

The Anonymous God:
Critical Psychoanalytic Inquiries into Social Domination

by

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Abstract

In the early to mid-twentieth century, the leading Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research turned to a psychoanalytic study of the authoritarian subject to better understand the rise of fascism. In this dissertation, I focus on Critical Theory's integration of Freudian psychoanalysis to explain the appeal of dangerous and irrational authorities and modern trends of domination. Throughout this genealogy of anti-authoritarian thought, I pay special interest to the unconscious psychodynamics that characterize reactionary deference to impersonal authorities, that is, modern, techno-bureaucratic authorities that have become so abstract and hyper-reified, they begin to resemble what Max Horkheimer termed an "anonymous god." The authoritarian experiences themselves as more powerless, impotent, and victimized than anyone else, subjected to an infinitely more powerful entity that hobbles their capacity for self-determination. The anonymous god, as I use it here, refers to a variety of psychological demands and social pressures that come to assume the mystique of ersatz-divinity within the authoritarian imagination.

From Critical Theory's investigation into the patriarchal *imago* of the fascist super-father to their analysis of the increasingly impersonal regimentation of everyday life, I trace the intellectual history of the authoritarian character and use interpretive inquiry to establish

theoretical linkages unrealized in the concept's development. I explore further the authoritarian's relationship with the anonymous god, the role of aggression and libidinal attachment in unconscious collusion, and the archaic *imago* that Critical Theory failed to excavate by limiting their analysis to a critique of the father. I call into question the inevitability of social domination by challenging top-down explanations for submission and command, including claims of supernatural immutability as they are tied to the unseen. In my conclusion, I suggest that the anonymous god operates as an alibi, jettisoning human agency and denying responsibility by appealing to an unalterable social order before which the adherent can only submit.

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1. Revisiting the authoritarian character and its relevance today

“In the long empty days, one speaks of other things than hunger and work and one begins to consider what they made us become, how much they have taken away from us, what this life is. In this Ka-Be [*Kranken Bau*], an enclosure of relative peace, *we have learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is much more in danger than our life*; and the old wise ones, instead of warning us ‘remember that you must die,’ would have done much better to remind us of this great danger that threatens us. If from the inside of the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: *Take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here.*”

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947)¹ (emphasis added)

“No one should be motherless and fatherless. Motherless and fatherless you are vulnerable to manipulation – to influences – you are rootless and you are vulnerable to everything.”

Philip Roth, *The Plot against America* (2004)²

“The man looked at me and said, ‘If Hitler came over here, I’d pay his first month’s salary.’”³ Reflecting on the prevalence of antisemitism in his youth, an elderly man recalled this greeting from a customer in 1939 when he was twelve years old, working as a grocery delivery boy in the Beaches neighbourhood of Toronto. Both of his parents were Polish Jewish immigrants who had fled the pogroms that intensified during the Russian Civil War. When the Great Depression hit, the boy’s father lost his job as a telegraph operator and opened a family-run grocery store under an anglicized surname; the grocery store ensured that the children would always have enough food to eat.

When the war broke out letters stopped arriving from those who stayed behind and, as in many Jewish homes, the children strained to decipher the softly spoken Yiddish that gave voice to their parents’ worst fears. The boy’s father found consolation for his grief in strict religious observance, frequently resorting to punitive measures when his sons did not share in this same fervor. His guilt, a God-fearing religiosity that interpreted systematic persecution as divine punishment, placed significant hardship on everyone, “My father was a very strange man, verbally abusive and domineering and a painfully religious fanatic. He cursed and swore at my

¹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Joseph Woolf, First Touchstone edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 55.

² Philip Roth, *The Plot against America* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 358.

³ Personal communication with Joseph Herbert Pascoe, “Family History,” March 17, 2012. I open with the personal recollections of my grandfather and cite his own written account of this period.

mother continuously and insisted that she obey him at all times. I cannot recall the number of times I would hear him say to her, ‘I am going to kill you and then kill myself.’”⁴

Later, as a medical student studying at the University of Toronto, the young man retaliated against his father, announcing that he would not wear the *teffilin* that he had been taught to wrap in such a way as to cut off his circulation. He distanced himself from the increasingly paranoid worldview of his father, pursuing a career in psychiatry that would take him far away from the strict religiosity of his youth. His university education was only made possible by his mother who had secretly saved up enough money for both of her sons to pursue careers beyond the family grocery store. She often relayed a maxim meant to be heard by successive generations, “*geben tsu di kinder.*”

In his old age, the son visited the Polish towns where his parents had lived and the camps where their relatives had been murdered. He had often been haunted by what might have become of him had his family remained. He also knew that, just as the customer warned him in 1939, it was only a matter of accident that this violence did not spread to the country where his mother and father had found refuge. All of these memories were recounted to his twelve year old granddaughter on a summer day in 2005 in the Toronto Beaches where signs, not long ago, once declared “NO JEWS, NO BLACKS, AND NO DOGS ALLOWED.”

I begin with the story of a father who finds that he is powerless to shelter his children from violence and misfortune. This father would defend his children against the destructive whirlwind of historical catastrophes – poverty, starvation, and pogroms – but he cannot shield them from the paranoia and rage that festers within the family home. Despite fleeing European antisemitism and narrowly avoiding fascist persecution, this newly arrived Jewish Canadian family illustrates what the authors discussed in this dissertation proposed to be the modern rise of the patriarchal, authoritarian family.

Throughout the interwar years, the leading Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research introduced the concept of the authoritarian character as a philosophical anthropology, that is, as an answer to the question of “what is a human being?” The constellation of traits that make up this character structure are specific to the socio-historical conditions that

⁴ Pascoe, *ibid.*

produces this individual, irrespective of political, ethnic, or national identity.⁵ In an effort to better understand fascist adherence, these theorists expressed great concern for the child who is crushed by the tyrannical father's arbitrary hold on power. They argued that the character structure shaped by this psychodynamic predisposes the child toward authoritarian compliance.⁶

The strictly Oedipal structure of father/mother/son, as recounted above, became paradigmatic for the Critical Theorists in theorizing the origin of the authoritarian character. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the father's role as family head and provider had been increasingly undermined by greater social forces. His employment, for instance, appeared to be entirely dictated by the non-negotiable laws of economic boom and bust. Meanwhile, the mother, infantilized in her domesticity, found herself condemned to only dream of a better future for her children; her supportive economic role was cheapened by the father's identification as primary wage earner. In this environment, the son matures (daughters are conspicuously absent in this narrative), vowing to surpass his father, a frustrated "little man" who dominates his children as the irrational legislator of immovable laws. This might be achieved through the son's identification with strongmen who promise a much-coveted sense of grandiosity. The opening anecdote is intended, in part, to reflect this intergenerational model of power, conflict, and subsequent liberation from patriarchal domination in the context of alarming socio-political developments.

Beyond a critique of the tyrannical father, Critical Theory identified a greater threat to the child in the form of the anonymous authorities that pervade modern society. With the increasingly impersonal regimentation of everyday life, what Weber described as the rationalization of modern society, the family found itself under the dominion of de-personalized, bureaucratic authorities. Not only did these authorities appear impervious to critique, but the child could not adequately identify with, defy, or emulate those real-life figures who had essentially been reduced to a bureaucratic office. Max Horkheimer in particular argued that the personal father's general inability to live up to the societal ideal of an aggrandized *pater familias* left the child defenseless against these impenetrable, outside authorities.

⁵ Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research as the (capitalized) Critical Theorists so as to distinguish them from later critical theory including, not only second and third generation critical theory but also post-modern and contemporary critical theories focusing on the intersection of gender, race, and power.

⁶ Although "authoritarian" is often treated as synonymous with "tyrannical" (the father), these authors were describing a psychodynamic in which those who do not have power (the son) both resist and crave authority.

An important theoretical shift took place with the exile of German Jewish Critical Theorists as they continued their research program in the United States. Now studying what they termed “the authoritarian personality,” these theorists argued that the patriarchal family, no matter how tyrannical, remained the last vestige of resistance against dangerous outside influences.

Nazi Germany had supplanted the role of the parental unit with the state reflecting the general erosion of the father’s authority by those extra-familial forces that govern modern day life. Adorno describes the child’s identification with the impotent father, disempowered by those bureaucratic structures that reduce the human being to an employee, as so precarious that the relationship “may break down under the impact of a situation which substitutes the paternal superego by collectivized authority of the fascist brand.”⁷ Rationalization had paved the way for a revival of patriarchal leadership in the form of fascist demagoguery, a far more charismatic substitute that could finally satisfy the child’s need for a (seemingly) approachable *pater familias*. Thus, Critical Theory’s initial critique of the tyrannical father transformed into a more socially conservative paradigm that promoted the patriarchal family as the last bulwark against the institutionalization and abstraction of authority in the modern world.

The traditional family so far described appears to be central to the narrative of the authoritarian character’s development. However, from today’s perspective, it is important to ask whether this model holds relevance especially with transformations in family structure and the eclipse of the family by the peer group (e.g., online communities) and electronic media. The father’s authority in most contemporary Western societies is often displaced socially, economically, and even reproductively. In fact, the strict nuclear model of father, mother, and son hardly reflects the reality of the typical mid-twentieth century, non-bourgeois home: mothers have always worked in some capacity; the child usually experiences their siblings, not just their father (or mother), as potential rivals; extended family members are often involved in child-rearing and thus play a greater authoritative role in the child’s psychical development; and daughters arguably experience a much more complex mediation of power in the home (domestic, sexual, emotional labour, etc.) than their male counterparts, who in turn can hardly seek paternal identification with a figure who might be entirely absent. None of these dynamics are accounted

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019), 683.

for in Critical Theory's monolithic, strictly Oedipal, and androcentric narrative of the authoritarian subject. What significance could this patriarchal, authoritarian model have for understanding present crises, never mind conflicts of the past? Put more psychoanalytically, is a strong paternal *imago* even necessary for the development of the child's super-ego, particularly when patriarchal structures of domination no longer have the same influence they once did?⁸

1.2. The return of the repressed: The patriarchal authoritarian family as a haunting

To understand why the Critical Theorists grappled with the patriarchal *imago* as it became central to their understanding of the authoritarian character, it is important to contextualize their shared cultural background. These theorists were primarily raised by fathers who either broke away or allowed their children to leave behind their mostly Eastern European Jewish heritage in favour of an assimilated, secular, and bourgeois life. They enjoyed the privilege of belonging to a middle class intelligentsia where they could pursue academic-adjacent professions (as university careers remained closed to the unbaptized). For a time, these burgeoning theorists thrived in the major metropolises of the German and Austro-Hungarian Empire.

As Hannah Arendt writes in her biographical sketch of Walter Benjamin, "an entire generation of German-Jewish intellectuals" assumed a rarefied entitlement founded on "the mentality of the fathers, successful businessmen who did not think too highly of their own achievements and whose dream it was that their sons were destined for higher things."⁹ Of course, any generation of self-professed geniuses would experience their share of Oedipal conflicts. As Arendt adds in a snarky aside, "if Freud had lived and carried on his inquiries in a country and language other than the German-Jewish milieu which supplied his patients, we

⁸ In a critical reading of Adorno and Horkheimer's treatment of women, Marsha A. Hewitt writes, "At no point do Horkheimer and Adorno allow women to emerge as subjects in any sense, nor do they attempt to lend a voice to the suffering that they freely admit has been unjustly inflicted on women in patriarchal society. The most woman can offer man is the mute reflex of a maternal love that is directed more by given biological facticity than by ethical choice. Woman never rises above the level of an empty, abstract principle with Horkheimer and Adorno. Moreover it serves the interest of men, both in the family and in society, that she remain locked within her maternal function for the sake of the psychological development of her sons. ... her only value lies in self-sacrifice; any attempt by women to break out of the condition imposed on them by history is immediately repudiated and ridiculed." (Marsha A. Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 96).

⁹ Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, by Walter Benjamin, ed. Zohn Harry (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 26.

might never have heard of an Oedipus complex.”¹⁰ Arendt is not incorrect insofar that a closer look at most of the father-son relationships among the Critical Theorists follow a common narrative, one that Stuart Jeffries describes as “a tale for its times, a tale of vigorous, worldly fathers refusing their destinies, of hypersensitive, critically astute, dialectically imaginative sons frozen by guilt, hobbled by their powers of projection.”¹¹

Even if the patriarchal, authoritarian family has proven to be obsolete or, more critically, never really existed outside of this specific milieu’s ambivalent longing for and rebellion against the personal father, I suggest that the theoretical basis for the authoritarian character goes well beyond what Arendt frames as a German Jewish neurosis. Intergenerational conflict, in whatever form, continues to shape contemporary understandings of authority and power. Despite its dated structure, Oedipal dramas are arguably observed on the world stage where some variation of this triangular dynamic is regularly played out in numerous political spheres. At this moment, a plethora of far-right, male, “l’état c’est moi!” celebrity demagogues have ascended to positions of leadership, giving voice to the long-familiar political malaise of populist discontent. Accompanied by a decline in multilateral and collaborative politics, these charismatic strongmen rely on unwavering mass support. Psychoanalytically speaking, it is not difficult to interpret this revival of a Father-protector/saviour as a collective compulsion to repeat unmastered pasts, both romanticized (restoring former nationalist glory) and traumatic (the price at which this so-called “greatness” has been achieved) with the goal of guaranteeing existential security and purpose. I argue that the patriarchal, authoritarian family has, in recent years, proven to be an idealized *imago* that haunts the Western patriarchal imagination.

The plan for writing this dissertation did not arise from but coincided with the 2016 election of United States President Donald J. Trump (an election that might have brought about the first woman president) in which a revival of the authoritarian father transformed from a psychoanalytic hypothesis into a central political narrative: a super-father who sought to supplant a castrating mother, demonizing her as a malignant supernatural force, and eclipsing her professional qualifications and leadership experience with innuendos of criminality. The nearly 63 million voters who elected a far-right populist whose policies threatened democratic freedom resonate strongly with what Freud described as a cycle of domination that repeats itself with a

¹⁰ Arendt, *ibid.*

¹¹ Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso, 2016), 46.

tendency toward “deferred obedience,” a pattern that echoes the ambivalent longing for the primal father of archaic memory. Writing about those underlying wishes that inform father-god religious practices, Freud posits that the reactionary need to submit to the father follows from the guilt of having once overpowered him, “an attempt to allay that feeling [guilt] and to appease the father by deferred obedience.”¹²

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. election, political unrest stemming from ethnonationalism and white supremacy – from the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville to the January 6th Insurrection on Capitol Hill – were unleashed in quick succession. Many of these developments appear to be a revitalization of the same frustrations and persecutory scapegoating that once marked the reactionary structure of the authoritarian character. This “return of the repressed” in the form of mass movements that would exploit weak governments and reverse humanitarian and democratic progress alerts the astute observer of just how fragile liberal society has always been and how quickly it can unravel under the right conditions.

Contrary to Arendt’s suggestion that the Oedipus Complex might have never existed outside of the German Jewish milieu, the problem of intergenerational conflict and patriarchal authority is firmly rooted in the broader socio-historical era in which Critical Theory emerged. As Henri Ellenberger writes in his study of Freud, the three major institutions that dominated turn-of-the-century Europe – the Church, the military, and the monarchy – embodied this patriarchal worldview. He offers the following description:

There was a strong emphasis on male domination. It was a world shaped by man for man, in which woman occupied the second place. Political rights for women did not exist. The separation and dissimilarity of the sexes was sharper than today ... Man’s authority over his children and also over his wife was unquestioned. Education was authoritarian; the despotic father was a common figure and was particularly conspicuous only when he became extremely cruel. Conflicts between generations, particularly between fathers and sons, were more frequent than today. But authoritarianism was feature of the times and reigned everywhere, not only in the family. The military, magistrates, and judges enjoyed great prestige. Laws were more repressive, delinquent youth sternly punished, and corporal punishment was considered indispensable. All this must be considered with regard to the genesis of Freud’s Oedipus Complex.¹³

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 13, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1913), 145.

¹³ Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 255.

Well beyond the neurosis of his (Jewish) patients, Freud's psychoanalytic theories capture not only the internal politics of the patriarchal home but also the societal ideal of paternal authority as transmitted by those greater institutions.

I contend that the ideal of a super-father has not been fully eradicated nor dispensed with despite contemporary social and political reforms. The father-oriented model presents us with a ghostly legacy. Although Freud was unable to prove his hypothesis of a tyrannical primal father, he suggested that masses are haunted by the unconscious memory of a patriarch as evidenced by the rise of and rebellion against the 'Great Men' in history. Herbert Marcuse describes this historical pattern as "the subsequent domineering father-images under which civilization progressed."¹⁴

Psychoanalytic hauntologies provide scholars with a means for articulating the repetition and preservation of old patterns. In the early 1990s, Jacques Derrida proposed that the disruption of European democratic stability represented the spectre of an unworked-through past: "entire regiments of ghosts have returned, armies from every age."¹⁵ More generally, Avery Gordon proposes that "the post-modern, late-capitalist, postcolonial world represses and projects its ghosts or phantoms in similar intensities, if not entirely in the same forms, as the older world did."¹⁶ In 2019, Noëlle McAfee continues this thread in application to contemporary democratic backsliding, describing the "ghosts, crypts, secrets, and fears of breakdown," arguing, "because of these unconscious intruders, political theory and political practice need psychoanalysis."¹⁷ I thus maintain that the patriarchal, authoritarian family is a legacy that refuses to die, a spectre of an unworked-through past.

1.2. Dissertation overview: The authoritarian disciple and the anonymous god

According to psychoanalytic Critical Theory, the authoritarian character is marked by a series of psychological contradictions: desiring autonomy and independence while also submitting to heteronomous control and domination; delighting in the domination of others while

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 62.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 100.

¹⁶ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 12.

¹⁷ Noëlle McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 2.

performing subordination; and a preoccupation with fantasies, thoughts, and attitudes that revolve around fairness as the outcome of rebellion (punishment) and obedience (reward). Reflecting the authority-oriented environment – including the patriarchal authoritarian family – that gives shape to this character structure, the authoritarian tends to organize groups and individuals into categories of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ or ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.¹⁸ The Critical Theorists regarded this ‘might makes right’ worldview as typical of Western capitalist modernity, often expanding their social critique from the Reformation to the twentieth century so as to draw out histories that might explain current trends of social domination.

In this dissertation, I address those contradictions that launched Critical Theory’s inquiry into the authoritarian character. I ask how a psychoanalytic psychology of religion can explain these contradictions with attention paid to specific unconscious mechanisms, motivations, and fantasies that shape the reactionary adherence to dangerous and irrational authority figures. I understand this relationship to involve an unconscious collusion between the authoritarian disciple and what I have termed the “anonymous god,” an authority that is experienced as so impersonal it assumes the mystique of ersatz-divinity within the authoritarian psyche.

Horkheimer’s metaphor of an anonymous god appears in his 1936 essay, “Authority and the Family,” as a hyper-reification of the more human, traditional authorities of the past. Following Max Weber, the term refers to the impersonal offices that had come to dominate modern techno-bureaucratic societies. Horkheimer characterizes these offices by their concealment of human subjectivity behind the façade of rational objectivity. He writes:

Thus a new and powerful authority has come into being. In decisions on the fate of men, the hiring and firing of the laboring masses, the ruin of farmers over whole sectors of the world, the unleashing of wars, and so on, caprice has been replaced not by freedom but by blind economic necessity, *an anonymous god* who enslaves men and is invoked by those who have no power over him but have received advantages from him. Men in power have ceased to act as representatives of heavenly and earthly authority and

¹⁸ *The Authoritarian Personality* study would propose a longer list of characteristics as listed in Adorno’s F-Scale. Rolf Wiggershaus offers a much more approachable summary of these traits: “a rigid commitment to dominant values, mainly conventional middle-class values such as outwardly correct, unobtrusive behaviour and appearance, efficiency, cleanliness, success along with a pessimistic and contemptuous view of humanity, a readiness to believe that uncontrollable, dangerous events were taking place in the world and that sexual depravity could be detected everywhere; extremely hierarchical thoughts and feelings, with submissiveness towards idealized authorities in one’s own group and contempt for outside groupings and everything deviant, discriminated against or weak; anti-introversion, i.e., defence against self-reflection, sensibility and fantasy, with a simultaneous tendency toward superstition and stereotyped misperception of reality” (Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 414).

consequently have become mere functions of the law inherent in their power (emphasis added).¹⁹

References to faceless, dehumanized authorities appear throughout Critical Theory texts, particularly as the reification of social conditions as inherent and immutable: Herbert Marcuse describes state capitalism as “a system of anonymous powers;” Horkheimer characterizes fascist leadership as an “inhuman abstractness;” and Erich Fromm equates social conformity with an “anonymous, invisible, alienated authority.”²⁰ Even the charismatic fascist dictator is described by Adorno as requiring propaganda to facilitate “a regressive repersonalization of impersonal detached social powers,” that is, the reanimation of a leadership so withdrawn from its political base that it, too, betrays impersonality.²¹

Horkheimer’s description of a “blind economic necessity” is likely inspired by Adam Smith’s economic metaphor of the “invisible hand.” Being familiar with the 1932 publication of *The German Ideology* (1846), Horkheimer’s passage bears some resemblance to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s comparison of the economic principles underlying global trade to a force that:

Rules over the world through the relation of supply and demand – a relation which, as an English economist says, hovers over the earth like the fate of the ancients, and with invisible hand allots fortune and misfortune to men, sets up empires and wrecks empires, causes nations to rise and to disappear.²²

Where the individual should detect the influence of the world market, Marx and Engels write, they are instead encountered with an enormous “alien power” that exerts upon the individual “a pressure which they have conceived of as a dirty trick on the part of the so-called world-spirit.”²³

Later, Horkheimer expands the anonymous god metaphor beyond a critique of economic abstraction, writing in *Eclipse of Reason*:

And just as the process of rationalization is no longer the result of anonymous forces of the market, but is decided in the consciousness of a planning minority, so the mass of subjects must deliberately adjust themselves: the subject must, so to speak, devote all of

¹⁹ Max Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1992), 82.

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 46; Max Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” in *The Family: Its Function*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen, vol. 5, Science of Culture Series (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 368; Erich H. Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1970), 138.

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1987), 179.

²² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 54.

²³ Marx and Engels, 59.

his energies to being ‘in and of the movement of things’ ... adjustment becomes the standard for every conceivable type of subjective behaviour. The triumph of subjective, formalized reason is also the triumph of a reality that confronts the subject as absolute and overpowering.²⁴

He adds, “our spontaneity has been replaced by a frame of mind which compels us to discard every emotion or idea that might impair our alertness to the impersonal demands assailing us.”²⁵

I treat the anonymous god along with other Critical Theory references to impersonal authorities as a framing device for conceptualizing the spectral other or “alien power” (described by *The German Ideology*) that guides the authoritarian’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. As I use it, the anonymous god refers to a variety of psychological demands and social pressures on the subject, many of which will be explored in this dissertation. Throughout my chapters, these subjective and objective forces that impose themselves upon the authoritarian subject include: the unconscious super-ego and historically acquired super-ego representatives (the spectral father) that shape the ego in relation to their hierarchically-oriented environment; idealized authorities of the past and the fantasy of reviving these figures to secure future greatness; the greater objective (social, economic, historical, etc.) forces that overdetermine the course of life events; bodily-based impulses, such as self-preservation or sexual desire, that drive an authoritarian allegiance to violent social movements; the uncanny, daemonic id that is experienced as an occult force of cyclical repetition; and modern interpretations of fate and destiny as a supernatural entity that blindly assigns fortune and misfortune.

My initial understanding of the anonymous god includes those social and psychological forces that depose human agency with objective fatalism or what Adorno termed *objektiver Geist*. As Horkheimer writes, the anonymous god is “invoked by those who have no power over him.”²⁶ The authoritarian experiences themselves as more powerless, impotent, and victimized than anyone else, subjected to an infinitely more powerful entity that hobbles the individual’s capacity for self-determination. What must be explored further is whether the anonymous god might also operate as an alibi, jettisoning human agency and denying individual responsibility by appealing to an unalterable social order before which the adherent can only submit.

²⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Continuum, 2004), 65–66.

²⁵ Horkheimer, 67.

²⁶ Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 82.

Contained within this query is a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious as an overwhelming psychological force that disrupts personal integrity and works against autonomy, freedom, and conscious thought. This multi-layered hypothesis is also shared by psychoanalyst Jay Frankel, when he asks in a similar vein how psychoanalytic theory can “illuminate the ways people work against their own conscious intentions and actual interests, in the larger social sphere as well as in their personal lives, and actively collude in their own powerlessness.”²⁷ This psychoanalytic premise is essential for understanding the unconscious collusion that takes place between the authoritarian character and agents of social domination.

1.3. Relevance for the critical study of religion

Rooted in critical social theory and the methods that are specific to the psychoanalytic psychology of religion, this dissertation raises a central question for scholars of religion: why should the study of religion be concerned with a question that appears to belong to the domain of political psychology? To answer this, I propose that an in-depth study of authoritarian psychodynamics must begin with a recognition of what William James identified as “the reality of the unseen.”

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James describes religion as encompassing “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”²⁸ In a passage that could just as easily be describing the reactionary structure of the authoritarian character, James writes:

All our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the “objects” of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves. Such objects may be present to our senses, or they may be present only to our thought. In either case they elicit from us a *reaction*; and the reaction due to things of thought is notoriously in many cases as strong as that due to sensible presences. It may even be stronger.²⁹

Instead of expanding the category of religion to include political movements that are without an explicit godhead, I propose that Critical Theory’s analysis of the authoritarian character engages

²⁷ Jay Frankel, “The Traumatic Basis for the Resurgence of Right-Wing Politics among Working Americans,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 20, no. 4 (2015): 372, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2015.53>.

²⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 61.

²⁹ James, 61.

with the reality of the unseen. The authoritarian psyche is populated with a vast range of idealized and paranoid objects, some fantastical or occult while others are entirely ordinary, which are presumed to be responsible for the goings on of history and world events. Susan Lepselter's *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny* offers a relevant description of how conspiracy theories account for a world in which "unseen powers, consortiums of the media, the government, and covert groups of the rich, elite, and powerful were intentionally testing the American people."³⁰ She concludes from one interview account, "what's real in this story is the conspiracy theory's dense figuring toward meaningfulness among blanched-out histories. *Something is wrong*, but no one knows what."³¹ Similarly, the authoritarian character struggles with the feeling that "*something is wrong*" and seeks to identify the anonymous god veiled behind the curtain of a highly administered society. As Horkheimer writes in his "Thoughts on Religion," "dissatisfaction with earthly destiny is the strongest motive for acceptance of a transcendental being."³²

The reactionary structure of the authoritarian subject might be likened to a "diabolical mysticism" which James describes as an inversion of more optimistic and exhilarating religious experiences. He writes:

The same sense of ineffable importance in the smallest events, the same texts and words coming with new meanings, the same voices and visions and leadings and missions, the same controlling by extraneous powers; only this time the emotion is pessimistic: instead of consolations we have desolations; the meanings are dreadful and the powers are enemies to life. It is evident that from the point of view of their psychological mechanism, the classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known. That region contains every kind of matter: "seraph and snake" abide there side by side.³³

At the time in which the Critical Theorists investigated the "seraphs and snakes" of the authoritarian unconscious, they encountered symbols of Aryan supremacy in Germany and white, Christian nationalism in the United States, both regarded as under threat by racialized outsiders. Today, a similar set of characters have been cast in an era of misinformation.

³⁰ Susan Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 13.

³¹ Lepselter, 43.

³² Max Horkheimer, "Thoughts on Religion," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1992), 129.

³³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 464–65.

American conspiracy theories that have spread to Canada and other parts of the world include the claim of a “deep state,” election interference/fraud, the great replacement conspiracy theory, secret funding of antifa and other leftist movements by George Soros, claims that California wildfires were ignited by space lasers controlled by the Rothschild banking firm, anti-vax movements in response to “Big Pharma” and the COVID19 vaccine, climate change denialism, Sandy Hook elementary school shooting denialism, QAnon, “Pizzagate,” among a variety of colourful accusations aimed at Trump’s political opponents ranging from Hunter Biden’s espionage to the pedophilia rings run by Hillary Clinton.

Despite framing my analysis in accordance with the anti-fascist program of the Institute for Social Research, this dissertation does not pursue a study of modern-day neo-Nazism nor their antisemitic and racist ideological derivatives. I do not discuss the rise and fall of authoritarian movements, such as the alt-right and populist political factions, nor do I explore religiously inscribed political movements such as the rise of Christo-fascism. I have sought to avoid the limitations of an exclusively political focus that seeks to name those divisions. As Wendy Brown argues, still amorphous entities threaten “the disintegration, or at least transmutation, of liberal democracy by forces for which we do not yet have adequate names.”³⁴

In approaching this topic as a scholar in the critical study of religion, my analysis of authoritarian grandiosity and inferiority is grounded in the subject’s ambivalent relationship with “the reality of the unseen.” These anonymous, transcendent objects are perceived as having power over world events, the course of history, and the life events that shape the individual.

It is crucial that any kind of scholarly engagement with authoritarian beliefs and behaviour does not dismiss their “psychic reality” as psychopathology even when they begin to take on a delusional quality.³⁵ Just as Marsha A. Hewitt proposes in her methodological outline of the psychoanalytic psychology of religion, psychic reality becomes a “key hermeneutic tool” in approaching subjective interiority. She argues that “the world of psychic reality, of which religious experience is a part, must be accepted and critically investigated in all its so-called

³⁴ Peter E. Gordon, Wendy Brown, and Max Pensky, *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7.

³⁵ Freud defines “psychic reality” in *Totem and Taboo* as “What lie behind the sense of guilt of neurotics are always *psychical* realities and never *factual* ones. What characterizes neurotics is that they prefer psychical to factual reality and react just as seriously to thoughts as normal people do to realities” (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 13:159).

irrationality and strange uncanniness because it is a product of the mind.”³⁶ To integrate psychoanalytic and critical approaches is neither to dismiss these authoritarian fantasies as irrational nor accept them as a rational reflection of reality. As James cautions, “non-mystics are under no obligation to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature.”³⁷

1.4. Theoretical context and contemporary scholarship

My dissertation develops an important psychoanalytic thread in Critical Theory, which has been almost entirely neglected by second and third generation Frankfurt School theorists. Freud’s writings play a minimal role in Jürgen Habermas’s work, but when they are referenced in the context of intersubjective communication he refrains from capturing the pre-socialized and pre-linguistic characteristics of the id.³⁸ As contemporary psychoanalyst and critical theorist Joel Whitebook writes, “Habermas’s general domestication of Critical Theory is duplicated in his deradicalization of what was perhaps Freud’s most subversive discovery, the unconscious.”³⁹ Where psychoanalysis is mostly abandoned by Habermas, Axel Honneth turns to Winnicottian object relations with his theory of recognition in an effort to gain better insight into parent-infant relationality.⁴⁰ This misreading of relational psychoanalysis comes at the expense of grappling with the affective unconscious and its mediation of psychic reality.

³⁶ Marsha A. Hewitt, *Legacies of the Occult: Psychoanalysis, Religion, and Unconscious Communication* (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2020), 156; 157.

³⁷ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 465.

³⁸ Habermas describes the unconscious as a mutilated language. This linguistic approach frames psychoanalysis entirely in terms of communication: “starting with the experience of the physician’s communication with his patient, Freud derived the concept of the unconscious from a specific form of disturbance of communication in ordinary language. For this he would really have needed a theory of language, which did not exist at the time and whose outlines are only just beginning to take form today.” (Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 238).

³⁹ Whitebook, Joel. *Perversion and Utopia: A Study of Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 7.

⁴⁰ Honneth’s approach to the theory of recognition, modelled after Hegel’s ethical community proposes “the existence of intersubjective obligations,” that is “a quasi-natural precondition for every process of human socialization” (Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 12; 15). Honneth will cite Winnicottian object relations theory to support this precondition, arguing that this psychoanalytic turn is “especially well-suited to rendering love intelligible as the interactive relationship that forms the basis for a particular pattern of reciprocal recognition” (Honneth, 96). While providing Honneth with a psychoanalytic “precondition” for mutual recognition, the appropriation of Winnicott’s writings on mutual care between mother and infant misses the psychoanalyst’s interest in the baby’s omnipotence that seeks destructive control over the object. As Whitebook points out “the relational appropriation of Winnicott only goes half way” (Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook, “Omnipotence or Fusion? A

For Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse especially, the unconscious is entangled with the material conditions that promote social domination. The psyche cannot be treated as a separate entity. While the emergence of the authoritarian character reflects the development of modern bureaucracy and the attendant mystification of authority, the Critical Theorists recognized that any one-sided analysis of socio-historical conditions that did not also account for the unconscious as a material force (e.g., the return of the repressed) carried the risk of ‘sociologizing’ the authoritarian subject out of existence. Sole focus on the internalization of domination via the super-ego overlooks the unconscious id and the threat it poses to the autonomous ego. Where internalization casts blame on society as a construct imposed upon the authoritarian subject, the unconscious id goes much further in demystifying those anti-social impulses that propel the problem of domination in the first place.

Contemporary critical theory’s failure to carry forward the affective unconscious is best illustrated by Honneth’s theory of recognition. Honneth argues that social conflicts should be resolved with the recognition that we are “needy creatures” in need of relational awareness (writing, “love represents the first stage of reciprocal recognition”).⁴¹ Original Critical Theory resisted calls for renewed membership and societal integration as a solution to social discontent, “a thoughtless optimism” as Horkheimer would describe it.⁴² Adorno in particular pointed out that the fascist mass is bonded together by an appetite for violence, a shared desire to annihilate a designated outsider, as such “there is too little in the content of fascist ideology that *could* be loved.”⁴³ Similarly, the later critical theorist, Cornelius Castoriadis, critiques the flawed application of mutual recognition as a social theory, observing that “millions of Germans ‘recognized themselves’ in Hitler’s discourse, millions of ‘communists’ in that of Stalin.”⁴⁴

Contemporary critical theory’s shift toward relationality and mutual recognition can be, in part, attributed to ongoing debates about human nature and the question of whether

Conversation between Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook,” *Constellations* 23, no. 2 (2016): 173, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12232>).

⁴¹ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, 95.

⁴² Horkheimer, “Thoughts on Religion,” 131.

⁴³ Similar to Wilhelm Reich, Adorno argues that sexuality operates at an unconscious level in fascism where it can be controlled and shaped toward submissiveness. (Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 123).

⁴⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 4.

domination is innate or learned.⁴⁵ However, I argue that any discussion of whether the human being is essentially bad or good, hateful or loving, aggressive or corrupted tends to dismiss the contradictory nature of the authoritarian subject, namely their profound ambivalence toward authority generally. To ask whether the authoritarian is motivated by innate, destructive drives or the internalization of outside trends – that is, in more philosophical terms, whether human evil is innate or acquired – exaggerates the gap between a social (acquisition-based) and a so-called physiological (needs or affectively-motivated) anthropology.

This gross dichotomy of the intra-psychic and the inter-subjective appears in Jessica Benjamin's study, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, where she suggests that Freud and the Critical Theorists were never able to account for the relational dimensions of human experience in which love can flourish.⁴⁶ Here, especially, the relational turn begins to echo the tenets of supersessionism. As Hewitt points out, the introduction of a “‘new’ psychology of love” by inter-relational psychoanalysts into what had been a previously loveless (Jewish) theory of the unconscious, not only distorts Freud's contributions but suggests a common narrative typical of Christian replacement theology.⁴⁷ Benjamin's claim that only object relations theorists made contributions toward understanding the relational field of human experience is easily challenged by any close reading of Freud's writings on group psychology, melancholia, and the social origins of religion, all studies that feature significantly throughout this dissertation.⁴⁸

While there are important debates and disagreements among psychoanalytic theorists about how Freud should be taken up, a selective reading of the unconscious that denies its fundamentally pre-linguistic, affective traits, is not psychoanalytical. As Marcuse pointed out in his critique of ‘neo-Freudian revisionism’, the rejection of sexuality and aggression in favour of

⁴⁵ As Whitebook admits in a 2016 debate with Honneth: “I posed my criticisms ... too much in terms of the goodness or badness of the human animal” adding “I'm closer to a Freudian pessimist, and he's much closer to a more sociable view – but that is something we should discuss over a bottle of wine in a Frankfurt *Weinstube* some night and not in public” (Honneth and Whitebook, “Omnipotence or Fusion? A Conversation between Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook,” 171).

⁴⁶ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 180.

⁴⁷ Marsha A. Hewitt, “Christian Anti-Judaism and Early Object Relations Theory,” *Critical Research on Religion* 6, no. 3 (2018): 237, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303218800378>.

⁴⁸ As Hewitt argues in *Freud on Religion*: “Freud was hardly oblivious to the importance of relationships with others in the developing human psyche; nor did he trivialize or dismiss the power of love and its role in fostering and recovering mental health” (Marsha A. Hewitt, *Freud on Religion*, Key Thinkers in the Study of Religion (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2014), 132).

“productiveness, love, happiness, and health” might as well dispense with the unconscious id altogether.⁴⁹

For this reason, I have de-prioritized Fromm’s immensely popular *Escape from Freedom* in order to better engage with those texts grounded in the affective unconscious. Fromm understood the sadomasochistic [authoritarian] character in relational terms of existential helplessness, security, and belonging. He proposed that fascism offers an escape from unbearable loneliness and feelings of inadequacy by dominating the subject absolutely. In Fromm’s explicit rejection of Freudian drive theory, the importance of sexuality, and the Oedipus Complex, he jettisons the satisfaction and frustration of bodily-based desires in favour of what his colleagues at the institute read as an entirely sociological approach to human relationships. As Otto Fenichel writes in his response to Fromm’s own relational turn,

Freud never denied that all those strivings – love, hatred, love of power, yearning for submission, enjoyment of sensuous pleasure, and especially fear of sensuous pleasure – are products of experiences – i.e., of the social process. What else does psychoanalysis do than find out in which way those attributes are formed in the individual by experiences during his childhood? Freud only added one thing which Fromm now tries to get rid of: He found out *how* the “social process” “produces” “those strivings”: by transforming the aims, objects, and directions of “certain needs which are common to man such as hunger, thirst, sexuality” – especially “sexuality.”⁵⁰

A deradicalization of the affective unconscious hobbles any serious inquiry into authoritarian subjectivity. When Benjamin describes, “the breakdown in the fundamental tension between assertion of self and recognition of other” as “the best point of entry to understanding the psychology of domination,” I suggest that it is precisely in the subjugation and modification of individual strivings where scholarship can better investigate the psychodynamics of unconscious collusion.⁵¹ As Wilhelm Reich observes in his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, “what has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals ... but why the majority of those who are hungry don’t steal.”⁵² The Critical Theorists recognized that the unconscious does not simply act as a passive receptacle, absorbing the exploitative social

⁴⁹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 264–65.

⁵⁰ Otto Fenichel, “Psychoanalytic Remarks on Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*,” in *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel*, ed. Hanna Fenichel and David Rapaport, Second Series (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1954), 268.

⁵¹ Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, 49.

⁵² Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Mary Boyd Higgins (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), 53.

relations taking place outside of the psyche; it commanded its own force in the world by entering the social arena of everyday life.

1.5. Chapter outline

This dissertation is a genealogy of anti-authoritarian thought that traces the thread of the anonymous god in Critical Theory writings in order to develop the concept further using interpretive inquiry.⁵³ Following the hermeneutics of suspicion, I emphasize the necessity of recovering the origins of unconscious collusion: both in a psychoanalytic sense of early psychological impressions and the formation of unconscious content and in the Marxian tradition of demystifying historical processes and excavating the roots of social exploitation.⁵⁴ I call into question the inevitability of social domination, particularly claims of supernatural authenticity as they are tied to the reality of the unseen. As Freud writes of the neurotic, “he creates his own world of imagination for himself, his own religion, his own system of delusions, and thus recapitulates the institutions of humanity in a distorted way.”⁵⁵ Similarly, I propose that the false metaphysics of top-down command tends to disguise human creation in supernatural immutability.

Chapters two, three, and four detail the theoretical frameworks and historical developments that transformed the authoritarian character from a psychoanalytic concept into a rigid typology of personality. This shift from a critical philosophical anthropology (an answer to the question of “what is a human being?”) to a normative model of psychopathology signalled an abrupt end to psychoanalytic inquiry. Although the Critical Theorists continued to develop their own psychoanalytically-informed analysis of fascist and authoritarian culture, I argue that the authoritarian character’s translation into an empirically-verifiable “personality” sacrifices social critique to better conform to the political trends of this period.

⁵³ In *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and Psychoanalysis*, Noëlle McAfee proposes a similar need for genealogy when she writes, “rather than focusing on securing normative footholds for critique, critical theory should expand its scope to work on identifying how to recognize the ghosts in the forum and then how to proceed. This may well include returning to the insights of the first generation of critical theorists, for example in trying to understand the roots of the authoritarian personality” (McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and Psychoanalysis*, 43).

⁵⁴ The hermeneutics of suspicion refers to the depth analysis of Nietzsche (genealogy of value), Marx (ideology critique), and Freud (unconscious meaning). Paul Ricoeur describes these thinkers as “three masters of suspicion” or “three great ‘destroyers’” in their approach to interpretation (Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 33).

⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 18, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1921), 142.

Chapter two, “A portrait of the fascist super-father: How the Critical Theorists incorporated Freud into their analysis of social domination,” presents an overview of those psychoanalytic concepts that help illuminate the twentieth century problem of social domination. The authoritarian wish for submission can be explained as the unconscious internalization and idealization of patriarchal authority. Introducing key concepts, such as super-ego formation, the transformation of id hostility into super-ego cruelty, and the cultural transmission of patriarchal *imagos* from one generation to the next, I identify the ways in which the unconscious operates as a material force in history. I present Freud’s hypothesis of the primal horde as a psychoanalytic construction or springboard for thinking about deferred obedience and the unconscious need for strongmen, however despotic and cruel. Beyond the theoretical background of this dissertation, chapter two establishes impersonality as a key feature of those unconscious projections that transform the ‘Great Men’ of history into super-fathers.

Chapter three, “Philosophical anthropologies: Reich, Fromm, and Horkheimer on the authoritarian character,” introduces the authoritarian as a philosophical anthropology. I review Reich, Horkheimer, and Fromm’s writings on the subject from the early to mid-1930s and the psychoanalytic orientation of these lesser-known works. I explore the conflicting anthropologies that inform their analysis with attention paid to how the psychoanalytic unconscious is integrated and what remains neglected in their approach to the problem of social domination.

Chapter four, “‘As irrational as the world in which they live’: Adorno and the objective-subjective dimensions of *The Authoritarian Personality* study,” addresses important theoretical shifts that took place with Critical Theory’s migration from Germany to the United States. Moving away from the philosophical anthropology and psychoanalytic premises favoured in the 1930s, the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* study (1950) established a definable typology in accordance with the empirical approaches of the American social sciences. I discuss the flaws and limitations of the study and focus on Adorno’s unpublished contributions (published in 2019). Here, Adorno explores authoritarian impotence and the greater objective forces that swallow up the individual. I trace the disappearance of the individual by “objective spirit” (*objektiver Geist*) in a genealogy that extends from Adorno back to Georg Simmel’s writings on the metropolis and Siegfried Kracauer’s concept of the “mass ornament.”

Chapters five to seven investigate the psychodynamics underlying the authoritarian’s relationship with powerful, unseen forces (i.e., the anonymous god). I demonstrate how

unconscious collusion draws on rage against and attachment to oppressive authorities. Here, I broaden my analysis of the anonymous god as an identification with the aggressor, incorporating psychoanalytic theorists who go beyond Freud and the Critical Theorists to explain how the unconscious negotiates and re-personalizes abstract authorities

Chapter five, “Authoritarian rage and subordination: Revisiting the psychoanalytic theory of the death drive,” recasts the objective forces of chapter four in terms of the subjective, psychoanalytic unconscious. I discuss the value of Freud’s dual-drive theory for Critical Theory, integrate Melanie Klein’s work on phantasy and aggression to gain better insight into the developmental origin of projective identification, and bring in contemporary psychoanalytic writings on the death drive as aggression and empathic shut-down in order to develop my own psychoanalytic theory of authoritarian interiority, including the introjection and projection of threatening phantasy-objects.

Chapter six, “Messages in a bottle: a psychoanalytic reading of Benjamin’s Thesis VII (1940),” explores in more detail the authoritarian’s encounter with overwhelming, impersonal authorities and the psychodynamics of unconscious collusion. This chapter focuses on a passage from Walter Benjamin: “[the history of domination relies on] a process of empathy [with the victor of history] whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*.”⁵⁶ I discuss the psychoanalytic significance of “*Einfühlung*” (empathy/receptivity) and *acedia* (melancholia) in order to develop a theory of unconscious collusion, drawing on the object relations outlined by Freud along with Sandor Ferenczi’s concept of identifying with the aggressor. I propose that an identification with the victor of history operates as a narcissistic defence against the despair of melancholic ego-loss; encountered with the divine omnipotence of the tyrant, the authoritarian abandons all political resistance.

Chapter seven, “‘The dark power of destiny’: the anonymous god and fate-anxiety in the authoritarian imagination,” explores the authoritarian’s struggle to re-personalize abstract authorities and thereby exercise influence over these impersonal figures. This chapter identifies the character of the hypnotist-dictator as he appears throughout Freud, Adorno, and Horkheimer’s writings, with attention paid to the problem of how an impersonal authority can also be the object of a libidinal transference. Here, I introduce a new discourse on how the

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.

anonymous god might be better conceptualized: a more archaic imago that lies beyond the strongman protector as suggested by the authoritarian's rejection of the spectral mother. It is the *imago* of the mother that stands in as representative of those greater cosmic forces that negate personal agency. Here, I explore the psychoanalytic concept of the daemonic as the mysterious workings of fate.

In my conclusion, "Chasing ghosts: Who is the anonymous god?," I present the anonymous god as a false alibi that negates all subjectivity and conceals agents of social domination behind a veil of impersonality. Here, I contextualize my own contribution within already existing trajectories of modern social theory in order to understand better how human creation can be eclipsed by supra-human intervention. More than a metaphor, the anonymous god becomes a means for charting the transformation of human authorities into the non-human.

1.6. Conclusion: "Take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here"

The dialectical shift in Critical Theory's treatment of the patriarchal authoritarian family, first as responsible for authoritarian character-formation and later as the only protection against oppressive social forces, can be summarized with the following passages. In his memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi warns his reader, "if from the inside of the Lager, a message could have seeped out to free men, it would have been this: Take care not to suffer in your own homes what is inflicted on us here."⁵⁷ As I sought to illustrate with my opening anecdote, the problem of domination tends to be reproduced within the family unit. Critical Theory's later yearning for the family could be summarized by a passage in Philip Roth's fictional memoir, set in an alternate America in which fascism succeeds. In *The Plot against America*, the main character advocates for a strengthening of the family, writing "no one should be motherless and fatherless. Motherless and fatherless you are vulnerable to manipulation – to influences – you are rootless and you are vulnerable to everything."⁵⁸ For both Levi and Roth, a firm partition must be established between oppressive social forces and the refuge of the family home.

Critical Theory's analysis of the patriarchal authoritarian family was developed in part to address the rapidly changing technological and economic developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and to understand the ways in which material conditions shaped and

⁵⁷ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, 55.

⁵⁸ Roth, *The Plot against America*, 358.

transformed human consciousness. The acceleration of economic production and distribution meant that more refined techniques for maximizing productivity had to be implemented into the everyday life of the worker. These techniques contributed to the rise of an authoritarian culture characterized by the loss of personal autonomy and mass-scale social conformity, including in those non-totalitarian societies where capitalism had become the standard economic system.

In addition to their analysis of prevailing social conditions, the Critical Theorists knew that more psychoanalytic investigation was needed to explain the oppressive dynamics taking place just below consciousness. This is suggested by Marcuse when he proposes that the failure of revolutionary activity might be gauged by a “*psychic Thermidor*,” asking “is there perhaps in individuals themselves already a dynamic at work that *internally* negates possible liberation and gratification and that supports external forces of denial?”⁵⁹

Supposing that there is an unconscious need for authority, the question of how dangerous and irrational authorities take root in the psyche goes well beyond a discussion of what can and cannot be accomplished in the family home. If Freud had conceptualized the unconscious as a powerful irrational force that worked against the development of personal agency, then the Critical Theorists endeavoured to examine the ways in which the unconscious might seek out its own subjugation colluding with irrational authorities and oppressive social agents to gradually erode autonomy from within.

⁵⁹ Herbert Marcuse, “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts,” in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 38–39.

2. A portrait of the fascist super-father: How the Critical Theorists incorporated Freud into their analysis of social domination

“I am not unlike a prisoner who enjoyed an imaginary freedom during his sleep, but, when he later begins to suspect that he is dreaming, fears being awakened and nonchalantly conspires with these pleasant illusions.”⁶⁰

Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)

“A much deeper and older danger abides, a darker knowledge is still missing. If all of us abhorred the Third Reich, why did it exist? Must there not have been feelings, unknown to our conscious mind, that condoned it, accepted it, willed it? Even among those who lived in fear and trembling of the Nazis, might there not have been in them somewhere, deep down, a layer of soul closely kin to that regime of terrible domination?”⁶¹

Bruno Bettelheim, Preface to Charlotte Beradt’s *The Third Reich of Dreams* (1966)

How did the first generation Critical Theorists articulate the problem of social domination? Herbert Marcuse proposed that historical progress was implicated in a “dialectic of domination,” a pendulum that swung at one moment toward emancipatory and revolutionary momentum and at the next, brought to a halt hard-won social reform as societies receded into despotic rule.⁶² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer asked “why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,” suggesting that dark, unconscious impulses had found social expression in the authoritarian irrationality of the early twentieth century, undermining humanitarian progress.⁶³ This tendency toward regression, then, sets the stage for introducing a psychoanalytic component into a theory of social domination.

To shed light on socio-historical trends of renewed subjugation, these authors turned to the depth-analysis of critical psychoanalytical and sociological inquiry to explain “the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism.”⁶⁴ One passage in particular from Wilhelm Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*

⁶⁰ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, Third Edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1641), 17.

⁶¹ Bruno Bettelheim, “An Essay by Bruno Bettelheim,” in *The Third Reich of Dreams*, by Charlotte Beradt, trans. Adriane Gottwald (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 169.

⁶² Marcuse, “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts,” 38–39.

⁶³ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xiv.

⁶⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, xvi.

illustrates how psychoanalytic theory might help explain the emerging contradictions growing between oppressive social conditions and human behaviour. He writes:

What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike.⁶⁵

Reich adds after this passage that those “who do not acknowledge psychology, are helpless in the face of such a contradiction.”⁶⁶ Reich interprets this contradiction as “an intense longing for and fear of freedom,” a formulation that would go on to influence Erich Fromm’s study of authoritarian culture and the appeal of fascism in his 1941 *Escape from Freedom*.⁶⁷ Fromm describes this contradiction as a “human problem,” asking “can freedom become a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something that he tries to escape from? ... Is there not also, perhaps, besides an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission?”⁶⁸

Approached psychoanalytically, the philosophical problem of heteronomy cannot be resolved *per se* as a conscious decision that can be merely re-directed toward autonomous thought and action.⁶⁹ Reich’s observation that the modern subject suffered from an “intense longing for and fear of freedom” points to a largely unconscious struggle in that the modern subject internalizes the interests of greater social and mechanical processes, even prioritizing them over physiological needs such as hunger. This suppression of immediate needs and perceptions reveals a way in which exploitation is often exercised without conscious awareness.

The question posed initially by the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (“why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism”) is later recast by Adorno, who asks “why modern men revert to patterns of behaviour which

⁶⁵ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 53.

⁶⁶ Reich, 54. The quote continues, “the vulgar Marxist and the narrow-minded economist, who do not acknowledge psychology, are helpless in the face of such a contradiction”

⁶⁷ Reich, 353.

⁶⁸ Erich H. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1969), 4–5.

⁶⁹ I use heteronomy to refer to the problem of domination as it hinders personal agency. This concept originates from Kant’s ethical philosophy in which, “the difference between autonomy and heteronomy consists in *how* we orient ourselves in relation to any type of incentive, influence, or authority” (James J. DiCenso, *Kant, Religion, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 172). For Kant, heteronomy encompasses a wide range of outside influences that may “be internalized to become part of our subjective ways of thinking” (DiCenso, 172). Although the question of heteronomy and autonomy is complicated by the ways in which we are bound by numerous social relations, such as in connectivity and nurturance, I restrict my use to the political context of the Critical Theorists (i.e., when one can no longer distinguish between what is in one’s best interests and what is prescribed by the authoritarian, technocratic structures that govern administered society).

flagrantly contradict their own rational level and the present stage of enlightened technological civilization.”⁷⁰ Modernity, despite accumulating unprecedented human knowledge and technical capability, allowed new forms of barbaric violence. Psychoanalytic theory served to illuminate how regressive tendencies continue to be embedded within the developmental progress of the individual and of society. However, disclosed in this critique of modernity is a much more compelling question: might the failure of humanistic progress (accompanied by the triumph of oppressive regimes and practices) be traced to a common psychological root? If so, then this unconscious wish for subjugation would need to be properly investigated using the insights of a psychoanalytically informed Critical Theory.

The problem of social domination can be encapsulated in what these theorists formulated as an “authoritarian character” who exhibits a cluster of psychological and behavioural contradictions that undermine the individual’s capacity for the development of personal autonomy.⁷¹ How these contradictions were studied and conceptualized as a typology will be more fully explored in my third and fourth chapters on the evolution of the authoritarian character, including how it came to be known as a “personality.” In this chapter, I introduce the psychoanalytic scaffolding for first generation Critical Theory’s thinking about the authoritarian character. The authoritarian wish for submission can be explained as the unconscious internalization and idealization of patriarchal authority. Consulting Freud’s writings on religion and super-ego formation, I explore the authoritarian appeal of Horkheimer’s “fascist super-father” as a reflection of the various *imagos* that populate the impersonal super-ego. I conclude the chapter by proposing that Freud’s hypothesis of a “primal father” serves as a powerful prototype for thinking about historical cycles of domination and the ‘Great Men’ of history.

I begin with Critical Theory’s integration of psychoanalytic concepts in order to explain the problem of social domination as the internalization and reproduction of hierarchical interests within the psyche, i.e., what I have termed in this dissertation, unconscious collusion. By social

⁷⁰ Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 121. The whole passage reads: “even if one were to assume that archaic, pre-individualistic instincts survive, one could not simply point to this inheritance but would have to explain why modern men revert to patterns of behaviour which flagrantly contradict their own rational level and the present stage of enlightened technological civilization. This is precisely what Freud wants to do. He tries to find out which psychological forces result in the transformation of individuals into a mass.”

⁷¹ The problem of “social domination” can be thought of as a Marxian development of “heteronomy” as a philosophical problem. By “social domination,” the Critical Theorists are referring to their critique of political economy. I argue that the “authoritarian character” represents the next step beyond Marxian theorizing to incorporate psychoanalytic insights into the individual.

domination, I am referring to a question that arose out of early to mid-twentieth century political crises: why does the psyche reproduce the hierarchical interests of the social whole even when those interests come into conflict with individual needs? In the first section of this chapter, I present the theoretical groundwork for thinking about the unconscious as a material force in history (2.1). To understand how the unconscious is implicated in the problem of social domination, I introduce the formation of the super-ego and its various mechanisms. The super-ego is formed via the internalization (and idealization) of outside authorities. I discuss these concepts in application to fascism via the transformation of id hostility into super-ego cruelty (2.2). Controversially, Freud put forward his own story of tyranny so as to explain the yearning for strongmen leaders. I interpret the hypothesis of the primal horde, which Freud presents as the catalyst for all historical cycles of domination, as a psychoanalytic construction that provided Critical Theory with an important narrative for thinking about authoritarian psychodynamics (2.3). In my final section, I arrive at Freud's explanation for the authoritarian attraction to the 'Great Men' of history as an unconscious, infantile wish for paternal love and protection. Although Freud never wrote about the appeal of fascism, I consider his insights in application to the problem of unconscious collusion and the authoritarian idealization of the fascist super-father as an omnipotent protector (2.4). Throughout this chapter, I highlight the impersonality of the fascist super-father, both as the result of his internalization and his transformation into a powerful psychological image that can be projected into real-life tyrants.

