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The Socio-Psychological Base of Contemporary Fascism in the World of Liberal Democracy. The Theoretical Scope of Erich Fromm's Socio-Pathological Theory of Alienation

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My essay will critically analyze the theoretical background of the present socio-pathological phenomenon of authoritarian populism in liberal democracy from the perspective of the Frommian conception of alienation.¹ The purpose of my article is in theoretical terms to identify the socio-psychological basis of a current political movement that takes the form of fascist authoritarianism. This is separate from simple racist chauvinism, and has gradually spread in advanced societies, as can be seen particularly in the emergence of President Donald Trump. Through integrating Fromm's social theory of narcissism into his socio-pathological theory of alienation – the latter theory enhanced by the former in his political theory of fascism – I argue that contemporary fascism in liberal democracy is the result of charismatic agitators seizing political power. These are expected to become new political leaders in the name of giving »the people« satisfactions, and in addition use racist fanaticism induced by the socio-pathological phenomenon of alienation, based on a contemporary way of life under the conditions of routine daily labor (which aims simply to maintain human existence as well as the system) and of the ideology of the worship of industrial production, which underlies people's narcissistic needs in the system of mechanism. They thereby develop narcissistic dissatisfaction and hostility towards internal and external enemies (narcissistic antagonism) due to existential conflicts concerning their narcissistic desire, and transfer group narcissism to its narcissistic objects (social transference).

Introduction

What are racist, chauvinistic phenomena that have gradually spread in the world based upon?

¹ The phenomenon of authoritarian populism, which my research calls »contemporary fascism,« can essentially be divided into that present in liberal democracy and that in social democracy. Here I focus on the former.



For example, some theorists claim that racist hate speech and hate crime are caused by the appearance of accumulated social hatred; does this contain extreme chauvinism? What does the inauguration of President Trump mean from these perspectives? Is it possible to see his emergence in politics via racist chauvinistic movements? Of these, the appearance of people's anxieties about society and frustrations in a social class is often referenced. In this respect, chauvinistic movements can be seen as an extension of extreme patriotism and right-wing extremism. However, it should be noted that a researcher focusing on East Asia emphasizes »relationships with neighbor countries,« and rejects the effect of socio-psychological factors, which highlight anxiety and frustration, on the emergence of chauvinistic politics with regard to »Japanese chauvinism« (Higuchi 2012). Although this is certainly apposite to the Japanese phenomenon, it is unsuitable for chauvinism in general, and it is certainly not true that socio-psychological factors are not relevant to a consideration of it. Japanese chauvinistic movements must be explained by socio-psychological factors or socio-pathological factors when applying the concept of fascism to them.

Erich Fromm focuses on the socio-pathological phenomenon of »alienation« in respect of a salient aspect of the psychological base of fascist politics (Fromm 1941a; cf. Sakurai 2018, Sects. 6.3 and 6.4). As is well known, the concept signifies the pathological phenomenon that, on the basis of the teleological action that »one *aims at satisfying his needs*, while simultaneously *seeing himself as a means* of fulfilling them« (Sakurai 2018, p. 171; emphases original), human beings come into existence as the object of the capitalist system under the condition of capitalism. In this system of capitalist production, they are required to fulfil the function of »commodity« as »labor power« generating »surplus value« (Marx 1992 [1867]). That is to say, in this social framework human beings are placed not in the active position that runs the system, but rather in the passive position that is run by the system.

As the condition of alienation becomes fixed on a social level, human beings struggle with their own sense of unbearable loneliness and despair, or more precisely they are caught by the pathological condition under which they feel they are being lived passively, rather than living actively. This is the loss of human subjectivity. From Fromm's perspective, the method of fascism is one of the solutions to this unhealthy psychological condition – Fromm is particularly cautious about this negative type of dialectical sublation of actual problems (Fromm 1941a, 1955a, 1947a, 1992a; cf. Sakurai 2018, pp. 176–191).

My essay, in terms of a Frommian theory of alienation, examines the pathological political phenomenon of contemporary fascism, which has a different character structure than racist chauvinism, and which has gradually become a symptom of the emergence of political fascism across the world. Firstly, I will analyze the two political concepts of fascism and chauvinism by identifying their socio-theoretical signification as well as some difference between them. Secondly, I will illustrate the conceptual implications of Fromm's usage of narcissism in socio-pathological terms. Thirdly, I will clarify the socio-pathological meaning and socio-theoretical relevance of Fromm's conception of alienation by elaborating it with his theory of narcissism. Finally, in terms of Frommian alienation I will give a theoretical analysis of the socio-psychological base of contemporary Western fascism as seen in liberal democracies.

