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# Nazism, Nationalism, and the Sociology of Emotions: *Escape from Freedom Revisited\**

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*The recent worldwide resurgence of militant nationalism, fundamentalist intolerance, and right-wing authoritarianism has again put the issues of violence and xenophobia at the center of social science research and theory. German psychoanalyst and sociologist Erich Fromm's work provides a useful theoretical microfoundation for contemporary work on nationalism, the politics of identity, and the roots of war and violence. Fromm's analysis of Nazism in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), in particular, outlines a compelling theory of irrationality, and his later writings on nationalism provide an existential psychoanalysis that can be useful for contemporary social theory and sociology of emotions. *Escape from Freedom* synthesizes Marxist, Freudian, Weberian, and existentialist insights to offer an original theoretical explanation of Nazism that combines both macrostructural and micropsychological levels of analysis. After forty-five years of research into the social origins of fascism and with recent theorizing in the sociology of nationalism and emotions, *Escape from Freedom*, its analysis of Nazism, and Fromm's larger theoretical perspective are worth reconsidering.*

The recent worldwide resurgence of militant nationalism, fundamentalist intolerance, and right-wing authoritarianism has again put violence and xenophobia at the center of social science research and theory (Calhoun 1994). Attempts to understand these diverse social phenomena must be grounded, of course, in concrete analysis of the history, politics, and social structure of specific nations. Sociologists increasingly recognize the need to analyze the emotional dynamics of irrationality, destructiveness, vengeance, and rage. Yet we do not have an adequate sociologically informed theory of emotions.

The work of German psychoanalyst and sociologist Erich Fromm provides a useful theoretical microfoundation for contemporary work on nationalism, the politics of identity, and the roots of war and violence. Yet Fromm has long been unfashionable among social theorists even though his concern with Nazism, extreme nationalism, and authoritarianism has never been more relevant. From the early 1930s through the early 1960s, Fromm was a major social theorist associated with the Frankfurt School for Social Research, neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, critical sociology, and early New Left politics. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, Fromm's reputation had dramatically declined, and he was widely dismissed by radical intellectuals as the Norman Vincent Peale of the left, as Herbert Marcuse once polemicized (Marcuse 1955). Fromm's work was allegedly marred by what

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C. Fred Alford called a “notorious optimism” (Alford 1988:115). According to today’s conventional wisdom, Fromm was not a real Freudian, a true Marxist, a rigorous social scientist, or a serious social critic.

This common view of Fromm as a naive rationalist and simplistic popularizer is a socially constructed myth. Fromm’s initial rise to fame, it will be remembered, came about because of the provocative theorizing on authoritarianism and Nazism in *Escape from Freedom*, published in 1941. Fromm’s major and often forgotten contributions to the early work of the Frankfurt School for Social Research were to integrate the Freudian emphasis on the irrational into Marxist theory and to develop the research tradition on authoritarianism that Theodor Adorno et al. would later refine in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Far from being a thinker whose “books are about goodness,” as political scientist John Schaar once polemicized (1961:8), Fromm was preoccupied with the human roots of destructiveness throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and he returned to these concerns in many of his later writings (Fromm 1955, 1964, 1973). He stressed the centrality of the human need for community and the emotional dynamics of mass political violence; also, in contrast to fashionable rational choice theories focused on the “logic of evil,” he pioneered an analysis of what Nobeit Elias would later call the “quest for excitement” as a key source of human irrationality and violence.

Fromm’s analysis of Nazism in *Escape from Freedom* outlines a compelling theory of irrationality, and his later writings on nationalism provide an existential psychoanalysis that can be useful for contemporary social theory and sociology of emotions. *Escape from Freedom* synthesizes Marxist, Freudian, Weberian, and existentialist insights to offer an original theoretical explanation of Nazism that combines macrostructural and micropsychological analyses. Fromm integrated insights from diverse theoretical perspectives, despite justified criticisms of his historical arguments and empirical evidence. Yet *Escape from Freedom* has been all but ignored in contemporary theoretical debates. I examine *Escape from Freedom*, its analysis of Nazism, and Fromm’s larger theoretical perspective after forty-five years of research into the social origins of fascism, as well as recent theorizing in the sociology of nationalism and emotions.

## ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM

Fromm’s basic explanation of Nazism in *Escape from Freedom* was provocative. The modern world had created both new freedoms and increased anxieties, and the stage had been set for Nazism by both the breakdown of the security provided by feudalism and the political crisis of the 1930s. In Germany, defeat in war and economic depression had destroyed the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Hitler’s “evangelism of self-annihilation” had shown millions of Germans the way out of cultural and economic collapse (Fromm [1941] 1969:259). The Nazi party’s racism, nationalism, militarism, and “spirit of blind obedience to a leader” were an “escape from freedom” (Fromm [1941] 1969:235).

Others had said similar things (particularly Harold Lasswell), but few so eloquently. Fromm had, as John Schaar once put it, “the gift of putting profound ideas simply (1961:6).” Although the war effort led to much anthropological speculation into the cultural roots of totalitarianism, Fromm’s analysis stood out because he opposed simplistic national character theories (Lenkerd 1994). With a nod to John Dewey, Fromm argued that “the crisis of democracy is not a peculiarly Italian or German problem, but one confronting every modern state” ([1941] 1969:19). Where theories of national character promoted simplistic generalizations, Fromm’s analysis raised larger questions about human motivation and the condition of modernity.

The intellectual reaction to Fromm’s book was immediate and widespread, particularly



in newspapers and journals of opinion.<sup>1</sup> *Escape from Freedom* was reviewed enthusiastically by such prominent public intellectual figures as Margaret Mead, Ashley Montagu, and Dwight Macdonald. The reaction from academic and professional audiences was less dramatic but largely positive. *The American Journal of Sociology* described *Escape from Freedom* as a “noteworthy book.”<sup>2</sup> *Escape from Freedom* initially was ignored in professional psychology journals, and it would be some time before Fromm’s work would have a major influence on academic psychology. The interdisciplinary psychoanalytic journal *Psychiatry*, however, published a symposium of reviews on *Escape from Freedom*. Psychologist Lewis B. Hill argued that “this book must be read by every clinical psychoanalyst who, like Freud, regards psychoanalysis as capable of further expansion and application rather than as a closed rigid system of thought” (Hill 1942:117).

The acclaim was hardly universal—Fromm was always a controversial figure. Orthodox Freudians, in particular, were unimpressed. Psychiatrist Karl Menninger, reviewing in *The Nation*, argued that although Fromm writes as if “he considered himself a psychoanalyst,” his lack of medical and psychoanalytic credentials disqualified him from serious consideration. Fromm is a “distinguished sociologist” who, Menninger conceded, is “wholly within his rights in applying psychoanalytic theory to sociological problems.” Yet, as Menninger put it, Fromm’s analysis only “purports to be psychoanalytic in character.” *Escape from Freedom* is a “subjective” book, written in a “heavy, tedious style” that contains “many flatly incorrect statements, especially of Freudian theories” (Menninger 1942:317). The doctrinaire Freudian and political radical Otto Fenichel also attacked *Escape From Freedom*, accusing Fromm of abandoning psychoanalysis (Fenichel 1944). The literary intellectual, anarchist, and ardent Reichian Paul Goodman also dissented from Fromm’s critique of Freudian libido theory, suggesting that “every part of this general indictment is either wrong or absurd” (Goodman 1945:198).<sup>3</sup>

Orthodox Marxists also were offended (although less so) by Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*. Francis Bartlett’s review in *Science and Society* suggested that the work had made “significant contributions” but was “blighted by . . . many faulty interpretations” (1942:188). Bartlett was impressed by *Escape from Freedom*’s stress on how character was shaped by the economic development of society, and argued that Fromm’s revision of psychoanalysis provided a “valuable contribution to the struggle against reactionary psychological theories” (1942:188). The major problem for Marxists, however, was that Fromm did not emphasize enough that psychological character plays only a subordinate role relative to the “total economic and political development” (1942:189).<sup>4</sup> In addition, *Escape from Freedom* is marred by “pessimism” and a “defeatist mood,” which suggest that the petty bourgeois is doomed “to succumb to fascist propaganda,” the working class “act[s] blindly,” and the “finance capitalists alone act rationally” (1942:189). Far from the Marxist stress on

<sup>1</sup> Mead called *Escape from Freedom* “an important and challenging book” in the *New York Herald Tribune* (1941). Montagu claimed that it was “one of the most important books published in our time” (1942:122), and Macdonald agreed, calling it “a book of the greatest importance” (1942:19). Eleanor Kittredge called *Escape from Freedom* an “eloquent warning to America” in *The New York Times Book Review* (1942). The reviewer in the *Saturday Review* called it the “best diagnosis of the psychological aberrations of Nazism” (Mattingly 1941:6). Ruth Benedict’s (1942) review was generally positive although she criticized Fromm’s account of individualism in premodern society.