2.1. "Trained in theory and determined to make things better": The Institute for Social Research in historical context

In this section, I discuss the problem of social domination in historical context. Critical Theory's incorporation of the psychoanalytic unconscious allowed for a depth-analysis that had otherwise been missing in their strictly economic critique of domination. For these theorists, the unconscious gravitation toward totalitarianism had to be reckoned with as a material force in history.

The Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) was originally founded in 1923 in Frankfurt as an independent centre dedicated to the critical study of the labour movement and its history through the lens of political economy. While the institute integrated mainly Hegelian dialectics with Marxian ideology critique, it also incorporated diverse thinkers

and interests in an effort to address the changes that characterize modern life. Under Horkheimer's 1931 directorship, the multidisciplinary focus of the institute became more decisive with a renewed focus on social philosophy and psychoanalytical perspectives. Following Marx's rejection of the abstract and isolated subject of traditional philosophy in favour of the human being as an "ensemble of social relations," the institute embraced a radical method of speculative inquiry that critically re-assessed the theorist's own standpoint. The Critical Theorist would have to find a middle ground in which traditional concepts could be rejected without requiring "a wholly new outlook" and yet be "constantly beginning anew."⁷²

The value of this method lay in its ability to address the ways in which philosophical ideas deteriorate into ideology and, from there, into a political movement. Just as the subject cannot be wholly separated from the object of study, the Critical Theorist could never stand outside of social reality as an objective spectator. Motivated only by "the abolition of social injustice," the theorist had to consider the object of their study within that object's historical context and take into account the ways in which it was shaped by social relations and material conditions.⁷³

Immanent critique as a critical approach appears early on in Horkheimer's directorship of the institute, as in his rejection of the economic determinism espoused by Western Marxism, writing that socialism "will not be realized by a logic" inherent in historical progression (i.e., historical materialism) "but by men trained in theory and determined to make things better. Otherwise it will not be realized at all."⁷⁴ To cite Martin Jay, immanent critique necessitates a way of thinking that abstains from "any universal or transcendent vantage point" by finding "an alternative in the specific normative claims of a culture that failed to live up to them in practice."⁷⁵ As long as the interests of the status quo were preserved and the economic and social superstructures that govern everyday life resisted calls for transformation and social improvement, the Critical Theorist was obligated to study what had become chronic to social existence. This included an examination of how thought is shaped by those same conditions that produce the object of study.

⁷² Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1992), 234.

⁷³ Horkheimer, 242.

⁷⁴ Horkheimer, Max. *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*. Trans. Michael Shaw, Afterword by Eike Gebhardt. New York: The Seabury Press, A Continuum Book. 1978. 37.

⁷⁵ Martin Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations* (London: Verso, 2020), 4.

In the 1920s and 1930s, this failure of normative claims included the supplanting of one set of dominating forces with a new ruling elite that could stamp out revolutionary activity just as ferociously as its predecessors. In January 1919, a power struggle in Germany between the Social Democrats and the Communist Party led to a brutal military suppression of the Marxist Spartacus League by Freikorps units culminating in the assassination of its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. In the wake of this political crisis, a series of terrorist attacks and assassinations followed, including the infamous 1922 murder of German Jewish Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau by ultra-nationalist extremists. National Socialism, which gained popularity after the failure of Adolf Hitler's 1923 *Putsch*, would come to succeed this brief period of constitutional democracy and represented an outgrowth of only one of these extremist groups.

Beyond the instability of the Weimar Republic, the early 1920s also bore witness to the Soviet consolidation of political power that would culminate with Lenin and Trotsky's 1921 suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion. For supporters of Soviet Communism, this neutralization of all political opposition represented a betrayal, wherein the original goal of world revolution was supplanted by state terrorism, and the dream of economic democracy shattered.

Throughout Europe, democracy, in any form, seemed incapable of stopping economic implosion, effecting change, or even of sustaining itself. Only totalitarian approaches grew to be seen as viable solutions. In this cynical environment, the theorists of the Institute for Social Research developed their social critique as a response to emerging totalitarian regimes. "The dictatorships did not swoop down upon this society from outside in the way Cortez invaded Mexico," writes Adorno, "rather they were engendered by the social dynamic following the First World War, and they cast their shadows before them."⁷⁶

Under Horkheimer's directorship, the integration of heterodox Marxism and psychoanalytic approaches was intended to explore the ways in which social relations, i.e., the uneasy relationship between the individual (the socio-economic base) and the political (the ideological superstructure), are shaped by unconscious dynamics.⁷⁷ Freud's theory of the unconscious represented a radical and subversive lens for theorizing the individual's relationship

⁷⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Those Twenties," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 41.

⁷⁷ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 92.

with authority, beginning with the crucial role played by the family and the internalization of the parental *imago* that forms the individual super-ego. As Horkheimer insisted in a 1942 letter, Freud's psychoanalytic theory had proven to be a "foundation stone" [*Bildungsmächte*] in the intellectual development of Critical Theory.⁷⁸ Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse endeavoured to incorporate these psychoanalytic insights in their analysis of how socio-economic conditions factor into and shape the psychological life of the individual (Fromm's synthesis would evolve to become more contentious, ultimately contributing to his departure from the institute).⁷⁹ In particular, Freud's theory of repression proved to be an invaluable contribution to Critical Theory, appearing for instance in Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* with the modification of "surplus repression," that is, "the restrictions necessitated by social domination" in contrast with the basic modifications imposed upon us by social authorities that Freud proposed were necessary for social co-existence.⁸⁰ If psychoanalytic concepts and theories were to illuminate the present situation, it was vital that Freud's writings also be subjected to immanent critique.

Although the first generation thinkers debated, and at times disputed, which Freudian concepts should be prioritized as necessary for their Critical Theory, the psychoanalytic focus of Reich, Fromm, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse led them toward a fundamental insight that domination and submission are intimately interwoven with the internalization of external forces and an unconscious need for authority.⁸¹ With the growing threat of German fascism, it became increasingly apparent that theories of political economy and class analysis had to be supplemented with a deeper understanding of how the unconscious internalized and reproduced the hierarchical interests of the social whole. The psyche, saturated with cultural and historical trends that promote exploitation, could be mobilized from without by mass psychology. Analyzing the effectiveness of fascist propaganda, Adorno remarks that "the psychology of the masses has been taken over by their leaders and transformed into a means for their

⁷⁸ As quoted in *The Dialectical Imagination*. Jay, 102.

⁷⁹ Although a thorough discussion of Fromm's departure from the institute stands outside the scope of this chapter, it is worthwhile to cite Susan Buck-Morss, "Adorno's simultaneous use of categories from Freud and Marx was dialectical in that the categories affected each other, resulting in the modification of both ... his aim was not to develop a theoretical synthesis, but to decipher a contradictory reality." Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 97.

⁸⁰ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 37.

⁸¹ The most significant debate between the Critical Theorists was Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer's critique of neo-Freudian revisionism prompted by Fromm's rejection of psychoanalytic drive theory along with other aspects of psychoanalytic metapsychology.

domination.”⁸² However, this process of being “taken over” did not mean that authoritarian psychology was tantamount to a straightforward top-down process of puppeteering or brainwashing; Adorno was firm with his observation that there are “those who keep their eyes shut though they are no longer asleep.”⁸³

2.2. Punitive super-egos: “If I were the father and you were the child, I should treat you badly”

The emergence of the authoritarian character can be traced to patterns of dominance as they are fostered in the patriarchal family. However, the Critical Theorists recognized that the societal ideal of paternal power and strength is rarely fulfilled by the father alone. According to Horkheimer, the father’s role had been weakened by industrial capitalism, stripping his once glorified position in the home to the fungible title of “employee.” He writes that the child, upon discovering that the father cannot approximate the mythic role of all-powerful judge and protector, “looks for a stronger, more powerful father, for a super-father, as it is furnished by fascist imagery.”⁸⁴ Horkheimer maintains that it is this desire for an abstract symbol of paternal power that results in “a general readiness to accept any authority provided it is strong enough.”⁸⁵ Horkheimer’s concern for the family in “crisis” lends itself to a more comprehensive discussion than can be provided at this point. From Reich’s critique of the “patriarchal-authoritarian family” as the cradle of fascism to Horkheimer’s post-war conviction that the family is the last bastion of hope against coercive society, it is the father that stands out as Critical Theory’s most prominent leitmotif for theorizing authoritarianism.

In this section, I present the Freudian super-ego as it is implicated in the problem of social domination, underscoring the distinction between the actual, personal father of childhood and the abstract ideal of the autocratic *pater familias* which has been much more decisive in forming the Western patriarchal super-ego. This internalization of paternal authority, both its actual representative and its idealization, explains how a “super-father, as it is furnished by fascist imagery” enters into the Critical Theory picture of domination.

⁸² Theodor W. Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1987), 135.

⁸³ Adorno, 137.

⁸⁴ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” 365.

⁸⁵ Horkheimer, 366.

The super-ego is a component of the psyche that is acquired over the course of psychosocial development and refers to the integration of the morality principle. It develops with the internalization of familial, institutional, and cultural authorities, originating with the child's parental figures and evolving with their later substitutes.⁸⁶ The relationship between the child and society is partly mediated by this internalization, providing an ideal standard of moral conduct by which the ego is judged. As a moral authority, the super-ego also enacts domination from within. Freud observes, "it is a remarkable thing that the super-ego often displays a severity for which no model has been provided by the real parents" since "it calls the ego to account not only for its deeds but equally for its thoughts and unexecuted intentions, of which the super-ego seems to have knowledge."⁸⁷ The super-ego contains a "parental *imago*," that is, a distillation of the once revered but fallible real-life authorities of childhood but distorted as an omniscient and omnipresent psychical entity. The super-ego is thus an essential component of mental life: it brings about the development of conscience and represses those impulses that would make social coexistence impossible.

Freud recognizes the harmful psychological repercussions of excess repression and guilt as a result of the super-ego's tyrannical influence over the psyche. The super-ego exercises enormous power over the individual, by recalling the discipline that is crucial for socialization but surpassing the extent to which those original authorities could make demands of the child. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud proposes that aggression is regulated through a process by which hostility intended for others is re-directed and internalized by the super-ego. Unbound hostility is then censored before it can be unleashed. Once internalized, this original aggression is now pressed into the service of the super-ego and turned back on the self. The super-ego enacts this (now derivative) aggression upon the ego as punishment in the form of guilt for the original hostility.⁸⁸

How certain impulses come to be punished or rewarded by the super-ego is determined by an outside influence, i.e., the parental agency, who first dictated those terms of conduct that would guarantee the child's membership within the family and, later on, the community. Their

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 23, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1940), 144-46.

⁸⁷ Freud, 23:205.

⁸⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. J. Strachey, vol. 21, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1930), 123.

punishment for moral transgression is experienced by the child as a loss of approval. The child then learns that obedience to the prevailing social order ensures their protection, belonging, and the love of surrounding adults, all of whom are crucial for survival.⁸⁹

The subsequent desire to obey authorities for fear of losing their love remains preserved within the psyche as a model that is then re-enacted in broader social organization. Even the mature adult, who has seemingly outgrown their infantile dependence, is motivated to renounce those selfish or aggressive desires that are at odds with the interests of the larger community.⁹⁰ Thus, conscience is formed as a “continuation of the severity of the external authority, to which [the super-ego] has succeeded and which it has in part replaced.”⁹¹

Not all external authorities are severe nor do they resort to punitive means to socialize children. If discipline ranges anywhere from gentle boundary setting to corporal punishment, it would follow that children who are confident in their being loved should have healthy super-egos. Yet, Freud observes that children raised by benevolent or lenient parents still exhibit tyrannical super-egos, demonstrating that they have just as much sensitivity to the guilt and repression demanded by social authorities as those children raised with punitive measures. In the following sketch, Freud suggests that the severity of the super-ego is in part formed by the workings of unconscious projection:

A considerable amount of aggressiveness must be developed in the child against the authority which prevents him from having his first, but none the less his most important, satisfactions, whatever the kind of instinctual deprivation that is demanded of him may be; but he is obliged to renounce the satisfaction of this revengeful aggressiveness. He finds his way out of this economically difficult situation with the help of familiar mechanisms. By means of identification he takes the unattackable authority into himself. *The authority now turns into his super-ego and enters into possession of all the aggressiveness which a child would have liked to exercise against it.* The child's ego has to content itself with the unhappy role of the authority – the father – who has been thus degraded. Here, as is so often, the [real] situation is reversed: ‘If I were the father and you were the child, I should treat you badly.’ The relationship between the super-ego and the ego is a return, distorted by a wish, of the real relationships between the ego, as yet undivided, and an external object. ... *the original severity of the super-ego does not – or does not so much – represent the severity which one has experienced from it [the object], or which one attributes to it; it represents rather one's own aggressiveness towards it.* If this is correct, we may assert truly that in the beginning conscience arises through the

⁸⁹ Freud, 21:124.

⁹⁰ Freud, 21:125.

⁹¹ Freud, 21:127.

suppression of an aggressive impulse, and that it is subsequently reinforced by fresh suppression of the same kind.⁹² (emphasis added)

According to this passage, the father must help the child adjust their expectations to reality by teaching them that frustration is inevitable and not every desire can or should be satisfied. The Oedipal drama plays out as an infantile fury to these external prohibitions and contributes to the unresolvable tension between bodily-based drives and societal expectations. These tensions are then repeated in powerful psycho-social dynamics including those contradictions that make up the constellation of the “authoritarian character,” for instance, anti-establishment views combined with a commitment to maintaining societal order. Although the super-ego perpetuates the severity of childhood authorities, even more constitutive of its cruelty is the transformation of unconscious hostility (internalized first and then instrumentalized as derivative aggression) into a punitive moral authority.

In thinking about Horkheimer’s description of a “super-father,” this psychoanalytic account better illustrates how this figure surpasses the actual father in grandiosity and authority and becomes aligned with the ideals maintained by the super-ego. The super-father is a projection of the “parental *imago*” that stands apart from the actual parents after which the super-ego has modeled itself. As Freud describes, the super-ego forms itself after the image of the parents’ strictness and not after their love, “it departs more and more from the original parental figures; it becomes so to say, more impersonal.”⁹³ The child’s rage, originally directed at the personal father and the renunciation of unacceptable desires, transforms this figure of childhood into a caricature of tyranny. Where the father may be hesitant, clumsy, or frustrated with the child, his decree is experienced as an “unattackable authority.”

There is another element that should be accounted for in Horkheimer’s fascist super-father, that is the infantile hostility that seeks externalization: “If I were the father and you were the child, I should treat you badly.” Aggression adds an important dimension to the fascistic father-leader who supersedes social prohibitions and moral expectations. His followers are attracted to his message that desire and hostility should be released from the powerful repressive

⁹² Freud, 21:129–30.

⁹³ According to Freud, the “parental *imago*” refers to the super-ego’s internalization of parental figures and constitutes a “structural relation that is not merely a personification of some such abstraction as that of conscience” (Sigmund Freud, *The Dissection of the Psychological Personality*, trans. J. Strachey, Vintage/Hogarth Press, vol. 22, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London, 1933), 64).

measures instituted by the liberal establishment. More than just a parental substitute, the fascist super-father embodies the unconscious hostility of his followers by permitting and fulfilling their aggressive wishes through legal and militaristic means. In metapsychological terms, the follower (ego) is effectively sandwiched between their own repressed desire for aggression (id) and the external authority (super-ego) that condones this aggression.

Following Adorno's observation that "there is too little in the content of fascist ideology that *could* be loved," the super-father can be thought of as a projection of the hate-filled fantasies that originate with the personal father.⁹⁴ This projection combined with patriarchal myths of just how strong and powerful the father *should be* propels the need for a fascist super-father, that is, as a collective expression of "if I were the father and you were the child, I should treat you badly."

2.3. The cycle of domination and its indestructible traces: the primal horde as a construction

The super-ego is profoundly impersonal in that it takes on a life of its own: outside authorities are internalized and distorted by the unconscious projection of hostility. The psyche is then populated with a series of tyrannical *imagos*. However, Freud also maintained that an additional source for the super-ego's impersonality could be found in cultural inheritance. In this section, I interpret Freud's hypothesis of the primal horde as a psychoanalytic construction for thinking about historical cycles of domination. By construction, I propose that, without a definitive history of actual events, the theorist may be able to gather enough fragments from the present to attempt a reconstruction of the forgotten past. More than an origin myth, this construction is intended to inspire further psychoanalytic insight into the perennial nature of patriarchal domination.

The super-ego operates as a "vehicle for tradition," transmitting the moral, legal, and doctrinal beliefs from one generation to the next.⁹⁵ The encultured psyche then inherits countless authorities via the unconscious super-ego. This alien influence, pre-dating the formative years of childhood, represents a fusion of authorities that may be identifiable or veer toward the abstract,

⁹⁴ Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 123.

⁹⁵ Freud, *The Dissection of the Psychological Personality*, 22:67.

taking on a fantastical, supernatural, or shadowy form, e.g., the mysterious working of fate.⁹⁶ For instance, in Freud's study of Moses and the origin of the Jewish tradition, he draws attention to the legendary temper of Moses along with that of the God in Exodus, suggesting that this trait may have originated from a fearsome volcano god.⁹⁷

The super-ego *imagos* that are transmitted within a tradition are made up of various personality and character traits, transcending what is original to the personal unconscious and approaching something that is deeply ingrained within numerous psyches. These fragments from specific historical epochs and cultural milieus come to be assembled within a group context and resonate with its members, becoming powerful enough to live beyond that specific context. Freud would maintain that the human species "never lives entirely in the present," arguing that "the past, the tradition of the race and of the people, lives on in the ideologies of the super-ego, and yields only slowly to the influences of the present and to new changes."⁹⁸ Echoes of historical events and perhaps even, Freud speculated, powerful historical memories might be preserved in the unconscious super-ego so that, as traditions are passed down to the child, so are the unconscious burdens of ancestral traumas.

Freud's notion of archaic inheritance and cultural transmission builds on the psychoanalytic concept of regression. Regression is described in one essay as the psyche's "mental plasticity" in that older, undeveloped, "imperishable" parts of the psyche may amass psychical energy and overshadow the current stage of mature development.⁹⁹ This capability is confirmed by dreams in which the dreamer turns off rational conscious thought, slipping into the

⁹⁶ "Fate is regarded as a substitute for the parental agency. If a man is unfortunate it means that he is no longer loved by this highest power; and threatened by such a loss of love, he once more bows to the parental representative in his super-ego – a representative whom, in his days of good fortune, he was ready to neglect. This becomes especially clear where Fate is looked upon in the strictly religious sense of being nothing else than an expression of the Divine Will." (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:126–27). According to Hannah Segal, "Freud, in his description of the super-ego, is not implying that there is a little man actually contained in our unconscious, but that this is one of the unconscious phantasies which we have about the contents of our body and our psyche. Freud never refers specifically to the super-ego as a phantasy, nevertheless he makes it clear that this part of the personality is due to an introjection – in phantasy – of a parental figure, a parental phantasy figure distorted by the child's own projections" (Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, Second (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 11).

⁹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 23, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 1939), 61.

⁹⁸ Freud, *The Dissection of the Psychological Personality*, 22:67.

⁹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," in *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 14, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 1915), 286.

amoral and a-logical realm of the unconscious, with Freud declaring that once we enter a dream, we “throw off our hard-won morality like a garment, and put it on again next morning.”¹⁰⁰

Regression is explored more thoroughly in Freud’s study of the “oceanic feeling,” the spiritual experience of being at peace and one with the world. He argues that this feeling is not, in and of itself, an original psychological state but a vestige of the earliest experience of bliss when the baby is nurtured by the mother. Accessing these archaic memories from childhood is made possible by the unconscious preservation of the affect associated with that stage. Here, Freud provides an archaeological metaphor for the mind, comparing it to an ancient city in which various strata dated to specific stages in psychological development remain preserved and open for excavation.¹⁰¹ The more mature and developed components of the psyche exist side by side with the deepest recesses of mental experience.

In another analogy, Freud likens these archaic feeling-states to the crocodile’s evolutionary proximity to long extinct reptilian species that pre-date more complex mammals. Keeping this in perspective, he thought it astonishing that such a close descendent of a prehistoric species continues to exist side by side with human beings.¹⁰² Although he admits that the analogy is imperfect – as crocodiles are subject to evolutionary development, albeit a much slower one compared with modern humans – Freud’s interest in evolutionary biology encouraged him to think about the preservation of historical traces beyond the individual to consider the greater history of the species.

Although these two analogies apply well to thinking psychoanalytically about the history contained within the individual (trauma, repression, the return of the repressed), it is difficult to apply them to group psychology without positing something like a collective super-ego. To infer trends in mass psychology from individual psychology is one of the more tricky gaps that Freud and the Critical Theorists would attempt to bridge in their work. However, Freud considered individual psychology to be more closely allied with group psychology than might be presumed, since “each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego ideal upon the most various models.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Freud, 286.

¹⁰¹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:70.

¹⁰² Freud, 21:68.

¹⁰³ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:129.

The internalized figures that make up the super-ego, referred to here as the “ego ideal,” range from the more personal *imago* to impersonal remnants of the distant past. Freud concludes that “each individual therefore has a share in numerous group minds – those of his race, of his class, of his creed, of his nationality, etc.”¹⁰⁴ To illustrate how Critical Theory took up Freud’s notion of archaic inheritance without resorting to scientific racism, it is useful to refer to a passage in Horkheimer’s 1947 *Eclipse of Reason* where he proposes that “the gestures, the intonations of voice, the degree and kind of irritability, the gait, in short, all the allegedly natural characteristics of a so-called race” may suggest remnants of historic traumas.¹⁰⁵ Countering the reification of antisemitic caricatures, Horkheimer proposes that “the reactions and gestures of a successful Jewish businessman sometimes reflect the anxiety under which his ancestors lived.” Far from genetic determinism, Horkheimer intends to illustrate with this example the impact of historical persecution on the psyche that is not so simply blotted out by present-day material security.¹⁰⁶ If the unconscious, as Freud once described, “chatters with [the] fingertips” and “oozes out...at every pore,” the repressed past will similarly stop at nothing to gain a hearing.¹⁰⁷

Freud could never explain how the transmission of memory and affect took place. He also rejected crude biological claims that would distract from his metapsychological investigation of the unconscious. The super-ego represents an organizing concept for thinking about shame and guilt, the internal judge, and the internalization of moral prohibitions. Whether the transmission of memory or affect could be tangible, like the physiological traits that are genetically encoded within a person’s phenotype, or if Freud is actually hinting at a mnemohistory of cultural mimetic narratives is unclear. What can be concluded is that Freud’s interest in archaic inheritance provided him with a springboard for thinking about social domination as a larger story embedded in the history of the species.

In several writings, Freud suspected that early human social organization was shaped by a traumatic series of events that were repeated in various forms throughout history. These “indestructible traces” could be found in cultural narratives and traditions and could arguably

¹⁰⁴ Freud, 18:129.

¹⁰⁵ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Horkheimer, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Sigmund Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” in *A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality, and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 7, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1905), 114.

shed light on “the beginnings of religion, morality, and social organization.”¹⁰⁸ In the following, I restrict my focus to the psychoanalytic narrative that Freud weaves from these traces. The anthropological evidence Freud relies on for his argument is questionable and out-dated and cannot serve as the focal point for this discussion.¹⁰⁹ What is of interest here is how Freud’s narrative of the primal horde became an essential component of Critical Theory’s investigation into social domination, providing symbolic value for thinking about the dialectic of domination.

This “glimpse of a hypothesis which may seem fantastic” drew on Darwin’s suggestion that early societies likely resembled the “male dominated harems” of certain species of apes. Freud proposes that if this observation applied to early human societies, then it might be assumed that the strongest and oldest male of the community would emerge as a tyrant: his selfish interests superseded all others and any threat to his dominion would likely be punished with brutal violence. Those younger males who challenged the rule of this “primal father” faced the terrifying prospect of being punished with exile.¹¹⁰

At some point, the young males who had been driven out would have joined together in rebellion to overpower the older male. Stronger as a collective, these “sons” murdered the patriarch, possibly even devouring him in order to absorb his strength and authority and become like him.¹¹¹ Ending the suffering and inequity experienced under the primal father, the sons would establish laws that could be levied against any would-be tyrants and encouraged the renunciation of socially unacceptable desires in order to insure a peaceful co-existence.¹¹² A

¹⁰⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:122. This is summarized in *Totem and Taboo*: “Society was now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse attached to it; while morality was based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt.” (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 13:146).

¹⁰⁹ Freud’s study of totemic clans inferred the hypothesis of the horde from what Freud knew about the revered totem animal. This spirit serves as the common ancestor for all members of the community and cannot be eaten which, along with the taboo of exogamy, suggests that membership in this clan is likened to a sense of familial belonging. The totem is a father substitute that has taken on a superhuman form to match the unconscious power of the remembered father. As Peter Gay notes in his biography of Freud, this series of inferences relies on the “unsubstantiated, quite insecure guesses” of Charles Darwin and Robertson Smith about early human social organization (Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 329). As the biographer notes, the horde hypothesis would be contradicted by the findings of later cultural anthropology. The vast majority of totemic tribes do not engage in a sacrificial totemic meal (contra Smith) and the autocratic, polygamous, primal father model is not practiced among higher primates (contra Darwin) (Gay, 333).

¹¹⁰ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 13:125.

¹¹¹ Freud, 13:141–42.

¹¹² Freud, 13:144.

new, egalitarian social organization, possibly resembling a proto-democratic society, would be established and may have even been, for a time, governed by matriarchal rule.

However, this social progress would not last for long. Haunted by the guilt of what had been committed against the dead patriarch, the sons experienced remorse and atonement that culminated in a “deferred obedience” to the ghost of his memory.¹¹³ Out of guilt, the rebels would betray the proto-democracy they had originally fought for and revive the patriarchal hierarchy of the primal father. As the memory of the dead patriarch amassed greater psychological power in the unconscious and the dead father became “stronger than the living one had been,” the sons would turn to increasingly violent father-substitutes in an effort to reinstall his original despotism.¹¹⁴ This cycle of tyranny, rebellion, and social justice would finally come full circle with a violent return of the repressed. Freud claimed that the primal horde represents the first trauma in a long series of historical repetitions, a haunting that “has not allowed mankind a moment’s rest.”¹¹⁵

This unusual family drama, a “just-so story” as one critic described it to Freud’s amusement, transforms the patriarchal model of the family into a psychoanalytic origin myth of inter-generational revenge and atonement.¹¹⁶ However implausible, the primal horde would pre-date and foreshadow Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* by tens of thousands of years if it had actually taken place. This suggests that Freud considered his hypothesis to be significant enough that it might serve as the historical prototype for all later generational conflicts between fathers and their sons and the cycle of domination that concludes with the return of the repressed. Where Freud’s arguments do not hold up to scrutiny, Marcuse provides the following defense:

If Freud’s hypothesis is not corroborated by any anthropological evidence, it would have to be discarded altogether except for the fact that it telescopes, in a sequence of catastrophic events, the historical dialectic of domination and thereby elucidates aspects of civilization hitherto unexplained. We use Freud’s anthropological speculation only in this sense: for its *symbolic* value.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Freud, 13:143.

¹¹⁴ Freud, 13:ibid.

¹¹⁵ Freud, 13:145.

¹¹⁶ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:122. The comparison of Freud’s primal horde hypothesis with Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories for Little Children* (1902) appears in R.R. Marett’s 1920 review of *Totem and Taboo* in *The Athenaeum* (Freud, 18:128).

¹¹⁷ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 60.

Where a hypothesis can be proven or disproven, I propose that the primal horde may be better thought of as a psychoanalytic “construction.” Constructions refer to a clinical approach outlined by Freud in which, without a definitive history of events, the analyst may still gather enough fragments from the patient’s analysis (dreams, free associations, and transferences) that a reconstruction of the forgotten past could be possible.¹¹⁸ Although constructions surpass interpretation, Freud writes “we do not pretend that an individual construction is anything more than a conjecture which awaits examination, confirmation or rejection” adding, “we claim no authority for it.”¹¹⁹

And yet once this conjecture is presented to the patient, it may be powerful enough to bring about a recollection of the traumatic past and break through the original repression. The construction only has therapeutic purpose if it is successful in bringing about repressed affect, meaning that if the reconstruction is ineffective, it can be altered and updated or abandoned entirely if it limits the analysis. Extended to the primal horde in its Freudian articulation, it is unlikely this event actually took place. However, if it is held lightly and contextualized within the political upheaval of the period in which Freud was writing, the suggestion that a cycle of domination has repeated throughout history – from tyranny to proto-democracy and then tyranny again – does not appear to be so incredulous as to be outright dismissed and abandoned.¹²⁰ The primal horde’s value to the Critical Theorists lay in its power to encourage their own analysis of social domination as a perennial cycle of patriarchal despotism.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Constructions in Analysis*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 23, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1937), 258–59.

¹¹⁹ Freud, 23:265.

¹²⁰ This sentiment is proposed by anthropologist Robin Fox “something like it may have taken place” is cited in Robert A. Paul, “Yes the Primal Crime Did Take Place: A Further Defense of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*,” *Ethos* 38, no. 2 (2010): 235.

¹²¹ A similar suggestion is made by Robert A. Paul who writes, “A myth, however, is not something that happened in the past; it is a story about something that is *supposed to have* happened in the past. The myth, far from being a phenomenon lost in the mists of archaic time, is a phenomenon of the present, for the myth works and remains active and alive by means of the ongoing tellings, enactments, performances, and ritual that actualize it at any given time ... The power of myth does not depend on whether it tells a true story about ancient history but rather upon whether it is capable of providing an authoritative foundation for the continual construction, maintenance, and reproduction of an ongoing social order ... The myth relates the story of the origin of the present world and implies how to orient oneself toward this world, as constructed by its master signifiers” (Robert A. Paul, *Moses and Civilization: The Meaning Behind Freud’s Myth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 10).

2.4. The need for an authority: fathers, gods, and the ‘Great Men’ of history

The problem of social domination, why social hierarchies tend to be structured according to the strong over the weak, can be recast psychoanalytically: what is the unconscious wish that generates the appeal of those strongmen that have come to dominate history? In this section, I continue my discussion of the super-ego, this time focusing on the *imago* of the ‘Great Men’ of history to better understand the appeal of the fascist super-father. The narratives, characteristics, symbols, and associations that revolve around these historical super-fathers fuel cycles of domination by appealing to an unconscious wish on the part of the masses. The gravitation toward these figures can be explained psychoanalytically as a longing for the father – idealized as a hero, protector, or leader – who may alleviate infantile helplessness with a much desired sense of security.

As discussed, domination is implicated with the formation of the super-ego and the internalization of outside authorities. These outside authorities include historic echoes from the past that may be repeated and acted out as a return of the repressed. According to Freud, the super-ego’s archaic traces include “impressions left behind by the personalities of great leaders – men of overwhelming force of mind or men in whom one of the human impulses has found its strongest and purest, and therefore often its most one-sided, expression.”¹²² Dislodged from actual history and transformed into powerful memories and narratives, these impressions set themselves up in the psyche where they may resurface when triggered by socio-political events.

The Critical Theorists were particularly suspicious of the ‘Great Men’ in history. In an essay that inspired Adorno and Horkheimer’s assessment that society had relapsed into barbarism, Walter Benjamin critiques the historicist who underestimates the threat of fascism. Assuming that progress could only climb upward, Benjamin’s describes the historicist’s nostalgia for the so-called great men of history as an “empathy with the victor” that “invariably benefits the rulers.”¹²³ For Benjamin, it is this empathy that gives power to tyrants, remains oblivious to social injustice, and ultimately perpetuates the history of domination. This sentiment would be later integrated into Critical Theory’s empirical approach to the authoritarian character with an interest in what historical figures participants identified with most strongly as an indication of latent fascistic trends.

¹²² Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:141.

¹²³ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 256.

In his Moses study, Freud interprets “the great man” as a cultural hero who spurs historical change, explaining how this epithet approaches the projection of a super-father:

A great man influences his fellow-men in two ways: by his personality and by the idea which he puts forward. That idea may stress some ancient wishful image of the masses, or it may point out a new wishful aim to them, or it may cast its spell over them in some other way. Occasionally – and this is undoubtedly the more primary case – the personality works by itself and the idea plays a quite trivial part. Not for a moment are we in the dark as to why a great man ever becomes important. We know that in the mass of mankind there is a powerful need for an authority who can be admired, before whom one bows down, by whom one is ruled and perhaps even ill-treated. We have learnt from the psychology of individual men what the origin is of this need of the masses. It is a longing for the father felt by everyone from his childhood onwards, for the same father whom the hero of legend boasts he has overcome. And now it may begin to dawn on us that all the characteristics with which we equipped the great man are paternal characteristics, and that the essence of great men for which we vainly searched lies in this conformity. The decisiveness of thought, the strength of will, the energy of action are part of the picture of a father – but above all the autonomy and independence of the great man, his divine unconcern which may grow into ruthlessness. One must admire him, one may trust him, but one cannot avoid being afraid of him too.¹²⁴

A wish for a hero who approaches godlike ruthlessness, inspires fear and awe, and exhibits “the decisiveness of thought, the strength of will, and the energy of action” may or may not originate from an actual living prototype in childhood. Regardless of whether the personal father is present or absent, brutal or benevolent, the idealization of the father or, more importantly, even just the idea of the father as a cultural model merges with the childhood wish of protection and crystallizes into an *imago*.

Although Freud will at times insist that the super-ego derives from a combination of the father and the mother (citing for instance, the “person to whom the child owed his existence, the father [or more correctly, no doubt, the parental agency compounded of the father and mother]”), it is unambiguous which parent has taken on a decisively more important role within a patriarchal context.¹²⁵ To consider this point from a contemporary perspective, even the “great women” of history are often those who are brought into a role of power that has been inherited from men in which they must channel the dominant androcentric model of authority. When

¹²⁴ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:109–10. At the end of this passage, Freud adds that “the word itself” *der grosse Mann* suggests that the “‘great man’ in childhood” must be the father with his English translator, James Strachey, including a footnote that the original German “means not only ‘the great man’ but ‘the tall man’ or ‘the big man’” (Freud, 23:110).

¹²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. J. Strachey, vol. 22, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 1933), 163.

Freud emphasizes the role of the father as a protector, it is from the presumption that it is the father that reigns within the patriarchally encultured, father-oriented psyche.

What exactly does Freud mean when he describes the great men who champion “some ancient wishful image of the masses” or points out “a new wishful aim to them”? Here, I refer back to the construction of the primal horde to trace Freud’s origin myth for the development of religious belief. As outlined, the repressed memory of the murdered primal father gave rise to increasingly harsh and severe substitutes in the form of kingship, totems, and then the creation of gods.¹²⁶ These figures could promise “everything that a childish imagination may expect from a father – protection, care and indulgence,” leading Freud to conclude in *Totem and Taboo* that “God is nothing other than an exalted father.”¹²⁷ This statement is explicated further in *Future of an Illusion*, a study of the origins of religion and the wishes and longings that motivate belief in “present-day white Christian” societies.¹²⁸

The basic structure of the horde narrative is detailed in a hypothetical account of how society arose from its hostility toward nature. In this early community, one individual might have proclaimed themselves leader so as to evade all cultural demands and restrictions: “he would be a tyrant, a dictator, who had seized all the means to power.”¹²⁹ The members of this community would find themselves caught between submitting to tyrannical rule or the much more terrifying prospect of exile. The existential threats associated with nature – natural disaster, disease, and death – become important catalysts for seeking out the protection and comfort of society.¹³⁰

In a brief aside, Freud points out that children discover early on that they can exert some mastery over their environment by influencing those adults who are in a better position to determine their external circumstances. This infantile sense of helplessness and desire to overcome factors outside of personal control is never outgrown and persists into adulthood, at which point, influencing others continues to be a means for compensating for one’s own

¹²⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 13:155.

¹²⁷ Freud, 13:144; 147. This narrative resonates with the Oedipal conflict that concludes with the child’s renunciation of aggression and, in those unresolved cases, produces guilt. The severity of the super-ego is explained as a need for punishment for an original crime (triumphing over the father) that is accompanied by a desire to revive the father.

¹²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 21, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1927), 20.

¹²⁹ Freud, 21:15.

¹³⁰ Freud lists natural disaster, disease, and death as the sources of suffering writing, “with these forces nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weakness and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilization” (Freud, 21:16).

powerlessness. It could be reasoned that, just as the tyrant might be persuaded through supplication, one could also appeal to nature if it were personalized. Freud describes the transformation of nature into a pantheon of supernatural beings:

Impersonal forces and destinies cannot be approached; they remain eternally remote. But if the elements have passions that rage as they do in our own souls, if death itself is not something spontaneous but the violent act of an evil Will, if everywhere in nature there are Beings around us of a kind that we know in our own society, then we can breathe freely, can feel at home in the uncanny and can deal by psychical means with our senseless anxiety. We are still defenceless, perhaps, but we are no longer helplessly paralyzed; we can at least react. Perhaps, indeed, we are not even defenceless. We can apply the same methods against these violent supermen outside that we employ in our own society; we can try to adjure them, to appease them, to bribe them, and, by so influencing them, we may rob them of a part of their power.¹³¹

Out of this deeply-felt sense of infantile helplessness, a whole “store of ideas is created.”¹³² Divine beings provide some reassurance for existential dangers and, in doing so, come close to the protective role that is played by the father.¹³³ This becomes more conspicuous with the monotheistic God: a super-father who offers recourse for death with an afterlife and may even compensate believers for their suffering, drawing on their love and fear and providing in return divine protection.¹³⁴ These traits correlate with the childhood experience of ambivalence toward the father’s authority, resonating with the confidence of knowing that one is protected.¹³⁵

Freud classifies religion as an illusion in that these beliefs represent “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.”¹³⁶ This is not to say that illusions are erroneous nor that they are necessarily at odds with reality, but rather that they are not grounded in reason and do not constitute knowledge.¹³⁷ The wish for protection by an all-powerful and loving super-father should be treated as wish-fulfillment that cannot be verified. Freud takes this concept of illusion a step further and considers if these wishes not only inform religious belief

¹³¹ Freud, 21:16–17.

¹³² Freud, 21:18.

¹³³ Freud, 21:24.

¹³⁴ Freud, 21:19.

¹³⁵ Freud, 21:17.

¹³⁶ Freud, 21:30.

¹³⁷ Freud, 21:31–32. What has been interpreted as Freud’s hostility toward religion is ultimately his concern that religion has contributed to social discontent and unhappiness. Although he values religion as an important social institution that “has contributed much towards the taming of the asocial instincts,” it has not alleviate the hostility felt toward society by those who will “do everything in their power to change that civilization, or else go so far in their hostility to it that they will have nothing to do with civilization or wish a restriction of instinct” (Freud, 21:37).

but also “other cultural assets of which we hold a high opinion and by which we let our lives be ruled” such as political worldviews, i.e., *Weltanschauungen*.¹³⁸

Later in Freud’s life, when he was forced to leave Vienna and become a refugee, he describes in one preface to *Moses and Monotheism* his assumption that the greatest threat to psychoanalysis would be the immense and powerful influence of the Catholic Church. In 1938, the Church proved to be, “to use the words of the Bible, ‘a broken reed’” against National Socialism.¹³⁹ Returning to Horkheimer’s fascist super-father, this projection of grandiosity and hostility succeeded in overshadowing the influence of religious authorities, offering consolation for the historical demands and severe renunciations maintained by religious prohibitions. Instead of enforcing guilt (and the repression of hostility), National Socialism promoted the conscious expression of this aggression and weaponized it for ideological purposes. This ultimate father-substitute might fulfill the wish for security and alleviate infantile helplessness by pointing out “a new wishful aim” of national and racial greatness.

The follower is driven by a wishful image that fulfills profound desires and the leader promotes illusions that may be reasonable or unreasonable. In his final study of authority and the origins of the Jewish tradition, Freud imagines a repetition of the horde dynamic in which Moses might have been killed by the Israelites for his severe demands, disappearing into history only to be revived later in memory as a ‘Great man.’ Drawing on the Book of Exodus, Freud points out how the temptation of idolatry would have prevented the Israelites from obtaining Moses’ love, however his strict monotheism would have represented a significant development in the ancient world. The renunciation of sensuality in the form of idolatry would lend itself to a greater capacity for abstract thought, what Freud calls *Geistigkeit*. The Mosaic prohibition on idol worship would have fostered an advance in intellectuality and contributed to the self-esteem of the Israelites as they met the extraordinary demands of their patriarch.¹⁴⁰ To obey a God that cannot be seen is a metapsychological achievement as the ego meets the demands of the super-ego, the internalized Moses *imago*.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 21:34.

¹³⁹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:57.

¹⁴⁰ Freud, 23:114–15. Freud explains this further: “an advance in intellectuality consists in deciding against direct sense-perception in favour of what are known as the higher intellectual processes – that is, memories, reflections and inference ... it declares that our God is the greatest and mightiest, although he is invisible like a gale of the wind or like the soul” (Freud, 23:117–18).

¹⁴¹ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:117.

When Freud introduced this theory, the Mosaic dream of greatness through renunciation would have never been able to compete with the fascist promise of releasing violent id impulses. As will be discussed throughout the following chapters, the possibility of cultural advancement through self-mastery is not a powerful enough vision to replace those relentless anti-social urges that have been subject to repression.¹⁴² In 1938, Freud describes the rise of totalitarianism as a “cruel coercion,” the guise of liberation accompanied by the systematic destruction of free thought.¹⁴³ Freud recognized that “there is a powerful need for an authority who can be admired, before whom one bows down, by whom one is ruled and perhaps even ill-treated” and that only an illusion, the strongest, oldest, and most urgent wish, could compensate for such ill-treatment.

2.5. Conclusion: “domineering father images”

In this chapter, I introduced the problem of social domination in terms of unconscious collusion. To understand the unconscious wish to subordinate oneself to a ‘Great man’ requires an understanding of the super-ego and the internalization of patriarchal authority. This bottom-up analysis of the authoritarian character focuses less on the charismatic personification of the tyrant and more so on the collective projections that promote the fascist super-father as an omnipotent, even divine, protector. The idealization of this figure draws on a variety of super-ego *imagos*: real-life authorities made even more punitive and fearful by the projection of unconscious hostility; the yearning for a *pater familias* as encultured by the collective idealization of the father and his prescribed role in the family; and the historically transmitted veneration of ‘Great Men’ leaders, conquerors, and strongmen. The fascist super-father can then be thought of as a caricature of paternal authority, uncanny in both his familiarity and impersonality.

Although Freud never wrote about the appeal of the fascist leader, his writings on religion and the hypothesis of the primal horde introduces an origin myth for thinking about

¹⁴² This is not to suggest that Freud’s “*der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*” does not present its own difficulties, namely the concept’s masculinist bias that monotheistic abstraction represented an evolutionary step forward from matriarchal-polytheism’s *Sinnlichkeit*. As Joel Whitebook points out, “Every advance exacts its price ... The costs of creating monotheism was not only the repression and debasement of sensuality and the body but the maternal dimension in general.” (Joel Whitebook, “Geistigkeit: A Problematic Concept,” in *Freud and Monotheism: Moses and the Violent Origins of Religion*, ed. Gilad Sharvit and Karen S. Feldman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 56). A more thorough discussion of whether fascism draws more on the aesthetic sensuality of idolatrous *Sinnlichkeit* or the androcentric basis of *Geistigkeit* goes beyond the scope of this discussion.

¹⁴³ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:54.

unconscious collusion. Re-interpreted as a psychoanalytic construction, the primal father as a prototype for the fascist super-father introduces important theoretical concepts such as historical transmission and repetition, regression and the undoing of cultural progress, and deferred obedience.

It is important to note that Adorno criticizes Freud's hypothesis of the primal horde of having "a touch of the apocryphal and screwy," writing in his remarks on the *Authoritarian Personality* that the contributors "are indebted to the Freud who developed the theory of the unconscious and of repression, of the id, the ego and the superego – not Freud the anthropologist."¹⁴⁴ The primal horde would nonetheless make an appearance three years later in Adorno's 1951 study of fascist propaganda where he describes the fascist leader as a "psychological image ... apt to reanimate the idea of the all-powerful and threatening primal father"; this psychological image compared with that of the personal father of childhood depicts "an omnipotent and unbridled father figure."¹⁴⁵ To support this point, Adorno references a passage from Freud describing the narcissistic primal father as completely unburdened of all social relationships and attachments, writing:

His intellectual acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others. Consistency leads us to assume that his ego had few libidinal ties; he loved no one but himself, or other people only in so far as they served his needs. To objects his ego gave away no more than was barely necessary. He, at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the 'superman' whom Nietzsche only expected from the future. Even today the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader; but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident, and independent.¹⁴⁶

Adorno remarks, "it is from this insight that Freud derives the portrait of the 'primal father of the horde' which might as well be Hitler's."¹⁴⁷ As for the followers in the horde, Freud imagines them weak-willed, only concerned with the interests of the collective. These observations prompted Adorno to write that Freud "clearly foresaw the rise and nature of fascist mass movements."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lxiii.

¹⁴⁵ Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 124.

¹⁴⁶ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:123–24.

¹⁴⁷ Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 126.

¹⁴⁸ Adorno, 120.

For Marcuse, the primal horde provides a model for “the mental preconditions for the *continued functioning* of domination.”¹⁴⁹ The primal father monopolizes all pleasure and imposes restrictions that guarantee continued labour through the suppression of bodily-based desire, thereby foreshadowing “the subsequent domineering father-images under which civilization progressed.”¹⁵⁰ The father’s deification introduces the reification of his authority and that of all subsequent patriarchs: “original domination becomes eternal, cosmic, and good, and in this form guards the process of civilization.”¹⁵¹ Freud’s narrative ends with the internalization of domination over the self as the sons impose increasingly severe father substitutes. Marcuse observes,

The events and experiences which may “awaken” the repressed material – even without a specific strengthening of the instincts attached to it – are, at the societal level, encountered in the institutions and ideologies which the individual faces daily and which reproduce, in their structure, both domination and the impulse to overthrow it (family, school, workshop and office, the state, the law, the prevailing philosophy and morality). The decisive difference between the primal situation and its civilized historical return is, of course, that in the latter the ruler-father is normally no longer killed and eaten, and that domination is normally no longer personal ... The function of the father is gradually transferred from his individual person to his social position, to his image in the son (conscience), to God, to the various agencies and agents which teach the son to become a mature and restrained member of his society.¹⁵²

Adorno and Horkheimer’s concern that technological progress relapsed into barbarism and Marcuse’s notion of a pendulum that swings back and forth from liberty to tyranny both suggest retrogressive trends in their critique of history. During the First World War, Freud would write, “in reality our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen so high as we believed.”¹⁵³ The European myth of civilized refinement and moral superiority stood out to these thinkers as a screen for greater cultural trends of domination. The primal horde offers a paradigm for the patriarchal cycle of domination that persists with every successive generation. As Marcuse observes, the horde hypothesis “does not lead back to the image of a paradise which man has forfeited by his sin against God” but instead “to the

¹⁴⁹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 61.

¹⁵⁰ Marcuse, 62.

¹⁵¹ Marcuse, 66.

¹⁵² Marcuse, 74–75.

¹⁵³ Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” 285.

domination of man by man, established by a very earthly father-despot and perpetuated by the unsuccessful or uncompleted rebellion against him.”¹⁵⁴

Treating the primal horde as a construction rather than a literal event, the story might be revised as the following: a triumphant narrative of a younger generation (and not just the sons of the primal father but also his daughters) rising up against a tyrant or one in which victims of sexual exploitation (a role that would not be exclusive to the heterosexist delineation of feminized victims and their male rescuers) emancipate themselves so as to create a better and just world. However the construction is altered to better reflect the dynamics of patriarchal domination, it is striking that the pre-Oedipal mother cannot enter into this story of patricide. Following Freud, the Critical Theorists concentrated on the relationship between the father and the son, neglecting the many roles women might also play in this dynamic and in the mental organization of the authoritarian character. The “spectral mother,” which I revisit in chapter seven, is never addressed by the Critical Theorists. Echoing Freud’s emphasis on the father, these theorists instead turned their analysis to the son with their study of the authoritarian character.

¹⁵⁴ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 59–60.

3. Philosophical anthropologies: Reich, Fromm, and Horkheimer on the authoritarian character

“It took millions of years for you to evolve from a jellyfish to a terrestrial biped. You have been living in bodily rigidity, your present aberration, for only six thousand years. It will take you a hundred or five hundred or five thousand years to rediscover the nature in yourself, the jellyfish in you.”¹⁵⁵

Wilhelm Reich, *Listen, Little Man!* (1946)

“Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus* [man is a wolf onto man]”¹⁵⁶

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)

From roughly 1930 to 1950, several members and associates of the Institute for Social Research developed a psychoanalytic model in their explanation for fascist adherence. This “authority-oriented character” or “fascistic character” shifted with the institute’s migration to the United States, where it was translated into its better known epithet, the “authoritarian personality.” As will be discussed more thoroughly in my fourth chapter, the authoritarian character transformed into a typology that could be more definitively established according to the methodologies of the American social sciences, i.e., psychometric assessments. Today, the concept’s well-worn political application, along with renewed speculation about the relationship between ideological adherence and psychopathology, has overshadowed the critical and psychoanalytic roots of the original concept as a *character structure*.

In this chapter, I introduce three theorists associated with the Institute – Wilhelm Reich, Max Horkheimer, and Erich Fromm – and survey their lesser-known contributions to the study of authoritarianism in the 1930s. In the cannon of anti-authoritarian thought, the writings discussed here tend to be neglected in favour of Horkheimer and Adorno’s work on *The Authoritarian Personality* and Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*. Both of these later texts

¹⁵⁵ Wilhelm Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), 328.

¹⁵⁶ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:111.

represent a decisive shift away from Freudian psychoanalysis and the original research agenda of the Institute for Social Research. Meanwhile, Reich's later controversies tarnished his reputation as the first psychoanalytic theorist to inaugurate the psychological study of fascism. Beyond surveying these works, I evaluate the theorist's contributions according to the distinct philosophical anthropology that informs their approach, that is, a response to the Kantian query of "what is a human being?" This evaluation is based on the depth of their analysis and the incorporation of the psychoanalytic unconscious into their understanding of domination and submission as a dynamic of psychological collusion.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the child's identity forms, first, in relation to the parental unit, both in seeking their love and protection and in rebelling against their authority. Freud extends these psychodynamics into social life: "the simultaneous existence of love and hate towards the same object," Freud writes, "lies at the root of many important cultural institutions."¹⁵⁷ The child's conflicted relationship with the patriarchal father re-emerges in the authoritarian character's attitude toward strongmen leaders, who may arouse in their followers the idealization of, and resentment toward, the original father. For the following theorists, Freud's classical model of the ambivalence between the father and the son of the patriarchal family represents a foundational premise for the development of the authoritarian character.

Wilhelm Reich, the Freud-Marxian anarchist and author of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, proposed that the authoritarian family introduces a sexual repression that is mirrored by the authoritarian state. These repressions come to be anchored within the subject's character structure as a layer of psyche that adjusts to societal expectations (3.1). Reich would further develop his character analysis, understanding it to be a mask behind which the "little man" channels the power of stronger authority figures. He describes this figure as a resentful and deeply wounded victim of the state who has buried their true self in order to conform to the demands of societal authorities (3.2).

In 1930 and 1931, the Institute for Social Research embarked on a new "form of theory" that they hoped would integrate social science methods with theoretical approaches to the study of authoritarianism. Although this collaborative approach was not pursued following their migration to the United States, the research of this period represents Critical Theory's first

¹⁵⁷ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 13:157.

attempt to explain fascist adherence by examining character traits. For Horkheimer in particular, these traits could be studied as an updated philosophical anthropology (3.3). With the 1936 essay collection *Studies on Authority and the Family*, Horkheimer proposed that the “characteristic stamp” of the present epoch was the abstraction and mystification of authority. Drawing on historical, economic, and sociological elements, he understood the authority-oriented character to be inextricably linked with the abstraction of authority in Western patriarchal societies (3.4).

Fromm similarly understood the authoritarian or sadomasochistic character as an adaptation to a specific environment. As the institute’s leading psychoanalyst, he introduced to the 1936 collection a metapsychological analysis of the “social character” who had acquired an overly severe super-ego in their adaptation to difficult life circumstances, thereby weakening ego development (3.5). Disputes and shifting trajectories among these theorists will be discussed in the conclusion with an emphasis on how conflicting philosophical anthropologies inform their approach to the authoritarian character (3.6). Here, I seek to recover those psychoanalytic concepts that thread together a genealogy of anti-authoritarian thought and also evaluate each theorist’s approach to the problem of social domination.

3.1. A political psychology: Reich’s character analysis

Unlike the much later *Authoritarian Personality* study (1950), Reich’s political psychology does not refer to a collection of measurable psychological traits that might correspond with particular political behaviours, beliefs, or groupings. He writes, “mental attitudes and political parties cannot be mechanically equated.”¹⁵⁸ Instead of constituting a distinct political system or philosophy, Reich held that shades of fascism can be observed in individuals across the political spectrum. If fascism is not endemic to specific groups, then economic analysis becomes sterile. As such, Reich argued that it is psychology, not a Marxian economic analysis, “that is in a position to investigate the structure of man’s character in a given epoch, to investigate how he thinks and acts.”¹⁵⁹ Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) maintains that fascism draws out a universally shared character-substructure that can be exploited by the authoritarian state. Holding the individual responsible for exercising personal freedom, Reich proposes:

¹⁵⁸ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 299.

¹⁵⁹ Reich, 50.

It is the irresponsibility of masses of people that lies at the basis of fascism of all countries, nations and races etc. Fascism is the result of man's distortion over thousands of years. It could have developed in any country or nation. It is not a character trait that is confined to the Germans or Italians. It is manifest in every single individual of the world.¹⁶⁰

For Reich, political psychology refers to what he calls the "subjective factor," i.e. where collective social reality is absorbed by the individual psyche. According to Reich's "character-analysis," the mind can be conceptualized as a three-tiered model in which "character" serves as an intermediary layer between the deeper fundamental "biological core" of the person (who the individual actually is) and the outer layer that guarantees social integration, a superficial "mask of cultivation" (whom the individual is forced to become in order to secure societal membership).¹⁶¹ Under ideal social conditions, the biological core is "an essentially honest, industrious, cooperative, loving, and, if motivated, rationally hating animal," while Reich associates the mask of personality with a disingenuous façade, describing it as the "reserved, polite, compassionate, responsible, conscientious" veneer of persona.¹⁶²

These two strata, the mask of cultivation and the biological core, never come into contact except through the intermediary layer of "character." Reich identifies this stratum as the location of sadistic and violent impulses traditionally associated by Freud with the unconscious id. Contrary to Freud, he argues that this sadism is not inherent to the human condition but is rather a learned trait that originates from the cruelty of the state apparatus. This cruelty is then internalized, becoming part of the character, where it is subject to repression, transforming into individual destructiveness. According to this model, the biological core of the human being is inherently neutral, if not benevolent, while character is responsible for perverse impulses and behaviour.¹⁶³

Character structure thereby plays the dual role of both aiding the individual in their adjustment to a repressive social order while also serving as a vehicle for that same social order

¹⁶⁰ Reich, 351.

