment shall be free« for prospective analysands of limited means (see Danto 2005, p. 48). It was a prevailing belief at that time that analysts had a social obligation to offer free services to those who couldn't afford them. Berlin was the first society to enact this dictum, and in its first year, 350 prospective patients applied for free or reduced fee psychoanalytic treatment.

The Berlin Society was the most progressive, left-wing association in the IPA. Karen Horney, Theodor Reik, Siegfried Bernfeld, Edith Jacobson, and Otto Fenichel, who developed an inner circle of analysts devoted to the promotion of Marxist-Freudian thought, flourished there while Wilhelm Reich wrote *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* during his residency in 1933. Most of these analysts were socialists and some were communists. Erich Fromm completed his training there in 1930 but moved to Davos, Switzerland in 1931 to be treated for tuberculosis. Therefore, he was not present during the reign of the Third Reich.

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. Three months later, the Nazi government ordered that no Jews could serve in any executive position in a medical organization. They specifically targeted psychoanalysis »as an aspect of Jewish so-called parasitism within Christian culture.« Further, Freud was accused of having had a »filthy imagination,« and his teachings were characterized as mere »Asiatic ideology of eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die« (Roazen 2001, pp. 9–10).

These events had devastating consequences for the Berlin Society where 80% of the members were Jewish. Thus, Max Eitingon, the co-founder of the Society and a Jew, took it upon himself to enlist Freud's advice on how to respond to this crisis. Freud replied by proposing that he, Eitingon, could dissolve the Institute and leave, or preserve it temporarily by handing over control to »Christians of purely German origin like Felix Boehm and Claus Muller-Braunschweig« (Danto 2005, pp. 253–254).

Eitingon chose the latter option, handing over leadership to the two Christians Freud had suggested and then emigrating to Palestine in September where he founded the first psychoanalytic society in Palestine the following year. This solution met with approval by the President of the IPA, Ernest Jones, who stated

that »I prefer Psycho-Analysis to be practiced by Gentiles in Germany than not at all« (quoted in Danto 2005, p. 254).

Under the leadership of Boehm and Muller-Braunschweig, the German Society thoroughly capitulated to the dictates of the Third Reich. Within one year, half of the Berlin analysts had fled Germany. Membership dropped from 65 to fewer than 15, and the number of candidates from 222 to 34. Boehm promptly promoted himself as a self-appointed expert on the »problem« of homosexuality and specialized in the »retraining« of homosexuals. Through his retraining program for gay men, he spared his patients from death sentences mandated for the crime of homosexuality, but at some cost. In order to prove they were »cured,« Boehm demanded that they perform heterosexual sex in front of a panel of doctors (see Kuriloff 2014, p. 90). He also was tasked by the Nazis to determine whether deserting soldiers were malingering or not. British psychoanalyst John Richman, who had gone to Berlin to conduct interviews with German analysts after the war, reported that Boehm had made life and death decisions with ease, drawing »his finger across his throat,« making a noise like »esh,« »chucking his thumb over his shoulder« and shrugging when determining a soldier was malingering; thus essentially condemning him to death by the Nazi authorities (see Danto 2005, p. 255).

For his part, Muller-Braunschweig approved the teaching of heredity and race at the institute, and sponsored a lecture by Herbert Linden, the director of the euthanasia program for the untreatable mentally ill under the Nazi regime. In October 1933, he published an article in the National Socialist weekly *Reichs-wart* entitled »Psychoanalysis and *Weltanschauung*.« He argued that »in the right hands, psychoanalysis endeavors to transform unfit *softlings* into people energetically engaged in life, (...) *phantasts* into realists, those who are selfish and incapable of love into persons able to love and to sacrifice, those uninterested in the whole of life into servants of the whole« (quoted in Antonovsky 1988, p. 219). Thus, in enabling the transformation of patients into »servants of the whole,« psychoanalysts could participate in the Nazi project of rendering individuals into willing subjects of totalitarian control.

Both Boehm and Muller-Braunschweig submitted to the Nazis appointing Matthias Henrich Goering, a neurologist and cousin of Field Marshall Hermann Goering, as president of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Society. Under his presidency, Goering promoted the Aryanization of psychoanalysis and forced all the remaining Jewish analysts to resign. In what came to be called the »Goering Institute,« all of Freud's works were burned, and the remaining members were required to read *Mein Kampf*.

Freud accepted the Goering Institute although he was resigned and unenthusiastic about it. He, along with Muller-Braunschweig and Boehm, preferred

Aryanization over the demise of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Society altogether. In order to preserve what remained a mere vestige of legitimate psychoanalysis, Freud, Jones, Boehm, and Muller-Braunschweig chose capitulation to the authoritarianism of the Third Reich. After the war, the IPA offered no apology to all of the Jews forced out of the Berlin Society. In fact, its president, Ernest Jones declared that Felix Boehm »saved psychoanalysis.« But this supposed success in saving psychoanalysis did not prevent the Russians from burning the Goering Institute to the ground in April 1945.

Displacement

In 1895 Sigmund Freud coined the term »displacement« in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. What he meant by this was the unconscious redirection of negative feelings – rage, fear, anxiety – from the true object of their intent to safer, less destabilizing ones. As a simple example, a child displaces his anger and hostility from his father, whom he fears or feels responsible for, to his younger brother and ends up taunting and berating that brother for reasons that appear uncalled for or even confusing to himself. In what follows, I wish to argue that displacement served as a container for fears and anxieties experienced by members of the British Psycho-Analytical Society during World War II. I then go on to suggest ways in which we can see displacement operating among psychoanalysts in the US today.

The British Psycho-Analytical Society was the last, surviving, true psychoanalytic society left in Europe when Sigmund and Anna Freud arrived in 1938. The British Society remained intact and fully operational throughout the war, and that may have something to do with the fact, unlike the other large societies in Vienna and Berlin, the vast majority of British analysts were not Jewish.

When Anna Freud joined the British Society after fleeing Vienna with her father, Melanie Klein, the famous Austrian child analyst and founder of Object Relations theory, had long been established as a major, theoretical force in British psychoanalysis, since her arrival in 1926. When Anna Freud joined, she had already begun criticizing Klein publicly over Klein's beliefs in seeing play therapy with children as the equivalent of free association for adults and her assertion that superego formation began in the first year or two of life.

Upon Freud's arrival, the British Society began to divide between these two women's positions. Tensions grew so high that a series of formal debates, termed the *Controversial Discussions*, were held every few weeks between 1942–1944. With German bombs occasionally falling, and air raid sirens a common occurrence, the entire British society gathered to debate superego formation and the question as to whether children could free associate through play.

During one of these discussions, Donald Winnicott famously exclaimed »I should like to point out that there is an air-raid going on outside!« and proceeded to suggest members seek shelter, but the analysts ignored him and went on with their discussion as if nothing had been said (Kuriloff 2014, p. 56).

Pearl King, the analyst who organized the minutes of the Controversial Discussions, wrote »The battle between Melanie Klein and Anna Freud was perhaps a diversion from the depression of what had happened, of having had to leave their homeland. There was rather a taboo about talking about it« (quoted in Kuriloff 2014, p. 50). So rather than discussing the experience of deracination, real threats to life from German bombs, or the threat of fascism washing up upon the shores of England, British analysts turned their fears, anxiety and anger toward each other, hotly debating rather arcane theoretical issues in the midst of war. British members' pent-up rage at the Germans and fears for their homeland, coupled with the grief and mourning of the refugee analysts like Klein and Freud who were compelled to leave their countries of origin, all seem to have found release and containment in displacement, that is, in attacking each other over theoretical issues.

A more contemporary example of displacement within organized psychoanalysis emanates from the turn to the political and to activism within the field in the US that is taking place today. Rather than using psychoanalytic thinking to look outward, to examine and understand the rise of authoritarianism in our society, increasingly psychoanalytic organizations, institutes, journals, conferences, and online forums focus their attention inward on systemic racism, transphobia, antisemitism, and other forms of »harm« within the field. In this turn inward, rigorous claims to truth, superior knowledge, moralism, and contempt for those not in agreement abound. While serving as a necessary corrective to bias within psychoanalytic practice and discourse, in many instances this turn represents a profound turning away from the growing authoritarianism in our society to the behavior of individual analysts and institutes.

As an example of what I am describing, in a recent webinar sponsored by a leading psychoanalytic journal, the presenter, a psychoanalyst, offered the following that was met without substantive criticism:

»There is a direct line from psychoanalysis to the systematic attacks on trans people and their allies, Palestinians and their allies, immigrants and their allies (...) that we are witnessing today. In every way that matters, this shit started with us. We have a special obligation, as psychoanalysts, to understanding our role in the flowering of fascism.« (J. Carter in *Conversations and Connections*, sponsored by the journal *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 23 July 2025).

By asserting that the origins of »the flowering of fascism« within the US emanate from the field of psychoanalysis, a field that has steadily declined in popularity and influence, not only appears grandiose on its face but suggests that it is the analyst's duty to focus on what is happening *within* our profession, to displace our anxieties and anger toward each other rather than Donald Trump, his Republican supporters, oligarchs, or those setting the Right wing agenda. Displacement can serve as a means of expressing agency and empowerment absent for so many in the larger political arena.

It can serve as a defense against psychic overwhelm, the experience of feeling lost and powerless. In the case of both the British Society and psychoanalytic activists in the US, it appears easier to redirect negative feelings and regain a sense of control and agency by attacking other analysts than feeling powerless in the face of rising authoritarianism in the larger society in which we live.

Erich Fromm

In many ways, we can see how Erich Fromm reacted to the rise of authoritarianism in his homeland as the consummate response of a sociologist and psychoanalyst: he sought to understand the genesis of authoritarianism and then, as a public intellectual, share that understanding with the widest possible audience. As Roger Frie pointed out, »Fromm insisted that in order for fascism to be defeated, it first need to be explained and understood« (Frie 2024, p. 77). Given that Fromm emigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1934, he witnessed Hitler's assumption of power and the hegemony of national socialism from afar. During the 1930s, he established himself in New York City, mastered English, built a psychoanalytic practice, established a center for the Institute for Social Research at Columbia University, taught at the newly created Washington School of Psychiatry, developed relationships with psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and anthropologists, and through those relationships, laid the foundation for what would become the interpersonal school of psychoanalysis anchored at the William Alanson White Institute. But throughout this time, he remained tethered to Germany in his tireless efforts to help his mother, then his estranged wife Frieda Fromm-Reichman, and finally many of his relatives escape from the Third Reich.

All of this happened within the context of his composing what I believe stands as the greatest contribution to our understanding of the psycho-social origins of authoritarianism, that is, Fromm's 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*. Drawing on his prior work that investigated authoritarian beliefs and character structure among German workers and employees, he asks »can freedom become

a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from? (Fromm 1941, p. 4). In so asking, he turns the accepted belief, man's supposedly inherent longing for freedom, on its head, and probes the irrational, the unconscious motivations that reside within us all. He asserts that his »aim will be to show that the structure of modern society affects man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more independent, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid« (ibid., p. 104).

Among the many things that are remarkable about Fromm's first book, is that it is not written for other psychoanalysts, other sociologists, or other high intellectuals in keeping with the writing projects of his fellow Frankfurt School colleagues such as Horkheimer and Adorno. It is written for the public, the widest possible audience of readers. And I believe this stands as a model for all of us who are engaged in intellectual labors. Do we continue to publish in journals for our fellow professionals, engage in internecine debates about what divides us within our academic departments, our psychoanalytic institutes, or our professional associations while authoritarianism is rising throughout our society?

After the publication of *Escape from Freedom*, a book that eventually sold five million copies, Fromm followed with a series of articles written for popular and academic magazines and journals. I've found that one of my favorites is that written in 1942, »Should We Hate Hitler?« published in the *Journal of Home Economics*. In addressing American housewives, he concluded:

»Every dictatorship, from the Roman Caesars to Hitler's gang, has known that there is nothing cheaper than to arouse destructiveness and sadism and to satisfy it with spectacles. (...) Hitler understood that people were desperate not only for economic reasons but for the reason that life had lost its meaning to them, that they did not know what to live for. (...) The war, if it is to be won as a war for democracy and human freedom, needs people whose primary motive is love for a better world (...) who have a vision of a future from which will be excluded elements whose destructiveness makes them unable to experience any kind of happiness excepting satisfaction in domination and destruction.«

It is remarkable to me that Fromm wrote to housewives, not a common audience for intellectuals of his stature, in an accessible journal and in accessible language. This truly sets Fromm apart from his contemporaries, the psychoanalysts and Critical Theorists who often wrote in what I have termed »birdcalls,« language that is meant to persuade and impress other thinkers in the field, those with the brightest plumage so to speak, but remains opaque to the public, to the broadest audience (see Philipson 2009).

According to the historian of psychoanalysis, Paul Roazen, Fromm believed that »outspokenness should be more important than any allegiance to organizational bodies. (...) [His] outspokenness (...) should be a special beacon for us all« (Roazen 1994, p. 9, 11). I suggest we, who inhabit the psychoanalytic orbit or labor in universities, follow Fromm's example: to not capitulate and not displace, but rather use our understanding and capacities for explanation to address our current rise of authoritarianism and to address that to the widest possible audience.

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How the Work of Erich Fromm Points Beyond the Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis

LYNN S. CHANCER

I



There has no doubt been a resurgence of interest in the work of Erich Fromm since the time that Neil McLaughlin wrote his dissertation here in the Sociology PhD Program at the Graduate Center – since we are both »proud alum’s« – on Fromm as a »forgotten intellectual.« From then until more recently when Neil and I co-authored an article in the journal *Sociological Forum* about »Why Fromm Now?« (<https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.13035>) a large variety of books and articles have appeared about Fromm – some written by psychoanalysts like Sandra Buechler (*Erich Fromm. A Contemporary Introduction*, New York 2025) in the previous panel and others by others at this conference like Dan Burston, Lauren Langman and of course Neil himself in his book *Fromm as Global Public Sociologist* (Bristol 2023). This resurgence of interest also manifests itself in conferences like this one (and the one that Rory Varrato is organizing this fall at Columbia University – this conference being a kind of ‘precursor’ to Rory’s conference) and others that have taken place in different places nationally and internationally.

But this paper makes an argument about *relating* this resurgence of interest in Fromm to the field of sociology – to a so-called »crisis« in sociology as per the title of this panel («The Crisis of Sociology«). While this particular panel title may sound dramatic, I believe it relates to what has been until recently a

marginalization of theorizing that goes back to Freudian perspectives overall and to the Frankfurt School generally including, of course, but not limited to Fromm.

Indeed, in 2014, John Andrews and I put together a collection of essays in a lengthy volume – also introduced by Craig Calhoun and Jeffrey Alexander – that we entitled *The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis* (New York 2014). This volume showed, as for example in one carefully researched chapter by Catherine Silver and George Cavalletto («Opening/Closing the Sociological Mind to Psychoanalysis»), that going back to the 1940s in American sociology and to the age of Talcott Parsons (himself both a sociologist and an analyst), major journals like *American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review* often featured articles that involved both sociology and psychoanalysis.

Thus marginalization – or an »unhappy divorce« – occurred much later and arguably from the 1960s onward when I would argue that symbolic interactionist ideas like those of Erving Goffman became the dominant mode by which »interpersonal« relationships – or the so-called »micro« rather than »macro« levels of analysis started to be understood. In other words, the evolution of American sociology veered toward understanding the »individual« or »individual agents« through symbolic interactionist perspectives that became dominant (or hegemonic) much more than Freudian (and therefore Frommian ideas) that tended, by contrast, to be relatively rejected or (again) marginalized. In fact, Goffman explicitly disliked and rejected psychoanalytic perspectives.

II

But why the marginalization of Freudian oriented psychoanalytic perspectives in American sociology in the first place – as was not always the case – and what does this have to do with Erich Fromm? My argument today is that many of the theoretical reasons that explain why sociologists marginalized and rejected psychoanalysis – at least in the US context from the 1960s onward – do not particularly apply to the psychoanalytic (and what I would call the »psychosocial«) ideas of Erich Fromm. In other words, Fromm's ideas and work – rather distinctively among Frankfurt School scholars – may be worth returning to precisely because Fromm's theorizations point beyond and past the unhappy divorce of sociology and psychoanalysis that has characterized American sociology.

Let me continue this argument, then, by exploring a trio of reasons that at one and the same time help to explain psychoanalysis' marginalization within sociology and why Fromm's work and ideas have the interesting potential to point beyond that unfortunate marginalization. With a resurgence of internet

in Fromm and the Frankfurt School they also have the potential to arguably enliven sociology's ability to explain a number of contemporary political and social problems.

First, Freudian psychoanalysis and perspectives (like Frankfurt School perspectives associated with it) were seen from the 60s onward as involving biological essentialism as opposed to socially constructed dynamics of power that brought social movements about class, race, gender and sexuality (for example) into existence. »Biology is destiny« couldn't be further from the radical anti-institutionalism that characterized someone like Goffman's critiques of total institutions or from beliefs in social constructionism overall. And yet many scholars may not know about – as I have written in several articles of my own about Frommian and feminist compatibilities – not all but definitely some of Fromm's early writings about gender (in particular, his case study of Dora) sound like they were written by early radical feminists as Fromm brilliantly criticized the clear cut and sexist power dynamics which happened in the clinical relationship between Freud and »the case of Dora.« In addition, Fromm's central belief in character structure – whether narcissistic or marketing or other forms of historically specific characters that blend social and culture contexts and patterned social dynamics they produce – is clearly far from anything biologically deterministic that one could take from Freud. Quite the opposite as – again – character structure is a fundamentally »psychosocial« concept that recognizes the importance of psychic patterns as these emerge and change in specific historical settings and formations.

A second reason for both marginalization of Freudian perspectives in American sociology and the potential of Frommian ideas to point beyond such marginalization has to do with the character of the unconscious – of unconsciousness itself. As I argued in the introduction to *The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis*, another major reason for marginalization of Freudian perspectives in sociology is that – in a field which can (is not always but can) be dominated by positivistic, quantitative and empirically-based perspectives (to some extent understandably so), the centrality of the notion of the »unconscious« to psychoanalytic perspectives is challenging indeed. For how exactly can one measure or quantify or falsifiably 'test' something like an unconscious at the same time – as I have argued elsewhere as for example in my book *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (New Brunswick 1992) – when unconscious dynamics certainly exist. Moreover, as I have also written about, I would argue that major sociological theorists of both the classical and contemporary variety – from Marx to Weber to definitely Pierre Bourdieu – are often unconscious of their own presumptions of unconscious motivations and dynamics within their central concepts.

Coming back to Fromm, though, of course – whatever else Fromm revised or changed or challenges in relation to conventional psychoanalysis – he certainly understood the importance of this most basic Freudian concept and its centrality within individual or social defense mechanisms. But what may be particularly interesting about Fromm is that he does not throw the sociological baby out with the bathwater in his psychosocial orientations. Rather, and even while of course incorporating and understanding the existence and persistence of unconscious dynamics, Fromm also embraced the importance of empirical research.

I argue that another important reason sociologists marginalized psychoanalysis is that the »unconscious« cannot be measured or empirically quantified in any easy methodological way – and in an age of increasing positivism, quantifiability and falsifiability are increasingly valued. On the other hand, Fromm was involved in empirical as well as theoretical work from his engagement with the authoritarian personality study to his empirically based *Social Character in a Mexican Village: A Socio-psychoanalytic Study* (together with Michael Maccoby, New York 1970).

The point here is that Fromm was psychosocially oriented both methodologically and theoretically – and leaves the door open for doing future empirical studies (for instance of why people have moved to the right in the US or the left in psychic as well as social terms) that involve both using psychodynamic concepts (like the unconscious) while doing empirically grounded interviews and research. With Fromm, the psychoanalytic baby does not have to be thrown out with the bathwater.

Third, psychoanalytic perspectives like Fromm's may have been marginalized in sociology because they were seen as too invested in a reductive focus on the solitary individual and his, her or their sexuality and childhoods – leaving out the broader social and sociological culture of which individuals are a part. Here again, though, Fromm is important for having revised the Freudian emphasis on Oedipal relations of childhood and sexuality to a shifted focus onto the pre-oedipal period during which (as later feminists like Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow have noted) secure object relations take hold (or not). In other words, Fromm shifts psychosocial attention to questions of relatedness – and people's need from childhood onward to have secure social connections and relatedness without which they would go mad. One sees this insistence on relatedness (as opposed to aloneness and loneliness) across much of Fromm's work from *Escape from Freedom* through the *Art of Loving* and in many others of his books as it comprises an orientation much more compatible with sociological frameworks than has often been recognized.

III

Why, though, does going beyond the unhappy divorce of sociology and psychoanalysis – as is a more synesthetic direction toward which Fromm's work points – even matter? I contend it matters tremendously because the rise and dynamics of what might be called »contemporary American authoritarianism« we are presently experiencing seem impossible to fully understand without looking at psychoanalytic and unconscious dynamics.

For example (a) contemporary deeply embedded political polarization – which could be called splitting in psychoanalytic terms – involves two-sided frameworks of »good versus bad« that seem to in fact draw on unconscious emotional and psychic preferences for two-sided frameworks that allow, for example, deeply embedded angers to be displaced – and indeed there seems to be an investment in polarizing two-sided frameworks at the moment.

Also for example (b) contemporary forms of displacement seem to be going on – whereby people may be using displacement as a collectively unconscious defense mechanism to blame others – immigrants, Muslims, jews, people of color, people who have since the 1960s fought to expand rather than limit human possibilities – may be using social forms of displacement to look elsewhere than at our own cultural and intrapersonal dynamics.

In other words, without frameworks of theoretical analysis that involve looking at a range of emotions that are currently circulating – whether anger or as Arlie Russell Hochschild recently says in *Stolen Pride* (New York 2024) at shame – sociologists may not be able to make anywhere near adequate progress toward understanding the rise of American authoritarianism or even – and even apart from that – how and why varied forms of discrimination and hatred continue to exist and be reproduced. Psychoanalytic and Frankfurt School perspectives and very much (as I have argued) ideas like those of Fromm are also needed to offer alternatives right now to what exactly a »sane society« would look like and about how people need to do what I call »positive politics« in terms of how we treat each other in ways Fromm recognized in *The Art of Loving* to involve mutual recognition of each others' need for community and love as well as for recognizing emotions from depression and sadness to joy.

One last point: None of this is to say that Fromm and Frommian theory offers a final answer to the problems of authoritarianism nor that other sociological perspectives are not also extraordinarily valuable. But it is to suggest that this set of ideas should certainly not be overlooked and that using Fromm's work to probe sociological problems like authoritarianism in more multi-dimensional ways involving rational as well as emotional experiences, and unconscious as

well as conscious processes, is hugely important as a tool. It certainly should not be overlooked as a way of illuminating present problems of encroaching authoritarianism and of pointing social relations in more positive and politically positive directions.

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Erich Fromm and a Theory of the Democratic Psyche

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1. Introduction

Today, we are witnessing the increasingly powerful anti-democratic forces that continue to undermine and regress democratic polities and cultures. I want to suggest in this essay that Fromm's ideas can be brought to bear on this question and shed critical light on the concept of a democratic mind. But in addition, given his distinctive, dialectical understanding of the relationship between the self and society, it also opens up for us a critical understanding of the nature of democratic forms of sociality and the ways that these shape, form and cultivate subjective democratic modes of mentality as well as objective institutional frameworks that organize social life. Attacks on reason, humanism and democracy go hand in hand in this age of de-democratization and cultural regression. Combatting these forces requires us to consider the ways that psychoanalysis can help us in the struggle to save and to deepen democracy.

As I see it, Erich Fromm's contributions to a theory of healthy and rational forms of social relatedness as well as psychological life should be seen as a central starting point for our collective attempt to theorize the fundamentally dialectical relation between psyche, society and politics. Fromm points us toward the idea that our psyche is rooted in something more than our own subjectivity, it is also social in nature. These are not distinctly separate spheres of reality, the mental and the social. Rather, our psychic dynamics are the source of our forms of relatedness and, by extension, the kinds of institutional and social forms of life that we generate and inhabit.

At the heart of what I would like to highlight in Fromm's work is a crucial insight from Hegel: that rationality, reason itself, is not only a subjective, it is also just as crucially an *objective* phenomenon. Mind, what Hegel referred to as *Geist* and English speakers awkwardly translate as »spirit,« is at the conceptual core of Fromm's own ideas about the inner world as well as the social world; it is the pivotal idea that constitutes his distinctive re-working of Freudian psychoanalytic theory as well as his own sociological ideas. A democratic mind is not merely about integrating the different parts of one's self and modelling that psychological capacity in the social world, as thinkers such as Christopher Bollas have argued (Bollas 2018). Rather, for Fromm, it is a matter of constituting forms of relatedness that possess certain types of features – features that are anchored in our own psychological desire and striving for mature, healthy forms of self-development, self-determining activity and social relatedness. We require, in short, certain psychic prerequisites for a democratic life to become concretely realized in the world.

Fromm's ideas about mental and social life therefore provide us with a crucial approach to richer understanding of democratic – that is, cooperative, free forms of life – consciousness as well as relatedness to others. Our capacities for relating to others, our dependence on others as a means of self-development, point toward the capacity for both progressive, freedom-enhancing dynamics of the psyche but also toward an understanding of democratic relatedness, that is, how a modern form of democratic social world can be constructed and maintained. Unlike those strands of critical theory, espoused by Adorno and Horkheimer among others, that concentrate on the importance of negation in the constitution of critical consciousness, Fromm gives us a theoretical model of social psychodynamics that enables us not only to diagnose the regressive tendencies of modern capitalist societies, but to move beyond the negative dialectic and toward a capacity for progressive social and psychic transformation. More importantly, it grants us a language to be able to articulate and shape actual forms of life and modes of consciousness and thought that objectify freedom and rationality in the world.

