



From neoliberalism to authoritarianism

In the perspective of socio-psychological characterology

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Today's trend toward authoritarianism is not a rejection of neoliberalism, but rather a continuation of it through other means. This thesis can be supported by looking at the debate about changes in social character in social psychological characterology. Under neoliberalism, the authoritarian character (Fromm 1932) as a threat to democracy gave way to the marketing character (Fromm 1976). In the crisis of neoliberalism today, we are not observing a return to the authoritarian character, but rather the fusion of authoritarian and neoliberal character traits to form an affirmative character (Jäger 2020). The appearance of right-wing populist parties such as the AfD, which is both neoliberal and authoritarian, fits in with this.

Neoliberalism is not just a political ideology, but 'permeates the interactions of peoples' daily lives' as Allan Siegel put it in the call for this issue. Beyond economic and political frameworks, the neoliberal agenda always includes a specific invocation of individuals that produces a certain social character. On this socio-psychological level, we have observed a peculiar dialectic in recent years, increasingly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: on the one hand, people influenced by neoliberalism experienced state hygiene measures as an illegitimate encroachment on personal freedom and, on the other, sought protection by a populism that promises to enforce a supposed normality by authoritarian means against the challenges of migration, socio-ecological transformation and (queer) feminist interventions.

Neoliberalism is turning into an authoritarianism that is not opposed to it, but emerges from it. Even if courts have now deemed it justified to call Björn Höcke a Nazi, this is not a return of National Socialism. The latter was historically forced to counter the criticism of capitalism from the trade union and socialist side with the myth of a National Socialist people's community, which also took up peasant and petty-bourgeois anti-capitalism and transformed it under anti-Semitic auspices.

Today's authoritarianism, on the other hand, takes up the hostility to the welfare state from the corporate and neoliberal side in order to position the myth of a national-liberal popular normality. Models of heteronormative nuclear families, normal employment relationships and normal consumerism are invoked and linked to the frightening image that this supposed normality is threatened by promigrant-cosmopolitan and eco-feminist elites. Ideologically, neoliberalism lives on in the world view of right-wing populism, as it is not an authoritarian state that is being called for to rebuild society into a national community in the spirit of right-wing collectivism, but

an authoritarian state that protects people in the spirit of right-wing individualism in a narrow-minded private sphere that wants nothing to do with globalized reality.

In view of these differences, it seems questionable whether the now classic concept of the authoritarian character is suitable for describing these dynamics from a socio-psychological perspective. There have been a number of contributions on this in recent years, particularly in German-speaking countries.¹ The connection between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, which would be central to the search for defense strategies, often remains underexposed. Erich Fromm (1900–1980), who developed the concept of the authoritarian character in the 1930s, reflected the change in post-war societies in the concept of the marketing character or externally directed character (Fromm 1956, 1976), which has neoliberal traits. The extent to which the authoritarian character (section 1) and the externally directed character (section 2) have common traits and how, according to David Jäger (2020), the affirmative character that characterizes our present (section 3) comes about on this basis will be examined below. The central question of this article is taken up more pointedly towards the end: What is the constellation of the change in the social character of society and the transformation of neoliberalism into authoritarianism?

The authoritarian character

Erich Fromm, who received his doctorate in sociology from the University of Heidelberg in 1922 and completed his training as a psychoanalyst in Berlin at the end of the decade, was responsible for the field of analytical social psychology at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research from 1930. Fromm defined social psychology in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1932 as follows: “Analytical social psychology therefore means understanding the drive structure, the libidinous, largely unconscious attitude of a group from its socio-economic structure”². Being, in Marx’s sense, not only shapes consciousness, but also the unconscious. This in turn interacts with being and consciousness. Based on Freud, Fromm thus endeavored to combine psychoanalysis and Marxism, which was referred to as Freud-Marxism in his Berlin circle around Wilhelm Reich and Otto Fenichel. Social psychology is to be seen as a continuation.