¹⁶¹ Reich, 13-14.

¹⁶² Reich, *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Here, Reich proposes, in opposition to Freud, that beyond the unconscious there is an even deeper stratification within the topographical model outlined by classical psychoanalysis that should be reserved for the "biological core" of the organism. The Freudian unconscious remains at the secondary level of Reich's model as a component of character (Reich, 14).

by embedding and preserving itself within the character structure.¹⁶⁴ Renewed in each generation, “a deep-reaching process” of psychic formation takes place in which the individual conforms to and reproduces the dominant social ideologies that will come to be “anchored” within an individual character structure.¹⁶⁵ The primary site for this anchoring is the traditional patriarchal family which, Reich argues, is enmeshed with the patriarchal authoritarian state.

For Reich, any notion of a state apparatus is synonymous with authoritarianism. Once interchangeable with society, the state “detached itself ... and became more and more alien to [society], eventually assuming the form of a raging force above and against it.”¹⁶⁶ The ideology of a political party, even one that props up state supremacy (e.g., the National Socialist German Workers’ Party) does not constitute authoritarianism by itself. As an institution that exists prior to political ideology, the authoritarian state is already installed as a naturalized and unquestionable component of social existence.

Furthermore, Reich argues that the authoritarian state is synonymous with the rigid social hierarchy of the traditional authoritarian family. The father maintains absolute power over women and children, relegating the mother’s sexual desires to the narrow confines of reproduction and subjecting the child’s autoerotic desires to moralistic prohibition.¹⁶⁷ Reich maintains that the child’s natural impulse toward masturbatory gratification is crushed by the punitive authority of the state, as exercised by the power of the authoritarian father. The child who is now made to be estranged from their perfectly natural impulse toward sexual gratification becomes “afraid, shy, fearful of authority, obedient, ‘good’, and ‘docile.’”¹⁶⁸ The original resentment and rebelliousness first felt toward the father remains preserved within the mature adult who, in their eagerness to adapt to a repressive society, cultivates a submissive and deferential attitude toward authority generally.¹⁶⁹ This ambivalence constitutes the nucleus of the authoritarian character.

The concept of “character” first appears in Freud’s 1908 clinical writings to refer to the ways in which repressed psychosexual desires and conflicts can be sublimated into distinct

¹⁶⁴ Wilhelm Reich, *Character-Analysis*, trans. Theodore P. Wolfe, Third Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1949), xxii.

¹⁶⁵ Reich, xxii, xxiii.

¹⁶⁶ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 301.

¹⁶⁷ Reich, 139.

¹⁶⁸ Reich, 64.

¹⁶⁹ Reich, 71.

personality traits. The stimulation of specific bodily zones, such as the excitations associated with the anal zone during toilet training, undergo societal repression and are transformed into profound feelings of “shame, disgust, and morality, [which] are created in the mind.”¹⁷⁰ Freud proposes that the original urge to mess or dirty might mutate into the character-traits of orderliness and obstinance; all characteristics that he observed in the consulting room as the defense mechanism of reaction-formation.¹⁷¹ The economic organization of bodily-based drives in accordance with societal expectations may manifest as “character-traits.” This idea is revisited in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

The development of civilization appears to us as a peculiar process which mankind undergoes, and in which several things strike us as familiar. The most remarkable example of such a process is found in the anal erotism of young human beings. Their original interests in the excretory function, its organs and products, is changed in the course of their growth into a group of traits which are familiar to us as parsimony, a sense of order and cleanliness – qualities which, though valuable and welcome in themselves, may be intensified till they become markedly dominant and produce what is called the anal character. How this happens we do not know, but there is no doubt about the correctness of the finding.¹⁷²

This passage and the comment following it draw attention to the similarity between the formation of the anal character and the renunciation of libidinal drives. Freud writes “we cannot fail to be struck by the similarity between the process of civilization and the libidinal development of the individual” adding “other instincts [besides anal erotism] are induced to displace the conditions for their satisfaction, to lead them into other paths.”¹⁷³ The individual’s social integration and acceptance by the community is then guaranteed by taking these “other paths,” transforming unacceptable impulses into behaviour that is more likely to be rewarded. As cited above, Freud is unable to account fully for how this re-direction takes place.

¹⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Character and Anal Eroticism,” in *Jensen’s “Gradiva” and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 9, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1908), 171.

¹⁷¹ Freud, *ibid.* Freud writes, “Among those whom we try to help by our psycho-analytic efforts we often come across a type of person who is marked by the possession of a certain set of character-traits, while at the same time our attention is drawn to the behaviour in his childhood of one of his bodily functions and the organ concerned in it. I cannot say at this date what particular occasions began to give me an impression that there was some organic connection between this type of character and this behaviour of an organ, but I can assure the reader that no theoretical expectation played any part in that impression” (Freud, 169).

¹⁷² Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:96–97.

¹⁷³ Freud, 21:97.

Freud's understanding of character would broaden beyond psychosexual development to include the incorporation of past identifications from childhood and the object relations that re-enforce the repression of unacceptable impulses. On the super-ego, Freud writes:

First and foremost there is the incorporation of the former parental agency as a super-ego, which is no doubt its more important and decisive portion, and, further, identifications with the two parents of the later period and other influential figures, and similar identifications formed as precipitates of abandoned object-relations. And we may now add as contributions to the construction of character which are never absent the reaction-formations which the ego acquires – to begin with in making its repressions, and later, by a more normal method, when it rejects unwished-for instinctual impulses.¹⁷⁴

Freud groups character formation with the internalization of the parental *imago*, suggesting that it is a behavioural pattern that crystallizes over time. It is peculiar that, despite its frequent clinical application, Freud never provides a precise definition for the origin and attributes of a character neurosis.¹⁷⁵ To cite the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel, who also puzzled over this question, character structures might be thought of as the ego's reactionary organization of incoming stimuli from outside the psyche and the internal impulses threatening to erupt from within. With every case of character neurosis, the psychoanalyst must inquire as to “when and how the ego acquires the qualities by which it habitually adjusts itself to the demands of instinctual drives and of the external world, and [the] layer also of the superego.”¹⁷⁶ According to this definition, impulses originating from the drives can be altered, shaped, and modified by the ego so as to compromise and adapt to the present environment. Those impulses that threaten social cohesion are repressed and defended against with the crystallization of a character structure along with character-traits so as to accommodate social expectations.

Karl Abraham, the student of Freud who first proposed the existence of psychosexual stages (e.g., oral sadistic, anal expulsive and retentive, phallic, genital, etc.), reported similarly obstinate patients in his clinical practice as those Freud had worked with. Attending the analysis but refusing to free associate, these patients hindered the psychotherapeutic process by evading

¹⁷⁴ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 22:91. Fromm would later write in *Man for Himself* that Freud's concept of character made an important distinction between traits commonly focused on by the behaviourists versus “a system of strivings” that are largely motivated by unconscious desires (Erich H. Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949), 54).

¹⁷⁵ J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 67.

¹⁷⁶ Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, 1st ed (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1946), 427, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203981580>.

analytic interpretation. Abraham suggests that the patient's resistance to free association and its attendant interpretation bears traces from early childhood experiences with the father and is due to the harm that the analyst's interpretation may cause to the patient's self-image. These patients are inclined to feel "humiliated by every fact that is established in their psycho-analysis" and "are continually on guard against suffering such humiliations," going so far as to adopt a style of speaking that is mechanical and stilted (what Abraham calls "ego-syntonic"), so as to guard against any actual psychotherapeutic work.¹⁷⁷

The unwillingness to free associate in the clinical context is also observed by Reich who would describe this defensive trait as a carefully-curated "character armor." The fragile psyche is protected by a barricade that is installed against the outside world (represented by the analyst) and also works to seal in the patient's psychological reality and fortify it within the unconscious. This precarious equilibrium is threatened by the inevitable return of the repressed which is compounded, in turn, by the work of the analyst who may pierce through the patient's façade.¹⁷⁸

In keeping with Freud and Abraham's observations, Reich proposed that characteristics associated with high resistance cement over time into a type. A character type is a "specific way of being of an individual, an expression of his total past" with Reich providing the following examples: the overly polite "good" patient who is unable to bring affect into the analytic setting; the patient who demands love from the analyst by concealing their aggression; or the highly defensive patient who will "smile inwardly about everything and everyone."¹⁷⁹ Like the "ego-syntonic" speech identified by Abraham, Reich is also interested in a patient's expressive style that relies on clichéd speech, facial tics, and other idiosyncrasies: "What is specific of the character resistance is not *what* the patient says or does, but *how* he talks and acts, not *what* he gives away in a dream but *how* he censors, distorts, etc..¹⁸⁰ Any suggestion that certain behaviour can be explained away because these individuals "just *are* that way" serves to reify these traits as synonymous with the patient rather than a biproduct of their adaptation to a given environment. Naturalizing these psychological traits "implies that the individual was born that

¹⁷⁷ Karl Abraham, "On a Particular Kind of Resistance against the Psycho-Analytic Method 1919," in *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham Md.*, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Alix Strachey Douglas Bryan (New York: Routledge, 2018), 305.

¹⁷⁸ Reich, *Character-Analysis*, 41.

¹⁷⁹ Reich, 44–46.

¹⁸⁰ Reich, 47.

way, that this ‘happens to be’ his character,” when they are really an alterable and analyzable symptom rooted in deeper personal conflicts.¹⁸¹

Authoritarian psychology, for Reich, can now be understood as character armour: a deflection against environmental and psychological disturbances that threaten to break through the carefully constructed mask of social compliance. As he argues in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, this armour is anchored with the suppression of sexuality in the nuclear, patriarchal family. The authoritarian state continues this repression but also channels the natural pursuit of anti-social urges and gratification toward activities that uphold the imperial interests of the state. For instance, the military not only instrumentalizes human aggression as a tool for state domination but also uses sexual images to recruit soldiers and even indulges in its own form of sexual exhibitionism, as Reich points out “the sexual effect of a uniform, the erotically provocative effect of rhythmically executed goose-stepping.”¹⁸² The authoritarian interests of the state exploit and tantalize repressed urges, transforming the subject of mass psychology into a character structure that acts, feels, and thinks against their own material interests and bodily-based wishes.

Reich insists that fascism’s success in exploiting the psychology of its followers cannot be chalked up to a mass deception or ruse or what was described at the time as a “Nazi psychosis.”¹⁸³ Reich argues that fascist propaganda could only be effective with the implementation of the authoritarian character structure in the patriarchal family.¹⁸⁴ It was the average worker’s identification with the ideology of state-power that enabled mass support for Hitler (despite the latter’s interest in maintaining class hierarchy along with racial and nationalist hierarchies).¹⁸⁵ Thus, the dominion of the Führer echoed the dominion of the father in the home. Reich argues:

The family cannot be regarded as the basis of the authoritarian state, but only as one of the most important institutions that supports it. We, however, have to look upon it as *political reaction’s germ cell*, the most important centre for the production of reactionary men and women. Originating and developing from definite social processes, it becomes the most essential institution for the preservation of the authoritarian system that shapes it.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Reich, 43.

¹⁸² Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 66.

¹⁸³ Reich, 69.

¹⁸⁴ Reich, 74.

¹⁸⁵ Reich, 80.

¹⁸⁶ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 137.

By reactionary, I interpret this passage as referring to the repression of internal impulses and the internalization of outside authorities. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the development of the super-ego and the defense mechanisms that redirect rebellious or anti-social behaviour toward compliance (i.e., reaction formation). In Reichian terms, it is the reactionary formation of a character mask that allows the subject to conform to the hierarchical expectations of the state.

3.2. The little man behind the character mask

Reich would be expelled from both the International Psychoanalytic Association and the Communist International for his contentious theories about sexuality. His anarchic “sex-political” solution to the problem of fascism suggested that if the reproductive orientation of the family could shift toward sexual consciousness, unburdening the child of repressively rigid character traits (e.g., a preoccupation with self-control, shame, punishment, etc.), then this awareness might have the power to disrupt the state’s hold over the authoritarian psyche.¹⁸⁷ This controversial aspiration had only worsened his break with Freud who the Nazis targeted by burning his books and declaring psychoanalysis a “Jewish science.”¹⁸⁸

Forced to leave Nazi Germany due to his political affiliations and Jewish heritage, Reich would go on to promote his treatments and “orgonomic” sex clinics in the United States in the years leading up to his incarceration and death in prison. Reich had hoped to introduce his treatments in Europe to those who channeled their sexual alienation into the false promises offered by fascist membership and ideology. In a 1946 clinical vignette of “the Little Man,” Reich describes the political implications of his character analysis:

I was in close contact with you for many years, because I knew your life through my own and wanted to help you ... I saw that I was indeed helping you and that you accepted my help willingly, often with tears in your eyes. Only very gradually did I come to see that you are capable of accepting help but not of defending it. I defended it and fought hard for you, in your stead. Then your leaders came and shattered my work. You followed them without a murmur. After that I remained in contact with you in the hope of finding a

¹⁸⁷ Reich, 138.

¹⁸⁸ Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 9–10. While Reich placed more emphasis on unmasking resistances that block sexual desire, Freud remained committed to making the analysand conscious of unconscious conflicts rather than acting upon desire and aggression. Reich’s legacy is complicated by his indictment by the FDA and subsequent death in prison. In the United States, he was subject to government surveillance and his works (including pamphlets, books, and several of his inventions including the orgone accumulator) were officially burned and destroyed. Toward the end of his life, Reich became increasingly paranoid, pursuing pseudoscientific and UFO research that only further denigrated his reputation.

way to help you without being destroyed by you, either as your leader or as your victim.¹⁸⁹

Reich considers himself to be the little man's greatest advocate, also describing empathy for this figure in 1933 as "a creature who had come under the domination of the worst social conditions, conditions he himself had created and bore within himself as a part of his character and from which he sought to free himself in vain."¹⁹⁰ Socially and economically disenfranchised, the little man aspired toward greatness by conforming to a powerful strongman authority and sharing in that authority's "illusions of strength."¹⁹¹

The little man's profound devotion to the fascist leader along with their rebellious hostility toward the (more accessible) authority-figure of the analyst should be interpreted as two extremes of the child's original ambivalence toward the patriarchal father. Reich claims to have successfully peeled away the character armour of his patient to expose tearful weakness and vulnerability: "I've seen you naked in body and soul, without your mask, political label, or national pride."¹⁹² As Freud observed in his clinical practice, it is common for the patient of psychoanalysis to regard their analyst as "the reincarnation" of an earlier prototype, contributing to an ambivalent transference that may be gleaned for further analysis.¹⁹³ Reich recognizes the role of transference and counter-transference in this relationship, "you might discover yourself in me and me in yourself, take fright, and murder yourself in me."¹⁹⁴

The analyst, who is already targeted for destruction by the fascist antisemite, is held responsible for the little man's feelings of inadequacy and smallness ("You feel inferior because you yourself are exactly what you want to kill off in the people you call Jews").¹⁹⁵ This smallness is then displaced into the analyst as the little man anticipates the much coveted sense of grandiosity promised by the strongman authority.¹⁹⁶ Whether or not this omnipotence can ever

¹⁸⁹ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 10.

¹⁹⁰ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 25.

¹⁹¹ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 7.

¹⁹² Reich, 6.

¹⁹³ Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 23:174–75.

¹⁹⁴ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 11.

¹⁹⁵ Reich, 31.

¹⁹⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer agreed with Reich's assessment that the strongman and the little man were interchangeable, drawing attention to "the similarity between the ghetto barber and the dictator" in Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 197). Reich's "the little man" is also adapted by Adorno as "the great little man" (Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 127, 128) and "our would-be Hitlers" (Adorno, 119).

be accessed by the little man, Reich responds, “you’re satisfied with the *illusion* that you hold power.”¹⁹⁷

In this essay, Reich describes the authoritarian character as one who has “inherited a terrible past.”¹⁹⁸ Regardless of political adherence, historical context, race, or gender (he even refers to the “little woman”), the little man’s inadequacy is concealed behind the greatness of others: “*a great man knows when and in what way he is a little man. A little man does not know he is little and is afraid to know.*”¹⁹⁹ They are unable to liberate themselves from societal repression and must enlist the help of strongman dictators to feel empowered (“Mussolini, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin”).²⁰⁰ Their doctrinaire thinking belittles the cautious thinker: “Your unscrupulousness, your narrow-mindedness, your crooked thinking and your ‘eternal truths,’ which are incapable of surviving ten years of social development.”²⁰¹ Reich observes, “you see everything upside down” and cites instances of the little man’s hypocrisy: “You have mistaken the right of free speech and criticism for the right to shoot off your mouth and crack stupid jokes”; “you want to criticize but not to be criticized”; and “you want to attack without exposing yourself to attack.”²⁰² The little man internalizes and identifies with the power of outside authorities. Reich observes, “you steal a bone and crawl away to gnaw at it. Freud once told you as much” adding, “*you cram yourself full of his knowledge, his happiness, his greatness, but can’t digest what you’ve eaten.*”²⁰³

The little man weaponizes their character armour against others but also against their own psyche. Defending against repressed urges, they exhibit “a basic bodily attitude ... of *holding back* and of defiant mistrust.”²⁰⁴ Reich hints at the sexual impulses raging beneath the defensive function of character armour, “you go to such lengths to sidestep the truth, little man. The truth might arouse a love reflex.”²⁰⁵ Their bodily-based interests are contradicted by their unwavering support for those authorities who will diminish what remains behind the little man’s character mask, “*what you wanted to destroy is flourishing more than ever, and what you should have*

¹⁹⁷ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 14.

¹⁹⁸ Reich, 5.

¹⁹⁹ Reich, 7.

²⁰⁰ Reich, 8.

²⁰¹ Reich, 19–20.

²⁰² Reich, 75.

²⁰³ Reich, 92.

²⁰⁴ Reich, 46.

²⁰⁵ Reich, 47.

preserved and guarded like your own life you've destroyed."²⁰⁶ The Little Man is both a "myth" and a "type" but Reich is hopeful that authenticity and self-actualization remain possible.²⁰⁷

Reich writes,

Oh yes, little man, you have depths, but you don't know it. You're afraid, mortally afraid of your depths; that's why your head swims when you look into the depths, why you reel as if you were on the edge of a precipice. You're afraid of falling and losing your "special character." Because, try as you will to find yourself, it's always the same cruel, envious, greedy, thieving little man that turns up.²⁰⁸

The Little Man may choose to become reconciled with their biological core. Thus, the "essentially honest, industrious, cooperative, loving, and, if motivated, rationally hating animal" described in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* is presumably intact beneath the character mask, preserved within the deepest recesses of the psyche.²⁰⁹

Reich's sex-political theory draws attention to the important ways in which the patriarchal family mediates the individual and society by highlighting the estrangement experienced by women and children. The Critical Theorists nonetheless distanced themselves from Reich, whom they never considered an official member of the institute (he had only worked in its fringes, contributing to their *Zeitschrift* journal).²¹⁰ More than just a study of the subjective factor, Reich's political psychology expounds a revolutionary sexual politics that the Critical Theorists would reject for its confident optimism that the masses only need to be liberated through the free expression of love.

Reich's claim that any prohibition on the masturbatory proclivities of the child results in a submissiveness that "constitutes a mixture of sexual impotence, helplessness, a need for attachments, a nostalgia for a leader, fear of authority, timidity, and mysticism" is understandably questioned if not ridiculed by scholars.²¹¹ However, Marcuse would come to recognize Reich's work as "the most serious attempt to develop the critical social theory implicit in Freud" having drawn attention to "the extent to which sexual repression is enforced by the

²⁰⁶ Reich, 75.

²⁰⁷ Reich, 115, 107.

²⁰⁸ Reich, 114.

²⁰⁹ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 13–14.

²¹⁰ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 27, 86.

²¹¹ Dagmar Herzog describes this conclusion as "silly ... in his conviction that it was above all parental prevention of child masturbation that prepared people for being obedient citizens and workers" Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 161.

interests of domination and exploitation, and the extent to which these interests are in turn reinforced and reproduced by sexual repression.”²¹²

Where Freud and the Critical Theorists depart from Reich is in his insistence that, to quote Marcuse, “progress in freedom appears as a mere release of sexuality.”²¹³ This optimistic solution idealizes the human subject’s capacity for peaceful co-existence by emphasizing sexual co-operation over the aggressive tendency to engage in violent conflict. Reich leaves little room for Freud’s 1930 discussion in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that destructive and aggressive impulses are mobilized in mass psychology and rejects outright Freud’s suggestion that these impulses have their origin in the death drive. In *The Freudian Left*, Paul A. Robinson also critiques Reich’s three-tiered metapsychology for its “alarming intellectual simplicity” as an uncorrupted biological core might achieve psychic health once it has disposed of its character armour.²¹⁴ I argue that Reich’s insistence that the state is to blame for all human conflict ignores the components of society that are created by the human imagination; beyond the internalization of the state, there is the production and reproduction of the tyrants who are responsible for managing the state.

Reich’s relentless desire to free the biological core of this obstruction takes on a more dogmatic tone in his later works. Once a symptom of larger social processes, Reich’s increasingly hostile preoccupation with character armour treats this psychical layer as a deadly illness. In *Listen! Little Man*, Reich shifts from advocating for social reform to aggressive treatment, chastising, “you’re sick, little man, very sick. It’s not your fault; but it’s your responsibility to get well.”²¹⁵ Although Reich distanced himself from those doctors who are “still bogged down in *pathology*,” the audacity of claiming his own treatments can rescue the Little Man – “but I, little man, have often saved your life” – betrays an alarming fanaticism.²¹⁶

Robinson notes,

Reich’s style was unabashedly melodramatic. His basic tactic was to isolate a particular character trait and confront the patient with it repeatedly, even threatening to terminate

²¹² Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 239.

²¹³ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, *ibid.*

²¹⁴ Paul A. Robinson, *The Freudian Left: Wilhelm Reich, Geza Roheim, Herbert Marcuse* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 9.

²¹⁵ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 16.

²¹⁶ Reich, 79.

the analysis if this procedure was objected to. ... The result of this heightened awareness was the dissolution of the character trait, and with it the release of imprisoned libido.²¹⁷

Reich imagines that without the character mask, the Little Man might discover who they truly are at the biological core, “not the newspaper you read, not your vicious neighbour’s opinion, but ‘yourself.’”²¹⁸ He concludes his study with hopeful appeals to what remains of the Little Man beneath their character, “you are *great*, little man, when you’re not mean and small.”²¹⁹ Although character armour is theorized as an anchor for greater social forces to take root in the psyche, Reich’s critique remains superficially confined to the development and eradication of these traits thereby hindering any investigation into what might lie beyond the character mask.

3.3. A marriage of social science and Critical Theory (1930-1931)

In 1936, Horkheimer published and edited the collection, *Studies on Authority and the Family: Research Reports from the Institute for Social Research*, including his own essay “Authority and the Family” and a contribution by Erich Fromm entitled “Sociopsychological Dimensions.”²²⁰ While these articles are primarily theoretical, the conception of this research dates back to a 1930-1931 empirical study on authoritarianism conducted by the institute under the direction of Fromm.

This earlier study investigated both explicit and latent authoritarian attitudes among the German working class through open-ended interpretive questionnaires. The questionnaire, which was distributed to over 700 participants, addressed several controversial topics salient at the time. Borrowing from the method of psychoanalytic interpretation, the interviewer scanned their report for any relevant word-patterns and repetition, sifting through the latent and manifest content of the participant’s answers. The results of the study pointed to a remarkable discrepancy between the right-wing extremism espoused by participants before filling in the questionnaire (manifest content) and their self-reported responses (latent content). From the written responses,

²¹⁷ Robinson, *The Freudian Left: Wilhelm Reich, Geza Roheim, Herbert Marcuse*, 27. Frequently these clinical confrontations resulted in physical attacks on Reich (Robinson, 28).

²¹⁸ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 26.

²¹⁹ Reich, 123.

²²⁰ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination : A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 116–17. The collection also includes Marcuse’s primarily philosophical essay “A Study of Authority” which I have chosen not to incorporate into this chapter as Marcuse had yet to integrate psychoanalytic theory into his analysis.

only ten percent of participants conformed to traits that could be considered consistent with the “authoritarian character,” fifteen percent expressed “anti-authoritarian” commitments, and the remaining majority demonstrated an ambivalent or non-committal combination of both profiles. Conducted just before Hitler’s 1933 seizure of power, Fromm and Horkheimer interpreted this conclusion as evidence that Nazism was unlikely to encounter resistance from the general population.²²¹

It is notable that, in pre-Nazi Germany, only ten percent of participants consistently indicated authoritarian tendencies. This may suggest either profile flexibility or an undeveloped concept resulting in an underdeveloped measure. For instance, one of the questions included in this open-ended questionnaire asked participants to list which historical figures they admired most. Some respondents answered military leaders and dictators (Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon, and surprisingly Marx and Lenin) indicated authoritarian tendencies while others who answered with figures uninterested in political power (Socrates, Pasteur, Kant, and also Marx and Lenin) indicating more democratic tendencies.²²² From this question alone, it is unclear what the question is actually measuring beyond Fromm and Horkheimer’s intellectual bias that the average respondent should be just as familiar with philosophers and microbiologists as they would be with history’s great military leaders. The researchers might have also shifted their focus from personality profiles to a study of passivity in the non-authoritarian and ambivalent subject, as this proved to be the more salient finding than a rigid typology. Unfortunately, much of this data was either lost in the institute’s departure from Germany or was never published in full due to the disputes between Horkheimer and Fromm culminating in the latter’s exit from the institute.²²³

Without producing a concrete profile, the study revealed the extent to which ambivalence and passive resignation to a stronger political force likely influenced the German federal election. However, what is perhaps most significant for the purposes of this chapter is not so much the study’s conclusions as the methodological tensions underlying the project. Horkheimer sought to incorporate the newly developed research methods of the social sciences into Critical

²²¹ Jay, 116–17.

²²² Erich H. Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ, and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 138.

²²³ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination : A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 117.

Theory while also remaining faithful to immanent critique. Discussing Fromm and Horkheimer's later 1936 publication and its departure from the 1930-31 study, Frankfurt School historian Rolf Wiggershaus observes the following:

The fact that the theoretical drafts did not refer at any point to the [1930-31] questionnaire material or to the reports on research and literature dramatically illustrated the limited extent to which [quoting Horkheimer] a 'fusion of constructive and empirical procedures' could be spoken of. At the same time, the letters of Horkheimer and Fromm showed that empirical research, and keeping themselves well-informed about the various scientific disciplines, served the Institute's two chief theoreticians as a kind of protective screen. *Behind this screen, a form of theory was being pursued which, on the one hand, was attempting to distinguish itself from pure philosophy, but which was also, on the other hand, sceptical about the various branches of science and about empirical research, and uncertain of its own status* (emphasis added).²²⁴

As evident from the 1936 theory-based essay collection, Horkheimer's aspiration to fuse together Critical Theory and empirical research failed to manifest. With the exception of his later collaborative work on *The Authoritarian Personality*, Horkheimer did not attempt to revisit this fusion nor would it be developed further in any of the institute's later works.²²⁵ Although the new "form of theory" described by Wiggershaus may not have taken off, it suggests an important step in the evolution of the authoritarian character as a concept: the development of a philosophical anthropology that could thread the needle between the cool abstraction of pure philosophy and the crude methods of early social science research.

As a subfield of German thought, philosophical anthropology attempts to answer the metaphysical and sometimes empirical question of what constitutes a human being and what qualifies their uniqueness among other living beings. As a modern twentieth century discipline, it came into popularity with the writings of Weimar phenomenologist, Max Scheler. Although the institute rejected the presupposition of a universal human essence (never mind one that could be realistically or adequately investigated), their writings on fascism offer an unconventional response to Kant's famous anthropological query, "what is man?"²²⁶ In a 1935 article,

²²⁴ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, 151.

²²⁵ According to Wiggershaus, "the climax of interdisciplinary work combining theory and empirical research had in reality already been passed in the *Studies on Authority and the Family*. Empirical research continued, but not even a loose-knit collective work like the *Studies* was ever produced again. Empirical research was left to run its natural course, as it were, without any further attempt being made to 'fuse constructive and empirical procedures.'" (Wiggershaus, 156).

²²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-1799*, trans. A. Zweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 205.

Horkheimer critiques Scheler's philosophical anthropology for its overly ambitious and "unrealistic" goal of understanding the human being in its totality, suggesting the following revision:

[Philosophical anthropology] asks for and seeks a definition of human nature that extends from prehistory to the end of humanity and it avoids the anthropological question par excellence, namely: how can we overcome an inhumane reality (since all human capacities that we love suffocate and decay within it)? Insofar as the first question can be posed meaningfully, its answer depends not only practically but also theoretically on every advance made in the second.²²⁷

For Horkheimer, it is essential that "there is no formula that defines the relationship among individuals, society, and nature for all time."²²⁸ This is in keeping with his approach to Critical Theory. However, he will insist that there are some people, that is "particular groups and personalities," who appear to be better prepared or conditioned for certain socio-historical events.²²⁹ Rejecting Scheler's ahistorical essentialism, Horkheimer insists on a recognition of individual variation and cultural particularity. This critical approach to philosophical anthropology treats the individual as an active agent in history while simultaneously understanding their "individual characteristics" as the result of greater societal developments. He writes:

We want to stress the existence and transformation of characteristics that may well determine the actual course of history. The concept of man here appears not as uniform, but as consisting in characteristics that designate certain groups. These characteristics arise together with the social life process, are transmitted from one class to another, and under certain circumstances are either absorbed by the entire society and given new meaning or else disappear. Every feature of the present age should be understood as a factor in a historical dynamic and not as a manifestation of an eternal being.²³⁰

It is this understanding of a philosophical anthropology that elucidates the declaration in Horkheimer's 1950 preface to *The Authoritarian Personality* that the researchers had discovered "the rise of an 'anthropological' species we call the authoritarian type of man."²³¹ Contrary to how this might be read as an uncharacteristic enthusiasm for the already dated field of physical

²²⁷ Max Horkheimer, "Remarks on a Philosophical Anthropology," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 160.

²²⁸ Horkheimer, 153.

²²⁹ Horkheimer, *ibid.*

²³⁰ Horkheimer, 161.

²³¹ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lxxi.

anthropology, Horkheimer is continuing the work he started in 1935. Unlocking the cipher of what constituted authoritarian psychology stood in the place of “the anthropological question par excellence,” that is, a theoretical attempt to overcome an inhumane reality.²³²

3.4. A new anthropology: Horkheimer’s authority-oriented character

The anthropological thread from 1932 continues with the 1936 essay collection, *Studies on Authority and the Family*, in which Horkheimer suggests that every epoch and society impresses upon its members a “characteristic stamp” or “alterations in the psychic character.”²³³ These alterations reflect the dynamic and interconnected ways in which numerous social spheres correspond and relate to one another (e.g., “customs, morality, art, religion, and philosophy”) and will ultimately contribute to “the maintenance or breakdown of a particular form of society.”²³⁴ Observing contemporary totalitarian trends, this essay turns to a psychoanalytic explanation: despite ascending to the economic heights of global imperialism, European nations had also embraced those “inner forces” that were “driving it towards destruction.”²³⁵ This collective breakdown is framed by Horkheimer as the “conscious and unconscious capacity” to make oneself subordinate to a higher power: “to accept existing conditions in one’s thought and action, to live in dependence on a pregiven order of things and on an alien will ... in brief [to accept] the existence of authority as an essential factor throughout the whole of human existence.”²³⁶

Horkheimer’s 1936 essay introduces the transformation of authority in the Western patriarchal context from a personified power that had been historically associated with divine ordination (and its human representatives) to the more secularized and interiorized abstraction of authority in the post-Enlightenment era. Due to mass bureaucratization, authority in the nineteenth century came to be exercised as an abstract principle rather than a human-to-human relationship bonded by, for instance, a contract of employment. Disembodied and

²³² To further support this point, Horkheimer even clarifies in a private letter to Marcuse that psychology, for him, refers to anthropology and “anthropology for the theory of man as he has developed under the conditions of antagonistic society” (Peter E. Gordon, “The Authoritarian Personality Revisited: Reading Adorno in the Age of Trump,” *Boundary 2* 44, no. 2 (2017): 42).

²³³ Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 51–52.

²³⁴ Horkheimer, 53, 54.

²³⁵ Horkheimer, 53.

²³⁶ Horkheimer, 67.

depersonalized, this authority transformed from a human function into a metaphysical concept that had the power to conceal itself behind administrative roles.

In a wide system of endless bureaucratic hierarchy, the industrial worker “stood alone in the world” without any human office to which they could appeal when harsh labour conditions became unreasonable; the refinement of exploitative labour practices contributed to an overall “acceptance of the blind power of chance.”²³⁷ If authorities behaved tyrannically then their demands could only be accommodated as a statement of fact. Horkheimer suggests that this social order can be compared to an “anonymous god,” writing:

Thus a new and powerful authority has come into being. In decisions on the fate of men, the hiring and firing of the laboring masses, the ruin of farmers over whole sectors of the world, the unleashing of wars, and so on, caprice has been replaced not by freedom but by blind economic necessity, an anonymous god who enslaves men and is invoked by those who have no power over him but have received advantages from him. Men in power have ceased to act as representatives of heavenly and earthly authority and consequently have become mere functions of the law inherent in their power.²³⁸

This “blind power” or “faceless economic necessity” had undergone a process of reification that disguised historically specific socio-economic interests behind the immutability of facts.²³⁹ The modern subject continued to perceive themselves as a free agent solely responsible for their own personal success or failure while, at the same time, becoming reconciled with the unchanging facts of social reality. These contradictory attitudes, “spontaneity of reason and heteronomy, freedom and blind obedience, independence and sense of weakness, lack of respect and uncritical admiration,” etc., manifested as a character stamp that could be observed in the individual as character traits.²⁴⁰ Confronted with wide restrictions on personal freedom and accustomed to social injustice, this individual had become accustomed to the inescapability of socio-economically dictated conditions.²⁴¹ Fromm echoes something similar in his analysis of the authoritarian character in *Escape from Freedom*: “the authoritarian character loves those conditions that limit human freedom, he loves being submitted to fate.”²⁴²

²³⁷ Horkheimer, 82.

²³⁸ Horkheimer, *ibid.*

²³⁹ Horkheimer, *ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Horkheimer, 91-92.

²⁴¹ Horkheimer, 93.

²⁴² Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 168.

The nebulous and shadowy anonymous god in Horkheimer's passage reflects the extent to which social domination has been mystified. As long as social conditions can be attributed to "a wise God whose ways are marvelous and obscure," the status quo is preserved.²⁴³ In this essay, Horkheimer writes in a similar vein as Freud's *Future of an Illusion* that,

The idea of God provided a framework for the limitless wishes and feelings of revenge, the plans and desires, which have arisen in connection with the struggles of human history. Religion indeed derives its whole content through the psychic elaboration of earthly data, but in the process it acquires its own specific form, which in turn influences the psychic apparatus and destiny of men and is a reality within social evolution as a whole.²⁴⁴

The "anonymous god," a deity that is "invoked by those who have no power over him but have received advantages from him," is both the product of historical coercion and the internalized sense of necessity that is attached to economic production.²⁴⁵ As gods are created in order to fulfill the wishes of humankind, how does the anonymous god figure into the historical struggles that contribute to the formation authoritarian character?

Horkheimer describes the authoritarian character as someone who, as a child, was dominated by a particular psychodynamic of power, "the fantasies with which he peoples the real world, his dreams and wishes, his ideas and judgments" resulting in an increasing preoccupation with "the thought of man's power over man, of above and below, of command and obedience."²⁴⁶ Just as Reich maintained, Horkheimer agrees that the fawning, calculating, rationalizing, and overly moralistic traits of the authoritarian adult is an outgrowth of the coercive tactics of the patriarchal family, "the pre-given mold into which every new impression is poured."²⁴⁷ The child is taught to idealize the father as a figure who is naturally and spiritually endowed with physical, economic, and moral superiority and to devalue the historically disempowered mother.²⁴⁸ Horkheimer describes this power dynamic from the child's perspective and elaborates on its attendant mode of thinking:

To yield to his father because the latter has the money is, in his eyes, the only reasonable thing to do, independently of any consideration of the father's human qualities. ... He may think what he will of his father, but if he is to avoid conflicts and costly refusals he

²⁴³ Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 94.

²⁴⁴ Horkheimer, 58.

²⁴⁵ Horkheimer, 82.

²⁴⁶ Horkheimer, 106.

²⁴⁷ Horkheimer, *ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Horkheimer, 101–5.

must submit to his father and satisfy him. The father is, in the last analysis, always right where his son is concerned. The father represents power and success, and the only way the son can preserve in his own mind a harmony between effective action and the ideal, a harmony often shattered in the years before puberty's end, is to endow his father, the strong and powerful one, with all the other qualities the son considers estimable.²⁴⁹

Even if the father is unable to command authority outside of the home, it is the principle of his unquestionable authority that cements the attitude of the authority-oriented character: just as all success reflects personal greatness, so failure suggests individual weakness. The child is doomed to only ever find fault with themselves when they are unable to achieve what the father has, even when social conditions outside the individual's realm of influence factor into this so-called "failure."²⁵⁰ Regardless of whether the personal father acted as a punitive disciplinarian, the coercive system of rewards and punishments that is propped up by social institutions can only foster the child's further preoccupation with the dynamics of submission.²⁵¹

Out of the naturalization of entirely changeable social conditions, a new type of individual emerges. For Horkheimer, the "authority-oriented character" is someone who identifies strongly with an internal sense of powerlessness and responds submissively to unreasonable demands of social authorities. In keeping with Horkheimer's revised philosophical anthropology, this character is a product of Western socio-historical conditions as they have been transmitted to the child by way of the typical bourgeois patriarchal family.

For Horkheimer, as it is for Fromm in this 1936 collection, the transmission of authoritarian ideals into a psychological type is not as conspicuous as the Little Man's acquisition of character armour nor is it as direct a process as the oppressive dynamic described by Reich as taking place in the authoritarian family. Instead, Horkheimer and Fromm understand the development of the authoritarian character as an unconscious process in which the family, along with the actual father, is under threat from greater societal forces. Where these 1936 essays depart most significantly from Reich is in their claim that the literal father is less important than the exaggerated and glorified patriarchal symbol of authority; this symbol can better approximate the patriarchal ideal of authority while the father of childhood can only imitate the role.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Horkheimer, 106–7.

²⁵⁰ Horkheimer, 108–9.

²⁵¹ Horkheimer, 111.

²⁵² Erich H. Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions," trans. Susan Kassouf, (1936) 2020, 18–19. It is important to Fromm that the family is discussed not as a generic or abstract entity but in

3.5. Social character and sadomasochism: Fromm's psychoanalytic contribution

For a time, Fromm was considered the leading psychoanalytic thinker of the institute, formulating his own Freudo-Marxian synthesis in 1932, writing:

Every society has its own distinctive *libidinal structure* ... This libidinal structure is the product of the influence of socio-economic conditions on human drives; in turn, it is an important factor conditioning emotional developments within the various levels of society, and the contents of the "ideological superstructure." The libidinal structure of a society is the medium through which the economy exerts its influence on man's intellectual and mental manifestations.²⁵³

In a footnote added later to this passage, Fromm suggests that the "libidinal structure of society" is interchangeable with "social character," a concept that he would soon develop and ultimately prefer over the latter term's reliance on Freudian drive theory.²⁵⁴ When Fromm published his 1936 "Sociopsychological Dimensions" in *Studies on Authority and the Family*, he had yet to break away entirely from the classical Freudian metapsychology that the institute (namely, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse) relied upon as the basis for their own theorizing. In the following, I discuss Fromm's contribution of the "social character" to the 1936 study with some references to the trajectory he would take in his later work.

For Fromm, "social character" refers to the psychical modifications that may occur in order to better adapt to prevailing social, cultural, economic, and political forces. The super-ego facilitates in this adjustment to the brute facts of social reality by internalizing outside authorities. The internalization of the child's actual parental agency is accompanied by the projection of that same parental *imagos* into real life authorities. Fromm remarks that "at times, the super-ego is the internalized authority and the authority is the super-ego personified."²⁵⁵ This is particularly the case if those extrafamilial authorities exhibit similar attributes as those first ascribed to the idealized parent (exaggerated strength, the ability to protect, fairness in judgment, etc.).²⁵⁶

specific terms, e.g. the bourgeois family in Western patriarchal culture as distinguished from one that exists in a matriarchal society (Fromm, 21).

²⁵³ Erich H. Fromm, "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology," in *The Essential Frankfurt School*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 494.

²⁵⁴ Fromm, 527.

²⁵⁵ Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions," 17.

²⁵⁶ Here, Horkheimer's observation that fascism might provide a stronger and more powerful super-father (discussed in section 2.3) is relevant as the father-leader represents the "super-ego personified."

In agreement with Freud, Abraham, and Reich's observations on character, Fromm maintains that certain children develop character traits that allow them to become reconciled with difficult and painful environmental conditions. "If childhood experiences have produced a strong super-ego," Fromm writes, "then this super-ego remains relatively resistant to life circumstances that would require a different sort of super-ego."²⁵⁷ If conditions change in adulthood, those character traits that had already been acquired are unlikely to be discarded or modified to fit the current context and may prove to be non-adaptive. When these original character traits persist, they become more conspicuous and thereby contribute to an identifiable "social character."

According to Fromm, the meta-psychological backbone of the authoritarian character is the weakening of ego development due to the influence of the super-ego. The ego can be strengthened and made independent or it can be weakened leading to passivity and helplessness. The ego's dread of authority, having once been useful to the child's development when they were forced to adapt to difficult circumstances, now fosters irrational and crippling fear of punishment.²⁵⁸ The integrity of the ego unravels in relation to the stronger super-ego. To counter this sense of helplessness, the individual gravitates toward more powerful external authorities.

Fromm compares the authoritarian relationship to the child-like dynamic of hypnosis. The hypnotist assumes the role of parent so as to appear "incomparably stronger and more powerful" over the hypnotized subject.²⁵⁹ The hypnotist can be simultaneously caring while at the same time endangering the ego by rendering it useless and replaceable. This is described further:

The ego evolved to serve the individual as a weapon in the struggle for survival: if somebody proves to be so powerful and dangerous that struggle against him is hopeless and submission still the best defense, or if he proves to be so loving and protective that one's own actions seem unnecessary, in other words, if a situation arises in which the ego's exercise of its functions becomes impossible or superfluous, then the ego disappears, for as long as the functions tied to the ego's own emergence can or must no longer be exercised.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions," 17.

²⁵⁸ Fromm, 31. Fromm reminds his reader that the ego is always vulnerable to dismantlement, such as in sleep where dreams are ruled over by the unconscious or under psychosis in which the reality-oriented ego is threatened with complete destruction (Fromm, 33–34).

²⁵⁹ Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions," 34.

²⁶⁰ Fromm, 35.

Motivated by the drive toward self-preservation, the ego resigns itself to an omnipotent authority. Submission is therefore a defense against potential annihilation by the hypnotist, the “super-ego personified.”

For Fromm, the authoritarian character is synonymous with sadomasochism, writing that: “The subordinate only too gladly surrenders his own personality, becoming a tool of the leader whose will replaces his own.”²⁶¹ In relation to a fearsome and loving authority, the masochist exchanges autonomy and independence for the satisfaction of absolute subjugation.²⁶² However, this dynamic is complicated by the repressed sadism of the masochist who may seek out another masochist outside of their primary relationship to act out a role reversal in which their sadism can be expressed. The aggression that is originally intended for the stronger authority splits off into a weaker outside target.²⁶³ This dynamic may recall Reich’s account of the Little Man, when he writes “you feel inferior because you yourself are exactly what you want to kill off in the people you call Jews.”²⁶⁴ Fromm theorizes, “if asserting one’s own will against the strong must be renounced, at least enjoyment can be found in the feeling of power provided by unrestrained control over the weak.”²⁶⁵

The subordinate’s identification with a stronger force (in opposition to those deemed weak) constitutes, for Fromm, the defining feature of the authoritarian character. The following description is formulated in 1963:

The authoritarian character feels himself strong when he can submit and be part of an authority which (to some extent backed by reality) is inflated, is deified, and when at the same time he can inflate himself by incorporating those subject to his authority. This is a state of sado-masochistic symbiosis which gives him a sense of strength and a sense of identity. By being part of the “big” (whatever it is), he becomes big; if he were alone, by himself, he would shrink to nothing.²⁶⁶

The “big (whatever it is)” suggests a mystification that recalls the marvelous and obscure “anonymous god” described by Horkheimer in 1936. The above passage reflects the gradual shift away from the personal father and toward the abstract super-father (Horkheimer) or deified

²⁶¹ Fromm, 10.

²⁶² Fromm, 39.

²⁶³ Fromm, 40–41.

²⁶⁴ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 31.

²⁶⁵ Fromm, “Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions,” 42.

²⁶⁶ Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ, and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture*, 139.

authority (Fromm) that is created by and for the authoritarian character as authority made abstract.

Fromm's 1936 essay would be left untranslated in the migration from Germany to the United States due to the author's later rejection of Freudian metapsychology and drive theory among other foundational premises, culminating in the official termination of his membership with the institute in 1939.²⁶⁷ This essay nonetheless provides a window into how Critical Theory integrated clinical psychoanalytical insights into their theory of the authoritarian character structure. What stands out as most valuable from Fromm's contribution to the analysis of sadomasochism is the *intra*-subjective dynamic that, first internalized in the patriarchal family, is then reproduced on a greater social scale. From the oppressive parental agency to the hypnotic dictator, the dissolution of autonomous individuality is an act of self-preservation that comes about from the ego's "passive, fatalistic acknowledgment of a higher power."²⁶⁸

3.6. Conclusion: disputes and shifting theoretical trajectories

Freud's writings on authority, specifically his account of character neurosis, ambivalence, the super-ego, and the idealization of the father, provided Critical Theory with a framework for conceptualizing the authoritarian character. The psychodynamics of the family, as analyzed by Reich and Fromm, served as a significant influence on the theoretical development of this character, with Horkheimer writing in his 1936 essay:

The family, as one of the most important formative agencies, sees to it that the kind of human character emerges which social life requires, and gives this human being in great measure the indispensable adaptability for a specific authority-oriented conduct on which the existence of the bourgeois order largely depends.²⁶⁹

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, there is nothing peculiar about the basic repressions that contribute to childhood ambivalence: the child represses those wishes and impulses that are prohibited by the parental agency in exchange for societal membership, along with the expectation that the child's frustration, as a result of renunciation, is also repressed. What becomes decisive in the development of an authoritarian character are those submissive traits

²⁶⁷ Rainer Funk comments in the preface to the later translation of "Studies on Authority and the Family" into English that "Fromm would have had to make hundreds of comments or rewrite the entire text" if it were to be made consistent with his later views (Fromm, "Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions," 8).

²⁶⁸ Fromm, 56.

²⁶⁹ Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 98.

that must be acquired in order to adapt to the unjust or unreasonable demands of the patriarchal family.

From these early texts, a clearer picture begins to emerge: the authoritarian character is someone who is preoccupied with fantasies, thoughts, and attitudes that revolve around hierarchy and the outcome of rebellion and obedience, i.e., punishment and reward. This character reflects their authority-oriented environment in that individuals and groups are organized into who, at any given point, is “strong” and who is “weak.” The authoritarian character displays a multitude of contradictory traits so that, while performing subordination, this figure also delights in the domination of others.

From the perspective of Critical Theory, the authoritarian’s internal structure is formed prior to political or ideological adherence and is typical of the Western, patriarchal, and post-industrial era. This new “anthropological type” cannot be divorced from the social, historical, and material conditions that dictate their socialization. According to Horkheimer, these individuals had internalized once identifiable authorities that, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had seemingly evaporated into abstract principles. From this essay, the “anonymous god” as a representation of that abstraction presumably arose out of the idealization of the *pater familias* and the devaluation of the human being confronted with an infinitely stronger super-ego and parental *imagos*.

The authoritarian character is thus a reactionary psychological organization in that the individual, confronted with overwhelming and seemingly omnipresent powers, redirects and modifies impulses that threaten societal membership into eager submission toward stronger authorities. These authorities will match the severity of internalized authorities but may also allow for the expression of unconscious id impulses (just as Reich observed with the sexually provocative goose-stepping or politically condoned violence of Nazism). To use Freudian language, the weak ego is effectively sandwiched between the unconscious and the super-ego, guaranteeing the subject’s self-preservation through an identification with a stronger authority. This dynamic is described with varying formulations: for Reich, the character mask operates as a psychological barricade against dangerous wishes and outside expectations; for Horkheimer, the child is brought up to believe that there are always clear winners and losers resulting in self-doubt and a sense of powerlessness that weakens ego autonomy; and for Fromm, this weakened ego is

always in danger of becoming subsumed and commandeered by the super-ego projected into outside authorities.

On closer examination, competing philosophical anthropologies abound throughout these texts. Most notably, Reich's philosophical anthropology presupposes that the "biological core" of the little man is "an essentially honest, industrious, cooperative, loving, and, if motivated, rationally hating animal."²⁷⁰ As far as the individual is irrational, cruel, and sadistic, the character mask works as a conduit for the authoritarian doctrines of the state. In Horkheimer and Fromm's 1936 essays, the psyche is not so neatly layered. According to their own Freudo-Marxian analysis, the psyche is so intertwined with social and historical forces that it would be impossible to study the modern subject as a distinct monad. Horkheimer might as well be critiquing Reich in his response to traditional philosophical anthropology when he writes "because the individual was regarded as wholly isolated and complete in himself, it could seem that the dismantling of old authorities was the only thing required if he was to exercise full potential."²⁷¹ If "authorities are allegedly done away with" only to "reappear philosophically in the form of metaphysical concepts" (e.g., the anonymous god), then a deeper process of heteronomy must be accounted for; one that recognizes the extent to which heteronomy has been internalized by the unconscious.²⁷²

Hovering just above the surface of psychoanalytic investigation, the notion of "character armour" or even "character," generally, begins to resemble at a certain point in this analysis a red herring for thinking about social domination. Where the character layer might be excavated and disposed of through psychotherapeutic work or educational reform, the problem of social domination invites a much more profound philosophical anthropology: why is the human being drawn to destructive and oppressive authorities, colluding with and supporting the irrationality of despots? The psychoanalytic investigations of Critical Theory endeavoured to unearth what they considered to be unconscious tendencies toward domination and submission. From their perspective, Reich's sexual political solution to state-imposed repression or even Fromm's emphasis on the social character's adaptation to an authoritarian society tilted the fragile balance

²⁷⁰ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 13–14.

²⁷¹ Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 78.

²⁷² Horkheimer, *ibid.*

between the psyche and society; they might have even argued that Reich and Fromm were at risk of sociologizing the individual and the unconscious out of existence.

Although Horkheimer's "Authority and the Family" refrains from a Freudian metapsychological analysis in favour of a socio-historical examination, I would argue that this essay comes closer to investigating an authoritarian *unconscious* when he describes, "the fantasies with which [the authority-oriented child] peoples the real world, his dreams and wishes, his ideas and judgments, are all dominated by the thought of man's power over man."²⁷³ Beyond the super-ego and the internalization of authority that is described by Fromm, Horkheimer's reference to fantasies, dreams, and wishes of domination suggest that a deeper analysis lay ahead.

Although Fromm's disputes with the institute stands outside the historical scope of this chapter, his rejection of certain components of psychoanalytic theory is relevant for thinking about competing philosophical anthropologies. In his 1941 *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm suggests that Freud: "accepted the traditional belief in a basic dichotomy between man and society, as well as the traditional doctrine of the evilness of human nature. Man, to him, is fundamentally antisocial."²⁷⁴ Here, the philosophical anthropologies of Fromm and Reich would be aligned with one another against Freud, insisting that sadism is a learned behavior rather than a biproduct of the death drive. Famously, Fromm rejected psychoanalytic drive theory for its alleged biological determinism, a position that is summarized in *Escape from Freedom*,

Freud's essential principle is to look upon man as an entity, a closed system, endowed by nature with certain physiologically conditioned drives, and to interpret the development of his character as a reaction to satisfactions and frustrations of these drives; whereas, in our opinion, the fundamental approach to human personality is the understanding of man's relation to the world, to others, to nature, and to himself. We believe that man is *primarily* a social being ... the key problem of psychology is that of the particular kind of relatedness of the individual toward the world, not that of satisfaction or frustration of single instinctual desires. ... Therefore, in our approach, the needs and desires that center about the individual's relation to others, such as love, hatred, tenderness, symbiosis, are the fundamental psychological phenomena, while with Freud they are only secondary results from frustration or satisfactions of instinctive needs.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Horkheimer, 106.

²⁷⁴ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 8. According to Rolf Wiggershaus, Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* "was published outside the framework of the Institute ... and did not contain a single indication of Fromm's earlier collaboration with the Institute of Social Research, except for a footnote in which an article by Horkheimer was mentioned" (Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, 272).

²⁷⁵ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 287–88.

Although an application of Freudian drive theory to the problem of social domination has yet to be discussed (I will present these theoretical disputes in chapter five), it is already apparent from Fromm's inter-relational emphasis in the above passage that he is working with a very different philosophical anthropology than that of the leading members of the institute. Fromm's assertion that Freud wrote from a "profound conviction of the wickedness of human nature" is what ultimately contributed to the criticism of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse that Fromm had abandoned Critical Theory in favour of "neo-Freudian revisionism."²⁷⁶ According to the Critical Theorists, the revisionist school (which includes interpersonal psychoanalysts, such as Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan) had rejected Freud for his crude and pessimistic emphasis on bodily-based drives and societal repression in favour of the cooperative, ethical, and loving human being.²⁷⁷ Marcuse writes in his epilogue to *Eros and Civilization* that the revisionists had sought to purify the psyche so that it "can again be redeemed by idealistic ethics and religion; and the psychoanalytic theory of the mental apparatus can be written as a philosophy of the soul."²⁷⁸ He continues to critique the revisionists' "minimization of the biological sphere and especially the role of sexuality" and their shift in emphasis from bodily based needs to spiritual potentiality, "not only from the unconscious to conscious, from the id to the ego, but also from the presublimated to the sublimated expressions of the human existence."²⁷⁹

In a back and forth dispute between Fromm and Marcuse, published in *Dissent* magazine, the latter would respond to his former colleague:

Fromm's own analysis of the early stages of character development has been increasingly purged of the explosive instinctual forces linked to the "archaic heritage" of man and to the deadly struggle against suppression. To reveal the implications of this struggle (and thereby the real conditions for the 'emancipation of man' was the great concern of Freud's depth psychology. It is not preserved by paying attention to the 'conflict between unconscious and conscious strivings' – it depends on the content and dynamic of the unconscious.²⁸⁰

Without becoming embroiled in the polemical nuances of this very public disagreement, it can be argued that the Fromm-Marcuse dispute is fundamentally one of scope: where Fromm shifted toward an existential inquiry into human possibility, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse

²⁷⁶ Fromm, 291.

²⁷⁷ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 248–49.

²⁷⁸ Marcuse, 240.

²⁷⁹ Marcuse, 264–65.