2. Philosophical Foundations of Fromm's Conception of Mind

Before proceeding to discuss Fromm's specific metapsychology and its relation to his social theory, it is important to understand the philosophical structure of thought that gives Fromm's ideas their specific character. The self-understanding of those that considered themselves critical theorists in the pre-WWII Years was that German Idealism, specifically the thought of G. W. F. Hegel, was to be seen as providing a theory of consciousness and reason to that of the critique

of capitalism provided by Marx. Thinkers in the German-speaking intellectual world such as Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács had provided an important developmental break with the theoretical dogma of orthodox Marxism: namely that revolutionary activity on the part of the working class was not to be secured by economic conditions and dynamics. Only a properly developed consciousness that was able to provide critical self-consciousness to working people, i.e., that was able to open up for them their active position in the capitalist social totality, would be able to grant them political agency.

A return to Hegel was crucial, these thinkers maintained, because Idealism provided Marxist theory with a needed account of consciousness. But it also did something else, it opened Hegel up to a new generation of thinkers who sought to oppose the reified neo-Kantianism of their time which was strongly identified with the natural sciences. Key to neo-Kantianism was the premise that mental phenomena were distinct from objective (social or natural) phenomena. Reason was confined to the capacities of mental life and did not extend beyond the categories of thought itself. This meant a kind of chasm between the self and the world. Reason was a capacity of mind; it regulated the phenomena that appeared to consciousness, organizing them into forms of meaning and understanding. To speak of reason existing outside of this domain was considered an inflated form of metaphysics that needed to be consigned to the theological past or to Romantic efforts of philosophical system building. It was not fit for any modern – i.e., post-metaphysical – account of reason.

Hegel's ideas, by contrast, held that mind was not confined to the self, that is, to individual consciousness alone. For Hegel, reason is to be understood *metaphysically*: it was constitutive of the world around us as well as of ourselves. This means that reason refers to an immanent logic of being that can be taken up and understood by our capacities for thinking, by the mind. But even our minds are not our own, they are socially, that is relationally, constituted. In his famous dialectic of Mastery and Servitude (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*), Hegel demonstrates how a rational account of the self is derived from our recognition (*Anerkennung*) of an other consciousness. I begin to understand myself as a minded creature when I see the other, with whom I identify via processes of intersubjectivity, possess those same features. My sense of self begins to take shape and achieve definition and conceptuality because I am able to internalize the other with whom I have identified other back into myself. I am able to form a stable concept of who I am as a result of seeing my place within the relational system with the other and understanding how the other sees me in the same way. This whole reciprocal dynamic is what becomes conceptualized into a kind of social self-consciousness: that is, a rational (that is, conceptual) grasp of myself as a member of a relational matrix with others.

Mind is therefore not merely an epistemic feature of consciousness; it possesses an objectivity *in the world*. The master treats the slave as an object because it does not yet possess the capacity to see the slave as a subject, he merely exists as an object to him to be used and manipulated. But once the process of recognition takes place, each of the two subjects internalize the other into themselves *conceptually* and, as a result, each becomes a *subject* to the other as well as to themselves. The relation of mastery and servitude can then break down because each views the other as equal and understood in light of the other. More importantly, the dynamic and structure of their relatedness also will begin to change since now each is perceived and cognized as a subject to the other and a subject-object form of consciousness morphs into one where subjects come to understand themselves as rational and reflective beings as a result of being recognized by the other.

One's subjectivity is therefore defined by a subject's grasping his or her being recognized by an other's subjectivity and, as a result, one's cognition migrates into a rational self-consciousness via the objectivity of the other's subjectivity. Reason now pervades not only the internal world of each mind, but the very relation between them as well. Reason becomes more than cognitive, it becomes a *phenomenon in the world*, »spirit,« or collective form of mindedness, emerges as *ontology*, a concrete, objective form of being or life. This why Hegel talks of a »*phenomenology* of mind (*Geist*)«: because reason gradually becomes manifested in the world, not only as a capacity of cognition, but in terms of the actual forms of life that we live – that is, the norms, relations, institutions and purposes to which we commit ourselves in the world. Reason is social, and it is something in which we, as concept-users, participate and interact.

There is much more, of course, to this rich philosophical insight, but for my purposes here I would like to highlight the Hegelian thesis that reason is a property not only of subjective mindedness but of our social world as well. Rationality and freedom, for Hegel, are connected concepts insofar as they form a structure of being that is non-coerced and which can unfold in its full development. To be a free person, for Hegel, as opposed to the paradigm of liberal theory, is to be able to live in a world of social interdependence with others for the common ends and purposes needed to cultivate free individuality itself. This free individuality is also one that is able to grasp that its own existence is dependent on that same cooperative interdependence. Hence, the rational (i.e., modern) form of the family is one where its members relate to each other for the purposes of the mutual development of each other's free individual development as persons. Their relationality should therefore be organized for such a purpose, rather than the instrumental needs of the patriarchal father or any other defective purpose. Such a social form is *rational* because it serves both the individual

and universal purposes; but it is also an instantiation of freedom because each member's activities and norms are organized not from the outside, by tradition, an external authority or some other form of coercion, but emerge spontaneously in accordance with the self-conscious awareness that those norms and practices realize a good in the world that is universal and not merely particular. Only free subjects can think and act in this way.

But Hegel's philosophy also maintains that the nature of the concept, that is, the core rational kernel of being itself, is to be understood as the relational organization of many different aspects of any given thing. A biological organism is not simply a plant, a dog, a human being, or whatever. It is a compound of many different layers and structures of being. These are constituted by relations and dynamics and it is only when we are able to grasp the whole as a dynamic and internally related organization of different parts can we achieve absolute knowledge of any thing. So too with human life: as his theory of recognition suggested, our relational dynamics with other persons is constitutive of our capacity for reason and for freedom.

So too with our social lives: the political community cannot be simply said to be free and rational simply because it exists, or because it fulfills certain kinds of personal or social utility. Rather, it is only when our relations with others achieve *reciprocity* – as opposed to being mechanistically related – that we begin to see how a rational form of community can be organized (see Hegel 1968; Hegel 1971). In other words, it is only when we act together, cooperate in concert for common ends and purposes and nevertheless still retain our individual capacities for judgment that the endorsement of those forms of life come from us and our rational capacities to justify and participate in them. Freedom and reason are therefore social in nature, they are not reducible to cognitive, empirical, psychological or epistemic categories or capacities.

Hegel's thesis therefore constitutes a social ontology that was a departure from the Kantian and subjective Idealist premises of Hegel's time. Relations and practices among members of the modern, free, rational community can be judged and evaluated based on the ways that they either promote rational social freedom or frustrate or negate that freedom. Relations are not merely the product of actions, they possess a being of their own, a structure and dynamic that can be grasped conceptually. A modern, rational, freedom-enhancing family life is quite different from one that instills traditional values and customs at the expense of the cultivation of individual autonomy and common ends and purposes. In such a family system, one is coerced into an adaptive relations to other members of the family or, in its negation, to flee forms of relatedness in one's life. Either way, what is missed here is the possibility of being exposed to, socialized by and into freedom-enhancing forms of relatedness and the corre-

sponding forms of mindedness and affects that accompany it. This structure of thought is very much at the heart of Fromm's ideas about the psyche and can help us understand the power of his critical theory of society as what I will refer to as a social psychodynamics.

3. Fromm and the Social-Relational Model of the Psyche

Fromm's metapsychology rests on the essential insight, drawn from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, that our psychic structure and dynamics are a function of our socio-relational world and vice versa. That this constitutes the essential way to understand human life and enable us to critique, judge and transform it. This is in sharp contrast to the dominant point of view of classical psychoanalysis and its metapsychology. For Freud, who was trained and whose thought was dominated by the perspective of neo-Kantian philosophy of science, the mind was considered as a distinct object that interacted with external objects, but possessed internal drives and mechanisms that were embedded within it. Later, the ideas of Melanie Klein and object-relations theorists explored the ways that the mind was shaped by its internalization of early forms of relatedness into endopsychic structures and dynamics that, in turn, formed the basis for the self.

Fromm's ideas are different because he sees the mind in Hegelian terms: as constitutively related with others and as interdependent on others. Each individual psyche is constituted by the distinctive patterns of relatedness in which it develops. This does not mean there is no phylogenetic impulses. Freud had pointed to the nature of drives as the main way in which the mental apparatus functioned, the successes and frustrations of these various drives (Freud at the end of his life saw only two, the »life« and the »death« drive manifesting in various forms) among others making up the basis of the self. But Fromm, who provided an important and critical revision of Freud's drive theory (Fromm 1992a) saw things differently. Instead of a life and death drive, Fromm saw the human individual as possessing needs that required fulfillment. These needs were intrinsically expressed and organized relationally among others. Fromm's ideas were in developing at the same time as a new generation of object-relations theorists were coming to similar conclusions. Ronald Fairbairn, for instance, made his important statement summarizing this new need-based, relational view of psychic life stating that »libido is primarily object seeking, not pleasure seeking« (Fairbairn 1974, p. 137).

Fromm also found resonance with the alternative theory of the psyche being developed by Harry Stack Sullivan. According to Sullivan, all aspects of psychic life emerge »interpersonally,« which meant that all psychic events and phenom-

ena occur within relational contexts (Sullivan 1953). In addition to Sullivan and Clara Thompson, Fromm was central in the early development of this alternative »relational« theory of the psyche and of psychoanalysis that would emerge in the 1980s as a new paradigm (see Mitchell and Greenberg 1983; Mitchell 1988; Becker 1964). Fromm was a pioneer in this sense because he saw that the need for relatedness, which he developed in several crucial writings (Fromm 1941; 1955; 1992b), was a primary need and that our patterns of relatedness held the key to understanding the nature of both psychic as well as social phenomena. A key concept here is the developmental achievement or failure of autonomy. As puts it: »There is a continuous process, a process in which we cut down ties to the past, ties to the mother, and emerge into a new situation which we can manage only by our own activities« (Fromm 1992b, p. 76).

The central theme emerges for Fromm in his analysis of the psychic development of the person. In the beginning we are dependent on our relations to our caregivers. They feed us, bathe us, keep us warm and alive. But they also provide a relatedness, cultivating our sense of self and world. »Man,« he says, »is 'a historical' and not 'a natural' person« (Fromm 1992a, p. 28). We do possess physiological needs – to satiate hunger or sexual tension, and so on – but these are always satisfied or organized in relation to other objects. There is no way we can be reduced to an abstraction of these needs. The community of social relations and their specific dynamics are always mediating and organizing those needs (see *ibid.*, pp. 44 ff.).

The key idea behind this is that our psychic and relational lives are intertwined and two facets of the same structure. They are not distinct entities, but dialectically mediate one another. But add to this that Fromm suggests an objective-ethical mode of judging these psychic and relational dynamics and structures. There is a normative claim embedded in the descriptive thesis about being a relational and psychological being. In this way, Hegel's thesis that reason is objective, that it needs to be seen as a relational and ontological entity is brought to a new level of precision. Fromm points to this in his discussion of love and loving relationships. In our fundamental need for relatedness, we can enter into object relations with others that are defective or pathological, such as sadistic or masochistic relations, that satisfy a defective psychic need: a regressed need for a tie that repeats the patterns of dependence and symbiosis that one experienced in early development. The self that has not been able to individuate, to separate in a proper way which means to preserve one's sense of independence while simultaneously possessing the capacity to enter into relational ties with others, will need to either submit to another object or make another object submit to them in order to retain the structural dynamics of early childhood, which is, by necessity, one of dependence.

Loving relationships, by contrast, are not between a self and an object, but between two selves, between two subjects that see one another as subjects, as whole persons. The loving relation, as Fromm describes it, »is union with somebody, or something, outside oneself, *under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self*. It is an experience of sharing, of communion, which permits the full unfolding of one's own inner activity« (Fromm 1955, p. 31). Relations are about the need to bond with another and to transcend separateness. The reason for this is that our existential aloneness creates an intolerable anxiety. This anxiety creates further, secondary needs for submission, domination, destructiveness, and so on. This anxiety is a response to needs that go unmet: early ties that were insecure or over-bearing, for instance, that repeat in adulthood as masochism or sadism. The dialectic between psychic and social life now begins to become apparent: the nature of the relation between persons is organized by the psychic needs of each. They form a relation, a tie, with certain characteristics that is an expression of prior, internalized object-relations. The self and its social relations are therefore unified; they are each defined in dialectical fashion by their mutual interaction and constitution.

The evaluative moment in this theory becomes clear when we see that these defective relations do not allow for the growth and development of the person but instead mark an expression of regressed needs and modes of psychic life. The problem of regression here is crucial: in regression, the mind migrates to more primitive and less complex modes of functioning: the capacity to tolerate frustration, difference, the unfamiliar just as cognitive capacities begin to become more simplistic and more reactive and less reflective. This hearkens back to Freud's distinction between *anabolic* and *katabolic* psychic processes which map his drives of »eros« and »thanatos« respectfully (Freud 1973). Anabolic processes that provide the ego with growth and strength to be able to live life whereas katabolic psychic processes frustrate impulses toward living, regressing our psychic and life-expanding processes and strivings. They each form the basis for *eros* and *thanatos*, respectively.

Fromm also sees that we can have evaluative criteria, but they center on the question of how our psychic lives orient our relation-making capacities. Loving relations need not be seen as romantic love. In its basic structure lies the nucleus of a theory of freedom not in a liberal or formalist sense, but in the objective, ontological sense that Hegel and Marx took as the center of their own way of conceiving of human life and freedom. For both, to be free was not a matter of an absence of physical interference (as Hobbes had maintained) nor was it to be seen as a capacity to guide one's life according to some objective maxim, as in the more liberal views of Locke (e.g., according to natural law) and Kant (e.g., the categorical imperative). Rather, to be free entails certain subjective capac-

ities and objective conditions. In the Hegelian-Marxian structure of thought, one must be able to possess object self-knowledge of oneself as a relational and purposive being and to inhabit a socio-relational world where these needs and properties of each are also the governing universal principle organizing the objective conditions of that world.

Fromm gives us a more focused conceptual vocabulary adding the dimension of psychodynamics to this tradition of thought. For Fromm, we need to possess the requisite strivings for relational freedom. That is, we need to be able to have achieved a developmental milestone of de-symbiosis, migrating to the sphere of individuality and autonomy (Fromm 1964). When one has successfully been able to achieve such a psychological mode of being and relating, then the ego is able to enter into relations with others in a giving, sharing, communal way without surrendering its autonomy and individuality. The self becomes more interlaced with others but it also maintains its sense of self and self-directedness. The relations that such a self seeks out and desires are those that embody this capacity for self-development and giving; it embodies the psychological status of what Hegel had sought to achieve in his ethical and political theory: namely, a dialectical synthesis of the classical Greek *polis* and its solidarity and objective ethical life with the modern, Kantian approach to the autonomous, self-conscious person. The fusion of these two poles Hegel had seen as the possible achievement of modernity and modern institutions of family, civil society and the state.

This is why Fromm also talks about categories of relating in critical terms. He argues that we can evaluate the various forms of relating according to certain paradigms of psychic need-fulfillment. Human beings possess innate, phylogenetic strivings for life, for development and growth. But the social world into which we are born and raised selects out which of those will be stressed and developed and which will be repressed and stigmatized. The Aristotelian distinction between potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*) is something that undergirds Fromm's social psychology: »Just as the infant is born with all human potentialities which are to develop under favorable social and cultural conditions, so the human race, in the process of history, develops into what it potentially is« (Fromm 1955, p. 14). A defect or neurosis occurs when these needs are not met and are instead re-circuited, as it were, toward other attitudes, strivings, needs and modes of consciousness. But again, his categories for critically evaluating these are not merely from *anabolic* and *katabolic* psychological dynamics, but from the Hegelian categories of freedom and unfreedom. But add to this the Freudian theme of *eros*: that of the developed ego's capacity to give, to love, to work and to add to the world. For Fromm, these two approaches – Hegelian-Marxian and Freudian – give us

his category of *productiveness*. That is, a way of being and living where one can give himself to others, to an other, to the world. Where one is not driven to destroy but to create.

What we can call anabolic or freedom-enhancing forms of life are those kinds of relatedness where social relations are freely created and the norms and obligations that regulate them are self-consciously endorsed by each as enhancing the lives of those that are in the relation. When I enter into relations of true equality, when each member of the relation recognizes the other and responds to each other's needs, when each does this from a vantage point of one's own sense of individuality, then we achieve »brotherliness,« a form of interdependence with others where dependence (sado-masochism or incestuous strivings) and independence (narcissism) are overcome. The defective pattern is katabolic in nature, it regresses or frustrates the development of our human capacities. In place of relations of solidarity or »brotherliness,« katabolic relations are incestuous, where there exists »a deep longing for the security and rootedness which the relationship to his mother once gave him« (Fromm 1955, p. 39). It is not difficult to see that the former, »brotherly« forms of solidarism, are adequate for democratic forms of life whereas the latter, »incestuous« forms lead us toward authoritarian dynamics since it is based on the repetition of patterns of hierarchy, object-dependence, and symbiotic intimacy from childhood. The core need here is a developed sense of reciprocity between autonomous selves that can, as an intentional group, carry out self-endorsed plans and pursue collectively endorsed ends and purposes.

The important point here is that a free way of life *psychologically* implies a democratic, free way of life *socially*. The failure of the self to achieve psychic autonomy means that it lacks the ego strength to be democratic: to tolerate difference, to revise one's cathected beliefs and values, to stand up to power and disobey unethical regulations and laws, and to be able to give and orient one's values and norms to the good of the *res publica*. The failure to achieve this state of psychic development means a lapse into sado-masochism. One seeks to scaffold one's weakened ego and sense of self via group narcissism (racism, nationalist, identity politics, and so on). Or it entails a doubling down on ideologies such as libertarianism – rooted in regressive forms of narcissism – that offer up defective modes of freedom (see Amlinger and Nachtwey 2025) which are based on the narcissistic fleeing from relations as opposed to the sado-masochistic need for unequal relatedness. Of course, it must be emphasized that, according to Fromm's theory of social character, there is a strong tendency for the dominant modes of social relatedness to become the formal cause for the structure and dynamics of the ego. This means that the structure of the self will be susceptible to the socializing powers of the ambient norms and practices of

the community. It does not, however, mean some kind of crude social determinism. There is space for what we can call »democratic mindedness« to emerge even under such conditions.

4. Core Attributes of Democratic Mindedness

We can extrapolate four core capacities that need to be achieved psychologically in order for a status of democratic mindedness to be said to exist. To possess what we can term a »democratic mind« it is necessary to understand the ways that human experience and development can be thought through and not merely be seen as a mechanical form of internalization. Rather, it needs to be seen as a psychologically achieved status one that is organized by social conditions and patterns of interacting and development. Central here is Fromm's emphasis on the need for individuation as a process of mature, rational psychological development. To lack this is to fall into the defects of neurosis. As Fairbairn once said: »Dependence versus independence is the basic neurotic conflict. The person one turns to becomes the person one must get away from« (Guntrip 1971, p. 116). Fromm could have spoken similar words, and it speaks to a broader concern for any approach to a theory of democratic mindedness. Fromm's emphasis on the process of individuation is crucial in this sense since the failure of this process entails not only neurotic symptoms, it also deforms our social world. I will now point to what I see to be three core capacities that need to be developed in order for democratic mindedness to be able to express itself.

A first core capacity is that one needs to be able to *see others in objective terms* as opposed to objects mapped by our own projections; we need to be able to see, cognize, experience and intuit other people *as subjects*, not merely as *objects*. I call this the capacity for *full relatedness*. The key idea here links with Hegel's views on recognition, to be sure, but they also point to the development of certain humanistic psychological capacities. The failure to do this constitutes a form of reification: that is, an objectification of others and a projection onto them of certain internal psychological content that distorts the other (what Harry Stack Sullivan termed a »parataxic distortion« of the other). This is a core deficit that can undermine the development of the democratic mind. When we fail to see the other's psychic point of reference, when we fail to be able to *mentalize* that is, to intuit the other's intentional stance toward us and the world, then we are failing in a core psychic capacity to generate reciprocal and equalitarian forms of relatedness. Democracy is only possible once we are able to deploy such a capacity in interpersonal terms but also as an internalized process of reflection, of thinking itself.

One's own experiences and thoughts are always particular. Migrating from particularity to individuality requires, as Hegel makes clear, a process of mediating our particularity with universality. Fromm translates this thesis into a more psychologically relevant mode when he defines the concept of mental health:

»Mental health is characterized by the ability to love and to create, by the emergence from incestuous ties to clan and soil, by a sense of identity based on one's own experience of self as the subject and agent of one's powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside of ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason.« (Fromm 1955, p. 69.)

To be able to conceive of oneself as a subject and as related to other subjects is not only to be seen as a developed capacity for empathy toward others, it is more essentially the basis for the capacity for reasoning itself. To lack true individuation also means that one's capacity for thinking in *objective* terms, one's capacity to call into question the beliefs and values that one inculcated from their traditions of youth and family life will also be weakened. Democratic mindedness requires that one be able to expand thinking outside of what is already known by the self's particularism and move into the sphere of universality and difference.

Second, and in addition to this capacity for full relatedness, we must also be able to achieve *capacities for solidarism*, that is, to possess what I think we can call, after Fromm's work, *expanded autonomy*. What I mean by solidarism is a way of relating to others in equalitarian as opposed to dependent terms. In non- or anti-democratic politics, emphasis is often placed on the traditional family and its hierarchical form, on the nation as an extended metaphor of family life, or one's ethnic group as an extension of the same. These are symbolic re-presentations of regressed, dependent ties to others. They express a need that Fromm points to again and again as a regressed need to re-create a form of symbiosis or object-dependence. This is also what occurs in sado-masochistic relational patterns, or, as Fromm describes it, »to seek for new, »secondary bonds« as a substitute for the primary bonds which have been lost« (Fromm 1941, p. 141).

In sado-masochism, the neurotic person is impelled toward patterns of relatedness that reproduce the »primary bonds« that are reminiscent in some sense of a pre-symbiotic past. As Fromm puts it: »In one case I dissolve myself in an outside power; I lose myself. In the other case, I enlarge myself and thereby I gain the strength I lack as an independent self« (Fromm 1941, p. 158). But if one has achieved expanded autonomy, one is able to incorporate others and the social whole as a matter of his or her own personal concerns. Expanded autonomy does not mean separation from others, it allows for the formation of relatedness

that are distinctly civic in nature. These relations are different from intimate, friendly or familial relations; they are instead to be seen as among equals for the common interest of the members as a whole. This common interest is also one that serves the fostering of individuality as well. This is a form of individuality that has been shaped and formed by the overcoming of dependent and sado-masochistic forms of relatedness. In this way we can talk about the kind of ideal citizenship envisioned by Aristotle who posited the excellence of the citizen as one who knew »how to rule and be ruled,« that is, how to follow and when to lead in accordance with reason.

Third, we can point to an intra-psychic *capacity for de-cathecting from our internalized beliefs and values*. This capacity is a deeper development of the first two relational capacities I denoted above. To be able to de-cathect from one's ingrained and internalized beliefs means that one possesses the capacity for self-transformation in accordance with reason. One of the central problems of modern culture is the inability of persons to alter their beliefs about the world in the face of different evidence or to be persuaded by reasons about certain ethical-political concepts and beliefs. This phenomenon leads to a sclerotic blocking of democratic culture and can be seen as psychological terms. The cathexes we form in relation to our world-views can be seen as an expression of the need to maintain psychic ties to early life and the structure and order that paternal and maternal order once gave the developing psyche. But the process of individuation must also be accompanied by a questioning of these cathected world-views and normative values. They can be rooted in the unconscious, but they are expressed consciously when we encounter moral and political conflicts.

Development of a truly democratic form of psyche, a psychologically and ethically developed form of autonomy, must be seen as a core achievement of individuation. To fear the exploration of new values and new ways of being and relating is to fear one's own inner capacity for leading a free life. From Plato to Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and beyond, this was seen to be a central feature of genuine reason and individual freedom. Fromm helps us with this by showing that this requires a psychological development beyond the bounds of dependence and »incestuous« forms of relatedness. We can say, pressing Fromm's insights further, that this »incestuous« need for staying close to what is familiar and known is not only a feature of our interpersonal relations, but also a dynamic of our intra-psychic dynamics as well. To this extent, the democratic mind – in order to be capable of tolerance, moral self-awareness, critical consciousness, and openness to debate and ethical self-transformation – must be capable of this de-cathexis of internalized values and world-views for a true form of self-authorizing agency and ego development.

Fourth, and dialectically related to the prior psychological capacities above, we can point to the *capacity for rational dissent and obligation*. Fromm sees that the ability to stand up for principle, to have the courage to dissent from and to not-cooperate in those norms and institutions that one sees as negating freedom or are inherently destructive of self, the community, or nature as being a crucial ability to provide democratic life with its vigor and power of negation. Overcoming the super-ego's other-directedness, its powerful means of making one submit to the prevailing powers, is a central if not essential dynamic of democratic mindedness. But each of us must also be able to do the opposite as well: we must be able to allow those norms and institutions which we see as rational (that is, which promote social forms of freedom as well as serve universal ends) to have my obedience. As Fromm concisely says: »If a man can only obey and not disobey, he is a slave; if he can only disobey and not obey, he is a rebel (not a revolutionary); he acts out of anger, disappointment, resentment, yet not in the name of a conviction or a principle« (Fromm 1981, p. 5).