“But once the motives of human behavior had been discovered in the drives, the secret source of ideologies and behavior in the unconscious, it was inevitable that the analytical authors would attempt to advance from the problem of the individual to that of society, from personal psychology to social psychology”³.

The term “source” is somewhat misleading with regard to political patterns of thought and behavior. After all, Fromm did not want to claim that socialism, liberalism, conservatism and fascism, for example, arise solely from the human psyche, such as an individual drive structure. Rather, the aim is to show how social and economic conditions are also reflected in people’s unconscious and thus shape their thoughts and actions. Fromm & Co. examined the social, economic and political conditions of the authoritarian character based on the three fields of family, economy and state.

The family in particular is regarded as “the psychological agency of society”⁴. This is where the values and norms that also shape economic and political life are passed on. Particularly with regard to the petty bourgeoisie, but also broad circles of employees and workers, Fromm assumes a basic experience that shapes the social character, especially in times of crisis: powerlessness. If a lack of power is part of childhood anyway, this becomes particularly formative in authoritarian family structures. “The behaviour of the adult towards the child can be characterized by the fact that the child is ultimately not taken seriously”⁵. In such families, the nucleus of the (authoritarian) state, children do not learn democracy as a way of life, but submission to parental demands. The extent to which the parents’ attitude is in turn socially

1 Decker 2019, Funk 2020, Henke et. al. 2020, Heimertl 2021, Ottomeyer 2022, Roepert 2023, Ziege 2023.

2 Fromm 1932, p 34. (all quotes in this article were translated by the author from German to English)

3 Ibid, p. 31.

4 Ibid, p. 35.

5 Fromm 1937

and politically conditioned is shown by their own situation. *"He (the average person) has the same attitude of powerlessness towards the social and political apparatus"*.⁶ Neither the crisis-ridden economy of the interwar period nor the political crises of the Weimar Republic were suitable for giving people a real sense of co-determination or even self-determination. In the face of what was perceived as chaotic conditions, the emerging fascism was able to make a double offer: A strong force as a guarantor of so-called national community and individual compensation for one's own powerlessness through ideology.

If anti-Semitism is primarily an expression of one's own paranoia, whereby the delusion of an all-powerful Jewish world conspiracy legitimizes the sadism that is lived out in the persecution and extermination of Jewish people, racism or the demarcation against supposed asocials serve the supporter as *"compensation for this powerlessness to feel strong and superior to those who are weaker than him"*.⁷ Self-confidence through the devaluation of others could also be compatible with a social democratic, liberal or conservative world view. For example, idlers who 'don't work hard', the unsuccessful who are a drain on society or intellectuals who 'criticize unproductively' would be devalued. In addition to the warmth of the nest of the in-group gained through demarcation, the authoritarian character is also characterized by a tendency to rebellion. Fromm makes a double distinction here, which also applies to the corona rebels of recent years: it is not about a revolutionary change to the status quo, but also not about a conservative preservation of the status quo, but about a rebellion with the aim of regaining lost security.

National Socialism, Fromm suspected early on, simultaneously pacified *"the rebellious tendencies and the latent longing for comprehensive subordination"*.⁸ As Otto Fenichel noted in 1946, this was ideally achieved through anti-Semitism: *"People were in a conflict between a rebellious tendency and the respect for authority to which they had been brought up. Anti-Semitism gave them the opportunity to satisfy these opposing tendencies at the same time"*.⁹ In the conflict between the desire of one's own id, for example to live out one's happiness or aggression, and the demands of the superego, namely to obediently subordinate oneself, a political way out is revealed here: the living out of antisocial drives in agreement with a political authority. Today's right-wing populists also claim such an authority for themselves, who, although they do not yet represent the demos, as can be seen from the election results, nevertheless believe they are the voice of the popolo, the silent majority.