<sup>2</sup> According to Frank Knight (one of founders of the Chicago School of Economics), Fromm’s analysis of Western cultural history “shows real penetration and knowledge of history” (1942:299).

<sup>3</sup> Goodman also took Fromm to task for defending representative instead of direct democracy and for being a “pale imitation” of Comte (1945:198). C. Wright Mills and Patricia J. Salter defended Fromm and Horney against Goodman’s “misunderstanding,” arguing that “Fromm and Horney are part of a general drift in current research and theory which moves toward a historical and a sociological psychology. We agree wholly with that drift and with its positive political relevance” (Mills and Salter, 1945:313).

<sup>4</sup> In Fromm’s treatment of the rise of the Nazi party, “the economic and political power of finance capital, the influence of social democratic ideas, leadership and organization, the arming of fascist bands, and the employment of force and terror under the Weimar ‘democracy’—all these recede into the background” (Bartlett 1942:189).





the revolutionary character of the proletariat, Fromm presents the working class as a “weak second fiddle” to the bourgeoisie in decline.<sup>5</sup>

Fromm had also offended some important sociological orthodoxies, besides the Freudian and Marxist (Green 1946). University of Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth wrote a blistering attack on Fromm’s “cosmic” thesis, “ambiguous terms,” and “predilection to play with riddles and anomalies” (Wirth 1942:129–130). Wirth made several valuable substantive points about the limitations of *Escape from Freedom*, but much of his review is unnecessarily nasty and uncharitable.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the reservations of *Escape from Freedom*’s critics, Fromm had arrived on the intellectual scene. As Dan Hausdorf has put it, “In one stroke, the book established Fromm’s reputation as one of the most provocative thinkers of his time” (1972:42). Over the next few years, *Escape from Freedom* was widely cited in major social science journals and books.<sup>7</sup> According to Alex Inkeles, “Fromm has added something to social history and to our understanding of modern man” (1963:345). Even those who would become skeptical of Fromm’s later work recognized the genuine accomplishment this book represented. John Schaar, one of Fromm’s harshest critics, conceded that *Escape from Freedom* is one of the “finest examples in modern social science of what C. Wright Mills calls the sociological imagination” (1961:94).

At the time, anthropologist Ashley Montagu predicted that *Escape from Freedom* would have a “wider and deeper influence upon modern thought” than the larger theoretical work of which it was part, arguing that it will always be read as “the essence of the author’s considered conclusions” (Montagu 1942:122). At one level, Montagu was right, for all of Fromm’s later writings can be seen as attempts to provide evidence for and revise the basic thesis of this first and most famous book. Ultimately Montagu’s comment was facile, however, because Fromm’s strength was as a theorist, not an empirical researcher; the contemporary relevance of *Escape from Freedom* comes from its theoretical insight, not its concrete analysis of Nazism.

Fromm himself understood full well the difference between empirical research and theoretical innovation. Since the early 1930s, Fromm had been developing a general social theory, synthesizing and revising the insights of Marx, Freud, and German sociology. The rise of Hitler and the advent of World War II interrupted this larger agenda, and *Escape from Freedom* was Fromm’s attempt to pull together the completed parts of his ongoing work to illuminate the roots of modern totalitarianism. Although Fromm was a historically

<sup>5</sup> Bartlett left room for a return to the Marxist faith. Fromm had the “equipment to produce something of great value” and “some of his errors seem to stem in part from his bias against the Soviet Union.” Fromm’s anticommunism, according to Bartlett, did not yet seem to be an “all consuming passion,” so it was hoped that “events and his own part in the anti-fascist struggle will change his mind” (Bartlett 1942:190). Bartlett would have been disappointed, of course, for Fromm died in 1980 as an anti-Stalinist democratic socialist.

<sup>6</sup> According to Wirth, Fromm underestimated the rational reasons why people would support Hitler. Fromm’s theory of the self would have benefited from the work of Cooley, Dewey, Mead, Baldwin and James as well as empirical research conducted by child psychologists. And Fromm overgeneralized about the lower-middle class and modernity without adequate evidence. Although most reviewers were impressed with Fromm’s analysis of the dialectical quality of freedom, Wirth asks “how freedom can be at one and same the time a passionately cherished goal and an oppressive burden?” (1942:129). The uncharitable nature of Wirth’s critique can be seen here: “Fromm seems to take it for granted that in the fascist countries, although here and there may have been some struggle to resist the dictator, on the whole people have willingly submitted to a leader and even lovingly embraced him. Mr. Fromm asserts that millions of Germans willingly surrendered their freedom. But the armies of refugees and the countless thousands in concentration camps furnish at least some reason to suspect that not all Germans deliberately and willingly gave up their freedom” (1942:129). One can reasonably argue that Fromm underplays both internal resistance to Nazism and the role of coercion in securing support for Nazism. But Fromm’s point was that coercion had been stressed in the contemporary discussions of Nazism in the West to such an extent that the mass support for Hitler had been underestimated. This is all debatable, but Fromm’s position can hardly be disposed of simply by pointing to refugees from Nazism, a phenomenon Fromm was quite familiar with.

<sup>7</sup> Fromm was among the 70 top cited intellectuals in the social sciences from 1956 to 1965, and *Escape from Freedom* remains his most cited book (McLaughlin 1996).



sophisticated Freudian theorist, his concern with Nazism was with sociological generalizations, not historical detail.<sup>8</sup> Explicitly critical of historians who dispute the usefulness of such sociological “ideal types” as the “medieval world” and “capitalism,” Fromm argued that the task for social science was to construct a theoretical account of human societies. The dangers of generalization were worth the risks, for the alternative was a dead end: the atheoretical compilation of endless historical narratives and sociological “facts.”

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MARX AND FREUD

Long before the “micro-macro” gap became fashionable among social theorists, Fromm argued that the dominant social science approaches to the problem of Nazism were falsely polarized between psychological and structural levels of analysis. Fromm explicitly criticized various Marxist theories of fascism that reduced Nazism to the “expansionist tendencies of German imperialism.” Although Fromm understood the role played by German militarism, Junkers, and opportunist right-wing industrialists in the rise of Hitler, Nazism cannot be understood simply as the result of a “minority’s trickery and coercion of the majority of the population,” the victory of madman Hitler or a capitalist plot. Fromm insisted that the mass base of Nazism be accounted for with an analysis that avoids both what we now call an “oversocialized” explanation of Nazism and psychological reductionism (Wrong 1961).