To disobey rationally means dissenting and not-cooperating with those norms and social practices that one deems to serve non-universal, non-democratic ends. To fear losing what one possesses, to fear retribution and punishment is of course a rational fear. But it becomes an undermining force in democratic culture when that fear suppresses the needed voice of dissent and the will to subtract or withhold one's collaborative efforts with a social system or institution that one deems to be unjust and irrational. The fear of punishment is no doubt a fear lurking deep in the mind as a fear of parental authority and subordination. To fail to achieve a capacity for rational dissent and disobedience implies a psychological failure to develop out of that psychological structure of subordination to parental authority. It indicates a failure to achieve a sense of ego-strength needed for the expression of one's convictions as an equal and not a subordinate to power (see Frie 2024, pp. 75 ff.). It is, in short, another expression of a *failure to individuate*. As Fromm insightfully puts it: »Only if a person has emerged from mother's lap and father's commands, only if he has emerged as a fully developed individual and thus has acquired the capacity to think and feel for himself, only then can he have the courage to say »no« to power, to disobey« (Fromm 1981, p. 9). To fail in some significant way in the process of individuation means that one will remain caught in a symbiotic matrix with authority; they will constantly look to satisfy the need for some form of psychic/relational dependence rather than a mature sense of autonomy.

It is the same with the capacity for obligation: one needs to know when to follow what rules, norms, laws and practices are those that serve the democratic purposes of common ends and when to disobey them. When to be able to put aside one's narcissistic sense of self and obligate oneself to those principles

which one sees as rational and democratic. Narcissistic tendencies work against this, and Fromm is clear that, for the narcissist, »there is only one reality, that of his own thought processes, feelings and needs. The world outside is not experienced or perceived objectively, i.e., as existing in its own terms, conditions and needs« (Fromm 1955, pp. 35–36). One can only truly obligate oneself to something rationally, as opposed to neurotically, once we are able to transcend narcissism and see how the whole is benefitted and not merely one's own myopic self-interest. But it also points to a failure of individuation in another sense. To adapt to a group and obey is not the same as rationally endorsing the social world in which one lives and acts. To adapt is a psychological process of creating a new form of dependence, it expresses a withered ego and a weakened sense of ethical and psychic agency. When we adapt to a norm or group instead of rationally obligating ourselves, we act non-democratically since we submit ourselves to the prevailing powers that exist.

These three core psychological capacities constitute what I think we can call democratic mindedness. It could be argued that there are more properties of a democratic personality, but my belief is that they would ultimately be reducible to one of these core, essential capacities of an achieved ego-status that I have outlined above. As I have been arguing, this theory of mindedness is itself dialectically a function of the forms of relatedness to which we have access as developing psychological beings. It is clear that the family is a core relational institution that is essential to consider in this regard, but not that alone. In any community, the developing self is one that has access to a plurality of relational frameworks: friendships, schooling, civic life, as well as working life, all provide us with corrective relational experiences to our own experiences of family life. The danger again here is one of individuation: to fail in any significant sense in this process is to fail to achieve the basic capacities for democratic mindedness.

This is of course dialectically related to the social world and its processes and structures. The family structure and its relational dynamics play a key role here, especially when considering the development and maintenance of democracy (see Winnicott 1950). The caregiver's capacity to give itself to the infant is crucial here since it provides the growing infant with needed psychic and relational security, when Winnicott terms the »primary maternal preoccupation,« where the infant gradually learns to organize and understand its feelings of anxiety, rage, jealousy and so on. But this can only really happen as a general social pattern if the caregiver feels security in her immediate and her social-relational world. Her aloneness and anxiety impedes this needed development on the part of the child (see Winnicott 1965: 26ff.).

5. Social Psychodynamics and Critical Theory

Fromm's ideas point to what I would like to term a *social psychodynamics* as opposed to a social psychology or some other method of integrating psychoanalysis and social theory. We need to be able to grip the depth-psychological dimensions of the formation of the self and the ways that social-relational processes and patterns shape it as well as how it is, I turn, shaped by the self's dynamics. The rationalist bias that has pervaded critical theory as well as democratic theory and political philosophy, with its roots in Kantian philosophy as well as pragmatism, has deeply distorted our conception of the modern self. As I see it, a critical social psychodynamics is an approach to human life that takes our relational and practical lives as emitting certain forms of mental and psychological functioning. Fromm's theory of social character here is powerful: he sees how the social world imprints itself on the developing ego. Critical theory must therefore seek to grasp the ways that this depth analysis of the self contributes to social critique but also how it can be used to guide and generate social change.

In this sense, the idea that relational dynamics and psychic dynamics are dialectically related is crucial. A social psychodynamics can serve the ends of a critical theory of society once we are able to see that the pattern and dynamism of specific relational forms have different effects upon the self. Fromm is certainly correct that we possess a phylogenetic need and capacity for relatedness; object-relations theorists have also been correct that this relatedness is the formative web of reality that organizes our psychological world. It is important to see how close this aligns with what Hegel and Marx emphasized in their own work: that the relational structure and dynamics of the totality, the social whole, is constitutive of the kinds of subjectivity and consciousness that we find around us.

The central problem here becomes the ways that freedom is distorted in modern society (see Amlinger and Nachtwey 2025). When seen in terms of the ability to do as one wants without external interference (we can refer to this as a kind of liberal fundamentalism), we fail to see how this is a defective mode of freedom since freedom and rationality, as Hegel pointed out, are fused concepts. Whenever members of a social form – a family, a community, an institution, or whatever – are in some basic sense forced to adapt to the strictures and norms of the group, then a certain kind of psychic need for relatedness is deformed. When we are coerced in any sense into adapting, then we grind down our capacities for mutuality and interdependence. My capacity to see the other as a subject, to recognize them and become changed in the process, is weakened.

The real danger of modern society has been, and continues to be, the swallowing of the developing ego by the strong imperatives of socialization flowing from the prevailing social system. This pushes each of us, especially under the

auspices of neoliberalism, into systems of adaptation and away from dynamics of equalitarian mutuality, interdependence, and recognition. Indeed, as Harry Guntrip insightfully pointed out from the point of view of object relations theory:

»Adaptation is one-sided and is certainly a matter of action. But personal object-relations are essentially two-sided, mutual by reason of being personal, and not a matter of mutual adaptation merely, but of mutual appreciation, communication, sharing, and of each being for the other« (Guntrip 1971, p. 111).

This is a fascinating insight on Guntrip's part, for it encapsulates much of what the Hegelian flavor of social psychodynamics seeks to capture. Fromm's ideas are in alignment here insofar as his primary understanding of critical theory was that it must get to the heart of the structural dynamics of our socio-relational lives, our »culture.« A culture that is based on adaptation and collaboration is intrinsically anti-democratic. It does not support, nor does it foster the forms of democratic relatedness and mindedness discussed above. If anything, it actively undermines and negates them. As Fromm noted on this problem: »The organization man has lost the capacity to disobey, he is not even aware of the fact that he obeys« (Fromm 1981, p. 12). The deep hyper-reification of consciousness that follows from the increasing absorption of the self into the prevailing social order is a major concern since this mitigates most strongly against the growth of the democratic mind as a cultural pattern.

But even more, Fromm, like his object-relations counterparts such as Fairbairn, Winnicott, Guntrip and others, all express evaluative criteria for critical judgment. They offer us a way to distinguish defective, irrational, unhealthy forms of psychic and social-relational life from those that are healthy, rational and good. This points us toward a need to move beyond the clinical frame and into the civic and public domain. For only when the cultural pattern of norms are altered, only when our institutions have been reformed, only when healthy relatedness becomes a feature of these spheres of life can we begin to talk about real enduring social transformation. For these changes also cultivate democratic mindedness and psychic strivings and capacities. It is precisely here, I think, that Fromm's ideas can provide us with a sense of judgment as well as a critical-diagnostic function, not only as clinicians, but as citizens as well. Only when we are able to depart from a false form of objectivity and neutrality and see that our evaluative concepts and judgments are rooted in actual forms of development and ways of living and relating, can critical theory reclaim a sense of active purpose in the project of rationalizing self and society and the continued project of democratic social transformation.

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Democracy and the Psychodynamics of Present-Day Political Power According to Erich Fromm

RAINER FUNK



Introduction

There seems to be a consensus that authoritarianism is making a comeback. Wherever autocrats, oligarchs, a single party, or the military exercise undemocratic and anti-pluralistic rule and political power, one can speak of authoritarianism (cf. Fahrenberg 2022). Such a system is characterized by authoritarian personalities and systems that exercise power and demand obedience and submissiveness. That this trend can be seen worldwide cannot be denied, considering Putin, the Chinese Communist Party, Saudi Arabia, the mullahs in Iran, or even North Korea. From a psychological perspective, this authoritarianism still exists today.

Similarly, political developments in Western European countries and North America, initially described as right-wing populism, are very often interpreted as a return to authoritarianism and fascism (cf. Braune 2024; Byrd 2023; Delogu 2022; Morelock 2018). The aim of my talk is to question this interpretation from a social-psychoanalytical perspective, as developed by Erich Fromm.

To get this out of the way right at the start: I, too, have the feeling that a new and very threatening development with obvious potential for violence is occurring in politics. I have never in my life felt so threatened by political developments as I have in the past five years. My question, however, is whether the terms »authoritarian« and authoritarianism or fascism adequately capture the *psychological* dynamics of this current threat.

How to respond to and deal with this threat depends largely on the motivations of both sides: the political actors and the people who elect and sympathize with them. It is therefore important to analyze the psychodynamics and find out what motivates and makes these people think, feel and act in regard to exercising power (cf. Fantauzzi et al. (Eds.) 2025).

The two sides certainly have in common that they instrumentalize their power. But to what end? Do they really want to turn people into obedient and submissive beings? Or is it about enabling people to feel great and important again? Does this psychologically fit with authoritarianism? With Erich Fromm, one must raise big questions as to whether we are dealing with a psychological dynamic of exercising power and wanting to be submissive – in other words, with an authoritarian psychodynamic.

It could also be that such interpretations and concepts serve our blind spots, allowing us to avoid recognizing what has to do with ourselves and that – more unconsciously than consciously – we promote what we experience as a threat from others.

Let us begin in the first section with the question of what is meant by »authoritarian character« and »authoritarianism« in psychological and social psychological terms.

1. Fromm's concept of the authoritarian character

As a matter of fact, it was not Adorno (Adorno et al 1950) but *Fromm* who developed the concept of the authoritarian character: in the early 1930s in the context of the Institute's research on authority and family. Fromm then described its psychodynamics in the volume *Autorität und Familie*, edited by Horkheimer (1936), as a (non-sexual) sadomasochistic character (Fromm 1936). And it was Fromm who, as early as 1930, empirically investigated the authoritarian character of German workers and employees who professed to be politically left-wing, even though the results were – due to Horkheimer's resistance – not published until 1980 (cf. Fromm 1984).

Fromm's key insight was that authoritarian personalities can manifest themselves in both active (sadistic) and passive (masochistic) ways, which can appear in different combinations in their relationships with the world and others, as well as in their being related with themselves. The aspect of wanting to exercise power can manifest itself, for example, in one's attitude toward oneself as self-control. Or the desire to be submissive can manifest itself in the suppression and repression of all autonomous and self-effective impulses. Another important aspect is the intertwining of authoritarianism with patriarchy, i.e., with a gen-

der-specific division between the desire to exercise power and the desire to be submissive (as Lynn Chancer in particular has highlighted in her research from 1992 on – cf. Chancer 1992).

Another important aspect of Fromm's concept of authoritarian character is the *symbiotic bond* between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, resulting in a strong emotional dependence on one another (with all the consequences this has for upbringing and the development of autonomy during puberty).

Psychodynamically, Fromm explained this mutual symbiotic dependence as follows (cf. Fromm 1941a, pp. 141–179): Due to the irrational authority's claim to domination, the submissive person projects his own autonomous powers – his own competencies, his own will, his own strivings, his goodness, his autonomy – onto the authority, in order to participate secondarily in the idealized authority by being existentially dependent on it. With this kind of psychodynamics, the motto is: Leader or party, we belong to you, because without your domination we are nothing.

And there is something else that needs to be emphasized at this point: authoritarian exercise of power is always an exercise of power that is not based on one's own competencies or on currently legitimate mandates and commissions. According to Fromm, the term »authoritarian« can therefore only be used when referring to the exercise of power by irrational authorities and when – and this is another important point – the authority is concerned with keeping those who are submissive in a state of dependence. *Rational* authority exercises power to reduce dependencies. *Irrational* authority seeks to maintain and increase dependency through demands for obedience and submission (cf. Fromm 1941, pp. 164–166).

This authoritarian character fights against a person's autonomy, demands blind obedience, and deprives people of their own sexual pleasure and gender self-determination. In education, this led to children being driven out of their own will through physical and mental castigation and violence. The authoritarian character lost its political dominance definitively only with the so-called 1968 movement in Western countries.

If one adopts such an understanding of authoritarian character, then from a social psychological perspective it is difficult to see a resurgence of authoritarianism and authoritarian character everywhere (cf. also Frindte 2025). The majority of Americans who voted for »Make America Great Again« are not submissive and obedient, but self-determined and eager to feel powerful and great again. And that is precisely what Trump is not prohibiting them to do; rather, he wants to give it back to them. That is to say: there must something else going on at the motivational level.

There are certainly authoritarian groups and individuals, such as evangelicals and creationists, anti-feminists, or Vice President Vance. There is also no doubt that strong authoritarian remnants still exist in the former socialist states of Central Eastern Europe (cf. Jecker 2025). Only in this way can the infighting among the Republicans in the US or the AfD in Germany be explained. And yet, if one wants to understand »America first« and the nationalist movements in Western European countries psychologically, it is mostly about something other than an authoritarian emotional situation.

What characterizes the exercise of power by right-wing populist systems, Brexit, or the Make America Great Again movement? What psychodynamics and emotional impulses primarily determine political events, but also interpersonal relationships?

2. On the psychodynamics of narcissistic exercise of power

It took Fromm quite some time to recognize the psychological dynamics that explain why people seek refuge in fantasies of greatness of a national, racist, religious, or even gender-based nature and at the same time keep away from anything that contradicts this fantasized greatness. Fromm's path to such an understanding of narcissistic and group narcissistic exercise of power and its completely different psychodynamics will be briefly outlined here (cf. Funk 2019, pp. 110–129; Chancer and McLaughlin 2024).

a) Needs for relatedness as psychological impulses

The starting point is Fromm's departure from Freud's drive theory in the mid-1930s: Psychological impulses do not result from innate drives, but from the need for relatedness (cf. Fromm 1992 [1937]; 1941, pp. 277–299). In this departure, Fromm focuses primarily on the basic mental problem of human beings. Due to their neural development, humans can make themselves the object of interest: in other words, they are self-reflective, can imagine things as real regardless of their actual existence, and can independently link what they imagine (fantasize) with affects. At the same time, humans experience a significant reduction in genetic-instinctive determinants.

Self-reflexivity and the ability to imagine result simultaneously in new psychological needs for relatedness: Thus, every person must create a framework of orientation (in the form of a philosophy, religion, science, etc.) in order to avoid going mad, and must give his or her life meaning in order to avoid sliding into a state of depressive futility. Above all, however, humans must develop a

constructive relationship with themselves and be able *to experience themselves as individually and socially identical and valuable*.

This existential need to sense one's identity and self-esteem, and therefore to be able to love and accept oneself, can – like all needs for relatedness – be satisfied in a variety of ways, but it *must* be satisfied. If, due to individual and socio-economic circumstances, the ways of satisfying it do not lead to a feeling of being able to love and value oneself, then this results in corresponding negative self-perceptions. The more unbearable these feelings become, the more likely it is that selfish and narcissistic compensation for the lack of self-love and positive self-perception will occur. Fromm described precisely this dynamic of impeded or thwarted self-love in his 1939 article *Selfishness and Self-Love* in the journal *Psychiatry* (Fromm 1939b).

Fromm insists on the psychological need inherent in all human beings for an individual and social sense of identity; however, he does not see narcissism as innate (as Freud did), but rather as the result of a lack of self-love and therefore a secondary possibility for humans, who are primarily *social* beings and strive for loving relationships with themselves.

I would like to emphasize here that, as early as 1939, Fromm saw the need to feel a sense of identity as a psychological necessity for mental survival – just as existential as physical needs such as eating or sleeping – and that he understood selfishness and narcissism as pathological compensations for a lack of self-love. (It is striking, however, that Fromm does not always follow his own understanding of narcissism, which he developed as early as 1939, and here and there also speaks of a biological function of narcissism – for example Fromm 1964, p. 72.)

b) Insecure identity and the narcissistic escape mechanism

The decisive breakthrough to a new understanding of social and political developments finally occurred in the early 1960s, when Fromm described the psychodynamics of narcissism in his book *The Heart of Man* (1964, pp. 62–94). He recognized that there are not only active narcissistic individuals, but also a passive form of narcissism, in which many people compensate for their lack of self-esteem and identity by identifying with a narcissistic person, idea, organization, institution, or group in order to feel themselves as great by identifying with fantasized greatness.

But let us first ask what happens at the level of relating to oneself and others in narcissistic compensation. A precondition is always that one's sense of identity and self-love is undermined and becomes fragile due to individual or social circumstances (cf. Golec-de-Zavala 2024). Which »circumstances« are

relevant in the present day, I will only hint at here. Globalization, climate change, dramatically increasing inequality, the digital revolution, which makes our own thoughts, feelings, actions, and self-efficacy completely dependent on creative technology and seriously weakens our sense of self and self-esteem, are just a few examples. Feelings of fear, uncertainty, disorientation, and powerlessness are getting harder to ignore and repress.

If the self is put under such pressure by individual or societal threats that it is in danger of losing its positive function of supporting a sense of identity, and people feel only insecure, anxious, written off, forgotten, and devalued, then narcissism, and above all the formation of a narcissistic character, offer an increasingly popular way out.

According to Fromm, this way out is always characterized by a splitting of positive and negative self-experiences. It usually leads to a dissociation from negative self-perceptions with the goal of only perceiving oneself as great and fantastic. One's own negatively experienced aspects of oneself are denied and projected onto others, where they are usually fought against.

The *idealization* of oneself and the *devaluation* of everything that does not reflect this idealized self is a defining characteristic of narcissism. According to Fromm, a narcissistic psychodynamic can therefore always be recognized when one's own grandiosity is linked to the devaluation or combating of everything that is foreign and different and therefore does not reflect or complement one's own grandiose fantasies. The malignant and pathological aspects of narcissism correspond to destructiveness toward what is not one's own: pronounced narcissism not only devalues everything that is not one's own, but also fights against it.

c) Group narcissism

The narcissistic splitting of the self has been well researched diagnostically and therapeutically at the intersubjective level. Fromm's achievement 60 years ago was to recognize this polarizing tendency of narcissism in social interaction and to describe it as collective or group narcissism (cf. Fromm 1964, pp. 78–94).

Even groups of people who feel threatened, insecure, written off, and devalued in their sense of identity must satisfy their need for social identity. They can overcome this desperate situation by identifying with individuals, groups, ideas, or institutions that have great fantasies, thereby making themselves feel great. The attractiveness of Donald Trump, for example, with his MAGA message, who uses the words »great« and »greatness« in every other sentence, can be seen in the fact that more than half of voters elected him because of his »greatness« message and his own narcissism.

On the one hand, there are strong narcissistic individuals in politics, religion, culture, the media, etc., and on the other, there are groups with their fan culture or narcissistic programs and institutions. There has been a resurgence of nationalism and right-wing populist figures and agendas in the political arena. It should not be forgotten that narcissism has not only become »socially acceptable« in the business world but has also developed into a »mentality of a society«.

In the past, narcissism was stigmatized and tabooed as arrogance, showing off, and selfishness, and was reserved at most for the feudal class (or the after-life); today there is a veritable culture of narcissism: the more grandiose, the better. How else can a trade war be understood when it is always about »America first«?

As the narcissistic social character becomes dominant, the mentality of a society increasingly becomes oriented toward delusions of grandeur. It's all about who or what is the biggest, most successful, most profitable, most lucrative, and which management consultancy has the most excellence to offer; where it's all about superlatives, the super-rich, and the new »heroes« along the lines of Elon Musk.

d) Authoritarian vs. narcissistic exercise of power

If narcissistic psychodynamics determine political events, this is also reflected in other power structures and in other ways of dealing with critical and dissenting voices. This will be illustrated by comparison with the exercise of authoritarian power.

Authoritarian psychodynamics is about the threat to the authoritarian system. This threat lies in the fact that the emotional symbiotic dependence between irrational authority and submissive individuals could be weakened by independent, autonomous thinking, feeling, and acting. Accordingly, anything that is independent and self-determined must be suppressed, identified by the secret service, persecuted, and punished; the rebellious and self-willed have no choice but to confess their guilt and, in rituals of submission, reaffirm their identity as obedient servants of the authoritarian system. If he is not willing to do so, he will be imprisoned or liquidated, depending on his political status (this is what Putin does, for example).

When a *narcissistic* dynamic dominates, everything is focused on ensuring that greatness is recognized and promoted. This does not happen through the submissiveness and selflessness of others, but rather through others directly *mirroring* or *complementing* the greatness of the narcissist or the narcissistic idea or organization. What connects us and enables social cohesion is our shared fantasy of greatness, not the desire to submit to irrational authority and blind obedience.

3. Other features of a narcissistic exercise of power

Other features of narcissistic exercise of power show up when people don't let themselves be used or monopolized to reflect or complement the greatness of the narcissist or a narcissistic idea or organization. They are then either ignored (stage 1), actively devalued (stage 2), or finally insulted and declared to be enemies, rogues, the axis of evil, terrorists, etc. (stage 3). The latter happens regularly when those who have been devalued insist on their right to view things critically and realistically. Then they become a projection screen for everything that narcissists and narcissistic groups have to deny about themselves: they are then the bad guys and the guilty ones who must be exposed and fought against.

An increased potential for aggression also arises when narcissistic individuals or groups interact with each other: The fantasized greatness of one's own person does not allow feelings of fear, inferiority, weakness, or even failure, so that anything that could lead to such perceptions and feelings must be immediately and aggressively rejected. Narcissistic individuals and groups do not react with a *fear* of strangers, but with *hostility* toward them; not with feelings of understanding, but with resentment; not with empathy and compassion, but with indifference and mercilessness.

Particularly striking in the narcissistic exercise of power is the need for *enemy stereotypes* and the *projection* onto others of those aspects of oneself that contradict one's fantasized greatness. The characteristics of the bogeymen usually correspond exactly to what one denies in oneself or in one's great fantasized idea or organization, and therefore projects onto others. In order to secure one's own social identity, those at the top are then made scapegoats, and the enemy to be fought is identified as social parasites, migrants, sexually diverse people, people of other faiths, or foreigners – precisely in everything that does not mirror and complement one's own greatness, and in everything that cannot be used and monopolized for one's own greatness.

Another peculiarity resulting from the narcissistic splitting of the self is that there is only »either/or,« only friends or enemies, only black or white but no »both/and,« no shades of gray, and no people with whom one has to engage and argue (scientifically, democratically, or however else).

Narcissistically idealizing oneself while devaluing everything that is not oneself leads not only to a distorted perception of oneself and others, but also to a distorted perception of reality and the claim to power to be able to determine what is real and true arbitrarily. This claim to power also exists in authoritarian psychodynamics. *Pravda*, the central organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, attempted to enforce fake news with power, just like Trump's *Truth*. While the authoritarian system of the Communist Party simply dictated

the truth, leaving the submissive with no choice but to gratefully accept it as the wisdom of the Party, Trump promises greatness with his »pravda« alias »truth« and invents flourishing worlds in the Midwest or a »golden age« on the beach in Gaza. What works and what power is exercised with is not a claim of domination, but fantasizing greatness.

Because narcissists and narcissistic groups are concerned with securing their fantasized greatness, any self-criticism is out of the question. If they are nevertheless confronted with limitations or even criticized by others, this is experienced as a violation of their fantasized greatness, leading to veiled or open anger, rage, and always to a never-ending desire for revenge. Such narcissistic violence against others (or, in the suicidal turn, against oneself, if the violence cannot be directed outward) is psychologically something completely different from the sadistic cruelty with which authoritarians demand submissiveness and blind obedience.

In his later work *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973, pp. 201–205), Fromm further refined his insights into narcissistic aggression, particularly with regard to group narcissism. He writes there:

»Those whose narcissism refers to their group rather than to themselves as individuals are as sensitive as the individual narcissist, and they react with rage to any wound, real or imaginary, inflicted upon their group.« (Ibid. p. 204.)

The special nature of the sensitivity and increased vulnerability of fantasized greatness therefore applies not only to individual narcissists, but also to those who identify with great people, ideas, and organizations.

The insights into group narcissistic dynamics led Fromm in this later work to incidentally interpret central aspects of the grandiosity of the Third Reich, such as the superiority of the Aryan race and the extermination of the Jews, from a much more narcissistic perspective. Thus, it was the specific interplay of narcissism and authoritarianism that shaped German National Socialism and what was called »fascisms.«

From a psychological perspective, the dangerous aspect of both individual and collective narcissism is primarily that interest in others – that is, in everything that transcends oneself, that is foreign, unknown, and not like oneself – is increasingly *lost*, and the fiction of greatness is *violently* upheld. Right-wing populism, but also many other developments in economics, society, politics, and culture, are increasingly following such narcissistic psychodynamics. Right-wing populism presents itself as the voice of the people, but at its core it is anti-democratic, because every democracy requires positive recognition of others as

others. Precisely because of his predominantly narcissistic psychodynamics, he knows no real tolerance or acceptance of anything that is not his own. All group narcissism propagates antagonism rather than the co-operation that is necessary for survival.

Conclusion

Concerning the psychosocial of the contemporary crisis we can conclude that the core problem can be identified as the question of individual and social identity and self-esteem – whether it is the fear of losing prosperity (as is particularly the case with Americans), the sense of no longer feeling at home and safe in one's own country, or the experience of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming technical creativity, excessive bureaucracy, or climate change.