The point of Fromm's approach was not only to trace the interactions between social existence and individual unconsciousness. His realization that political consciousness and the psychologically unconscious can contradict each other is decisive. In 1932 the SPD (20.4%) and KPD (16.9%) still combined for 37.3% of the vote - compared to 33% for the NSDAP. A general strike was expected if the Nazis would win the elections. Fromm, on the other hand, noticed deep-seated ambivalences early on, whereby *"the supporters of the left-wing parties often exhibited a mental attitude that in no way corresponded to the constructed ideal-typical one, indeed was downright opposed to it"*.¹⁰

There is a huge gulf between left-wing commitments to the anti-fascist struggle or even liberal commitments to the defense of democracy and the real resistance after 1933, when the Nazis themselves represented the authority.

"Undoubtedly the most important result was the low percentage of leftists who agreed with the socialist line both in thought and feeling. Only this small group, at 15%, could be expected at critical times to muster the courage, sacrifice and spontaneity necessary to lead the less active elements and defeat the enemy".¹¹

What can be learned from Fromm's first socio-psychological study is above all the importance of the social character itself. This cannot simply be derived from the socio-economic circumstances. After all, the revolutionary character, Fromm's coun-

6 Ibid, p. 12.

7 Ibid, p. 14.

8 Fromm 1930/2019, p. 268.

9 Fenichel 1946/1972, p. 240.

10 Fromm 1930/1980: 243.

11 Ibid, p. 270.

terpart to the authoritarian character, reacts to the same circumstances, e.g. authoritarian management in the company, not with subordination and resentment, but with solidarity and criticism. However, even a change in family life, the reduction of authoritarian relationships in the private sphere, can remain ineffective if the experiences of powerlessness in public only make the path of submission seem necessary. At least in a negative sense, we can learn from early analytical social psychology how important the factor of the unconscious and affective is in relation to being and practice or consciousness and rationality. *"Political doctrines, however, not only encompass a series of views, but also appeal to certain emotions and passions or to a character structure and attitudes in which these passions and feelings dominate."*¹²

You can't rely on official political positioning in 1932 or 2024. What is most alarming about Fromm's study of predominantly left-wing workers and employees is therefore the contradiction between self-image and social character. Although officially organized as socialists and anti-fascists, 5% of the nominal supporters of the left at the time turned out to be compromising and 16% to be indifferent. Fromm summarizes these 25% formal supporters as the most strongly represented group of ambivalent characters at 46%. The 15% with a revolutionary character are also offset by 5% authoritarian, 15% broken authoritarian and 19% rebellious-authoritarian characters, which together make up 39% authoritarian characters.

Even if this first study on the authoritarian character rather hints at the conditions of its emergence – authoritarian parenting styles, conformist lifeworlds of everyday culture, authoritarian corporate cultures, political chaos – it nevertheless outlines a direction for further questions: How is the authoritarian potential changing in post-war societies? Have more modern parenting styles, a liberalization of everyday life, flatter hierarchies, team-oriented working methods and political stability permanently reduced the significance of the authoritarian character, the authoritarian rebel?

Fromm is sceptical here, although he recognizes that the question of authority, whereby the revolutionary character fights the authorities while the authoritarian character submits upwards in order to be allowed to step downwards, takes a back seat to another perspective: horizontal conformism. Initially, in times of social partnership, from the 1950s to the 1980s, social conflicts appear to be at a standstill and overall prosperity increases. But even in times of social cuts, from the 1990s to the 2020s, the revolutionary will for change or reactionary rebellion are not diametrically opposed, as they were in Weimar times. The transition from a social security state to a neoliberal competitive state¹³ is taking place more as a change within stable statehood: the social-liberal promotion of equal opportunities is turning into a neoliberal demand for self-responsibility. Both variants of capitalist social structures are compatible with a social character that is typical of neoliberalism, the externally directed or marketing character.