*Escape from Freedom* follows the insights of historical materialism in tracing the origins of Nazism to the economic changes that over several hundred years transformed medieval Europe into a modern market society. Fromm was hardly an orthodox Marxist, arguing that Marx’s nineteenth-century enlightenment tradition was unprepared theoretically to deal with humanity’s powerful propensities for violence, lust for power, and yearning for submission. Nazism cannot be understood in purely rationalistic terms; Freud’s theory of the unconscious helps fill the gaps in Marxist theory and provides tools to understand the human irrationality of the First World War and the rise of Hitler, events that shattered the confidence of all nondogmatic Marxists. Fromm would not, however, have agreed with Daniel Burston’s suggestion that Freud was “a shrewd critic of historical materialism” (1991:30); Freud and his followers did not understand Marxism and had little useful to say about society or politics. Unlike many psychohistorians, Fromm insisted that Freudianism cannot be swallowed whole. Freud and most of his disciples “had only a very naive notion of what goes on in society, and most of his applications of psychology to social problems were misleading constructions” (Fromm [1941] 1969:23). Yet Fromm argued that Freud’s ideas were essential for a social theory that could come to grips with the human potential for destructiveness inherent in the Nazi party.

Fromm’s insistence on the irrational and emotional aspects of Nazism is even more important today than it was in the 1940s because the contemporary influence of rational choice theory is so pervasive. There may be a certain “logic of evil,” but sophisticated psychoanalytic perspectives provide a useful balance to the extremes of rational choice theory. Yet to adapt psychoanalytic insights for sociology, Fromm argued, we must reject Freud’s overly speculative, ahistorical, and biologically oriented social theory in favor of a revised version of psychoanalysis.

<sup>8</sup> Historical sociologist Reinhard Bendix once favorably compared Fromm and Erik Erikson to Wilhelm Reich in a review of Reich’s *Character Analysis*, arguing that Fromm and Erikson were the two most historically sophisticated Freudians.



THE REVISION OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Fromm's most original intellectual contribution to modern thought is his revision of Freudian theory. Contrary to the claims of his orthodox detractors, Fromm remained committed to the insights of the Freudian tradition (Burston 1991). He believed that a modified version of Freudian theory was essential to both the profession of therapy and the development of a sophisticated theory of human psychology and behavior. However, he also believed that several important aspects of classic Freudian theory were profoundly misleading constructions that had been codified into stale and dogmatic certainties by psychoanalytic bureaucracies. Unlike many other critics of psychoanalytic dogma who became anti-Freudian crusaders after leaving the fold (Frederick Crews and Jeffrey Masson, for example), Fromm argued that Freud was a genius who contributed indispensable insights that required revision and reformulation. Fromm's work has much to offer those who believe that Freud's theory provides a vitally important but seriously flawed perspective on human motivation (Burston 1991; Kovel 1994; Roazen 1990; Maccoby 1995; Cortina and Maccoby 1996; Cortina 1996; Mitchell 1988).

Contrary to the polemics of Herbert Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School (Marcuse 1955; Jacoby 1975; Jay 1973; Richert 1986; Wiggershaus 1994; Funk 1982; Burston 1991), it is misleading to argue that Fromm and the other neo-Freudian critics of orthodox libido theory presented a superficial rationalist and purely sociological view of human motivation. As contemporary "relational" psychoanalysts Greenberg and Mitchell put it, "Sullivan, Fromm and Horney all portray the human experience as fraught with deep, intense passions" (1983:80). Fromm's "relational model" suggests that the "inner life of the individual is dominated by powerful passions and illusions" that derive "not from body-based drives but from the desperate and profound struggle to overcome aloneness" (1983:108).<sup>9</sup>

Psychoanalyst and social theorist Joel Kovel suggests that Fromm had "consistently argued that Freud exaggerated the erotic dimension, giving the sexual meanings of neurosis unwarranted primacy over all others and burdening psychoanalytic theory with a drive-defence model better suited for zoology than the study of human beings" (1994:vii). Even though Fromm was rejected by the psychoanalytic establishment in his lifetime, psychoanalysis "began extricating itself from precisely the biologicistic and mechanistic thinking against which [Fromm] had inveighed" and has moved from a theory "that emphasized forces" to one focused on "meanings." Contemporary psychoanalysis has thus largely rejected the libido theory that Fromm was one of the first and most articulate to criticize, replacing drive theory with "less biologicistic foci such as object relations, attachment, and individuation" and the "psychology of the self, with its attendant focus on narcissism" (1994:vii-viii). Numerous criticisms and revisions of psychoanalytic theory that Fromm helped pioneer in the 1940s and 1950s have been integrated into mainstream psychoanalytic theory over the last twenty years.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In addition, what Stephen Mitchell calls Fromm's "important treatise" (1993:156), *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), is a serious attempt to theorize why human aggression can be exciting and stimulating, an insight often underdeveloped by psychoanalysts who reject drive theory (Mitchell 1993:165).

<sup>10</sup> As Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell (1983:106) have suggested:

Fromm addressed many contemporary psychoanalytic issues decades before they were popularized by other theorists. He pointed to the importance of "narcissism," which currently dominates the literature, more than forty years ago (1941). He introduced the concept of "symbiosis" (1941) years before Mahler. He considered the role of agency and responsibility (1941) recently brought into the analytic mainstream by Schafer and Shapiro. He described the use of sexuality and perversions in the service of maintaining a fragile sense of self, an interpretive approach currently being developed by adherents of Kohut's "self psychology."



FROMM'S BREAK WITH FREUD

Fromm was well positioned to revise Freudian theory from inside the tradition, since he had been a relatively orthodox Freudian from the 1920s until the mid-1930s. Because Freudian thought was not well established in America in the 1930s and 1940s, Fromm initially had attempted a delicate balancing act of promoting Freudian ideas even as he moved away from Freudian orthodoxy. Although Fromm had first broken from orthodox Freudianism with articles published in the mid-1930s (Burston 1991), *Escape from Freedom* contains Fromm's basic critique of Freud, setting the stage for a later revision of psychoanalysis that provides a valuable foundation for contemporary social theory.

*Man for Himself: Towards a Psychology of Ethics*, published in 1947, was Fromm's first sustained attempt to clarify his differences with mainstream psychoanalysis. At the center of Fromm's work was a critique of orthodox Freudian libido theory, a position first developed by Adler, Jung, and Rank, psychoanalysts who were denounced as heretics by defenders of orthodoxy in the 1920s and 1930s (Roazen 1974, 1990; Burston 1991). Freud's concept of sex is based, for Fromm, on the model of "an urge springing entirely from physiological conditioned tension, relieved, like hunger, by satisfaction" (Fromm [1947] 1975:188). Fromm argued that Freud's analysis of the unconscious was distorted and narrowed by the philosophical premises of the "mechanistic-materialist" model picked up from his medical school teacher, von Brucke, as well as the circle around Helmholtz. This "mechanistic-materialist" model, according to Fromm, suggested that humans were like a machine "driven by chemical processes" (1980:109). It was Freud's intellectual need to find identifiable physiological roots of human emotions and passions that led him to develop a "hydraulic model" of human behavior centered on the conflict between sexual instincts and society. Fromm accepted the existence of unconscious motivation, but he endeavored to preserve the essence of Freud's insight while removing the theory from the limiting confines of orthodox drive theory. Despite Freud's brilliant insights into unconscious human motivation, his theories are distorted by positivist foundations. Fromm writes that

in accordance with the type of materialistic thinking prevalent in the natural sciences of the late nineteenth century, which assumed the energy in natural and psychical phenomena to be a substantial not a relational entity, Freud believed that the sexual drive was the source of energy of the character. By a number of complicated and brilliant assumptions he explained different character traits as "sublimations" of, or "reaction formations" against, the various forms of the sexual drives. He interpreted the dynamic nature of character traits as an expression of their libidinous source. ([1947] 1975:56-57)

In contrast, Fromm insists that "man's passionate striving cannot be explained by the force of his instincts" ([1947] 1975:46). Even intense sexual desire can be rooted in psychic not physiological needs, as in the case of insecure people driven to sexual activity out of an unsatiable need to prove themselves. Fromm argues that the instinctually based need for food and sexual satisfaction cannot ultimately "satisfy" human beings. As Fromm puts it, "man,"

strives for power, or for love, or for destruction, he risks his life for religious, for political, for human ideals, and these strivings are what constitutes and characterizes the peculiarity of human life. ([1947] 1975:46)

The classical Freudian model must be reformulated as what Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) calls the study of "interpersonal relations." In contrast to a Freudian analysis based on





instincts and the “idea of the primarily isolated individual,” Fromm argues for a sociological account of human motivation based on “the relationship of man to others, to nature and to himself” (Fromm [1947] 1975:57). Fromm developed this critique of Freudian theory more systematically in his works of the 1950s, and he would later break with Sullivan’s formulations.