Feelings of fear, insecurity, powerlessness, and the sense of being unable to make a difference and being written off lead to an unbearable individual and collective self-experience. To escape such feelings, people seek salvation not in submission to authority, but in fantasized greatness – as Germans, as grand nation, great Americans, white people, as high performers, as fan clubs, as followers of whatever happens to present oneself as great. If Fromm had written his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom* 25 years later, he would have added to the escape mechanisms of authoritarianism, conformism and destructiveness a fourth escape mechanism: to escape in fantasized grandiosity.

Fighting narcissists as authoritarians is only partially effective; socially and politically marginalizing and stigmatizing them only reinforces their escape into their chosen nationalistic or other fantasized grandiosity. Our problem today is not that the escape into authoritarianism has become socially acceptable again, but that narcissistic self-idealization is considered the most normal thing in the world. That is *the* prominent pathology of normalcy of today.

At the beginning, I speculated that interpreting social and political developments as »authoritarian« stems not only from an unpsychological understanding of authoritarian character but also serves our own blind spots regarding our own narcissism. We then fight against the narcissism of our time among those who openly live it out in nationalistic fantasies of greatness, and we have difficulties seeing our own involvement and how we are affected by it. How deeply we are all infected by this can be confirmed relatively quickly if we turn our attention to the everyday superlatives and the omnipresent tendency to see reality and other people only as »good« or »evil«, so that there is only an »either/or,« and no longer a »both/and« .

When it comes to finding a constructive response to the ever-increasing narcissistic violence from a psychological perspective, it is important to start with

the fantasies of greatness that are demanded and promoted by society today. The first step is to recognize their function of compensating for unbearable feelings of powerlessness, fear, disorientation, insecurity, and a lack of self-esteem and self-efficacy. These are conducive to escaping into narcissistic fantasies of grandeur, which can be avoided only if one is prepared to return to reality, which is becoming increasingly difficult in view of virtual escape routes and simulating techniques.

Returning to reality, however, means two things: on the one hand, we must re-learn how to come to terms with the limited, binding, frustrating, and frightening reality that surrounds us and that we ourselves are. On the other hand, this means re-discovering and practicing one's own mental powers of thinking, feeling, and imagining. This is because, alongside the physical abilities of strength development and movement, they form the basis of our experience of ourselves as valuable, powerful, and self-effective.

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What Does It Mean to Be Human in Times of Polycrisis?

Erich Fromm's Humanistic Thought as an Anthropological Key to the Present

Erich Fromm Lecture 2026

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Walking in the Dark on Mined Ground

The current state of the world can best be described using the term »polycrisis,« coined by the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin (1993): A polycrisis is characterized by a multitude of simultaneous political, ecological, economic, and social crises that negatively influence and reinforce one another. The effects of a polycrisis are more dramatic than the sum of its constituent crises and conflicts, which would already be difficult enough to manage on their own. Reducing complexity in this situation entails many dangers.

Over 30 years ago, Edgar Morin described the polycrisis as a threatening monster that feeds on individual conflict, danger and complexity. According to Morin, this monster is an embodiment of the problem of all problems, namely humanity's inability to become humane. Only if we »learn to be human«, as the Neo-Confucian philosopher Tu Weiming puts it (Tu 2023), can we avert an acceleration and deepening of the polycrisis. Morin was optimistic (over 30 years ago!) that a community of shared destiny among all humans on Earth («our common home») could bring solutions closer via joint effort and global solidarity.

Alas, we are scarcely witnessing such solidarity at the moment: instead of wise reforms aimed at creating a new order that takes into account the diverse geopolitical, economic, social, and environmental challenges of the past 35 years, we are witnessing increasing disorder. Power trumps law, both international law and trade law; consensus-oriented, compromise-driven agreements are giving way to coercive »deals« that the powerful impose on the less powerful; former partners are treated like vassals who must pay tribute. The »One World« vision, in which so many have believed over the past decades, appears to be nothing more than naive wishful thinking in the light of such prevalent group narcissism.

In the most powerful country in the Western Hemisphere, freedom of opinion and speech, as well as academic freedom, are coming under pressure, as is the independence of the judiciary. Sober, fact-based analysis of reality is giving way to fake news and ideological rhetoric – accompanied by threats, intimidation, and arbitrariness. Politics is being geared toward private interests of self-enrichment, if necessary even in conflict with existing law. Today, in the spirit of a rehashed Monroe Doctrine, those in power in the U.S. unabashedly presume the right to act as they see fit within their – self-defined – sphere of interest, according to their own discretion and alignment of interests. That this will provoke new conflicts is obvious (Walt 2026).

In this context, the arguments put forward by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) take on greater significance: democracies do not usually die as a result of armed revolutions, but rather slowly at the hands of elected governments. The formula is clear: nationalist ideology; erosion and dismantling of democratic institutions; appointment of cronies to the judiciary; vilification of political opponents; restriction of civil liberties; and intimidation of the media by democratically elected leaders. This is actually nothing new, but rather elements of a totalitarianism described by Hannah Arendt over 70 years ago (Arendt 1955/2008).

We are witnessing tariffs and trade restrictions, imposed arbitrarily in confrontational language, used as instruments of blackmail. In part, they aim to break legitimate resistance to violations of international law; they are also intended to help secure victory in an ideologically motivated »competition« between systems of government – and to disrupt competitors' supply chains. In light of the life-threatening consequences of climate change, the decline in biodiversity, and the destruction of essential resources, investments in an ideologically motivated competition between systems are part of the problem, not the solution.

Despite all the measurable evidence, there is currently no sense among the world's population of a »community of shared destiny« as described by Morin. On the contrary: mono-national, short-sighted, and recklessly simplistic thinking and action take precedence. This increases the danger that – just as Europe's

great powers sleepwalked into World War I in 1914 – today's world powers are sleepwalking into a political, ecological, and global economic catastrophe (Clark 2015). In an age of nuclear weapons controlled by artificial intelligence, such a catastrophe would lead to the end of our civilization.

Even today – as in 1914 – those in positions of responsibility in politics, business, and society are by no means unaware of the possible consequences of their decisions. But because of the priority given to the safeguarding of short-term interests, they remain blind to their potential long-term and cumulative consequences. Just as in 1914, they underestimate the potential for escalation arising from the interaction of individual problem clusters, which – given the proliferation of nuclear weapons – is far more dangerous than was the case in 1914. Some world leaders already accept war as a legitimate means of advancing economic and political interests. Cyberattacks are already almost a daily occurrence.

The Most Dangerous Individual Aspects of the Polycrisis

In my view, the most dangerous individual aspects of the polycrisis today are the lack of responsible political leadership, the underestimation of the impacts of global environmental problems, and the decline in social capital caused by increasing polarization and mutual distrust.

1. The Political Dimension of the Polycrisis

Politics is not everything, but without good politics, everything is nothing. By politics, I mean an institutionally regulated process of social negotiation. In this process, various social groups, conflicting interests, and competing ideologies reach an agreement on matters of the common good – through weighing and considering various aspects – to safeguard freedom and limit power.

Theoretical Reflections on Politics and Politicians

Different political theorists attach varying degrees of importance to discourse as a means of decision-making. *Carl Schmitt* and *Jürgen Habermas* could be viewed as polar opposites:

For Carl Schmitt, a clear distinction between friend and foe was essential; when necessary, he preferred authoritarian decisions made through strong state leadership to normative rules. He regarded discussions, compromises, and moral arguments as a distraction from pure questions of power. For Schmitt, war is a

means of enforcing policy (Schmitt 1932/2015). The fact that Carl Schmitt joined the NSDAP as early as 1933 and justified Hitler's dictatorship casts a shadow over his intellectual legacy.

For Jürgen Habermas, the democratic legitimacy of decisions arises through public deliberation. This is characterized by rational, free, fair, and inclusive discourse. Laws must be enforceable (facticity) and justifiable by reason (validity). Civil society and the media can contribute to decision-making processes – parliament translates the outcome of these discourses into binding law (Habermas 1998; 2011).

Several other important political thinkers will be briefly cited here due to their current relevance:

For *Hannah Arendt*, the task and purpose of politics is

»the protection of life in the broadest sense. It enables the individual to pursue his or her ends in peace and quiet, that is, unmolested by politics – whereby it is, for the time being, entirely irrelevant in which spheres of life these ends [...] lie, whether it is a matter, in the ancient sense, of enabling the few to engage in philosophy, or, in the modern sense, of securing for the many life, livelihood, and a minimum of happiness.« (Arendt 1993, p. 36 f.)

For Arendt, politics is always based on a large number of diverse people (plurality). It arises in the »space between people« and thrives on the »being-together and living-together of the diverse« (ibid., p. 9 ff.). People organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities. The purpose of politics is freedom (ibid., pp. 28 and 42). The state holds a monopoly on the use of force and prevents a war of all against all. For Arendt, therefore, war is not the continuation of politics by other means, as Clausewitz claimed. Her sober assessment of those who engage in politics remains relevant today in the spring of 2026:

»No one has ever doubted that the state of truth in politics is poor; no one has ever counted truth among the political virtues. Lying seems to be part of the trade not only of the demagogue, but also of the politician and even the statesman. A remarkable and disturbing fact.«

Max Weber defines politics as the »governing activity« of a political entity, such as the state. This activity is characterized by »the striving for a share of power or for influence over the distribution of power, whether between states or within a state among the groups of people it encompasses« (Weber 1919, p. 397). According to Weber, those who engage in politics »strive for power – power either

as a means in the service of other goals, whether ideal or selfish – or power ‘for its own sake’, to enjoy the sense of prestige it confers» (ibid.).

The state is legitimized by the will of the »ruled.« Through its ministers and officials, it is the bearer of lawful authority in a relationship of domination of some people over others. Those who engage in politics as a profession should be characterized by three qualities: passion, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of proportion (ibid., p. 435 ff.):

- Passion in the sense of a passionate dedication to a cause – not sterile excitement or the empty romanticism of intellectual curiosity devoid of any sense of practical responsibility;
- Responsibility toward this cause as the decisive guiding principle of action – in contrast to woke sensibilities; and
- A sense of proportion, defined as the ability to let realities take their course with inner composure and calm. Politics, according to Weber, is conducted with the head, not with other parts of the body.

In his analysis of politicians’ conduct, Weber makes the distinction – still fundamental to our present age – between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. For Weber, a gulf-wide chasm exists between acting according to the maxim of the ethics of conviction (in religious terms,

»the Christian does what is right and leaves the outcome to God«) and acting according to the ethics of responsibility, where one must take responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of one’s actions. [...] If the consequences of an action flowing from pure conviction are evil, the person acting is not held responsible, but rather the world, the stupidity of other people, or the will of God who created them thus. The ethical convictionist feels responsible only for ensuring that the flame of pure conviction [...] does not go out. To constantly rekindle it is the purpose of his actions.

[...] The ethicist of responsibility, on the other hand, takes into account the average flaws of human beings and has no right to assume their goodness and perfection; he does not feel able to shift the consequences of his own actions, insofar as he could foresee them. He will say: »These consequences are attributed to my actions.« (Ibid., p. 441 f.)

Finally, let us mention here an institutional perspective from the World Bank on what politics is and what those who practice it should do for the good of humanity. For the World Bank, sound policy is guided by the problems existing in a country and aligned with the resources available to solve them. Govern-

ments that have been entrusted with policymaking through legitimate processes are expected to demonstrate good governance. This is achieved when the state, through its actions, enables the people of a country to enjoy security, prosperity, social cohesion, order, and continuity. Good governance creates a social environment in which individuals can develop their productive, political, and cultural capabilities without limiting the opportunities for future generations to do the same (Leisinger 1995, p. 114 ff.). For the World Bank, the key elements of good governance are:

- Transparency, in the sense of adequate and reliable information about the foundations of policy and social decision-making processes;
- Accountability, in the sense of responsibility for the work of government employees and, if necessary, the ability to sanction failure;
- Institutional pluralism, i.e., the promotion of independent institutions such as trade unions, chambers of commerce, professional associations, universities, as well as media and nongovernmental organizations;
- Participation, i.e., the systematic and sustained involvement of the population (through consultation) in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects and programs that affect them;
- The rule of law, i.e., the creation of conditions in which an independent and efficient judiciary is tasked with applying laws (oriented toward the common good); and
- A strong civil society (World Bank 1992).

The *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific* (ESCAP 2009) adds two important elements to this list of requirements:

- Willingness and ability to address the concerns of the population within a reasonable timeframe (responsiveness); and
- Effectiveness and efficiency, i.e., doing the right things in a goal-oriented manner and achieving the highest possible return with the least possible effort.

As (tragically still relevant) indicators of poor governance, the World Bank highlights the following (World Bank 1991):

- Lack of a clear distinction between what is considered »public« and what is considered »private,« and hence a tendency to use public resources for private gain;
- Overregulation in the sense of an excessive number of regulations, permit requirements, and laws (as well as the associated reporting obligations imposed by authorities) that hinder the functioning of the market;
- Priorities for action and spending that do not align with solutions to the

problems at hand and therefore constitute a misuse of scarce resources; and

- Non-transparent decision-making processes based on an extremely narrow circle of individuals, as well as instances of arbitrariness in the intervention of political leaders and their abuse of power for personal enrichment.

Political Practice in the First Quarter of the 21st Century

A reality check regarding the political dimension of the polycrisis yields extremely disheartening results:

The world order – which was heavily Western-oriented and formerly shaped, supported, and militarily secured by the United States – no longer exists. The assumption of mutual support in joint action to address global problems is also a thing of the past. We are helpless witnesses to the collapse of the postwar political and economic order. A multipolar world is emerging – unfortunately without the multilateral cooperation that would be necessary to jointly address global problems.

The government of the world's most economically and militarily powerful country violates international law with impunity, enforces economic interests through military means, threatens the territorial integrity of NATO member states, withdraws from international treaties, and opts out of the Paris Climate Agreement. Under the pretext of reducing bureaucracy, it is ending health programs for poor countries, such as PEPFAR, thereby putting millions of people in direct mortal danger. Human rights are being trampled with impunity in Ukraine, Gaza, Iran, and South Sudan – to name just a few countries and regions (Human Rights Watch 2026). Russia is bringing war back to Europe, China is threatening Taiwan, and a largely overlooked civil war is raging in South Sudan, claiming countless victims. In March 2026, a new war breaks out in the Middle East, causing great human suffering and immense collateral damage. All these wars that, once set in motion, can no longer be controlled by any of the parties involved.

Democratic forms of government have been losing ground for nearly two decades. An axis of autocrats – united by their lust for power and their pursuit of personal enrichment – is attempting to create a new world order (Applebaum 2024). Here, too, signs of political shifts are emerging towards populisms that we thought we had permanently overcome (Czwalina 2025). By the summer of 2025, the international community was not on track to achieve two-thirds of the goals unanimously adopted in 2015 in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2025). Instead of raising the necessary resources for investments in sustainable development, scarce funds are being spent on armaments. Instead

of promoting free trade and international cooperation to an extent that reduces unilateral dependencies, Green and other left-wing EU parliamentarians, in a naive defense of national niche interests and a self-referential, adolescent defiance, are still attempting to overturn the Mercosur Free Trade Agreement, which was finally signed in January 2026 after 25 years of discussion. This is leading to uneasy coalitions which are then denounced, when politically expedient, as »unholy alliances«.

In the style of George Orwell's dystopia 1984, the meanings of important terms morph unrecognisably: legitimate citizen protests, such as those in Minneapolis, are labeled »terrorism«; lawful objections to the irresponsible deployment of paramilitary troops within the United States are slandered as »lies spread by radical extremists«; cold winter storms are cited as evidence against global warming. Here, too, Orwell is making a cheerful comeback: a trillion dollars in new debt, which our children and grandchildren will have to repay, is being rebranded as a »special fund.«

The 2,500-year-old insight of the Athenian strategist Thucydides, according to which the strong do what they want and the weak endure what they must, is gaining new relevance under far more difficult circumstances. Thanks to circular interactions and cumulative causation among the individual problem areas of the polycrisis, the time is ripe for enlightened and coherent political, economic, and scientific thinking and action. International scientific and technological exchange, as well as cooperation in a climate of good relations and good governance, provide the only justifiable hope that solutions can be found.

However, the Edelman Trust Barometer 2026, published in mid-January, offers little cause for optimism in this regard: there is a pervasive sense of resentment toward political and business leaders worldwide. People are withdrawing from public discourse into echo chambers and »islands« of like-minded individuals (insularity). And – catastrophic for constructive cooperation – they distrust those who think differently: 70% of respondents are unwilling to trust someone if they have different values, different facts, different proposed solutions, or a different cultural background (Edelman 2026). This is nothing short of tragic, because the framework for solutions to global problems already exists: These are the universal goals and principles that the international community adopted over 80 years ago in the founding treaty of the United Nations, the United Nations Charter (Appendix). The spirit of this Charter states that peace is much more than the absence of war and that common goals can only be achieved through cooperation.

Due to formal voting rules, however, the United Nations is today powerless to address most aspects of the polycrisis. These rules, shaped by the political constellations following World War II, stipulate that in the supreme executive

body – the UN Security Council – a single member can block any decision through its veto. As a result, the UN is reduced to a meaningless spectator on all major issues affecting the interests of the US, Russia, or China. Taking advantage of this power vacuum, US President Trump founded a sort of »counter-UN« in Davos in January 2026, with members of his own choosing – and with *himself* as president for life.

The European Union suffers from a comparable veto system: the veto of a single country can, for example, torpedo Commission proposals on common foreign and security policy. This makes fundamental reforms that improve the EU's effectiveness and efficiency impossible when they threaten the privileges of individual countries. The resulting gridlock only exacerbates existing problems. Europe, indeed, is becoming irrelevant in global politics and must passively accept changes instead of actively helping to shape them.

Still mired in a phase of mourning and lamentation over U.S. power politics, European nations are unable to come together to establish a new order adapted to the current circumstances. Strong words amount to nothing but hot air if they are not backed by a willingness and ability to take action. The U.S. political magazine *Foreign Affairs* writes in its December issue: »Europe is missing its moment – it's time to finally reform – or risk irrelevance.« Dysfunctional politics, moreover, are leading to an exacerbation of global environmental problems.

2. The Environmental Dimension of the Polycrisis

The second element of the current polycrisis is the ecological catastrophe that is becoming increasingly apparent. It is characterized, on the one hand, by the growing global ecological footprint and the resulting human-induced climate change, and, on the other hand – and linked to this – by the ongoing destruction of biodiversity. Together, these factors are leading to fundamental changes in the global economy and politics – and to a new kind of domestic and foreign policy tension. The fact that the rivers and air in Germany and Switzerland are cleaner than ever before presents us with a false picture of the bigger problem.

The global material footprint (the amount of biomass, minerals, and fossil fuels required to produce the goods consumed by households and industry) is now three times higher than in 1970 and exceeds our planet's natural capacity for regeneration. The Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research analyzes the state of planetary health based on nine planetary boundaries – and concludes that by 2025, seven tipping points will have been reached or exceeded. The risk of reaching new tipping points in the Earth system increases as temperatures rise (University of Exeter 2025; Potsdam Institute 2025b).

Earth Overshoot Day 2025 – the day on which humanity’s consumption of ecological resources exceeded the Earth’s annual capacity to regenerate – fell on July 24, 2025, globally, and on May 3 for Germany. For 2026, both dates will come even earlier.

Climate change is accelerating: Global average temperatures are already about 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. 2024 was the hottest year on record, with consequences such as the melting of glaciers and ice sheets, rising sea levels, more intense heat waves, and the warming of the oceans (United Nations 2024). The year 2025 was only marginally less hot.

Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate: human activities are destroying habitats, overexploiting natural resources, and polluting the local and global environment. The destruction of biodiversity, in turn, exacerbates climate change (European Parliament 2025).

As the world changes, many long-held certainties are losing their significance. It is no longer true that ecological (and social) developments follow a linear path, and that it is therefore possible to predict them and keep them under control. The current state of knowledge strongly suggests that, in many environmental domains, there are »tipping points« beyond which a downward spiral emerges that is unstoppable, let alone controllable. The die-off of coral reefs due to excessively high water temperatures, the melting of the West Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets, and the thawing of permafrost with the subsequent release of greenhouse gases are ecological examples.

Despite these empirically verifiable facts, global environmental policy is losing momentum. The shift in political priorities (e.g., toward the defense sector) is crowding out consistent investments in sustainability. As with previous UN climate conferences, the most recent summit held in November 2025 in Belém resulted in a high level of abstract agreement – but only minimal concrete outcomes (Federal Environment Agency 2025).

When it comes to consistent national action against global environmental change, there is a seemingly insurmountable problem of motivation: leaders in democracies, who seek re-election in relatively short cycles, would have to impose restrictions, financial burdens, and mobility constraints on their potential voters here and now. They would do so on the grounds that this would, for example, slow the rise in sea levels and thus delay the submersion of individual islands in the South Pacific. However, it is not in human nature to accept restrictions today for the sake of strangers in distant places and in the distant future. This is especially true when infinitesimally small contributions to the preservation of global ecological systems are barely measurable due to their relative inertia. While the burdens are incurred here and now, there is no »reward« in the form of visible success.

3. Declining Social Capital

Robert Putnam uses the term »social capital« to describe the social web of relationships among individuals: it refers to networks and norms that foster trust and reciprocity among people. Social capital, according to Putnam, makes a society smarter, healthier, safer, and wealthier – and in this way empowers people to manage their affairs justly in a democracy. (Putnam 2020)

Due to political turmoil and economic uncertainties, social capital has been declining for years, and with it, trust in political and economic institutions. Civic engagement is on the decline or shifting to informal spheres. The willingness to engage in dialogue and to cooperate with those who hold different views is diminishing, while political polarization is on the rise (Edelman Trust Barometer). Where shared social norms once taken for granted begin to lose their binding power, and where trust and a willingness to cooperate are no longer sufficient to resolve conflicts amicably at the grassroots level, government intervention is expected. Since the state cannot provide these, the diffuse »resentment« empirically documented by the Edelman Trust Barometer arises.

In cities in particular, social bonds and cooperation are declining as a result of greater individualization, increased mobility, and more stressful work demands. Traditional social networks – such as neighborhood associations or clubs – where individuals find recognition and human connection, are eroding. New forms of work organization and new information and communication technologies are also reducing interpersonal bonds in the context of professional life.

Since intact social capital – which entails a willingness to help others, a sharing of networks, mentoring, mutual understanding, and recognition – reinforces feelings of security and well-being, the erosion of social capital is particularly regrettable in difficult times.

An Initial Summary

The interplay of today's political, social, and environmental challenges poses immense risks and threats to our world. It is clear that, as a human community, we have not learned how to deal with complex systems – or are politically unwilling to take the necessary action. A »community of shared destiny for humanity,« as Edgar Morin hoped for, is easily recognizable in theory, but not tangible even at the national level, let alone the international one.

If global warming causes ice to melt, resulting in more meltwater from the Arctic, this will eventually lead to the weakening or even collapse of the climate-regulating Gulf Stream system. This system, however, ensures a mild climate and reliable precipitation patterns for us. Such a scenario would not only jeopardize

dize food security in Europe but also, more generally, people's quality of life. The consequences would be authoritarian regimes and new struggles for resources fought by military means.

How Do We Get Out of This Precarious Situation?

All the problems described above are man-made and can therefore at least be »mitigated« by people of good will. The details of the solution are well known; they are all laid out in the UN General Assembly resolution of September 2015 (Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015)), namely:

- Protecting the planet from destruction, particularly through sustainable consumption, investment, and production;
- Ensuring that all people can lead successful and fulfilling lives and that economic, social, and technological progress is in harmony with nature;
- Promoting peaceful, just, and inclusive societies free from fear and violence;
- Acting in partnership and cooperation in the spirit of strengthened global solidarity, leaving no one behind.

Each of the nations that unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda more than ten years ago pledged to develop country-specific solutions and to report regularly on successes and obstacles. Yet once again, it has become clear that well-worded resolutions at an abstract level are easier to achieve than measurable successes in practice.

Uncertain circumstances that are perceived as a threat to one's own existence give rise to anxiety. This anxiety is exacerbated by a loss of trust in governmental, economic, and social institutions. People suffering from fear caused by complex problems seek simple explanations and someone to blame. In this situation, the appeal of political parties and leaders who engage in pseudo-politics through gross oversimplification, ideological enemy stereotypes, and xenophobic arguments increases.

But, as Erich Fromm noted over 50 years ago,

»The situation of mankind today is too serious to permit us to listen to the demagogues—least of all demagogues who are attracted to destruction—or even to the leaders who use only their brains and whose hearts have hardened. Critical and radical thought will only bear fruit when it is blended with the most precious quality man is endowed with—the love of life.« (Fromm 1973, p. 438)

In the current situation, what is needed is responsible, participatory, and people-centered leadership grounded in existing knowledge and rational insights. Erich Fromm has much to offer regarding the architecture of such leadership.

The Relevance of Erich Fromm's Thought in an Era of Multiple Crises

Exploring the important elements of Erich Fromm's thought for our time by drawing on his extensive body of work would entail a whole book – or even shelf of books. I would like to limit myself here to the three lines of Frommian thought that, in my view, are most significant in the present context:

- Fromm's ideas about a »healthy,« humane social order,
- his view of human nature; and, linked to this,
- his understanding of love.