The externally directed (marketing) character

Unlike Freud, who locates the formation of human character in early childhood, with parents representing the values and norms of society, Fromm assumes a greater dynamic. Social appeals, whether to political solidarity or hierarchical subjugation, are permanent. If the social situation changes, the social character also changes.

*"Character in the dynamic sense of analytical psychology is the particular form into which human energy is brought by the dynamic adaptation of human needs to the particular form of existence of a particular society. Character in turn determines the thoughts, feelings and actions of the individual".*¹⁴

Human needs, e.g. for happiness or togetherness, can be channeled in different ways. According to Fromm, the revolutionary character strives for happiness through self-realization and togetherness through solidarity. The authoritarian character, on the other hand, finds happiness in subordination and a sense of belonging in collective rebellion against insults. Different experiences are made within a class society. Before the Second World War, for example, one of the aims of trade union and socialist

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Cf. Hirsch 1998.

¹⁴ Fromm 1936, p. 180.

educational work was to convey the connection between collegial cooperation and political solidarity. Those who share the fate of wage dependency with many others should be able to develop a transnational awareness of their common situation and overcome divisions based on gender, origin or nationality. According to Fromm, revolutionary characters are also able to do this because they have a strong ego. They react to crises with criticism, joint resistance and commitment.

Petty-bourgeois milieus, on the other hand, i.e. the self-employed and employees, are traditionally characterized less by company experiences such as cooperation and strikes, and more by competition for higher positions in companies. Experiences of crisis lead to fears of relegation and ideologies that assert one's own self-worth through sexist or racist devaluation. If the authoritarian character, who has learned to improve his situation through promotion, is in need, he turns against old elites and towards new authorities. Fromm's classifications of milieu, social character and political consciousness were relatively clear at the end of the Weimar Republic: unemployed people in particular tended towards the communist party, skilled workers towards the social democratic party, both sharing a critical attitude towards society and an internationalism. The fascist parties, on the other hand, initially found their supporters mainly among the petty bourgeoisie, the threatened, nationally-oriented middle classes.

A common feature of the historical left, liberals and right is the attempt to provide answers to the modern tension between politics and economics. Democratization of the economy, freedom of the market or the authority of the state are proposed solutions that appeal to different character types. Desires for social co-determination, individual success or a sense of security differ, but remain expectations of the outside world. In post-war societies, from the German 'economic miracle' of the 1950s to the global rise of neoliberalism since the 1970s, Fromm observed a blurring of these boundaries between the individual and the outside world and the emergence of a new social character: the marketing character. This character is not opposed to social conditions, but has internalized them:

"I chose the term 'marketing character' because the individual experiences himself as a commodity and his own value not as 'use value' but as 'exchange value'. The individual becomes a commodity on the 'personality market'".¹⁵

If Fromm associated the contrast between revolutionary and authoritarian character with a crisis-ridden capitalism that pushes towards the bifurcation of either socialist revolution or fascist rebellion, it is now about a (neo)liberal character that turns itself into human capital. The marketing character is clearly different from the political liberalism of a successful bourgeoisie, which can also uphold bourgeois values such as tolerance and self-determination. Personal characteristics appear on the personality market, by which Fromm means both the labor market and the relationship market, only as successful or unsuccessful. What was upheld as individualism by the older liberalism of class society, the originality of the successful entrepreneur, disappears in the neoliberalism of mass society, which above all rewards conformity.

Helmut Wehr appropriately remarks:

"The marketing character is characterized by an even stronger emotional detachment. He experiences himself in social events as a seller and commodity in the general state of exchange. The individual becomes a commodity himself. [...] Appearance, streamlined, 'friendly' behavior must characterize the marketing character, since he wants to and must please everyone, since he is socially conditioned by the necessary constant recognition".¹⁶

If the authoritarian character was ultimately a perfect fit for the authoritarian state (Horkheimer) and a politically controlled market, then the externally directed character for the neoliberal market. The marketing character, which David Riesman called the externally directed character in 'The Lonely Mass' in 1950, is far removed from both revolutionary aspirations and authoritarian rebellions. These people are skeptical of both solidary collective concepts (class struggle) and exclusionary collective concepts (national community); all that remains for them is the effort of individual adaptation.