By the 1970s, Fromm had developed a compelling assessment of what he called the “greatness and limitations” of Freud’s thought (1970, 1980). He argued that Freud’s greatest contribution was to put unconscious motivation “at the center of his psychological system” and investigate “unconscious phenomena in the greatest detail” (Fromm 1980:23). As a result of Freud’s work, modern thought has gained new and deeper insight into the complex and often irrational motivations that operate beneath human behavior. Fromm needed to move beyond Freud’s biological assumptions to develop a revision of psychoanalysis based upon Freud’s fundamental insights.

These ideas were heretical within the psychoanalytic institutes in the 1940s and 1950s, but, through the 1970s as Mitchell and Kovel suggest, the drive theory that Fromm believed was crippling psychoanalytic progress was no longer widely accepted. Fromm’s writings were thus major precursors to the present fashionable interest in “interpersonal relations” and the psychology of the self.<sup>11</sup> Today it is widely believed that Freud’s formulations reflect the “influence of now outmoded neurological conceptions” as well as “the influence of hydraulic metaphors” (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983:25). Within contemporary psychoanalysis, the mainstream view has shifted from the original Freudian view of humans as “drive-regulating animals” to an object relations perspective that views us as “meaning generating animals” (Mitchell 1993:23). Psychoanalytic clinical theory has seen a “marked shift in emphasis from the clarification and renunciation of infantile fantasies to the revitalization and elaboration of the patient’s sense of personal meaning” (Mitchell 1993:67).

Contemporary object relations theorists, particularly followers of Fairbairn, “begin with the assumption that it is not the pursuit of gratification that is the basic underlying motivation in human experience but the pursuit of contact” (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983:46).<sup>12</sup> But unlike Fairbairn and most other contemporary object relations theorists, Fromm broke from Freudian orthodoxies, while insisting on a sophisticated sociological and historical analysis. *Escape from Freedom* begins with a critique of Freudian orthodoxy, but the bulk of the book reflects Fromm’s engagement with the German sociological tradition learned from his dissertation advisor Alfred Weber, Max Weber’s younger brother.

## THE WEBER THESIS

Drawing on Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Fromm argues that scholars in Protestant countries have stressed only the positive aspects of Luther’s legacy. The story of the Protestant contribution to freedom is a familiar one: The doctrines of Luther, Calvin, and Puritanism often have been linked to the development of modern political and spiritual freedom. Fromm accepts this historical account, but argues that the Weberian theoretical tradition ignores Luther and Calvin’s “emphasis on the fundamental evilness and powerlessness of man.” Luther’s stress on the worthlessness and insignificance

<sup>11</sup> The major thinkers within the Interpersonal School along with Fromm were Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney, Clara Thompson, and Frieda Fromm-Reichman, a diverse group of thinkers united in their view that “classical drive theory was fundamentally wrong in its basic premises concerning human motivation, the nature of experience, and difficulties in living” (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983:80). For a useful historical survey to these thinkers, see (Hale 1995). Also see (Sullivan 1953).

<sup>12</sup> As Daniel Burston puts it, there are “astonishing parallels” in the clinical orientation of Fromm and Fairbairn (1991:63). For Burston, “Fromm’s idea of character structure and Fairbairn’s notion of unconscious fantasy are highly convergent, though differing in pedigree” (1991:64).





of human action “paved the way for a development in which man not only was to obey secular authorities but had to subordinate life to the ends of economic achievements” (Fromm [1941] 1969:103). For modern fascists, “the aim of life is to be sacrificed for ‘higher’ powers, for the leader or the racial community” ([1941] 1969:103). Calvinism served the same sociological function for Anglo-Saxon countries. Fromm’s revision of Weberian orthodoxy provides balance for the sociological literature from Weber to Merton that stresses the positive aspects of Protestant culture. Protestantism was intimately linked to political freedoms and economic progress as well as to Nazism.<sup>13</sup>

## EXISTENTIALISM

*Escape from Freedom* synthesizes Marxist political economy, Freudian psychology, and Weberian historical sociology. Yet Fromm’s use of existentialist philosophy is the most innovative aspect of his argument, and it provides an early version of a position that Benedict Anderson would make decades later in his influential *Imagined Communities*, first published in 1983. Drawing on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dostoevski, Fromm says that the very conditions of human existence bring about “the need to be related to the world outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness” ([1941] 1969:34). Fromm argued that the “position in which the individual finds himself in our period had already been foreseen by visionary thinkers in the nineteenth century” ([1941] 1969:154). Kierkegaard, according to Fromm, “describes the helpless individual torn and tormented by doubts, overwhelmed by the feeling of aloneness and insignificance” ([1941] 1969:154). Nietzsche had foreseen the “approaching nihilism which was to become manifest in Nazism,” and his “superman,” for Fromm, was intended to negate the insignificance of the individual in the modern world ([1941] 1969:154).

Fromm’s analysis of the human need for submission owes much to Dostoevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, quoted by Fromm as suggesting that man has “no more pressing need than the one to find someone to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, that gift of freedom which, he, the unfortunate creature was born with” ([1941] 1969:173). For Dostoevski, eliminating the self also eliminates the burden of freedom—the basic thesis of *Escape from Freedom*. “Moral aloneness” and “lack of relatedness to values, symbols, patterns” is as “intolerable as psychical aloneness” (Fromm [1941] 1969:33). The need to relate to the world is an even more powerful driving force than instinctual dynamics. Humans will turn to religion or nationalism for refuge from “what man most dreads: isolation” ([1941] 1969:34). Human self-consciousness; the awareness of one’s self as distinct from nature and also from other humans is what makes man’s fear of isolation so powerful.

Contrary to critics who argued that Fromm’s Marxism was marred by idealism, Fromm understood the need to ground social analysis in concrete sociology and history. Fromm later clarified this point, saying that unlike Kierkegaard and many others in the existentialist tradition, Marx saw “man in his full concreteness as a member of a given society and of a given class, aided in his development by society, and at the time its captive” (1961:vi). Existentialists wrote in broad abstractions about the human condition, dread, and death, whereas Fromm used existentialist insights and Marxist philosophical anthropology to develop a psychological foundation for a historically informed and empirical social science.

<sup>13</sup> Randall Collins gives too much credit to Max Weber for developing an analysis of the “means of emotional production” (1981:41). For Collins, Weber “made a discovery analogous to those of Durkheim and Freud (and above all Nietzsche, on whom he drew), when he recognized that people have emotional desires and susceptibilities, and that these are crucial for their social lives” (Collins 1981:41). *Escape from Freedom* can be read as an attempt to fill in the psychological gaps in Weber’s political sociology.