Social structures shape people, and people shape society. People's perceptions within a society depend on political, economic, social, ecological, and other factors. Once again, general statements are only possible at a relatively high level of abstraction. On the one hand, people have different ideas about which subsystem in a society characterized by functional differentiation should assume responsibility for which tasks. On the other hand, different cultural influences, different religious and cultural contexts, and different historical experiences all shape perceptions. Resentment arises from the impression that, for example, the political or economic subsystems are failing to meet expected responsibilities, or that one is not personally benefiting from existing positive developments. The overall impression is sobering and alarming (Hett 2026):

The Edelman Trust Barometer for the past two years, presented each January at the World Economic Forum in Davos, reveals global attitudes and reactions that are cause for concern. More and more people trust only a closed inner circle that confirms their own worldview and lives under comparable economic conditions (insularity). Globally, 70% are unwilling or hesitant to trust others if they hold different values, rely on different facts or sources, seek to address social problems with different solutions – or have a different cultural background. Companies – especially those operating globally – are largely met with distrust regarding their contribution to the common good (GlobeScan 2024).

The analysis of data collected by Edelman for Germany also paints a bleak picture. The majority of Germans view the future with fear rather than confidence: Only 8% of people in Germany still believe that their own children and grandchildren will be better off in the future. New technologies such as artificial intelligence are viewed by the majority not as potential solutions, but as a threat to their own living conditions. Trust in the integrity of national politicians, media

representatives, and business leaders continues to decline.

Increasing political polarization and growing fears about material security have triggered a sense of social resentment toward the government, corporations, and the »wealthy« among many people. Diffuse feelings of anxiety are on the rise, whether stemming from various forms of discrimination, the negative impact of new technologies on job security, the rise of extremist forces in society – or even globalization as a whole. About four in ten respondents would, if necessary, even support hostile activism to supposedly improve their situation.

In a country that is crying out for leadership, more than half of the people in Germany believe that they are being deliberately lied to by leaders in the government (57%), the business community (53%), and the media (55%), or that important facts are being grossly exaggerated. The »rich,« according to the prevailing impression among 77% of people in Germany, pay too little in taxes – their selfishness is seen as the cause of many social problems.

The simultaneous convergence of various problem areas – the polycrisis – intensifies existing resentment. The palpable unease toward the »system« is leading to a shift in voting behavior in favor of parties not associated with the system. This is occurring in a national and international context where, due to the scale and complexity of the problems, solutions are conceivable only through constructive cooperation. Imagine a new pandemic that threatens the health and lives of many people, yet the funds for the WHO's coordinating role are no longer available because wealthy nations have withdrawn, and countries like the U.S., China, or Russia refuse to cooperate. Even with a deep understanding of cultural, social, and economic pluralism – against the backdrop of the symptoms of illness described above – our society cannot be described as »healthy.«

Fromm's Concept of a »Healthy« Society

Erich Fromm's ideas about a »healthy« or »sane« society are shaped by his humanistic ethics and a conception of humanistic, communitarian socialism based on them. This vision advocates a transformation achieved by peaceful means, in which changes are implemented simultaneously in the economic, sociopolitical, and cultural spheres. (Fromm 1955, pp. 361f.)

Fromm views human beings as embedded in a web of socio-economic necessity, a series of brute facts with which they must come to terms in order to survive psychologically. His work proceeds from the premise that

»human beings – like all living things – have a primary tendency to satisfy their needs in such a way that constructive possibilities – that is, reason on the cognitive level, love on the emotional level, and one's own creativ-

ity on the imaginative level – are optimally realized« (Funk 2025a, p. 13).

A social and economic system that conditions people to constantly »want more,« Fromm argues, leads to people's alienation from themselves, to illness and unhappiness – and ultimately to envy and war.

It would be presumptuous to attempt to offer a profound commentary on – or even to criticize – the sociopolitical architecture of Erich Fromm's work, given both my own insufficient knowledge and the constraints of time. In an age, however, when influential political elites are calling for a »competition of systems«, it is worth noting that a serious discourse on the political and economic architecture of a society that enables its people to live a good life in freedom and contentment cannot be conducted in terms of »-isms.« The U.S. government under Trump's second presidency understands capitalism differently than the governments of Denmark or Switzerland. The political functionaries of the former GDR understood socialism differently than the leaders of Sweden under Olof Palme. And finally: the intellectual founding fathers Marx and Engels understood communism differently than Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in Cambodia.

For »healing« changes in a society, the goal must be to assemble, from as broad a range of institutional and socio-political structural elements as possible, the puzzle that has the best chance of achieving sustainable success under the given national conditions. It is evident that different societies, under different conditions, are able to organize satisfactory living conditions or even a sense of happiness for their populations through various political, social, and economic measures (World Happiness Reports 2016–2025). The results of the World Happiness Report, compiled from multiple variables, nevertheless show countries with different variants of a social market economy occupying the top spots. They also show that beyond an income level that generously covers basic needs, additional income leads to an increasing sense of happiness only to a diminishing extent. Social determinants, such as a sense of belonging to a community, the ability to rely on others, and a willingness to help one another, are – at least beyond a certain point – more important to people's sense of happiness around the world than financial or material factors.

Elements of a Social Market Economy

Much of what Erich Fromm outlines in his book *The Sane Society* can be achieved with people of good will in a social market economy (Fromm 1955, pp. 270–272). A socially and ecologically sustainable market economy tailored to national specifics is, at least for German-speaking Europe, the most promising model for

creating lasting prosperity and preserving freedom.

The Economic Element

There are problems that the market can solve – and those it cannot. Markets ensure the efficient allocation of scarce resources and have the advantage of being able to react quickly to changes in demand. Competition among ideas leads to innovation and greater efficiency.

- For the economic subsystem of society (Luhmann 1987), this means:
- Private ownership of the means of production;
- The pursuit of profit as an incentive for performance and a reward mechanism; and
- Precautions against restrictions on competition.

Key rights include basic personal liberties, the right to engage in economic activity, the right to form associations to protect economic and social interests, etc.

A new social contract that is sustainable and universally acceptable, however, must not reduce solutions to economic market processes. Since markets can only satisfy the demand of »market participants« and given that it is unacceptable for a lack of purchasing power to prove decisive in matters of life and death, the state must also be an integral part of the solution.

The Social Element

The primary responsibility of the state is to care for those who – for whatever reason – cannot participate in the market or benefit from market mechanisms. Therefore, efforts are made to combine market efficiency with the principles of social justice and environmental sustainability. The economic growth generated by market forces and a fair tax policy are intended to enable a network of social benefits that protects the elderly, the sick, the low-income, the unemployed, or those unable to work for other reasons (Federal Agency 2016).

However, there are very differing views on what this actually means in practice. The intellectual architects of the social market economy – Alfred Müller-Armack, Ludwig Erhard, and Walter Eucken – envisioned social elements different from those advocated today by leading representatives of the SPD, the Greens, or the Left Party in Germany. Moralizing confrontations in political sham debates today prevent necessary public discussion of the possibilities and limits of the welfare state.

Since companies must generate profits even in a social market economy – and they must do so amid resource scarcity, time constraints, and international competition – constant adjustments become necessary. These can have unplea-

sant consequences for people and result in social burdens. In a functioning social market economy, while those affected are protected from falling into absolute poverty, they nevertheless suffer disadvantages due to circumstances beyond their control.

When, in such situations,

»feelings of solidarity and compassion for the losers and the weak are no longer practiced, or when empathy for moments of failure and defeat is lost, a range of sudden internal reactions can arise, from aggressive restlessness to paralyzing apathy and listlessness, intense fear of loss and panic attacks, and depressive numbness. Such compensations, often diagnosed as burnout or exhaustion, can be understood as clear reactions to socially induced defects.« (Funk 2025.)

Even in a social market economy, moreover, one's sense of self depends to varying degrees on recognition from others and on »success« in the labor market. A social market economy is, after all, a market economy in which feelings of solidarity or even compassion are not part of the »corporate contract«; and in labor markets, too, performance is what counts. The complex social system established in Germany today will reach its limits in the foreseeable future due to competition with companies abroad, where people work more days per year, more hours per week, and for lower wages. Moralizing and pointing to problematic individual cases may serve to raise one's profile, but they do not solve a single problem.

A socially and ecologically sustainable market economy that does not externalize the environmental and social costs incurred in the production process and pass them on to innocent third parties or future generations also aids in the ecological transformation. When prices reflect ecological reality, the consumption of goods with an undesirable ecological footprint is correspondingly limited.

For me, a socially and environmentally sustainable market economy also means strictly adhering to the principle of subsidiarity – that is, whenever possible, problems should be solved where they arise. This is often at the local level. At the grassroots level, there are no black boxes – everything is visible and tangible. Where people know one another, where they are confronted with problems directly rather than abstractly, where they must look affected people in the eye, where they are forced to reach acceptable compromises, and where excessive self-promotion is met with ridicule, games like moralizing over factual issues and the distracting creation of bogeymen do not lead to success.

At the local level, decision-making processes are also not characterized by echo chambers of mutual reinforcement. Because you can't fool yourself locally, you know that problems don't disappear if you just ignore them long enough;

tailored solutions become possible – even if that takes some time. That is one of the reasons why, in many respects, I believe in »development from below« – from the grassroots population – as opposed to »from above«, namely from bubbles in political leadership circles, from people who have forgotten that they are actually servants of the people and not their masters.

At the local level, with good leadership, it is possible to avoid falling into Einstein's famous trap. Einstein believed that a problem cannot be solved with the same mindset that caused it, and that it would be mad to keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results. In this regard, I have great hope that new best practices can be developed in the local government sector.

However, because desirable changes require the development of a new »social contract« that serves humanity as a whole, »healthy« societies require not only a functioning political sphere but also coherent action and behavior from all other social subsystems – above all the economy, civil society, and the media, but also religion. The intellectual challenge that arises in the latter context is that there is no simple definition of religion or universal agreement in the theological sphere. In difficult times and in the context of the polycrisis, however, answers are needed to big questions of meaning that cannot be addressed by reference to economic rationality or political constraints.

Erich Fromm engaged intensively with religion. In his book *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm begins by working with the *Oxford Dictionary* definition: Religion is »the recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship« (Fromm 1950, p. 34). In contrast to the possible interpretation of this definition as »authoritarian religion« – which subjects people to a power in the hereafter that demands obedience, veneration, and worship – Fromm sees a God who empowers humans to act appropriately on their own. Fromm supports the mystics' view that God is not a symbol of power over human beings, but a symbol of our own powers (p. 37). The individual human being is called upon to

»develop his power of reason in order to understand himself, his relationship to his fellow men and his position in the universe. He must recognize the truth, both with regard to his limitations and his potentialities. He must develop his powers of love for others as well as for himself and experience the solidarity of all living beings. He must have principles and norms to guide him in this aim. [...] Man's aim in humanistic religion is to achieve the greatest strength, not the greatest powerlessness; virtue is self-realization, not obedience. Faith is certainty of conviction based on one's experience of thought and feeling, not assent to propositions on credit of the proposer. [...] God is a symbol of *man's own powers* which

he tries to realize in his life.« (Ibid., p. 37.)

There are no specific social or cultural conditions in which people can answer questions about the meaning of life – or a connection to binding values, or solidarity with a community, or the nature of final authority – solely via economic incentives and legal criteria. Experience shows that material wealth and power can go hand in hand with spiritual poverty and intellectual emptiness.

Society depends upon the establishment of norms and the provision of meaning which the social subsystems of politics, science, and economy cannot provide. Not least in the context of sustainable development, where personal sacrifice may be required for the sake of an abstract greater whole, a return to the notion of inviolability, to a horizon of transcendence of the limits of human experience, and to faith in what is »sacred« to humanity becomes increasingly important.

The awareness that human beings depend on the wholeness of creation and the integrity of our »common home« (*Encyclical Laudato Si'*) changes our understanding of what is at stake, and thus also alters the rules of the »game.« Recalling the importance of »fraternity« and social friendship for a life of dignity (*Encyclical Fratelli Tutti*) allows fresh food for thought and new forms of encouragement that secular institutions cannot provide (Leisinger 2005; 2018). Growing »religious indifference«, in the Christian civilisational sphere in particular (Loffeld 2024), may have many causes, but whatever these may be, something is clearly missing in modern societies that cannot be compensated by material abundance or esoteric self-help guides.

New problems with complex new dimensions require new coalitions bridging politics, business, and civil society. A prerequisite for success is that the respective representatives feel primarily committed to the cause itself, rather than to party-political loyalties or short-term economic advantages. This, in turn, means that dilemmas must take center stage in our public discourse; in the polycrisis, nothing is handed to us on a silver platter. Hypocritical moralizing and sensationalizing serve only to stir up hostility and to create bogeymen – and at best provide only the illusion of political action. Such cynicism solves not a single problem – and complicates many solutions.

Erich Fromm drew attention to much of what affects us negatively today as early as fifty years ago in his book *To Have or To Be* (Fromm 1976). Fromm warned against social conditions characterized by unchecked economic growth and the accompanying environmental strain, in which people compensate for their personal frustrations through consumption as income and wealth disparities rise year on year, and as Oxfam has impressively demonstrated once again in 2026 (Oxfam 2026).

Fromm argues that a social system based on the assumption in Mandeville's

fable of the bees (where the unrestrained egoism of individuals promotes general prosperity) only makes people sick. Fromm contrasts a way of life focused on the pursuit of personal, material possessions – «having» – with an existence centered on »being,« characterized by independence, personal freedom, and critical reason. Within the framework of political and social action, he calls for a »spiritual renaissance« – an »awakening of compassion, love, the sense of justice and truth in response to the political, social and cultural situation of present-day industrial society, and the actions motivated by this awakening« (1968, p. 139). Nothing can be added to this Frommian formulation today – except perhaps to stress the aspect of sustainability.

Fromm's View of Humanity

Although each of us is a unique individual and thus different from everyone else, we share the same dignity, the same need for respect and recognition, and the same fundamental rights – but also the associated duties. Equality exists insofar as every human being (in Kant's sense) is an end in themselves and not a means to achieve the ends of others. Finally, all people have a need for relatedness and connection with other people (Fromm 1959). As human beings and communities, we have – regardless of culture, religion, ethnicity, or nationality – far more in common than that which divides us. The core of all world religions contains comparable moral concepts for a thriving social coexistence (Küng 2004).

This should inspire *prima facie* confidence in the development of a sense of shared destiny – and thus hope for common solutions to global problems.

However, given the complexity and diversity of human characteristics, broad statements »about human beings in general« are only possible at a highly abstract level. There is one important example which proves this rule: the theoretical construct of the *homo economicus* is overly simplistic and does not do justice to us as social beings. Mentally healthy people do not think exclusively in economic terms, do not constantly weigh benefits against costs, and do not act in an unrestrictedly rational manner aimed solely at maximizing utility. While they often act rationally and are guided by economic criteria, many people also want – albeit to varying degrees – to do »good,« to be generous and altruistic, and to collaborate with others for good causes (World Values Survey 2024).

Erich Fromm recognizes the human needs for self-perfection, salvation, enlightenment, unity and harmony as important elements in the discussion of social change. He also highlights our capacity for creative and critical thinking and for nuanced emotional and sensory experiences (Fromm 1941, p. 40). In Fromm's view of human nature, all people have scope for action in professional and private spheres, and they can use this freedom to pursue what is desirable.

Institutional factors may indeed constrain personal development, but no one can hide behind institutions. Whether this freedom is used in accordance with the norms of a humanistic ethos depends on the character of the individuals concerned.

In the present context of the polycrisis, Fromm's optimism is of great motivational significance: Human beings are »living being[s] caught up in a continual process of development. At every point in his life he is not yet what he can be and what he may yet become« (Fromm 1983, p. 140). But this human being is always capable of doing what is humanly possible. The decision lies with each of us at all times, for

»man is capable of discerning and making value judgments as valid as all other judgments derived from reason. The great tradition of humanistic ethical thought has laid the *foundations* for value systems based on man's autonomy and reason.« (Fromm 1947, p. 6.)

Whether people feel morally responsible and – of particular importance in the present context – *wish to act appropriately beyond existing legal obligations* is the result of individual social, economic, and political socialization. Experience shows, however, according to Erich Fromm, »that many people, blinded by greed and vanity, do not act rationally« (Fromm 1983, p. 141). Fromm views the challenge of generating ethical behavior in the real world in terms of these differences in character (cf. Fromm 1964, p. 61).

Finally, and most importantly in the present context of the polycrisis: Since human beings are »the only creatures endowed with reason,« they are

»capable of understanding the very forces which [they are] subjected to and who by [their] understanding can take an active part in [their] own fate and strengthen those elements which strive for the good. Man is the only creature endowed with conscience. His conscience is the voice which calls him back to himself, it permits him to know what he ought to do in order to become himself, it helps him to remain aware of the aims of his life and of the norms necessary for the attainment of these aims. We are therefore not helpless victims of circumstance; we are, indeed, able to change and to influence forces inside and outside ourselves and to control, at least to some extent, the conditions which play upon us. We can foster and enhance those conditions which develop the striving for good and bring about its realization.« (Fromm 1947, p. 233.)

In this regard, the world has changed since Fromm's work was first published. Two of the world's most influential economic institutions are increasingly assigning greater weight to the human factor in resolving problematic issues:

As early as 2015, the World Bank dedicated an entire issue of its annual *World Development Report* to the significance of human thought and behavior (World Bank 2015). The report's main message was that human decision-making and behavior depend not only on economic and technical factors, but to a large extent on psychological, social, and cultural influences. These influences can be identified and utilized in development policy – and beyond mere taxes and subsidies. »Marketing« tailored to the specific characteristics of the target population (information about visible and tangible benefits of changed behavior and the use of established social norms) contributes significantly to achieving development policy goals. Development policy (including policy drafted in the spirit and purview of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) must therefore be redesigned and based on careful consideration of human factors. Academic disciplines that have been scarcely utilized in the field of development policy to date (neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology, behavioral economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology) can positively transform individual actions and behavior and, ultimately, collective behaviors, thereby generating widespread trust.

In its December 2025 report, the International Monetary Fund highlighted the irreplaceable role of well-educated people in driving social change. Curiosity, critical thinking, and self-regulated, creative action are more important than ever in the age of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence may be capable of reorganizing or summarizing old and electronically accessible data, but it cannot account for what humans develop anew in response to changing conditions. And just because we cannot imagine it from today's perspective does not mean it will not happen. Just think of our great-great-grandparents trying to picture what Google or AI are capable of today (Pena and IMF 2025).

Love as Reverence for People and Nature

The art of loving was central to Fromm's conception of the human developmental arc. Fromm defines love as an art that can be learned through discipline, concentration, patience, and reason (cf. Fromm 1956, p. vii). However, using the term »love« in everyday professional discourse requires explanation, as it belongs neither in standard political vocabulary nor in common management jargon. In a private context, it triggers associative chains that are not necessarily helpful in the present context. Fromm was aware of this and broke the concept down into four basic elements: care for the other, a sense of responsibility for

the other, respect for the other, and insight. I would like to address these various elements in a modified order and highlight their significance for solutions in our era of polycrisis.

Knowledge

Fromm regards knowledge as an integral part of love. With regard to practically all elements of the polycrisis, there are no gaps in knowledge, but rather frustrating implementation deficits. For me, therefore, knowledge – including knowledge of the importance and scope of existing knowledge as well as the immense costs of failing to implement it – is the most important aspect of Fromm's definition of love. Only to the extent that we recognize the implications of existing knowledge can we acknowledge priorities and accurately assess the need for action. Those who, despite all available scientific facts, fail to recognize that human-induced climate change exists, see no reason to act in a manner commensurate with the problem.

Self-awareness – what Fromm calls »knowledge of oneself« – plays an important role in this context. It presupposes that a person is soberly aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, talents and competencies, prejudices, and blind spots (cf. Fromm 1956, p. 29). We humans tend to assess our intellectual, social, and other abilities more positively than is rationally justified. The American psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger see signs of a vicious cycle: the more limited people's intelligence and knowledge are, the less they can recognize how limited their intelligence and knowledge may actually be (Kruger and Dunning 1999). As for the willingness to seek advice and engage in dialogue with those who think differently, the necessity of recognizing one's own weaknesses cannot be emphasized enough for one simple reason: personal weaknesses, especially blind spots, can only be uncovered through dialogue with others.

True knowledge is only possible »when I can transcend the concern for myself and see the other person in his own terms« (Ibid., p. 29), that is, without the filter of self-interest, considerations of utility, prejudices, or predefined hierarchical structures. If, in today's world, we also count the people of future generations among these »others,« then another dimension of insight and relevant knowledge is added – one that is not sufficiently recognized today, let alone taken into account.

It would be asking too much for people whose decisions affect others to possess comprehensive knowledge of all the complex problems arising within their sphere of influence. But the demanding nature of problems in the polycrisis cannot serve as a cheap excuse for inaction. People in positions of significant responsibility are capable of obtaining necessary knowledge from experts and engaging in dialogue to address differing interpretations of commonly accepted facts.

One final important aspect is the realization that, as the constructivist school in epistemology teaches us, human beings actively create their own specific realities (Watzlawick 1981). What we personally regard as objective truth is often merely the result of our subjective, selective assumptions, which are based on our specific cultural heritage, socialization, worldview, values and interests, as well as our individual character and nature. Since people are different, many different conceptions of reality arise. We all tend to regard our personal reality as the only »true reality« (Watzlawick 1983; 1985; 1995).

Our subjective perception of this »reality« determines whether a particular situation is assessed as a problem or an opportunity, as a threat or a source of support. The same situations, in short, arouse different levels of interest in different people. Decisions regarding problem-solving are made in accordance with the individual's best knowledge and convictions – yet all too often without being aware of the limitations of one's own perceptions (Watzlawick 1985). Erich Fromm worked with a comparable hypothesis: for Fromm, people construct »an all-inclusive mental picture of the world which serves as a frame of reference from which he can derive an answer to the question of where he stands and what he ought to do« (Fromm 1947, p. 46.). I am convinced that questioning common assumptions of all kinds («challenging assumptions») is also an important part of gaining or enriching our knowledge (Laguerre 2023). Individual and collective assumptions in decision-making processes are usually based on past experiences – and on conventional but perhaps outdated assumptions. The elements of the polycrisis that are becoming apparent today have arisen from modes of thought and behavior that, in light of current knowledge, urgently require revision. A resulting obligation is to communicate such knowledge in a way that is generally understandable.

Respect for Others and Respect for Otherness

Erich Fromm describes respect for others as »the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality. Respect means the concern that the other person should grow and unfold as he is« (Fromm 1956, p. 28).

Since God, in His infinite generosity, has created a wide range of characters and personalities, this often presents a major human challenge. However, dealing with this challenge in a purposeful and humane manner is the task of leaders in politics and business – even in situations such as Russia's war with Ukraine. »Understanding« others does not mean endorsing their positions. Wars are rarely ended on the battlefield. Without dialogue, mutual understanding is not possible; without an understanding of mutual interests and the potential for balancing those interests, no architecture of peace is foreseeable. Breaking

off discussions in politics and society postpones possible solutions and causes unnecessary human suffering. Fromm's thoughts on the theory and practice of peacebuilding are readily available, but unfortunately they are not being heeded in the present day (Fromm 2025a, p. 139, but also Kant 1795 / 1991, pp. 194–251).

For Fromm, respect for fellow human beings versus behaving exclusively in accordance with the law are not merely two different ways of showing respect for the rights and dignity of others, but two fundamentally different logics of thought and action. Adhering to the law means doing nothing that is prohibited. Respect for others, however, presupposes the inner conviction to avoid every form of injustice, i.e., unequal treatment and the denial of equal opportunity based on race, ethnic origin, age, disability, religion, ideology, or sexual orientation. Not even ordinary decency, let alone benevolent kindness, can be introduced into an institutional culture through command and control. Solutions in the context of the polycrisis require leaders who can tolerate dissent, convincingly exemplify proclaimed values, and remain committed to lifelong learning in the spirit of humanity (Tu Weiming 2023).

Rules are no substitute for sound judgment or good interpersonal skills. A report by Ernst & Young points to an interesting practical insight in this context: »Geopolitical, economic, and social changes mean that traditional compliance frameworks may be based on assumptions that are no longer valid« (Ernst & Young 2018). *Challenging assumptions* thus becomes a virtue in politics and business.

Leaders of integrity, in short, develop *moral imagination*. This concept, developed by Patricia Werhane, is of the utmost importance in the polycrisis (Werhane 1999; 2026). Via moral imagination, leaders whose decisions impact others become sensitized to ethical issues in their decision-making processes. They feel a kind of moral duty of care to identify areas where people could potentially be negatively affected by the decisions of others. Such moral imagination

«involves the ability to understand the context or a series of activities from different perspectives, the realization of new, non-context-dependent possibilities, and the initiation of the process of evaluating these possibilities from a rational and moral standpoint« (Werhane and Bevan 2026, p. 2).

In most situations, moral imagination helps us to find solutions which cause less direct and indirect harm than would otherwise be the case.

In everyday economic and political life, respect for others naturally also includes respectful treatment by superiors of their subordinates. Individuals whose decisions influence the lives of others but who do not at least act according to

the Golden Rule, let alone apply situational ethics (Fletcher 1966), should not hold leadership positions.

»Respect for others« is of great importance not only in terms of interpersonal relationships but also in the context of international strategies for sustainable development. The point is not always to insist on direct reciprocity of services, but rather, where possible, to do something for others which is helpful for solving the problem at hand – and without expecting an immediate, personal return. Acting without a foreseeable personal, political, or economic return, however, in light of prevailing incentive systems, is only rarely part of mainstream political or managerial thinking.

Dealing respectfully with culturally conditioned actions and behaviors – which, for example, are customary in migrants' home countries but violate the spirit of local law – is a major challenge. The social status of women and girls, as well as their equal opportunities for personal development, are examples in this regard. With all due respect for other cultures and value systems, the limit of tolerance that must not be crossed is enshrined in our *Grundgesetz*. This must be insisted upon respectfully but consistently.