¹⁵ Fromm 1976, p. 156.

¹⁶ Wehr 1990, p. 43.

“The ultimate goal of the marketing character is complete adaptation in order to be desirable under all conditions of the personality market. The person of this type does not even have an ego (like the people of the 19th century) that he could hold on to, that belongs to him, that does not change. For he constantly changes his ego according to the principle: ‘I am as you want me to be’.”¹⁷

People want to be rewarded for this kind of adaptation. Under neoliberal conditions, there are two ways to do this: on the one hand, the feeling of success, e.g. in the competition for a job on the labor market, and on the other hand, compensatory consumption as compensation for the effort made. Here, of course, we also have a breaking point where neoliberal ideology and externally directed character structure come up against the limits of social reality. Valerie Schneider, who is doing her doctorate in Passau on the Corona Transverse Front, asks in 2023 what the promise of success of neoliberalism can do when it is broken.

“The fact that the implementation of neoliberalism is simultaneously accompanied by a resurgence of authoritarian ideas, groups and movements, right down to the level of party politics in democratic states worldwide (see Stögner, 2020, p. 269) and the increasing prevalence of depression (see Fischer 2013, p. 30ff.) leads to the question of the connection between neoliberal subjectivation and authoritarianism.”¹⁸

After neoliberalism has driven out social criticism and the antidepressant of social utopia¹⁹, it leaves people alone with the self-responsibility attributed to them. In this context, privatization means not only the transfer of social wealth into private hands, but also the privatization of social problems. However, individual failure and depression do not only affect a precarious class or the threatened third of Western societies. The dismantling of social guarantees is leading to a climate of fear in late capitalist societies as a whole. In his first book on the AfD, sociologist Andreas Kemper quotes his colleague Wilhelm Heitmeyer in 2013: “*We can prove that the middle class has been massively afraid since the introduction of Hartz IV*.”²⁰

In the late days of neoliberalism, the marketing character is also in crisis. Social psychologist Klaus Ottomeyer notes:

“For around 20 years, we in the West have had the subjective response of the ‘brand ego’ program, which means that the anxious individual should stylize themselves as an unmistakable, unique being who is enthusiastic about themselves so that they do not appear interchangeable in the competition between the many applicants: anxiety leads to life as permanent casting.”²¹

Since an “*abolition of fear*”²² is unthinkable under the conditions of neoliberal isolation, the ideological offer of right-wing authoritarianism provides multiple relief. Those who have failed under neoliberalism can project the reasons for this away from themselves, for example onto powerful elites who would threaten their view of normality. Climate or equality policies then quickly appear to them as paternalism towards their usual consumer and social behavior, as an emerging eco- or gender dictatorship. In addition to this upward demarcation, there is also a downward demarcation if one’s own fear of social decline is also channeled into a defence against migration, in which refugees appear as a frightening image of a reality to be suppressed. But a dividing line is also drawn against traditional poverty or unemployment and a tougher integration policy is demanded. The common denominator of all hostilities – from eco-activists and queer people to migrants and the poor – is the accusation that a normality consisting of consumerism, heteronormative nuclear families, ethnic homogeneity and normal employment relationships is being called into question. Even if the reasons for the actual erosion of this normality are not to be found in conspiracies by elites or internal/external enemies, the marketing character perceives such upheavals as threats to be warded off and is on the threshold of authoritarianism. Unlike the authoritarian character, the externally directed character is not initially a rebel; after all, he wants to live in the normality to which he has adapted.

17 Fromm 1976, p. 157.

18 Schneider 2023, p. 121.

19 Cf. Negt 2012, p. 130.

20 Heitmeyer, quoted from Kemper 2013, p. 14.

21 Ottomeyer 2022, p. 110.

22 Adorno 1936/1994, p. 173.

If this is impossible, it is precisely the conformists who are impressed by a strong expression of anger.