²⁸⁰ Herbert Marcuse, "A Reply to Erich Fromm," *Dissent: A Quarterly of Socialist Opinion* 3, no. Winter (1956): 81.

descended into the depths of the unconscious in order to pursue a more primeval account of genocidal aggression. To convey a sense of Freud's continued importance for Critical Theory, Marcuse would insist that "Freud's hypothesis of the death instinct and its role in civilized aggression shed light on one of the neglected enigmas of civilization" that is, "it revealed the hidden unconscious tie which binds the oppressed to their oppressors, the soldiers to their generals, the individuals to their masters."²⁸¹

According to Martin Jay, the Critical Theorists had taken on a new theoretical trajectory by "abandoning their tentative hopes of the twenties and thirties" which meant that, for better or for worse, Fromm's "more optimistic position" would also be rejected.²⁸² "In a society in which social contradictions seemed unbridgeable and yet paradoxically were becoming more obscured" Jay writes, "the antinomies of Freud's thought appeared as a necessary bulwark against the harmonistic illusions of the revisionist."²⁸³ Eric Oberle similarly describes Horkheimer's intellectual partnership with Adorno and the institute's split with Fromm as a disciplinary crisis, "a crisis whose name was not Fromm but fascism."²⁸⁴ Oberle continues,

If Fromm became a target at this moment, it was because his near successes and real failures pointed back to the mistakes of the Institute and critical theory and clarified the challenge of designing a rigorous social survey that neither juxtaposed nor collapsed interdisciplinary approaches.²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 270–71.

²⁸² Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 100. For instance, Horkheimer warns against keeping "society from indulging in a thoughtless optimism, an inflation of its own knowledge into a new religion" (Horkheimer, "Thoughts on Religion," 131).

²⁸³ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 105. According to Marcuse, "Behind all the differences among the historical forms of society, Freud saw the basic inhumanity common to all of them, and the repressive controls which they perpetuate, in the instinctual structure itself, the domination of man by man. ... Freud destroys the illusions of idealistic ethics: the "personality" is but a "broken" individual who has internalized and successfully utilized repression and aggression" (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 257). According to Martin Jay, "Fromm affirmed the notion of a philosophical anthropology. Like Martin Buber and others in the Lehrhaus circle he understood man's nature as something created through relatedness to the world and interaction with others. This was to appear most vividly in his later works after his departure from the Institute, but at all times Fromm affirmed the reality of a human nature ... in the 1940s he attempted to go beyond psychology, to an ethical system also based on human nature. Behind the humanistic veneer of his ethics ... there lurked a naturalism that some critics found difficult to sustain" (Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 89).

²⁸⁴ Eric Oberle, *Theodor Adorno and the Century of Negative Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 156.

²⁸⁵ Oberle, 156.

In the history of the institute, the 1930-1931 empirical study represents the first and final attempt to integrate empirical research with psychoanalytic Critical Theory. Horkheimer and Fromm had originally sought to identify and interpret how certain words and patterns might expose an unconscious structure that could be studied as a psychological profile. Fromm reflected later that the study had been designed for the purpose of discerning lightly held opinions from those deeply rooted beliefs and convictions that were already embedded and amassing energy within individual character structures.²⁸⁶ However, deeply entrenched convictions proved to be less significant than overall passivity and ambivalence that likely reflected the historical need to adapt to radical political change. This result can be interpreted as a deepening rift between philosophical anthropology and empirical research methods which proved inadequate in plumbing the depths of the unconscious (to be discussed in more detail in chapter four).

Those who continued to work under the umbrella of Critical Theory might have argued that beneath this defensive screen of passivity and the realm of personal and ideological convictions, more alarming psychological developments were taking place. Fantasies that escaped conscious articulation but found expression in the explosive violence of “false projections,” as Adorno and Horkheimer would describe them, were stirred up by the fascist imagination. However, these fantasies were not yet readily observable to those theorists who managed to escape the worst of Nazi persecution. To quote the Austrian Jewish writer, Stefan Zweig, the 1938 *Anschluss* erupted as though “all the sick, perverted fantasies they had thought up over many nights of sadistic imaginings were now put into practice in broad daylight.”²⁸⁷ Ego weakness and the resignation of the autonomous ego could not truly account for the violence that was about to unfold.

²⁸⁶ Jay, 89.

²⁸⁷ Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, trans. Anthea Bell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 432.

**4. “As irrational as the world in which they live”:
Adorno and the objective-subjective dimensions of *The Authoritarian Personality* study**

“In a substantial letter to Horkheimer, and even more recently in conversation with Pollock, and in opposition to Fromm and, in particular, to Reich, I defended the position that the true ‘mediation’ between society and psychology was to be found not in the family, but rather in the commodity and fetish character itself, that the phenomenon of fetishism is the authentic correlate of reification. You find yourself here, perhaps without being aware of the fact, in the most profound agreement with Freud; there is certainly much to be thought about in this connection.”

Theodor W. Adorno, correspondence with Walter Benjamin (June 5, 1935)²⁸⁸

“Amongst all the things in your letter, none struck me more forcibly than the position you seem to take up with regard to the question of ‘mediation’ between society and psychology. Here we are both pulling at the *same* rope, although I was unaware of the fact in this particular form – although it is hardly an ideal situation to find Fromm and Reich are both pulling hard at the other end. I shall be looking at Freud soon.”

Walter Benjamin, correspondence with Theodor W. Adorno (October 16, 1935)²⁸⁹

In the above 1935 correspondence with Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno proposes that instead of examining fixed psychological types as they are formed within the patriarchal family, more attention should be given to the ways in which the human subject comes to be fetishized by greater social forces. Adorno’s emphasis on the “thingification” of all living beings, i.e., their transformation into objects that can be commodified for exchange, reflects an important shift from theorizing the authoritarian character’s emergence in the patriarchal family toward a socio-cultural analysis of the conditions that give rise to domination.

Written in the same period as *The Authoritarian Personality* study, Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* proposed that the failure of instrumental reason is encapsulated in the history of Western civilization as society sought to achieve domination over nature. According to the authors, knowledge and progress have been achieved, first, through the sacrifice of the subject’s internal nature and, secondly, through the domination of what has come to be associated with nature, i.e., the subjugation of animals and the oppression of women. From

²⁸⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Adorno to Benjamin, June 5, 1935,” in *Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 93.

²⁸⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Benjamin to Adorno, October 10, 1935,” in *Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 99.

Homer's *Odyssey* to the rise of fascism, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* explores the ways cultural achievement relies on the transformation of living things into interchangeable components of any overriding system of thought. Whether domination is enacted by the laboratory scientist over their specimen so as to advance human knowledge, the industrialist purchasing labour in pursuit of capital, or the *Kommandant* of the death camps fulfilling the political doctrine of racial extermination, trajectories of progress became entangled with destruction.

While a discussion of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is outside the scope of this chapter, this text along with other Critical Theory writings in the 1940s and 1950s signifies an important turning point in the analysis of domination as the authors move away from the exclusive focus on the authoritarian family. In this chapter, I continue to examine the trajectory laid out by Reich, Fromm, and Horkheimer with a discussion of Adorno's contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality*. For Adorno, the problem of authoritarianism is an unconscious struggle between the weakened individual and greater objective interests. Where Freud had maintained that the ego still held onto a "scrap of independence and originality" when faced with mass psychology, Adorno was less hopeful about the ego's capacity for personal autonomy.²⁹⁰

Although *The Authoritarian Personality* builds loosely on the character analysis of the 1930s, in this chapter I argue that the study is disconnected from the tradition of psychoanalytic Critical Theory, specifically critical philosophical anthropology. Treating this study as a detour from the genealogy under discussion, I identify an important theme in Adorno's contributions to the project: the disappearance of the individual when confronted with greater objective forms.

The terminological ambiguity of what is meant precisely by "authoritarianism" (4.1) and the study's reliance on a normative model of psychopathology in order to establish a psychological typology (4.2) are both important aspects of *The Authoritarian Personality's* history that represent a departure from psychoanalytic characterology. In these sections, I discuss the history and implications of why the authors used "authoritarianism" rather than "fascist totalitarianism," "prejudice" instead of "antisemitism," and "personality" in place of "character."

Where the study makes the greatest contribution to a Critical Theory of domination is in Adorno's unpublished remarks on *The Authoritarian Personality*. Here, I review the objective-subjective debate, i.e., the problem of how the mind and society are mediated. In these remarks,

²⁹⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:129.

Adorno draws attention to the onslaught of dominant social trends of all varieties that threaten to overwhelm the individual, thereby questioning the study's underlying hypothesis that the authoritarian personality should be set apart from a healthy democratic typology (4.3). I bolster this discussion with an examination of two essays by Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer that provide the genealogical context of Adorno's remarks by exploring the authoritarian's overwhelming encounter with objective forces. The shift from studying the authoritarian personality as a product of the patriarchal family to the way that society is structured suggests that a personality, even one described as "authoritarian," provides some self-worth in a world that had so greatly devalued the individual in favour of anonymous, objective forms (4.4).

4.1. Critiquing "authoritarianism": terminological ambiguity and the suspicion of definitions

In 1933, the Frankfurt Institute was officially closed with the Nazi confiscation of their property by which point Horkheimer and most of its leading members had fled Germany with plans to relocate in the United States.²⁹¹ The Critical Theorists faced a dire situation under fascism as they shared close ties with both Western Marxism and the International Psychoanalytic Association; in the antisemitic imagination, these affiliations located them anywhere between the canard of "Judeo-Bolshevism" and the so-called "Jewish Science" of Freudian analysis.²⁹² With the majority of the institute's staff and members being of Jewish descent, those who managed to emigrate would come to be identified with a growing number of German Jewish thinkers critiquing the destructive appeal of fascism in exile. Not all of these intellectuals would survive to find refuge outside of Europe, as Peter E. Gordon points out, "fascism was not only a topic of research; it was also an existential threat."²⁹³ In the United States, important publications addressing the political and psycho-social dimensions of fascism were introduced into public discourse, most notably Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Adorno and Horkheimer's contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950).

²⁹¹ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination : A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 29–30.

²⁹² Jay, 11, 14. The Critical Theorists even shared classrooms and students with the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute, dubbing it a "guest institute."

²⁹³ Peter E. Gordon, "Introduction to The Authoritarian Personality," in *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019), xxv.

From these publications, two distinctive approaches were predominant: where Arendt developed an entirely new political philosophical analysis of totalitarianism, Adorno went further by developing a critical social analysis that could explain the psychological appeal of Nazism. It was Critical Theory's vague application of "authoritarianism" to the shifting political landscape that prompted a not altogether unfair critique levelled by Arendt in 1954 at certain "political and social scientists" for having conflated authoritarianism with tyranny and totalitarianism (the latter providing the basis for her own seminal contribution to twentieth century political thought).²⁹⁴

Where tyranny (one against all) refers to the assertion of the leader's will as a law upon all others, authoritarianism (a classic pyramid structure) describes a system in which the law reflects the will of a transcendent, superhuman authority. Both are distinct from totalitarianism (famously compared by Arendt to the layers of an onion) as an entirely novel political organization in which dictators operate within a closed-off ideological system that is protected by a robust bureaucracy.²⁹⁵ According to Arendt, the social scientist who operates outside of these commonly accepted definitions indulges in the presumed "right to retreat into our own worlds of meaning" contributing to a "private terminology" that bears no real-life application.²⁹⁶ Following these definitions, the Critical Theorists might have more accurately referred to a "totalitarian personality."

Unlike Arendt, the Critical Theorists rarely engaged in nuanced political analysis or extended their social critique to phenomena they considered, according to Martin Jay, "epiphenomenal" to the true focus of their inquiry.²⁹⁷ To the consternation of those scholars reading the Critical Theorists through the lens of political philosophy, most of these authors were uninterested in questions of what authority is, how it works, or even what constitutes a just authority as distinguished from an irrational authority. They were far more interested in pursuing what might be described as the "pre-political" or psychological dimensions of emerging ideological movements. As Gordon comments, fascism was investigated "not merely [as] a

²⁹⁴ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 95.

²⁹⁵ Arendt, 97–100.

²⁹⁶ Arendt, 95.

²⁹⁷ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 118.

political phenomenon” but rather as it “correlates with the deepest features of the human psyche.”²⁹⁸

Arendt’s criticism can be leveled at the application of “authoritarianism” to a wide range of contemporary political developments in the twenty-first century. As a catch-all term, “authoritarianism” is used indiscriminately to describe both unprecedented political developments and those trends that exhibit an uncanny blend of far-right libertarian and neofascist extremism that invite historical comparison to Nazism. As political theorist Wendy Brown observes, the contemporary scholar is at a loss to identify the source of this democratic backsliding, writing “the old terms bandied about to describe it – populism, authoritarianism, fascism – fail to capture the strange brew of bellicosity, disinhibition, and an antidemocratic blend of license and support for statism in current political social formations.”²⁹⁹

At this point, it might be argued that without strong concepts and well-established definitions, Critical Theory’s confidence in the correlation between political ideology and a psychological character type begins to lose credibility. To counter this point, an appeal to correct terminology may be futile once these concepts enter into common use and lose theoretical nuance. Even Arendt’s thought was subjected to significant distortion when her writings on authority became implicated in the McCarthyite “Red Scare.” Bruce Lincoln investigates this aspect of her work in *Authority: Construction and Corrosion*, drawing attention to a 1953 conference that addressed totalitarianism as a collective threat to Western democracy where Arendt was invited to give the keynote address (Adorno and the Critical Theorists were conspicuously absent as they had not been invited to the conference). Unbeknownst to the political philosopher who had distanced herself from McCarthyite circles, members of the conference’s steering committee along with numerous participants maintained close, covert ties with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency via the Russian Research Centre and the Carnegie Corporation. Underlying the conference’s treatment of Soviet and fascist totalitarianism as the most malignant (and monolithic) threat to liberal freedom was its vehement opposition to the hypothesis advanced by the Critical Theorists – that the potentially fascistic personality might also be pervasive in liberal capitalist democracies. Where “totalitarianism” addressed Nazi and

²⁹⁸ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, xxxvii.

²⁹⁹ Brown, Wendy. “Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century ‘Democracies’” Gordon, Brown, and Pensky, *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries*, 10.

Soviet systems of domination through the lens of Arendt's more liberal political philosophy, "authoritarianism" became increasingly associated with the Marxian-inflected critique of submission and authority in Western capitalist nations.³⁰⁰

Following the CIA's appropriation of Arendt's political philosophy, the application of "totalitarian" versus "authoritarian" became increasingly implicated in Cold War politics. In the following decades, several conservative and neoconservative thinkers collapsed Arendt's concepts into a binary of "authoritarian regimes" that did not, at the time, pose a threat to U.S. interests and their communist or socialist "totalitarian regimes and rivals." As Lincoln notes, these "authoritarian regimes" were usually propped up by the CIA and distinguished from the latter by their use of military dictatorships and death squads to persecute socialists and other declared enemies of the state.³⁰¹ From this vignette, it is not surprising that the theoretical concepts introduced by German Jewish exiles to understand the rise of fascism, namely "authoritarianism" and "totalitarianism," often wound up deteriorating with their instrumentalization for Cold War propaganda.

When discussing *The Authoritarian Personality* along with earlier publications on the authoritarian character, it is important to underscore the absence of concise definitions in the writings of the Critical Theorists as this impedes the possibility of providing a positive conception of authority from which to understand its malignant counterpart.³⁰² This suspicion of committing to the gravitational pull of precise definitions does not facilitate easy transition for serious scholarly engagement. As Horkheimer writes in 1936, "a general definition of authority would necessarily be almost empty of content" as it would "attempt to capture elements of social life in a way that would be valid for all of history."³⁰³ Martin Jay explains further, "Horkheimer stressed the necessity of unmasking domination in any political form, whether fascist, ostensibly socialist, or otherwise."³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 120–23.

³⁰¹ Lincoln, 127.

³⁰² Leadership that might be described as corrupt, unreasonable, or potentially dangerous or paranoid, may gradually or secretly employ coercive and/or violent tactics to gain power, is motivated solely by self-interest or megalomania, etc. compared with its opposite presupposes a binary that belongs to a much more robust philosophical tradition than can be explicated here.

³⁰³ Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 69.

³⁰⁴ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*, 248.

Although he refrains from distinguishing between political orientations, Marcuse provides a rare definition of domination:

Domination is in effect whenever the individual's goals and purposes and the means of striving for and attaining them are prescribed to him and performed by him as something prescribed. Domination can be exercised by men, by nature, by things – it can also be internal, exercised by the individual on himself, and appear in the form of autonomy. This second form plays a decisive role in Freudian instinct theory: the super-ego absorbs the authoritarian models, the father and his representatives, and make their commands and prohibitions its own laws, the individual's conscience. Mastery of drives becomes the individual's own accomplishment – autonomy.³⁰⁵

According to this pre-political understanding, any social organization, individual, or object (irrespective of ideological or political adherence), may be implicated in domination and this domination may even contribute to productive forms of self-mastery. Here, some self-mastery is necessary for the child's developmental growth, socialization, and their gradual sense of competence (as distinguished from the unnecessary, surplus repression of bodily-based drives).

Critical Theory's reluctance to latch onto a specific historical expression of domination complicates the translation of political ideology into psychology. Although Adorno and Horkheimer's work on *The Authoritarian Personality* relied on an F-Scale as a measure for latent fascist trends, the decision to combine political doctrines under the umbrella term of "authoritarianism" only serves to further obfuscate their social critique.

Following Horkheimer's suspicion of definitions, it is important to keep in mind that the first generation Critical Theorists are not entirely responsible for the misapplication or misuse of what was already a murky concept in the 1940s. As discussed, the misuse of political concepts, e.g., the Cold War binary of so-called "good" authoritarian regimes in contrast with "bad" totalitarian regimes, is precisely the kind of appropriation or "ticket thinking" that Critical Theory sought to avoid.³⁰⁶ In keeping with the method of immanent critique, clear-cut political concepts tend to trap socio-political events within the concept's seemingly transcendent or objective viewpoint; definitions and concepts are more often applied retroactively when historical nuance has been smoothed out and flattened into one-dimensional "-isms."³⁰⁷ If the

³⁰⁵ Marcuse, "Freedom and Freud's Theory of Instincts," 1–2.

³⁰⁶ Ticket thinking refers to an uncritical and stilted way of thinking that cannot accommodate historical specificity or variation, i.e., all forms of communism or socialism must be oppressive compared with democracy.

³⁰⁷ Adorno writes for instance, "Fascism essentially dispensed with theory formation across the board, and that any content of consciousness which appeared in it served from the outset merely as a means of control. As an aside, this is what makes it so pointless to discuss what aspects of older tradition were pre-fascist, or might have driven people

authoritarian character presented itself to the Critical Theorists as though it were a shadow on a wall, perceptible but without precise contours, then their greatest challenge was to interpret this figure without resorting to the crude chalk outline of a theoretician endeavouring to capture something that could never be made entirely concrete.

4.2. ‘When fighting monsters’: the authoritarian personality framed as psychopathology

In the early 1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno joined researchers from the University of California, Berkeley to collaborate on a project sponsored by the American Jewish Committee. This research belonged to a five-volume series that investigated contemporary antisemitism under the title of “Studies in Prejudice.” For their contribution, Horkheimer and Adorno initially planned to title this research, *The Fascist Character and the Measurement of Fascist Trends* but compromised when they were outvoted by the other authors in favour of *The Authoritarian Personality*.

How “prejudice” took the place of “antisemitism” and “the authoritarian personality” came to replace “the fascist character” highlights an important rift between a genuinely critical approach to the topic and escalating pressure to accommodate American isolationism. According to Rolf Wiggershaus, the American Jewish Committee and its researchers substituted the true focus of their inquiry with the euphemism of “prejudice,” believing that it would mobilize political action where the government had proven to be unreliable in supporting Jewish causes.³⁰⁸ What Wiggershaus describes as the “camouflaging title” of the authoritarian personality drew on Fromm’s terminology from a period in which the study of Nazi antisemitism had not been officially integrated into the institute’s research program (although even Fromm preferred “the sado-masochistic character” in his own work).³⁰⁹ The enormous study commenced in 1943 but was not published until 1950, by which point most Americans perceived Soviet totalitarianism,

towards fascism, and which did not. Of course there is a certain – how shall I put it? – a core tendency of ideas that brought about fascism, but, apart from that, fascism was capable of adopting virtually any manifestation of spirit, without distinction, in so far as it contained some elements that were usable for its controlling purposes.” (Theodor W. Adorno, “Lecture 17: 28 July 1964,” in *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*, ed. Tobias ten Brink and Phillip Nogueira, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 135).

³⁰⁸ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, 409.

³⁰⁹ Peter Gordon offers a much more generous reading of this word choice, writing that the study “set out to demonstrate that fascism is something far deeper than a political form: it correlates with psychological patterns of domination and submission that take shape in earliest childhood and later harden into a syndrome of attitudes regarding hierarchy, power, sexuality, and tradition.” (Gordon, “Introduction to *The Authoritarian Personality*,” xxiii).

not European fascism, to be the greatest threat to Western democracy, giving further weight to the elusive “authoritarian” personality.

The Authoritarian Personality launched a whole new genre of literature in the American social sciences dealing with the intersection of political ideology and personality with its famous construction of an F-scale: a measure for fascist tendencies in which the participant demonstrated a high score for numerous and, at times, contradictory traits that suggested an overall inclination toward blind submission. Designed by Adorno in collaboration with the other authors, the scale measured for nine basic traits:

1. Conventionalism. Rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values.
2. Authoritarian submission. Submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup.
3. Authoritarian aggression. Tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values.
4. Anti-intraception. Opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded.
5. Superstition and stereotypy. The belief in mystical determinants of the individual’s fate; the disposition to think in rigid categories.
6. Power and “toughness.” Preoccupation with the dominance-submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension, identification with power-figures; overemphasis on the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness.
7. Destructiveness and cynicism. Generalized hostility, vilification of the human.
8. Projectivity. The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses.
9. Sex. Exaggerated concern with sexual “goings-on.”³¹⁰

Distributed to 2,099 (predominantly white, Christian, and middle class) American participants from several cities located in the western United States, the questionnaire was designed according to the psychoanalytically-informed hypothesis that latent fascist trends (measured by the F-scale) could only be studied when accompanied by the manifest content of prejudicial beliefs (with scales measuring antisemitism [the A-S scale], political-economic conservatism [PEC scale], and ethnocentrism [E scale]).³¹¹ A high score on the F-scale often accompanied a high scale of prejudice (although proved to be more so correlated with ethnocentrism and antisemitism than political-economic conservatism), indicating the fascistic potential within a character structure for antidemocratic beliefs and conduct.³¹²

³¹⁰ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 228.

³¹¹ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, 412.

³¹² Examples from the questionnaire included agreement (high score) or disagreement (low score) with the following statements: “Although many people may scoff, it may yet to be shown that astrology can explain a lot of things”

The translation of Fromm and Horkheimer's 1936 psychoanalytical "character" into "personality" reflects the burgeoning field of personality psychology as it arose in popularity in conjunction with Anglo-American research methods such as psychometrics. Personality testing originated with the 1917 Woodworth's Personality Data Sheet that evaluated the emotional stability of American soldiers for the purpose of predicting which subjects were more prone to shell shock. This psychometric framed what would eventually come to be understood as war trauma under the assumption-laden question of "psychological fitness." i.e., gauging the soldier's adjustment or maladjustment to the unprecedented conditions of trench warfare.³¹³ Personality testing continued to be administered for the purpose of rooting out psychopathology. Outliers who did not conform to present social conditions could then be compared with those subjects who were better adjusted. Adorno would go on to describe this normative model of health as an example of the remarkably pervasive "democratic bias" (to be discussed below) in social science research.

Broadly speaking, the psychoanalytic character neurosis introduced by Freud and Abraham (and developed by Fenichel, Reich, and Fromm) outlines a reactionary and defensive organization against external and internal stimuli. These reactions are better adapted to certain circumstances and become more conspicuous and maladaptive when those conditions change. While this interest in adaptability is not altogether distinct from personality testing's origins in studying social adjustment, it is important to distinguish between these two approaches. At this point in the history of psychology, "personality" emphasized the individual's capacity to adjust to normative frameworks, while "character" would contend with those traumatic conditions that gave rise to a reactionary organization.

Considering the methodological gaps between these two concepts (character versus personality), it is surprising that Adorno and Horkheimer transitioned seamlessly from a

(superstition and stereotypy); "Too many people today are living in an unnatural soft way; we should return to the fundamentals, to a more red-blooded, active way of life" (destructiveness and cynicism); "The sexual orgies of the old Greeks and Romans are nursery school stuff compared to some of the goings-on in this country today, even in circles where people might least expect it" (projectivity and sex); "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn" (authoritarian submission); and "What this country needs is fewer laws and agencies, and more courageous, tireless, devoted leaders whom the people can put their faith in (power and "toughness") (Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 226–27). With every question posed uniformly, with the participant only having to confirm "yes" to achieve a high score (rather than a combination of confirming and denying), the questionnaire's primary flaw is its confirmation bias.

³¹³ Robert E. Gibby and Michael J. Zickar, "A History of the Early Days of Personality Testing in American Industry: An Obsession with Adjustment," *History of Psychology* 11, no. 3 (2008): 167–167.

psychoanalytic model to empirical research methods for thinking about the potentially fascistic character while making significant concessions in their own Marxian theorizing.³¹⁴ Despite Horkheimer's insistence that Adorno be listed as first author, one might remain skeptical as to whether *The Authoritarian Personality* should even be included in the institute's canon if the Critical Theorists only made a relatively slim contribution to the study (with Adorno focusing only on the qualitative interview components).³¹⁵

In a private letter written to Marcuse, Horkheimer provides some insight into his own frustrations with the research:

Since we have decided that here in Los Angeles the psychological part should be treated, I have studied the literature under this respect. I don't have to tell you that I don't believe in psychology as a means to solve a problem of such seriousness. I did not change a bit my skepticism towards that discipline. Also, the term psychology as I use it in the project stands for anthropology and anthropology for the theory of man as he has developed under the conditions of antagonistic society ... If we could succeed in describing the patterns, according to which domination operates even in the remotest domains of the mind, we would have done a worthwhile job. But to achieve this one must study a great deal of the silly psychological literature and if you could see my notes ... you would probably think I have gone crazy myself."³¹⁶

As the leader of the study, Horkheimer's skepticism toward psychology was countered by his commitment to developing a philosophical anthropology of the potentially fascist subject.

Adorno shares this sentiment when he similarly describes the project as a "cultural anthropology."³¹⁷

Despite this appeal to a critical philosophical anthropology, the study's introduction does not read as particularly critical of the socio-historical conditions that contributed to the rise of the authoritarian personality. In the passage below, Horkheimer introduces this new typology without political context:

The central theme of the work is a relatively new concept – the rise of an "anthropological" species we call the authoritarian type of man. In contrast to the bigot of the older style he seems to combine the ideas and skills which are typical of a highly

³¹⁴ For example, Horkheimer writes in 1939, "whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism" (Max Horkheimer, "The Jews and Europe," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Routledge, 2005), 226).

³¹⁵ Gordon writes that it is incorrect to regard *The AP Study* "as a straightforward application of Frankfurt School critical theory" (Gordon, "Introduction to The Authoritarian Personality," xxxii).

³¹⁶ Cited in Thomas Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 244.

³¹⁷ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, xliv.

industrialized society with irrational or anti-rational beliefs. He is at the same time enlightened and superstitious, proud to be an individualist and in constant fear of not being like all the others, jealous of his independence and inclined to submit blindly to power and authority. The character structure which comprises these conflicting trends has already attracted the attention of modern philosophers and political thinkers. This book approaches the problem with the means of socio-psychological research.³¹⁸

As discussed in the previous chapter, Horkheimer's declaration of a new "anthropological species" should be read as a study of the human being that can only be conducted with an analysis of particular historical and social conditions. In 1936, Horkheimer argued that the question of what is a human being can only be answered in tandem with how one might overcome the inhumane reality that has produced this figure.³¹⁹ In the above passage, there is no explicit reference to state capitalism nor to the rise of fascism (despite both being essential to what Horkheimer describes as the combination of "the ideas and skills ... of a highly industrialized society with irrational or anti-rational beliefs").³²⁰ Without a critical anthropology that would hold society responsible for the emergence of the authoritarian subject, the study's emphasis on "types" serves to, in Gordon's words, "reify the psychological as the antecedent condition, thereby diminishing what was for critical theory a *sine qua non* for all interdisciplinary labor joining sociology to psychoanalysis."³²¹

Divorced from the socio-historical conditions that necessitated the study to begin with (i.e., where class consciousness had failed to bring about improved social conditions along with the need to explain the mystique of fascism), a once critical philosophical anthropology transformed into an ahistorical one. Lost in the shift from "antisemitism" to "prejudice" and "fascist" to "authoritarian" is the study's intended critique: do the authors wish to explain the rise of state-sponsored antisemitism in Nazi Germany or the endemic antisemitism of democratic America? With *The Authoritarian Personality's* title obscuring its own object of study and withholding any actual historical referent, the vague origins of this character is made even more puzzling when the authors introduce its antithesis, the democratic type:

[The project] seeks to develop and promote an understanding of social-psychological factors which have made it possible for the authoritarian type of man to threaten to

³¹⁸ Adorno et al., lxxi.

³¹⁹ Horkheimer, "Remarks on a Philosophical Anthropology," 160.

³²⁰ Adorno acknowledges this as a "lack of historical perspective in our study" which he weakly attributes to America's supposed lack of history compared with Europe (Adorno et al., xliii).

³²¹ Gordon, "The Authoritarian Personality Revisited," 37.

replace the individualistic and democratic type prevalent in the past century and a half of our civilization, and of the factors by which this threat may be contained. Progressive analysis of this new “anthropological” type and of its growth conditions, with an ever-increasing scientific differentiation, will enhance the chances of a genuinely educational counterattack.³²²

The “threat” posed by the authoritarian type in replacing the democratic type, the “growth conditions” of this individual, the need for “containment,” along with an “educational counterattack” relay a militaristic and even fear-mongering attitude that is uncharacteristic of most Critical Theory texts. From this passage alone, the translation of the “authority-oriented character” of 1936 into an “authoritarian personality” appeared to have taken a significant turn in the context of post-war America.

Beyond the rigid binary of these two anthropological types (the democratic and the authoritarian), a deeper problem should also be addressed. The authors advocate for reform by purging those traits that weaken the individual ego. For instance, the study’s conclusion likens authoritarian traits to symptoms: “some symptoms are more harmful than others ... we are sometimes very glad to be able to control a disease even though we cannot cure it.”³²³ The measures by which Horkheimer and the authors attempt to “control” the authoritarian subject, e.g., the vaguely pugilistic “educational counterattack,” might invite some comparison between the attitude of the authors toward their topic and the attitudes that they consider specifically authoritarian: a rigid and condemnatory attitude toward those who violate conventional values including those consistent with the liberal democratic status quo. As discussed in the third chapter, a similar approach is also taken by Reich who sought to liberate the authoritarian subject from a system of defenses (the character mask) with aggressive psychotherapeutic treatment that would liberate their “biological core” (“you’re sick, little man, very sick. It’s not your fault; but it’s your responsibility to get well”).³²⁴ Sander L. Gilman and James M. Thomas critique the study’s solution through an aggressive re-education with the following: “though the ideals [Horkheimer] sets forth are clearly less violent and repressive than those of a fascist state, they do seem to suggest rigid rules about how people ought to be educated.”³²⁵

³²² Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lxxii.

³²³ Adorno et al., 973.

³²⁴ Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 16.

³²⁵ Sander L. Gilman and James M. Thomas, *Are Racists Crazy? How Prejudice, Racism, and Antisemitism Became Markers of Insanity* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 185–86.

Addressing the study's standardization of psychological types, Adorno's qualitative interview section ("types and syndromes") defends the development of a "critical typology." He proposes:

Our typology has to be a *critical* typology in the sense that it comprehends the typification of men itself as a social function. The more rigid a type, the more deeply does he show the hallmarks of social rubber stamps. This is in accordance with the characterization of our high scorer by traits such as rigidity and stereotypical thinking. Here lies the ultimate principle of our whole typology. Its major dichotomy lies in the question of whether a person is standardized himself and thinks in a standardized way, or whether he is truly "individualized" and opposes standardization in the sphere of human experience. The individual types will be specific configurations within this general division. The latter differentiates *prima facie* between high and low scorers. At closer view, however, it also affects the low scorers themselves: the more they are "typified" themselves, the more they express unwittingly the fascist potential within themselves.³²⁶

Identifying his own work as "a *critical* typology" that might dismantle the "all-pervasive classification and subsumption" of the twentieth century subject, Adorno is attempting to critique the authoritarian type by way of identifying the problem of typological thinking.³²⁷ Gordon frames this justification to conduct a typology via the already-typed subject as a "self-referential paradox where the principle that animates the study becomes trapped in its own diagnostic."³²⁸

The study's reliance on typology proves to be a major methodological flaw as it instrumentalizes that same type of thinking that is already under critical analysis. To move past this paradox, Adorno's unpublished remarks propose that the standardization of individuals into types is so pervasive that there is, in actuality, no individual left. The authoritarian personality should not be considered exceptional compared with the individualistic type but rather the most adapted to the coercive society out of which this figure emerged: "individualism, opposed to inhuman pigeonholing," Adorno writes "may ultimately become a mere ideological veil in a society which actually *is* inhuman."³²⁹

The quantitative and qualitative data from this enormous study pointed to a wide spectrum of high and low-scoring subjects, with the majority of participants located between the two margins of the democratic type and the authoritarian type. Despite the seven years it took for the study to be completed and its subsequent influence over political discourse, *The*

³²⁶ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 749.

³²⁷ Adorno et al., 747.

³²⁸ Gordon, "The Authoritarian Personality Revisited," 40.

³²⁹ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 747.

Authoritarian Personality's limited sample prevented the authors from establishing broad conclusions, such as concrete percentages, that would indicate the prevalence of this figure in American society. As Jay describes, the study's greatest contribution to the study of authoritarianism was its introduction of a "description typology of authoritarian and nonauthoritarian characters."³³⁰

According to one of Nietzsche's most cited aphorisms, "whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster ... when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you."³³¹ Several aspects of this study might warrant Nietzsche's counsel: the euphemisms that obscure the study's true focus in favour of accommodating prevailing political trends; insisting on an analysis of the individual without the socio-historical conditions that had given rise to an authoritarian character; pathologizing the "potentially fascistic individual" without psychiatric rationale; and the insistence on a "counter-educational attack" that should transform the authoritarian into an unwavering democratic type.³³² The Critical Theorists recognized that any critique of domination must avoid becoming itself an act of domination in which the real-life subject is flattened into a one-dimensional and all-enveloping concept. A social-psychological critique of Nazi ideology would also have to be cautious of that same totalizing thought which had been weaponized by prevailing authorities to crush its own opponents.

4.3. Adorno's unpublished remarks: a study of the objective

Having discussed some of the methodological complexities of *The Authoritarian Personality*, I turn my attention to a 1948 theoretical piece written by Adorno at the conclusion of the study. Likely omitted in favour of cohesion, Adorno's remarks remained unpublished until they were included in the 2019 Verso re-printing of *The Authoritarian Personality*. Considering

³³⁰ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination : A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 249.

³³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 89.

³³² In the present-day application of "the authoritarian personality" to the new alt-right "lunatic fringe," Jay reconsiders the goal of this research in application to the contemporary authoritarian. He proposes that "it would be counterproductive to pathologize their politics too quickly and subsume them under theoretical categories that rob them of any critical self-reflexivity" (Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations*, 171). He adds that "there is, after all, nothing designed to harden prejudices more effectively than calling those who hold them mentally defective or passive dupes of a social pathology beyond their control" (Jay, 172).

the chapter's theoretical opposition to the subjective focus of the study, this previously excluded section provides some insight into where Adorno would have taken his social critique with greater creative freedom: taking into account those psycho-social mechanisms that blur the lines between mass psychology and mass society.

Although *The Authoritarian Personality* remains primarily focused on individual reactions, Adorno argues that “the ultimate source of prejudice” is found in “social factors which are incomparably stronger than the ‘psyche’ of any one individual.”³³³ Here, Adorno attempts to resolve the Freudo-Marxian problem of bridging a critique of ideology (the objective superstructure) with an analysis of the individual (the subjective base). The social forces that Adorno describes as “incomparably stronger” than the individual stand out as the core issue of this chapter, suggesting that any notion of a true, democratic type would be subsumed by objective trends.

Adorno questions the binary introduced early in the study, suggesting that between the authoritarian and the “individualistic and democratic type,” the latter had been made tenuous by the rise of mass psychology. Instead, Adorno proposes that the high-scoring participant is better adjusted to the status quo compared with the low-scoring participant and thus “more characteristic of the present historical situation.”³³⁴ Casting doubt on the existence of an independent, autonomous psyche in an era marked by mass culture, Adorno proposes that “the orthodox concept of what people feel, want, and do proves to be obsolete.”³³⁵

This recognition that the average person is characterized more so by prevailing trends than by individual wants is further supported by the study's “democratic bias” (a flaw that Adorno attributes to most methodologies in the social sciences). According to Adorno, any quantified study that derives its findings from the opinions and attitudes of the greatest number

³³³ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, xlii.

³³⁴ Adorno et al., xlv.

³³⁵ Adorno et al., xlii. I include the complete passage here, “Our high-scoring subjects do not seem to behave as autonomous units whose decisions are important for their own fate as well as that of society, but rather as submissive centres of reactions, looking for the conventional ‘thing to do,’ and riding what they consider ‘the wave of the future.’ This observation seems to fall in line with the economic tendency towards gradual disappearance of the free market and the adaptation of man to the slowly emerging new conditions. ... the orthodox concept of what people feel, want, and do proves to be obsolete – just as success or failure of a commodity offered on the market supposedly depends on the mentality of the buyer” (Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, xlii). By the decline of the market economy, Adorno is proposing that where supply once met demand (demand being determined by the consumer's ability to make free decisions), supply and demand appear to both be dictated to the consumer by the market itself.

of people operates under the bias that the study of human nature should be based on what is true for the majority. The study's conclusion that high-scoring participants demonstrated conventional behaviour and conformity to societally dictated attitudes is an example of this bias.

Therefore, *The Authoritarian Personality's* study of the high-scoring participant's pattern of thinking is not so much psychological as it is an investigation into the objective content of their thought, by way of the psyche's internalization of ideology. Although the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* could not have agreed with Adorno's pessimistic conclusion (considering their primary contribution is precisely those typologies that are being questioned by Adorno), they do acknowledge that the individual is overwhelmed by stronger, objective forces when they write in their introduction:

The research to be reported in this volume was guided by the following major hypothesis: that the political, economic, and social convictions of an individual often form a broad and coherent pattern, as if bound together by a 'mentality' or 'spirit,' and that this pattern is an expression of deep-lying trends in his personality.³³⁶

It is striking that the major hypothesis underlying the study supposes that the authoritarian character is dominated by a "'mentality' or 'spirit,'" terms which suggest "political, economic, and social convictions" hang together like a constellation over and above the subject. Although the researchers do not divulge further what they mean by these terms, this passage is not so dissimilar from Wilhelm Reich's assertion that the political becomes anchored in "character." The authoritarian absorbs the political, the economic, and the social or, alternatively, they become taken-over by these structures ("spirit," in English, carries the connotation of spirit possession), suggesting the potential for shared convictions. Considering *Geist* [spirit] has its own philosophical genealogy, I think it is more likely that Adorno and Horkheimer are referencing what social theorist Georg Simmel described as "objective spirit" [*objektiver Geist*]. It will be useful to return to this passage in the next chapter section.

Although Adorno questions the viability of the true individual as a typology, he defends the subjective focus of *The Authoritarian Personality*, remarking that "if our society is really on its way to becoming one and a whole ... it does not make so much difference whether a beginning is made with the analysis of economic forces or with man" and adding, "all ways lead

³³⁶ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 1.

to the same center.”³³⁷ It would be impossible to understand objective ideology without studying its manifestation within the individual as “the mechanisms to which individuals are incessantly subject from without are to be found in the depth of these same individuals.”³³⁸

Considering Critical Theory’s integration of Freud and Marx, it is perhaps surprising that Adorno advocates for the “the behaviourist concept of man as a bundle of conditioned reflexes” as the most useful template for thinking about “the limitations of psychological determinants in modern man and their replacement by omnipotent social adjustment.”³³⁹ Adorno comments that Freud could not have anticipated just how much the twentieth century subject had come to be dominated by powerful societal forces: writing at the turn of the century when individuality was still highly esteemed, Freud’s philosophical anthropology founded on the “bourgeois subject” of the consulting room is comparatively optimistic contrasted with the reduction of the human being to “conditioned reflexes.”³⁴⁰ More than just drawing attention to ego weakness (as Fromm had already explored in his 1936 “Studies on Authority and the Family”), Adorno is describing the collapse of the reality principle that aids in the ego’s capacity for reason and judgment, allowing the psyche to assess properly external conditions before pursuing action.

This observation has disturbing implications for the consideration of an authoritarian personality. At this point, the ego is already suspect due to its internalization of the expectations and demands of objective authorities via the super-ego. Even more concerning, however, is the individual’s readiness to accept and integrate ideological slogans as so-called personal conviction, what Adorno calls “ticket thinking.” This conformity supports the above conclusion that the ego had been conditioned into passivity with the individual acquiescing to a distorted external reality.³⁴¹ The weak ego’s identification with a stronger persona promotes a “pseudo-reality which, being a ‘closed system’ of delusions, cannot be refuted and thus offers a

³³⁷ Adorno et al., lxv.

³³⁸ Adorno et al., *ibid.*

³³⁹ Adorno et al., lxiv.

³⁴⁰ Adorno et al., lxiii–lxiv. As a counter point to Adorno’s remarks, it is relevant to recall here that Freud understood character types as a layering of *reactionary behaviour* that cements over time so as to defend against a harsh reality *and* unconscious impulses; the early behaviourists disavow the unconscious (or any mental content) in favour of reactions. Adorno appears to incorporate both positions in his analysis.

³⁴¹ Adorno et al., lxiv. Adorno writes, “ticket thinking is possible only because the actual existence of those who indulge in it is largely determined by ‘tickets,’ standardized, opaque, and overpowering social processes which leave to the ‘individual’ but little freedom for action and true individuation” (Adorno et al., 747).

considerable degree of intellectual security.”³⁴² Without the capacity to resist objective content, the individual can only adapt to present conditions.³⁴³

From this behaviourist model of reaction and stimuli, it is perhaps curious that Adorno insists on a renewed psychological depth that (to his mind) the neo-Freudian Revisionist abstains from pursuing in favour of the ego’s more adaptive traits. In a remark that is likely aimed at Fromm, Adorno criticizes the exclusive analysis of the ego in relation to the environment without investigating unconscious psychodynamics.³⁴⁴ This sociological approach naturalizes social domination without investigating its psychological causes: “It is as if the sociological approach would hypostatize the congealed effect of material social forces and make them, in turn responsible for tendencies of which they themselves are mere results.”³⁴⁵ Adorno distances his approach from those theorists who would “sociologize” the authoritarian character out of existence even if behaviourism’s model of stimuli and reaction better captures the anthropology of this historical juncture.

The behaviourist model, however applicable as a critical anthropology, does not provide Adorno with a means for critiquing ‘the way things are.’ I argue that Adorno’s unpublished chapter, instead of disavowing the Freudian unconscious, invites an integration of psychoanalytic theory into a critique of the conditions that produced the authoritarian subject. Even if Adorno does not pursue this line of thinking fully, Marcuse’s essay, “The Obsolescence of the Freudian Type of Man,” provides some insight into how Adorno might have furthered this social critique:

That which is obsolete is not, by this token, false. If the advancing industrial society and its politics have invalidated the Freudian model of the individual and his relation to society, if they have undermined the power of the ego to dissociate itself from the others, to become and remain a self, then the Freudian concepts invoke not only a past left behind but also a future to be recaptured.³⁴⁶

To study “the mentality of those who are at the receiver’s end of today’s social dynamics” Adorno argues, is essential to the research study “not only because they reflect these dynamics but above all because they are the latter’s intrinsic anti-thesis.”³⁴⁷ If individuality can be restored

³⁴² Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lx.

³⁴³ Adorno et al., lxix.

³⁴⁴ Adorno et al., xlvi.

³⁴⁵ Adorno et al., liv.

³⁴⁶ Herbert Marcuse, “Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man,” in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 60–61.

³⁴⁷ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lxvi.

and the independent critical capacity of the ego can be strengthened, there is some hope for resistance against objective ideology.

The unconscious makes an appearance in Adorno's remarks on antisemitism when he writes, "the objective social forces making for anti-Semitism work upon the individual, not only from outside but actually within it."³⁴⁸ By "within," Adorno may be referring to the super-ego's internalization of prejudice or even the mobilization of the uncanny id (in German, *das Es* or "the it" of the above "within it"). Here, Adorno favours the psychoanalytic explanation of psychological mobilization that goes beyond mere internalization to include unconscious aggression: "if the psychology of the anti-Semite were carried to the extreme, it would finally have to reach a point at which external, social repression and the intra-subjective mechanisms of psychological repression coincide."³⁴⁹

Those uncanny aspects of modern-day antisemitism that rely on a combination of "old and sometimes-half-forgotten prejudices and stereotypes" are revived by social and material anxieties as an "antidote against the sufferings entailed by rational civilization."³⁵⁰ Echoing Horkheimer's 1936 observation that the authority-oriented character is made to feel impotent by the societal idealization of paternal authority, Adorno attributes the appeal of antisemitism to its remarkably simplistic explanation for why the individual experiences powerlessness in relation to greater objective forces. Antisemitism's reduction of irrational socio-economic laws (irrational in that they only benefit the elite) to the diabolical goings-on of a scapegoated community provides an outlet for everyday frustration while also shifting blame away from the status quo.³⁵¹ The impotence of the subject who "cannot determine his fate" in a world that seems to be governed by obscure objective forces promises to be mitigated by this redirection of blame to an identifiable group.³⁵²

Under the enormous pressure of outside social forces, objective interests are internalized and accepted as personal conviction: "it is the realm of ideology in which unconscious

³⁴⁸ Adorno et al., lxii.

³⁴⁹ Adorno et al., lxiii.

³⁵⁰ Adorno et al., xliii–xliv.

³⁵¹ For example, the Nazi death camps may have served the unconscious purpose of projecting the Nazi's own fungibility into "objects of manipulation, living corpses, virtual 'cakes of soap.'" Adorno's reading of Sartre also lends itself to this idea, citing him directly that the antisemite "is afraid of discovering that the world is badly made" (Adorno et al., liii; lix).

³⁵² Adorno et al., lii.

psychological processes seem to transform objective and therefore opaque, ‘unconscious’ economic laws into individual patterns of behaviour.”³⁵³ Like the “anonymous god” of Horkheimer’s 1936 essay on authority, irrational economic laws appear to work as an invisible force. These irrational economic laws that compose the groundwork of antisemitic conspiracy theories or other prejudicial worldviews maintain the status quo while keeping the actual source of social injustice remote (as Freud writes, “the law is not able to lay hold of the more cautious and refined manifestations of human aggressiveness”).³⁵⁴ The objective works upon the psyche as a mysterious presence that is both devastating and impenetrable; it is a law that seems so objective and superhuman that it could only have been issued from high above the mundane coercion of administered society.

4.4. Objective forms in Simmel and Kracauer: “The hypertrophy of objective culture”

Adorno’s unpublished remarks rethink the relationship between the subjective and the objective by proposing that the individual is made to feel impotent in their encounter with elusive political, economic, and social forces. Beyond the workings of culture or society, the objective also finds expression within the psyche (“the objective social forces making for anti-Semitism work upon the individual, not only from outside but actually within it”).³⁵⁵ This entanglement of the subjective and the objective is laid out by the study’s underlying hypothesis that “the political, economic, and social convictions of an individual often form a broad and coherent pattern, as if bound together by a ‘mentality’ or ‘spirit.’”³⁵⁶ Beyond the F-Scale as a measure for the pattern of potentially fascistic thinking and behaviours, the authors never explain what is meant precisely by this statement: what is the “mentality” or “spirit” that holds these traits together? Can this hypothesis be rescued from the pathologizing tendency that is so explicit in *The Authoritarian Personality*’s subjective focus? Following Adorno’s turn to social critique over psychological typologies, I refer to two essays that provide the 1948 unpublished remarks with an intellectual genealogy: Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) which introduces the notion of “objective spirit” and Kracauer’s more critical rendering of this concept in “The Mass Ornament” (1927).

³⁵³ Adorno et al., liii.

³⁵⁴ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:112.

³⁵⁵ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lxii.

³⁵⁶ Adorno et al., 1.

An important precursor to first generation Critical Theory, Simmel's writings on social forms (i.e., various patterns of social interaction) provide the basis for Adorno's observation that modernity had brought about the atrophy of individuality. In this 1903 lecture "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Simmel explores the impact of fast-paced city life on inter-human relationships and how economic exchange (what he calls the "money economy") has transformed the subject. In a passage that addresses the extent to which the individual is under siege by the supra-individual, Simmel proposes the following:

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life. ... An enquiry into the inner meaning of specifically modern life and its products, into the soul of the cultural body, so to speak, must seek to solve the equation which structures like the metropolis set up between the individual and the supra-individual contents of life. Such an enquiry must answer the question of how the personality accommodates itself in the adjustments to external forces.³⁵⁷

In 1900, Simmel proposes that the "metropolitan type of individual" had learned to adapt to unprecedented technological developments (including electricity, telegraphs, radio, automobiles, etc.). Adjusting to the complexity of modern life, these excessive stimuli contributed to an "intensification of nervous stimulation."³⁵⁸ The subject can only accommodate so much sensory data until the mental apparatus becomes overloaded by their environment and numbed to all sensation. The intensity of everyday sensory stimuli encourages the cultivation of what Simmel describes as a "blasé attitude" which he observes in the metropolitan's everyday demeanour. This attitude aids in blunting the reception of overwhelming experiences.³⁵⁹

The blasé attitude is tied to what Simmel understands to be the "money economy": the impersonal, calculating determination of all objects and persons according to their exchange value. He points out that the reduction of all things to the question of "how much?" has an antithetical effect on the worth of objects by flattening their value: "[the money economy] hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability. All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money."³⁶⁰

³⁵⁷ Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (New York: Sage Publications, 1998), 174–75.

³⁵⁸ Simmel, 175.

³⁵⁹ Simmel, 178.

³⁶⁰ Simmel, *ibid.*

Simmel reasons that the metropolitan's indifference and apathy is not only a means for protecting the subject from overstimulation but also reflects the hollowed-out malaise of modern capitalism. Even personality is subject to the money economy so that the individual's sense of worthlessness is only countered by fashioning for oneself a unique and exceptional persona that will attract attention and social cachet.³⁶¹ With greater inter-human competition in the metropolis, this persona represents an attempt to stand apart from the crowd and compensate for one's own feeling of worthlessness. These "phoney" personalities, as Simmel describes them, nonetheless betray the extent to which the subject will conform to the expectations of the money economy, paradoxically resulting in their resembling the cultivated personae of numerous individuals. These "character types," Simmel proposes, attempt to regain the self-esteem that has been degraded by the money economy. The struggle to set oneself apart from the crowd highlights "the preponderance of what one may call the 'objective spirit' over the 'subjective spirit.'"³⁶²

In a passage worth quoting in full, Simmel anticipates Adorno's observation that the objective has swallowed up the subject. This passage is framed within the context of the overwhelming metropolis:

The individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life. It needs merely to be pointed out that the metropolis is the genuine arena of this culture which outgrows all personal life. Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology, in the formations of community life, and in the visible institutions of the state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and impersonal spirit that the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact. On the one hand, life is made infinitely easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides. They carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself. On the other hand, however, life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. This results in the individual's summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to remain audible even to himself.³⁶³

³⁶¹ He writes "the self-preservation of certain personalities is bought at the price of devaluing the whole objective world, a devaluation which in the end unavoidably drags one's own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness" (Simmel, 179).

³⁶² Simmel, 185.

³⁶³ Simmel, 184.

Adjusting to increasingly complex social organization, the subject is streamlined and absorbed into the collective. Simmel describes this process succinctly as “the atrophy of the individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture.”³⁶⁴

Kracauer, a student of Simmel’s and colleague of Adorno, continues to explore the decline of the individual in modern life with his 1927 essay of cultural criticism, “The Mass Ornament.” This essay replaces objective spirit and the metropolis with the mass ornament: a symbol that is made up of numerous bodies and represents mass production along with the aestheticization of capitalist calculation and rationality. The mass ornament is introduced with the dance form made popular by the Tiller Girls in which human beings are assembled into abstract symbols that can be replicated and produced on numerous stages. Kracauer writes, “the regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier.”³⁶⁵ The enchantment that these shapes elicit from the crowd is only made possible by the mass ornament’s meticulous precision. “The more the coherence of the figure is relinquished in favor of mere linearity,” Kracauer writes “the more distant it becomes from the immanent consciousness of those constituting it.”³⁶⁶ Once the dancer enters into the mass ornament, they are reduced to bodily segments of uniform limbs; they are unable to regain their full and singular sense of individuality even if they exit the ornament as they are trapped within their very own “indissoluble girl cluster” of the dance troupe.³⁶⁷

Kracauer extends this implication of 1920s body culture to the workers who make up the factory. From their limited vantage point, the dancers cannot grasp the entire mass ornament that can only be captured by the audience’s vantage point. Similarly, the factory worker is unable to perceive the end-product of their labour. As its own mass ornament, the factory and its assembly lines rely on specialized tasks and workers who are unable to perceive the total production process. Kracauer writes,

Everyone does his or her task on the conveyer belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality. Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and

³⁶⁴ Simmel, *ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76.

³⁶⁶ Kracauer, 77.

³⁶⁷ Kracauer, 76; 78.

barely even observes it himself. The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls.³⁶⁸

Situated on the same conveyer belt of mass production, the capitalist is also estranged from the product that they sell – in more impersonal terms, the product that is sold. According to this model, both the labourer and the capitalist who owns (but cannot grasp fully) the means of production find themselves alienated from the mass ornament, unable to perceive the greater whole of which they only make up a small part.³⁶⁹ All individuality, personality, or even bodily integrity is eliminated by the authority that is culturally attributed to the mass ornament.³⁷⁰

For Kracauer, the mass ornament is an aesthetic expression of (or attempt to derive aesthetic value from) the rationality toward which capitalism aspires. Despite capitalism's self-image as a demythologizing force in the world via the deconstruction of the mass ornament into its highly rational (mathematical and geometrical) components, this aesthetic devolves into its own kind of mythology: the mass ornament is a "mythological cult that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction."³⁷¹ No matter how calculated and structured the bodies who make up the symbol appear to be, the mass ornament is ultimately mute. This is because the rationality it claims to represent is only a "murky reason" in which economic necessity transforms into unchecked greed.³⁷² Kracauer writes,

Precisely because the bearer of the ornament does not appear as a total personality – that is, as a harmonious union of nature and "spirit" in which the former is emphasized too much and the latter too little – he becomes transparent to the man determined by reason. The human figure enlisted in the mass ornament has begun the *exodus* from lush organic splendor and the constitution of individuality toward the realm of anonymity to which it relinquishes itself when it stands in truth and when the knowledge radiating from the basis of man dissolves the contours of visible natural form. ... its only remnants of the complex of man that enter into the mass ornament.³⁷³

³⁶⁸ Kracauer, 78–79.

³⁶⁹ Kracauer describes the mass ornament as aesthetically pleasing to the eye, explaining. "when significant components of reality become invisible in our world, art must make do with what is left, for an aesthetic presentation is all the more real the less it dispenses with the reality outside the aesthetic sphere" (Kracauer, 79).

³⁷⁰ In a comment that might be read as a potential critique of the much later *Authoritarian Personality* study, Kracauer also considers the mass ornament in application to psychometrics: "Going beyond manual capacities, psychotechnical aptitude tests attempt to calculate dispositions of the soul as well. The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" (Kracauer, 78–79).

³⁷¹ Kracauer, 83.

³⁷² Kracauer, 82.

³⁷³ Kracauer, 83.