Managing such situations, however, requires all the fundamental elements of love in the sense of Erich Fromm: brute knowledge; esteem for others and respect for otherness; responsibility for others and a feeling of care: »To respect a person is not possible without *knowing* him; care and responsibility would be blind if they were not guided by knowledge« (Fromm 1956, p. 29).

Responsibility for Others

For Erich Fromm, »responsibility, in its true sense, is an entirely voluntary act; it is my response to the needs, expressed or unexpressed, of another human being. To be »responsible« means to be able and ready to »respond« (Fromm 1956, p. 29). Responsible leaders strive to make decisions that take into account the legitimate interests of the people affected. They respond to the questions arising in the decision-making process to the best of their knowledge and belief. Goodwill and the ability to engage in dialogue with stakeholders enable the anticipation of potential problems that others already have in mind. Without dialogue, these would not be on their radar.

The entire literature on the topic of stakeholders (Freeman et al. 2010) could be summarized under the headings of recognition, respect, and responsibility with regard to the expectations, fears, and concerns of others. What leaders in politics and business regard as their responsibility beyond legal regulations depends on their knowledge, moral imagination, and scope for decision-making given the available resources.

With often unlimited expectations placed on politics and business today, it is not possible to fulfill every desire with the limited resources of the real world. Therefore, not every expectation or demand made of an institution or leader can result in an obligation to act. An appropriate »response« can sometimes be an explanation of the reasons for rejecting a demand; failing to provide any answer at all, however, is indicative of a lack of respect for others. Answering questions, even when the questions are uncomfortable, is a matter of respect for others and, for decent people, a matter of course. It is hence highly disconcerting that, as the *FAZ* reported on January 31, 2026, the Vatican is not responding to letters in the context of the Synodal Reform Path of German Catholics. This is a highly un-Christian lack of respect.

Anyone who wants to lead must be able to justify his position with a clear inner compass. Anyone who wants to create meaning must explain the *why* and the *how*, and not just the *what* (HHL 2018). Responsibility for others is therefore not a nice extra service provided by those in positions of responsibility whose decisions influence the lives of others, but rather a fundamental aspect of good leadership practice. If one can explain the »why« of a decision and action, one understands the specific context in which the action takes place. This understanding enables decisions regarding the goals and priorities of action – including the possibilities and limits of caring for others.

Care for Others

In a business context, the term »care« is usually equated with »due diligence,« that is, the »care required in business conduct.« This encompasses efforts to avoid risks and unlawful acts. In addition to the usual legal, environmental, human rights-related and other risks, responsible leaders in politics and business also take into account risks that may result from dwindling social acceptance. Although the term *due diligence* is not used in the political sphere, it *should be*; even ideologically driven decision-makers would then be better placed to anticipate – and thus avoid – the unexpected »side effects« of political decisions. This would prevent significant unnecessary costs at the expense of taxpayers.

In the political sphere, the term »care« suggests an association with acting in the interest of poorer social classes. This is part of what Erich Fromm understood by care, but it goes far beyond that. For Fromm, care entails the active effort to

- recognize people's needs and take them seriously;
- develop their personalities and foster their values and self-confidence;
- inspire enthusiasm for a shared vision;
- be empathetic, respectful, and capable of acknowledging others' contributions toward achieving common goals.

What sounds idealistic can have great positive significance in political and economic practice. The feeling that people are understood, valued, and supported in their development is not only intrinsically good; it is also clearly and measurably linked to people's satisfaction and motivation to perform. When people have the opportunity to remain true to their values in their professional environment, they are happier, mentally and physically healthier, and also significantly more productive than when they feel restricted in their scope for free critical thinking and action (Leisinger 2020, p. 138 ff.).

When people feel that the political sector of society does not consist of aloof, self-referential self-promoters living in a privileged bubble and financed by taxpayer money, but rather of people who address the problems of their country to the best of their knowledge and ability, they feel less resentment – and are more willing to change their behavior in the interest of greater sustainability.

Leadership through fear, as seems to be creeping into the international political arena at present, does not work in the medium or long term, either in politics or business. This type of leadership is a sure sign of weak leadership and incompetence. Where the »why« behind a decision cannot be explained in a way that is generally understandable, and where corresponding support cannot be mobilized for it, trust, loyalty, and a willingness to contribute to the common good – the most valuable resources of any country – are destroyed.

»Insight Separated from Practice Remains Ineffective«
(Fromm 1976a, p. 170)

In 1968, Fromm posed a question that remains crucial here and now: »Can We Do It?« (Fromm 1968). Can the necessary spiritual renewal – away from a way of life centered on »having« and toward one centered on »being« – be achieved through democratic means within the framework of current power structures, and given today's public opinion and prevailing mindset? Is it realistic to expect success if Friedrich Dürrenmatt's view – namely that »what concerns everyone can only be solved by everyone« (Dürrenmatt 1962) – is correct? Is it wishful thinking or idealistic daydreaming to believe in solutions?

It may well be that we are dealing today in Germany with a paradox that Alexis de Tocqueville described nearly 200 years ago in the United States (Tocqueville 1835/1987). In Tocqueville's view, social progress which objectively results in a reduction of social inequality (as witnessed in the post-Independence United States) paradoxically leads to more refined and demanding expectations. This, in turn, provokes outrage, as the remaining inequalities are viewed as »man-made.« The global elements of the polycrisis, however, are historically new and significantly more complex.

Writing in the 1960s (e.g. Fromm 1968, p. 146), Fromm hoped that

- the middle class, through its material prosperity, would come to realize that increased consumption is not a path to happiness (the World Happiness Reports from various years indeed show a decreasing correlation between »higher income« and »greater happiness«);
- the middle class's higher level of education would expose it to new ideas and make it open to reasonable arguments (there is scientific evidence for this as well, see OECD 2017, p. 11); and
- the »power of ideas« would take effect, causing people to think more actively, reach new knowledge, and demonstrate a growing willingness to take responsibility. Indications of this include a rising awareness of environmental issues as well as political efforts to address them.

Where people organize into groups in response to such changes and further develop and concretize these impulses, they will, according to Fromm's hope, develop a »new, unsentimental, realistic, honest, courageous, and active lifestyle.« Regarding the potential of small groups, Fromm argues similarly to Margaret Mead:

«Important movements have begun their lives in small groups [...]. Groups which represent an idea in its purity and without compromises are the seedbeds of history.» (Fromm 1968, p. 160.)

Given today's knowledge of the complexity of the polycrisis and the resulting social sentiments (resentment and withdrawal into familiar circles), one might be tempted to resign oneself to the situation – but this only exacerbates existing problems. Fatalism is therefore not an option. Instead, it is our duty as citizens to point out that today, as a »community of shared human destiny,« we possess more knowledge, greater computational capacity, and more opportunities for exchange than ever before in human history. New discoveries in physics (e.g., quantum computers), biology (gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR-Cas9), information technology (e.g., artificial intelligence and machine learning), environmental technology (e.g., renewable energy) and medicine (e.g., mRNA vaccines and medications) expand the globally available portfolio of solutions and make it possible for us to tackle previously impossible problems.

Erich Fromm advocated a »rational faith in man's capacity to extricate himself from what seems the fatal web of circumstances that he has created« (Fromm 1973, p. 437). Today, this can be affirmed with reference to empirically measurable data: over the past hundred years, the global community as a whole has made historically unprecedented progress in living conditions. All available

statistics show that people everywhere in the world today live longer than they did just fifty years ago. They are healthier and have better access to education and sanitation services. Absolute poverty as a mass phenomenon has fallen by more than two-thirds. The physical quality of life for 450 million people in Europe has been steadily improving for many years – a trend measurable through a multidimensional indicator that synthesizes material living conditions, working conditions, health, education, economic and physical security, the environment, as well as the rule of law and fundamental rights into a self-defined overall sense of well-being (Eurostat 2026). The McKinsey Global Institute (2026) examined the framework conditions for the progress achieved over the past hundred years and demonstrates that smart, innovation-promoting policies and advancing technological innovation will enable future generations to enjoy a high quality of life without exceeding planetary boundaries or causing lasting damage to the environment. Prerequisites for this include a change of perspective, an overcoming of obstacles that currently stand in the way of technological innovation, and optimism rather than doomsday sentiments (a »new narrative«).

Without succumbing to blind optimism, I am convinced of the predominantly positive effects of advanced knowledge and technology. Yes, technology is inherently ambivalent; every innovation can be used for both good and bad purposes. All innovations entail advantages and disadvantages, opportunities and risks; their benefits depend largely on the people who apply them. Despite the risk of misuse, overestimating potential risks and applying a »fear heuristic« (Jonas 1984) is not conducive to shaping the future (Leisinger 2023). What is needed are wise regulations and fundamental moral standards for those who utilize innovative knowledge and technologies.

In the future as in the past, scientific and technological innovations will usher in the kind of progress that the German philosopher Helmut Gollwitzer described forty years ago as »a constant struggle to realize positive aspects, survive associated dangers, and overcome losses caused« (Gollwitzer 1970). As Erich Fromm also foresaw, leaders in politics, business, and civil society can make the world a better place based on what is possible today. Spiritual »musicality« is particularly helpful in making difficult decisions (Phipps 2012).

Groundbreaking developments – and the intelligent application of new knowledge for novel forms of shared value creation – will likely not offset the need for more enlightened patterns of consumption, mobility, and resource use, but they will give us more time to adapt the human lifestyle to the requirements of sustainability.

I also believe in the effectiveness of positive thinking on people. The latest neuroscientific findings demonstrate that people are capable of boosting their immune system's response by focusing on positive expectations. In my view,

this is merely the tip of the iceberg of new knowledge regarding the capabilities of the human brain (Lubianiker et al. 2026).

Erich Fromm's complete scientific works are more relevant and timely today than ever before. One cannot directly translate various lines of thought from the social-philosophical genius Fromm – some of which originated in the 1950s and 1960s – into the political practice of today's Federal Republic of Germany. But Fromm's complete works offer food for thought on many issues relevant today and can help us move forward. The central questions Fromm posed in his time are, in many respects, also the central questions of the present: »What causes many people to suppress life-sustaining impulses and behave in an ignorant, dysfunctional, and irrational manner in the face of environmental destruction, the climate crisis, wars, nuclear destruction, and threatening social inequalities? What economic, technical, social, and political developments contribute to the fact that the life-loving and life-sustaining aspirations of so many people are drained away?« (Funk 2025a, p. 11.)

The arguments put forward by Erich Fromm and his call for a new humanism can trigger something essential within us, namely the overcoming of thoughtlessness, as Albert Schweitzer urged us to do in his reflections on the idea of »reverence for life« (Schweitzer 1974).

The mindset of reverence toward a situation alters our perception and evaluation of it – and reorders existing knowledge. Experiences of reverence can significantly change behaviors and priorities. Reverence for life may even be the only emotion that motivates changes in thinking and behavior compatible with the criteria for sustainable development (Leisinger 2025).

In his recently published book *How to Fall in Love with the Future*, British writer Rob Hopkins calls for the creation of spaces where we can share positive developments we've witnessed, learn from one another, and develop the motivation to bring about change wherever possible. Hopkins refers to successful examples in hundreds of communities and cities worldwide that have been transformed into more livable places through »bottom-up development.« Such »spaces« can also be created by religious communities. I share Hartmut Rosa's view that religion has the power to positively influence change:

»[Religion] holds a reservoir of ideas and a ritual arsenal full of corresponding songs, gestures, spaces, traditions, and practices that expand one's sense of what it means to be summoned, to be transformed, to be in resonance.« (Rosa 2022, p. 74.)

Initiating a global shift in course via a new development paradigm requires broad, unorthodox, and creative thinking enriched by a spiritual dimension.

Such »spaces,« as mentioned, can also be created at the local level: mobilization is more feasible there, and the motivation to act arises more readily when people are close to their problems. Successes in concrete aspects of »development from below,« shared in Hopkinsian spaces, motivate others to try something similar – in this respect, and only in this respect, »more of the same« makes sense.

I would like to conclude my reflections with an encouraging observation. Erich Fromm prefaced his book *The Sane Society* with this quote from Léon Blum:

»The human race had the wisdom to create science and art; why should it not be capable to create a world of justice, brotherliness and peace? The human race has produced Plato, Homer, Shakespeare, and Hugo, Michelangelo and Beethoven, Pascal and Newton, all these human heroes whose genius is only the contact with the fundamental truths, with the innermost essence of the universe. Why then should the same race not produce those leaders capable of leading it to those forms of communal life which are closest to the lives and the harmony of the universe?

Reflecting on what each of us can do within our sphere of influence is a first step for every person of good will. The limited nature of the contribution each of us can make to solving the problems on our own doorstep should not deter anyone from doing what is possible. It is precisely the small interventions of Popper's »piecemeal social engineer« that can be continuously improved.« (Popper 1992)

All great changes start small. To quote Margaret Mead, we should »never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world – indeed, it is the only way the world has ever been changed.« We need the courage to embrace small successes, to make a small contribution to the big idea, because it is not in vain. Each of us can make a contribution here. Therefore, the call made by the American evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson in his »Letter to a Young Scientist« applies to each of us (Wilson 2013):

»You are capable of more than you think. Choose a goal that seems right to you, and strive to be the best, no matter how difficult the path may be. Set high goals for yourself. Conduct yourself honorably. Be prepared to be alone at times and to endure setbacks. Persevere! The world needs everything you can give.«

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Erich Fromm and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Thought in Argentina: Reception and Influence within the Jewish Community (1940s–1990s)

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Abstract: This paper examines the reception of Erich Fromm's work within the Argentine Jewish community and its contribution to the consolidation of a humanistic and liberal Jewish intellectual field. The study addresses three interrelated questions: How did Fromm's thought reach Argentina – through what editorial channels, transnational connections, and publishing networks? What does the archival evidence of Argentine Jewish periodicals reveal about the nature and scope of his reception? And what specif-

ic conditions of Argentine Jewish life made Fromm's work so widely read and referenced across ideological lines within that community? To address these questions, the paper traces Fromm's connections to the Frankfurt School and its Argentine reception, examines the role of key publishing houses – above all Editorial Paidós and the Fondo de Cultura Económica – in bringing his works to Spanish-speaking readers, and draws on archival research in three key periodicals: the progressive newspaper *Nueva Sión* (New Zion), the Hebrew literary magazine *La Luz* (The Light), and *Majshavot* (Thoughts), the journal of the Conservative Movement's *Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano*. These sources are complemented by exploratory interviews and, for comparative reference, by a survey of the ICUF publications *Tribuna* (Tribune, 1946–1970) and *Tiempo* (Time, 1968–1987), the independent Yiddish philosophical journal *Davke* (Pre-

cisely, c. 1949–1982), and the newspaper *Mundo Israelita* (Jewish World; 1923–). The paper argues that Fromm occupied a singular position in Argentine Jewish intellectual life: a globally recognized thinker who never concealed his Jewish identity and integrated Jewish sources into his most important works – making him particularly significant for a community of largely first- and second-generation Eastern European immigrants navigating the tension between universal participation and Jewish distinctiveness in a secular, politically engaged world.

1. Introduction

This paper emerges from my personal encounters with the works of Erich Fromm. Growing up in a liberal and humanistically oriented Jewish environment in Argentina during the late 1990s, I was drawn to the ideas of Marx and Freud while seeking a deeper connection with my Jewish identity. During this period, I discovered several books by Erich Fromm in my parents' library – an experience that opened up a new way for me to engage with Judaism: one that was critical, aligned with Marxist thought, and intellectually stimulating. Fromm's writings presented a vision of Judaism that was not only open and intellectually rigorous but also deeply humanistic and progressive.

Now, as I near the completion of my rabbinical studies, I feel a personal drive to explore Fromm's reception in Argentina from an academic perspective, particularly his contribution to humanistic and progressive Jewish thought. While I was aware from my own experience that Fromm was a well-read and frequently cited thinker within various Jewish circles in Argentina, the objective of this paper is to rigorously investigate the nature and extent of his impact.

This paper serves as a preliminary exploration of these questions, recognizing that future research will be necessary to expand on the findings. The study draws on available archives, including those of the Jewish newspaper *Nueva Sión*, the Hebrew literary magazine *La Luz*, and the journal of the Conservative Rabbinical Movement in Latin America, *Majshavot*. These archival sources are complemented by exploratory interviews with individuals who were directly involved in these publications. Additionally, the paper presents an introductory analysis of the Spanish translations of Erich Fromm's works published in Argentina, including references to the publishing houses that brought these works to the Argentine public.

This investigation raises several key questions: Where can we find evidence of Erich Fromm's reception in Argentine Jewish circles between the 1940s and the 1990s? What were some of the factors that contributed to Fromm's popularity in these spaces? How did Fromm's ideas influence the development of

new expressions of Judaism in Argentina, and what was their impact on other Spanish-speaking Jewish communities?

While scholarly attention has been given to the religious and philosophical dimensions of Fromm's thought – particularly his critique of authoritarian religion and his humanistic reading of biblical tradition – the specifically Jewish reception of his ideas in Latin American contexts has received considerably less attention. Indeed, to the best of the author's knowledge, virtually no systematic research exists on Fromm's specific reception in Argentina. What makes this paper particularly original is precisely its focus on this unexplored terrain: the ways in which Fromm's thought was received, appropriated, and transformed within Argentine Jewish intellectual and communal life. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the unique ways in which Fromm's ideas were received and integrated into Argentine Jewish life, contributing to the broader discourse of Jewish thought in the region.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily utilizing archival analysis and exploratory interviews. The primary sources of data include the archives of three key publications from Argentina: *Nueva Sión*, a Jewish progressive newspaper; *La Luz*, a Hebrew literary magazine with more conservative ideas; and *Majshavot*, the journal of the Conservative Rabbinical Movement in Latin America. These sources provide insight into the reception of Erich Fromm's work within the Argentine Jewish community from the 1940s to the 1990s.

The selection of these three sources is based on two primary considerations. First, these archives are readily accessible for research. Second, they represent different perspectives within the Jewish community: *Nueva Sión* reflects the views of liberal, socialist Jews with a distinctly leftist approach; *La Luz* offers a more conservative intellectual perspective, aligned with traditional religious thought; and *Majshavot* represents the emerging Conservative Movement, which embraced a modern and liberal religious Judaism, initiated by Rabbi Marshall Meyer.

To complement the archival research, a series of exploratory interviews were conducted with individuals who were directly involved in these publications. The most substantive interview was conducted with Guillermo Atlas, former editor of *Nueva Sión*, who served in that role in the late 1980s and who provided crucial context for the publication's intellectual orientation and its relationship to Fromm's thought. Additionally, this paper presents an introductory analysis of the Spanish translations of Erich Fromm's works published in Argentina, in-

cluding a review of the publishing houses responsible for bringing his ideas to the Argentine public. In the course of the research, several other publications were consulted for comparative reference: the ICUF periodicals *Tribuna* and *Tiempo*; the Yiddish-language philosophical journal *Davke*; and the newspaper *Mundo Israelita*. These sources are not analyzed in depth here but inform the broader picture presented in the final section of the paper. The archives of the Sociedad Hebrea Argentina – a central institution of Argentine Jewish cultural and intellectual life – and its literary journal *Davar* were identified as a significant and promising source but remain largely undigitized and await future systematic study.

3. Transnational Connections

The purpose of this article is not to provide a comprehensive overview of Erich Fromm's career and impact, as there are already excellent biographies and published materials that cover these topics in depth. Instead, this paper aims to explore the specific reception of Fromm's work in Argentina and within the Jewish community there. Although there is no record of Fromm ever visiting Argentina, certain noteworthy connections warrant attention.

One such connection is Felix Weil, the founder and philanthropist behind the Frankfurt School, who was born in Argentina from German parents before moving to Germany. Another often overlooked aspect is that Erich Fromm lived in Mexico from 1950 until 1973 – a period during which his academic contributions, editorial involvement, and intellectual production from a Spanish-speaking country likely contributed to the broader impact of his work in Argentina.

a. Felix Weil and the Argentine Connection

Felix Weil was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1898, to German parents. His father achieved considerable prosperity as one of the most prominent businessmen in the grain industry. At the age of nine, Weil moved to Germany, where he continued his education and academic pursuits. While not one of the most visible figures of the Frankfurt School, it was Weil who played a pivotal role in its creation. With the significant inheritance from his family, Weil became the principal philanthropist and patron of the school, seeing it as a means to »transform the system from within« (Messer 2023).

According to Argentine economist and historian Mario Rapoport, a significant portion of Weil's work is tied to Argentina, even though he lived there for only the first decade of his life. In the 1930s, Weil traveled to Buenos Aires to

assist in the creation of a tax system reform, an effort that resulted in his most notable book, *El Enigma Argentino* (published in English in 1944).

When historian Martin Jay embarked on writing his book about the history of the Frankfurt School, he engaged in a significant epistolary exchange with Weil. Through this correspondence, it becomes evident that Weil found the emphasis on the Jewish origins of the Frankfurt School's members not only uncomfortable but also a reminder of the antisemitic stereotypes he had encountered in Germany. Despite Weil's reluctance to be labeled as Jewish, he acknowledged this influence, though he later contradicted it. As Weil remarked to Jay, »You seem to hold that we became Socialists and Revolutionaries as a consequence of our Jewishness« (Crawford 2023, p. 67). Jay, reflecting on this exchange, noted that for most members of the Institute, aside from Löwenthal, Fromm, and Benjamin, »Judaism was a closed book« (Crawford 2023, p. 70).

Despite these intriguing coincidences, no evidence was found that Weil's Argentine connection contributed directly to the impact of Erich Fromm in the country. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the reception of Critical Theory in Argentine academic circles has been significant, with elements of these ideas incorporated into the curricula of major social science programs at the University of Buenos Aires.

Importantly, Jay's observation makes it clear that key figures in Critical Theory – Löwenthal, Benjamin, and Fromm – not only acknowledged their Jewish origins but also allowed these roots to inform and influence their intellectual pursuits, highlighting the intersection of their Jewish identities with their contributions to Critical Theory.

b. Erich Fromm's Life in Mexico

Erich Fromm lived in Mexico from 1950 to 1973, during which a significant part of his work, particularly in research and psychoanalysis, flourished. Various scholars present the reasons for Fromm's move to Mexico differently. Lawrence J. Friedman, Rainer Funk, and Salvador Millán argue that his relocation was primarily due to his wife Henny Gurland's illness (Friedman 2013, p. 127; Funk 2000, p. 208; Millán 1995, pp. 69–76). Historian Mariana Elizabeth Reyna Chávez additionally attributes Fromm's emigration to difficulties practicing psychoanalysis in the United States and to the pressures of McCarthyism (Reyna Chávez 2010).

Fromm's intellectual exchanges in Mexico were noteworthy. His interaction with Paulo Freire – the Brazilian Marxist educator whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* became one of the foundational texts of Critical Pedagogy – underscores the interconnectedness of their ideas. Freire and Fromm met at Fromm's home in Cuernavaca through the introduction of Ivan Illich (Braune 2014, p. 44). Another

prominent figure influenced by Fromm during his time in Mexico was Alejandro Jodorowsky, the Chilean artist and filmmaker of Jewish-Ukrainian descent, whose encounters with Fromm contributed to the development of his therapeutic method known as psychomagic (Jodorowsky 2005, pp. 268–275).

Among the significant encounters in Mexico was the collaboration that led to the publication of *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1964), emerging from the intellectual exchange between D. T. Suzuki and Erich Fromm, published in Spanish by the Fondo de Cultura Económica. This book resonated with the cultural movement of the 1960s when many young Jewish individuals began exploring Eastern traditions. Conceptually, the book gave Argentine readers access to Fromm's central notions of *productive orientation* and the critique of the *marketing character* – his diagnosis of a modern self that relates to others instrumentally, as commodities to be exchanged. For young Argentine Jews exploring Eastern philosophy as an alternative to both orthodox religion and dogmatic Marxism, Fromm's synthesis offered a psychoanalytic framework that validated their spiritual search while grounding it in his broader humanistic vision.

One of Fromm's most significant contributions during his time in Mexico was the establishment of the *Instituto Mexicano de Psicoanálisis* (IMPAC A.C.), inaugurated on March 8, 1963, with Fromm serving as its first director (Reyna Chávez 2010; Millán 1995). Among the significant works produced during this period, *El lenguaje olvidado*, *Psicoanálisis de la sociedad contemporánea*, and *El arte de amar* stand out. The dissemination of these books in Spanish-speaking contexts clearly contributed to Fromm's status as a long-seller.

c. The Influence of Publishers on Fromm's Reception in Argentina

Understanding the widespread influence of Erich Fromm in Argentina requires examining the role of key publishing houses. Two major publishers were instrumental in translating and distributing Fromm's works: Editorial Paidós and Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Founded in 1945 by Jaime Bernstein and Enrique Butelman, both from Jewish families, Editorial Paidós quickly became one of Argentina's most important publishers for academic and intellectual works, specializing in psychology, psychoanalysis, and social sciences. Paidós placed Erich Fromm among the principal authors they introduced to Argentina, alongside Karl R. Popper, Hannah Arendt, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, and Judith Butler (Serras, Navarro, and Soliva 2020). Paidós translated several of Fromm's seminal works, including *El arte de amar* and *El miedo a la libertad*, ensuring they reached both academic professionals and the wider public. This institutional presence had a personal dimension as well: León Bernstein, son of

Paidós co-founder Jaime Bernstein, was an active member of the Bet-El community founded by Rabbi Marshall Meyer, and brought with him a collection of Jewish thinkers close to Meyer's intellectual world – to the point that the Seminario Rabínico later attempted to establish its own publishing house. This connection speaks to a broader alignment between the kind of Jewish thought Paidós promoted and the humanistic Judaism being built by Meyer's movement (Dr. D. Fainstein, personal communication, April 2026).