Existential dread and moral aloneness provide a crucial motivational drive lacking in rational choice, symbolic interactionist, and instinctual theories. People certainly attempt to maximize utility and interact through symbolic meanings, and they are motivated by instinctual dynamics and biological hardwiring. But what explains the human passion to kill, take revenge, and destroy? How does one explain self-destructive behavior and suicide? Rational choice theorists generally downplay the theoretical significance of irrational destructiveness, and most microlevel paradigms within contemporary sociology still derive from an overly cognitive view of human motivation. Dennis Wrong, in *The Problem of Order: What Unites and Divides Society* (1994), for example, argues that symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists display a “cognitivist” bias. And sociobiology as well as Freudian-influenced theories of “death instincts” ignore the social and historical variability of human violence as well as the concrete reasons why nations go to war. The existentialist tradition provides a foundation for a fuller account of human irrationality and destructiveness even though existentialists themselves seldom developed these insights fully. Unlike most existentialist philosophers, Fromm understood modernity in its historical specificity, not simply as an abstract human condition. The value of his work is that Fromm drew from existentialist philosophy but returned to historical analysis.

#### INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIETY

For Erich Fromm, as for Tocqueville and Durkheim, individualism was the central theme of modernity (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985). Drawing on the work of Carl Jung, Fromm called the process by which an individual emerges from original ties “individuation”—something that “seemed to reach its peak in modern history in the centuries between the Reformation and the present” ([1941] 1969:40). Fromm attempts to deal with these issues at the micro level, where the individual self develops, *and* in macrohistorical terms. Fromm’s account of individuation begins with a discussion of “primary ties”—the ties that exist before the complete emergence of the self. Fromm, influenced by the “birth trauma” theories of the Freudian Otto Rank, wrote of the “comparatively sudden change from foetal into human existence and the cutting off of the umbilical cord that mark the independence of the infant from the mother’s body” ([1941] 1969:41). Along with the growing strength of individuation comes “growing aloneness” ([1941] 1969:41).

The history of the human species is, for Fromm, a progressive move away from a behavior determined by instincts (Cortina and Maccoby 1996 and Cortina 1996). Man is “the most helpless of all animals at birth. His adaption to nature is based essentially on the process of learning, not on instinctual determination” (Fromm [1941] 1969:41). Fromm argues that “human existence and freedom are from the beginning inseparable.”<sup>14</sup> For Fromm, separation and individuation produce “an unbearable feeling of isolation and powerlessness” that leads to psychic mechanisms ([1941] 1969:47).

These mechanisms cannot be understood purely in structural terms. Fromm was explicitly critical of Durkheim and his school for trying to “eliminate psychological problems from sociology” and for neglecting the “role of the human factor as one of the dynamic elements in the social process” ([1941] 1969:29). Fromm’s criticism of the Durkheimian approach has also been made by sociologists influenced by George Herbert Mead. For all the insights of such symbolic interactionist thinkers as Mead and Erving Goffman, however, few contributors to this tradition (with the notable exception of Randall Collins) placed the formation of the self in an adequately historical and comparative context. Unlike Mead,

<sup>14</sup> Fromm’s analysis here, of course, is outdated with regard to both empirical studies of the formation of the self in children as well as historical accounts of individualism. For some discussion of recent work in the empirical study of the self within psychoanalysis, see Greenberg and Mitchell (1983).



Fromm put as much emphasis on “society” as on “mind” and “self” (Wolfe 1989). Although Mead attempted to link society to both mind and self, his analysis is flawed by the fact that he wrote about society in general, but seldom about any specific society. Whereas Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) contains little history, Fromm moved from an abstract philosophical and literary discussion of the emergence of the self in the child to a historical discussion of European Feudalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and through to the 1930s. Fromm argued that the breakdown of feudalism produced both modern individualism and fascism.

## THE MARKET, MODERNITY, AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Lutheranism and Calvinism emerged along with modern market societies. Fromm wrote that the “mechanism of the new market seemed to resemble the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination,” where the “market day became the day of judgment for the products of human effort” ([1941] 1969:79) The roots of Fromm’s analysis of Nazism lie in his analysis of Lutheranism’s appeal for the middle class of the Reformation. This analysis of the cultural consequences of the Reformation led to his discussion of capitalist modernity. For Fromm, capitalism freed man from traditional bonds and created a “critical and responsible self.” Yet freedom has a cost for it “made the individual more and more alone and isolated,” imbued “with a feeling of insignificance and powerlessness” ([1941] 1969:123).

Modern freedom can be frightening; Fromm argued that psychological “mechanisms of escape” allow people to overcome the anxiety inherent in modernity. While much of *Escape from Freedom* consists of a polemic against Freudian instinct theory, Fromm argued also against sociological thinking “tinged with behaviorism” and what we now call rational choice theory. Although his Marxism highlighted the fundamental importance of economic relations in shaping human behavior, Fromm insisted that utilitarian models are inadequate for understanding the complex sources of human action.

The clinical evidence we have on masochistic and sadomasochistic behavior raises serious questions about contemporary social and political theory (Chancer 1992). “From Hobbes to Hitler,” said Fromm, “the lust for power has been explained as a part of human nature which does not warrant any explanation beyond the obvious,” blurring, for Fromm, an understanding of the “personality structure which is the human basis of fascism” ([1941] 1969:169, 186). The characteristics of the “authoritarian character” are familiar to contemporary readers because of Adorno’s development of Fromm’s ideas in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950).<sup>15</sup> The most important aspect of an authoritarian character is his or her attitude toward power: Such a person tends to disdain and have contempt for the weak and powerless while also submitting to those more powerful.

<sup>15</sup> Fromm conducted an empirical study on the social character of the German working class in the late 1920s and early 1930s as part of his work with the Institute for Social Research—what we know as the Frankfurt School. He published a summary of this research in German as part of Horkheimer’s edited collection *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (1936). By the late 1930s, however, Fromm had broken with the other members of the Frankfurt School. For various reasons, the full text of the original authoritarian character study was not published until after Fromm’s death, when German sociologist Wolfgang Bonss pulled the uncompleted manuscript together as *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study* (1984). Adorno developed Fromm’s ideas with much better empirical methods (helped by a group of social psychologists at Berkeley) in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Adorno and Horkheimer both underplayed Fromm’s contribution to this research tradition, although the history of Fromm’s involvement was quite widely known in the 1940s and 1950s. By the late 1960s, however, Fromm had largely been written out of the history of the Frankfurt School. Martin Jay’s *The Dialectical Imagination*, for example, does not make enough of Fromm’s contribution to the early Frankfurt School’s empirical research. For more details, see Funk (1982), Richert (1986), Burston (1991), Wiggershaus (1994), Kellner (1989), and Bronner (1994). A detailed discussion of Fromm’s intellectual and personal relationship to the Frankfurt School deserves a fuller discussion than is possible here.



### THE PSYCHOLOGY OF NAZISM

It is only after a 230-page whirlwind tour through philosophy, psychological theory, historical sociology, and theology that Fromm returns to a discussion of the political and psychological basis of Nazism. The political events he stresses are well known to contemporary students of history. Unemployment and inflation accelerated the loss of legitimacy caused by the collapse of the monarchy after World War I. The older generation was bewildered by the rapid cultural changes while young people rebelled against the authority of their discredited elders. Hitler rallied people to his ideology as the representative of a humiliated but now resurgent Germany. Although he stresses psychological dynamics, Fromm never denies the importance of specific political events, such as the debate over the Versailles Treaty. He argues, however, that Hitler's indignation at the injustice of the Versailles Treaty was a rationalization for his real motives of hatred, lust for power, and conquest.