As the bearer of the ornament, the individual is anonymized (disappearing into the image itself) and made anonymous (as a replaceable participant in the mass). The ornament becomes detached from its bearers just as “objective spirit” becomes alienated from the social institutions and laws that make up seemingly supra-individual forces. In Kracauer’s essay, the objective may even be so alienated from its original social conditions that its authority becomes synonymous with the laws of nature. As Kracauer writes, “after the twilight of the gods, the gods did not abdicate: the old nature within and outside man continues to assert itself,” contributing to “superstructures of a *mythological* thinking which affirms nature in its omnipotence.”³⁷⁴

Consulting Simmel’s notion of objective spirit through the lens of the turn-of-the-century metropolis or Kracauer’s mass ornament as an analogy for mass production, Adorno’s unpublished remarks can be better contextualized as a return to critical social theory. Where social science approaches failed to account for the ways in which society consumes individuality (along with the hope for a “true democratic type”), social theory can better capture the ways in which the authoritarian personality only makes up a small component of larger social trends. Both Simmel and Kracauer’s essays illustrate the historical tension between the subject’s self-determination and the domination of the objective. This conflict culminates in the mass culture of the twentieth century with the disappearance of the individual.

The power that Simmel, Kracauer, and Adorno attribute to objective forms – while also demystifying their claim of objectivity – raises an important question about how the modern subject comes to be trapped in their own creation. How can the mass ornament or the metropolis (as it mediates the supra-individual) exercise such a profound effect on the subject when the individual actively assists in the construction of these social monuments? How could the subject be so profoundly devalued and overpowered by that which is human-made?

To answer this question, it is useful to turn to an argument made by Simmel in his *Sociology* in which he proposes that domination may be exercised by an individual or a group but even more intriguingly, it may originate from “an objective power, be it social or imaginary.”³⁷⁵ In relation to this abstract authority, the subject may “feel determined by it,” as

³⁷⁴ Kracauer, 79.

³⁷⁵ Georg Simmel, *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, trans. Anthony J. Blasi, Anton K. Jacobs, and Matthew Kanjirathinkal (Boston: Brill, n.d.), 135–136.

though “they themselves have no effect on it; they have no possibility to react to the law itself in an effective way.”³⁷⁶

Simmel illustrates the authority of impersonal laws through the social arrangement of the traditional patriarchal family. Regardless of whether the father can claim paternity, he is dictated by this arrangement (as it is prescribed by patriarchal society) to treat his wife and any of her children as an extension of his property.³⁷⁷ Simmel maintains that this “absolute subjugation” in which women and children are condemned to “sink psychologically into the category of mere *thing*” follows in accordance with patriarchal social arrangements, not the despotic will of the father.³⁷⁸ Although the father inevitably benefits from this social form, his role in the family is transformed from master into a “custodian in the interests of the whole” so that he too becomes subordinate to the “objective idea of the family.”³⁷⁹

In relation to an objective power, the human and subjective origins of social institutions are dispensed with in favour of spiritually or otherwise elevated, impersonal commands that must be obeyed due to their apparent transcendence. The *pater familias* is maintained by “spiritual necessity” to an objective process or goal.³⁸⁰ The impersonal command and its impact upon the psyche is described by Simmel with the following:

We feel ourselves subordinated by a command that appears to be carried by no human, personal power. We hearken to the voice of conscience only *in* us when, equal in decisiveness against all subjective egoism, it appears to be able to stem only from a suitable authority *outside* the subject. As we know, the attempt has been made to resolve this contradiction in such a way that one would derive the contents of morality from social commands: what is necessary to the species and the group, and what this therefore requires for its self-preservation from the members, is to be cultivated in individuals gradually as instinct, so that it would appear in them as their own autonomous feeling, the actually personal, and thus often in contrast to the social commands. Thusly is explained the double character of the moral command: that it, on the one hand, confronts us as an impersonal order, to which we simply have to submit, and that yet, on the other hand, is imposed on us from no external power, but rather only from our own most inner impulse. ... the individual reproduces inside one’s own consciousness the relationships that exist between one as wholeness and the group.³⁸¹

³⁷⁶ Simmel, 183.

³⁷⁷ Simmel, 185–86.

³⁷⁸ Simmel, 186.

³⁷⁹ Simmel, 192.

³⁸⁰ Simmel, *ibid.*

³⁸¹ Simmel, 186.

The authority of objective commands is contextualized as the internalization and reproduction of social relationships within the psyche. The objective does not take place outside of individual minds even if it appears to hover over social interactions from above.³⁸² Simmel's understanding of the "double character of the moral command" can be interpreted psychoanalytically as the relationship between the super-ego and the parental *imagos*: the original relationship between the individual and the parent is taken in where the latter becomes distorted and experienced as an exaggerated and significantly more impersonal figure.

"Objective spirit" represents an important step toward thinking about social authorities that cannot be detected but are experienced as so ubiquitous and overwhelming that they cannot be escaped. Internalization is an important aspect of this omnipresence, as Simmel observes, the objective command is issued from within. Although its origin is entirely socio-historical, it appears to be supra-individual and mistaken as either belonging to the divine or to nature. In the individual's confrontation with objectivity, a significant shift takes place within the psyche. For Simmel, this is the blasé attitude of the metropolitan who remains apathetic to all stimuli so as to protect the psyche from overwhelming sensory experiences (anticipating Adorno's comment about the applicability of the behaviourist model of stimuli and reaction). In the money economy that is specific to turn-of-the-century capitalism, Simmel describes the degradation of the individual and the flattening of all value. For Kracauer, this degradation had been aestheticized with body culture: the fetishization of the human being as a mechanical component of greater and more highly valued machinery.

Beyond the impossibility of accommodating overwhelming stimuli (Simmel) or the transformation of the human being into a thing (Kracauer), Adorno's unpublished remarks spotlight the affective dimensions of the authoritarian's rage against the objective. The subject rails against their own impotence by allying themselves with stronger societal authorities against those they consider weak; consequently, the authoritarian extends their own experience of becoming "thingified" to others. In the unpublished remarks, Adorno writes,

³⁸² Simmel, 499. Here, Simmel would likely be in agreement with Freud that group psychology is also individual psychology, with the latter writing in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: "each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego ideal upon the most various models" (Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:129). This is perhaps also what Adorno means when he writes, "no harm comes to man from outside alone: dumbness is the objective spirit" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Minimia Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 138).

The fury against civilization, concentrated in a pure form, as it were, in anti-Semitism, stems from the feeling of being cheated. Because of the unfulfilled promise to redeem man from barbarism, civilization time and again unleashes barbaric instincts. The rebel against civilization is stimulated to boundless outbreaks of wrath because the power that oppresses the barbarian in him is itself barbarian. He wants to live in a chaotic world and even destroy everything, rather than live in a culture which he knows to be but a system guaranteeing the control of those in command. Because he could not live otherwise, because “his” world would otherwise fall to pieces, his latent fury against his oppressors, who are stronger than he is, is transferred and directed against the very idea of the good which has been polluted by this civilization. This displacement also permits him to follow the line of least resistance and to persecute those who are weak anyway.³⁸³

Without vindicating the antisemite or absolving the authoritarian of responsibility, this passage highlights the experience of betrayal and frustration that may culminate in irrational hatred (with Adorno proposing “people are inevitably as irrational as the world in which they live”).³⁸⁴

Drawing on Simmel and Kracauer’s insights into objective spirit, I understand the authoritarian antisemite as someone who rages against the social forms that have trapped them within a flattened and reified identity while also joining those oppressive forces out of a recognition of that authority’s omnipotence; their latent fury is matched by manifest acquiescence. The antisemite’s rage against the systematic commodification of the subject and the “unleashing of barbaric instincts” will be explored further in conjunction with Freudian drive theory (chapter five).

4.5. Conclusion: reflections from damaged life

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud suggests that it may be possible to psychoanalyze a socio-historical era and community using the same categories that are employed for an analysis of the individual. He writes:

If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization – possibly the whole of mankind – have become ‘neurotic’? ... I would not say that an attempt of this kind to carry psycho-analysis over to the cultural community was absurd or doomed to be fruitless. *But we should be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are only dealing with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved.* Moreover, the diagnosis of communal neurosis is faced

³⁸³ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lvii.

³⁸⁴ Adorno et al., lli.

with a special difficulty. In an individual neurosis we take as our starting-point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be 'normal'. For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere ... But in spite of all these difficulties, *we may expect that one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities.* (emphasis added)³⁸⁵

In some ways, this passage anticipates Critical Theory's work on the authoritarian character as they sought to combine psychoanalytic and empirical research methods for the study of a "new anthropological type." In chapter three, I discussed and evaluated the pioneering work of Reich, Fromm, and Horkheimer in the early to mid-1930s in their attempt to bridge the gap between social and psychological analysis. However, as discussed, *The Authoritarian Personality* shifted this analysis toward a psychopathology that could be defined against a normative model of so-called democratic health.

The historical gap between the institute's 1936 studies and the 1950 *Authoritarian Personality* presents a significant obstacle for establishing a psychoanalytic through-line in the development of a concept. Horkheimer's goal of fusing philosophy and the social sciences to investigate a new anthropology would never be realized in his lifetime: where the 1936 publication is theory-based, the 1950 study is almost entirely empirical.³⁸⁶ Reflecting on the study, Adorno acknowledges that the authors could only present a "superficial and fallacious" portrait of the authoritarian character; its empirical methodologies could not plumb the unconscious depths of the irrational and affective components of fascist adherence.³⁸⁷

In the earlier passage, Freud warns that the analogy between individual neurosis and destructive cultural trends must be approached with caution primarily due to the difficulty of identifying how normative cultural frameworks, i.e., what has been standardized and accepted within a historically specific context such as prejudice, slavery, persecution, etc., are actually symptomatic of cultural neuroses. This is precisely what *The Authoritarian Personality* struggles with most: a limited perspective on what constitutes a healthy, democratic type as compared with those who do not conform to this ideal.

³⁸⁵ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:144.

³⁸⁶ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 156.

³⁸⁷ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, xlv.

As a publication that deviates significantly from the theoretical traditions that inform Critical Theory, the conclusions of *The Authoritarian Personality* prove to be unsatisfactory. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the empirical sciences promised to make visible and manifest those unconscious conflicts that had so far only been inferred from historical trends. However, the methodological shortcomings of the project, i.e., limited self-reflexivity as apparent from the study's democratic bias and an over-reliance on the establishment of psychological typologies, are arguable inadequate but, most importantly, uncritical.

Reflecting on *The Authoritarian Personality's* most significant contribution, Adorno writes that it was “the conception of the problem, which is marked by an essential interest in society and is related to a theory that had not previously been translated into quantitative investigations” adding “we all considered the work, despite its great size, a pilot study, more an exploration of possibilities than a collection of irrefutable results.”³⁸⁸ In his unpublished contribution to the nearly 1,000 page pilot, Adorno shifts from thinking about the authoritarian personality's origin in a specific family environment (as Reich, Horkheimer, and Fromm had advocated for) toward a critique of a mass culture that had subsumed individuality, reducing the subject to behavioural input and output. This meant that antisemitism and other kinds of prejudice could be regarded as social illnesses or psychological distortions and the authoritarian personality understood to be an anthropological reflection of the coercive society that had produced this figure.

In addition to Adorno's critical remarks, I presented Simmel and Kracauer's contribution to thinking about the rise of objective forms and the disappearance of the individual. The character type described by Simmel, a metropolitan who seeks to rise above the crowd by cultivating a unique persona that will more easily succeed in the marketplace of inter-human competition, is reduced to an object of exchange. In the money economy any construction of “personality” represents an attempt to recover an internal sense of worth even if this value is found in making oneself into a fetish object that can be monetized, traded, and sold.

Although Adorno maintains that the authoritarian represents a “critical typology” by which the internalization and reproduction of ideologies could be studied through the subjective, it is obvious that the study hypostatizes its own theoretical construct. Where the whole purpose

³⁸⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 235.

of this research had been an attempt to explain the rise of fascism and the preponderance of antisemitism in a liberal democratic society, I argue that the authors' declaration of a "new anthropological type" only played further into the subject's commodification by a coercive society. *The Authoritarian Personality* represents one typology that might be rejected in favour of its alternative democratic type. From their praise of this democratic type, the researchers arguably constructed a new fetish object.

In his 1968 essay, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," Adorno suggests that individuality and autonomy do not stem from self-growth but might be better attained with improved social relations. He writes,

We become free human beings not by each of us realizing ourselves as individuals, according to the hideous phrase. But rather in that we go out of ourselves, enter into relation with others, and in a certain sense relinquish ourselves to them. Only through this process do we determine ourselves as individuals, not by watering ourselves like plants in order to become well-rounded cultivated personalities. A person who under extreme coercion or indeed through his egoistic interest is brought to behave in a friendly manner in the end attains a certain humanity in his relation to other people, more so than someone who, merely in order to be identical with himself – as though this identity was always desirable – makes a nasty, sour face and gives one to understand from the outset that one does not exist for him and has nothing to contribute to his inwardness, which often does not even exist.³⁸⁹

Beyond advocating for human decency and respect, Adorno is also suggesting that "under extreme coercion" those who are "brought to behave in a friendly manner" will prove to be instrumental in improving current social conditions. This surprisingly conservative statement, reminiscent of Freud's suggestion that some social coercion is necessary for peaceful co-existence and Marcuse's definition of domination which proposes that personal autonomy may be acquired through self-mastery, suggests that hostility is better off regulated if not concealed from the surface of social interaction. Adorno would never suggest something so unrealistic as a purging of aggression from the psyche.

³⁸⁹ Adorno, 240.

5. Authoritarian rage and subordination: Revisiting the psychoanalytic theory of the death drive

“I would say that, from birth to death, we are driven. At the beginning of life, there is no ‘knowledge’ about the ‘what for’ of our drives’ aims, and, later on, we do not realize that these many ‘whats’ we have come to know about are what we are ‘driven to.’ Yet at every instant, we are where our drives take us.”

Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau, “We are Driven” (2005)³⁹⁰

“The ego not only protects the organism from external and internal stimuli by blocking its reactions. It also reacts. It sifts and organizes stimuli and impulses; it permits some of them to find expression directly, others in a somewhat altered form. The dynamic and economic organization of its positive actions and the ways in which the ego combines its various tasks in order to find a satisfactory solution, all of this goes to make up ‘character.’ ... The questions of character would thus be the question of when and how the ego acquires the qualities by which it habitually adjusts itself to the demands of instinctual drives and of the external world.”

Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory Of Neurosis* (1946)³⁹¹

In his unpublished remarks on *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno argues that a study of the individual is in fact a study of incomparably stronger social factors. These greater, objective forces overwhelm the category of the individual by narrowing the gap between outside stimuli and autonomous action, thereby reducing subjects to “submissive centres of reaction.”³⁹² The authoritarian personality can thus be reconceptualized as a reactionary psychology that rages against (and embodies) the unjust conditions that seek to commodify or transform human beings into automata. With the naturalization of these objective forces, systems of oppression are transformed into elusive and ghost-like entities thereby making them appear impervious to critique. The authoritarian’s rage toward these mysterious forces is displaced as prejudice toward more identifiable but fabricated threats. Instead of tracing injustice back to the status quo, the authoritarian personality assists in already established trends of domination by seeking an alternative outlet for their rage in a scapegoated community.

What drives this rage? How does it become contained and redeployed? In this chapter, I explore the death drive and psychoanalytic theories of aggression that may explain the

³⁹⁰ Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau, “We Are Driven,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2005): 1023.

³⁹¹ Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, 427.

³⁹² Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, xlii.

authoritarian subject's tendency to persecute minorities as well as their gravitation toward social domination and malignant authorities. I introduce Freud's dual drive theory as it evolved in his metapsychological writings and social criticism (5.1) and discuss briefly the value of these ideas when integrated into Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse's critique of social domination (5.2). I then supplement Freudian drive theory with Melanie Klein's developmental theories including the origin of aggression, splitting, and projective identification as informed by her study of infant play and phantasy-building (5.3). I conclude with more contemporary formulations of drive theory (e.g., Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau), specifically focusing on Dori Laub's article on empathetic shut down as a death drive derivative (5.4). In conclusion, I propose that the theory of the death drive represents a useful heuristic framework for understanding authoritarian interiority as saturated with persecutory phantasies that are often manipulated by outside authorities.

5.1. "Something in the background behind Eros": the evolution of Freud's dual-drive theory

In this section, I review the evolution of dual drive theory in Freud's writings. By drive, Freud is referring to physiologically-based pressures or needs that exert a powerful force on the psyche. These "somatic demands upon the mind" seek satisfaction and often require negotiation when they are frustrated.³⁹³ Freud suggests that these somatic demands fall into one of two basic drives: the libidinal drive and, more controversially, the death drive. The libidinal or pleasure principle would come to be described more broadly under the concept of "Eros" and encompasses the drive toward self-preservation, building bonds, and maintaining relationships. The desire to build social connections exceeds the boundaries of sexual reproduction to include creative, action-oriented growth.³⁹⁴ However, Freud would go on to argue that Eros is counter-balanced by its opposite, the destructive drive or the death drive (*Todestrieb*, also referred to as Thanatos and the Nirvana principle), which he argues is a return to the primary and original state from which the organism first develops. Unless it is turned outwards and projected into others as aggression, it is difficult to observe the death drive in action. Freud maintains that the goal of the

³⁹³ Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 23:148.

³⁹⁴ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:91. Freud clarifies the "'wider' sense" of eros to include the love described by Plato and by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. He writes "anyone who considers sex as something mortifying and humiliating to human nature is at liberty to make use of the more genteel expressions 'Eros' and 'erotic'. I might have done so myself from the first and thus have spared myself much opposition" (Freud, 18:91).

death drive is to destroy those unities established under Eros and return what is living to its original, inorganic state.³⁹⁵

The controversy surrounding this hypothesis amounts to its unpersuasively metaphysical, if not pseudo-mystical, grounding: how can the human organism be oriented toward an impulse that cannot be observed directly except when it works in tandem with the drive towards preservation? To review all of these criticisms and debates would exceed my current focus on how this psychoanalytic framework may be useful for theorizing the psychodynamics of authoritarian rage.³⁹⁶ In this overview, I make a point of demonstrating how drive theory developed as a response to questions that continued to be important to the Critical Theorists in their critique of fascism; for these theorists, drive theory had the potential to explain the pervasiveness of human destructiveness and the contradiction of masochistic submission.

According to Freud's pre-1921 writings on psychoanalytic metapsychology, the organism is dominated by the pleasure principle, meaning that we seek out pleasurable stimuli and avoid unpleasurable or repress painful stimuli. In 1911, Freud set the pleasure principle and its governance over the unconscious id apart from the reality principle that, in a much weaker sense, guides the conscious ego in its interactions with the world. As wishes frequently come into conflict with reality, the pleasure principle fails to adapt to outside conditions and cannot protect the organism against external threats. The development and strengthening of the reality principle is thus integral for the organism's survival by encouraging the deferral of immediate gratification.³⁹⁷

Although Freud did not abandon the theory of the pleasure principle (and its rivalry with the reality principle), he revises his metapsychology in 1921 to include what he suggests is a built-in orientation toward destruction and decay.³⁹⁸ This suspicion arises out of Freud's thinking

³⁹⁵ Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 23:149.

³⁹⁶ The controversy surrounding the death drive can be summarized by Jean Laplanche, "a good number of analysts have ... maintained on the one hand that the *notion* of a death instinct is unacceptable, and on the other hand that the clinical *data* adduced by Freud must be interpreted without having recourse to such a concept" (Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 101). Often, these objections arise from the question of whether aggression is an original or a derivative phenomenon.

³⁹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning," in *Case History of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 12, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 1911), 223.

³⁹⁸ Before the 1921 revision, Freud insisted upon an earlier dualism of self-preservation (e.g., hunger and nourishment) and pleasure (e.g., obtaining sexual pleasure) and would later combine these two drives under the pleasure-unpleasure drive. Its significance is better elucidated in 1911 when Freud presents this drive in conflict with the ego-driven reality principle.

about the catastrophic effects of the First World War, even describing violence as a force that could be unleashed upon the world: “it tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way, as though there were to be no future and no peace among men after it is over.”³⁹⁹ Here, he introduces drive theory as an object of study that should be theorized outside of moral categories, proposing: “we classify them [drives] and their expressions ... according to their relation to the needs and demands of the human community.”⁴⁰⁰ Drive theory thus becomes essential for Freud’s account of human cruelty and its motivation: no matter the degree to which an individual has been socialized or educated, all human beings are constituted by the same bodily-based impulses and may be subject to regressive states that empower those impulses that veer toward the anti-social and destructive.⁴⁰¹

In his controversial *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud suggests that the organism is not always motivated by pleasurable stimuli and that there may be another impulse toward mastery or repetition. Where libidinality is oriented toward change and movement, mastery seeks to bind excitations and stimuli. For instance, traumatic dreams do not seek to gratify wish fulfillment but rather exert mastery over a past stimulus that continues to haunt the psyche long after the traumatic event.⁴⁰² Mastery over the original stimulus may re-introduce pleasure where there had been originally discomfort and suffering, freeing the psyche from excitation or at least lessening its impact.⁴⁰³ This orientation toward restoring an early condition, that is, recovering a sense of tranquility or inertia before the onset of unpleasant or traumatic stimuli, runs completely counter to the drive toward excitation and growth, i.e., seeking pleasurable stimuli.⁴⁰⁴ Even if this drive toward mastery is also motivated, like Eros, by the pursuit for gratification and avoidance of unpleasure, the drive toward mastery and repetition is primarily oriented toward control over the original stimulus (as exemplified by the compulsion to repeat) from which very

³⁹⁹ Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” 279.

⁴⁰⁰ Freud, 281.

⁴⁰¹ Freud, 286.

⁴⁰² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 18, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1920), 32–33.

⁴⁰³ Freud, 18:62.

⁴⁰⁴ Freud, 18:40.

little pleasure is actually obtained. This duality is described as a combination of regressive and progressive tendencies that are tied to the life cycle of the organism.⁴⁰⁵

What Freud suspects is a built-in tendency toward atrophy and decay may be seen as blending in with the physiological readiness of all living beings toward gradual deterioration; the drive toward life and pleasure is counterbalanced in all organic life with a return to the inorganic. The controversy that arises out of Freud's dual drive theory, as introduced most vehemently by *Beyond the Pleasure Principle's* hypothesis that the physiological pressure toward death leaves traces in the mind, is Freud's insistence that the death drive is innate to the biological composition of the individual. This notion is rejected outright in Fromm's later writings and treated more tentatively by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, who would insist upon reading the death drive as a psycho-social phenomenon rather than as an innate, biological concept.

Beyond the quandary of repetition compulsion, much of Freud's discussion of the death drive arises out of the question of how sadomasochism is possible: how can sexual desire become intertwined cruelty and aggression? Even if sadism is primarily an outgrowth of sexuality, Freud puzzled over the incomprehensibility of masochism, namely that masochistic behaviour appears to be antithetical to the principle of self-preservation.⁴⁰⁶

Having previously argued that masochism is a derivative of sadism (the same pressure and drive originally directed toward the other is now re-directed back onto the self), Freud could explain both masochism and, to some extent, sadism as expressions of the destructive drive. In "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud proposes that masochism is actually original to sadism (with the latter now regarded as the external expression of the death drive projected outward). When sadism is transformed back into masochism, derivative aggression is reunited with the original destructiveness of the death drive that is bound to the psyche (described by Freud as "[sadism] once more introjected, turned inwards, and in this way regress to its earlier

⁴⁰⁵ "It is as though the life of the organism moved with a vacillating rhythm. One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey" (Freud, 18:40–41).

⁴⁰⁶ The problem and solution to understanding sadism as an outgrowth of Eros is laid out in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: "One of these object-instincts, the sadistic instinct, stood out from the rest ... in that its aim was so very far from being loving. Moreover it was obviously in some respects attached to the ego instincts: it could not hide its close affinity with instincts of mastery which have no libidinal purpose. But these discrepancies were got over; after all, sadism was clearly a part of sexual life, in the activities of which affection could be replaced by cruelty" (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:117–118).

situation [of self-destructiveness”]).⁴⁰⁷ This 1924 essay demonstrates drive theory’s dynamism, allowing for a more sophisticated psychoanalytical understanding of how one set of impulses might work in the service of numerous and even conflicting motivations as well as their modification or conversion into those expressions that are more situationally appropriate. Projection and introjection also become much more pronounced concepts in their application to dual drive theory, taking on increasing importance in Freud’s later writings on the death drive (and, as will be seen, in Klein’s reconceptualization as well).

In his 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud explores the relationship between the pleasure principle and those social conditions that seeks to stifle pleasure, asking why the vast majority of people are left unsatisfied by their interactions with the external world.⁴⁰⁸ Wish fulfillment is impeded by several existential threats (illness, natural disaster, and death) including, Freud notes, our social relations which appear to be similarly inevitable in causing unnecessary frustration and suffering.⁴⁰⁹ The primary conflict presented by our social relationships is the struggle between internal needs (drives) and the external regulation of those needs that have arisen out of society’s prioritization of safety and cooperation.⁴¹⁰ Although the regulation of the unruly drives is instrumental for the development of laws that bind human beings into a safe, equitable, and just community, several of these restrictions prove to be damaging so much so that “serious disorders” may come about by frustrating perfectly harmless desires.⁴¹¹ For instance, the inhibitions and restrictions placed on sexual desire (including, Freud adds, non-heterosexual, genital, monogamous, and reproductive sexuality) perpetuate “serious

⁴⁰⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 19, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 1924), 164.

⁴⁰⁸ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:76.

⁴⁰⁹ Freud, 21:77. Here Freud writes “a suspicion dawns on us that here, too, a piece of unconquerable nature may lie behind – this time a piece of our own psychological constitution” (Freud, 21:86).

⁴¹⁰ On anti-social impulses, Freud writes that the individual “will always defend his claim to individual liberty against the will of the group. A good part of the struggles of mankind centre round the single task of finding an expedient accommodation – one, that is, that will bring happiness – between this claim of the individual and the cultural claims of the group; and one of the problems that touches the fate of humanity is whether such an accommodation can be reached by means of some particular form of civilization or whether this conflict is irreconcilable” (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:96). Aggression is more or less contained by legal principles resulting in the renunciation of anti-social impulses so that no member of society is “at the mercy of brute force” (Freud, 21:95).

⁴¹¹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:97.

injustice” upon those who do not conform to the normative expectations that are specific to any given socio-historic context.⁴¹²

Eros, specifically the drive to fulfill bodily-based desires, is often embattled with coercive forms of social control. Personal attachments, such as the love that is shared between two people, may also be subject to unnecessary restrictions as they threaten societal obligations with a bond that has been privileged over all others (these obligations include those associated with national identity, citizenship, etc.).⁴¹³ Where Eros encourages libidinal identification and attachments between members of a group, even to the extent where these relationships become more powerful than overall social interests (e.g., falling in love versus military conscription), the death drive works to destroy these relational units. The social mechanisms that bind destruction have to be much more exacting. Considering the role of aggression and particularly those forms that transcend crude brutality, Freud observes that “the law is not able to lay hold of the more cautious and refined manifestations of human aggressiveness.”⁴¹⁴ The aggression that social control fails to contain is still unable to slip past the censor of the super-ego. Therefore, aggression is re-internalized and sent back into the psyche from where it first originated as the death drive.⁴¹⁵ This point requires further explication.

Where Eros is “conspicuous and noisy enough,” Freud proposes “we can only suspect [death drive], as it were, as something in the background behind Eros, and it escapes detection unless its presence is betrayed by its being alloyed with Eros.”⁴¹⁶ Where the death drive is more observable is when it is sent out of the organism and directed toward an outside (animate or inanimate) object. This externalization of destructiveness becomes a means for diverting what would otherwise work against the self-preservation drive of Eros. However, when this

⁴¹² Freud, 21:104.

⁴¹³ Freud, 21:108–9.

⁴¹⁴ Freud, 21:112.

⁴¹⁵ For Marcuse, this outcome is formulated differently as a “dialectic of civilization” in which the suppression of Eros results in a strengthening of the death drive. As aggressive forces become more powerful, greater repressions have to be introduced which only results in a further weakening of Eros – the only force capable of binding the social whole together. Although some of this hostility can be transformed into socially useful aggression, its influence over civilization increases the more Eros is diminished by harsher social regulation (Marcuse, “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts,” 18–20). The subordination of individual goals and happiness for social needs and the demand for instinctual renunciation may culminate in a profound wish for destruction.

⁴¹⁶ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:121. An example of this combination can be found in sadomasochism in which erotic and destructive drives work together (Freud, 21:119). Freud also offers a more everyday example with the destructive and self-preservative process of eating (Eros) and digestion (death drive) (Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 23:149).

externalized aggression is inhibited in its aim, it can only be reabsorbed by the subject where it wreaks havoc upon the psyche.⁴¹⁷ The re-internalization of aggression, once the death drive deflected out, may be re-absorbed by the super-ego in the form of “conscience.”⁴¹⁸ Even before destructiveness can be acted upon, the super-ego (as the site of conscience) works to transform this intended hostility into a punitive guilt that exacts justice upon the ego for its original impulse to harm. “Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it,” writes Freud “and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city.”⁴¹⁹

Aggression is now understood as a dynamic force that can either be projected out or re-internalized into the psyche where it continues to exert pressure via the super-ego. The mere wish to act out a destructive impulse is powerful enough to warrant punishment from this omniscient agency. As discussed in chapter two, the ego in its relationship with the super-ego exhibits an obedience that recalls the erotic attachments formed in early infantile experience in which submission to the parents ensures their love and the child’s survival. As the super-ego is associated with parental love and protection, the punitive authority of this agency is experienced as an existential threat. Requiring the love and approval of the super-ego to ensure psychic survival, the ego renounces unacceptable desires that may be harmful or perceived to be dangerous by society, such as the hostility that impedes social integration. Where “the danger only sets in if and when the authority discovers it,” the omniscient super-ego (“a continuation of the severity of the external authority, to which it has succeeded and which it has in part replaced”) registers those impulses that the ego has renounced but that nonetheless persist in the unconscious even after they are repressed.⁴²⁰ Renunciation is then insufficient for managing unconscious hostility as the individual is dominated by the omniscient super-ego in the form of either crippling anxiety or guilt. Freud concludes that societal discontent is acted out psychically in the uneasy relationship between ego and super-ego – a sado-masochistic attachment experienced by the ego as a “need for punishment” from those internalized representatives of authority that are only too willing to exact revenge on the unconscious.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:122.

⁴¹⁸ Freud, 21:123.

⁴¹⁹ Freud, 21:123–24.

⁴²⁰ Freud, 21:124; 127.

⁴²¹ Freud, 21:136.

Freud's dual drive theory represents a psychodynamic framework for conceptualizing how somatic demands are translated into internal conflicts. More importantly, this framework situates these demands within the context of social control: while society seeks to administer the needs and desires of the subject (e.g., the restrictions imposed on sexual orientation), somatic drives continue to shape our social relations including the ways in which more refined expressions of hostility may evade detection and censorship. Before reviewing Kleinian and contemporary psychoanalytic approaches to the death drive, it is important to highlight the critical social theory that is already implicit in Freud, paying special attention to how the dynamics of aggression are taken up by the Critical Theorists.

5.2. Critical Theorists on social control, surplus repression, and pathic projection

Cultural development is only made possible by the renunciation and regulation of anti-social impulses, as ensured by the development of the individual super-ego; the renunciation of impulses that allows for individual progress is also important for cultural progress.⁴²² According to Freud's construction of the primal horde, tyranny is replaced with a proto-democratic community in which the interests of the whole are established over that of the selfish individual. This development is summarized neatly in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

Human life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals. The power of this community is then set up as 'right' in opposition to the power of the individual, which is condemned as 'brute force'. This replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization. The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions. The first requisite of civilization, therefore, is that of justice – that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favour of an individual.⁴²³

According to this model, the group works in opposition to the individual by establishing a collective standard of what is lawful and ethically just.⁴²⁴ Every member of the community must

⁴²² Freud, 21:141.

⁴²³ Freud, 21:95.

⁴²⁴ This sentiment is also expressed in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: "social justice means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well, or, what is the same thing, may not be able to ask for them. This demand for equality is the root of social conscience and the sense of duty" (Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:121). Adorno shares a similar sentiment in the passage cited at the conclusion of my third chapter: "We become free human beings ... in that we go out of ourselves, enter into relation with others, and in a certain sense relinquish ourselves to them. Only in this process do we determine

renounce their own selfish interests by restricting their capacity for pleasure (“instinctual renunciation”).⁴²⁵ Following this, it would be reasonable for the majority to protest against those social conditions that only benefit a select few. As Freud writes, any society that “leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence.”⁴²⁶

Freud is well aware of the actual infrequency of this kind of rebellion relative to the prevalence of inequity that gives rise to the horde-like repetition of a tyrannical “power of the individual.” Where an unfair status quo goes unchallenged, Freud suspects that emotional attachments have been established between the ruling elite and exploited classes. These emotional attachments take the form of identification as disenfranchised members come to identify with the cultural ideals that the elite have insisted on representing. Otherwise, Freud writes “it would be impossible to understand how a number of civilizations have survived so long in spite of the justifiable hostility of large human masses.”⁴²⁷ The most contemporary example of this attachment can be found in the vast majority of Trump supporters who see themselves in his populist persona despite the interests of the business oligarchs whom he actually represents. This “narcissistic satisfaction,” in which destructive impulses are renounced in exchange for belonging and a share in the greatness of what the elite have come to represent, appears in conjunction with hatred toward the “uncivilized” outsider who does not or, more conveniently, can never share in that same belonging.⁴²⁸ The problem of social domination and the self-destructive consequences of allying oneself with agents of oppression – articulated by Reich as the paradox of why the hungry do not steal – is once again entangled with the curious ways in which self-preservation is curtailed by powerful counter-forces.

Although Freud frames the instinctual renunciation of anti-social impulses and the strengthening of the super-ego as “a precious cultural asset,” there is an extent to which this

ourselves as individuals ... A person who under extreme coercion or indeed through his egoistic interest is brought to behave in a friendly manner in the end attains a certain humanity in his relation to other people” (Adorno, “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America,” 240).

⁴²⁵ English readers of Freud are often disoriented by James Strachey’s error of translating Freud’s *Trieb* (drive) into the English “instinct,” despite the original concept’s distinction from the German *Instinkt* which is only referred to a few times in Freud’s work as “inherited mental formations” (Schmidt-Hellerau, “We Are Driven,” 993). Although it would be more accurate to describe “the renunciation of drives,” I have chosen “instinctual renunciation” so to avoid terminological awkwardness.

⁴²⁶ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 21:12.

⁴²⁷ Freud, 21:13.

⁴²⁸ Freud, 21:ibid.

strengthening contributes to undue repression.⁴²⁹ This critique is much more pronounced in Marcuse's writings. Marcuse suggests that the subordination of individual goals and happiness to the needs of the community has always been a criterion for securing the survival of the greater whole: "freedom is only possible on the basis of unfreedom, that is, on the basis of instinctual suppression."⁴³⁰ However, since social needs are determined by a dominating ruling elite that distributes social wealth according to its own interests, the individual is increasingly subjected to unnecessary and alienating work. Thus the reality principle, once working toward self-preservation via the suppression of pleasure, now serves a seemingly unstoppable incline of historical progress that requires, in turn, an unreasonable rate of production.⁴³¹

To maintain this escalation of productivity and ungratifying labour, more unnecessary repressions and instinctual modifications have to be enforced resulting in what Marcuse describes as "surplus repression."⁴³² Compelled by an internal sense of necessity, the subject conforms to the increasingly irrational demands of modernity and reproduces this form of social domination from within so that social unreason is transformed into what Marcuse calls a *rational universal*.⁴³³ The ego becomes increasingly automatized (i.e., reified), conforming to social structures of domination and along with it the dissolution of critical consciousness.⁴³⁴ The false sense of freedom attained from this excessive domination over pleasure is inevitably accompanied by discontent and hostility as the individual sacrifices their personal happiness for the goals prescribed by society. Thus, the transformation of the subject into an alienated worker is completed with what Marcuse describes as "the introjection of the masters into their subjects."⁴³⁵

In thinking about the authoritarian character, it will be recalled that Adorno understood this figure as a casualty of administered society who had come to recognize actual social injustice. Instead of directing their rage against repressive mechanisms that monopolize happiness (e.g., unfair compensation), this figure champions current and brand-new forms of despotism in favour of even more brutal tactics of social control. As Freud points out, the

⁴²⁹ Freud, 21:11.

⁴³⁰ Marcuse, "Freedom and Freud's Theory of Instincts," 5.

⁴³¹ Marcuse, 6.

⁴³² Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 35.

⁴³³ Marcuse, "Freedom and Freud's Theory of Instincts," 22.

⁴³⁴ Marcuse, 17.

⁴³⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, xv.

repression of socially unacceptable defiance in exchange for an identification with the elite redirects rage toward outsiders who do not or cannot share in this identification. This point is elaborated succinctly in a passage from Adorno's "Unpublished Remarks on the Authoritarian Personality," that I cited in the previous chapter but should now be revisited in the context of drive theory:

The fury against civilization, concentrated in a pure form, as it were, in anti-Semitism, stems from the feeling of being cheated. Because of the unfulfilled promise to redeem man from barbarism, civilization time and again unleashes barbaric instincts. The rebel against civilization is stimulated to boundless outbreaks of wrath because the power that oppresses the barbarian in him is itself barbarian. He wants to live in a chaotic world and even destroy everything, rather than live in a culture which he knows to be but a system guaranteeing the control of those in command. Because he could not live otherwise, because "his" world would otherwise fall to pieces, his latent fury against his oppressors, who are stronger than he is, is transferred and directed against the very idea of the good which has been polluted by this civilization. This displacement also permits him to follow the line of least resistance and to persecute those who are weak anyway.⁴³⁶

This "outbreak of wrath" assimilates its victim into an all-encompassing identity through what Adorno and Horkheimer describe in their "Elements of Anti-Semitism" chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as pathic projection, meaning an evacuation of unconscious content that is then projected into the other. Pathic projection, in which affect is sent out into another, is the opposite of mimesis, the capacity to take into oneself traits that aid the individual in adapting to their environment, thereby assisting in self-preservation.⁴³⁷ If mimesis is the individual's imitation of their external environment, then "false projection" does precisely the opposite by transforming the outside world into a psychical projection of unconscious fantasies. Through the projection of volatile repressed content, "the alien becomes intimately known" by disavowing this content into the other.⁴³⁸ The fascist antisemite, a "sick individual" who remains out of touch with the reality principle, embellishes a collectively shared paranoid delusion that once expressed out in the open

⁴³⁶ Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, lvii.

⁴³⁷ In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer describes mimesis with the following: "From the day of his birth, the individual is made to feel that there is only one way of getting along in this world – that of giving up his hope of ultimate self-realization. This he can achieve solely by imitation. . . . By echoing, repeating, imitating his surroundings, by adapting himself to all the powerful groups to which he eventually belongs, by transforming himself from a human being into a member of organizations, by sacrificing his potentialities for the sake of readiness and ability to conform to and gain influence in such organizations, he manages to survive. It is survival achieved by the oldest biological means of survival, namely, mimicry" (Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 95–96).

⁴³⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 154.

“threatens to dominate everything which goes beyond self-preservation: culture.”⁴³⁹ This predatory rage can be understood in the context of drive theory as the projection of self-destructive impulses that finds its “release valve” in the unconscious hostility of pathic projection.⁴⁴⁰

Antisemitism, along with other forms of prejudice, is founded on collectively shared paranoia: a “sickness [that] is socialized.”⁴⁴¹ Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that, just as beliefs are shared within a religious community, collectively shared paranoia appeals to “objectified, collective, approved forms of delusion,” that is an “objective spirit” that disables critical thinking and self-reflection.⁴⁴² The individual becomes both “subject and object of repression” (made possible by, to borrow Marcuse’s term, the automatization of the ego).⁴⁴³ In this system of delusion, hateful projections are channeled into an identifiable outsider as “the socially responsible elite is in any case far harder to pin down than other minorities.”⁴⁴⁴

In the administered society, surplus repression lends itself to the internalization of coercive authorities via the encultured super-ego and further automatization of the ego. However, these mechanisms of social control are not powerful enough to contain unconscious aggression. This is where pathic projection can be manipulated to serve the interests of those in power while, more importantly, appearing to serve the interests of Eros (specifically, self-preservation) by deflecting outward death drive aggression. A question that is never asked by the Critical Theorists is how these projections first develop and when they are first formed in relation to the outside world. In the next section, I broaden my analysis by drawing important points of intersection between pathic projection and Klein’s post-Freudian contributions to thinking about the death drive, specifically her concept of projective identification.

⁴³⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, 161.

⁴⁴⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, 140.

⁴⁴¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, 162.

⁴⁴² Adorno and Horkheimer, 163.

⁴⁴³ Adorno and Horkheimer, 169. They write, “The subjects of the drive economy are being psychologically expropriated and the drive economy is being more rationally operated by society itself. The individual no longer has to decide what he or she is supposed to do in a given situation in a painful inner dialogue between conscience, self-preservation, and drives. ... The committees and stars function as ego and superego, and the masses, stripped of even the semblance of personality, are molded far more compliantly by the catchwords and models than ever the instincts were by the internal censor” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 168).

⁴⁴⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 172.

5.3. Klein's concepts on paranoid-schizoid splitting and projective identification

Following the outbreak of the Second World War and the diaspora of continental psychoanalysts and Critical Theorists, a significant rift grew between American and British psychoanalytic schools of thought. Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse were writing in favour of the late Freud when the death drive had begun to lose traction, particularly among those interpersonal psychoanalysts who migrated to the United States (specifically, Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, and to some extent, Anna Freud). Meanwhile, the British Psychoanalytic Society under the influence of Melanie Klein continued to develop Freud's theory of the death drive and aggression in the context of infant and child psychoanalysis.

Klein's work calls attention to the destructive tendencies that are apparent in children's play and phantasy-building such as greed, rage, and envy.⁴⁴⁵ While Freud's theories remain more or less limited to the Oedipal drama of the vengeful child and the punitive father, Klein's understanding of aggression begins with the pre-Oedipal mother-child dyad. Her interest in the child's play technique was inspired by an anecdote recounted in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which a little boy's drive to master his fear of abandonment is acted out when he throws a toy away and exclaims *fort* for "gone" (representing his absent mother) only to pull the object back by a reel and declare *da* for "here" and then repeating the entire process over again.⁴⁴⁶ Even if Klein's developmental object relations did not extend into Freud-Marxian social critique, C. Fred Alford comments on what might have been the Frankfurt School's integration of her thought, "it is as though two ships of émigrés passed in the night."⁴⁴⁷

Klein proposes that the infant harbours aggressive and destructive phantasies toward the mother's breast/substitute of the bottle as this object is crucial for the child's earliest experience of gratification (survival) and frustration (deprivation). In her essay "Weaning," Klein describes the stimulation of the infant's mouth, throat, and the filling of the stomach as contributing to pleasurable phantasy-building. However, the inevitable frustration of delayed gratification lends itself to unpleasurable phantasies centered on hostility toward that same object originally associated with pleasure and now blamed as the source of the infant's hunger.⁴⁴⁸ This object (the

⁴⁴⁵ *Ph-* indicating the Kleinian unconscious realm of object relations as distinguished from conscious *fantasy*.

⁴⁴⁶ Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 2.

⁴⁴⁷ C. Fred Alford, "Reconciliation with Nature? The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and Melanie Klein," *Theory, Culture & Society* 10, no. 2 (1993): 207, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327693010002011>.

⁴⁴⁸ Melanie Klein, "Weaning," in *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: Delta Publishing, 1936), 290.

breast) is dissociated from the mother as a whole person and becomes split into two: a good object and an evil object. Klein writes:

What one might call the ‘good’ breast become the prototype of what is felt throughout life to be good and beneficent, while the ‘bad’ breast stands for everything evil and persecuting. The reason for this can be explained by the fact that the child turns his hatred against the denying or ‘bad’ breast, he attributes to the breast itself all his own active hatred against it – a process which is termed *projection*.⁴⁴⁹

While projecting components from their own phantasy into the good and bad object, the infant also introjects these projected elements in an effort to grasp the outside world: “the child sucks the breast into himself, chews it up and swallows it.”⁴⁵⁰ Once introjected, these good and bad objects of phantasy live on in the unconscious where, gradually over time, the infant begins to recognize these objects as one and the same:

He begins to see his mother and others about him as ‘whole people’, his realistic perception of her (and them) coming gradually as he connects her face looking down at him with the hands that caress him and with the breast that satisfies him, and the power to perceive ‘wholes’ (once the pleasure in ‘whole persons’ is assured and he has confidence in them) spreads to the external world beyond the mother.⁴⁵¹

To experience the mother as a whole requires the infant to reconcile benevolent phantasies of gratification, safety, and love with the more frightening phantasies of hostility, denial, frustration, and destruction. The sadistic phantasy of biting, gnashing, and tearing at the breast/mother gives way to the infant’s fear that her phantasies of omnipotence may contribute to the mother’s depletion or demise. Persecutory anxiety felt in relation to the persecutory object should ultimately transform into restorative guilt in an effort to reintegrate the mother as a whole object.⁴⁵²

How does Klein integrate the death drive into her theory of splitting? She suggests that the libidinal drive and death drive are present from birth and contained within the ego until they are projected into the mother as the good/ideal breast and the bad/persecutory breast. Similar to

⁴⁴⁹ Klein, 291.

⁴⁵⁰ Klein, *ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ Klein, *ibid.*

⁴⁵² Klein, 293–94. Sadism, Klein notes, fuses these phantasies of erotic gratification and aggression which are projected into the breast and then into the body of the mother: “greedy, erotic and destructive phantasies have for their object the inside of the mother’s body. In his imagination the child attacks it, robbing it of everything it contains and eating it up” (Klein, 293). She adds “analytic experience has proved that these tendencies go along with phantasies of a definitely cannibalistic nature” suggesting that these destructive phantasies are “in full swing when the child begins to perceive his mother as a whole person” (Klein, *ibid.*).

Freud's account of aggression as a derivative of the death drive in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Klein maintains that the ego deflects death drive out of the psyche in the form of aggression. Much of this original death drive becomes split off and projected into the now-persecutory breast contributing to what Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid position (insofar that the ego splits [*schizoid*] and indulges in the phantasy of persecution [*paranoia*]).⁴⁵³ The infant will even perceive numerous persecutory objects that only further provoke aggressive phantasies that will use up any remaining death drive contained within the ego.⁴⁵⁴

An important distinction made by Klein in contrast to Freud's theory of super-ego development which, it will be recalled, occurs in the Oedipal stage in relation to the child's identification with the father, is that the Kleinian super-ego appears much earlier with the infant's internalization of projected aggression/the bad breast. In response to Freud's suggestion that the super-ego bears very little resemblance to the actual parent, Klein insists that the super-ego is first formed in relation to the infant's destructiveness: "This view of the matter makes it also less puzzling to understand why the child should form such monstrous and phantastic images of his parents."⁴⁵⁵ The super-ego, as an internal object, reflects the reality of gratification and deprivation as well as the phantasy of the persecutory object, i.e., the destructive impulses projected outward by the infant.

Beyond forming the super-ego and the phantasy-building of persecutory object(s), Klein is not altogether clear about what the death drive represents beyond its role in object relations: What is its psycho-physiological origins? What is its relationship with Eros? The death drive appears to be something that can either be turned away outside of the psyche through aggression or, less often, accepted and tolerated within the ego. In her infant analysis, the death drive is associated with phantasies of annihilation (deprivation) that must be kept at bay in order to protect, not just the self, but the more vulnerable ideal object. This process results in either the introjection of the ideal object or, even, its projection into another so as to safeguard the good object against wherever the bad object(s) currently resides (as a persecutory object in the world

⁴⁵³ The paranoid-schizoid position is contrasted by Klein with the depressive position in which the fragmented object is perceived as a whole person that can be related to as the source of both good/love and bad/hate (Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 68).

⁴⁵⁴ Segal, 25.

⁴⁵⁵ Melanie Klein, "The Early Development of Conscience in the Child," in *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: Delta Publishing, 1933), 250.

or inside the self).⁴⁵⁶ From this dynamic, Klein develops her theory of projective identification as a defense mechanism in which components of the self are projected into another object, either to a) dispel those harmful or unacceptable aspects of the self that can be better controlled, attacked, or destroyed if they are split off into a persecutory object or b) ensure that good aspects of the self are protected, cherished, or improved if they are harboured within an ideal object.⁴⁵⁷

Projective identification is only made possible by the capacity to empathize with another and, in turn, makes possible the symbolization of thought by identifying parts of the self that can be projected into another.⁴⁵⁸ When this defense mechanism becomes pathological is when the ego is so fragmented that it confuses reality and phantasy. For instance, if the good object cannot be preserved, the ego may sink into despair, as Hanna Segal writes: “an ideal object cannot be found, therefore there is no hope of love or help from anywhere,” while in the case of the persecutory object that cannot be destroyed, it becomes “the source of endless persecution and later guilt.”⁴⁵⁹ This extreme form of projective identification not only fragments the projected-into object but also that of the perceptual apparatus contributing to extremely painful and violent distortions of reality.⁴⁶⁰ As Robert Caper points out, although projective identification is communicative and empathetical, these strong phantasies can also be used as a means to control or coerce another. The emotion that is projected into the other comes to be experienced by both the subject and the object of this projection as a concrete, objective phenomenon instead of the phantasy it actually is (for instance, words take on omnipotent power, as in magical thinking). The subject will even experience the object they sought to coerce as “controlling him in return.”⁴⁶¹

I argue that splitting and projective identification are important Kleinian concepts for thinking about the psychodynamics of authoritarian rage, particularly in application to Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of antisemitism. The persecutory object comes into being out of the authoritarian’s desire to assert control over collectively-agreed upon persecutory objects that may or may not represent a significant threat to the status quo, e.g., Jews, women, immigrants,

⁴⁵⁶ Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 26.

⁴⁵⁷ Segal, 27–28.

⁴⁵⁸ Segal, 36.

⁴⁵⁹ Segal, 41–42.

⁴⁶⁰ Segal, 56.

⁴⁶¹ Robert Caper, *Immaterial Facts: Freud’s Discovery of Psychic Reality and Klein’s Development of His Work* (London: Routledge, 1988), 107.

queer people, people of colour, etc. However, this process of projective identification (“they are weak, I am strong”) gives way to the paranoid schizoid anxiety that the authoritarian will become dominated by this same persecutory object (“their weakness will make me weak”).⁴⁶² Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the antisemite’s system of delusion mirrors Klein’s theory of projective identification as aggressive elements are split off and projected into Jewish persecutors. The victim becomes so totalized within a collective phantasy as a source of danger that they must be attacked, undermined, and even destroyed. This projection of bad objects contributes to a psychotic distortion of reality so that the antisemite, as Adorno and Horkheimer write, “[transforms] the world into the hell they have always taken it to be.” The authors propose the following solution to pathic projection:

A radical change would depend on whether the ruled, in face of absolute madness, could master themselves and hold the madness back. Only the liberation of thought from power, the abolition of violence, could realize the idea which has been unrealized until now: that the Jew is a human being.⁴⁶³

Through the lens of Klein’s theory of splitting, the emancipation of critical thought might be likened to reparation (i.e., the depressive position as opposed to the paranoid-schizoid position) in which the mother is finally treated as a whole object rather than a part object, a whole human being that is capable of committing both good and bad actions (i.e., as flawed as anyone else but not particularly dangerous as a threat). The authoritarian’s rage can then be understood as the persecutory phantasy of being destroyed by another, that is, their veiled wish for the destruction of the bad object.

5.4. Contemporary approaches to dual drive theory (Schmidt-Hellerau, Solms, and Laub)

In light of contemporary neurobiology and psychology, the biological orientation of Freud’s death drive cannot be proven and might be dismissed altogether for lack of concrete evidence. However, I follow psychoanalytic theorist Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau in her proposal that the question of whether the death drive exists is unimportant compared with its heuristic

⁴⁶² Although the authoritarian antisemite will often characterize Jews as powerful or influential to the point of approaching world-domination, this phantasy is often woven in with contradictory claims of their physical weakness, moral or sexual deviance, and conniving political manipulation. As Wilhelm Reich observes in his fascist patients, “you feel inferior because you yourself are exactly what you want to kill off in the people you call Jews” (Reich, *Listen, Little Man!*, 31).

⁴⁶³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 165.

value. In her words, are there “phenomena that we can unite by a notion to be defined and called the *death drive*”?⁴⁶⁴ In this section, I focus on those contemporary psychoanalysts who have found useful (clinical) applications for thinking about the death drive.⁴⁶⁵

According to neuro-psychoanalyst Mark Solms, Freud’s libidinal and destructive drives may be interpreted in terms of homeostatic functioning as the regulation of biological systems. The death drive does not need to be wholly dismissed for lack of biological evidence (there is no psychological drive toward death even if the body is physiologically oriented toward decay) with Solms reframing the Nirvana principle according to “feelings of pleasure and unpleasure” that work “from or toward the homeostatic settling point of the need in question.”⁴⁶⁶ These drives are not always oriented toward pleasure or arousal (as in Freud’s libidinal principle) but may achieve satiation through de-escalation or quiescence (thus corresponding with the desired zero-point of the death drive).⁴⁶⁷ As a framework, Solms suggests that drive theory might be integrated with Jaak Panksepp’s seven basic emotional drives. Although each emotional drive is irreducible, I list them here with the corresponding grouping of Freud’s dual-model: lust (Eros), seeking (Eros), rage (aggression), fear (death), panic/grief (death), care (Eros), and play (Eros).⁴⁶⁸ Sadomasochism, which puzzled Freud for its combination of libidinal and destructive traits, might then be thought of as a combination of play (Eros) and rage (aggression).

Just as Solms insists on the correspondence between physiologically based affect and feeling-states, Schmidt-Hellerau also underscores the psychological representation of

⁴⁶⁴ Schmidt-Hellerau, “We Are Driven,” 999–1000. Schmidt-Hellerau is referencing here Freud’s frontier or border thesis, citing him directly: “a ‘drive’ appears to us as a concept on the border between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body” (cited in Schmidt-Hellerau, 999).

⁴⁶⁵ Mark Solms, a neuro-psychoanalyst, has argued that drives are useful in thinking about the translation of autonomic regulatory mechanisms into felt affect (homeostatic, emotional, sensory affects), i.e., feelings that make us aware of physiological needs that are innate to the human infant. (Mark Leonard Solms, “The Neurobiological Underpinnings of Psychoanalytic Theory and Therapy,” *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 12 (2018): 2–3).

⁴⁶⁶ Solms, 6.

⁴⁶⁷ Mark Leonard Solms, “Revision of Drive Theory,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 69, no. 6 (2021): 1051–1053, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00030651211057041>. Solms writes in “Revision of Drive Theory” that “Freud was conflating psychology with biology. The individual organism does not aim for death, psychologically, although it is our inevitable destination” and adds, with regard to self-destructive behaviour, e.g., malignant narcissism, “I will make a swift generalization. What these phenomena have in common (apart from the fact that they are not the expressions of a natural drive, precisely because they are pathological) is the fact that they are attempts to achieve satiation by ‘short circuit’; that is, they are attempts to satisfy the demands made upon the mind for work *without actually doing the work*. In other words, they are attempts to evade the reality principle, which is indeed a dangerous and potentially fatal) thing to do. These are failure of *ego* functioning.” (Solms, 1054).