Socio-theoretical meanings of fascism and chauvinism



Fascism is a relatively new political phenomenon emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century. As is well known, the word fascism has its roots in the Italian word »fascio«, meaning a »bundle of rods«, and is used to describe group solidarity (e.g. Whittam 1995, p. 6). The term came to be used in the 1920s and to refer to a »generalized historical type of authoritarian political regime« (Bach 2016, p. 192). It is of course possible to consider it as a political system, but it is more appropriate to see it as a political *movement*, in the sense that it destroys democracy from within, thereby taking control of a society by way of the creation and recreation of ideology and fear. It is also possible to regard fascism as totalitarian politics in the same realm as the communist ideology of Stalinism, as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt argues.

On the other hand, chauvinism (derived from a French soldier's name, Nicolas Chauvin, who is supposed to have played a role in the Grande Armée of Napoleon) is generally used as a political term meaning an extreme form of patriotism. The word is often considered in the same category as other political terms of significant patriotic such as nationalism, nativism and ethnocentrism. Perhaps the political phenomenon of chauvinism is characterized particularly by its aspect of fanaticism, as is fascism – but the former has a weaker conceptual impact than the latter in the sense that fascism has not only socio-psychological implications but also socio-pathological ones, while chauvinism does not. In addition, fascism, contrary to chauvinism, internalizes the pathological concepts of authoritarianism and sadomasochism. For these reasons, my essay highlights the socio-pathological functions of fascism by using the concept.

How is it then possible to analyze fascism from a socio-pathological perspective? Perhaps a provocative and appropriate way of conducting this analysis is to apply the concept of alienation to an examination of fascism. However, it is particularly important to note that contemporary fascism is not the same as traditional fascism. The former is rather deep-rooted in a contemporary way of life under the condition of alienation (Sakurai 2018, p. 208).² Contemporary fascism takes neither extreme forms of violent politics nor ideological movements, but rather becomes apolitical in the contemporary form of alienation, and hides within peaceful appearances in our everyday life. More precisely, contemporary society internalizes some core fascist aspects in socio-psychological terms. From this perspective, fascism is rather seen as a socio-psychopathology of which we are generally unaware due to seemingly democratic and marketing practices in our way of life. For these reasons, a consideration of contemporary fascism requires *socio-pathological* analyses.

Despite this, fascism emerges in visible forms when it absorbs racist ideologies. It is generally considered that fascist politics are colored by racism when it contains a chauvinistic ideology (Griffin 2013). Thus it seems that fascism first shows its aggressiveness after integrating chauvinism. It may be that chauvinism always includes racism, and if so, we may think the core problem is the latter. However, it should be understood that racist ideologies are characteristic of fascism, as can be seen particularly in extreme forms of authoritarianism containing racism.

In this respect, the focal point of the issue is how to see the political pathology of fascism. As

² In this sense, my position on fascism is essentially different from that held generally (e.g. Finkelstein 2017; Griffin 2013). However, this difference is basically regarding its socio-political form rather than its socio-psychological base, with the exception of the function of alienation.



mentioned above, contemporary fascism emerges on the basis of alienation. Although, in this sense, it should be considered as a socio-pathological phenomenon in our daily lives, fascism comes into existence as discriminatory behaviors or chauvinistic and xenophobic movements embracing extreme racism that justify people's existential value – particularly if the masses with authoritarian characteristics, who are not provided with opportunities to show their own *raison d'être* in everyday life, try to find them in a fascist ideology. Essentially, I define this kind of politics within the concept of contemporary fascism.

From these perspectives, it seems that fascism and chauvinism are intertwined. However, it is important to remember that fascism consists of a different socio-character structure than chauvinism's in Fromm's social theory. While the latter is based on a narcissistic character structure, the former is based on an authoritarian character structure (Fromm 1941a, 1964a; cf. Funk 1993). In my view, however, the character structure of contemporary fascism concerns not only the authoritarian personality but also the narcissistic causing antagonism to others, induced under the social condition of alienation, which can rather fulfil a primary function in the social environment. In fact, Fromm stresses the socio-psychological effect of alienation on fascism itself (Fromm 1941a). I will, employing the concept of contemporary fascism, attempt to find its socio-psychological base in Frommian terms. Before starting an analysis, however, I will clarify the socio-pathological implications of Fromm's important concept of narcissism.