Fromm's collaboration with the Fondo de Cultura Económica (FCE) also played a crucial role. Among his significant activities in Mexico, he served as director of the *Biblioteca de Psicología y Psicoanálisis* series, published by FCE beginning in 1955. FCE's stature as a publisher of significant social and economic works contributed to the extensive reach of Fromm's ideas in Argentina, particularly notable in the 1960s and 70s.

In 1966, following the political controversy surrounding C. Wright Mills' *Escucha, yanqui* and the resignation of FCE's director Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, a group of intellectuals – Erich Fromm among the founding shareholders – established Siglo XXI Editores (Reyna Chávez 2010, p. 196). Today, Siglo XXI stands as one of the most influential publishers in Latin America, and Fromm's works continue to be reprinted: Siglo XXI published a Spanish translation of *Anatomía de la destructividad humana* as recently as 2022. The fact that Fromm was a founding shareholder of Siglo XXI is rarely noted in discussions of his Argentine reception, but it speaks to his deep integration into the Latin American intellectual publishing network.

d. Gino Germani and *Escape from Freedom* in Argentina

Escape from Freedom was first introduced to Argentina by Editorial Paidós in 1962, translated into Spanish as *El miedo a la libertad*. The choice of the Spanish title – following the UK edition by Routledge & Kegan Paul rather than the US title – is itself significant for the reception analysis: for Argentine readers, the emphasis on *fear* rather than *escape* framed the book's central argument in more affective, psychological terms, foregrounding the emotional dimension of submission to authority. This edition featured a significant 14-page preface by Gino Germani, an Italian sociologist who had fled to Argentina in 1934 and became a prominent figure in the development of scientific sociology in Argentina and Latin America – the principal research institute for social sciences at the University of Buenos Aires bears his name.

In his preface, Germani identifies the book's central theoretical achievement as the overcoming of two opposing errors. As he writes: »We find in Fromm's work a felicitous overcoming of the two antithetical errors: sociologism, which

forgets the human element – the fundamental fact that human beings are the actors and authors of history – and psychologism, which considers only individual consciousnesses without taking into account their mode of formation and their connections with objective sociocultural institutions and facts» (Germani 1962, p. 16; my translation).

Germani's preface also contains a passage that would have been particularly charged for Argentine Jewish readers: »Fromm's analysis confirms – on the psychological plane – what other scholars have affirmed time and again: fascism, that political expression of the fear of freedom, is not an accidental phenomenon of a particular moment or country, but is the manifestation of a deep crisis that affects the very foundations of our civilization [...] The end of the war has not ended this danger« (Germani 1962, p. 18; my translation). This framing – fascism as civilizational crisis, not as a closed historical episode – carried an unmistakable urgency for Jewish readers in 1962 Argentina. Germani was simultaneously speaking to the Argentine context: a country that had harbored Nazi war criminals and experienced its own cycles of authoritarianism. The resonance of *El miedo a la libertad* for Jewish readers was thus overdetermined – the book spoke at once to a universal theory of authoritarianism and to the specific historical trauma of European Jewry. This urgency would only deepen in the years that followed: the book went through successive reeditions precisely in the most turbulent periods of Argentine political history, and with the military coup of March 1976 – which inaugurated the most violent dictatorship in the country's history – *El miedo a la libertad* acquired a new and devastating layer of relevance that has kept it in continuous circulation to this day.

It is equally significant that the Argentine Jewish reception of *El miedo a la libertad* coincided with a period of intense engagement with the memory of the Shoah. The Eichmann trial had concluded in Jerusalem just weeks before the Paidós edition appeared (Eichmann was convicted in December 1961, sentenced in 1962). For the Argentine Jewish community – many of whom were Holocaust survivors or their children – reading Fromm's psychosocial analysis of authoritarianism in the immediate context of Eichmann's trial gave the book a resonance that went beyond its sociological or psychoanalytic content. Fromm was offering a theoretical framework for understanding how ordinary people submit to authoritarian systems, precisely when Argentine Jews were confronting that question in the most immediate and painful terms. This reading was further overdetermined by what came later: the military dictatorship initiated in 1976 carried out a persecution that was markedly antisemitic in character. Jewish detainees were dramatically overrepresented among the disappeared relative to their share of the population, and the clandestine detention centers – as documented in detail by the *Nunca Más* report – saw forms of torture that explicitly replicated

Nazi symbolism and humiliation, including the use of antisemitic slurs and references to concentration camps (CONADEP 1984). For Argentine Jews reading and rereading Fromm across these decades, his analysis of the psychological mechanisms of submission to authority was not an abstract theory but a living framework for understanding their own experience of violence, persecution, and survival. It is also worth noting that *El miedo a la libertad* opens with a quote from Pirkei Avot: »If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now – when?« This Talmudic opening would have immediately signaled to Jewish readers that Fromm's framework was grounded in Jewish ethical tradition, even as it addressed a universal human condition.

Germani concludes his preface by framing the current crisis not as an inevitable fate but as a crisis of growth, comparing the approaches of Laski and Fromm: for both authors, »the path of salvation offered to humanity is the transition from negative to positive freedom« (Germani 1962, p. 21). This optimistic framing – humanity »standing on the threshold of a new world« – provided a counterweight to despair and would have resonated strongly with the humanistic, progressive vision of Judaism cultivated in publications like *Nueva Sión*.

At the time of writing this article, when expressions linked to fascism are resurfacing across the globe – including in Argentina, Europe, and various other regions – Fromm's reflections in *Escape from Freedom* regain their urgent relevance. His analysis of the fear of freedom and its connection to authoritarianism reminds us that the dangers Fromm identified are not confined to a single moment in history.

4. Erich Fromm through the Lens of the Argentine Jewish Press

Having traced the transnational pathways through which Fromm's work reached Argentina — the Frankfurt School connection, his Mexican years, and the publishing networks that brought his books into Spanish — we now turn to the question of how that work was actually read, cited, and appropriated within the Argentine Jewish community itself. The following sections present the findings of archival research conducted across four publications that, taken together, cover a broad ideological and institutional spectrum of Argentine Jewish print culture: the progressive Zionist-socialist newspaper *Nueva Sión*; the center-right Hebrew weekly *La Luz*; *Majshavot*, the academic journal of the Conservative Movement's *Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano*; and, more briefly and comparatively, a set of additional sources — the ICUF publications *Tribuna* and *Tiempo*, the Yiddish philosophical journal *Davke*, and the Spanish-language newspaper *Mundo Israelita* — that round out the picture.

a. *Nueva Sión* and the Progressive Jewish-Argentine Sphere

Nueva Sión began as a biweekly newspaper printed in Buenos Aires with distribution across Latin America. Its first edition was published in the weeks leading up to the creation of the State of Israel. The publication was forced to close its doors in 1977 due to the repression of Argentina's civic-military dictatorship, resuming with the return of democracy in 1984, and since 2010 has existed exclusively as an online publication.

From its inception, *Nueva Sión* identified itself as a left-wing socialist Zionist newspaper, representing the voices of progressive Judaism. In an era without the internet and with limited television access, *Nueva Sión* became a vital source of detailed reports on the war preceding Israel's creation, international events, and book reviews that introduced Judaism from a progressive perspective. Notably, thinkers such as Freud, Marx, Martin Buber, and Erich Fromm were often discussed within its pages.

To further investigate the paper's history, we interviewed Guillermo Atlas, who sought exile in Frankfurt, Germany, during Argentina's dictatorship and later served as editor of *Nueva Sión* in the late 1980s. Atlas highlighted that Fromm was associated with a leftist, socialist perspective, distinct from the more dogmatic communism of the era. His works, including *Escape from Freedom* and *The Art of Loving*, were considered essential reading among this intellectual community. Atlas described *Nueva Sión*'s audience as »educated Jewish professionals, similar to the Aufklärung,« who found Fromm's work to be both deeply Jewish and universally appealing.

Analysis and Reflections

Based on the archival research made possible by the digitization carried out by the University of Florida (*Nueva Sión* 1948–2002), several important conclusions can be drawn. References to Fromm span from the very year the newspaper emerged – even before any of his works had been translated into Spanish – to the present day. The first reference appears in 1948, with a summary of *The Fear of Freedom* framing Fromm's social-psychological analysis as a tool for understanding Germany's collective responsibility for Nazism. Subsequent decades bring increasingly sophisticated engagements: references to *Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Society* (1961), *Escape from Freedom* (discussed in the context of Soviet communism in 1989), and sustained engagement with *You Shall Be as Gods* (cited in multiple issues from 1968 through 1993 as a resource for humanistic Jewish thought).

It is worth pausing on what the inaugural 1948 reference reveals about the dynamics of reception. The anonymous author uses Fromm's psychosocial fra-

mework to argue for Germany's collective responsibility for Nazism – a reading that subtly diverges from Fromm's own universalist argument. For Fromm, the character structure underlying submission to authoritarianism was not specifically German; it was a latent possibility in any modern mass society shaped by alienation. The Argentine Jewish reader, however, directs Fromm's analysis toward a particularist indictment of Germany. This early instance of *productive misreading* – a creative appropriation that exceeds the author's explicit intentions – is itself analytically significant: it shows that from the very beginning, Fromm's work was received as a politically engaged tool for processing the traumatic experience of the Shoah.

The mentions of Fromm in *Nueva Sión* range from brief and passing references to more detailed analyses of his theories, particularly concerning key debates of the 1960s and 1980s. Criticism of Soviet communism and psychoanalytic reflections on freedom and alienation are recurring themes. But it is also noteworthy how Fromm's ideas served as a foundation for discussing humanistic Judaism and internal debates within the Argentine Jewish community – from articulating the basis of secular Judaism (Shunia Bendor 1986) to grounding a political theology of Exodus (Rabbi Mario Ablin 1993). The engagement of progressive Jewish intellectuals with Argentine political life that this archive reveals was not, moreover, limited to the Zionist-socialist circles of *Nueva Sión*. As Kahan (2015, p. 163) has documented in his study of the communist-progressive ICUF journal *Tiempo*, progressive Jews across different ideological currents shared the conviction that »the Jewish cause was inextricably and indissolubly bound up with decisive general problems« – a framing that made Fromm's social-psychological framework for understanding authoritarianism, alienation, and freedom politically indispensable across the full spectrum of Argentine Jewish progressive thought.

What the archive reveals most strikingly is that *Nueva Sión's* writers and readers came to regard Fromm as a theorist of secular, humanistic Judaism – not merely as a psychoanalyst or political thinker. This reception is visible across the archival record: in 1968, Sara Strassberg reads *You Shall Be as Gods* as a philosophical statement about human freedom and Jewish ethics; in 1986, Shunia Bendor cites *Psychoanalysis and Religion* as a foundation for secular Judaism; in 1988, Arnaldo Liberman invokes Fromm's concept of God as the core of a secular Jewish project. This pattern reflects specific socio-political and religious conditions in Argentine Jewish life: the need for a Judaism that could speak to secular, leftist, and psychoanalytically literate intellectuals without requiring religious practice or theological commitment. Fromm offered exactly this – a Jewish thinker who could translate the ethical and humanistic core of the tradition into a universalist, psychosocially grounded language. The Argentine Jewish reception of Fromm thus parallels broader developments in liberal and humani-

stic Jewish thought internationally, but with a distinctly local inflection shaped by Argentina's particular combination of Zionist politics, psychoanalytic culture, and experience of authoritarian violence.

b. *La Luz Weekly*: A Comparative Study

The second archival source explored is the *Semanario Hebreo La Luz* (The Light; The Hebrew Weekly) (University of Florida Digital Collections 1931–). This publication catered to a different audience and represented a political stance that combined religious values with center-right and sometimes right-wing politics. The contrast with *Nueva Sión* becomes particularly clear when considering the role *La Luz* played during the Argentine civic-military dictatorship (1976–1983): not only did *La Luz* continue its publication throughout this period, but one of its editions even featured a message from Jorge Rafael Videla in honor of Rosh Hashaná – published at a time when the regime was actively torturing, murdering, and disappearing people, with particular brutality against Jewish citizens (CONADEP 1984).

While *La Luz*'s political stances were not always uniform or linear, the archive reveals a focus on Jewish community life in Buenos Aires, featuring more frequent shorter news pieces and book reviews. References to Fromm in *La Luz* span from 1959 to 1999, beginning with a conference at Hebraica celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Fondo de Cultura Económica (1959), where Fromm was listed among the key Jewish thinkers published alongside Spinoza, Marx, and Buber. Subsequent references document Fromm's presence in community events and courses: a 1964 lecture by Dr. Horacio Pinto comparing Fromm and Russell; a 1980 course at AMIA led by philosopher Jaime Barylko dedicated exclusively to *You Shall Be as Gods*; and a lecture by Felix Schuster – later Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires – presenting a tribute to Fromm and Sartre.

Analysis and Reflections on *La Luz*

The archival investigation of *La Luz* reveals a broader presence of Fromm across the Argentine Jewish institutional landscape – beyond progressive circles. Fromm's work is mentioned in a special publication by the Latin American Jewish Congress (*Coloquio*), in AMIA discussions, and in other Latin American magazines. The stature of those teaching his work – Barylko and Schuster both becoming leading public intellectuals – underlines the depth of his institutional penetration.

The most politically revealing aspect of *La Luz*'s Fromm reception is its internal contradiction. Several articles use Fromm ironically or selectively: in 1977 and

1981, Fromm is cited in arguments about Marx's supposed antisemitism – the very thinker Fromm defended being used against him. Yet in 1980, immediately after Fromm's death, *La Luz* honors him with a warm tribute, and from the 1980s onward the editors invoke Fromm freely as an authority on freedom, repentance (Yom Kippur 1997), and the Jewish ethical tradition. This trajectory – from instrumental and ambivalent use to genuine reverence – suggests that Fromm's authority as a Jewish humanist thinker eventually transcended the ideological divide between progressive and conservative sectors of the Argentine Jewish community.

c. *Majshavot* and the Conservative Movement

Majshavot is the official publication of the Conservative Jewish Movement in Latin America, following the founding of the *Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano* led by Marshall Meyer in 1962. It is important to note at the outset that the available archive of *Majshavot* is incomplete: not all issues have been digitized and made accessible, and the drashot (sermons) and other institutional materials produced by the Seminario are only partially preserved in the consulted collections. The research presented here is therefore necessarily limited to the material that was accessible, and future work should aim to expand the archival base. Unlike *Nueva Sión* and *La Luz*, *Majshavot* is an academic journal, aimed at analyzing Jewish topics from an intellectual perspective aligned with the values of the Conservative Movement.

The figure of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer (1930–1993) is central to understanding the intellectual and ethical context in which *Majshavot* was produced and in which Fromm's ideas found their place within the Conservative Movement. An American rabbi trained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York – where he was a student of Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most influential Jewish theologians of the twentieth century – Meyer arrived in Argentina in 1959 and founded the *Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano* in Buenos Aires in 1962. The movement he built was widely regarded as revolutionary within Argentine and Latin American Judaism: it brought a religious vision that was simultaneously modern and Halakhically grounded, open to the challenges of secular modernity without abandoning Jewish practice, and deeply committed to social engagement and democratic values. What distinguished Meyer's project above all was its ethical commitment and political activism. During the military dictatorship of 1976–1983, he became one of the most prominent religious voices denouncing the crimes of the regime, visiting political prisoners in clandestine detention centers, accompanying families of the disappeared, and maintaining contact with international human rights organizations at considerable personal risk. With the return of democracy in 1983, President Alfonsín appointed Meyer

to CONADEP – the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons – alongside Professor Gregorio Klimovsky, one of two Jewish human rights advocates chosen for the commission (Elkin 2011, p. 262). Their landmark report *Nunca Más* (CONADEP 1984) became one of the foundational documents of Argentina's transitional justice process.

It is important to note that in the available archives – themselves incomplete – no explicit citation of Fromm by Meyer was found. This archival absence is corroborated by the testimony of Dr. Daniel Fainstein, who noted that Meyer's most direct intellectual influences were Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel rather than Fromm – a proximity that is itself illuminating, since Fromm's own humanistic project was deeply shaped by the same tradition of prophetic and dialogical Jewish thought that defined both Buber and Heschel (D. Fainstein, personal communication, April 2026; see also Pinkas 2024). The parallels between Meyer and Fromm are thus structural rather than documented: in a sermon published in *Majshavot* (1989), Meyer described modern society as corroded by anomie – »social instability resulting from a breakdown of norms and values,« marked by »anonymity, solitude, hopelessness, and despair« (Meyer 1989, p. 6) – in language that closely mirrors Fromm's diagnosis of alienated modern life. This structural convergence, rooted in shared prophetic and rabbinic sources, helps explain why Fromm's thought found such a natural institutional home in the space that Meyer built.

Within the material investigated, we identified two significant references to Erich Fromm in *Majshavot*. The first appears in Volume 21, Number 3, published in 1982, in an article by Gustavo D. Perednik. The second occurs in Volume 26, Number 1, published in 1987, in an article by Dr. Daniel Fainstein.

The ideological contrast between these two authors is itself analytically revealing. Gustavo Perednik later became associated with a Jewish right-wing voice, strongly anti-communist, and often critical of the left. In contrast, Dr. Daniel Fainstein positioned himself within a more religiously grounded and humanist Jewish tradition. That both engage with Fromm – from opposing ends of the Conservative Movement's intellectual spectrum – demonstrates that Fromm's reception in the Argentine Jewish community was not confined to progressive circles (see also Setton 2023).

Perednik's article, »Judíos y Judaísmo: una relación compleja,« attempts to define Jewish identity through sociological elements, though it does so without sustained academic grounding: broad assertions are made without sufficient theoretical apparatus or bibliographical support, including the claim that for the Jewish people »the unifying element par excellence is Zionism« (Perednik 1982, p. 28). In discussing Judaism as a moral framework for freedom, Perednik introduces Fromm's idea that the Exodus provided the Jewish people with »freedom

from,« but what was still missing was »freedom to« – a framework within which to apply that freedom (Perednik 1982, p. 30). The references to Fromm are superficial, and Fromm is described as a »Jewish-American psychoanalyst,« overlooking his German origins. Despite these shortcomings, Perednik's citation of Fromm is noteworthy as evidence that Fromm's work had permeated Jewish intellectual discourse even in circles ideologically opposed to his humanist philosophy.

The second article, »Modernidad, crisis y esencia humana: reflexiones sobre el pensamiento del Rab. Soloveichik y Erich Fromm,« written by Dr. Daniel Fainstein when he was dean of the *Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano*, is a condensed version of research conducted at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, supervised by David Hartman. The article originated in a course on Fromm's *Man for Himself* taught by Hartman in Jerusalem in 1983 – a context in which, as Fainstein noted in interview, Fromm was not yet widely circulating in Israeli academic and Jewish intellectual circles. The research was also mentored by Professor Paul Mendes-Flohr of the Hebrew University, a leading scholar of modern Jewish thought (D. Fainstein, personal communication, April 2026). Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), known as »the Rav,« was one of the most influential Orthodox Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. The very choice to place Fromm and Soloveitchik in dialogue is itself significant: it implies that despite the profound gulf between Fromm's nontheism (Pinkas 2024) and Soloveitchik's Orthodox commitments, their respective engagements with the crisis of modern selfhood are commensurable enough to sustain genuine philosophical comparison. Fainstein's article is, in this sense, an act of intellectual bridge-building – an attempt to show that humanistic psychoanalysis and Halakhic thought, however different in their premises and conclusions, share a common concern with the problem of authentic human existence in modernity.

Fainstein examines how both thinkers address the existential problem of modernity: Soloveitchik through Halakhah, Fromm through humanistic psychoanalysis. He finds significant structural parallels in their diagnoses of modern alienation and self-ignorance, while ultimately critiquing Fromm's aspiration for a universal explanatory system as philosophically unattainable (Fainstein 1987, pp. 39–47). Fainstein returned to Fromm in his teaching at the Seminario in 1989–90, in a course on the conception of the mitzvot in which he placed traditional Jewish positions in dialogue with Fromm's humanistic reading of commandment and obligation in *You Shall Be as Gods* – demonstrating that his engagement with Fromm was not confined to a single scholarly article but informed a sustained pedagogical practice (D. Fainstein, personal communication, April 2026).

It was also found in the *Majshavot* archives that some of the ideas presented in Fainstein's article were expressed during a sermon delivered on Yom Kippur night in 1989 at the Bet-El Community – the community founded by Rabbi Mar-

shall Meyer. The sermon directly draws on Fromm's critique of self-love and indifference to human suffering, explicitly applying it to those in Argentina who believed that »peace and national unity could be built on the basis of impunity and forgetfulness« – clearly referring to the crimes of the military dictatorship. These reflections reveal that the reference to Fromm is not merely a citation of a renowned author: Fromm's ideas form the foundation for a Judaism actively engaged with the democratic, ethical, and social issues of Argentina.

d. Other Archival Horizons

The three publications examined in depth in this study represent only a portion of the Argentine Jewish periodical landscape in which Fromm's thought circulated. To understand the broader context, it is worth recalling that Argentine Jewry produced what Alejandro Dujovne (2014) has described as one of the richest Jewish print cultures in the diaspora – a community that, driven from Europe and shaped by persecution, made the book and the periodical press its »portable homeland« (Dujovne 2014, p. 14). This print culture was simultaneously liberal in its intellectual orientation and deeply committed to Jewish identity: it engaged seriously with universal currents of thought – psychoanalysis, socialism, humanism, existentialism – while doing so from within a strong sense of Jewish particularity. Fromm, as a thinker who embodied precisely this combination, was naturally at home in it. In the course of this research, several additional sources were consulted with a more limited and explicitly comparative aim; their findings are summarized here.

The Federación de Instituciones Culturales Judías de la Argentina (ICUF), founded in 1941, brought together the left-wing, communist-affiliated sector of Argentine Jewish communal life. As Kahan (2015) has documented, the ICUF operated within a framework in which »the Jewish cause was understood to be inseparably and indissolubly bound up with decisive general problems« (Kahan 2015, p. 163) – a posture that made it, in principle, fertile terrain for Fromm's social-psychological analysis of authoritarianism and alienation. Its main publications included *Tribuna* (Tribune; 1946–1970) and *Tiempo* (Time; 1968–1987; University of Florida Digital Collections). In *Tribuna*, a reference to Fromm appears as early as 1961, in an article documenting the military repression of university student organizations, where Fromm's *Psicoanálisis de la sociedad contemporánea* is mentioned as habitual reading within the Jewish middle-class university milieu of Buenos Aires. This early and contextually embedded reference suggests that Fromm was already circulating in these spaces at the very moment of his first Spanish-language publications. The density of Fromm references in the ICUF publications appears more limited than in the archives

examined in depth in this study; this may reflect the partial state of digitization of the ICUF holdings, and should not be taken as a definitive conclusion about the scope of his reception in these circles.

Davke (Precisely; 1949–1982; University of Florida Digital Collections), edited by Shlomo Suskovich, was an independent Yiddish-language philosophical journal of notable intellectual ambition, published in Buenos Aires across 83 issues. Unlike the ICUF publications, *Davke* was not affiliated with any political movement; its explicit purpose was to serve as a bridge between Western philosophy and Jewish thought, acquainting Yiddish readers with the major currents of European philosophical inquiry while demonstrating the contribution of Jewish thinkers to those currents. Of its 83 issues, 48 were monographic, each dedicated to a specific philosopher or concept – among them Spinoza, Bergson, Maimonides, Einstein, and Freud – following what Berger (2007) describes as the journal's »double mission«: to present European philosophy to Yiddish readers while placing Jewish philosophical ideas within the European tradition. Significantly, *Davke* had already dedicated a topical issue to Sigmund Freud (vol. 8, no. 30, January–April 1957), treating him not as a psychologist but as a philosopher whose contribution lay in what Suskovich called »speculative thinking« about the human condition (Berger 2007, pp. 309–311). This is directly relevant for understanding the subsequent references to Fromm: a journal that had already situated Freud within a Jewish-philosophical framework was a natural space for engaging with Fromm, whose psychosocial humanism extended precisely that tradition. The Argentine Psychoanalytic Association (APA), founded in 1940, had made Buenos Aires a major center of psychoanalytic culture (Berger 2007, p. 310), and *Davke*'s engagement with these figures reflects the deep penetration of psychoanalytic thought into the Argentine Jewish intellectual world. A search of the digitized holdings of *Davke* (University of Florida Digital Collections) returned eight references to Fromm across issues spanning 1954 to 1972 – extending the documented reception of Fromm into the Yiddish intellectual world of Argentine Jewry, for whom the integration of universal philosophy with Jewish intellectual life was itself the central cultural project.

Mundo Israelita (Jewish World) (University of Florida Digital Collections) was founded in June 1923 by the intellectuals Salvador Kibrick and Samuel Resnick, making it the oldest Spanish-language periodical directed at the Argentine Jewish community. Conceived explicitly for a younger generation of Argentine Jews who lived, worked, and studied in Spanish, it combined coverage of Argentine Jewish communal life with international Jewish affairs and cultural criticism. It was in the pages of *Mundo Israelita* that Jorge Luis Borges published his celebrated response to a wave of antisemitic agitation in 1932, defending the Jewish community with characteristic irony – a collaboration that exemplifies

the publication's role as a meeting point between the Argentine intellectual world and the Jewish community. References to Fromm appear in *Mundo Israelita* with notable frequency from 1958 through its later publications. This trajectory reinforces the broader picture established in this study: Fromm's presence in Argentine Jewish print culture was neither confined to a single sector nor limited to a particular moment but sustained across decades and across the ideological and institutional diversity of that culture.