⁴⁶⁸ Solms, “Revision of Drive Theory,” 1064–80.

physiological strivings (borrowing Freud’s understanding of drive as a somatopsychic “border concept”) through various symbolizations, thoughts, feelings, fantasies, etc.⁴⁶⁹ When we refer to drives, we are describing the process of pursuing and activating a specific activity. She writes “the drive provides the *direction*, the *movement*, and the energy is *what is directed*, the ‘*something*’” that, although unquantifiable as psychological content, seeks to invest in “an object (its representation), an activity, a feeling, and so forth.”⁴⁷⁰ Just as homeostatic functioning must be kept in balance, too much or too little stimulation will result in defensive reactions that are then observed in the force and intensity of the original drive.⁴⁷¹ Schmidt-Hellerau explains how aggression, instead of being a death drive derivative, refers to the intensity of self- and object-preservation:

Aggression is not about aggression per se, but is always about something else – namely, about survival or sexuality, or about overcoming or defeating any interference, real or imagined, to the goals of these two primal drives [sex and preservation]. In order to succeed, we will increase our efforts expressed by the energy quantities invested in our strivings. That is to say, what we experience as aggression is the expression of *intensified* sexual or preservative drive activity. ... I believe that our minds are constantly calculating and anticipating the appropriate intensity afforded in order to *reach*, to *frighten off*, to *flee*, or to *destroy* the relevant object.⁴⁷²

When preservation is threatened (Schmidt-Hellerau does not distinguish between that of self and that of another object), aggression – referring to the intensity of the need to satisfy this drive – increases. This intensity is sometimes appropriate but may be inappropriate, such as “in states of psychopathology or neurotic conflict.”⁴⁷³ Schmidt-Hellerau illustrates the failure of aggression to achieve its object when, in a regressed state, the analysand raises their voice to reach the analyst who is already within close proximity and is responsive to their patient’s distress.⁴⁷⁴ Recalling Klein’s theory of the persecutory object, aggression expresses the felt-experience of deprivation even when that experience should be contradicted by reality.

⁴⁶⁹ Schmidt-Hellerau, “We Are Driven,” 1011.

⁴⁷⁰ Schmidt-Hellerau, *ibid.*

⁴⁷¹ Schmidt-Hellerau, 1012.

⁴⁷² Schmidt-Hellerau, 1012–13. She continues, “the rationale for this is: A drive is defined as a movement from the (somatopsychic) source of the subject’s need/desire to the object of satisfaction; if satisfaction is not achieved, then unpleasure persists; thus, the goal of getting to the required object is a decisive determinant of any drive activity.” (Schmidt-Hellerau, 1013).

⁴⁷³ Although Freud insists on “self-preservation” in his early writings, Schmidt-Hellerau introduces “preservation” as encompassing both self- and object-preservation, writing “not only are we driven to preserve ourselves, we are also driven to preserve our objects” (Schmidt-Hellerau, “We Are Driven,” 1021).

⁴⁷⁴ Schmidt-Hellerau, 1014.

In a 2020 essay, “How Demagogy Works: Reflections on Aggression in Politically Fraught Times,” Schmidt-Hellerau applies this understanding of aggression to an examination of alt-right Trump rhetoric. Proposing that “aggression springs from a real or imagined threat to the satisfaction of our preservative needs and/or our sexual desires in the broadest sense, including our narcissism (our self-regard and our values),” she suggests that Nazi propaganda and Trump slogans share a common strategy in manipulating these basic drives.⁴⁷⁵ In Nazi Germany, the Jews represented an imagined threat to *Volk* survival, triggering panic and destructive impulses.⁴⁷⁶ In recent years, the anti-immigrant fear-mongering that is apparent in contemporary alt-right propaganda in the United States stems from a similar anxiety among white supremacists. This is particularly apparent from the conspiracy narrative of “replacement theory” (which posits that increased immigration population and decreased birth-rate as a consequence of feminist and pro-immigration politics – due to Jewish influence in politics – will contribute to the eventual extinction of white Americans), thereby anticipating aggressive solutions to the racist belief that white survival is in jeopardy.⁴⁷⁷

So far, Solms and Schmidt-Hellerau emphasize the “border concept” of drive theory as a somatopsychic phenomenon. They also present the death drive as a useful heuristic even if they do not subscribe to the classical definition in psychoanalysis, insisting on its being joined or combined with the drive toward preservation and libido. It is notable that aggression is not treated by Schmidt-Hellerau as a death drive derivative (death drive turned outward) but as an indication of the preservation/sexual drive’s intensity, even taking on more pathological forms such as delusional or conspiratorial thinking. However, this does not explain those cases in which this intensity works in the opposite direction of aggression, that is, when affect is lessened or shut down and the subject seeks quiescence.

In “Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization: A Death Instinct Derivative?,” contemporary psychoanalytic theorist, Dori Laub, reconsiders death drive in its clinical application to studying the dissociate impact of severe trauma. The article recounts his own early

⁴⁷⁵ Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau, “How Demagogy Works: Reflections on Aggression in Politically Fraught Times,” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (2020): 235.

⁴⁷⁶ Schmidt-Hellerau, 238.

⁴⁷⁷ Schmidt-Hellerau summarizes Trump rhetoric as “*foreign countries are cheating us economically; hordes of illegal immigrants, murderers and terrorists, invade our homeland; they take our jobs, and live on our social security benefits; they inundate the US with drugs that kill thousands of our good citizens – and they rape our women! Islam is un-American and facts are fake news etc.*” (Schmidt-Hellerau, 238).

experience of being unable to work effectively with a patient exhibiting intergenerational war trauma. In this case, the failure of both the analyst (Laub) and his analytic supervisor to engage in an “empathic inquiry” into the patient’s inner experience is explored as un-worked through trauma on their part as Holocaust survivors.⁴⁷⁸ This double counter-transference impaired the analysis resulting in Laub, decades later, reconsidering the role of death drive in the consulting room.

Laub draws on several psychoanalytic theorists (Klein, Sandor Ferenczi, and André Green, among others), to argue that the capacity to symbolize thought is only made possible by the internalization of “good objects” resulting in an “internal dialogic process” in which the subject narrates its experience to an “internal ‘thou,’” i.e., the good object. After extreme trauma, this good internal object vanishes, producing a “state of dread, of catastrophic object loss, that compels the victim to internalize the only object available to him, that of the perpetrator.”⁴⁷⁹ Ferenczi terms this internalization of the bad object as “identification with the aggressor” (to be explored in more detail in the following chapter). In this state of terror and fragmentation, Laub proposes that “death drive derivatives” come to the fore by way of the paralyzed subject’s orientation toward a state of nothingness (described in Green’s account of the dead mother complex as “negative narcissism,” a destructive identification with an emotionally unresponsive and ultimately “dead” object of attachment).⁴⁸⁰

For Laub, there are four mechanisms at play in this empathetic and symbolic shutdown: 1) the psychological impact of trauma resulting in “an ‘unbinding’ of destructive forces”; 2) the disappearance of the good object and “internal other” or “thou” that allows for symbolic processes; 3) the tendency toward nothingness (Green’s “negative narcissism”); and 4) what Laub describes as a “hijacking” of the victim, that is, “the identification with the death-like

⁴⁷⁸ Dori Laub, “Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization: A Death Instinct Derivative?,” in *Lost in Transmission: Studies of Trauma across Generations*, ed. Gerard M. Fromm (London: Routledge, 2012), 311.

⁴⁷⁹ Laub, 315.

⁴⁸⁰ Laub, 317. Here, Laub relies significantly on Green’s dead mother complex: “this tendency towards nothingness is the real significance of the death instinct” (as quoted in Laub, 317). Laub distinguishes his view from Green by writing “I believe that the same dynamics and a comparable phenomenology hold true *not only* for the infant’s symbolic maternal loss but also for the *traumatic loss of the good internal object at any age*” (Laub, *ibid*). For Green, the dead mother is not absent but rather an “imago which has been constituted in the child’s mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming a living object, which was a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate, deeply impregnating the cathexes of certain patients whom we have in analysis ... Thus, the dead mother, contrary to what one might think, is a mother who remains alive but who is, so to speak, psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care” (André Green, “The Dead Mother,” in *On Private Madness*, trans. Katherine Aubertin (London: Karnac Books, 2005), 142).

quality of the internal world of the perpetrator.”⁴⁸¹ These four mechanisms reorient death drive in the context of object relations.

At first, empathetic shutdown appears to be the opposite of Klein’s projective identification in that it seeks to disengage from the other (for example, Laub includes the accounts of shocked witnesses of the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks, perceiving its footage on live television as unreal and movie-like).⁴⁸² On this shutdown of symbolization and empathy, Laub describes the internal world of the perpetrator:

The executioner does not heed the victim’s plea for life, and relentlessly proceeds with the execution. The ‘other,’ the ‘thou,’ who is empathically in tune and responsive to one’s needs, ceases to exist, and faith in the possibility of communication itself died. There is no longer a ‘thou,’ either outside or inside oneself, a thou whom one can address. An empathic dyad no longer exists in one’s internal world representation. There is no one to turn to, even inside oneself. It is an utterly desolate landscape, totally void of life and of humanity, permeated by the terror of the state of objectlessness.⁴⁸³

Of the perpetrator, Laub describes them as shockingly unaware of what has been committed: “he doesn’t ‘know’ what really happened, because he stopped symbolizing and communicating with himself ... Nothing is acknowledged, so there is nothing to tell.”⁴⁸⁴

With the disappearance of the good object, the empathic or dialogic process that is only made possible through libidinal attachment, empathetic shut-down shares some resemblance to the manipulative and coercive aspects of projective identification (Klein). However, Laub does not associate this shut-down of symbolization with Klein’s concept since projective identification is precisely what makes symbolization possible. Laub would likely frame empathic shut-down as the opposite of projective identification since his concept closes off those libidinal connections that would make sense of and symbolize the un-symbolizable.

Challenging this distinction, I would point out that both Laub’s reference to negative narcissism (Green) and identification with the aggressor (Ferenczi) implies that *some* kind of transference is taking place in this psychological hijacking. Contrary to Laub’s position, I would argue that the shut-down of symbolization is not a true shut-down but rather a perversion of symbolization. Where projective identification relies on the kind of empathy that seeks to control

⁴⁸¹ Laub, “Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization: A Death Instinct Derivative?,” 321.

⁴⁸² Laub, 311–13.

⁴⁸³ Laub, 315.

⁴⁸⁴ Laub, 320.

and manipulate the object, empathic shut-down evacuates into its victim the death landscape of the perpetrator. Even if this evacuation shuts-down the inner-dialogic (I-Thou) process of the once-autonomous subject, this transference should still be counted as a form of unconscious communication of that perpetrator's inner world, i.e., their own (perverse) symbolization. This projection and introjection of the perpetrator's destructiveness constitutes a perverse form of empathy or, to borrow Ferenczi's analogy from "The Confusion of Tongues," a new language of violence and domination that, even in its unreality, follows some kind of logic – albeit, the disturbing logic of the perpetrator. In Laub's context, that perverse logic might look like race ideology or fascist propaganda: "I perceive my victim as vermin and vermin must be exterminated for fear that they will spread disease," etc. I plan to pursue further this particular thread of unconscious communication and introjection in the following chapter with Ferenczi's concept of identification with the aggressor.

5.5. Conclusion: "from birth to death, we are driven"

As a somatopsychic border concept, drive theory can be reconsidered in the context of developmental psychology, environmental factors, and bodily-based affect.⁴⁸⁵ Reviewed in this chapter are several theorists who incorporate drive theory into their understanding of how desires can either be satisfied or frustrated, repressed or unleashed, acted out or worked through. Although Freud posits a biological origin for the death drive, this notion is generally rejected by contemporary thinkers in favour of a more dynamic analysis. Freud's most fervent critics were alarmed by a fatalistic biological determinism that, I would point out, does not persist in Freud's later development of the death drive (e.g., *Civilization and Its Discontents*) nor in its reception by the Critical Theorists.

Challenging what he describes as subjective (autonomous) and objective (genetically determined) explanations for human behaviour, Critical Theory scholar Benjamin Y. Fong suggests that drive theory eludes this dichotomy, writing "drive theory does not assume total, conscious, volitional activity ... [nor does it] assume nonconscious passivity."⁴⁸⁶ Drives are

⁴⁸⁵ This can be found in those Critical Theory texts that explain the internalization of domination as a modification of both preservative and destructive drives by mechanisms of social control, reification, and automatization (e.g., Marcuse on surplus repression and the renunciation of harmless pleasure and justifiable hostility).

⁴⁸⁶ Benjamin Y. Fong, *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and Subject of Late Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 15.

formed in relation to the environment but they can be adapted, redirected, and better controlled through the cultivation of self-mastery. Without relying on out-dated universalist claims about human nature to explain the consistency and regularity of bodily-based drives, Fong insists on what Freud scholar Peter Gay proposes are “universal preconditions,” writing:

What mouths and their various acts *are* to human beings differs in various places and times, but *that we have mouths*, mouths that can do a limited number of things and that *must* ingest food, *does not*, and this fact provides a constraint on the range of meanings mouths can have for human beings. Even more important: what care *is* can be radically different in different societies, but *that* human beings enter life completely dependent on the responses of other human beings (and for a fairly lengthy amount of time in comparison to other animals) is invariable. ... In sum then, drives are formed in relation to the environment, but they are not just formed *in* any old thing: they appear in mammals with mouths, anuses, and genitals (not to mention opposable thumbs and large brains) that would, without fail, *die* upon birth were it not for an extended period of infancy in which they are *absolutely dependent* on their caretakers.⁴⁸⁷

This approach is most integrated in Klein’s work: the infant demands gratification and perceives any frustration to that satisfaction as an obstacle for survival. Despite the mother’s best effort, feeding is not always experienced as soothing nor is it always accepted without the infant becoming distressed by an internal sense of frustration. The satisfaction of the need is not isolated but attached to a corresponding object that constitutes the inner world of the child.

While Freud identified a destructive current that worked against the pursuit for pleasure, Klein’s contributions help explain the role of phantasy in aggression. Both thinkers highlight the dynamism of drive theory, such as in Klein’s theory of the persecutory object and Freud’s account of aggression as a derivative of the death drive (contributing to the internalization of the severe super-ego). When Adorno and Horkheimer describe the antisemite as “transforming the world into the hell they have always taken it to be,” it is important to consider both the real hell that is economic disenfranchisement and social injustice as well as the internal experience of hell that is projected by the subject into their victims. As Freud insisted throughout several of his writings on the psychology of religion, there is an element of truth in all psychoses even when these delusions are at odds with reality.⁴⁸⁸

Beyond considering its heuristic value, hackneyed debates over the death drive’s validity are arguably unproductive for an analysis of authoritarian rage and submission. I have sought to

⁴⁸⁷ Fong, 17.

⁴⁸⁸ Hewitt, *Freud on Religion*, 50.

demonstrate the theoretical value of death drive and aggression in considering the ways in which domination builds on the projection of internal phantasies and objects. The dynamism of destructiveness – its projection and introjection – becomes key for understanding: how hostility can be re-absorbed and transformed into the severe super-ego (Freud); the phantasy of persecutory object(s) that must be destroyed lest they destroy the subject (Klein); the false projection or projective identification of the authoritarian's destructive inner world into their victim (Adorno and Horkheimer); aggression as an intensified response to the perceived or imagined threat of annihilation (Schmidt-Hellerau); and the empathetic shut-down that absorbs the traumatic death landscape of the perpetrator (Laub). Although these theories provide important psychoanalytic insight into thinking about rage towards scapegoated communities and attachment or identification with agents of oppression, the mechanisms of submission underlying the subject's disregard for self- and object-preservation still require further explication. In the following chapter, I deepen this analysis of shut-down with a close reading of a passage from Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History."

6. Messages in a bottle: A psychoanalytic reading of Benjamin's Thesis VII (1940)

“So Eichmann's opportunities for feeling like Pontius Pilate were many, and as the months and the years went by, he lost the need to feel anything at all. This was the way things were, this was the new law of the land, based on the Führer's order; whatever he did he did, as far as he could see, as a law-abiding citizen. He did his *duty*, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law*. ... Since, in addition to performing what he conceived to be the duties of a law-abiding citizen, he had also acted upon orders – always so careful to be ‘covered’ – he became completely muddled, and ended by stressing alternatively the virtues and the vices of blind obedience, or the ‘obedience of corpses,’ *Kadavergehorsam*, as he himself called it.”

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963)⁴⁸⁹

“Another psychological force at work in this situation may be termed ‘counteranthropomorphism’. For decades psychologists have discussed the primitive tendency among men to attribute to inanimate objects and forces the qualities of the human species. A countervailing tendency, however, is that of attributing an impersonal quality to forces that are essentially human in origin and maintenance. Some people treat systems of human origin as if they existed above and beyond any human agent, beyond the control of whim or human feeling. The human element behind agencies and institutions is denied. Thus, when the experimenter says, ‘The experiment *requires* that you continue,’ the subject feels this to be an imperative that goes beyond any merely human command. He does not ask the seemingly obvious question, ‘Whose experiment? Why should the designer be served while the victim suffers?’ The wishes of a man – the designer of the experiment – have become part of a schema which exerts on the subject's mind a force that transcends the personal. ‘It's *got* to go on. It's *got* to go on,’ repeated one subject. He failed to realize that a man like himself wanted it go on. For him the human agent had faded from the picture, and ‘The Experiment’ had acquired an impersonal momentum of its own.”

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience and Authority: An Experimental View* (1974)⁴⁹⁰

In 1961, social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted experiments on obedience and conformity at Yale University with the goal of explaining “the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority.”⁴⁹¹ The participant, who was arbitrarily assigned the role of “teacher,” tested the memory of a second participant who sat in another room and was assigned the role of “learner.” If the “learner” failed to answer a question correctly, an “experimenter” would instruct the “teacher” to deliver small shocks to the other

⁴⁸⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 135.

⁴⁹⁰ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974), 8–9.

⁴⁹¹ Milgram, 5.

participant. These incremental shocks ranged from 15 volts (slight shocks) to 450 volts (severe shocks). The manipulation of the experiment lay in the assignment of all participants to the role of “teacher” while the “experimenter” and the “learner” were both confederates. As the “experimenter” commanded an increase in shocks, the “learner” in the other room (who was actually unharmed) would plead for an end to the experiment and simulate the agony of being shocked by screaming.⁴⁹² Even when “teachers” vocalized or expressed their fear for the “learner,” struggling to complete their task, the majority of participants (over 60%) continued to obey the instructions of the “experimenter” and delivered the full range of shocks.⁴⁹³

All participants were led to believe that the experiment was designed to study the impact of discipline on learning and later claimed that they felt compelled to complete their task with the experiment taking on a life of its own. Milgram had initially wanted to study “how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim” and determine “when and how people would defy authority in the face of a clear moral imperative.”⁴⁹⁴ Inspired by Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil,” Milgram writes of the subject:

He divests himself of responsibility by attributing all initiative to the experimenter, a legitimate authority. He sees himself not as a person acting in a morally accountable way but as the agent of external authority. In the postexperimental interview, when subjects were asked why they had gone on, a typical reply was: “I wouldn’t have done it myself. I was just doing what I was told.” Unable to defy the authority of the experimenter, they attribute all responsibility to him. It is the old story of “just doing one’s duty” that was heard time and time again in the defense statements of those accused at Nuremberg. But it would be wrong to think of it as a thin alibi concocted for the occasion. Rather, it is a fundamental mode of thinking for a great many people once they are locked into a subordinate position in a structure of authority. The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority.⁴⁹⁵

Variations of the same experiment all pointed to a similar conclusion that there was nothing unique about the German character that made them predisposed toward genocide. Americans were just as likely to follow orders blindly, commit violence, and find themselves

⁴⁹² Milgram, 3–5.

⁴⁹³ Milgram, 35, 60–61, 94–95.

⁴⁹⁴ Milgram, 3–4.

⁴⁹⁵ Milgram, 8. He adds “The person who assumes full responsibility for the act has evaporated. Perhaps this is the most common characteristic of socially organized evil in modern society” (Milgram, 11).

unwilling or unable to defy those in authority.⁴⁹⁶ This conclusion was also shared by those who worked on *The Authoritarian Personality* although Milgram denies that there is a strong relationship between the two projects (his only reference to the F-scale is when he points out the “imperfection of paper-and-pencil measuring devices,” adding “it is hard to relate performance to personality because we really do not know very much about how to measure personality”).⁴⁹⁷

As an experimental social psychologist, Milgram’s explanation for uncritical obedience could be found in what he introduced as the *agentic shift theory*, an “internal modification” in which “the person entering an authority system no longer views himself as acting out of his own purposes but rather comes to see himself as an agent for executing the wishes of another person.”⁴⁹⁸ The agentic state can be likened to what Marcuse coined as “the automatization of the ego” in which the subject is so instrumentalized by a larger system that they cease to act as an autonomous being. This psychological state is facilitated by the “suprahuman character” of certain kinds of authority which are experienced as “something larger than the individual ... an impersonal force, whose dictates transcend mere human wish or desire.”⁴⁹⁹ Milgram describes this psychological force as an impersonal and trans-human influence on the subject that, having once been human, is now experienced as “counteranthropomorphic.”⁵⁰⁰ In considering Arendt’s study, the agentic shift can be observed in Adolf Eichmann’s identification with what he interpreted as the Kantian imperative. Despite demonstrating a basic understanding of the imperative, Eichmann had distorted it to become: “act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it,” with Arendt adding, “Kant to be sure, had never intended to say anything of the sort.”⁵⁰¹ Eichmann had replaced practical reason with Hitler’s “law of the land.”

⁴⁹⁶ Numerous scholarly debates have been ignited by Milgram and Arendt’s rejection of the *Sonderweg* [special way] thesis, most notably renewed by the publication of Daniel Goldhagen’s controversial 1996 *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* which argued the Holocaust was ignited by a uniquely German form of “eliminationist antisemitism.” A more sophisticated consideration of the *Sonderweg* thesis through a Marxo-Freudian lens can be found in Adorno’s essay, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” in which he writes “the *volkish* community of the unfree and the unequal was a lie and at the same time also the fulfilment of an old, indeed long familiar, evil bourgeois dream” and “only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken” (Theodor W. Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 95; 103).

⁴⁹⁷ Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, 205.

⁴⁹⁸ Milgram, 132–33.

⁴⁹⁹ Milgram, 144.

⁵⁰⁰ Milgram, 8.

⁵⁰¹ (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 136). Kant would have likely pointed out that Eichmann is not actually making use of his own his own reason but only, by his own account, blindly adhering to external commands. This does not meet the definition of a categorical imperative because following orders without

He no longer just obeyed his duty to the law but embodied the role of legislator, i.e., the underlying principle of the law to carry out the mass murder of those marked for death by Nazi race ideology.⁵⁰²

In Critical Theory's development of the authoritarian character as a concept, Adorno's unpublished remarks on *The Authoritarian Personality* represents a shift from the family and the father (Reich, Fromm, and Horkheimer) to thinking about overwhelming, impersonal forces that are also experienced as counter-anthropomorphic. The subject's impotence, loss of autonomous individuality, and their estrangement from the larger superstructure in Simmel's metropolis, Kracauer's mass ornament, Milgram's 'Experiment', etc. is the domination of the subject by an objective form. Milgram's experiment provides a stark illustration of how most individuals in the role of functionary find themselves representing (and to a certain extent identifying with) harmful machinations, perceiving themselves as only a small cog in the greater machine.

It will be recalled from the previous chapter that drive theory provides a useful framework for thinking about what psychological mechanisms are at work in authoritarian rage and subordination. Asking what mechanisms drive this authoritarian rage, this chapter turns to the other half of the story: collusion with the aggressor. Here, I argue that an identification with the victor of history operates as a narcissistic defence against the despair of melancholic ego-loss. I begin with an examination of a passage in Walter Benjamin Thesis VII in his essay, "On the Concept of History" where he proposes that the history of domination relies on "a process of empathy [with the victor of history] whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*." The subject of this passage is the historicist, an early, Benjaminian prototype of the authoritarian who is characterized by their belief in the upward trajectory of historical progress and, in 1940, failed to defend social democracy against fascism. In this close reading, I introduce Freud's object relations as they are developed in his *Group Psychology* study and *Mourning and Melancholia*

thinking is not universalizable. In addition to this, Eichmann's office positions him in the role of a responsible authority who should voice his objections and "have courage to make use of [his] *own* understanding," as Kant writes: "it would be ruinous if an officer, receiving an order from his superiors, wanted while on duty to engage openly in subtle reasoning about its appropriateness or utility; he must obey. But he cannot fairly be prevented, as a scholar, from making remarks about errors in the military service and from putting these before his public for appraisal. ... For if he believed he had found the latter [contradictions] in them, he could not in conscience hold his office; he would have to resign from it" (Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment? (1784)," in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17; 18–19).

⁵⁰² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 136–37.

and discuss their relevance for interpreting the historicist's conflict (6.1). Turning to Sandor Ferenczi's theory of identification with the aggressor and Jay Frankel's adaptation of this concept for thinking about authoritarian movements, I suggest that the historicist's identification with the victor (*Einfühlung* translated as empathy/receptivity) is a narcissistic defense against despair (*acedia*) (6.2). In my conclusion, I revisit Thesis VII as a critique of defensive identification that externalizes the individual's own sense of powerlessness by condemning others to tyrannical conditions that had always been alterable (6.3).

6.1. Interpreting Thesis VII: "Empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers"

Written shortly before the summer of 1940 and published posthumously by Adorno in 1942, "On the Concept of History" provides a window into the sense of crisis felt by many German Jewish refugees at this historical juncture.⁵⁰³ What may be read as the essay's fatalistic tone should be framed against the backdrop of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, described by Arendt as "the darkest moment of the war."⁵⁰⁴ As Nazism and its collaborators proceeded to absorb Western Europe, and with it, all remaining anti-fascist momentum, Benjamin addresses those who feel "the current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century."⁵⁰⁵ For him, the Nazi invasion followed in the footsteps of the Weimar Republic's failure to guarantee a democratic Germany.

Benjamin's primary argument is that the doctrine of historical progress is only made possible by the tyrannical subjugation of oppressed classes and groups. The historicist's unwavering commitment to the upward trajectory of political and social perfectibility had also come to infect Marxian historical materialism with an economic stage theory that falsely guaranteed the imminent failure of capitalism and, with it, a new world order motivated only by the pursuit for social justice. This false determinism reassured the leftist revolutionary that they now only had to submit to prevailing historical forces, thereby guaranteeing a perpetual

⁵⁰³ The mass-arrests of German Jewish refugees by the Vichy government was well underway in 1940 with the intention of transferring these prisoners to the Gestapo. By the time "On the Concept of History" was written, its author had already been incarcerated and kept in a prison camp as a "stateless person." Arendt describes the unlucky circumstances surrounding Benjamin's suicide: "a few weeks later the embargo on visas was lifted again. One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible" (Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)," 18).

⁵⁰⁴ Arendt, 1.

⁵⁰⁵ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

domination of the oppressed or the “ever-same” of the status-quo. Where the historicist conceptualizes history as a series of great events, Benjamin sees a chain of catastrophe in which suffering has been made anonymous and invisible by the ruling elite. Only “the genuine historical image,” a fleeting image of the past, has the power to disrupt the assumption of automatic progress by capturing history’s unwritten segments including the standpoint of the oppressed.

In Thesis VII of the essay, Benjamin addresses those historicists who realized the growing threat of fascism too little too late:

To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly. Among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: “*Peu de gens devineront combine il a falu être trist pour ressusciter Carthage*” [“Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage”]. The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with casual detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.⁵⁰⁶

The historicist only recognizes “great” historical events without considering the echoes of destruction that have reverberated throughout history. Empathy for the victor of history is extended beyond the conqueror to the triumphal procession of treasures that have been plundered through violent conquest. Benjamin is proposing here that domination is ensured by an empathy that has its origin in “the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine image as it flares up briefly.” In this section, I attempt to piece together the strikingly

⁵⁰⁶ Benjamin, 256. The passage continues: “They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical material therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain” (Benjamin, 256–57).

antithetical relationship between *Einfühlung* (empathy/receptivity) and *acedia* (apathy) and demonstrate this passage's relevance for thinking about the psychodynamics of domination.

Empathy/receptivity (*Einfühlung*) is presented in the above passage as a vehicle for historical domination, a "process" that is partisan and favours the victor rather than the oppressed or those who have been designated historically as "weak." The altruistic connotation associated with the English "empathy" does not capture the author's intended meaning by *Einfühlung*. This is made more explicit by Benjamin's French translation of "On the Concept of History," not as *empathie*, but as *identification affective* (the German *Empathie* is also not used in the original).⁵⁰⁷ Emotional or affective identification with the victor of history suggests an entirely different meaning than what is conveyed by "empathy" or *empathie*. This distinction can be clarified by Freud's own use of the term *Einfühlung* which, I suggest, is likely an important source for the writing of Thesis VII.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1920), Freud proposes that identification is the primary mechanism by which our earliest emotional attachments in childhood are established with our caregivers.⁵⁰⁸ These attachments include significant ambivalence in that the child carries a simultaneous wish to replace (gain what one does not have) and a wish to become (shape oneself into) the identified-with figure.⁵⁰⁹ Both impulses guide the child toward the incorporation of these characteristics so that, once taken in, a previously external object works upon the psyche as an internal object where it "remoulds the ego."⁵¹⁰ According to Freud, this affective mechanism of identification "leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy."⁵¹¹ Freud understands empathy [*Einfühlung*] to be the psychological capacity "to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life," not just one of compassion.⁵¹² By taking into the psyche the characteristics, traits, or components of an external object, we incorporate "what is inherently foreign to our ego in other people."⁵¹³ From

⁵⁰⁷ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History,"* trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2016), 47. Originally written and published in German, Löwy explains that "in 1974, the critical edition of the 'Theses', variants and notes, with a commentary – together with the French translation made by Benjamin himself – appeared in the *Gesammelte Schriften*" (Löwy, 19).

⁵⁰⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:105.

⁵⁰⁹ Freud, 18:105–6.

⁵¹⁰ Freud, 18:108.

⁵¹¹ Freud, 18:110.

⁵¹² Freud, 18:ibid.

⁵¹³ Freud, 18:108.

this, the concepts of identification, internalization, and empathy all become crucial for ego development in that the ego “by way of imitation” comes to be constituted by and populated with those traits that were originally foreign to the ego.

Consulting Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, his uncompleted history of the nineteenth century Parisian arcades that he worked on throughout the 1930s, *Einfühlung* appears in multiple passages where it is associated with the mystification and distancing of the commodity from the consumer. Here, exchange-value (rather than use-value) provides a theoretical window into the capitalist phantasmagoria that transforms commodities into living things, i.e., what Marx coined “commodity fetishism.” Empathy/receptivity is experienced, for instance, by the voyeuristic flaneur who delights in examining the wares of the shopping arcade.⁵¹⁴ In two separate passages (M17a,4 and M17a,5), Benjamin incorporates *Einfühlung* in his description of the flaneur who takes voyeuristic pleasure in regarding the commodities that make up the arcades, even experiencing an “intoxication of empathy” for these objects.⁵¹⁵ Benjamin supplements this passage with two quotations from Flaubert: one in which the speaker finds themselves identifying with both animate and inanimate objects in nature (“I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horses, the leaves, the wind”) and another that expresses the speaker’s identification with various historical figures. He quotes Flaubert:

I see myself at different moments of history, very clearly. ... I was boatman on the Nile, *leno* [procurer] in Rome at the time of the Punic wars, then Greek rhetorician in Suburra, where I was devoured by bedbugs. I died, during the crusades, from eating too many grapes on the beach in Syria. I was pirate and monk, mountebank and coachman – perhaps Emperor of the East, who knows? ⁵¹⁶

Here, it is Freud’s definition of empathy as the psychological capacity “to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life” that provides insight into the speaker’s identification, be it in relation to grandiose and imagined historical figures or to a commodity so fetishized that it is transformed into something life-like. Although the Flaubert passages and the flaneur in the

⁵¹⁴ “The world exhibitions were training schools in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value. ‘Look at everything; touch nothing.’” ([G16,6] in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 201); “Love for the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity” ([J85,2] in Benjamin, 375); “Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The flaneur is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man” ([M17a,2] in Benjamin, 448).

⁵¹⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 449.

⁵¹⁶ Benjamin, *ibid.*

shopping arcade do not deal explicitly with the question of domination, it may also be recalled that Fromm and Horkheimer asked participants of their 1930-1931 authority studies which historical figures they most identified with: Alexander the Great, Caesar, and Napoleon indicated authoritarian tendencies versus the non-authoritarian choice of Socrates, Pasteur, and Marx.⁵¹⁷ An identification with those ‘Great Men’ of history who expressed ambition over thoughtfulness, force over intellect, constituted an important component of the authoritarian character’s psychological profile.

Read psychoanalytically, Benjamin’s “empathy with the victor” suggests a process of internalization in which dominant historical forces are taken into the psyche where they remould the ego. If this process “leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy,” as Freud proposes, then the historicist who identifies with the self-proclaimed victors of history would also re-enact dominion over the weak. The historicist seeks to “blot out everything they know about the later course of history” so that they are better able to overlook the reverberations of suffering and oppression that follow conquest.

The second concept in Thesis VII, *acedia*, is introduced as the source of empathy/receptivity with the victor of history. Benjamin describes it as “the indolence of the heart,” adding “among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness.”⁵¹⁸ This late Latin word refers to sloth or a lack of concern for others and appears in only one other Benjamin text, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* – in a passage that the author deems important enough to also cite in his later *Arcades Project*. In this 1928 analysis of the German *Trauerspiel* (the play of mourning), Benjamin describes *acedia* as “a dismal and melancholy submission to a supposedly unfathomable order of baleful constellations.”⁵¹⁹ Recalling the Adorno-Simmelian concept of “the objective” (along with Kracauer’s mass ornament and Milgram’s experiment), this unfathomable order is experienced as overwhelming, impersonal,

⁵¹⁷ Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ, and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture*, 138.

⁵¹⁸ The historical context for this term is explicated by contemporary critical theorist Anson Rabinbach in *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*. He writes, “In early modern Europe the noble figure of work was constantly threatened by the subversive figure of idleness, whose proscription can be traced to the Christian concept of *acedia*, which was condemned in the hierarchy of vices established by the monastic orders. ... over time its meaning changed considerably and that it sometimes emphasized physical weariness or drowsiness, especially during prayer, and sometimes ‘tepidity in spiritual pursuits’ – restlessness, boredom, lack of fervor” (Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 25).

⁵¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009), 156.

and alienating. While similar, *acedia* appears to be far more mystical and powerful than the concepts that have so far been introduced and begins to approach the transcendence that Horkheimer associates with the anonymous god. Submission to a fixed historical order is experienced as, to quote Benjamin scholar Michael Löwy, “the melancholy sense of the omnipotence of fate which removes all value from human activity ... it leads, consequently, to total submission to the existing order of things.”⁵²⁰

In Thesis VII, the historicist fails to recognize the “genuine historical image as it flares up briefly” and succumbs to the lethargy associated with *acedia*; they recognize the historical oppressor as an omnipotent and immutable force that is akin to fate. More devastating than just resignation or apathy, *acedia* should be read as the impotent despair of encountering a superhuman force that is impervious to resistance. However, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin reminds his reader that this omnipotence is a pretense, qualifying it as “a *supposedly* unfathomable order of baleful constellations” [emphasis added] implying that its imperviousness is a projection of the melancholic’s despair.⁵²¹ The real historical danger, what in 1940 was the actual possibility of fascism’s success, fails to be recognized by those who experience it as historical inevitability.

There is another psychoanalytic link that might be established to better understand the relationship between empathy/receptivity and *acedia*. Although the relationship between these two texts is never made explicit by the author himself, Benjamin’s 1925 description of *acedia* as a “melancholy submission” may have drawn on Freud’s 1917 distinction between mourning and melancholia (at the very least, both texts would have drawn on similar sources or cultural understandings to have an approximately similar definition of melancholia as pathology).⁵²² For Freud, mourning is an entirely normal response to an external loss while melancholia coincides with a depression that appears to be independent of whether any actual loss has taken place. He describes melancholia as “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding

⁵²⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,”* 47.

⁵²¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 156.

⁵²² For instance, one source for Benjamin’s concept of *acedia* is a passage from the seventeenth century writer Aegidius Albertinus: “*Acedia* or sloth is comparable in kind to the bite of a mad dog, for whoever is bitten by the same is immediately assailed by horrible dreams, he is terrified in his sleep, becomes enraged and senseless, rejects all drinks, is afraid of water, barks like a dog, and becomes so fearful that he falls down in terror. Such men die very soon if they receive no help” (Benjamin, 156).

feelings.”⁵²³ The loss associated with melancholia cannot be articulated even if there is an identifiable object that could be mourned: he writes that it is not a “whom” but a “what” with which the psyche fails to reconcile itself.⁵²⁴

Melancholia originates with the introjection of an earlier love object that comes to situate itself within the psyche (as in all instances of identification). When the real life figure who corresponds with the internalized figure disappoints or abandons the subject, their existence as an internalized object continues to haunt the unconscious. Clinging to a “what” rather than the real-life “whom,” the ego is divided so as to accommodate this painful intrapsychic dynamic; the split psyche rages against its other half that has come to represent the lost object. The ambivalence that once existed in relation to the external object is then acted out within the psyche resulting in the ego unknowingly attacking itself. This is what Freud is referring to when he writes “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego”: even with the death of the original object, the ego continues to attack itself in an attempt to recover the lost object.⁵²⁵ In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud revisits this dynamic in the same chapter on identification cited earlier, writing that “the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second. This second piece is the one which has been altered by introjection and which contains the lost object.”⁵²⁶

Although Benjamin does not explain the relationship between *Einfühlung* and *acedia*, I interpret this passage as a psychoanalytic critique of the peculiar psychological condition that compels the historicist to side with the powerful against the weak. In 1940, this passage addresses those who failed to resist charismatic despotism, military power, and the seeming inevitability of invasion. The flawed standpoint of the historicist is precisely their wish to relive “great events” and gain proximity to “the big man” of history. Where Freud and Adorno would dwell on this attachment to or identification with the victor, Benjamin’s *acedia/melancholia*

⁵²³ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 14, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1917), 244.

⁵²⁴ Freud, 245.

⁵²⁵ Freud, 249.

⁵²⁶ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:109. He continues on this same page: “But the piece which behaves so cruelly is not unknown to us either. It comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego” Here, Freud is hinting at the development of his metapsychological model to include the development of the super-ego, a product of early childhood identifications that sets itself up in the psyche as a punitive moral authority that exacts cruelty on the ego.

explores in more depth the nature of this acquiescence as helpless submission to an impending doom. Considered through the lens of Milgram's agentic state – a concept that offers an insightful, albeit cursory glance at the psychological modifications that are under investigation in this chapter – Benjamin is describing how the ego can be remoulded in such a way that its capacity for resistance is nullified.

6.2. Identification with the aggressor: “The present rulers step over those lying prostrate”

It is not altogether clear how melancholia's inward-turn that “leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests” (*acedia*) becomes the origin point of *Einfühlung*'s identification with the oppressor, an extension of oneself into the other that then takes in “what is inherently foreign to our ego in other people.”⁵²⁷ The object relations that are at play in Thesis VII can be summarized with the following psychoanalytic propositions: early attachments and relationships are constituted by ambivalence (i.e., the desire to become and to replace the other); the psyche is populated with internalized objects that, once external and real, are taken into the ego where they mould the psyche; and the mind is capable of dividing and destroying itself through a process of grieving, attacking, or yearning for another object.⁵²⁸ The incompatibility between *Einfühlung* and *acedia* might be resolved if identification is interpreted as a defense mechanism of psychic splitting, in which the ego rages against the loss and impotence of defeat. Following this, I read Thesis VII as a case of confused object relations in which the historicist splits off the intolerable standpoint of the oppressed and finds refuge in the oppressor's fantasy of grandiosity. In this section, I explore in more detail the traumatic basis of this defense.

As discussed, *acedia* is the false recognition that submission is the only option left to the historicist. This reaction combines both self-preservative and destructive tendencies as a calculated wager for survival in the encounter with overwhelming objective forces. Through the lens of drive theory, internal conflict and tension may be eliminated through immobilization, the

⁵²⁷ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 244. ; Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:108.

⁵²⁸ My interpretation of Thesis VII assumes that Benjamin drew on Freud's 1917 *Mourning and Melancholia* for his description of *acedia* (introduced in 1925 and revisited in 1940) along with Freud's 1920 *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* which, as I have noted, is made most apparent by Benjamin's translation of *Einfühlung* as *identification affective* (1940). Recalling that Adorno encouraged Benjamin in 1935 to read Freud (ironically, for a better understanding of the Marxian concepts of commodity fetishism and reification), it is notable that *Einfühlung* is used to both describe the fetishization of the commodity in *The Arcades Project* along with the historicist's fetishization of the victor of history in the 1940 essay.

zero point of the death drive. In zoological terms, this reaction might be likened to *thanatosis*: the catatonic response of certain animals (such as possums and rabbits) to “play dead,” an artifice that is designed to trick predators who will not feed on dead animals to move on from their original prey. Here, there may be some correspondence with the resignation described by Dori Laub as symbolic shut-down (see chapter five). According to Laub, all that is left to the victim of severe trauma is an “identification with the death-like quality of the internal world of the perpetrator,” that is, an “identification with the aggressor.”⁵²⁹

Ferenczi’s 1932 lecture, “The Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child: The Language of Tenderness and Passion,” identifies, among Ferenczi’s adult patients who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, a peculiar tendency to pick up on “the wishes, tendencies, whims, sympathies and antipathies” of the psychoanalyst.⁵³⁰ This extreme submissiveness on the part of the patient includes an uncanny ability to divine the analyst’s inner thoughts, desires, and interpretations.⁵³¹ Ferenczi interprets this transference as a revival of the child’s earlier, traumatic identification with the authority who was first entrusted with the victim’s well-being only to betray them in cases that can be described as “incestuous seductions.”⁵³² With no escape, the overwhelmed child might find reassurance in the perpetrator’s insistence that these pathological expressions (the language of passion or adult sexuality) are harmless and should be interpreted only as expressions of love (falsely equated with the only “language” spoken by the prepubescent child, that of tenderness).⁵³³ Operating from within a psyche that is “not sufficiently consolidated in order to be able to protest” and developmentally incapable of

⁵²⁹ Laub, “Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization: A Death Instinct Derivative?,” 321. This hijacking of internal experience is similarly explored by psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg as a deadening and shut-down of relatedness, writing that dissociation constitutes an unstructured, unsymbolizable, sense of discontinuity. In one clinical case, he describes this type of dissociation as “the appearance is of a *dis*-integration of the affective state associated with the trauma, so that the experiences linked with that state of mind have no self-authorized ‘voice’ with which there can be communication. What could not originally be said could not come to be thought, and what cannot now be thought cannot come to be said” (Philip M. Bromberg, “On Knowing One’s Patient Inside Out: The Aesthetics of Unconscious Communication,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 1, no. 4 (1991): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481889109538911>).

⁵³⁰ Identification with the aggressor is commonly associated with Anna Freud’s study of defense mechanisms in which children take into themselves the aggressive characteristics of an external authority and project those characteristics into others, an aggression that is combined with the child’s own repressed destructiveness (Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (London: Routledge, 1966), 120). However, it was first introduced by Ferenczi to describe the introjection of the abuser’s guilt (see footnote 46).

⁵³¹ Sandor Ferenczi, “Confusion of the Tongues Between the Adults and the Child—(The Language of Tenderness and of Passion),” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 30 (1949): 226.

⁵³² Ferenczi, 227.

⁵³³ Ferenczi, *ibid.*

deciphering adult eroticism, the child enters into a psychological trance.⁵³⁴ Ferenczi describes what follows from this traumatic assault:

The overpowering force and authority of the adult makes them dumb and can rob them of their senses. *The same anxiety, however, if it reaches a certain maximum, compels them to subordinate themselves like automata to the will of the aggressor, to divine each one of his desires and to gratify these, completely oblivious of themselves they identify themselves with the aggressor.* Through the identification, or let us say, introjection of the aggressor, he disappears as part of the external reality, and becomes intra- instead of extra-psychic; the intra-psychic is then subjected, in a dream-like state as is the traumatic trance to the primary process, i.e. according to the pleasure principle it can be modified or changed by the use of positive or negative hallucinations. In any case the attack as a rigid external reality ceases to exist and in the traumatic trance the child succeeds in maintaining the previous situation of tenderness.⁵³⁵

Three psychological phases can be observed: subordination to the overwhelming power of the aggressor from which there is no chance of escape; anticipating the aggressor's desires and gauging the severity of the threat they pose; and from this fear and the need to survive this threat, compliance with those desires.⁵³⁶

Ferenczi's 1932 lecture can be read as an addendum to the object relations introduced in Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*: the damaged psyche retreats into the inner realm of fantasies (the transition from extra- to intra-psychic) in spite of an outside reality that continues to pose a threat to that psyche's survival. "The fear of the uninhibited, almost mad adult," Ferenczi writes, transforms the child into a little psychiatrist: "in order to become one and to defend himself against dangers coming from people without self-control, he must know how to identify himself completely with them."⁵³⁷ The victim can now predict the role that is expected of them and play the part of willing partner, not to appease, but to survive the violence of the perpetrator. The shock of this trauma splits the child's psyche into two as the adult's disavowed

⁵³⁴ Ferenczi, 227–28.

⁵³⁵ Ferenczi, 228.

⁵³⁶ Jay Frankel, "Exploring Ferenczi's Concept of Identification with the Aggressor: Its Role in Trauma, Everyday Life, and the Therapeutic Relationship," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 12, no. 1 (2002): 103. According to Frankel, this process of self-preservation is the opposite of Anna Freud's concept of identification with the aggressor which involves deferred aggression that is displaced into a different context (Frankel, *ibid*).

⁵³⁷ Ferenczi, "Confusion of the Tongues Between the Adults and the Child—(The Language of Tenderness and of Passion)," 229.

guilt is successfully introjected by their victim. The child, “innocent and culpable at the same time” finds “his confidence in the testimony of his own senses is broken.”⁵³⁸

It is crucial to distinguish between Benjamin’s Thesis VII and the context in which Ferenczi conceptualizes identification with the aggressor. The latter concept is intended to explain the psychology of the child victim who, without sufficient means to resist or even understand the assault, blame themselves with the unconscious introjection of the perpetrator’s split-off guilt. This should not be collapsed with the uncoerced bystanders of Benjamin’s Thesis VII who ally themselves with the self-proclaimed victor of history. More than the self-deception of bad faith (Sartre) or the betrayal of false consciousness (Marx), Benjamin is calling attention to the kind of psychological debasement that would lend itself to the pious veneration of history’s tyrants (“whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate”).⁵³⁹ Keeping these distinctions in mind, I nonetheless propose that Ferenczi’s concept of identification with the aggressor presents a useful template for thinking about the “dismal and melancholy submission” of *acedia* and psychic splitting. If Benjamin is describing a cowardly response to a terrifying and inevitable social reality, Ferenczi explains how psychological and bodily survival is only ensured by closing the gap between one’s own mind and the “the internal world of the perpetrator.”

In a compelling re-reading of Ferenczi, contemporary psychoanalyst Jay Frankel argues that identification with the aggressor can be observed in cases that extend beyond severe trauma (even citing Milgram’s obedience experiments, noting that his subjects “had *not* been selected on the basis of a history of trauma”).⁵⁴⁰ Among a broad spectrum of patients, Frankel observes this mechanism in the subject’s accommodation of another’s demands and expectations, even

⁵³⁸ Ferenczi, 228. In an unfinished 1938 essay, Freud writes that “in certain particular situations of pressure” an individual may resolve a conflict between the demands of reality and their inner desires by obeying both. In a passage that recalls the “Confusion of Tongues” lecture, Freud writes: “Both of the parties to the dispute obtain their share: the instinct is allowed to retain its satisfaction and proper respect is shown to reality. But everything has to be paid for in one way or another, and this success is achieved at the price of a rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on. The two contrary reactions to the conflict persist as the centre-point of a splitting of the ego.” (Sigmund Freud, “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence,” trans. J. Strachey, vol. 23, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1940), 275–76).

⁵³⁹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 256.

⁵⁴⁰ Frankel, “Exploring Ferenczi’s Concept of Identification with the Aggressor: Its Role in Trauma, Everyday Life, and the Therapeutic Relationship,” 118. Of course, Frankel goes on to clarify that those who have experienced more severe trauma “affects both the pervasiveness and the rigidity of identification ... in grossly traumatized people, identification with the aggressor occurs much more of the time, in response to many more situations; by rigidity ... That person is struck to her identification and is unlikely to able to hold a second perspective simultaneously” (Frankel, 123).

accepting the projective identifications that have been imposed upon them.⁵⁴¹ Frankel explains this accommodation and submissiveness as a reaction to any authority that is powerful enough to do great harm, recalling the fear or actual childhood experience of emotional abandonment by an attachment figure. The child's sense of helplessness translates into a fear of the powerful adult and a recognition that their authority (attributed to the adult by the child) may become dangerous if it is abused. Frankel writes, "in this light, the trauma of actual or potential emotional abandonment can be understood as a subset of the broader trauma of being subjected to a great power."⁵⁴² He continues:

I think it is reasonable to suggest that all children, owing to the inevitability of loss and disappointment and by virtue of being children whose lives are under the control of parents and other adults whom they need, get a taste of trauma that colors their experiences in a permanent (even if essentially benign) way. ... I think that identification with the aggressor, on a smaller scale, operates invisibly but pervasively in the everyday lives of most people. Its ubiquity is likely largely due to the fact that emotional abandonment and relative powerlessness are experiences that no one entirely escapes.⁵⁴³

An inescapable sense of helplessness even appears among Frankel's adult patients who, despite appearing resistant to outside influences, tend to submit themselves to or identify with greater social forces, i.e., an idealized socio-cultural community, an abstract social entity, or a collective aspiration.⁵⁴⁴ Suggesting that identification with the aggressor makes up a component of how we communicate with one another unconsciously, Frankel proposes that "we efface our own particularity all the time in our social interactions with symbolically powerful figures in whose presence we become awed, meek, dumbstruck, or gullible" including "doctors, bosses, celebrities, experts, people who wear uniforms or suits."⁵⁴⁵

Frankel broadens his application of Ferenczi's concept to thinking critically about the psychodynamics of authoritarian movements. Writing in 2015, Frankel addresses emerging developments in American politics, specifically the populist backlash to President Obama's

⁵⁴¹ Frankel, "Exploring Ferenczi's Concept of Identification with the Aggressor: Its Role in Trauma, Everyday Life, and the Therapeutic Relationship," 122. One of Frankel's examples of identification with the aggressor is the following: "a young man got a phone call from a stranger about an advertisement he had placed to sell his car; as the caller became rude and demanding, this man acted and felt increasingly apologetic about not being able to accommodate the caller's obnoxious demands" (Frankel, 119).

⁵⁴² Frankel, "Exploring Ferenczi's Concept of Identification with the Aggressor: Its Role in Trauma, Everyday Life, and the Therapeutic Relationship," 121.

⁵⁴³ Frankel, 121–22.

⁵⁴⁴ Frankel, 124.

⁵⁴⁵ Frankel, 122.

electoral success in the wake of the 2008 recession (e.g., Tea Party Republicans, Fox news pundits, pre-Trump “celebrity demagogues,” etc.). Just as the abused child “clings to the only slender reed of connection available by buying into the self-protective false reality her parent is selling,” the authoritarian also moulds themselves according to the would-be demagogue’s fiction.⁵⁴⁶ Both subscribe to the mentality of: “I’ll *do and be* what you want me to; I’ll make myself *think and feel* the part; and I’ll feel that you’re being reasonable and good and *blame myself* for all the bad events and bad feelings – just don’t hurt me or abandon me.”⁵⁴⁷

Spotlighting the anti-Big Government trend among working- and middle-class Americans, Frankel calls attention to how this electoral base, in a time of economic anxiety, had turned to those political movements that champion the interests of the wealthy (e.g., calls for the elimination of social-safety-nets and protections such as social insurance programs, taxation of the wealthy, and regulation of corporations, etc.). Here, a correspondence might be drawn between the messages of right-wing media and what Ferenczi describes as the “parental hypocrisy” of the abusive family: “people hurt by these politics are blamed for their own suffering, just like abused children” due to, for instance the libertarian ideology of economic self-reliance being “presented as natural law or absolute truth, and its questioning seen as a sacrilege and an outrage.”⁵⁴⁸

Identification with the aggressor can be observed as a reaction to the widespread dispossession and insecurity that drives the authoritarian subject to identify themselves with the aggressor’s omnipotent fantasies of national greatness, chosen-ness, or specialness. As the only source of security and belonging, the aggressor is idealized and sheltered from the unconscious rage that must now be redirected toward substitutes. The “inability to tolerate, and a refusal to accept the *annihilation of self* that identifying with the aggressor entails or the *emotional abandonment* that provoked it, both of which feel horribly shameful” culminates in what Frankel describes as a compensatory narcissistic pathology.⁵⁴⁹ This narcissistic refusal to mourn what has been split off in identification with the aggressor gives rise to compensatory fantasies of grandiosity. Frankel writes:

⁵⁴⁶ Frankel, “The Traumatic Basis for the Resurgence of Right-Wing Politics among Working Americans,” 361.

⁵⁴⁷ Frankel, 361.

⁵⁴⁸ Frankel, 365.

⁵⁴⁹ Frankel, 362–63.

These intolerable realities are denied by soothing omnipotent fantasies in which what feels lost has been restored – that one is whole, good, and loved – and more, that one is special – though this protest may be only half-believed. ... An exaggerated sense of autonomy and power is essential to such fantasies, whether these qualities are attributed directly to oneself or – importantly for the sociopolitical manifestations of such narcissistic reactions – projected onto an idealized person or group with whom one identifies and whose perceived strength and righteousness one “borrows.” This “manic” element reverses the awareness of one’s own needs and vulnerabilities – an awareness that would undercut the needed omnipotence.⁵⁵⁰

For Frankel, these omnipotent fantasies of grandiosity, “based on a denial of the realities of trauma, other people, and oneself” are a poor substitute for re-building the self-esteem, existential security, and social relationships that have been devalued by those political ideologies that blame the dispossessed for their own lack of social mobility.⁵⁵¹

To recall Klein’s theory of paranoid-schizoid splitting, scapegoated groups are transformed into persecutory objects (e.g., “disparaged marginal groups become recipients of right-wingers’ disavowed and projected feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, need, and envy” so that “they are depicted as the moral opposite of strong, self-reliant ‘Real Americans’ who shun government ‘handouts,’ don’t want a ‘nanny state,’ and don’t whine”).⁵⁵² Meanwhile, the strong and powerful protector is idealized as a good object (“the charismatic rescuer ... perhaps an attractive politician or magnetic media figure acting as a front for those with real power”).⁵⁵³ Anyone who challenges the manic and paranoid fantasy of this figure and their followers is allied with the persecutory object as they threaten the authoritarian’s only source of compensation.

Echoing Freud’s own observations in *Future of an Illusion*, Frankel expands Ferenczi’s concept to account for the ways in which the root helplessness of political subjugation is also common to the experience of the infant. Encountered with an overwhelming power, the authoritarian – or historicist – shares an identification with the aggressor even where traumatic victimization is more often observed among already oppressed groups. For instance, the 2017 U.S. detention of children crossing the Mexican border was intended by the Trump administration to work as a deterrent to their families and future asylum seekers but also

⁵⁵⁰ Frankel, 363.

⁵⁵¹ Frankel, *ibid.*

⁵⁵² Frankel, 367.