Fromm's conception of narcissism

Fromm's conception of narcissism is a socio-pathological concept. In Fromm's social theory, narcissism is seen as »selfishness«, a major hindrance to productive work, as opposed to »self-love« (Fromm 1947a, p. 131, 1955a, p. 36, 1956a, pp. 60 f.; also, see n. 3 below). Importantly, his conception of narcissism shows its semantic scope on three levels: theoretical, socio-pathological and clinical levels. It is characterized particularly by the fact that it constitutes »character structures« on the second level (Bacciagaluppi 1993). Here »social narcissism« (Fromm 1964a, Ch. 4) on a socio-pathological level comes into being, taking the form of contemporary society's character structure of »industrial cybernetic society« (Fromm 1979a, p. 53). In addition, narcissism internalizes »existential dichotomies« (Fromm 1947a, pp. 41–45), in which human beings necessarily overcome the narcissistic obstacle to realizing individuality by way of achieving »productive love and thinking« (Fromm 1947a, pp. 96–107). On this basis, in Fromm's social theory, social narcissism on a socio-pathological level functions in the way that it synchronizes itself with the marketing orientation under the condition of a free market society.

Fromm's conception of alienation

What is theoretically contemporary fascism based on? I will answer this, focusing on the Frommian signification of alienation, a social condition under which human beings are inevitably required to play an extremely passive role. I will first clarify the basic meaning of his conception of alienation and its socio-pathological implications, and then develop it in conjunction with his socio-pathological conception of narcissism, particularly by showing core socio-theoretical implications.



Essentially, Fromm adopts the concept of alienation from Marx (Fromm 1961b; cf. Lio 1989). For Marx, alienation means the phenomenon that human beings gradually lose subjectivity as the system of capitalism functions automatically, distancing itself from them. Perhaps it can be understood as »in a capitalist market economy, human beings are controlled by man-made tools fulfilling in the capitalist economy the important function of generating »surplus value«, such as currency, production and commodity, that is to say »capital«, thereby *losing the position of the subject*« (Sakurai 2018, p. 171; emphasis original). It must be noted that Fromm adopts the conceptual signification of alienation almost exclusively from Marx (Fromm 1961b, Ch. 5; cf. Marx 2004 [1844], 1992 [1867]). This is clearly shown by Fromm's following sentence: »Marx's philosophy, like much of existentialist thinking, represents a protest against man's alienation, his loss of himself and his transformation into a thing« (Fromm 1961b, p. v; emphasis added).

What then does alienation signify in Marx's philosophy? For him, it is a social phenomenon that spoils »species-being«, namely humanity, and »species-life«, namely human life (Marx 2004 [1844], p. 93–109). In other words, labor inducing the condition of »alienated labor« gives rise to the loss of human nature (Marx 2004 [1844]). On this basis, Marx argues:

»A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labor, from his life activity and from his species life is that man is alienated from other men. When man confronts himself he also confronts other men. What is true of man's relationship to his work, to the product of his work and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, to their labor and to the objects of their labor. In general, the statement that man is alienated from his species life means that each man is alienated from others, and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life.« (Marx 2004 [1844], p. 103.)

Here Marx explains the primary effect of the paradoxical phenomenon of alienation on human beings. They result in sacrificing their own humanity by treating others as well as themselves in the same category as commodity, particularly through the phenomenon of reification, in which humans treat each other in the same way that they treat products (Marx 1992 [1867]; cf. Urbanek 1999). Through this experience, they are bound to feel alienated from both others and themselves, that is to say they no longer feel like actively-living humans.

In line with this, Fromm applies his concept of »marketing orientation« to Marx's notion of alienation. This orientation means people's character structure formed under a free market economic system. It is interesting to note that according to Fromm, it did not exist in any societies before the modern era (Fromm 1947a, p. 67, 81). As he argues, this shows that individuals have come to cultivate their own characteristics suitable for human lives under the conditions of a market economy as it emerged and developed in modern society. He first mentions that the marketing orientation is a character structure in which one experiences »oneself as a commodity and... one's value as exchange value« (Fromm 1947a, p. 68). He then accounts for the important socio-theoretical implications of the character. Fromm says (ibid., pp. 72 f.):

»In the marketing orientation man encounters his own powers as commodities alienated from him. He is not one with them but they are masked from him because what matters is not his self-realization in the process of using them but his success in the process of selling them. Both his powers and what they create become estranged, something different from



himself, something for others to judge and to use; thus his feeling of identity becomes as shaky as his self-esteem; it is constituted by the sum total of roles one can play: »I am as you desire me.«