Hitler's hatred would have been harmless had it not found a mass base. Fromm, following Wilhelm Reich, was interested primarily not in individual pathology but in the "mass psychology of fascism."<sup>16</sup> Whereas Reich stressed the passing on of authoritarian values through sexual repression in the German family, Fromm insisted that a full explanation of Nazism must account for larger sociological and political realities. The authoritarian character that Fromm claimed was dominant in the lower middle class created a potential mass base that was exploited by the "radical opportunism" of the Nazi party (Fromm [1941] 1969:245). Inflation played both an economic and a psychological role in the move toward fascism. Fromm points out that inflation was "a deadly blow against the principle of thrift as well as against the authority of the state" ([1941] 1969:239). Just as Luther expressed the social and psychological insecurities of his supporters during the Reformation, Hitler was a representative of the threatened and marginalized lower middle class and a humiliated nation.

### LOWER MIDDLE-CLASS FASCISTS

As empirical sociology, *Escape from Freedom* does not hold up to recent historical accounts of the rise of Hitler. Fromm offers little evidence for his central assertion that the base of mass support for fascism lies primarily with the urban lower middle class of shopkeepers, artisans, and white-collar workers. This "middle-class" theory of Nazism was common in the 1940s and since then has been institutionalized as the conventional wisdom in historical sociology. Yet it is probably wrong. Writing today with the benefit of fifty years of modern research, Richard Hamilton convincingly argues that there is little empirical evidence for a lower middle-class affinity for Nazism, particularly in urban areas.<sup>17</sup> He describes a linear positive relationship between the social class and the Nazi vote in major German cities. Those of the upper middle class, not the lower middle class, were more likely to vote for the Nazi party, relative to their numbers in Germany at the time. The evidence is not as

<sup>16</sup> Reich deserves a place in intellectual history for bringing an analysis of sexuality, character, and the body into social theory. Fromm drew on Reich's work extensively, and contemporary theorists have developed Reichian themes (Chancer 1992). Fromm's work, however, is more useful for sociologists. The issue here is not primarily the paranoid and bizarre writings of Reich's later years. Even Reich's work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* ([1933] 1970) lacked historical depth and sociological detail relative to *Escape from Freedom*, and Reich overemphasized the role of German sexual repression in explaining the appeal of Nazism. For a useful discussion of both Reich and Fromm's relationship to the circle around Otto Fenichel see Harris and Brock (1991).

<sup>17</sup> For a somewhat different view see Kuechler (1992). Thomas Childers also modifies the conventional wisdom instead of discarding it, arguing that "the nucleus of the NSDAP's following was formed by the small farmers, shopkeepers, and independent artisans of the old middle class" (1983:264).





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clear when one considers party membership instead of voting (Kater 1983); nonetheless, Hamilton has raised serious empirical questions about the conventional wisdom regarding the lower middle-class nature of both the Nazi vote and the party cadre (Hamilton 1982, 1996). Fromm, along with many others, was probably wrong on the urban lower middle-class roots of Nazism.

## PROTESTANTS AND THE NAZIS

Fromm was right, however, to perceive a link between the 1500s and 1600s and the 1930s. Protestantism is the single best predictor for Nazism, a point blurred by a Marxist-influenced orthodoxy that focuses on the lower middle class. And while Fromm stressed how the uprooting of community led to Nazism, Hamilton's data suggest that rural, not urban, Protestants were the single most important social stratum voting for the Nazi party. It is likely, as Barrington Moore stressed in *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1968), that fascism emerged out of the militaristic values of rural Germany, not from an escape from freedom created by the conditions of mass society.

Fromm's critique of the Protestant bias of much historical sociology is useful, however, as a corrective to the literature in political sociology that simplistically links Protestantism with democracy and political liberalism. Parsons, for example, wrote in 1940 that there is "an authoritarian element in the basic structure of the Catholic Church itself which may weaken individual self-reliance and valuation of freedom" (quoted in Gerhardt 1993:106). Randall Collins's (1992) contemporary work offers a compelling critique of this traditional sociological view of Protestant liberalism and Catholic authoritarianism similar to Fromm's writing from the 1940s.

To be sure, Collins's stress on the organizational structure of the respective churches as the key to their political stances is more compelling than Fromm's Weber-influenced account that privileges ideas. *Escape from Freedom's* identification of the early roots of Nazism within elements of the Reformation is one-sided in stressing only the authoritarian aspects of Luther and Calvinist doctrines (Erikson 1958).<sup>18</sup> Fromm's account can hardly explain Italian, Spanish, and Japanese fascism nor the widespread Nazi support in Catholic Bavaria and Austria. Fromm's emphasis on Protestant culture can best be seen as a complement rather than an alternative to more detailed macrohistorical explanations of the paths to dictatorships (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; Greenfeld 1992). His unorthodox and intentionally exaggerated challenge to the conventional wisdom on the democratic nature of Protestantism is a contribution that still has not been fully utilized.

## EXISTENTIALISM AND ORGANIZATIONS

More important, Fromm's existentialist-influenced sociology of emotions provides a useful foundation that can be combined with organizational models to provide an intellectually powerful way to understand the rise of Nazism. Hamilton explains Nazism with an organizational model that views Hitler's movement as members of a right-wing ex-military cadre who gained access to potential followers in places with the least organizational resistance (Hamilton 1996). Thus Hamilton, along with Randall Collins, argues that the central sociological difference between the Catholic and Protestant churches was organizational, not doctrinal, as Fromm posited. The German Catholic Church provided a thick

<sup>18</sup> This overly harsh view may have been colored by Fromm's reaction to the antisemitism of Luther's later years.



institution of culture and commitment that helped isolate Catholics from outside political influence. The Nazi party's early anti-Catholic rhetoric had cut the party off from the leadership of the church. Consequently, Catholic priests were not allowed to join the Nazi party, a policy that could be enforced only by a centralized church. In contrast, the decentralized Protestants responded to Nazi appeals based on more local considerations and personal beliefs. Some Protestant ministers led resistance to Hitler, while others joined and recruited for the party. The relative individualism of Protestant communities also left people less tied to church culture and institutions, providing an opening for mobilization from the far right (Hamilton 1996).

Analyzing of the rise of the Nazi party within the context of Hamilton's organizational model is illuminating. Unions and left parties in the cities and the Catholic Church in the countryside complicated the Nazi mobilization, while rural Protestants and the anti-left upper middle class were the obvious source of potential recruits. The upper middle class supported the Nazi party partly to protect their privilege from the left, a political force Hitler promised to destroy. Hamilton found that humiliation in war and the demobilization after the Treaty of Versailles laid the foundation for Nazism, not the economic and social squeeze of the lower middle class between the workers and the industrialists. This suggests that political sociology has overemphasized class relations and ignored the enormous political and social importance of war and war making (Giddens 1987).

Hamilton's account of the motivations of the Nazi cadre, however, is inadequate. Certainly demobilized officers and soldiers were socialized into a militaristic culture, were angry at their defeat in war, and were in need of jobs. But what explains the level of anger, hatred, and far-right commitment and sacrifice these cadres exhibited over the many years it took for the Nazi party to gain power? What explains the level of irrationality and fanaticism exhibited by Hitler and the Nazi party once they controlled the state? And what of the Holocaust? There is a psychological flatness to Hamilton's model.

Contemporary historical accounts of the rise of the Nazi party and the policies of the Third Reich often rely on an untheorized analysis of the emotional appeals of National Socialism. Sociological theory can add to our understanding of far-right extremism and militant ultra-nationalism by highlighting the microlevel roots of destructive mass politics. Thomas Scheff's *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism and War* (1994a), in particular, when combined with Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), provides a fuller theoretical account of the victory of Hitler, complementing Hamilton's rigorously empirical sociology as well as the more detailed writings of academic historians.