⁵⁵³ Frankel, 365. Frankel writes, “The narcissistic emphasis on power and aggression, and rejection of vulnerability, are also seen in the right’s attraction to mean-spirited policies and bullying politicians” (Frankel, 368).

demonstrated the extent to which an undesirable population could be excluded by the authority in charge. Impotent and faced with overwhelming objective forces, the authoritarian exhibits a narcissistic pathology that not only accommodates the manic fantasies of the authoritarian leader or movement but also fulfills the fantasy of reparation between the helpless child and the omnipotent, if not also unhinged, adult.

Frankel's assessment of a narcissistic psychopathology echoes an approach taken in *The Authoritarian Personality* in which the authors root out psychopathology in favour of the healthy democratic type of individual. Writing about the so-called "lunatic fringe," Martin Jay has criticized this way of thinking by suggesting "it would be counterproductive to pathologize their politics too quickly and subsume them under theoretical categories that rob them of any critical self-reflexivity."⁵⁵⁴ From a psychoanalytic perspective, I would argue, contra-Jay, that critical self-reflexivity is premised on a presumption of psychological security and self-esteem that, as Frankel demonstrates, is already hijacked by the aggressor. The authoritarian is robbed of self-reflexivity long before the psychoanalytic theorist can identify compensatory narcissism. As Frankel proposes, this figure's "self-awareness as political beings" and their "direct sense of their own real interests and their ability to pursue them in the political arena" is weakened when the aggressor's interests are incorporated into the psyche.⁵⁵⁵ In defense of Frankel, perhaps domination, like the language of passion that becomes confused with the language of tenderness, represents a perverse form of symbolization that is intended to shut down critical self-reflexivity and autonomous thought. To counter the assumption that psychopathology negates personal responsibility, I refer back to Benjamin on the "indolence" of *acedia*, that is the historicist's inability to recognize that triumph of the victor is not inevitable, that dismantles the individual's capacity for political resistance: the authoritarian adult is not in the same position as the helpless child. As Adorno describes those who would collaborate with the demagogue, there are "those who keep their eyes shut though they are no longer asleep."⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵⁴ Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations*, 171.

⁵⁵⁵ Frankel, "The Traumatic Basis for the Resurgence of Right-Wing Politics among Working Americans," 372.

⁵⁵⁶ Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 137.

6.3. Conclusion: “To historians who wish to relive an era”

To end on one final illustration of how Thesis VII’s *Einfühlung* (empathy/receptivity) relates to *acedia*, Benjamin incorporates a quote from Flaubert that can be read as the voice of the historicist: “few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage” (“*Peu de gens devineront combine il a falu être trist pour ressusciter Carthage*”). As Benjamin reminds his reader, Flaubert is “familiar with [the concept of *acedia*],” perhaps suggesting Flaubert’s use of irony in this passage. The speaker identifies with the victor of history while also mourning the long-lost city of Carthage. He frames the 146 BCE Carthaginian defeat by the Roman Republic as a large-scale tragedy but ultimately as collateral damage in Rome’s pursuit for absolute power. Since mourning cannot resuscitate the ruins representing this sacked city, the speaker remains petrified in what might now be interpreted as a melancholic ego-loss: they cannot revive what is lost no matter the depth of their inarticulable grief. The world has become empty.

The despair of *acedia* works in the victor’s favour by encouraging the melancholic to submit rather than resist hegemonic imperialism (citing Thesis VII, “the nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize”).⁵⁵⁷ Rome represents the unstoppable calamity of military destruction at the same time as perpetual progress. The historicist believes that the creation of great civilization necessitates the destruction of a so-called lesser culture; they do not pause to consider at what cost this civilization is obtained. According to Löwy, the melancholic who suffers from *acedia* is “attracted by the solemn majesty of the triumphal procession of the powerful” and will betray the oppressed “because his submission to destiny always makes him join the victor’s camp.”⁵⁵⁸ The sadness conveyed by Flaubert is the speaker’s hopelessness and abandonment of resistance. As Benjamin argues, it is not sadness that will revive the victim of history but the “historical image as it flares up briefly” that may ignite political resistance through a recognition of the ever-same; not submission, but spontaneous, collective action which has the authority to rupture and overthrow the oppressor. Although the potential for revolutionary change is tenuous and its inspiration (as the historical image) all too brief, Benjamin’s approach to disrupting the status quo is only violent insofar that it breaks the spell of reification. Otherwise, the passivity and

⁵⁵⁷ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 256.

⁵⁵⁸ Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,”* 48.

sadness of the historicist does as much to change present conditions as the “teacher” of Milgram’s experiment who laughs nervously, shakes their head, and expresses agitation, all the while delivering shocks to the “learner.” If, as Löwy points out, the Third Reich identified (to quote Freud) “by way of imitation” with Ancient Rome, then Carthage provides Thesis VII with an important allegory for the historicist’s waning faith in anti-fascism.⁵⁵⁹ In the context of 1940, the passage might be rewritten as: “few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate social democracy under the shadow of European totalitarianism.”

In this chapter, I returned to what Freud identified as an unconscious wish for the ‘Great Men’ in history and explored the psychodynamics of unconscious collusion as identification with the aggressor.⁵⁶⁰ To use Benjamin terms, I propose that the authoritarian’s identification with the victor of history operates as a narcissistic defence against the despair of melancholic ego-loss. Upon encountering the divine omnipotence of the tyrant, the authoritarian is more inclined to abandon all political resistance. A discussion of how the victor of history is characterized, i.e., personalized as a specific ‘Great Man’ or made counter-anthropomorphic as an impersonal force, remains to be examined. I have, however, sought to underscore *acedia*’s mystical projection of the superhuman into the victor of history, transforming their victory into an omnipotent fate. It is essential that this unwavering belief in absolute domination is recognized for what it is: an appeal to the supernatural that serves as an alibi for human responsibility. To counter the emptiness and impotence of *acedia*, identification with the victor of history invites the tyrant to extend their dominion over everything that exists.

The internal world of the historicist or authoritarian is one that is populated with inescapable powers, some that can be appealed to and wielded for one’s own protection and

⁵⁵⁹ It would not be a great leap to interpret Thesis VII as alluding to Nazi Germany with this reference to Ancient Rome. To cite Benjamin’s contemporary, Freud describes in a self-analysis his unconscious failure to visit the city of Rome: “I had actually been following in Hannibal’s footsteps. Like him, I had been fated not to see Rome; and he too had moved into the Campagna when everyone had expected him in Rome. But Hannibal, whom I had come to resemble in these respects, had been the favourite hero of my later school days. Like so many boys of that age, I had sympathized in the Punic Wars not with the Romans but with the Carthaginians. And when in the higher classes I began to understand for the first time what it meant to belong to an alien race, and anti-semitic feelings among the other boys warned me that I must take up a definite position, the figure of the semitic general rose still higher in my esteem. To my youthful mind Hannibal and Rome symbolized the conflict between the tenacity of Jewry and the organization of the Catholic church. And the increasing importance of the effects of the anti-semitic movement upon our emotional life helped to fix the thoughts and feelings of those early days” (Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 4, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1900), 196).

⁵⁶⁰ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:109–10.

others that must be defeated and destroyed. Recalling Laub's description of the perpetrator's death landscape, the aggressor's fantasies of omnipotence appear to be the only defense against the emptiness of ego-loss ("to avoid the horrors of objectlessness and the dissolving of psychic structure, [the patient] holds on to the only object life – the perpetrator aggressor").⁵⁶¹ The historicist becomes, to borrow Arendt's own description of Eichmann, "a leaf in the whirlwind of time."⁵⁶²

⁵⁶¹ Laub, "Traumatic Shutdown of Narrative and Symbolization: A Death Instinct Derivative?," 319.

⁵⁶² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 32.

7. “The dark power of destiny”: The anonymous god and fate-anxiety in the authoritarian imagination

“They looked at Alexander’s broad, stone-like figure no differently than they would a supernatural being, which had power over them, and which could only with difficulty be credited with human feelings. He was a tyrant.”

Klaus Mann, *Alexander* (1929)⁵⁶³

“When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child for ever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection. Thus his longing for a father is a motive identical with his need for protection against the consequences of his human weakness. The defence against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult’s reaction to the helplessness which *he* has to acknowledge – a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion.”

Sigmund Freud, *Future of an Illusion* (1927)⁵⁶⁴

Three days after Adolf Hitler was appointed as Reich Chancellor, a sixty-year-old German manufacturer who employed several workers at his medium-sized factory began to suffer from a recurring nightmare. In the dream, his workers stand in two lines, facing one another and lifting their arms in a *Sieg Heil* to greet the Reich Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. The reluctant factory owner, Herr S., is expected to join them but finds that he cannot raise his arm in the expected salute. He watches as his arm is raised at an agonizingly slow pace with small mechanical movements, resulting in tear-like beads of sweat that run down his face. Just when Herr S. fears he will collapse from physical exhaustion, Goebbels tells him that he does not want his salute and exits the scene: “There I stood in my own factory, arm raised, pilloried right in the midst of my own people. I was only able to keep from collapsing by staring at his clubfoot as he limped out.”⁵⁶⁵ In every variation of the dream, Goebbels watches as a silent spectator with the same empty, expressionless face as the factory workers who must conceal their true convictions under the veneer of compliance. In one variation, Herr S. struggles once

⁵⁶³ Klaus Mann, *Alexander*, trans. David Carter (London: Hesperus Press, 1929), 136.

⁵⁶⁴ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 21:24.

⁵⁶⁵ Charlotte Beradt, *The Third Reich of Dreams*, trans. Adriane Gottwald (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 5.

more to complete the salute under Goebbels' impersonal gaze but the effort of raising his arm forces his spine to snap in two.⁵⁶⁶

Herr S.'s dream is one of numerous dreams recounted in a compilation, *The Third Reich of Dreams*, collected by journalist, Charlotte Beradt, between 1933 and 1939 from over three hundred anonymous informants in Nazi Germany. Beradt presents these dreams as the internalization of the greater socio-political landscape, writing that they were "conceived independently of their authors' conscious will. They were, so to speak, dictated to them by dictatorship."⁵⁶⁷

This suggestion of direct, heteronomous internalization is opposed by Sharon Sliwinski who proposes that Herr S.'s dream is evidence of "not just a documentary representation of Nazi persecution but an active composition that works to *transvalue* the remains of the day."⁵⁶⁸ The dream reveals the dreamer's internal conflict as his insubordination becomes embattled with paternalistic responsibility, culminating in a failure to protect his employees due to his inability to erect a Nazi salute (among other demonstrations of physical impotence, e.g., tear-like beads of sweat).⁵⁶⁹

In an essay that accompanies Beradt's book, Bruno Bettelheim notes that the breaking of the spine ("*brach ihm das Rueckgrat* [backbone]") shares the same double meaning in English as the breaking of one's convictions.⁵⁷⁰ The dreamer's eventual submission is only met with indifference, his efforts dismissed by an expressionless and impersonal authority. In Bettelheim's words, Herr S. is "forced to obey an overwhelming power which even despises the obedience he so painfully forces on himself."⁵⁷¹ As a consequence of this disdain, all guarantees of physical

⁵⁶⁶ Beradt, 5–8.

⁵⁶⁷ Beradt, 9.

⁵⁶⁸ Sharon Sliwinski, *Dreaming in Dark Times: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 123.

⁵⁶⁹ It is apparent from the dream that Herr S. is humiliated by feelings of impotence and emasculation. However, it is unimportant whether these details belong to the dreamer's personal associations since they are so strongly tied to the cultural symbols of this period. Certainly, Wilhelm Reich's commentary on the erotics of military pageantry in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism* can be extended to the phallic *Sieg Heil*. Klaus Theweleit also observes in his study of Nazi culture in *Male Fantasies* that phallic imagery would be employed in various military performances, describing for instance how "the men 'halt' and 'stand firm,' a phallus against the dissolution that surrounds them" (Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway, Erica Carter, and Chris Turner (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 50).

⁵⁷⁰ Bettelheim, "An Essay by Bruno Bettelheim," 159.

⁵⁷¹ Bettelheim, 161. As Bettelheim writes, "the regime was successful in forcing even its enemies to dream the kinds of dreams it wanted them to dream" enforcing the message that "resistance was impossible, that safety lay only in compliance" (Bettelheim, 151). Beradt was unable to compile the dreams of those who supported the Nazi party,

safety, social belonging, and political membership evaporate, leaving Herr S. and the fate of his factory uncertain.

Like Sliwinski and Bettelheim, I would also counter the thesis that Herr S.'s dream was "dictated by dictatorship" in a top down process of internalization. I argue that malignant authorities and their heteronomous influence are not merely absorbed by the psyche but collude with unconscious representatives of the distinctively impersonal and punitive super-ego. Even in those cases in which the individual would resist this influence, it is apparent from Herr S.'s dream that the indifference of Goebbels transforms this character into something much more powerful and omnipotent, thereby giving shape to an "anonymous god" that resides in the psyche. As discussed with regards to the "objective spirit" identified by Adorno, any attempt to personalize what has been counter-anthropomorphized into an impersonal force is often met with further mystification. This mystification is conjured by the authority itself and the subject who unconsciously wishes to remain enthralled with that authority.

There is, nonetheless, a unique elaboration in the Herr S. dream that might seem unremarkable but, reconsidered in this light, would unravel the impersonality of this tyrant: Goebbels' deformed foot. The searing gaze of the internalized authority is contradicted by an impairment that not only humanizes (by stigmatizing) the dream character but also calls into question the competence of Nazi race science, of which Goebbels was its chief defender.⁵⁷² For the dreamer, this small detail suggests that there is still some hope that the curtain of impersonality can be lifted and that not all is "dictated by dictatorship."

In this chapter, I explore the contradiction of this impersonality as it is projected into abstract authorities, thereby veiling their fallibility through mystification, along with the authoritarian's struggle to re-personalize these forces and exercise some influence over them. I begin with a psychoanalytic discussion of the impersonal unconscious, focusing on the uncanny and the daemonic as these concepts appear in Freud, Adorno, and Horkheimer's critique of the hypnotist-dictator (7.1). Rejecting the "tyranny of suggestion" thesis, Freud explains the

only of those who privately recoiled from their political doctrine. For Bettelheim, Beradt's compilation captured the anxiety of helplessness but missed fantasy dreams of omnipotence, writing: "Destroyed here is the healthy balance between submission and self-assertion. The Third Reich invades and controls even the deepest, the most private recesses of our mind, until finally, even in the unconscious, only submission remains" (Bettelheim, 155–56).

⁵⁷² Going on to become a key figure in carrying out genocide against those populations that did not demonstrate "physical fitness," the propaganda minister's physical disability garnered attention among those who would call attention to the Nazi party's hypocrisy.

psychology of influence as a libidinally-charged transference, thereby posing interesting questions about what relationship can be established with abstract, impersonal authorities (7.2). Both Adorno and Horkheimer's post-*Authoritarian Personality* writings address this problem of how any influence can actually be exercised without a direct transference. They propose that the impersonal, fascist super-father must undergo a "regressive re-personalization" by their follower (7.3). Building on this discussion, I suggest that this re-personalization of a 'Great Man' operates as a screen for a more archaic *imago* that combines the need for a strongman protector with an unconscious fear of the pre-Oedipal maternal (7.4). In conclusion, I propose that the authoritarian imagination is driven by a desire to take control over one's fate by appealing to an intercessor who claims authority over those forces operating outside of personal control (7.5).

7.1. Taken in by the impersonal gaze: helplessness, terror, and castration-anxiety

I read the impersonal glare of Herr S.'s dream-Goebbels as a striking example of what Freud characterizes as the uncanny, daemonic unconscious. When effective, the gaze of this authority or hypnotist is experienced as uncanny in its ability to leverage total authority over the individual and suspend personal autonomy. For Freud, the uncanny refers to what is both strange and known intimately, that is, "something old and familiar that has undergone repression."⁵⁷³ The old and familiar power of the gaze lies in the transference that takes place between the hypnotist and the hypnotized subject. Freud maintains that this transference constitutes a revival of the primal horde in which the hypnotist/primal father holds his subject spell-bound by bringing into the present the repressed memory of this collective haunting. He writes:

The hypnotist asserts that he is in possession of a mysterious power that robs the subject of his own will; or, which is the same thing, the subject believes him. This mysterious power (which is even now often described popularly as 'animal magnetism') must be the same power that is looked upon by primitive people as the source of taboo, the same that emanates from kings and chieftains and makes it dangerous to approach them (*mana*). The hypnotist, then, is supposed to be in possession of this power; and how does he manifest it? By telling the subject to look him in the eyes; his most typical method of hypnotizing is by his look. But it is precisely the *sight* of the chieftain that is dangerous and unbearable to primitive people, just as later that of the Godhead is for mortals. Even Moses had to act as an intermediary between his people and Jehova, since the people could not support the sight of God; and when he returned from the presence of God his

⁵⁷³ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:125.

face shone – some of the *mana* had been transferred on to him, just as happens with the intermediary among primitive people.⁵⁷⁴

The mysterious power or *mana* that is possessed by the hypnotist “awakens in the subject a portion of his archaic heritage,” specifically “the idea of a paramount and dangerous personality, towards whom only a passive-masochistic attitude is possible, to whom one’s will has to be surrendered [in that] to be alone with him, ‘to look him in the face,’ appears as hazardous enterprise.”⁵⁷⁵

For Freud, the hypnotic gaze as a revival of the primal father represents the best psychoanalytic hypothesis for explaining how an autonomous subject could be so easily disarmed by a simple look. In chapter two, I suggested that this “just-so story” be read as a psychoanalytic construction, that is, as conjecture that has the potential to piece together repressed narratives that cannot be recovered in their fullness due to their traumatic origin. There will never be a full picture of what started, as Marcuse calls it, the “sequence of catastrophic events” that makes up historical cycles of domination – from tyranny to rebellion, from social progress to despotic backsliding – nonetheless, Freud’s primal horde construction provides Critical Theory with an explanation for hypnotic suggestion as a “deferred obedience” to an original authority.⁵⁷⁶ By shifting this prestige or *mana* away from the hypnotist to the hypnotized, Freud is attributing more authority to a figure of memory/phantasy who continues to hold sway over the unconscious, be it a primal father of archaic history (phylogenetic inheritance), the actual parental agency (ontogenetic inheritance), their internalization as a distinctively impersonal parental *imago* (the formation of the super-ego), or a combination of figures who have been transmitted via the collective veneration of history’s ‘Great Men.’⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷⁴ Freud, 18:ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Freud, 18:127.

⁵⁷⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 60. In 1939, Freud would write “to this day I hold firmly to this construction ... I am not an ethnologist but a psycho-analyst. I had a right to take out of ethnological literature what I might need for the work of analysis” (Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:131).

⁵⁷⁷ In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud credits Ferenczi with the following observation: “Ferenczi [1909] has made the true discovery that when a hypnotist gives the command to sleep, which is often done at the beginning of hypnosis, he is putting himself in the place of the subject’s parents. He thinks that two sorts of hypnotism are to be distinguished: one coaxing and soothing, which he considers is modelled on the mother, and another threatening, which is derived from the father. Now the command to sleep in hypnosis means nothing more nor less than an order to withdraw all interest from the world and to concentrate it on the person of the hypnotist. And it is so understood by the subject; for in this withdrawal of interest from the external world lies the psychological characteristic of sleep, and the kinship between sleep and the state of hypnosis is based on it” (Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:127).

The danger of the uncanny as something that is both “frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” can be explained as a powerful emotion that, having remained thus far dormant in the unconscious, threatens to re-emerge from unconscious repression.⁵⁷⁸ Freud finds a literary example for this experience of danger and familiarity in E.T.A Hoffman’s horror novella, *The Sand-man*: haunted by the childhood memory of a fabled character who tears out the eyes of naughty children who cannot fall asleep when instructed, a young man becomes enamoured with an automaton he believes to be human until he witnesses her bleeding eyes fall out of their sockets, thereby reviving the old childhood fear of the sand-man. Freud points out that the dread of eye injuries and the removal of one’s eyes – evident not only in Hoffman’s story but also in childhood phobias, neurotic adult fantasies, terms of speech (“we will treasure a thing as the apple of our eye”), and the powerful Oedipus myth which culminates in the antihero’s self-punishment by blinding himself with his wife-mother’s brooch – can be interpreted as particularly evocative instances of castration anxiety, i.e., the fear of loss as a result of parental punishment.⁵⁷⁹

Freud interprets this eye motif and its psychological significance as a fantasy of doubleness and as a way of surviving bodily punishment and death. For instance, one may indulge in the fantasy of watching ourselves or of being watched in “a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self.”⁵⁸⁰ The original wish behind this doubleness is the desire to survive ego death by a self-preservation that might be found in “reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with guarded spirits, with the belief in the soul.”⁵⁸¹ From a metapsychological standpoint, the psyche is already split and divided in numerous constructions. For instance, the ego is often objectified by the super-ego when this omniscient agency, representing moral authority in its full knowledge of unacceptable, desires, looks down upon and judges the self-as-other. “In the pathological case of delusions of being watched,” Freud writes, “this mental agency becomes isolated, dissociated from the ego, and discernible to the physician’s eye.”⁵⁸² Finally, doubleness can be attributed to what is gained and lost in the ego’s relation to the external world, “the

⁵⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 17, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1919), 220; 241.

⁵⁷⁹ Freud, 17:231–32.

⁵⁸⁰ Freud, 17:234.

⁵⁸¹ Freud, 17:235.

⁵⁸² Freud, 17:ibid.

unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy” that may be thwarted including “all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will.”⁵⁸³

Freud arrives at a more puzzling example of the uncanny when he discusses the double nature of déjà vu. Once these mysterious repetitions are noted, they cannot be easily dismissed as coincidence. In these cases, the uncanny appears as “something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of ‘chance’”⁵⁸⁴ Interpreted as an unconscious compulsion to repeat, Freud continues to explore this question of déjà vu in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a drive toward mastering unpleasurable experiences and recurring nightmares.⁵⁸⁵ Freud’s discussion includes examples of those patients who give the impression that they are “being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some ‘daemoniac power,’” adding that “psychoanalysis has always taken the view that their fate is for the most part arranged by themselves and determined by early infantile influences.”⁵⁸⁶ These individuals possess a remarkable ability to unconsciously bring about the fate that they fear, as in the case of a “man who time after time in the course of his life raises someone else into a position of great private or public authority and then, after a certain interval, himself upsets this authority and replaces him by a new one.”⁵⁸⁷ Following this example, deferred obedience and the dialectic of domination might also be interpreted as a collective form of daemoniac repetition, thereby explaining the momentum behind what Marcuse describes as a pendulum that swings at one moment toward emancipatory, revolutionary momentum and despotic rule at the next.⁵⁸⁸

Daemoniac repetition is only ever understood by Freud as an unconscious expression of repressed content and the fulfillment of what is most feared or desired by the psyche (he does not attribute déjà vu to the mysterious working of the universe). However, Freud does raise the perplexing problem of passive repetition:

This ‘perpetual recurrence of the same thing’ causes us no astonishment when it relates to *active* behaviour on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experience. We are much more impressed by cases

⁵⁸³ Freud, 17:236.

⁵⁸⁴ Freud, 17:237.

⁵⁸⁵ Freud, 17:238.

⁵⁸⁶ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 18:21.

⁵⁸⁷ Freud, 18:22.

⁵⁸⁸ Marcuse, “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts,” 38–39.

where the subject appears to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality.⁵⁸⁹

Even when the subject feels that they are possessed by a greater power, this “dread of rousing something that ... is better left sleeping,” even in those passive cases, are not really occult happenings.⁵⁹⁰ In thinking about Herr S.’s recurring nightmares, this fear of malignant authority and loss of control is no more “dictated by dictatorship” than it could be some supernatural revelation transmitted from above. On the contrary, these dreams are executed from below.

Hans Loewald takes up Freud’s notion of the daemonic in an essay that discusses dual-drive theory and other “unconsciously motivating forces.” He writes:

Instincts, the Unconscious, the id – these words evoke the impersonal, the depth hidden beneath the surface, concealed by the surface mask of the person as an organized, conscious human being (the Latin *persona* = mask of an actor). They also suggest involuntary action, innate impulse, elementary and untamed forces, compelling, irrational, unreasoning. The id is called daemonic. A daemon is something that possesses us, that has power in us or over us; in Greek religion it is a divine power, not definitely personified, a power of lesser stature than a personal god, yet more personal than the forces of nature.⁵⁹¹

Here, the daemonic maintains its uncanny character in that it is “neither attributable to the power of a personal god, nor a powerful force of the person *qua* individual or conscious being,” rather, it is “something in between, having an impersonal character.”⁵⁹²

The classicist Walter Burkert further elaborates on this concept’s etymological origin as an ancient Greek word that, although ambiguous, is usually employed whenever a disruptive event takes place that is beyond the protagonist’s control (such as in the *Iliad* and *Oedipus the King*). Burkert writes, “it is used when the speaker does not understand what the addressee is doing and why he is doing it. *Daimon* is occult power, a force that drives man forward where no agent can be named ... *Daimon* is the veiled countenance of divine activity.”⁵⁹³ Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* makes reference to the origin of this term and its association with lesser gods and spirits:

⁵⁸⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 18:23.

⁵⁹⁰ Freud, 18:36.

⁵⁹¹ Hans W. Loewald, “On Motivation and Instinct Theory (1971),” in *The Essential Loewald: Collected Papers and Monographs* (Hagerstown: University Publishing Group, Inc., 2000), 109.

⁵⁹² Hans W. Loewald, “Psychoanalysis and the History of the Individual,” in *The Essential Loewald: Collected Papers and Monographs* (Hagerstown: University Publishing Group, Inc., 2000), 537.

⁵⁹³ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan (Blackwell, 1985), 180.

The respect paid to dreams in antiquity is, however, based upon correct psychological insight and is the homage paid to the uncontrolled and indestructible forces in the human mind, to the 'daemonic' power which produces the dream-wish and which we can find at work in our unconscious.⁵⁹⁴

Only the subject who is unfamiliar with the workings of their own unconscious and repressed history would attribute repeated misfortune to a mysterious, superhuman force. In doing so, they surrender themselves to a self-alienation or self-occultation that transforms the psyche into something akin to divine authority.⁵⁹⁵

One last example from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides further insight into the uncanny authority of the daemonic gaze. The authors draw attention to the similarity between the hypnotist and the fascist despot, writing that the dictator's gaze operates according to one of two modes, either fixation or disregard. Describing this figure as a "self-encapsulated paranoiac," seemingly self-sufficient in his independence, they propose that he captivates the object of his attention with a gaze that would have them believe that he feels desire rather than indifference. Those who are drawn in by this seduction will, "follow the man who looks past them, who does not treat them as subjects but hands them over to the operations of his many purposes."⁵⁹⁶

In a comparison between "nations that fall to their knees before totalitarian fascism" with the masochistic woman who declares her unwavering love for the egotistical Lothario, Adorno and Horkheimer write:

Like everyone else, these women have made the occupation of greater or lesser positions of power their religion, and themselves the maligned creatures society takes them for. And so the gaze which reminds them of freedom must strike them as that of the over-naive seducer. Their world is inverted. But at the same time they know, like the ancient gods who shunned the gaze of the faithful, that something lifeless resides behind their veil. In the trusting look of the nonparanoid they are reminded of the spirit which has died in them, but they see outside them only the cold means of their self-preservation. To be touched in this way awakens in them shame and rage. Yet the madman does not reach them, even though he may stare them in the face like the *Führer*. He merely inflames

⁵⁹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part)*, ed. J. Strachey, vol. 5, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 1900), 614.

⁵⁹⁵ I am grateful to Marsha A. Hewitt who discusses this very important connection between Freud, Loewald, and Burkert in her *Freud on Religion*, 102–3. Here, she writes: "As with Freud, from whom he takes the idea, Loewald is drawing upon the concept of the *daimon* of ancient Greek religion as, in many respects, as apt metaphor for the ways in which human beings often experience that bewildering, inexplicable and at times frightening unconscious part of themselves that occupies the major portion of mental life" (Hewitt, 102).

⁵⁹⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 157.

them. His proverbial gaze straight into the eyes, unlike the free gaze, does not preserve individuality. It fixates. It binds others to one-sided loyalty by confining them to the windowless monadic fortress of their own person. It does not awaken conscience, but prematurely imposes responsibility.⁵⁹⁷

Both the masochist and the nation (combined in this passage under the pronoun, “they”) only yield to this form of domination, because they seek to possess the same impossible independence as the paranoid leader. They perceive the possibility of their own freedom by taking up various roles in his hierarchy, thereby making for themselves a “religion” of these “greater or lesser positions.” This submission only garners the reputation that they seek to escape (“the maligned creatures society takes them for”). Drawing out his object’s unconscious desire for independence (“their world is inverted”), the seducer brutalizes his followers, stifling the possibility of mutual recognition with a gaze that “inflames” those brave enough to demand more from his attention. Instead of autonomous thought (“awakening conscience”), his gaze commands submission (“imposes responsibility”). The passage continues:

The penetrating look and the one that goes past you, the hypnotic and the disregarding gaze, are of the same kind: in both, the subject is extinguished. Because in both looks reflection is absent, the unreflecting are electrified by them. They are betrayed: the women cast away, the nation incinerated. Thus, the self-encapsulated figure remains a caricature of divine power. . . . He is malignant, driven by compulsion, and as weak as he is strong. If divine omnipotence is said to draw creation unto itself, this satanic, imagined omnipotence draws everything into its impotence. That is the secret of its rule.⁵⁹⁸

The “self-encapsulated figure” may resemble a Little Man, but his seeming independence camouflages his ambition of achieving greatness through the domination of others. The fascist dictator and the “monadic fortress” of his internal world hijacks his subordinate in a transference that recalls Ferenczi’s identification with the aggressor; individuality is ultimately crushed by his hypnotic gaze.

Although these authors would never suggest that the “civilized” European male is immune to hypnotic suggestion, these passages associate the submissive with psychological weakness, regression, and even feminization. The impression given is that of a passive authoritarian subject, regressed to the point of impotence. Although Freud extends this same analysis of “animal magnetism” to Western religious traditions, his association of the hypnotist’s

⁵⁹⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, 157–58.

⁵⁹⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, *ibid.*

power with the animism of “primitive” cultures (“it is precisely the *sight* of the chieftain that is dangerous and unbearable to primitive people”) implies an unsophisticated susceptibility traditionally attributed to the non-European subject. Adorno and Horkheimer also choose an analogy that equates fascist adherence with the narcissist’s seduction of the gullible, masochistic woman. For Adorno especially, this feminization is presented as an inversion of the “he-man” persona of the hetero-fascist, writing “in the end the tough guys are the truly effeminate ones, who need weaklings as their victims in order not to admit that they are like them.”⁵⁹⁹

Unfortunately, this critique rests on the theorist’s presumption *tout court* of a generalizable homosexuality, claiming that “totalitarianism and homosexuality belong together ... the subject negates everything which is not of its own kind” in what appears to be a literal reading of the Greek prefix of non-heterosexual preference as a repudiation of all difference.⁶⁰⁰ This feeble critique of fascism becomes less a question of semantic etymology when Horkheimer asserts that the fascist male’s rejection of women as a maligned other reflects “a deep-rooted affinity between homosexuality, authoritarianism, and the present decay of the family.”⁶⁰¹ Even if the authors intend to undermine the hypermasculinity of fascist doctrine, their remarks betray a homophobic distancing and othering of their object of study that seeks to uphold the possibility of a rational-male subject who knows better than to be taken in by the spell of the gaze.

This feminized infantilization of the authoritarian subject – either as a “primitive” or as a “homosexual totalitarian” – is most likely a disavowal on the part of the authors, a castration anxiety that belies an overwhelming fear of the sado-masochistic dynamic that may be powerful enough to strip away rational, critical thought.⁶⁰² Where the gaze is only a ploy on the part of the hypnotist to facilitate in their subject’s total, undeviating concentration, Freud suggested that a more powerful, libidinal transference is taking place just beneath the surface of awareness.

⁵⁹⁹ Adorno, *Minimial Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, 46.

⁶⁰⁰ Adorno, *ibid.*

⁶⁰¹ Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” 370.

⁶⁰² It is worth mentioning that some passages in Freud’s work present a more enlightened point of view than Adorno and Horkheimer’s thinking on the subject of sexuality. For instance, Freud recognizes sexual fluidity in his theory of group bonds, writing: “there is scarcely any sense in asking whether the libido which keeps groups together is of a homosexual or of a heterosexual nature, for it is not differentiated according to the sexes, and particularly shows a complete disregard for the aims of the genital organization of the libido” (Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:141).

7.2. When things get ‘Fliessian’: Freud’s rejection of the tyranny of suggestion thesis

In a personal dream analysis entitled “Irma’s Injection,” Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* arrives at its central thesis: the unconscious harbours a desire for wish fulfillment. In this dream, Freud is reunited with a former patient, Irma, who claims to suffer painful symptoms in her throat and stomach. This prompts Freud to reproach her for not accepting his treatment when she was under his care: “if you still get pains, it’s really only your fault.”⁶⁰³ She nonetheless insists that he examine the inside of her throat where Freud discovers horrible scabs on the turbinal bones which, he notes in the self-analysis, are only found in the nasal cavity. After seeking confirmation from a series of male doctors, Freud shifts blame for the infection from Irma to a nameless colleague who had administered his patient with a chemical injection using a contaminated needle: “injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly.”⁶⁰⁴ In his self-analysis, the dreamer associates this last detail with what must be an unconscious accusation against the actual colleague who had betrayed the patient along with the shaky reassurance that Freud had always been the more conscientious doctor.⁶⁰⁵

It is well known that “Irma’s Injection” is based on Freud’s fraught entanglement with Wilhelm Fliess, an ear, nose, and throat specialist who made the recommendation that Freud’s patient, Emma Eckstein, be submitted for an unnecessary procedure resulting in her near-fatal hemorrhage and partial paralysis of her face.⁶⁰⁶ The friendship between the two doctors only lasted from 1887 until 1901 but its fraught dynamics would be revived in later relationships, prompting Carl Jung to insist to his mentor that “not only now but for the future ... nothing Fliess-like is going to happen.”⁶⁰⁷ What of course complicates Freud’s transference with Fliess (and Eckstein) is that he had also been persuaded to undertake these painful operations.⁶⁰⁸

The medical mistreatment of Eckstein has been taken up by several feminist scholars who interpret Freud’s complicity and subsequent need to shift blame away from his colleague to his

⁶⁰³ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, 4:107.

⁶⁰⁴ Freud, 4:ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ Freud, 4:117–18.

⁶⁰⁶ Fliess’s outlandish theory of “nasal reflex neurosis” posited a physiological link between neurotic symptoms and the nasal cavity, a link that could be treated by cocaine use or severed through an operation that Fliess had very little experience in carrying out.

⁶⁰⁷ Joel Whitebook, *Freud: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 227.

⁶⁰⁸ Whitebook, 215. Whitebook writes “[Fliess] had treated Freud during his cardiac episode, cauterized and cocaineized his nose shortly before the fateful operation on Eckstein, and planned to operate on him again at the end of the summer. Furthermore, like Emma, Freud suffered serious complications in the aftermath of Fliess’s interventions” (Whitebook, 215)

patient (“if you still get pains, it’s really only your fault”) as evidence of the doctor’s well-documented enmity toward women’s sexuality and, on a deeper level, the pre-Oedipal maternal. In *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, Madelon Sprengnether elaborates on Freud’s buried indictment of his colleague as it appears in the dream-analysis, remarking specifically on his comment “injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly”:

Fliess is guilty of malpractice for having violated Eckstein. The distortions of the dream bring out the theme of sexual violation (the injection of a sexual substance with a dirty instrument) in addition to Freud’s split identification with Fliess and with his female patient. Freud seems to have found it easier, however, to blame himself for other professional lapses than for his complicity with Fliess in their joint treatment of Eckstein. He evidently also found the role of the self-critical physician more congenial than that of the abused woman.⁶⁰⁹

These professional lapses are hinted at by the scabs in Irma’s throat, associated by Freud with the long-term effects of cocaine use on the nasal cavity, prompting the author’s admission that he sought to overcome his own addiction to cocaine after recommending the substance to a colleague who would eventually succumb to a fatal overdose.⁶¹⁰ According to Sprengnether, it is easier for Freud to admit to these cases of medical malpractice – and thus remain aligned with the medical patriarchal establishment – than “to be like Eckstein, a victim of Fliess’s bungled operation [which] is not only analogous to being a victim of sexual violation; it is also to be a woman.”⁶¹¹ As much is supported by Eckstein’s quip to her doctor, when Freud proved unable to stomach the gush of blood that streamed from her unhealed suture, “so this is the stronger sex.”⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁹ Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 174.

⁶¹⁰ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, 4:111.

⁶¹¹ Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, 31.

⁶¹² Lia Appignanesi and John Forrester, *Freud’s Women* (London: Phoenix, 2005), 119. The events following the surgery took place in 1895: “Fliess returned to Vienna in early February, operated on Emma and left. Freud reported on her post-operative progress on 4 March: the patient was not doing well. She had excessive secretion of pus, a bone chip had been expressed and a rather noxious smell emanated from her nose. Four days later, on 8 March, Freud gave Fliess the sudden upsetting news that Emma’s condition had worsened to the point where Freud had hurriedly called in a surgeon, Rosanes, who, in attempting to halt the increased flow of blood from her nose, had discovered that a half-metre of gauze had been left by Fliess in her nasal cavity during his operation on her. Extracting the gauze led to a massive haemorrhage, in which the patient almost lost her life. After the haemorrhage was stemmed, Freud had to go into the next room to be sick” (Appignanesi and Forrester, *ibid*).

The triangular relationship between Freud, Fliess, and Eckstein presents a striking example of Ferenczi's concept of identification with the aggressor: what appears at first glance to be a misguided attempt on Freud's part to prove a bizarre hypothesis of "nasal reflex neurosis" can be read as the young, impressionable doctor's collusion with a much stronger and more seductive personality. A deeper examination of this relationship appears in Joel Whitebook's *Freud: an Intellectual Biography* where he argues that the young doctor "fell passionately in love with Wilhelm Fliess," so much so that "[he] could not appropriate his own autonomy until he worked through that thralldom, that extreme heteronomy, and being in love."⁶¹³ Following Sprengher, he maintains that Fliess's "actively intervening into Freud's body" blurs the roles between doctor (male) perpetrator and the less enviable role of submissive (woman) patient.⁶¹⁴ In addition to this, Whitebook insists upon an alternative configuration that would deviate from the strict victim-perpetrator binary that is typically drawn between gender lines. The triangular situation may be presented as one in which "Freud and Eckstein [are] grouped together and occupying one side of the figure, opposing Fliess who faces them on the other" thereby submitting Freud to the "feminine/ homosexual position as he defined it."⁶¹⁵

Aligned with Eckstein's victimhood, this configuration does not absolve Freud of responsibility nor his abuse of medical authority. Rather, Whitebook is underscoring the astounding, passionate love that binds – and blinds – the masochist to the dangerous personality of the sadist. Whitebook posits that the reverberations of this sado-masochistic dynamic can be felt throughout Freud's writings, not just in Irma's Injection but in "what Freud has to say about the relation of hypnosis and love [which] can be read almost as a gloss of the dynamics of his relationship with Fliess."⁶¹⁶ If Whitebook is correct that "Freud's struggle to comprehend his love for Fliess produced a group of essential ideas concerning object-love, self-love, loss, internalization, ego development, and projection," then Freud's study of mass psychology can be read as the culmination of a twenty year self-analysis that started with "Irma's Injection" on the intoxicating influence of the charlatan-hypnotist.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹³ Whitebook, *Freud*, 148. This love for Fliess is admitted by Freud in a letter to Jung (Whitebook, 232–33).

⁶¹⁴ Whitebook, *Freud*, 190.

⁶¹⁵ Whitebook, 215.

⁶¹⁶ Whitebook, 149.

⁶¹⁷ Whitebook, 233. The passage continues, "And he later used these ideas in the formulation of his landmark theories on narcissism, loss, mourning, and ego development" (Whitebook, *ibid*).

It is common for most scholars to read *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) as a harbinger of what was to come with the rise of fascism.⁶¹⁸ Even Adorno suggests that Freud's explanation for mass psychology serves as an uncanny prognosis of future events: "if it is true that the analyst's unconscious perceives the unconscious of the patient," then "one may also presume that his theoretical intuitions are capable of anticipating tendencies still latent on a rational level but manifesting themselves of a deeper one."⁶¹⁹ However, in light of this traumatic transference between Freud and Fliess, this 1921 investigation into the psychodynamics of the pogrom can be better appreciated not only for its insight into malignant, charismatic figures, but also for the author's intimate and personal knowledge of just how deeply one might succumb to another's influence.

Although the *Group Psychology* study is primarily concerned with the transformation of the individual in the mass, Freud deviates significantly from dominant theories of hypnotic suggestion as they were first introduced by his mentor Jean-Martin Charcot along with Hippolyte Bernheim and Gustav le Bon. He dismisses explanations that range from the group-member's acting on self-preservation (a concept that is too rational for this phenomenon) and the more occult concept of charisma on the part of the leader's personality. Instead, Freud argues that it is only love that could be so powerful a bond as to suspend all rational thought.⁶²⁰

The individual's transformation in the mass or the crowd includes intensified affect and exaggerated feelings, a reduction in intellectual ability and critical faculties, a sense of omnipotence and invincibility, a desire to conform, a respect for force, and a tendency to unquestioningly obey an established leader even in cases of ideological extremism.⁶²¹ The hypnotic power of the mass is precisely in its ability to throw off inhibitions that are usually placed on unconscious life resulting in irrational and contradictory thinking that values wish fulfilment over reality. Freud writes "groups have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions, and cannot do without them," adding "[the mass] has such a thirst for obedience that it

⁶¹⁸ Jacqueline Rose, for instance, rejects the notion that this text is emblematic of Freud's bourgeois aversion to the power of mass movements, writing, "Anti-Semitism gives a different historical substance and context to what might otherwise appear as no more than a familiar and conservative revulsion against the mob. As a Jew, Freud knows what it is like to be the target of collective hate" (Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), 64).

⁶¹⁹ Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 120.

⁶²⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:88.

⁶²¹ Freud, 18:77–78.

submits instinctively to anyone who appoints himself its master.”⁶²² Contrary to the leader’s claim of prestige or charisma (what Freud defines as “a mysterious and irresistible power ... [that] paralyses our critical faculty, and fills us with wonderment and respect”), Freud attributes this transformation of the individual to the power of suggestion.⁶²³

On the seeming irreducibility of suggestion as a psychological mechanism of influence, Freud proposes an alternative perspective that shifts focus away from charisma to the autonomy of the patient:

Such, too, was the opinion of Bernheim, of whose astonishing arts I was a witness in the year 1889. But I can remember even then a muffled hostility to this tyranny of suggestion. When a patient who showed himself unamenable was met with the shout: ‘What are you doing? *Vous-vous contre-suggestionnez!*’, I said to myself that this was an evident injustice and an act of violence. For the man certainly had a right to counter-suggestions if people were trying to subdue him with suggestions. Later on my resistance took the direction of protesting against the view that suggestion, which explained everything, was itself to be exempt from explanation.⁶²⁴

Where earlier doctors sought to impose hypnotic suggestion on their patients, Freud identifies “a scrap of independence and originality” which can also be traced throughout the development of his own clinical interventions; instead of relying on hypnosis, Freud preferred the method of free association.⁶²⁵ He reasoned that hypnotic transference cannot be a relationship of force, since this would only ignite resistance. “A group is clearly held together by a power of some kind” he proposes, “and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world?”⁶²⁶

The experience of falling in love invites the suspension of all criticism and an idealization of the love object that can be explained as a projection of the subject’s own narcissism: “the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own.”⁶²⁷ In an observation that echoes Freud’s earlier discussion of uncanny doubleness, idealization mirrors the subject’s own self-image, as they would wish it to be, projected into the other. Freud suggests that this

⁶²² Freud, 18:80; 81.

⁶²³ Freud, 18:81.

⁶²⁴ Freud, 18:89.

⁶²⁵ Freud, 18:129.

⁶²⁶ Freud, 18:91.

⁶²⁷ Freud, 18:112. The ego-ideal shares some resemblance with the super-ego but should be understood in this context as a more approachable ideal that the ego can aspire toward as it combines the ego’s narcissism with the idealization of the parents/parental substitutes.

idealization is accompanied by a gross undervaluing of the self, including one's own critical capacity:

Contemporaneously with this 'devotion' of the ego to the object, which is no longer to be distinguished from a sublimated devotion to an abstract idea, the functions allotted to the ego ideal entirely cease to operate. The criticism exercised by that agency is silent; everything that the object does and asks for is right and blameless. Conscience has no application to anything that is done for the sake of the object; in the blindness of love remorselessness is carried to the pitch of crime. The whole situation can be completely summarized in a formula: *The object has been put in the place of the ego ideal.*⁶²⁸

The psychodynamics underlying hypnosis are not so different from the experience of falling in love: "there is the same humble subjection, the same compliance, the same absence of criticism," Freud writes, "the hypnotist is the sole object, and no attention is paid to any but him."⁶²⁹ Despite the subject's lack of sexual fulfillment, they find in the hypnotist a bondage of love in which one's own ego is devalued and impoverished by the idealization of the other.⁶³⁰

The dream-like experience of submitting to the hypnotist's demands can be explained as the surrender of the reality principle. This does not make resistance impossible, as "some knowledge may be retained that what is happening is only a game, an untrue reproduction of another situation of far more importance to life."⁶³¹ On the contrary, as Adorno remarks in his application of Freud's *Group Psychology* to the study of fascism, "this game has been socialized, and the consequences have proved to be very serious."⁶³²

The Freud-Fliess-Eckstein case is one illustration of how intoxicating love that encourages an overvaluation of the idealized object places human life and dignity at great risk with serious consequences. What is not accounted here is the profound aggression, not only felt toward the woman patient in a surgical violation reminiscent of sexual assault, but also in the perpetrator's masochism. It is still not altogether clear why these two doctors resorted to surgical violations that put their professional reputations at risk when they might have engaged in a more creative and productive collaboration (as Freud pursued with several colleagues, men and women, in the post-Fliess years). There is more to this story than erotic bonds.

⁶²⁸ Freud, 18:113.

⁶²⁹ Freud, 18:114. Multiplied with several members of the group, a similar transference is taking place in which group members put in place the same object as their ego ideal (Freud, 18:116).

⁶³⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:113.

⁶³¹ Freud, 18:116.

⁶³² Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 137.

If Freud were to indulge in a later self-analysis that integrated his theory of the death drive, he might have interpreted this self-sabotaging behaviour as an unconscious need for punishment. In 1924, Freud extended his analysis of sexual masochism to the unconscious guilt associated with “moral masochism” in which Eros and the death drive become fused together resulting in unique expressions of self-destructiveness. He writes:

Moral masochism, is chiefly remarkable for having loosened its connection with what we recognized as sexuality. All other masochistic sufferings carry with them the condition that they shall emanate from the loved person and shall be endured at his command. This restriction has been dropped in moral masochism. The suffering is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance. It may even be caused by impersonal powers or by circumstances; the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow.⁶³³

As Adorno would point out, Freud’s explanation for hypnotic suggestion as a libidinal transference only explains half of the story: the mass may be bonded by a shared hostility toward others (projected from within the group) and an identification based on negative group integration. This can be certainly detected in the Eckstein case, as Sprengnether argues, with Freud’s disavowal of his own passive masochistic role and identification with the patriarchal medical establishment.

It is striking that Freud’s explanation for moral masochism goes beyond the beloved, charismatic authority with a need for punishment as exercised by an impersonal, shadowy authority. Among the many layers of the parental *imago*, Freud also points out in this same passage that the “influences of teachers and authorities, self-chosen models and publicly recognized heroes” echoes until one reaches, at bottom, “the last figure in the series that began with the parents is the dark power of Destiny which only the fewest of us are able to look upon as impersonal.”⁶³⁴ He proposes that this intolerance of the impersonal lends itself to the projection of the parental agency into forces that appear remote; the more personalized entities of “God” and “Nature” allow for the possibility of influencing the supernatural through “libidinal ties.”⁶³⁵ Where fate presents itself as an impersonal judge, divinity provides a more accessible,

⁶³³ Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” 19:165. “Moral masochism” in this passage is further theorized in *Civilization and Its Discontents* as unconscious guilt resulting from the severity of the super-ego.

⁶³⁴ Freud, 19:168.

⁶³⁵ Freud, 19:ibid.

daemonic guide for navigating uncertainty. The moral masochist can identify this punishment as an expression of divine will.

In application to Herr S.'s recurring nightmares, the daemonic Goebbels is terrifying precisely because of his indifference to the dreamer's effort to save his factory. The dreamer would re-animate this abstract power and weaken his seeming omnipotence as exemplified by the dream elaboration of Goebbels' distinctive limp as he exits the factory. If the parental *imago* is projected into the mysterious entities that govern nature and fate, then this re-personalization can be thought of as an attempt to counter-influence those forces that operate outside of the dreamer's personal control.

Even the Fliessian nightmare of being under the maligned influence of a beloved colleague in the dream of "Irma's Injection" instrumentalizes a similar abstraction, this time, that overwhelming objectivity that accompanies medical authority. Reinforced by his colleague's idealization, Fliess's procedure takes on the appearance of a necessary intervention that camouflages its inherent irrationality and cruelty (as Whitebook writes, "the attack masquerades as a legitimate medical procedure").⁶³⁶ Even naming the traumatic transference, as Jung had reassured his mentor, "nothing Fliess-like is going to happen," cannot dismiss the haunting of daemonic repetition.⁶³⁷

Far from being a passive figure, the authoritarian subject would establish a libidinal connection that might re-personalize these inherently impersonal forms. Their terrifying, uncanny authority can now be explained not only as a fear of the super-ego and its identifiable representatives, but also of those uncanny, archaic entities that lie in the deepest stratifications of the psyche, as Freud writes, "the dark power of Destiny."

7.3. Adorno and Horkheimer on re-personalizing the fascist super-father

Group Psychology provides an important counter-argument to Bernheim's tyranny of suggestion but, as already established, libidinal bonds cannot explain all cases of influence. This is somewhat addressed in a later chapter where Freud comments on an "additional element of paralysis derived from the relation between someone of superior power and someone who is without power and helpless," a paralysis that he compares with "the hypnosis of fright which

⁶³⁶ Whitebook, *Freud*, 214.

⁶³⁷ Whitebook, 227.

occurs in animals.”⁶³⁸ What follows is an explanation for this terror as the revival of the primal horde in which autonomous individuality is subsumed by the common will of the mass.⁶³⁹ This violent phylogenetic cycle of domination is the closest Freud comes to integrating aggression into his study. In this section, I return to the Critical Theory notion of the fascist super-father and explore in more detail how this authority is re-personalized in the authoritarian imagination.

Paying special attention to the role of aggression in the fascist group, Adorno’s 1951 “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” applies the insights of *Group Psychology* to a study of American fascist agitators and their rhetoric.⁶⁴⁰ The fascist mass appears to be held together by a “threatening authority,” rather than a “loving father,” meaning that the bond that binds the movement to its followers is only artificial, with Adorno writing “there is too little in the content of fascist ideology that *could* be loved.”⁶⁴¹ This threatening authority instrumentalizes societal discontent and frustration: having already been “robbed of autonomy and spontaneity” by administered society, the authoritarian subject is organized and weaponized by the fascist agitator in their persecution of outsider groups.⁶⁴² Betraying the revolutionary promise of actual social reform and liberation, the fascist mass is united in their contempt for others thereby redirecting in-group hostility toward the outsider.⁶⁴³ Adorno suggests that the follower’s identification with the fascist leader recalls a transference that must pre-date that of the Oedipal father, going “beyond this father image and through an ‘anaclitic’ process reach[ing] a more archaic one,” i.e., the omnipotent, primal father *imago* of the subterranean unconscious.⁶⁴⁴

⁶³⁸ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:115. Freud points out that moral masochism is only sexual insofar that it revives the Oedipal dynamic of childhood by provoking authority figures for punishment (Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” 19:169).

⁶³⁹ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:122. According to Jacqueline Rose, “how solid can any group identification possibly be if the leader we love and who loves us all as equals is also, deep in the unconscious, the tyrant who must be killed? It would seem that the mass is only held together, like those first brothers, because it is aghast at its own history, its own actual and potential deeds” (Rose, *The Last Resistance*, 67–68).

⁶⁴⁰ These agitators range “from Coughlin and Gerald Smith to provincial small-time hate mongers” (Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 119).

⁶⁴¹ Similar to Wilhelm Reich, Adorno argues that sexuality operates at an unconscious level where it can be controlled and shaped toward the follower’s submissiveness. (Adorno, 123).

⁶⁴² Adorno, 134.

⁶⁴³ Adorno, 131–32.

⁶⁴⁴ Adorno, 125. “Anaclitic” is Freud’s term for the infant’s early love-object as it is tied to the pleasure principle, e.g., the nourishment obtained at the breast (Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 29–32). Adorno is likely referring to the archaic father of early memory, the primal father (although, “anaclitic” is more often associated in psychoanalytic thought with the child’s dependence on the mother).

As discussed, the fascist agitator does not emit prestige or genius but draws his insight of his followers from his common membership and identification with them.⁶⁴⁵ Adorno recognizes that the narcissistic agitator must remain withdrawn while also appearing simultaneously approachable and larger than life; this is achieved by his transformation into a “great little man.”⁶⁴⁶ The illusion of omnipotence is attained through often empty, clichéd, and repetitive language. Adorno posits that this repetitive style may be traced back to “a total common conception, be it conscious or unconscious, *which determines every word that is said*” meaning that “in order successfully to meet the unconscious dispositions of his audience, the agitator so to speak simply turns his own unconscious outward.”⁶⁴⁷ By making “rational use of his irrationality” and exploiting his own unconscious, the leader can successfully draw out the fears and desires of his base.⁶⁴⁸ Thus, Adorno proposes that “fascism defines a psychological area which can be successfully exploited by the forces which promote it for entirely nonpsychological reasons of self-interest.”⁶⁴⁹ In other words, the false promise of liberation through a much longed-for regression is entirely motivated by the agitator’s need for greater social control. Instead of making conscious those wishes that reside in the unconscious (the psychoanalytic dictum of “where id was, there ego shall be”), fascism shackles the autonomous subject to their own irrationality, prompting Adorno to borrow the phrase from Leo Löwenthal, “fascism is psychoanalysis in reverse.”⁶⁵⁰

Fascist propaganda’s “incessant plugging of names and supposedly great men,” rather than objective causes, demonstrates the extent to which the agitator must fashion himself after the common individual while also embodying an idealized version of his followers in the persona

⁶⁴⁵ Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 132.

⁶⁴⁶ Adorno, 128.

⁶⁴⁷ Adorno, 119; 133.

⁶⁴⁸ Adorno, 133.

⁶⁴⁹ Adorno, 135.

⁶⁵⁰ Adorno, 136. In a biographical sketch of Adorno, Leo Löwenthal writes: “I am proud that Adorno approved and used my shorthand definition of fascist agitation as well as culture industry as ‘psychoanalysis in reverse,’ that is, as more or less constantly manipulated devices to keep people in permanent psychic bondage, to increase and reinforce neurotic and even psychotic behaviour culminating in perpetual dependency on a ‘leader’ or on institutions or products. We both saw modern antisemitism and culture industry as ultimately belonging to the same social context even though at times they go different political ways. What is at stake here, as Adorno never grew tired of repeating, is the ever-increasing difficulty of genuine experience mediated primarily through art, whose independence and integrity has been increasingly sabotaged by the sophisticated apparatus of social manipulation and domination.” (Leo Löwenthal, “Theodor W. Adorno: An Intellectual Memoir,” in *An Unmastered Past: Autobiographical Reflections of Leo Löwenthal*, ed. Martin Jay (Berkeley: Berkeley University of California Press, 1987), 186).

of the “great little man.”⁶⁵¹ Adorno associates this narcissism as particularly evocative of Freud’s description of the self-encapsulated primal father, a near-perfect portrait of Hitler.⁶⁵² At the same time, he proposes that the fascist agitator might be interpreted ontogenetically as “the enlargement of the [follower’s] own personality, a collective projection of himself.”⁶⁵³ This projection is apparent from the follower’s ambivalent identification with and idealization of (the wish to become) the fascist agitator.