A different order of archival horizon is represented by the Sociedad Hebraica Argentina and its literary journal *Davar*. Founded in 1926 – and preceded by the Asociación Hebraica (1923), whose invitation brought Albert Einstein to Buenos Aires in 1925, where he was named its first honorary member – the Sociedad Hebraica was one of the most influential cultural and social institutions of Argentine Jewry (Sociedad Hebraica Argentina 2024). It combined a vibrant sports program with theater, music, and one of the most important Jewish libraries in the country. Its literary journal *Davar* – the word means both »word« and »logos« in Hebrew – was founded in 1945 by Alberto Gerchunoff and published until 1992 (131 issues). Described by contemporaries as second only to Victoria Ocampo's *Sur* in the Buenos Aires literary landscape, *Davar* shared many collaborators with *Sur* and served as a space where Jewish literary and intellectual life intersected with Argentine culture at large. The archives of both the Sociedad and *Davar* remain largely undigitized, rendering systematic consultation impossible at this stage. Given the cultural centrality of these institutions and the intellectual stature of *Davar* as a literary journal, their future exploration represents one of the most promising directions for research on Fromm's reception in Argentine Jewish intellectual life.

5. Final Reflections

This study aimed to be one of the first exploratory investigations into the still underexplored reception of Erich Fromm in Argentina, particularly within the Jewish-Argentine community and thought. We examined the transnational connections that brought Fromm's work to Argentina – the Frankfurt School, Felix Weil, Fromm's time in Mexico, and the role of key publishing houses – and analyzed three primary archival sources: *Nueva Sión*, *La Luz*, and *Majshavot*. Far from being a definitive conclusion, this is intended as the beginning of what could become a broader project.

A central question this paper raises is not only where Fromm was read, but why he became so indispensable for this particular community. The Jewish readers documented in this study were, in their great majority, first- or se-

cond-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe whose parents had arrived in Argentina in the early decades of the twentieth century. Like other immigrant communities seeking integration into a new society, they faced a distinctive modern tension: the desire to participate fully in a universal culture and to be recognized as intellectual and civic equals within it, while preserving a sense of Jewish distinctiveness that could no longer be anchored in the religious practice of their parents. The generation that came of age in the 1950s and 1960s – the generation of Guillermo Atlas, of the readers of *Nueva Sión*, of the students at the *Seminario Rabínico* – was largely secular, university-educated, professionally integrated into Argentine society, and politically engaged. It was a generation also marked by the trauma of the Shoah and by a long history of antisemitism – and, in the Argentine context of the 1960s and 1970s, by political participation that was repeatedly censored, repressed, and persecuted. For this generation, Fromm's analysis of authoritarianism, the fear of freedom, and the psychological roots of destructiveness carried unusual urgency and personal resonance.

Fromm met this generation in Buenos Aires – a city in which psychoanalysis had become intrinsic to everyday middle-class culture in ways unparalleled anywhere else in the world, and in which Freudian vocabulary had permeated intellectual and professional life, including and perhaps especially its Jewish sector. Into this milieu, Fromm brought something that no other thinker of comparable global stature offered: a humanistic and psychosocially inflected framework that was simultaneously universal and openly, unapologetically Jewish. His major works integrated Jewish sources as foundational rather than decorative: *El miedo a la libertad* opens with a Talmudic epigraph from Pirkei Avot; *El lenguaje olvidado* begins with a Talmudic saying about dreams; *El arte de amar* engages rabbinic conceptions of love; *Y seréis como dioses* offers a sustained humanistic reading of the Hebrew Bible and its tradition. The repeated reprinting of these works by Editorial Paidós and the FCE, and the decision by AMIA and the Milá publishing house to produce their own Spanish translations of *Y seréis como dioses* specifically for the Jewish community, are documentary evidence of a sustained communal demand. To read Fromm was, for these readers, to be cosmopolitan and Jewish simultaneously – to claim a place in the universal conversation about freedom, love, alienation, and human dignity without relinquishing a particular identity. This profile was rooted in Fromm's own formation: his early engagement with major Jewish thinkers – Martin Buber, Leo Löwenthal, Franz Rosenzweig – within Rabbi Nehemia Nobel's intellectual circle in Frankfurt had shaped his understanding of Judaism as a »religion of reason« (Pinkas 2018).

The archival evidence presented here suggests that Argentine Jewish intellectuals went further than merely reading Fromm as a universalist thinker who happened to be Jewish. They actively constructed him as a theorist of secular,

humanistic Judaism – a thinker who demonstrated that rigorous engagement with the Jewish ethical and intellectual tradition was compatible with, and indeed expressed through, a nontheistic, psychosocially grounded humanism. In this sense, the reception of Fromm in Argentine Jewish circles is not simply a chapter in the history of intellectual influence: it is a chapter in the construction of a specifically Argentine Jewish modernity. As Ronen Pinkas (2024) has argued, Fromm's humanism is not reducible to an atheistic secular project; it is grounded in a nontheistic mysticism whose roots lie in the Jewish prophetic, Talmudic, and Hasidic tradition – what readers in Buenos Aires recognized was not a thinker who had abandoned Judaism, but one who had translated its deepest ethical commitments into a language accessible to the secular, psychoanalytically literate world they inhabited. A particularly revealing comparison emerges with Israel, where – according to Dr. Daniel Fainstein's testimony, corroborated by the context of his 1987 article – Fromm's circulation was considerably more limited during the same period, arriving later and with less intensity than in Argentina (D. Fainstein, personal communication, April 2026). This contrast merits dedicated future investigation.

Much like Woody Allen in cinema, Fromm became a special reference for a significant portion of the Jewish population in Argentina. Dr. Daniel Fainstein confirmed this in interview: for his generation, Fromm was a central figure, recognized across the Jewish middle-class intellectual circles of Buenos Aires as a thinker who combined a psychosocial approach, a Marxian critical base, and a nontheistic humanism (D. Fainstein, personal communication, April 2026). Fainstein characterized Fromm, following Isaac Deutscher, as a »Non-Jewish Jew« – a thinker who had broken with the institutional forms of his religious origins while remaining profoundly shaped by their ethical and intellectual substance (Traverso 2017). This framing captures something the archival record alone cannot: the affective dimension of Fromm's reception, in which his books functioned not merely as intellectual references but as personal identifications for a secular Jewish intelligentsia navigating the tensions of modernity and belonging. What that intelligentsia found in Fromm was, as Pinkas (2024) has shown, a Judaism of the prophetic and rabbinic tradition translated into universal humanistic language – liberated from its institutional and liturgical forms but no less demanding for that. The framework that replaced prayer and observance in Fromm's work was one of critical thought, ethical engagement with the social world, and what Fromm called the art of loving. This explains why his reception crossed ideological lines: he was cited in the socialist *Nueva Sión* and in the center-right *La Luz*, by secular intellectuals and by rabbis in formation, by Zionist socialists and by Conservative movement thinkers – each finding in his work a model for living Jewishly in the modern world without separating from it.

We consider it important and worthwhile to further explore other archives and testimonies to better understand Fromm's reception in Argentina and Latin America – including the archives of the *Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano*, community bulletins, and the extensive Paidós correspondence files – as well as to deepen our understanding of the development of this specific field of humanist and progressive Judaism.

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With the support of the Erich Fromm Stiftung

- the Institute's collections are now *permanently accessible* to scholars and to the public
- a two-year *fellowship* (of 1.500 € per month) is financed for scholarly research on the thought and work of Erich Fromm. It is for persons who can demonstrate a scientific involvement with Erich Fromm (preferably in the form of a dissertation or scientific publication) and wish to acquire further scientific qualifications and/or to prepare a publication on the basis of their research on Erich Fromm (see: ><https://fromm-online.org/en/institute/erich-fromm-research-fellowship/<>)
- *printing cost subsidies* can be provided: a subsidy of 500 € can be granted for a publisher to publish dissertations and equivalent papers which aimed to promote the reception and research of Erich Fromm's scientific ideas
- the English edition of *Fromm Forum* can be financed, and the Erich Fromm Foundation is now the publisher
- a *digital documentation center* is being set up and maintained in which the holdings of the Erich Fromm Institute and the collected secondary li-

terature on Erich Fromm are recorded and in many cases made accessible (>www.opus4.kobv.de/opus4-Fromm/home<)

Postal address of the Erich Fromm Stiftung: Erich Fromm Gemeinnützige Stiftung (EFS), c/o Dr. Rainer Funk, Ursrainer Ring 24, DE-72076 Tübingen / Germany; Phone: +49 7071 600004; Email: frommfunk@gmail.com.

* * *



ERICH FROMM INSTITUTE TÜBINGEN

see also: <https://fromm-online.org>

The Erich Fromm Institute Tübingen (EFIT) was opened on January 30, 2015, and is located next to Tübingen's Old Town at Hintere Grabenstrasse 26. It is a one-of-a-kind Fromm research center. It houses Erich Fromm's reference library and his literary estate (with original typescripts, handwritten drafts and other documents). Here you will find a comprehensive collection of the literature about Erich Fromm and publications and documents of the International Erich Fromm Society. Also, the papers from 1930's and 1940's which Fromm deposited at the New York Public Library are accessible in the Tübingen Erich Fromm Institute as copies. A short video (in German) on the Fromm-Website introduces to the Institute (<https://fromm-online.org/institut>).



The regular opening times are Thursdays and Fridays from 12:00 to 6:00 p.m. and Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. A free guided tour (in German) is offered on Saturdays from 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. If you plan to visit the Institute on or around a public holiday, please check the news on the Institute's website:

><https://fromm-online.org/en/institute/>< for up-to-date information. The custodian Martha Bergler takes care of the Erich Fromm Institute Tübingen. If you wish to contact her directly please use this email-address: >institut@erichfromm.de<.

On the **Institute's website** you will also find descriptions of the collections together with information regarding the online availability of catalogue listings (some 37,000 entries). With the financial support of the Karl Schlecht Foundation, a significant portion of existing Fromm resources have been scanned and can now be directly downloaded via the document server (>www.opus4.kobv.de/opus4-Fromm/home<). Access to the document server can also be obtained via the official Fromm website: >www.fromm-online.org/en<.

The official **Fromm website** also contains a wealth of information about the life and work of Erich Fromm and of downloadable papers by and about Fromm, a freely usable photo of Fromm, and a glossary of important terms used in Fromm's work.

Particularly notable and helpful for research on Fromm are three large Excel files that contain links to the corresponding full-text documents (it's best to use a laptop or computer for this):

- in the >WORKS< menu, under >E-Books<, you have access to an overview of all of Fromm's German and English writings, with links to the full texts or e-books
- In the >Downloads and Media< menu, you find access to all downloadable works by Erich Fromm under >Writings by Erich Fromm<
- and you can access a selection of downloadable works about Erich Fromm under >Writings about Erich Fromm<

A new addition to the >Downloads and Media< menu is the >**Erich Fromm Podcast**<. It provides access to lectures and interviews by and with Erich Fromm. Most of the documents date from the 1960s and 1970s and were only discovered in recent years. The audio and video files can also be found on the Fromm-online **YouTube channel**: <https://www.youtube.com/@ErichFrommPodcast/videos>

To promote scientific research on Fromm's theories and findings, which is part of the purpose of the Fromm Foundation, an **Erich Fromm Research Fellowship** was established. The next application opportunity is for the period from October 2027 on. Applications should be sent by June 1st, 2027, at the latest. You can find the present call for applications on the Erich Fromm website: ><https://fromm-online.org/wp-content/uploads/Fromm-Foundation-Fellowship.pdf><.

Postal address of the Erich Fromm Institute: Hintere Grabenstr. 26 (1st floor), 72070 Tübingen, Germany; Phone: +49 7071 9490635 (institute itself and the custodian Martha Bergler) or +49 7071 600004 (Rainer Funk); Email: institut@erichfromm.de (Martha Bergler) or frommfunk@gmail.com (Rainer Funk).



INTERNATIONAL ERICH FROMM SOCIETY

See also: <https://fromm-gesellschaft.eu/en/>

With regard to the aims and objectives of the International Erich Fromm Society, founded in 1985 in Germany, paragraph 2 of the Constitution states: »The International Erich Fromm Society (...) is being founded to maintain, to research, to develop further and to pass on the scholarly findings and ideas of Erich Fromm as the fitting continuation of his international work and in recognition of his worldwide significance.« For more information about the activities and events confer the website: <https://fromm-gesellschaft.eu/en/>

The Executive Board and the Advisory Directors

Three *executive directors* represent the Society intramurally and extramurally:

- Prof. Dr. Jürgen Hardeck, DE–55122 Mainz;
Email: juergen_hardeck@iefg.de
- Marc Leesch, DE–15377 Waldsiedersdorf,
Email: marc_leesch@iefg.de
- Veit Hailperin, CH–8047 Zürich,
Email: veit_hailperin@iefg.de

The advisory directors, who are responsible for the Society's academic status and are able to assist the executive directors in an advisory capacity. The members are:

- Dr. Nils Bischof, DE–99085 Erfurt,
Email: nils_bischof@iefg.de
- Dr. Dr. Michael Kubsda, DE–44799 Bochum,
Email: michael_kubsda@iefg.de
- Josef Pallas, DE–92421 Schwandorf-Fronberg,
Email: josef_pallas@iefg.de
- Benjamin Schramm, DE–01097 Dresden,
Email: benjamin_schramm@iefg.de

Business Bureau

International Erich Fromm Society, Business Bureau, c/o Klaus Widerström, Bachstr. 5, DE–64347 Griesheim/Germany; Phone: +49 6155 7700402; Email: info@fromm-gesellschaft.de.

Membership

Members can join the Society by applying. The application form (<https://fromm-gesellschaft.eu/en/about-us-2/#membership>) should be used for this purpose. Membership is confirmed by the decision of the executive board.

The annual membership fee is normally US-\$ 80 or sFr 100 or 60 € for advanced industrialized countries (reduced to US-\$ 40 or sFr 50 or 30 € for unemployed and family members); due to the different monetary value in other countries, half of the fee is charged, and no fee is charged in Eastern European and comparable countries. For incorporated groups, membership is set at US-\$ 160 or 120 € or sFr 200 per annum. Students are freed from payment while they are studying at a highschool or university. In addition, a *sponsorship contribution* of a self-determined amount can be chosen.

For members within Germany and the European Union it is simplest to pay by SEPA bank transfer. The bank account of the Internationale Erich-Fromm-Gesellschaft is 254 313, Kreissparkasse Tübingen (BLZ: 641 500 20). IBAN: DE63 6415 0020 0000 2543 13; SWIFT/BIC: SOLADES1TUB.

For overseas payment please send checks or pay by Paypal as instructed at the end of our website <https://www.fromm-gesellschaft.eu/index.php/en/about-us/membership>.



**ERICH FROMM SOCIETY
OF NORTH AMERICA**

See also: <https://www.efsna.org>

The Erich Fromm Society of North America is a rapidly growing fledgling organization started in 2022 and centrally rooted in the United States and Canada. Yet participation is not limited by location. The events and efforts are to date held in the English language.

The EFSNA has a democratic structure comprising four committees, each consisting of three people. The titles of the committees are »social inquiry,« »clinical practice,« and »social engagement,« and finally a »coordinating committee« comprising one of the members from each of the other three committees. The purpose of these separate but coordinated committees is to allow representation, autonomy, and dialogue between three central areas of relevance that we find for Fromm's work today.

A good number of EFSNO members are also full members of the IEFSS, including all the people serving on our committees.

The specific task now is to work together on restructuring the Society and establishing new governance procedures. Such changes will be essential for ensuring the compliancy and longevity of the Society; for facilitating international cooperation with other organizations that share our mission; and for underta-

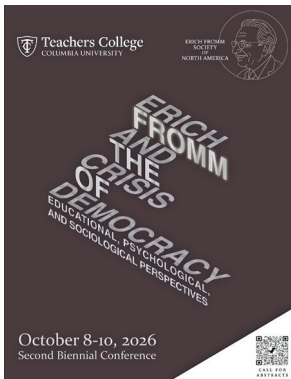
king major new projects, including the establishment of institutional partnerships. News from the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee will be communicated on the website <https://www.efsna.org/>.

The Website (<https://www.efsna.org/>)

Here you will find information about the structure and mission of the organization (including our Certificate of Incorporation); details about the upcoming conference at Columbia University in October; and a blog with news items pertaining to events, publications, and other important topics. This website will serve as a hub for the Society's activity going forward. It will be updated frequently (though it is still under construction).

A Nonprofit Organization

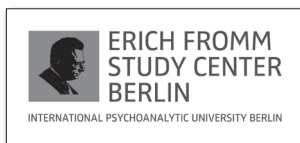
In the meantime the Erich Fromm Society of North America is a tax-exempt [501(c)(3)] nonprofit organization in the State of New York. It means that EFSNA is now able to solicit and use funds to fulfill the chartered purposes; namely, preserving Fromm's work and supporting contemporary Frommian scholarship in North America. To donate see: <https://www.efsna.org/donate>.



Erich Fromm and the Crisis of Democracy: Educational, Psychological, and Sociological Perspectives

International Conference, October 8–10, 2026,
at Teachers College, Columbia University
in the City of New York

Please direct all questions and correspondence to the Conference Committee Chair, Rory Varrato, or the Assistant Chair, Chiara Berra, at rv2373@tc.columbia.edu or cb3882@tc.columbia.edu, respectively.



ERICH FROMM STUDY CENTER

The Erich Fromm Study Center was established in 2016 at the International Psychoanalytic University (IPU) in Berlin with the support of the Karl Schlecht Foundation (KSG). Professor Dr. Thomas Kühn, who holds the Erich Fromm Endowed Professorship, and Dr. Rainer Funk, Head of the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen, manage and run the Erich Fromm Study Center together.

The activities conducted by the Erich Fromm Study Center serve the aim of conveying and further developing the socio-psychological thinking of Erich Fromm. Taking a humanistic understanding of science as its basis, it is concerned with investigating and probing the psychological and social conditions for the success of humans and society, as well as with the application of corresponding findings to course contents and research projects.

The funding by the Karl Schlecht Foundation allowed the financing of an Erich Fromm professorship (including assistant position) for ten years. In addition, funds are made available for *lectureships* to teach Fromm's theories in the Bachelor's and Master's programs offered at the IPU.

Online-Meetings of Fromm Scholars

Since the coronavirus pandemic, the Erich Fromm Study Center offers an online meeting about four times a year for anyone interested in Fromm's scientific work. The time is chosen so that interested parties from Japan or the USA can also take part: Saturday at 3 pm Central European Time. The meeting itself lasts 90 minutes and is primarily used to discuss a presentation, which is sent as a text (and video) to all interested parties by email about four weeks in advance. The topics and presentations from previous online meetings are available on the Erich Fromm Study Center's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@erichfrommstudycenter/videos>.

International Fromm Seminar for Docs and Postdocs

A special concern is the promotion of *Fromm research*. At the moment, this takes concrete form mainly in an annual *International Fromm Seminar for Docs and Postdocs*. Doctoral students and postdocs working on Fromm-related research projects (e.g. in psychology, sociology, philosophy, education, history, anthropology, political theory, political science, social work, theology, religious studies, international relations, literary studies etc.) are invited. The seminar is open to some 10 participants from all over the world and will be conducted in

English. International junior researchers will have the chance to discuss their own research in the Seminar. Each project will receive feedback from a senior advisor and will be discussed in the seminar group. The 8th seminar took place in September 2025 at the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen. The 9th seminar will take place in September 2026.



The photo shows the participants of the 8th seminar, from left:

Tomohiro Uozumi (Japan), Neil McLaughlin (Canada), Charles Villet (South Africa), Susanne Klimroth (Germany), Rory Varrato (USA), Catherine Booska (USA), Niclas O'Donnokoé (Germany), Lynn Chancer (USA), Thomas Kühn (Germany), Minh Thu Nguyen (Vietnam/Portugal), Rainer Funk (Germany), Wei Zhang (China/Macao), Daniel Davis (England). Not in the photo: Franz Joseph Yoshiy II (Philippines)

YouTube Channel

In order to keep Erich Fromm's thoughts and work present in today's media, the Erich Fromm Study Center has its own YouTube channel (<https://efsc.ipu-berlin.de/youtube>), which now has more than 21,000 subscribers. Along with Fromm's most popular videos and videos of Fromm events at the IPU, Rainer Funk has posted a large number of educational videos. A current total of around 142 videos can be viewed and downloaded.

EVENTS

Erich Fromm in Jerusalem

The first academic conference in Israel dedicated to Erich Fromm was held on May 12–13, 2026, »Erich Fromm: Love, Jewish Philosophy, and Theopolitics. A Conference Marking 70 Years of »The Art of Loving«. The Leo Baeck Institute Jerusalem for the Study of German-Jewish History and Culture hosted the event. The organizing committee included Dr. Nadav S. Berman (Bar-Ilan University), Dr. Sharon Livne (Leo Baeck Institute, Deputy Director), and Dr. Ronen Pinkas (Potsdam University).



Due to its unique nature, the conference was held primarily in Hebrew. The first day featured greetings from Dr. Lexander Dobrau, Director of the Leo-Baeck Institute, Dr. Rainer Funk, Dr. Ronen Pinkas, and Dr. Sharon Levena. Rabbi Prof. Naftali Rothenberg presented the opening lecture on Abravanel's *Dialoghi d'amore* and Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, chaired by Lior Tal Sadeh.

Eleven lectures were held on the second day. In the session *Erich Fromm: Theopolitics and Cultural Criticism*, chaired by Prof. Aya Eliade, Dr. Dror Yinon gave a lecture on Fromm and Marcuse. Prof. Christoph Schmidt gave a lecture on Theopolitics: Ego and God. Dr. Ido Ben Harosh lectured on Fromm's messianism in the context of his criticism of Israel.

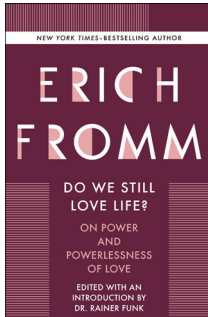
In the *Jewish Philosophy* session, chaired by Dr. Rachel Freudenthal, Prof. Hanoch Ben Pazi lectured on Fromm's hope in the context of Ernst Bloch; Dr. Biti Roi lectured on Fromm and Hasidism, focusing on love in the Book of Tanya; and Prof. Yaakov Kohler presented boundaries for examining the relationship between Fromm and Hermann Cohen.

The third session on *The Art of Loving*, chaired by Prof. Rachel Elijor, featured lectures by Prof. Gilad Sharvit on Fromm and Freud, Dr. Berman on Fromm's Jewish critique of ›agape,‹ and Prof. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson on love as secular mysticism. Dr. Pinkas gave the concluding lecture on self-love and love of God. This was followed by an open discussion with Prof. Ruhama Weiss, along with questions and comments from the audience. Dr. Berman gave closing remarks and greetings in a poetic and ethical spirit.

The conference was very well-organized, successful, and *lovely*. A fairly large group of culture enthusiasts attended and were privileged to hear scholars discuss various aspects of Fromm's thought, especially in the Jewish and Israeli contexts. The conference also received radio coverage on *Kan Tarbut*, the leading Israeli national radio station. The organizers intend to publish the conference lectures in a special issue of the Leo Baeck Institute Journal, *Chidushim*.

May 2026, Dr. Ronen Pinkas, Berlin.

A new e-book with largely unknown texts on a highly topical subject:



Erich Fromm
Do We Still Love Life?
On Power and Powerlessness of Love

The future is built not on the destructive power of weapons, but on humanity's capacity for love. That is the central message of the essays in this volume. An important question here is how we deal with feelings of powerlessness—creatively or aggressively. Does our love for life shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions, or are we secretly or openly drawn to what is lifeless, violent and destructive? Given recent technological advancements and the rise of artificial intelligence, *Do We Still Love Life?* remains topically relevant, even though the essays were written in the last century. The issue has only become more pressing.

Open Road Media, a New York e-book publisher, has become the leading publisher of Fromm's works in English. The new book announced for summer 2026 will be the 33rd Fromm title published by ORM (<https://openroadmedia.com/contributor/erich-fromm>).

This volume contains the following essays by Erich Fromm:

- *Do We Still Love Life?* (1967)
- *The Moral Responsibility of Modern Man* (1958)
- *Selfishness and Self-Love* (1939)
- *The Creative Attitude* (1959)
- *The Will to Live* (1976)
- *On the Feeling of Powerlessness* (1937)
- *The Psychological Aspects of the Guaranteed Income* (1966)
- *The Psychological and Spiritual Problems of Abundance* (1970)
- *Vita activa* (1977)

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Homepages and YouTube Channels

International Erich Fromm Society: fromm-gesellschaft.eu/index.php/en/
 Erich Fromm Society of North America: efsna.org
 Official Erich Fromm Website: erich-fromm.de or fromm-online.org
 Erich Fromm Institute Tübingen: fromm-online.org/institut/
 Erich Fromm document server: opus4.kobv.de/opus4-Fromm/home
 Erich Fromm Study Center at IPU in Berlin: efsc.ipu-berlin.de
 Library of the Erich Fromm Study Center: <https://efsc.ipu-berlin.de/library>
 YouTube-Channel of the Erich Fromm Study Center: efsc.ipu-berlin.de/youtube
 YouTube-Channel of the Fromm Society: youtube.com/user/FrommSociety
 YouTube-Channel of the Erich Fromm Podcast: m.youtube.com/@ErichFrommPodcast

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 BIC: SOLADES1TUB

»What is potent today is nationalist, racial, and political narcissism. In other words, the feeling of my group, whatever it is, is the most wonderful one. (...) »I am great because I belong to the most wonderful group.« Whether that's called Whites, or Americans, or Aryans, or something else, what matters is not the contents. What matters is here the psychological attitude of transferring one's personal narcissism to the group. (...) We must critically appraise our own ideas, our own attitude to ourselves and to the group to which we belong by becoming aware of those narcissistic aspects which falsify our judgment. We must arrive at a new concept of humanism.«

Erich Fromm