### BLOODY REVENGE AND HUMILIATED RAGE

Thomas Scheff draws on the sociology of Simmel and contemporary research in psychoanalysis to articulate a microlevel theory that can explain macrolevel wars. At the center of Scheff's analysis is Simmel's sociological insight that "unlimited destruction is a product of broken bonds" (Scheff 1994a:2). Yet Scheff argues that much modern social science research on intra- and intergroup relations is deeply flawed by the fact that "emotions have virtually disappeared as creditable motives in modern scholarship" (1994a:62). The emotional aspects of group conflict, when discussed at all, are often "dismissed" or lumped under "non-rational" motives (1994a:62). When analysts seek to understand the actions of nations or political actors, "humiliated fury is not the creditable, respectable motive that power, territory, or other objectified motives are" (1994a:65). Drawing on the psychoanalysis of Karen Horney and Helen Lewis, the historical sociology of Norbert Elias, and Suzanne



Retzinger's recent research in family therapy, Scheff argues that shame is the "master emotion" and thus is central to an understanding of group conflict and war (1994a:53).<sup>19</sup>

Scheff's theory rests on historical case studies on the First and Second World Wars. Insisting on the need to avoid psychological reductionism, Scheff begins his analysis with an extended critique of John Stoessinger's suggestion that Kaiser Wilhelm's "paranoid delusions" played an important role in the origins of World War I. Scheff argues that the Kaiser's reaction to the aftermath of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was rational because the English, the Russians, and especially the French really were conspiring against German interests. Arguing against the view that Germany was largely responsible for World War I, Scheff places the blame equally on the secrecy and power grabbing of all the major European powers. World War I was not caused by psychological dynamics, but had political and historical roots in Great Power conflicts. Yet for Scheff, as for Fromm, psychological theory is useful in exploring how the leading intellectuals of the period (including Freud, Weber, Wittgenstein, and Whitehead) were caught up with the nationalist collective illusions that justified the mass slaughter.

Psychology plays a more prominent role in Scheff's analysis of the roots of the Nazi rise to power and the subsequent World War II. Building on Harold Lasswell's analysis of the relationship between Hitler's psychopathology and paranoia and broader political dynamics, Scheff argues that the "labelling, segregation, and stigmatization of Germany after its defeat in World War I" created a cultural and political context in which Hitler's own "continual humiliated fury produced a program responsive to the craving of his public for a sense of community and pride rather than alienation and shame" (1994a:105). Scheff stresses the mystery in the rise to power of a "singularly unprepossessing" fanatic such as Hitler, with a personality "bizarre to the point of madness." Despite the fact that Hitler's speeches were rambling, incoherent disasters he was able to unite a large following around a disorganized, vague, and hate-filled political program. For Scheff, the central explanation for the appeal of Hitler's lies, distortions, and scapegoating was the psychological need for Germans to experience a community that would restore societal bonds, pride, and self-confidence to their nation. According to Scheff, German social structure had been pulled apart by rapid social change and humiliated by defeat in war and the conditions of the Versailles Treaty.

Scheff makes a compelling case that collective shame and humiliated fury were central causes in the rise of the Nazi party. Germans often referred to the Versailles agreement as the "treaty of shame," and Hitler called the Weimar Republic "fourteen years of shame and disgrace" (Scheff 1994a:108). Contrary to rational choice theories that highlight the economic benefits of Nazism and the "logic of evil," Scheff suggests that "a huge part of Germany's resources, even during wartime, were devoted to the attempt to make Hitler and his followers feel large (proud) rather than small (ashamed)" (1994a:116). Honor is an undertheorized motive for social and political action.

Scheff, like Lasswell and Fromm, also argues that Hitler's individual psychopathology played an important role in the irrational aspects of the mass appeal of the Nazi program. Scheff emphasizes the roots of Hitler's psychological problems in his father's "physical and emotional violence" and his mother's "complicity" (1994a:111). As a result, Hitler grew into an extremely isolated individual with no friends or real bonds with other human beings, and lived in a "constant state of anger, bounded by shame" (1994a:111). Attempts to bypass shame explains, for Scheff, Hitler's "many obsessions with superiority, racial purity, pollution, and contamination" (1994a:113), his widely documented desire for sexual

<sup>19</sup> Scheff realizes that in claiming an "isomorphism between interpersonal and international relations," he is challenging "an article of faith of modern social science" (1994a:75). Yet, like Fromm before him, Scheff argues that it is necessary to include a nonreductionist theoretical account of emotional dynamics in any analysis of group life and social interaction.



humiliation in front of women, as well as the seething rage that drove him to war and mass destruction.

The psychological roots of Hitler's mass appeal can be traced to the fact that "this combination of insecure social bonds and humiliated fury was endemic among the German masses" (Scheff 1994a:117). According to Scheff, many Germans had harsh fathers and "loving" mothers who yielded to the cruelty inflicted on children. Thus Hitler's charisma can be explained by the "emotional, not the cognitive, content" of his message. Scheff suggests that the "leader who is able to decrease the shame level of a group, interrupting the contagion of overt shame, no matter how briefly or at what cost, will be perceived as charismatic" (1994a:118).

Although there are many important questions about the empirical basis of Scheff's analysis of Nazism, *Bloody Revenge* is significant because it sharply raises the theoretical importance of a sociology of emotions for a political sociology of nationalism.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, Scheff fails to theorize fully the psychological roots of shame. Fromm's existential-influenced analysis of the human awareness of both our individual existence and inevitable death provides a theoretical microfoundation for Scheff's sociology.

## IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

For Fromm, human beings fear isolation as much as death itself, because only through connections to other people and society can humans find meaning in a universe that otherwise appears arbitrary, capricious, and absurd. This is the human root of the sociological dynamics of shame and humiliation central to Scheff's argument. Shame operates differently in distinct historical periods, societies, and institutional settings, of course, but its enormous power to enforce social norms is ultimately rooted in the human condition and the dynamics of individual psychology. For Fromm, individuals are drawn to the dangers of symbiosis because it provides the relations with others that humans require if they are not to go insane. The human need for recognition creates deeper and more powerful human passions than does simple shame avoidance (Benjamin 1988).

Scheff's idea of engulfment (1994b) is essentially the same as Fromm's analysis in *Escape from Freedom*. Says Fromm, the psychological dynamic of symbiosis is "the union of one individual self with another (or another power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of its own self" ([1941] 1969:157). *Escape from Freedom* stresses how modernity undercut the traditional religions that provided consensual meaning for solidly integrated societies with little individualism. Consequently, modernity creates people drawn to symbiotic relationships with new systems of meaning—like nationalism and fascism. This is a commonplace insight today, but was far less so in 1941 when *Escape from Freedom* was published.

Fromm's analysis of the psychological roots of the human attraction to symbiosis and engulfment was further developed in his 1947 work, *Man for Himself*. *Man for Himself* represents a major intellectual break from Fromm's early work, for he now put the fear of death at the center of his analysis (concern with mortality had always been marginal to the

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton is more sociologically rigorous in rooting the anger about the Versailles Treaty in the Nazi cadre of demobilized soldiers and officers. Scheff, in contrast, does not marshal data that allow him to account carefully for the social origins of Nazi support. And Scheff offers no data to support his contention that the cruelty of fathers and the complicity of mothers predict Nazi support. In addition, the fact that the largest base of support for the Nazi party was in rural areas, not the "mass society" of the cities, raises questions about Scheff's stress on loss bonds as a central factor in the "shame-rage" cycles he posits were at the core of the Nazi appeal. In addition, Hamilton stresses the fear of communism among the German middle class as an important source of the appeal of the Nazi party, whereas Scheff concedes he cannot rule out other emotions, such as fear and anger, from his analysis.