Although the “great little man” persona is constructed to make the fascist demagogue appear more approachable, Adorno suggests in a footnote that this personalization cannot veil his narcissistic detachment: “In technological civilization, no *immediate* transference to the leader, unknown and distant as he actually is, is possible. What happens is rather a regressive repersonalization of impersonal detached social powers” adding “this possibility was clearly envisaged by Freud.”⁶⁵⁴ Adorno is arguing that, despite the movement’s collective idealization of their leader, it would be impossible to claim any direct relationship with the dictator due to the “collectivization and institutionalization” of authority generally. Adorno posits that this relationship is made “more and more indirect and precarious” contributing to an observable phoniness that may break down those psychodynamics that originally made the fascist mass movement possible.⁶⁵⁵ Without a direct transference with “the great little man,” the authoritarian must resort to a “regressive repersonalization” of this figure so as to maintain their identification with the mass.⁶⁵⁶

This footnote on the re-personalization of abstract authorities makes explicit reference to Freud’s *Group Psychology* with a brief passage that is worth quoting in full in order to better appreciate Adorno’s observation. Freud writes,

⁶⁵¹ Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 124.

⁶⁵² Adorno, 126.

⁶⁵³ Adorno, 125.

⁶⁵⁴ Adorno, 179.

⁶⁵⁵ Adorno, 137.

⁶⁵⁶ According to Adorno, “by personalization I mean a habit of thinking that is very widespread today: that one attributes certain grievances – whether one would normally consider them so blind and fateful that one has no power over them, or at least looks for a scapegoat or a living person to cling to so that one can somehow deal with it, to avoid being hopelessly consumed by the awareness of one’s alienation ... This factor of personalization has been a trick for a very long time, incidentally, and its function seems to grow in virtually direct proportion to mass society – that is, to the alienation of the masses from the most important decisions in direct proportion to the anonymity of social decisions” (Theodor W. Adorno, “Lecture 5: 16 June 1964,” in *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*, ed. Tobias ten Brink and Phillip Nogueira, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 35).

We should consider whether groups with leaders may not be the more primitive and complete, whether in the others an idea, an abstraction, may not take the place of the leader (a state of things to which religious groups, with their invisible head, form a transitional stage), and whether a common tendency, a wish in which a number of people can have a share, may not in the same way serve as a substitute. This abstraction, again, might be more or less completely embodied in the figure of what we might call a secondary leader, and interesting varieties would arise from the relation between the idea and the leader.⁶⁵⁷

Freud's analysis is reserved primarily for the "more primitive and complete" mass as they are united by a visible, charismatic leader. However, his notion of a "secondary leader" provides one model for thinking about the relationship between the mass and an idea that is inherently impersonal, abstract, and remote. The secondary leader refers to a figure who mediates the invisible and the intangible. Although neither Freud or Adorno make reference to Freud's later study of Moses, a similar dynamic is at play. Moses as a law-giver who transmits the principle of *ma'at* into Jewish monotheism might be described as fulfilling this function: the followers are united in their wish for chosen-ness by a divinity, represented by Moses and abstract thinking, allowing the Israelites to "survive all the blows of fate and that kept them alive to our own days."⁶⁵⁸

For Adorno, the need for a secondary leader stems from the wish to re-personalize what was increasingly becoming depersonalized in modern, administered society. In a 1955 application of psychoanalytic theory to an analysis of Nazi Germany, Adorno proposes:

If the theory of Freud's "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" is correct, according to which the father imago can be transferred to secondary groups and their leaders, then the Hitlerian Reich offers the model of such transference, and the violence of authority as well as the need for it were virtually summoned by its absence in the Germany of the Weimar Republic. Hitler and modern dictatorships are indeed, to use the term of the psychoanalyst Paul Federn, the product of a "fatherless society." How far, however, the transference of paternal authority to the collective changes the inner composition of authority; to what extent it still represents the father and not already what Orwell called the Big Brother, is open to question. In any case, it would be nonsensical to equate the crisis of the family with the dissolution of authority as such. Authority is

⁶⁵⁷ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 18:100.

⁶⁵⁸ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:45; 51. The study describes this Mosaic God as "the greatest and mightiest, although he is invisible like a gale of wind or like the soul" (Freud, 23:118). While *Moses and Monotheism* explores the psychology of religion in relation to the abstraction of a monotheistic deity, I would not go so far as to suggest that the Mosaic God is an "the anonymous god." As discussed, the anonymous god appears in Critical Theory writings in the context of modern bureaucracy and administrative society. In Freud's study, Moses is a "great man," rather than a "great little man," and the cultural advancement of *Geistigkeit* requires the Israelites to resist mass psychology, not submit to the violent impulses that characterize the coercive practices of fascist agitators.

becoming more and more abstract; but also more and more inhuman and inexorable. The gigantic, collectivized ego ideal is the satanic antithesis of a liberated ego.⁶⁵⁹

Contrary to the “crisis of authority” thesis popularized in post-war conservative thought, Adorno maintains that where the mass was once led by a primary leader (i.e., the ‘Great Men’ of history for whom personal power took on more importance than objective causes), abstract authorities have become ubiquitous.⁶⁶⁰ The dictator or “great little man” stands in as the secondary leader or intercessor for the authoritarian subject who finds themselves without protection or security in a “fatherless society.” While “Big Brother” authorities would model themselves after the father so as to better facilitate in a paternal transference, the secondary leader can only stand in as a mirror for the impersonality of administered society.⁶⁶¹

In a thesis echoed most adamantly by Horkheimer’s 1949 “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” the disembodied and mystical personification of authority (i.e., the inhuman Big Brother) cannot truly satisfy the paternal function. In this addendum to his 1936 “Authority and the Family” essay, Horkheimer explores the discrepancy between the *pater familias* and the actual social conditions that give shape the personal father’s role in the home. Here, he draws an

⁶⁵⁹ Translated by Jacob Blumenfeld (2022) <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/theodor-adorno-on-the-problem-of-the-family-1955>. Original German: “Wenn die Theorie aus Freud’s ‘Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse’ zutrifft, der zufolge die Vaterimago auf sekundäre Gruppen und deren Häupter übertragen werden kann, dann bietet das Hitlerische Reich das Modell solcher Übertragung, und die Gewalt der Autorität ebenso wie das Bedürfnis nach ihr wurden geradezu durch deren Absenz im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik herbeizitiert. Hitler und die moderne Diktatur sind in der Tat, den Terminus des Psychoanalytikers Paul Federn zu brauchen, das Produkt einer ‘vaterlosen Gesellschaft’. Wie weit allerdings die Übertragung der väterlichen Autorität auf das Kollektiv die innere Zusammensetzung der Autorität verändert; wie weit sie noch den Vater und nicht bereits das repräsentiert, was Orwell den Großen Bruder nannte, steht dahin. Unsinnig wäre es jedenfalls, die Krise der Familie mit der Auflösung der Autorität als solcher gleichzusetzen. Die Autorität wird immer abstrakter; damit aber auch immer unmenschlicher und unerbittlicher. Das ins Gigantische vergrößerte, kollektivierte Ich-Ideal ist das satanische Widerspiel eines befreiten Ichs” (Theodor W. Adorno, “Zum Problem Der Familie,” in *Gesammelte Schriften: Vermischte Schriften I*, vol. 20.1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 303).

⁶⁶⁰ Arendt writes, “most will agree that a constant, ever-widening and -deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our century ... the most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its depth and seriousness, is that it has spread to such prepolitical areas as child-rearing and education ... the fact that even this prepolitical authority which ruled the relations between adults and children, teachers and pupils, is no longer secure signifies that all the old time-honored metaphors and models for authoritarian relations have lost their plausibility. Practically as well as theoretically, we are no longer in a position to know what authority really is” (Arendt, “What Is Authority?,” 91–92).

⁶⁶¹ To support Adorno’s point about the fatherless society and the “Big Brother” of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eight-Four*, it is striking that the inspiration for this character (according to Anthony Burgess) can be found in advertisements for Bennet Correspondence College that, in pre-war London depicted in “a picture of Benette père, a nice old man, shrewd but benevolent, saying ‘Let me be your father.’ Then Bennett fils came along, taking over the business, a very brutal-looking individual, saying ‘LET ME BE YOUR BIG BROTHER’” (Anthony Burgess, 1984 (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1978), 21–22).

important distinction between the father's actual function in the modern family and "the moral and religious ideas, the spiritual images, derived from the structure of the patriarchal family [that] still constitute the core of our culture."⁶⁶² Even when he plays a significant role in the child's life, the father cannot live up to this collectively idealized *pater familias* due to his authority being constantly deferred to extra-familial institutions: "the socially conditioned weakness of the father, which is not disproved by his occasional outbreaks of masculinity, prevents the child's real identification with him."⁶⁶³ Overwhelmed by a socially-transmitted culture of "authoritarian aggressiveness," the child finds strongmen substitutes outside of the family who will better approximate this elusive paternal authority.

For Horkheimer, personal, male authorities would provide a child with a stronger source of identification (or rejection of this identification), no matter how despotic their influence, as compared with the impersonality of abstract authorities. He writes,

Today the growing child, who instead of the image of a father has received only the abstract idea of arbitrary power, looks for a stronger, more powerful father, for a super-father, as it is furnished by fascist imagery. Whereas authoritarian submissiveness is still being inculcated in the child by the family, the instinctual relation toward the parents is greatly injured. In past periods, when the father could not play a direct role in the child's upbringing, his place in the child's emotional life was occupied by an uncle, a tutor, a teacher, or some other individual person. Harsh and hardened though he might be, he had at least some human traits, some personal features and gestures that could be imitated, some ideas that could be meditated and argued. Today the father tends to be directly replaced by collective entities, the school class, the sports team, the club, the state. The more family dependence is reduced to a mere psychological function within the soul of the infant, the more abstract and unspecific it becomes in the mind of the adolescent; gradually it tends to lead to a general readiness to accept any authority provided it is strong enough.⁶⁶⁴

The question being asked here is how can the child resolve their Oedipal conflicts with the parental unit (renouncing the mother and identifying with the father) if parents are replaced by non-human, institutional authorities?⁶⁶⁵ Without a strong-enough parental figure who exudes the

⁶⁶² Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family Today," 361.

⁶⁶³ Horkheimer, 365.

⁶⁶⁴ Horkheimer, 365–66.

⁶⁶⁵ A similar sentiment is expressed by Donald W. Winnicott when he writes, "It is certain that a baby cannot develop into a person if there is only a non-human environment; even the best machine could never provide what is needed. No, a human being is needed, and human beings are essentially human – which means imperfect – free from mechanical reliability. The baby's use of the non-human environment depends on the previous use of a human environment" (D.W. Winnicott, "Communication between Infant and Mother," in *Babies and Their Mothers*, ed.

inner authority needed to approximate the child's hostility (via the child's projection of their aggression, transformed into castration anxiety), how can the child work through and recognize the boundaries of their own omnipotence? Thus, a stronger substitute is sought out among the impersonal authorities who populate the bureaucratized landscape (e.g. in a secular context, the seemingly omnipotent commander in the military college made impersonal by his institutional mystification), while remaining immune to criticism due to their opaque, extra-familial role. Even when they prove to be just as fallible as the imperfect parents of the home, the child's rage is effectively transformed into submission and masochistic obedience.

Citing interview data obtained through *The Authoritarian Personality* study, Horkheimer blames the authoritarian subject's "rigid, uncritical identification with the family" for reducing the family to an ideology. Subjects would respond to the interview question, "who did they consider to be the greatest personalities in history," with the non-descript answer of "my parents."⁶⁶⁶ This idealization of the parental agency is devoid of any actual reverence or emotional attachment: "it is this configuration of submissiveness and coldness which more than anything else defines the potential fascist of our time."⁶⁶⁷

Even when the relationship with the hardened, idealized father is one of ambivalence, the authoritarian's "whole resistance against paternal authority is displaced and turned exclusively against the weak, the underdog," i.e., the weak mother for whom the child is conditioned to feel contempt.⁶⁶⁸ It is precisely this transference that is channeled by the fascist agitator's persecution of out-groups:

Through rigid distinction between those who are "like oneself" and the rest of the world, the authoritarian leanings of the prospective fascist attain an element of inhuman abstractness – glorification of authority *per se*, without any specific idea of the end which the authority is supposed to serve.⁶⁶⁹

Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc, 1987), 93).

⁶⁶⁶ Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family Today," 368.

⁶⁶⁷ Horkheimer, *ibid.*

⁶⁶⁸ Horkheimer, *ibid.*

⁶⁶⁹ Horkheimer, 368–69. The quote continues, "The authoritarian personality is thoroughly conventionalized and stereotypical. The image of the father is that of a stern, just, successful, detached and sometimes generous disciplinarian. That of the mother is composed of the standard attributes of womanhood, such as practical skill, good looks, cleanliness, and health. Where once the agencies of conscience, individual independence, and possible resistance against the pressure of social conformity had their place, the only yardstick left is that of success, popularity, and influence, together with the subject's eagerness to succeed through uninhibited identification with anything that exercises authoritarian strength in reality. No ideal authority, be it religious, moral, or philosophical, is

Horkheimer's position can be summarized with this critique of the authoritarian subject: "what they suffer from is probably not too strong and sound a family but rather a lack of family."⁶⁷⁰

Horkheimer's essay is arguably one of his most conservative writings on the topic of the family. His antiquated championing of traditional paternal authority is most evident from the author's condemnation of working mothers and divorce, writing, for instance, that children in these contexts "never experience the warmth of that second womb which, at times and in certain social strata, the family used to be."⁶⁷¹ Horkheimer's deeply flawed mythology of a once-harmonious family fused with post-war fantasies of the nuclear family exaggerates the protective shield of the family.

In opposition to Horkheimer, I would argue that the situation described here is chronic to the historical glorification of 'Great Men.' Neither the personal father nor any specific kind of family organization can compete with nor provide an unshakeable defence against malignant external forces; no actual parental figure can live up to the child's original idealization and yearning for a superhuman protector. Where religious deities had once provided these guardians, secular institutions constructed their own secondary leaders as ersatz-divinity. Freud recognized the importance of phantasy, projection, and idealization long before the spectre of fascism was realized, particularly as these mechanisms take place within and eventually outside the family home in relation to super-ego substitutes.

Horkheimer describes the fascist agitator with the following: "he sets the pattern for that most contemporary phenomenon, the deindividualized, incoherent, and fully malleable

accepted for its own sake; only what is, is recognized. The 'unpopular,' or whatever is rejected by power, should remain powerless." (Horkheimer, *ibid*).

⁶⁷⁰ Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family Today," 373. Nazi Germany recognized the necessity of separating children from the shelter of their homes with Horkheimer commenting, "the problem today is whether the complicated interaction of these forces was especially German or indicative of a more universal historical trend" (Horkheimer, 374).

⁶⁷¹ Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family Today," 363. Meanwhile, the mother's love for her child – according to Horkheimer – reflects administered society so that "her natural, unlimited protectiveness and warmth tend to be dissolved" so that even the moniker of "'mom' is the death mask of the mother" (Horkheimer, 366; 367). It is common for the Frankfurt School theorists to sentimentalize maternal love with Horkheimer describing her domestication and infantilization by patriarchy with the following: "she could sincerely dream the dreams of utopia with the child, and she was his natural ally whether she wished it or not" (Horkheimer, 367). There is also a presumption that "toughness, ruthlessness, and the forced display of masculinity, all leading to politico-fascist ideologies, are genetically linked with a disturbed relationship toward the mother or, perhaps even more, with the lack of any genuine relationship with her" (Horkheimer, 370).

personality structure into which antidemocratic forces seek to transform man.”⁶⁷² If this modern super-father maintains his distance from his follower, that is, remote and self-assured in his omnipotence, does he not fail to satisfy the infantile wish for a loving father-protector? How could this absolutely narcissistic figure command any kind of influence without a personal, libidinally based relationship? No amount of “regressive repersonalization” should allow this kind of authority and suggestion to take root in the psyche.

It is, once again, less a question of charisma and prestige as the projections of the follower that determine the intensity of the relationship. As Adorno and Horkheimer note, the unguarded masochist’s desire to see love in “the man who looks past them,” who “hands them over to the operations of his many purposes” feeds into the hope that one might also exert some influence over the will of this cold authority.⁶⁷³ Here, Freud’s discussion of the father-complex in *Future of an Illusion* provides some insight into how this would develop:

Impersonal forces and destinies cannot be approached; they remain eternally remote. But if the elements have passions that rage as they do in our own souls, if death itself is not something spontaneous but the violent act of an evil Will, if everywhere in nature there are Beings around us of a kind that we know in our own society, then we can breathe freely, can feel at home in the uncanny and can deal by psychical means with our senseless anxiety. We are still defenceless, perhaps, but we are no longer helplessly paralysed; we can at least react. Perhaps indeed we are not even defenceless. We can apply the same methods against these violent supermen outside that we employ in our own society; *we can try to adjure them, to appease them, to bribe them, and, by so influencing them, we may rob them of a part of their power.* A replacement like this ... not only provides immediate relief, but also points the way to a further mastering of the situation. (emphasis added)⁶⁷⁴

The infant discovers early on in relation to the all-powerful caregiver that establishing a relationship in order to gain influence over another will satisfy their basic needs. Inevitably, they will discover that these needs cannot always be met and their frustration cannot change a given situation, ideally resulting in the renunciation of these desires when the good-enough parent continues to provide them with love, containment, and a holding environment. Applied to the psychology of religion, Freud considers this relationship as the basis for the vulnerable human being’s appeal to powerful, impersonal forces such as nature or fate. When we are unreconciled

⁶⁷² Max Horkheimer, “Foreward to the First Edition,” in *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), xxxviii.

⁶⁷³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 157.

⁶⁷⁴ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 21:16–17.

with the cold forces of nature, a more approachable tyrant is established. He may or may not offer consolation in the face of total powerlessness. It is nonetheless the phantasy of counter-influence that would break the paralysis of “senseless anxiety” (as Freud writes, “we can at least react”). Where this may prove to be difficult is when the overwhelming objectivity of an authority can only be weakened by a humanization that proves impossible to attain.

7.4. Demystifying the Janus-face of fate/destiny: reaching for a more archaic *imago*

Commissioned by the American Jewish Committee’s “Studies in Prejudice” series, Leo Löwenthal and Max Guterman’s 1949 *Prophets of Deceit* set out to examine fascist propaganda and explain the appeal of the American fascist agitator. In their analysis of radio speeches, the authors noted that the agitator tended to attribute all suffering and failure to “secret enemy machinations” that could blend in with the workings of administered society “by exaggerating to the point of the fantastic its suspicions that [the audience] is the toy of anonymous forces.”⁶⁷⁵ Persecutory and malevolent political forces, such as the communist threat, are presented as a hidden “red menace” responsible for all historical catastrophes that pre-date modernity. The agitator gives voice to social discontent by promising liberation through the destruction of “bureaucrats, Jews, congressmen, plutocrats, communists – whatever political stereotype he can find to suggest to him concentrations of power,” claiming that they perpetuate and benefit from socio-economic injustice: “there is that secret and inaccessible gang which lives in air-conditioned penthouses, enjoys the favors of movie stars and luxuriates on yachts, the lucky few, who tempt him with the possibility of success and the dream of escape from his own grimy and dreary life.”⁶⁷⁶

Even when these phantasies promote delusional fear and prejudice, the authors do not dismiss the agitator’s concerns outright: “often enough such suspicions are not devoid of objective justification in a world where the individual’s sphere of action is increasingly restricted

⁶⁷⁵ Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 25; 27. They write, “when the agitator tells his listeners that they are ‘pushed’ or ‘kicked’ around and are victimized by bankers and bureaucrats, he exploits feelings they already have. Such stereotypes as ‘Wall Street machinations,’ ‘monopolist conspiracies,’ or ‘international spies’ are present, however, not as well-defined ideas but as tentative suspicions about the meaning of complex phenomena. As inadequate reflections of reality, they might serve as starting points of analysis of the economic and political situations” (Löwenthal and Guterman, 25).

⁶⁷⁶ Löwenthal and Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, 155.

by anonymous social forces,” adding “our daily existence actually is influenced by tremendous developments whose causes are difficult to grasp. Hence many people are anxious to learn what is happening behind the scenes.”⁶⁷⁷ For Löwenthal and Guterman, anonymous political forces – ranging from secret human organizations to the mysterious workings of fate – are inferred from the punitive, irrational, and opaque workings of administered society.

However, these anonymous forces are not always malevolent. One agitator attributes his personal sense of invulnerability (despite the deluge of enemy threats he encounters at every public event) to the feeling of being “protected by an anonymous providence” with the authors observing, “he is safe and sound, magically immune, secretly protected ... he survives by virtue of superior destinies.”⁶⁷⁸ This providence or destiny operates in this propaganda as a means for consolidating the agitator’s following under the shared illusion of other-worldly assurance, the only defence against those who operate in the shadows, pulling the strings of government and those in power.

Psychoanalytically speaking, providence can be interpreted as a clear substitute for the benevolent, caring parent while fate represents the more ominous and persecutory parent. Freud considers the significance of this figure in a discussion of the super-ego and its projection into higher powers:

If a man is unfortunate it means that he is no longer loved by this highest power; and, threatened by such a loss of love, he once more bows to the parental representative in his super-ego – a representative whom, in his days of good fortune, he was ready to neglect. This becomes especially clear where Fate is looked upon in the strictly religious sense of being nothing else than an expression of the Divine Will.⁶⁷⁹

Commenting on Karl Abraham’s work on character analysis, the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein describes similar cases as those found in *Prophets of Deceit*: “we all know people who go about in life with constant grievances. For instance, they resent even the bad weather as a thing especially inflicted upon them by a hostile fate.”⁶⁸⁰ In keeping with her theory of the paranoid-

⁶⁷⁷ Löwenthal and Guterman, 25. *The Authoritarian Personality* shares a similar conclusion “That people too often cannot see the workings of society or their own role within it is due not only to a social control that does not tell the truth but to a ‘blindness’ that is rooted in their own psychology. Although it cannot be claimed that psychological insight is any guarantee of insight into society, there is ample evidence that people who have the greatest difficulty in facing themselves are the least able to see the way the world is made.” (Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, 976).

⁶⁷⁸ Löwenthal and Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, 145; 146.

⁶⁷⁹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:126–27.

⁶⁸⁰ Klein, “Weaning,” 303.

schizoid position, this hostile fate stands in as a projection for the bad breast/mother who cannot gratify the infant's needs. In some cases, the frustrated infant turns away from the mother even when this gratification is made available in a failure to adapt when their desires are not immediately satisfied. For Klein, the opposite of a healthy and successful weaning is precisely this failure to adapt to frustration, with her extending this important stage in the infant's relationship with the mother to her substitutes such as the weather and fate or even "towards all those sources of gratification and satisfaction which are needed for building up a full, rich and happy life."⁶⁸¹

What makes the authoritarian character unique in their failure to adapt to frustration (both the renunciations required for socialization along with the more objectionable privations resulting from social inequity) would be their appeal to a strongman dictator as an intermediary figure, or intercessor, between earthly struggles and transcendent powers. Although Freud and the Critical Theorists describe the dictator and his appeal as a "secondary leader," an important question remains unanswered by their inquiry: why has it been so important, historically, for this strongman intercessor to be gendered male in his negotiations with greater cosmic authorities?

I have suggested that the family in crisis, as Horkheimer conceived it, and the pernicious influence of extra-familial forces cannot be reversed with the re-implementation of traditional, identifiable father-figures. The child's yearning for a superhuman protector is already internalized with the cultural idealization of 'Great Men' in history. Even if the problem of de-personalized authorities is unique to the modern abstraction and reification of power, the fascist re-personalization of the super-father represents only one link in the historical chain of victors. From the veneration of Alexander to Caesar to Napoleon (all listed by Horkheimer and Fromm in their 1930 qualitative studies), the dictator belongs to a patriarchal legacy.

Where the Critical Theorists fail to critique this legacy in their writings on the family, psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott makes an intriguing suggestion in this same post-war period. He proposes that the gravitation toward male political leaders and despots derives from an unconscious fear of "woman." The mature adult, regardless of gender, would forget their once infantile dependence on the mother. This integral period in the child's life is only remembered as a debt that must be paid: "the debt is not acknowledged, except in so far as the fear of *woman*

⁶⁸¹ Klein, 304.

represents the first stage of this acknowledgement.”⁶⁸² On the rise of dictatorships, Winnicott describes a re-personalization of this maternal spectre:

One of the roots of the need to be a dictator can be a compulsion to deal with this fear of *woman* by encompassing her and acting for her. The dictator’s curious habit of demanding not only absolute obedience and absolute dependence but also “love” can be derived from this source. Moreover, the tendency of groups of people to accept or even seek *actual* domination is derived from a fear of domination by *fantasy woman*. This fear leads them to seek, and even welcome, domination by a known human being, especially one who has taken on himself the burden of personifying and therefore limiting the magical qualities of the all-powerful woman of fantasy, to whom is owed the great debt. The dictator can be overthrown, and must eventually die; but the woman figure of primitive unconscious fantasy has no limits to her existence of power.⁶⁸³

Here, the dictator not only stands in as a more accessible, male personification for the mysterious “fantasy woman” of infancy, a “loving” mother in addition to being a powerful father substitute, but asserts mastery over this terrifyingly omnipotent figure. As a “known human being,” he demands from his followers an obedience that would satisfy the debt owed to the original mother even when the attempt is futile: with his death, the mother is resurrected to reign supreme in the authoritarian imagination. Recalling Adorno’s description of the Oedipal transference with the fascist super-father as one that goes “beyond this father image and through an ‘anaclitic’ process reach[es] a more archaic one,” it is worthwhile to consider whether, instead of a primal father, this archaic *imago* should be thought of as a primal mother.

It is curious that in Freud’s construction of the primal horde, he never insists on a cultural haunting of the mother. Despite outlining various timelines of matriarchal polytheism and its overthrow by patriarchal monotheistic supremacy, Freud does not consider the possibility of an original tyrant-mother who would have been distorted in memory as a primal father.⁶⁸⁴

Ontogenetically, the mother is the first authority that the child must contend with and, in her pre-

⁶⁸² D.W. Winnicott, “Some Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word Democracy,” *Human Relations* 3, no. 2 (1950): 182.

⁶⁸³ Winnicott, 183.

⁶⁸⁴ Freud writes, “A fair amount of the absolute power liberated by the removal of the father passed over to the women; they came a period of *matriarchy*. Recollection of their father persisted at this period of *matriarchy*. ... At a point in this evolution which is not easily determined great mother-goddesses appeared, probably even before the male gods, and afterwards persisted for a long time beside them. In the meantime a great social revolution had occurred. Matriarchy was succeeded by the re-establishment of a patriarchal order. ... It is likely that the mother-goddesses originated at the time of the curtailment of the matriarchy, as a compensation for the slight upon the mothers. The male deities appear first as sons beside the great mothers and only later clearly assume the features of father-figures” (Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 23:82–83).

Oedipal role, she is the first to say “no” to the baby’s demands on her body. Even the cannibalization of the father bears more resemblance to the oral aggression that may arise from the tug of war of breast feeding, to which Klein attributes much more importance in her analysis of the pre-Oedipal dyad (compared with Freud’s preoccupation with the Oedipus complex). In what could be conceived as the original dialectic of domination, Freud draws his founding premise of psychoanalytic theory from the Oedipus myth in which the father plays a relatively minor role in the tragedy compared with that of the mother: Jocasta suspects Oedipus long before he realizes what crime he has committed and her suicide is what prompts her husband/son’s symbolic castration via a woman’s brooch. The murderous and devouring/devoured mother might be best typified by the magic-wielding, child-murderer Medea, of whom Leonard Shengold writes in his study of women perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse, “she represents the omnipotent mother who may give the child the gift of fleeing *with* her but will never permit the child to flee *from* her; the child is to be bound to the mother forever.”⁶⁸⁵ The destructive and creative aspects of the primal father – his terrifying authority and violence that at the same time unites the horde in a libidinally shared identity under his reign – better describes the Janus-face of a terrifyingly powerful primal mother.

Freud was well aware that maternal creation and destruction constituted an important dualism throughout various mythologies and religions, symbolizing the intertwining of sexuality, reproduction, and death. In his 1913 article, “The Theme of Three Caskets,” Freud analyzes a common motif that is repeated in fairy tales and fables in which a male protagonist must choose between one of three women. The correct choice is always the obsequious and unassuming third, who, Freud proposes, is actually a veiled representation of death. He suggests, “if the third of the sisters is the Goddess of Death, the sisters are known to us. They are the Fates, the Moerae, the Parcae or the Norns, the third of whom is called Antropos, the inexorable.”⁶⁸⁶ In these stories, the Goddess of Death is transformed into the Goddess of Love, like a dream image

⁶⁸⁵ Leonard Shengold, *Soul Murder Revisited: Thoughts about Therapy, Hate, Love, and Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 31.

⁶⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 12 (London: Vintage/ Hogarth Press, 1913), 296. Among Freud’s examples, he lists the scene of the three caskets in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* as taken from *Gesta Romanorum*, the ‘Judgment of Paris,’ ‘Cinderella,’ ‘Psyche,’ ‘The Twelve Brothers,’ ‘The Six Swans,’ and *King Lear*. (Freud 291-295; 300)

that is distorted into its opposite. This reactionary construction stems from a denial of death and the universal truth of its inevitability. He writes:

The Moerae were created as a result of a discovery that warned man that he too is a part of nature and therefore subject to the immutable law of death. Something in man was bound to struggle against this subjection, for it is only with extreme unwillingness that he gives up his claim to an exceptional position. Man, as we know, makes use of his imaginative activity in order to satisfy the wishes that reality does not satisfy. So his imagination rebelled against the recognition of the truth embodied in the myth of the Moerae, and constructed instead a myth derived from it, in which the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love and by what was equivalent to her in human shape. The third of the sisters was no longer Death; she was the fairest, best, most desirable, and most loveable of women.⁶⁸⁷

Freud adds that resistance to death can be read as a resistance to the only fate that all human beings must meet. Thus, the male protagonist is provided the opportunity to choose rather than submit to this third woman:

Here again there has been a wishful reversal. Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually. No greater triumph of wish-fulfillment is conceivable. A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion; and what is chosen is not a figure of terror, but the fairest and most desirable of women. ... who has taken the place of the Death Goddess, has kept certain characteristics that border on the uncanny, so that from them we have been able to guess at what lies beneath.⁶⁸⁸

As a personification of the impersonal and remote certainty of death, the fates can be better appealed to or cheated if there is an illusion of choice. Freud interprets these three characters as “the three inevitable relations that a man has with a woman – the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him” that is, “the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more.”⁶⁸⁹

The historical case study of the seventeenth century painter Christoph Haizmann is another study in which Freud sheds light on the mother and father *imagos* as they are projected into religiously inscribed figures. According to archival fragments, Haizmann claimed to have willingly signed over his body and soul to the devil in a bond that had been signed in blood nine years earlier; the signs of his possession included convulsions, seizures, and visions, prompting a

⁶⁸⁷ Freud, 299

⁶⁸⁸ Freud, 299–300.

⁶⁸⁹ Freud, 301.

1677 exorcism conducted by the priests of Mariazell. When the exorcism for this blood contract was unsuccessful, Haizmann insisted that he was bound by an even earlier bond, this time written in ink. Both pacts would ensure that Haizmann remained cared for by the devil.⁶⁹⁰ Freud interprets this figure's self-reported hallucinations of demonic possession as a melancholic attachment to the recent death of his father for whom he likely felt great ambivalence. The devil, as a representative of "bad and reprehensible wishes, derivatives of instinctual impulses that have been repudiated and repressed," plays the role of the protective father upon whom the painter insisted that he remain dependent (with Freud interpreting the unconscious significance of nine years as referring to nine months of gestation).⁶⁹¹ Where God is a projection of the "good father," interchangeable between the ontogenetic figure of childhood and the admirable traits of the phylogenetic primal father, the devil stands in for the malevolent "bad father."⁶⁹²

Freud's analysis remains limited by his exclusive focus on the father. The devil first appears to Haizmann as an unfamiliar, elderly man with a black dog. This paternal image begins to evolve as "his appearance grows more and more terrifying – more mythological, one might say," appearing to Haizmann as a winged and horned creature with a combination of male and female sex characteristics (including breasts and a forked penis), and then finally as a terrifying dragon.⁶⁹³ While it could be argued that this distortion approximates the phylogenetic memory trace of the primal father in which Haizmann makes an inferno-like descent into the archaic unconscious, a transformation of the actual father into something beastly and ancient, it would seem more accurate to characterize this monster as a combination of the archaic parental dyad. Not only does the devil appear with female sex characteristics and the peculiar length of the contract resemble the nine months of pregnancy, but the demonic possession is broken by Haizmann's vision of the Virgin Mary, not his vision of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, Freud

⁶⁹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis," in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 19, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage/Hogarth Press, 1923), 80–81.

⁶⁹¹ Freud, 72; 89–90.

⁶⁹² Freud describes God "as a copy of a father as he is seen and experienced in childhood – by individuals in their own childhood and by mankind in its prehistory" so that the "ideational image belonging to his childhood" merges with "the inherited memory traces of the primal father" (Freud, 85).

⁶⁹³ Freud, 85.

abstains from incorporating the Virgin Mother into this analysis as a simultaneously terrifying as well as a comforting mother.⁶⁹⁴

In considering Haizmann's vision of the beast-devil as a composite fantasy-figure, the closest comparison might be found in Shengold's reference to the Sphinx of *Oedipus the King* as a phylogenetic primal parent. He writes:

I feel that the Sphinx most meaningfully represents what I would call the primal parent (not just the primal father or mother, but parent) who emerges in ontogenetic development as the bad mother of the oral-sadistic stage – the cannibalistic mother. Cannibalistically penetrative (via tooth and claw), the imago develops into the phallic penetrative parent – by this time usually differentiated as the father – toward whom, in the male, the negative oedipus complex becomes activated. The phylogenetic primal parent is described as terrifying, intent on torturing and killing, and mendacious. This figure is omnipresent in development, entering into superego formation, blatantly emerging in pathologic states like depression and paranoia.⁶⁹⁵

Although this passage from Shengold is describing the phylogenetic counterpart to actual Jocastas and Medeas (or her counterpart in Cronos and Aeëtes) in the family home where individual abuse takes place, I suggest that the Sphinx lends itself to a more archaic *imago*, generally, compared with that of the primal father.

Fate represents the ultimate threat to autonomy by holding the individual back just as a mother may hobble (or may be perceived as hobbling) the infant's drive toward self-competence. However, even if the spectral mother of this analysis can be made corporeal in consultation with Winnicott, Klein, and Shengold, it is more important to focus on her role in the authoritarian imagination than resort to the mother-bashing that is typical of the Critical Theorists. As Klein suggests, "if the child cannot obtain the desired thing, he feels that it is being withheld by the nasty mother, who has power over him."⁶⁹⁶ Similarly, the regimented and bureaucratic systems

⁶⁹⁴ This transference of care, from the devil to the Mother Mary to the brothers of Mariazell, is described by Marsha A. Hewitt in *Freud on Religion*, "when all these efforts failed, he ultimately turned to the church and with the intercession of the Virgin Mary, the exalted heavenly Mother, he was related to the care of yet another parental agency 'the pious Fathers of the Church'" (Hewitt, *Freud on Religion*, 29–30). Hewitt also pointed me to the following passage in private communication: "[Haizmann] obtained his freedom once more on the day of the Mother's Nativity (September 8). Whether the day on which the pact was made – September 24 – was not also determined in a similar way, we shall of course never know" (Freud, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis," 91).

⁶⁹⁵ Leonard Shengold, "The Parent as Sphinx," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 11, no. 4 (1963): 726–27.

⁶⁹⁶ Klein, "Weaning," 295.

that govern everyday life can be interpreted as a withholding nasty mother along with the split-off part-objects that would destroy all that is good. The authors of *Prophets of Deceit* write,

The explanation of everyday mischances in terms of uncanny world catastrophes revitalizes and reinforces the heritage of infantile anxieties. The unconscious finds in the agitator's interpretations a replica of its own primitive reactions to the outside world; the listener plays the role of the little child responding to the warning that bogeys may come for him.⁶⁹⁷

Just like the Sphinx, these opaque authorities are hidden behind the screen of what Adorno describes as a "false metaphysics," i.e., entirely changeable conditions presented as the way things are rather than what they could be, thereby resembling more and more the impersonal bogeys of the unconscious.

It could be argued that the authoritarian imagination is populated with devouring parents who are, at base, the oral aggressive projections of the hungry child perceiving threats everywhere including that of the devouring (in actuality, the wished to be devoured) parent. The Sphinx is a projection of the infant's rage and desire for omnipotence, operating as a defence against the vulnerability of being unable to control the mother or primary caregiver. Stripped of human traits, this impersonal monster is not only representative of the daemonic rhythm of fate, but encapsulates the existential dread and frustrations of the infant.

7.5. Conclusion: "I sometimes feel I am myself behind me, and yet I cannot escape"

In this chapter, I examined the psychological origins of the anonymous god, interpreting it as a powerful, unseen force that the psyche would re-personalize in order to exercise some influence over this figure. The relatable strongman veils the anonymous god and the more archaic *imago* it symbolizes. As Winnicott observes, the yearning for a 'Great Man' is a defense against "fantasy woman," the omnipotent and eternal mother *imago* that haunts every child who knows what it is to be born without autonomy and agency. Since the opaque workings of administered society echo the mysterious workings of fate, the debt owed to this mother *imago* can be thought of in terms of Klein's theory of the good/bad breast: will she forgive this debt (as benevolent providence) or call it in (as malignant fate)? The authoritarian imagination is dominated by a fear of this primal mother and her various representatives as nature, death, Janus-

⁶⁹⁷ Löwenthal and Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, 37.

faced destiny, and so forth. To what extent do these characteristics stem from the infant's hostile projections and their much-coveted need for omnipotence and domination over the mother? How much of this *imago* is the introjected parent or the transmission of parents-past? This is where Critical Theory fails to account for the developmental anxieties and frustrations that pre-date the Oedipal father.

In a comparative analysis of two landmark films of the Weimar period, Siegfried Kracauer proposes that the child murderer depicted in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) is the cinematic heir to the somnambulist of Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Where Cesare (played by Conrad Viedt) is unconscious of the nocturnal murders he commits under the command of the hypnotist Dr. Caligari, the much more disturbed, unassuming serial killer, Hans Beckert (played by Peter Lorre), finds himself compelled by a violent psychosis. In *M*, a vicious mob demands an explanation for Beckert's crimes, reducing him to a simpering child as he cries, "I am always forced to move along the streets, and always someone is behind me. It is I. I sometimes feel I am myself behind me, and yet I cannot escape."⁶⁹⁸ Of this passage, Kracauer writes:

Like Cesare, [Beckert] lives under the compulsion to kill. But while the somnambulist unconsciously surrenders to Dr. Caligari's superior will power, the child-murderer submits to his own pathological impulses and in addition is fully aware of this enforced submission. ... this modernized Cesare is a killer because of his submission to the imaginary Caligari within him. ... Both films bear upon the psychological situation of those crucial years and both anticipate what was to happen on a large scale unless people could free themselves from the spectres pursuing them.⁶⁹⁹

As explored in this chapter, the authoritarian imagination is populated with terrifying figures and draws primarily on both fear and desire to be humiliated, paralyzed, wounded, seduced, devoured, and possessed by a dominant authority. I have introduced several examples of how these spectres take on an objectivity of their own: Herr S.'s punitive super-ego as personified by the dream-Goebbels; the self-encapsulated, narcissistic man whose gaze both penetrates and looks past his devotee; the hypnotist-doctor whose cruelty is finally unveiled in

⁶⁹⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of The German Film* (Princeton University Press, 1947), 221.

⁶⁹⁹ Kracauer, 221–22. Kracauer's analysis is founded on his assertion that "popular screen motifs ... satisfy existing mass desires," adding that films do not betray ideological commitments so much as they reflect "psychological dispositions – those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness" (Kracauer, 5; 6).

the dream of “Irma’s Injection”; the providence that protects the fascist agitator from anonymous enemies; the terrifying father-devil who takes possession over Haizmann’s soul; the fantasy-woman whom the dictator would both replace and vanquish; and the “someone” who is always one step behind Beckert, driving him to commit the most abhorrent of murders. The daemonic, what Marsha A. Hewitt describes as “a force that lies somewhere between the personal and the impersonal, however the latter is conceived, as gods, demons or alien spirits,” provides an important organizing concept for thinking critically about these secular motifs of fate.⁷⁰⁰ Haunting the authoritarian subject, these spectres are ultimately expressions of the daemonic unconscious, embodying those impersonal *imagos* that reside at its deepest strata.

⁷⁰⁰ Hewitt, *Legacies of the Occult: Psychoanalysis, Religion, and Unconscious Communication*, 6.

8. Conclusion

Chasing ghosts: Who is the anonymous god?

“The dead man was not killed by a ghostly hand but by a murderer of flesh and blood. ... The solution of the question how the deed was done no longer leaves room for the unconscious suggestion that it was done by magic. The proof that a shot came from a certain revolver makes a great difference to our secret belief in omnipotence. We recognize the criminal as a creature of flesh and blood if we know how he got there, how he committed the crime and how he managed to get away. All the uncanny elements disappear. He did not fly through the air; he came in by the window. The absence of any clues was no proof that magicians committed the crime, but only that clever culprits had wiped out their traces.”

The Unknown Murderer, Theodor Reik (1936)⁷⁰¹

“Astrology, although it sometimes pretends to be chummy with theology, is basically different from religion. The irrationality of the source is not only kept remote, but is also treated as impersonal and thing-like: there is an underlying philosophy of what might be called naturalist supranaturalism. This ‘depersonalized’ merciless aspect of the supposedly transcendent source has much to do with the latent threat spelled by astrology. The source remains entirely abstract, unapproachable and anonymous. This reflects the type of irrationality in which the total order of our life present itself to most individuals: opaqueness and inscrutability.”

The Stars Down to Earth, Theodor Adorno (1952-1953)⁷⁰²

The authoritarian character represents Critical Theory’s attempt to answer the historical question of how socialist and democratic hope came to be eclipsed by the yearning for dictatorship. This philosophical anthropology relied on psychoanalytic explanations that could make sense of unconscious contradiction. Rather than attribute all subordination to direct coercion, psychoanalytic theory suggested that there is an unconscious need to revive dangerous super-fathers of collective and personal memory. Sigmund Freud interpreted these historical cycles of domination as a collective haunting of the once-powerful primal father, a construction that might help explain the daemonic return of the repressed. However, as suggested in my previous chapter, this idealization of a strongman protector may stand in as a screen for a much more powerful maternal *imago* to whom the infant remains bound, even in maturity. This is where Critical Theory’s psychoanalytic investigation of the authoritarian character comes to an

⁷⁰¹ Theodor Reik, *The Unknown Murderer*, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Katherine Jones, The International Psychoanalytical Library 27 (London: Hogarth Press, 1936), 233–34.

⁷⁰² Theodor W. Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth: And Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (London: Routledge, 2002), 57.

end. Arguably, without an understanding of the pre-Oedipal, Critical Theory cannot explore the deeper conflicts that drive the authoritarian worship of fascist super-fathers. This analysis would require a deeper investigation of the maternal/primary caregiver and infant dyad: the inherent ambivalence of this relationship (Donald W. Winnicott) and the infant's annihilation anxiety which signals deprivation via persecutory objects (Melanie Klein). To confront present political crises, the contemporary theorist must consider how collective regression draws out earlier conflicts, especially those that pre-date the Oedipal father.

In this conclusion, I contextualize my own contribution to thinking about the anonymous god within already existing (primarily Marxian) trajectories of modern social theory. At this point in the dissertation, it is useful to answer the question of how the anonymous god functions in an authority-oriented society and how it can be weaponized by the authoritarian subject against others and themselves.

To investigate the psychic reality of the authoritarian subject, I expanded Max Horkheimer's metaphor of the "anonymous god" to include experiences of objective (socio-political, historical, economic, etc.) along with subjective (psychological) forces as they exert heteronomous pressure upon the individual. While privately embattled with the impossible demands of modernity and perceived limitations to personal freedom, the authoritarian character tends to outwardly accept these forces as 'just the way things have always been.' As discussed, this individual rages against and also cleaves to the opaque workings of the cosmos. Where all traces of human agency are wiped out, autonomous individuality is jettisoned and substituted with impersonal forces.

Shades of the anonymous god appear throughout twentieth century social theory. For Karl Marx, the concept is first introduced as the "alien power" envisioned by Adam Smith as the invisible hand of the world market.⁷⁰³ Georg Lukács continues this thread with his theory of reification, proposing that the life-like "phantom objectivity" of fetishized commodities reduces the human labour that went into the product's creation to a mere relation between things.⁷⁰⁴ Even

⁷⁰³ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 59.

⁷⁰⁴ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 83.; Commodity fetishism describes the process whereby exchange value takes on more significance than the actual socio-historical processes that went into the commodity's production. Thus, the fetishization of the commodity is accompanied by the mystification of "abstract human labour" (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, ed. Tom Griffith, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, vol. Volume 1 (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2013), 49–50)

non-Marxist sociologist, Georg Simmel, describes a similar process of alienated labour: “The worker ... functions only as a servant of an objective economic process, inside of which the element of contractor or manager is superior to the worker, thus not at all personally but solely objectively required.”⁷⁰⁵

Beyond its genesis in political economy, the anonymous god can be thought of in more general terms as the reification of all human activity. To borrow a term from religion scholars Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, the anonymous god can be categorized as an *opus alienum* (translated literally as “foreign work” or “work of a stranger”).⁷⁰⁶ Berger and Luckmann describe how this mystification lends itself to constructions of entire worldviews: “the mystagogue can concoct a highly sophisticated theory reaching out from the concrete human event to the farthest corners of the divine cosmos.”⁷⁰⁷ Bruce Lincoln characterizes this mystification as essential to the political superstructure, writing in his “Theses on Method” that any critique of ideology is potentially undermined by the systemic reproduction of that same ideology within critical consciousness. He writes “the system’s very success renders its operations invisible, since one is so consistently immersed in and bombarded by its products that one comes to mistake them (and the apparatus through which they are produced and disseminated) for nothing other than ‘nature.’”⁷⁰⁸ As Theodor Adorno pointed out in *The Authoritarian Personality*, our own psychological make-up is shaped by the ‘might makes right’ worldview of an authority-oriented society.

Divorced and alienated from human creation, the anonymous god cannot be thought of in metaphysical terms precisely because it negates all subjectivity. Even its psychical manifestation as the super-ego or paternal *imago*, etc., reflects the subject’s alienation from their own unconscious. In this sense, the anonymous god can be better conceived of as a false alibi (*alibi* being Latin for “elsewhere”) that masks social oppression as natural and human responsibility as negligible. Here, I draw on critical theorist Stathis Gourgouris, who critiques what he calls “the politics of transcendence,” in which authority is envisioned as having its origin somewhere else

⁷⁰⁵ Simmel, *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, 193.

⁷⁰⁶ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 106.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 108.

⁷⁰⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

and, thereby, only related to in terms of command and obedience.⁷⁰⁹ This “politics of transcendence” follows Cornelius Castoriadis in his observation that socially produced hierarchies are often attributed to a greater meta-historical or trans-social order, what Castoriadis calls the “self-occultation of the self-institution of society.”⁷¹⁰ Without recognizing the social conditions that bring about ‘the way things are,’ human responsibility is dispersed into metaphysical entities such as God, gods, ancestors, the laws of Nature, the laws of Reason, the laws of History, etc.⁷¹¹ This process of obfuscation is also described in more psychoanalytic terms by Russell Jacoby as a social amnesia or a collective forgetting that disavows critical thought.⁷¹² Jacoby suggests that the “social illusions” produced by reification contribute to a collective repression of “society’s own past.”⁷¹³ We tend to forget that we live in a world that was created by us.

To re-cast the authoritarian subject in terms of self-occultation or social amnesia is to take an important step toward understanding how human creation may be eclipsed by supra-human intervention: when current social conditions are presented as fixed or mandated by a higher authority, those social conditions begin to appear immune to critique. More than a metaphor, the anonymous god becomes a means for charting the transformation of (all-too) human authorities into something non-human.

A particularly striking illustration of the anonymous god appears in Siegfried Kracauer’s “The Hotel Lobby.” Exploring the sense of *horror vacui* that plunged secular Weimar society into existential crisis, Kracauer proposes that the individual had been subsumed by the anonymous collective and atomized from meaningful social relationships. Kracauer likens this isolation to what is experienced in a hotel lobby. The hotel lobby stands in as an inversion of the house of worship: instead of encountering oneself in divine congregation with others, the individual only feels themselves to be a guest engaged in meaningless encounters. The most important encounter that takes place in the hotel lobby is the one-dimensional hospitality of “the

⁷⁰⁹ Stathis Gourgouris, *The Perils of the One* (New York: Columbia, 2019), xi–xii.

⁷¹⁰ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Nature and Value of Equality,” trans. David A. Curtis, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* Vol.12, no. 4 (1986): 31.

⁷¹¹ Castoriadis, *ibid.*

⁷¹² Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 4.

⁷¹³ Jacoby, 5.

impersonal nothing represented by the hotel manager.”⁷¹⁴ This *vis-à-vis de rien* between the guest and the all-accommodating, incognito figure is the antithesis of human connection. The lobby can only masquerade as a religious congregation as it is without the interhuman “we” of a true community. The guest perceives themselves and others as superfluous and unreal, “remnants of individuals,” in their having transformed into mere figures in a crowd: “It is the coming and going of unfamiliar people who have become empty forms because they have lost their password, and who now file by as ungraspable flat ghosts.”⁷¹⁵

The Critical Theorists did not share Kracauer’s concern that modernity was marked by a spiritual crisis nor would they have suggested that fascism could be avoided through religious congregation (at times, they argue for precisely the opposite). However, their concern for the family in crisis, most starkly illustrated by Adorno and Horkheimer’s post-*Authoritarian Personality* essays on fascism, expresses a similar brokenness of the human spirit: the subject is overpowered by the inhuman social structures of an impersonal, technocratic society, their humanity reduced to a ‘thingified’ component of larger systems.

The anonymous god characterizes the most effective form of authority as found in modern bureaucratic organizations that have become prevalent in Western democratic (and now, non-Western and even non-democratic) societies. Max Weber considered the increasingly impersonal regimentation of everyday life to be necessary for rationalization, an inevitable course of development marked by disenchantment, intellectual mastery, and rational calculability. Whereas traditional and charismatic authority had always relied on submission to a personal and potentially more irrational leadership, the rational-legal authority of secular industrial societies demanded obedience to an office regardless of its occupant, as long as this position had been acquired legally through democratic election. The bureaucratic efficiency and large-scale administrative functioning of rational-legal authority becomes a key feature of how Weber presents the social organization of modernity. He writes, “However much people may complain about the ‘evils of bureaucracy,’ it would be sheer illusion to think for a moment that continuous administrative work can be carried out in any field except by means of officials

⁷¹⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, “The Hotel Lobby,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 176.

⁷¹⁵ Kracauer, 183.

working in offices.”⁷¹⁶ Exorcised of personal traits or partiality, this “spirit of formalistic impersonality” should, in theory, lend itself to the improvement of reliable governance and the development of mass democracy.⁷¹⁷

However, Weber also addresses the dark side of rationalization when he suggests that economic gain may masquerade as a rational means for the further accumulation of capital. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he compares “the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order” to “an iron cage” in which the individual is confined within an all-determining mechanistic enclosure of rationalization.⁷¹⁸ Responding to Weber’s defense of bureaucracy, Adorno critiques this omnipresence of rational-legal authority as contributing to a new mode of alienation, “power relations cloak themselves in the bureaucratic procedures ... it is not about opposing administration as such but about its reification as power.”⁷¹⁹ For Adorno, rationalization is always accompanied by regression. Along with Horkheimer, he writes in 1944, that “power is revealing itself as archaic terror in a fascistically rationalized form.”⁷²⁰ Fascism had found its footing in the inevitable regression that accompanies technocratic progress.

In 1936, Horkheimer wrote that the anonymous god is “invoked by those who have no power over him but have received advantages from him.”⁷²¹ To invoke the anonymous god as an alibi is to attribute crimes of societal injustice to a crime committed by nobody. “My name is nobody [*Udeis*]” is the answer Ulysses gives to Polyphemus just before he blinds the cyclops in order to escape him. Adorno and Horkheimer interpret the hero’s negation of self-subjectivity as a form of detached and highly-rationalized violence: “once the deed was done, Polyphemus would answer ‘Nobody’ when the tribe asked who was to name ... [Ulysses] preserves his life by mimicking the amorphous realm ... this name condemns [Polyphemus’] cry to impotence.”⁷²²

⁷¹⁶ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. Talcott Parsons and A.M Henderson (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 337.

⁷¹⁷ Weber, 340.

⁷¹⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 181.

⁷¹⁹ Adorno, “Lecture 17: 28 July 1964,” 131–32. According to Martin Jay, the Critical Theorists critiqued Weber’s optimistic treatment of rationalization for not distinguishing between substantive rationality (valuing both means and ends) and instrumental rationality (choosing any necessary means for a desired end), of which they argued the latter had come to dominate modern life. (Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination : A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 120–21).

⁷²⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 68.

⁷²¹ Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 82.

⁷²² Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 53.

The anonymous god as alibi evokes the story of the Ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*. In this famous analogy for criminal misdeeds committed under the veil of anonymity, Glaucon recounts the story of a shepherd who discovers the power of invisibility a magical ring grants its wearer. The shepherd can now pursue pleasures only attained by living the unjust life: seducing the queen of the kingdom, murdering its king, and seizing total power. The wearer's ability to never get caught "would make him like a god among humans."⁷²³

Observing a similar trend in modernity, Erich Fromm writes that "in anonymous authority both command and commander have become invisible. It is like being fired at by an invisible enemy. There is nobody and nothing to fight back against."⁷²⁴ Whether it is anonymity's "caricature of divine power" or the draining of all human subjectivity and social relations (e.g., the self-negation of *Udeis*), the disguise has the same effect of veiling the identity of the perpetrator.⁷²⁵ Where Freud once wrote, "in prayer, one has assured oneself a direct influence on the divine will and with it a share in the divine omnipotence," how could this same confidence be found in appealing to the shadowy, impersonal authorities of secular society?⁷²⁶

The Critical Theorists were not optimistic that the process of reification could ever be reversed. However, as Hannah Arendt documents in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* report, Nobodies cannot remain hidden forever. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, administrative and bureaucratic efficiency allowed for greater impersonality between perpetrators and the victims of genocide. Adolf Eichmann, the "'tiny cog' in the machinery of the Final Solution," had evaded responsibility as a bureaucratic nobody. However, in the courtroom, she writes, Eichmann transformed from an impartial functionary back into a human being.⁷²⁷

Perhaps at some unconscious level, the mystique of the anonymous god and the false alibi of an 'elsewhere' is understood to have always been a gross deception. Brought down to earth, the anonymous god is transformed back into what it had always been, a clever culprit that succeeded in hiding its traces.

⁷²³ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C Reeve (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 36.

⁷²⁴ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 166.

⁷²⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 158.

⁷²⁶ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 22:164.

⁷²⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 289.

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