“They are often attracted to ‘emotional people’, but because of their naivety they cannot tell whether they are genuine or faking it. This may explain why so many phonies succeed in the spiritual and religious realm; it may also explain why politicians who express strong emotions make a strong impression on the marketing character.”²³

The crisis of the marketing character today does not simply mean a return to the authoritarian social character, but to a fusion of neoliberal and authoritarian impulses in the type of the affirmative character.

The affirmative character

Both the authoritarian character, whose emergence Fromm locates in the 19th century in the era of competitive capitalism, and the externally directed character that prevails in the 20th century are affirmative in certain respects. In the first case, the family and the state are affirmed as forces of order against capitalist chaos; in the second case, affirmative self-adaptation to the market is central. To what extent is the affirmative social character a new development that becomes relevant in the crisis of neoliberalism with regard to a shift to authoritarianism? Let us first briefly recapitulate Fromm’s concepts. In his late work from 1974, he combines and differentiates his thoughts on the concept of social character. The aspects of domination of others and self-control are now central: “*The sadomasochist is also described as an authoritarian character if one translates the psychological aspect of his character structure into a political attitude*”.²⁴

Sadistic domination and masochistic submission are the hallmarks of such a destructive character. This type only becomes a rebel against elites in alliance with a new authority. Fromm now sees the necrophilic character as a form of intensification, shaped by the experience of National Socialism. “*Those who lack even this perverse way of relating [domination/submission] [...] are the necrophiles. Their aim is to transform everything living into dead matter; they want to destroy everything and everyone, often even themselves*”.²⁵ Following Freud, who links his death drive with the need for peace, the necrophilic character combines destruction out of hatred and self-destruction out of hatred of life, for example in the case of Islamist suicide bombers. Fromm also takes the reference to life itself as the starting point for his redefinition of the revolutionary character as biophilic: “*A revolutionary in the characterological sense is not only characterized by the desire to overthrow the old order. If his motive is not the love of life and freedom, he is a destructive rebel*”.²⁶

In 1932, Fromm originally located a broad field of ambivalent characters between the constructive-revolutionary-critical-biophilic and the destructive-rebellious-authoritarian (necrophilic) character. He later concretized this type: there is neither an orientation towards a future to be created, as with the revolutionary character, nor an orientation towards authorities who invoke the value of tradition, but rather an exclusive orientation towards the present. “*For this marketing character, everything is transformed into consumer goods – not only things, but also people themselves [...]. This type of character is historically a new phenomenon, because it is the product of a fully developed capitalism with the market at its center*”.²⁷ The marketing character, first described by Fromm in 1947 and most recently in 1974, is the neoliberal character who endeavors to adapt his instinctive desires and his ego ideal to neoliberal acceleration. He identifies with his consumption, but is able to postpone desires in order to fulfill performance requirements. This character model enters a deep crisis when the neoliberal equation of commitment and success obviously breaks down. Before we go into this, let’s take a look at the tendency towards affirmative character as a phenomenon between Fromm’s death in 1980 and our current situation.

23 Fromm 1976/1980, p. 145.

24 Fromm 1974, p. 330.

25 Ibid, p. 392.

26 Ibid, p. 314.

27 Ibid, p. 393.

Based on empirical studies, David Jäger devotes himself in 2020 to the *“affirmative character”, a new social type based on deprivation and narcissistic grievance*.²⁸ One difference to the externally driven character is already indicated here: while the externally driven character successfully adapted in the heyday of neoliberalism, even though it satisfied its narcissism at the expense of its own health, the well-being of others and the common good, the affirmative character of our day experiences the presence of the total market as a grievance. Since the economic crisis from 2007/2008 at the latest, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent inflation crises from 2020, the neoliberal promise that performance would be worthwhile has become obsolete.