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Marxism that Fromm embraced in the 1920s and early 1930s). Fromm argues that “the emergence of man can be defined at the point in the process of evolution where instinctive adaptation has reached its minimum” ([1947] 1975:39). As a result, humans are different from animals because of man’s “awareness of himself as a separate entity” and his ability to understand the world through symbols, imagination, and reason ([1947] 1975:39). Fromm writes,

Reason, man’s blessing, is also his curse; it forces him to cope everlastingly with the task of solving an insoluble dichotomy. Human existence is different in this respect from all other organisms; it is in a state of constant and unavoidable disequilibrium. Man’s life cannot “be lived” by repeating the pattern of his species; he must live. Man is the only animal that can be bored, that can be discontented, that can feel evicted from paradise. Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape. He cannot go back to the prehuman state of harmony with nature; he must proceed to develop his reason until he becomes the master of nature, and of himself. ([1947] 1975:40)

Fromm argued that this “split in man’s nature” leads to “existential dichotomies” that cannot be overcome because they are rooted in the human condition. The central explanation for human motivation is, for Fromm, the human need to react to the fear of death and the fact that the “short span” of individual human life does not permit the “full realization” of human potential under “even the most favorable circumstances” ([1947] 1975:42). Human beings respond to this contradiction in various ways, relative to their character and their culture, but this “existential dichotomy” shapes humanity’s universal search for meaning and transcendence.

Benedict Anderson took essentially the same position nearly forty years later in *Imagined Communities* ([1983] 1991). Anderson insists that while “neither Marxism nor Liberalism are much concerned with death and immortality,” the “cultural roots of nationalism” are intimately tied up with mortality—a point emphasized by the importance of “unknown soldier” monuments in modern nationalist rituals. As Anderson puts it,

If the manner of a man’s dying usually seems arbitrary, his mortality is inescapable. Human lives are full of such combinations of necessity and chance. We are all aware of the contingency and ineluctability of our particular genetic heritage, our gender, our life-era, our physical capabilities, our mother-tongue, and so forth. The great merit of traditional religious world-views (which naturally must be distinguished from their role in the legitimation of specific systems of domination and exploitation) has been their concern with man-in-the cosmos, man as species being, and the contingency of life. ([1983] 1991:10)

The extraordinary survival over thousands of years of Buddhism, Christianity or Islam in dozens of different social formations attests to their imaginative response to the overwhelming burden of human suffering—disease, mutilation, grief, age and death. Why was I born blind? Why is my best friend paralysed? Why is my daughter retarded? The religions attempt to explain. The great weakness of all evolutionary/progressive styles of thought, not excluding Marxism, is that such questions are answered with impatient silences. ([1983] 1991:10)

For Anderson, religious thought transforms “fatality into continuity” in various ways. It is not an accident, then, that in “Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the



dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought” ([1983] 1991:11). Modern nationalism can be understood partly as a “secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning,” since nations “loom out of an immemorial past” and “glide into a limitless future” ([1983] 1991:11). This is not to suggest that nationalism was “produced” by the erosion of religion, a complex phenomenon in itself. Yet for Anderson, “nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being” ([1983] 1991:12). *Escape from Freedom* attempted precisely this type of cultural analysis, even if Fromm’s history and sociology were not as sophisticated as they might have been.<sup>21</sup>

This comparison of Fromm and Anderson illuminates Richard Hamilton’s finding that rural Protestants were the single most important voting bloc for the National Socialists. Standard histories of the *Kulturkampf* as well as an analysis of the political collapse of German liberalism in Weimar Germany explain most of this phenomenon. Hamilton offers an additional sociological emphasis on the organizational dynamics that made rural Protestants more vulnerable to the appeals of Nazi cadre. And, as Talcott Parsons once pointed out, the Nazi appeal, while “not primarily religious,” had a “good many resemblances to that of fundamentalism” (quoted in Gerhardt 1993:111). In the Weimar period, communists and social democrats in the cities and the Catholic Church in the countryside all provided competing worldviews that were disseminated through comprehensive ideologies and maintained through communal-like institutions. Rural Protestants were the least tied into an ideological system that provided meaning and an “imagined community.” Protestants were thus the most vulnerable to a Nazi worldview that answered all doubts, showed a way out of confusion and social breakdown, and promised symbolic immortality through a Thousand-Year Reich. In this sense, Fromm was right that Nazism was an “escape from freedom.”

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to critics who have attempted to dismiss him as a simplistic conformist popularizer (Marcuse 1955; Jacoby 1975; Jay 1973), Erich Fromm laid out a powerful psychoanalytic theory that can help us develop a microfoundation for contemporary research on neo-Nazism, fundamentalism, and nationalism. Fromm’s Marxist-influenced account of Nazism deals seriously with the economic and historical roots of fascism while avoiding dogmatic economic determinism. Fromm’s existential psychoanalysis stresses the irrational and destructive emotional forces behind Hitler’s mass appeal without ignoring history and society. *Escape from Freedom*’s sociological imagination highlights the importance of interpreting historically rooted religious and cultural values with a psychological sophistication not found in most Weberian historical sociology. Fromm’s use of continental philosophy allows him to avoid both the naivete of positivist social science and the abstract speculation that mars much contemporary postmodern and psychoanalytic sociology (Fromm and Maccoby 1970, Maccoby 1996). *Escape from Freedom* challenges the one-sided macro focus of Marxist, Weberian, and various structuralisms as well as atheoretical narrative historiography.

Although Fromm was often criticized for being a Freudian and Marxist revisionist, the

<sup>21</sup> The great strength of Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* is his detailed knowledge of the history and culture of Cambodia, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam, case studies that allow him to develop convincing reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism. Fromm, in contrast, was not a historian and never wrote the kind of detailed works that have secured Anderson’s reputation. Nor did Fromm have Thomas Scheff’s disciplined concern with engaging methodological issues of how one tests social theory.



irony is that *Escape from Freedom* is marred by its orthodox theoretical commitments. While his revised version of psychoanalytic theory is compelling, his analysis of Nazism remains overly psychological. Fromm, like many Freudians, assumed that psychological insight gained through clinical practice could translate relatively easily into understanding of broader social dynamics—a rather questionable proposition. And although Fromm's Marxism gives historical materialism a needed cultural and psychological analysis, *Escape from Freedom's* account of Nazism ultimately relies on an outdated class model. Contemporary research suggests that Hitler's movement can be understood not primarily as a lower middle-class revolt, but as nationalist *Volks* movement. Moreover, like many Marxists, Fromm puts far too little emphasis on the role of ideas in the emergence of Nazism, particularly German antisemitism. Finally, while Fromm's engagement with Weber's historical sociology allowed him to highlight the importance of Protestant support for Hitler, *Escape from Freedom's* stress on the ideological roots of Lutheran authoritarianism is not compelling, nor does it help us understand fascism from a comparative perspective. Fromm's analysis relies far too heavily on Weber's account of the Protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism, where an organizational analysis of the role of religions in political life would be more illuminating.

These flaws notwithstanding, there is much worth building on in Fromm's analysis. His existentialist-influenced revision of psychoanalysis is useful for thinking about the role of expressive and emotional appeals in ethnic nationalism and fascist movements. Political and nationalist movements involve far more than purely instrumental forms of mobilization, and social theory requires a theoretically informed sociology of emotions. Other scholars have engaged these issues, of course, and there is little doubt that Fromm's analysis of Nazism could have benefited from more stress on youth culture, gender, family, and sexuality (Koonz 1987; Theweleit 1989; Mitscherlich 1969; Loewenberg 1971). Moreover, contemporary scholars must avoid Fromm's tendency for overgeneralization and romanticism.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* remains a neglected social science classic; his insights into the often irrational roots of human motivation demand our renewed attention.

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<sup>22</sup> David Riesman has pointed out that for all of Fromm's theoretical interest in American culture and Protestantism, Fromm did not show any interest in studying either Mormons or Southern Baptists (personal interview, Boston, summer 1992). In addition, Fromm's account of the Middle Ages in *Escape from Freedom* is excessively romantic.



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