Here the principle of exchange controls and erodes everything in its arbitrary way, and all things including human beings must therefore follow that absolute rule. Strangely, however, they are bound to always require themselves to be liked by others, since they are fully required to act in the way that »[they are] as you desire [them]«, as shown above. The consequence of the act that »one aims at satisfying his needs, while simultaneously seeing himself as a means of fulfilling them« is that human beings themselves become a simple means of maintaining their own existence while expecting their own value to be highly assessed by the system of capitalism. Namely, in the marketing orientation the self is *identified solely by others* on the grounds that one's own value is always dependent on others and their view of it. As Fromm puts it, »the ability to play the expected role is one of [the] main assets« to contemporary people (Fromm 1947a, p. 82; cf. Sakurai 2018, p. 173). This existential contradiction of human beings in market society shows the dialectical fact that, while their existence depends on their own narcissistic desire in the character structure of its society, based on the marketing orientation, they must nevertheless overcome narcissism – I call this theoretical implication the »dialectic of narcissism« (Sakurai 2018, Ch. 6, Sect. 6.3, pp. 164–181; cf. Sakurai 2015). On this basis, this dialectic undergoes the journey of either achieving democracy or falling into fascism.

Alienation and the dialectic of narcissism

As can be expected in the above discussion on the dialectic of narcissism, it is possible to discern the opportunity that fascism uses to emerge under this social condition, namely alienation. Importantly, this clearly explains why, in Frommian social theory, as mentioned above, narcissism takes the dialectical way, in which human beings are given the two possibilities of taking positive and negative paths, according to one's and society's forms of love, namely self-love and narcissism.³ This signifies precisely that the dialectic undergoes one of the two ways of realizing democratic politics on the basis of a sense of productiveness, and falling into fascist politics on the basis of the authoritarian character modified by contemporary people's narcissism in industrial cybernetic society, for the purpose of solving the »existential contradiction« noted above. Essentially, this implies that in contemporary society human beings *exist in the way that they are always liked by others* in economic and political terms. On the one hand, one acts so as to be liked by others in order to sell oneself at the highest possible price in a free market society – this exactly means the Frommian sense of alienation – whereby the *economic sense of narcissism* is recognized. On the other hand, one helps and works together with others – this can be called the politics of self-love – thereby contributing to democratic politics. Alternatively, one pathologically depends on others – this can be called the politics of narcissism – thereby contributing to fascist politics. This theoretical implication is the *political sense of narcissism*.

³ In Fromm's psychoanalytic theory, self-love fulfils a positive function, while narcissism fulfils a negative one – essentially his theory distinguishes between these two concepts in pathological terms, as seen above.



In this dialectic, it is much easier to fall into fascism than realizing democracy, on the grounds that society's socio-economic structure stimulates alienation, which induces people's extreme narcissistic needs, and which justifies market-based capitalism, and they are thereby brought to an unsatisfied psychological condition which brings about their antagonism caused by extreme fear and loneliness in economic survival. This means that in Frommian social theory, fascism is essentially based on capitalism. In fact, for Fromm the socio-political form of liberal democracy, meaning capitalist society taking the form of free market economy, is simply an object of his criticism. In fact, his conceptions of the new Man and the new society completely reject this kind of democracy by offering his request for the abandonment of »free market economy« (Fromm 1976a).

For Fromm, alienation is the dialectical human condition of human existence that functions in the contemporary system of capitalism. In this respect, the existence of human beings is rather typified by ways of coping with their existential contradictions. From this view, Fromm describes how humans escape from the condition of alienation, under which they feel unbearable pain:

»Primary bonds once severed cannot be mended; once paradise is lost, man cannot return to it. There is only one possible, productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual. However, if the economic, social and political conditions on which the whole process of human individuation depends, do not offer a basis for the realization of individuality in the sense just mentioned, while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom.« (Fromm 1941a, pp. 36 f.)

This is precisely the human psychological condition underlying fascist politics. In particular, the contemporary social condition of alienation bases its functional aspects on a psychological condition that prevents human beings from individualizing themselves and respecting and realizing their personalities – both of which fulfil the requisites for the realization of democracy.

In this social situation, narcissism functions negatively for democracy, and social structures based on alienation therefore rather encourage human beings to stimulate malignant narcissism in obtaining human conditions under democracy. Fromm essentially requires them to overcome their own narcissistic needs and maintains that they will never achieve an authentic and genuine democracy unless completing the task of getting rid of the desire, an obstacle to the realization of it. Under these conditions, however, human beings are most often masochistically dependent on charismatic political leaders, who satisfy their masochistic needs, rather than being independent of them by gaining a firm grip on positive freedom.