As Valerie Schneider shows, this is expressed in the mass phenomenon of depression.

“If we look at depression against the background of social conditions, the psychodynamic origin of this prevalence is obvious: the unrealistic or ego-alien ideals that are brought to the subject from outside sometimes lead to such a large gap between the ego and the ego ideal that, as soon as it becomes apparent in ‘one’s own failure’, it can lead to chronic feelings of powerlessness, inferiority and hopelessness. [...] Depending on the context, the inner pressure of the subject associated with this can also lead to a connection to the promise of salvation of an authoritarian mass”.²⁹

It is precisely the lived coldness of neoliberal manners that runs counter to the promised warmth of authoritarian community narratives.

The affirmative character differs from the externally directed, neoliberal marketing character because it remains attached to a social order whose promises it no longer believes in. The false anti-capitalism of the authoritarian rebels of the early 20th century, which led to eliminatory anti-Semitism, is lacking in today’s authoritarianism. The AfD in Germany, for example, is programmatically both neoliberal and authoritarian. It does not promise a national community, but rather the authoritarian exclusion of migrants so that the ‘real’ Germans can compete. It is not frustration at the damage done to everyday capitalist life, from the relationship between nature and gender to precarious working conditions, that is the driving force here, but the desire to hold on to consumerism, the nuclear family and work performance.

A core group of rebellious authoritarianism has historically been young people who oppose the conservatism of their parents with an even more rigid order that opposes the liberal market principle with the authoritarian state. Today, however, there is no such (authoritarian) anti-capitalist rebellion. For Jäger, this is also a result of neoliberalism:

“Through the completely unreflected subjugation of almost every interpersonal emotion to the maxim of performance, cost-benefit considerations, competition and effectiveness, today’s young people affirm the existing conditions to an unimaginable extent [...] The former rebellion against parents and their insistence on the reality principle is outdated, today’s young generation is unbearably much more adult in every one of its impulses”.³⁰

Even where it seems to be different, this tendency can be recognized. Unlike previous protest movements, Fridays for Future does not question social institutions in general. They believe in science – ‘Follow the science’ – which is understood to be apolitical.

They do not believe in their own ability to assert themselves, but in the regulatory power of the state: ‘We will strike until you act’. While Fromm still placed his hopes in movements that questioned authority and family, the market and consumerism, technocracy and the state, most FFF activists share their parents’ values, calling for green markets, sustainable consumption, electric cars and more state regulation. It is therefore clearly not an authoritarian rebellion for an eco-dictatorship, but an affirmative protest that demands more sustainable sustainability. Jäger also sees this difference.

28 Hunter 2020, p. 178.

29 Schneider 2023, p. 122.

30 Jäger 2020, p. 184.

“Conformist rebellion means something different today than it used to: anyone who does not want to jeopardize the maintenance of production relations must find a way to discharge the aggressive impulses generated by the relations themselves, but without causing major social upheaval. The aggression is directed inwards, as a drive for the final ‘bite’, the ‘volition’ [...] that separates the successful from the loser”.³¹

The young climate activists may be biophilic, but they are reformist. They do not want to take a critical stance from which they question the familial, economic and political patterns of reproduction, consumption, production and distribution, but rather live a green alternative. There is no revolt against their own entanglement in the meritocracy; even poor people are often accused of unecological consumer behavior. The aggression of the market is internalized as self-optimization, dissatisfaction can be directed against the lack of organic market use by others.