The theoretical base of contemporary fascism in market-based capitalism

How does contemporary fascism function under the social condition of alienation? In order to



make this clear, I want to refer particularly to Fromm's theory of narcissism. In this theory, narcissism plays a predominantly functional role in negative aspects of humanity (Fromm 1947a, 1956a, 1964a; cf. Sakurai 2018, Sects. 6.3 and 6.4). According to Fromm, »group narcissism« (social narcissism) as malignant narcissism is the theoretical base of political narcissism (1964a, p. 78 f.).⁴ In his social theory, the negative connection between fanatical and destructive politics, and narcissism, is characterized by the »lack of objectivity and rational judgement«, the need for »narcissistic satisfaction« the »reaction of rage« induced by vulnerability, and »narcissistic symbiosis and identification« (Fromm 1964a, pp. 85–87). In particular, »nation«, »race« and »religion« are the narcissistic objects of political movements, and to an uncontrollable racist, chauvinistic politics based on »fanaticism« and »destructiveness« comes about through »social transference« (Fromm 1964a, p. 73, 83; 1979a, pp. 38–54, esp. pp. 41 f.).

For Fromm, however, the most serious issue is that the basic structure of contemporary society is industrial cybernetic society. According to him, people, while feeling extremely lonely and fearing to live under this social condition, are required to survive in life's competition, which makes them angry, while encouraging them to feel lonely, by causing a sense of »antagonism«, based on society's economic system justifying alienation, under the apolitical condition of the »worship of industrial production« (Fromm 1979a, p. 53). This is precisely the human condition in contemporary American free market economy. In my view, it is quite possible that racist chauvinism can emerge from this social situation, for it is highly probable that group narcissism be transferred to its narcissistic objects. This social scale of transference, namely social transference, satisfies the social conditions that bring about chauvinist movements, which thereby start to prepare to justify their own racist ideologies.

How do we, then, expect fascism to emerge in contemporary narcissistic society? In my view, fascism rather comes into existence after generating racist chauvinism through socially transferring narcissism to its narcissistic objects under the social condition of alienation. Or more precisely, contemporary fanaticism, induced by the economic condition of alienation causing narcissistic antagonism, sometimes develops itself into the political form of fascism in a way that stimulates masochistic authoritarianism, due to extreme economic isolation and a sense of injury in life competition that have long been ignored in a society – so they may naturally come to need pathologically symbiotic relationships with charismatic leaders who promise narcissistic and masochistic satisfaction. Harsh, economic survival induces fascist politics by transforming racist chauvinism, based on narcissistic hostility and satisfaction, into fanatical politics requiring authoritarian-masochistic satisfaction. Here we can clearly recognize the transformation from *economic fascism* to *political fascism*,⁵ which is made ironically by the fact that the former creates narcissistic dissatisfaction and makes people lonely, thereby leading

⁴ On this, Fromm points particularly to Germany's Nazism and the Third Reich, and the »racial narcissism« of the Southern US (see Fromm, 1964a, p. 79).

⁵ Economic fascism means fascist movements in the economic world that destroy democratic aspects in free markets and justify their own economic activity in an authoritarian way on the basis of an economic sense of narcissism, while political fascism means political movements that destroy democratic facets of society and justifies its own politics in an authoritarian way on the basis of a political sense of narcissism (see above). Both are regarded as contemporary fascism in my essay.



them to be masochistic in an authoritarian way. It might be the case that the same leaders and groups hold hegemony over both economic and political fascism.

Contemporary fascism is derived from enthusiastic political movements that are generated by the social transference of the people's narcissism to its objects under social conditions justifying alienation, under liberal democracy, on the basis of their hostility towards others induced by brutal economic survival. Since in this social structure based on alienation people are made more narcissistic by the social system of the structure itself, they are increasingly malignantly narcissistic, inducing intolerant psychological emotions. To sum up, contemporary fascism socio-pathologically functions through *bundling up* people's negative social emotions cultivated structurally by the pathological phenomenon of alienation in an authoritarian way.

Towards the development of Frommian socio-pathological approaches

It is impossible to fully explain contemporary complex social and political conditions solely by referring to Fromm's theory of alienation. In the sense that the society of Fromm's object is mass society in the middle of the twentieth century, my essay's premise has its limitations. However, it is greatly relevant to analyzing the emergence of the social pathology of contemporary fascist movements in the socio-political system of liberal democracy, which bases its own *raison d'être* on the social functions of alienation, as can be seen particularly in current US society, because we can clearly see the contradiction and limitations of liberal democracy precisely from this perspective. This is exactly why I am intrigued by modifying Fromm's theory of fascism in conjunction with his theory of alienation, as it may fit contemporary complex social conditions. What we wish to do is to reshape our society ourselves, for which purpose our society still needs *socio-pathological* analytic tools, exactly as Fromm's conception of alienation implies.

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