Even the young activists of the AfD are not authoritarian characters in the sense that young Nazis were 100 years ago. Their racism is not an ideology intended to legitimize a war of conquest for more living space. Their racism is aimed at mass deportations, including so-called remigration, in order to finally have peace from the integration challenges of multicultural societies. The affirmative character, which does not want to create rebellious unrest, but rather to maintain peace with the status quo, is evident in both spectrums. The decisive difference, however, is that young right-wingers, for example, want an authoritarian state to restore supposed normality, while young left-wingers still trust the democratic state to protect normality against the threats of global warming. In both cases, however, the aim of the affirmative character remains to stabilize a normality which, on the one hand, is the familiar neoliberal competitive society with which people identify, but which, on the other hand, threatens to perish without authoritarian state policy. The special nature of the AfD as a party fits in perfectly with this, as it manages to stand for neoliberal self-responsibility and national community in equal measure. If the affirmative character is the synthesis between authoritarian and neoliberal character, then the AfD is the party of neoliberal authoritarianism.

On the basis of Fromm’s critique of the authoritarian character (1932) and of the marketing character (1976), we can understand why neoliberalism has not only fostered a new authoritarianism (Schneider 2023), but also why the new type of affirmative character (Jäger 2020) is a synthesis of earlier social characters: behind the new authoritarianism is not a misguided rebellion, but the desire to guarantee a neoliberal normality by authoritarian means, whereby neoliberalism returns to its Chilean origins. It could only be defeated if revolutionary character structures could develop again, for example in a revolt against authoritarianism and neoliberalism and the affirmative character that supports them.

Perspectives

Since Fromm, theory formation within analytical social psychology has been characterized by a discontinuous continuity. One continuum of experience is the feeling of individual powerlessness in the face of social reality (Fromm 1937). At the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, people experienced this powerlessness in relation to institutions (family, economy, state) and individuals (parents, factory owners, authorities) quite directly, which explains the emergence of revolutionary-critical, ambivalent and authoritarian-rebellious character structures. As shown, the authoritarian character deals with his feeling of powerlessness through masochistic submission on the one hand and sadistic domination on the other.

With the transition from class society to mass society, which proves to be the basis of neoliberalism, a new form of mediation emerges. The externally directed character (Riesman 1950), which Fromm later referred to as the marketing character, compensates for its powerlessness less by connecting to authorities than by adapting to the supposed constraints of markets (labor market, relationship market). One continuity in the transition from high to late capitalism remains what Nadja Meisterhans has termed “*invocation*”, namely “*that subjects are assigned a certain social position by the*

31 Hunter 2020, p. 195.

way they are invoked and spoken about in ideological debates”.³² If the authoritarian character corresponds above all to the invocation as part of firmly established communities, from the family to the nation, which lent attractiveness to the ideology of the national community, the neoliberal invocation applies to the isolated competitive subject who hopes to achieve personal success through individual adaptation.

Understanding their own failure in the face of intensifying competition becomes a problem for the marketing character. He has learned not only to submit, but also to identify with the system. In times of neoliberal crisis, the successful marketing character is replaced by the affirmative character. The latter affirms the competitive society that puts him on the siding. In this situation, the new authoritarianism or right-wing populism appears to be the way out. *“As a result, marginalized groups are not only held responsible for the diffuse suffering caused by the neoliberal constellation, but are also turned into a collectivized projection surface for revenge fantasies”*.³³ In this way, it is possible to continue to affirm the neoliberal impositions and at the same time articulate one’s own suffering from them. If, for example, it becomes increasingly difficult to find affordable housing, this is not blamed on the neoliberal deregulated housing market, but on an alleged overburdening of society through migration. Right-wing populism is authoritarianism on a neoliberal basis. It is not about questioning the market principle, but about using authoritarian means to exclude unpopular groups (migrants, women) from the market. *“From a psychoanalytical point of view, it seems plausible in view of these developments [...] that there is a certain continuity between (neo-)liberal and right-wing thinking [...]. [...] Both invocations suggest the possibility of a closed identity – be it in the form of optimized (neoliberalism) or traditional subjectivity (right-wing populism)”*.³⁴ What is needed is an oppositional self-invocation of the many, who no longer want to be subjectivized as the isolated or the attached, but as subjects in solidarity.

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32 Meisterhans 2017, p. 113.

33 Ibid, p. 120.

34 Ibid, p. 122.



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