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Authoritarianism from Berlin to Berkeley: On Social Psychology and History

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*Emerging conceptions of authoritarianism, their transformation, and their fate are traced through the recent history of social psychology. The issue was first formulated around 1930 by Wilhelm Reich in an attempt to combine Freudian and Marxist ideas into an explanation of political developments in Germany. Erich Fromm pursued the idea further in the analysis of a questionnaire study of German workers, and later in his book *Escape from Freedom* (1941). Subsequent work by the Frankfurt Institute merged with research at Berkeley and produced *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Initially received enthusiastically, the theory gradually succumbed under the impact of two different lines of attack. This series of transformations in changing historical contexts points both to the need for a better historical understanding of our discipline and to some unresolved questions in our approach to its subject matter.*

Man glaubt zu schieben, und man wird geschoben. (Goethe, *Faust*)

Twenty years after the founding of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) during the Depression—which had “not only been a devastating experience for a multitude of people but has forced many to become

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somewhat radical in their political views," as one not entirely sympathetic observer put it (SPSSI: Paterson, 1936)—a long, nostalgic letter arrived in the office of the SPSSI secretary. Complaining about the embarrassingly poor attendance at the latest annual meeting in New York, the writer saw in the low turnout a symptom of a larger problem of change in SPSSI's nature that was not "quite the same" as it had once been and now "lacked something" (SPSSI: Fishman, 1956). One reason, the writer thought, was that SPSSI members were no longer "an insecure and suspect minority . . ." in their profession; "from our underprivileged, eccentric, iconoclastic origins we have progressed to a point of influence, acceptance, and ease." But another set of factors was important, which had "made many of us less interested in rocking the boat . . . [:] the societal pressures opposing such action have mounted to new heights. . . . Social scientists not only chart and predict conformity pressures, they are also affected by them" (p. 2). The letter, incidentally, triggered the SPSSI self-study reported by Katz (1958).

Another 20 years later, the malaise or "crisis" of social psychology in the early 1970s was given a very different diagnosis in Kenneth Gergen's (1973) article, "Social Psychology as History." Gergen asserted that the search for universal laws of social behavior was misdirected because, he claimed (without much detailed evidence), all contemporary theories were "firmly wedded to historical circumstances" (p. 315). Even basic patterns of social behavior change over time, he said, in part because historical circumstances change, and in part because the diffusion of knowledge acquired by social psychologists induced reactive changes in the population. Consequently, established empirical generalizations soon become false.

Gergen's challenge to a core belief supporting the scientific status of our discipline produced a vigorous and equally abstract defense (Schlenker, 1974) reaffirming traditional faiths by purely verbal means while calling the issue an empirical problem (p. 5). Yet the defenders of empirical science and its trans-historical validity provided no empirical support for their claim; they even failed to raise the question of how such a thesis could possibly be submitted to a nontrivial empirical test.

On the other hand, Gergen's view of history was a peculiarly limited one. It saw "history" essentially as an abstract set of erratic "circumstances" which, like random mutations, produce changes in arbitrary and unpredictable ways and condemn us to the status of bewildered observers. One does not need be an adherent of old-fashioned philosophies of history, which divined a fixed and predestined direction for the historical process, in order to argue that a human science might well include the search for an understanding of historical changes and perhaps some orderliness in them. After all, historicity is part of the human condition (cf. Elias, 1981)—a fact ignored by a trans- or ahistorical science at its own peril. In addition, we might also question the inflated estimate of our own



importance: perhaps passing on our expert knowledge to the ordinary mortal does not really produce historical changes after all.

At this point we find ourselves confronting the more humbling, as well as fascinating, question hinted at in Fishman's letter in 1956 but omitted by Gergen: How did and how does the course of history affect not our subjects, but ourselves and our discipline?¹ For various reasons, we have not progressed very far toward an understanding of this problem. Apart from some interesting reminiscences (e.g., Smith, 1983), most of our history is "company history"—ceremonial, inspirational, or justificatory in function (cf. Samelson, 1974). A few recent critical essays, valuable in themselves, were less attempts to scrutinize our history in any detail than to read a diagnosis of our present ills back into it.² There are some modest beginnings of a more genuinely historical study of social psychology's past (e.g., Finison, 1983, Gorman, 1981; Mednick, 1984; Morawski, 1979; Samelson, 1978), which will ultimately require a more wide-ranging effort.

The present journal issue should represent another step in this direction. Most of its articles focus on the organizational history of SPSSI or deal with official SPSSI activities. The following essay tries to round out the picture by outlining the history of a social psychological idea closely related to the concerns of SPSSI and involving work by some long-term SPSSI members, including one of its presidents. Confined to the published record and, unfortunately, to rather limited archival sources, it attempts first to describe the historical development of the concept of authoritarianism and its vicissitudes in changing historical contexts, and then to raise some questions about the implications of this history.

The Authoritarian Personality

The publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* by the "Berkeley group" (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) has been considered a milestone and may have marked a turning point in the history of American social psychology. Over five years in the making, the 1000-page volume attempted to describe, in Horkheimer's words (p. ix), a new "anthropological" species: the potential fascist who, in contrast to the old-style bigot, combined the skills of industrial man with irrational or antirational beliefs. Implicit in the argument, and heightening its relevance, was the question whether "it could happen here," too.

¹We also find ourselves in good company; a bit of knowledge of modern history of science, beyond the fashionable talk about "paradigms," might contribute to our metatheoretical debates.

²See Pepitone (1981); see also Sampson's (1981) critique of cognitive social psychology as representing value biases toward "technical knowledge interests," a dominating environment, and the reaffirmation of "what is" (pp. 732, 741). Such a characterization fits behaviorism at least as well, a fact which might indicate an insufficient historical analysis.



Reactions were quick and intense. The book, later described as an instant classic of social science (Jay, 1973), produced a flood of empirical follow-up studies lasting into the 1960s (Christie & Jahoda, 1954; Kirscht & Dillehay, 1967) as well as a rather one-sided political debate (Kecskemeti, 1951; Shils, 1954). Yet today's social psychology texts seem to either ignore *The Authoritarian Personality* altogether or to devote only a few paragraphs to it (cf. Seeman, 1983, p. 172; Smith, 1983, p. 173), in spite of occasional attempts at revival (Altemeyer, 1981; Gieser, 1980) and the more or less subterranean existence of a band of the faithful (see the 1984 Conference on Authoritarianism and Dogmatism at Potsdam, New York). Any claim for the progressive accumulation of knowledge in the social sciences will not find *The Authoritarian Personality* and its fate to be a very compelling illustration.

Initially the project was praised as a model of imaginative and integrative work: it had brought together sophisticated attitude scaling, opinion research, projective testing, and clinical interviews; it combined hardheaded empirical methods, clinical sensitivity, and original theoretical insights; and it dealt with a problem of major social significance. Even before publication, Shils (1948, p. 29) had praised the work in progress as "conducted with originality and precision in technique . . .," one of the brighter spots in an otherwise fairly dim sociological landscape—though he was to change his mind rather soon.

The major thrust of the gradually emerging criticism, beginning with Cohn (1953),³ was ostensibly aimed at various methodological problems. (For the most detailed and comprehensive analysis, which arrived at a Scotch verdict of "not proven," see Hyman & Sheatsley, 1954). Yet critics seemed unaware that most of the issues they raised had been recognized and discussed (though not always solved) by the original authors. Another aspect usually ignored by critics and supporters alike was the fact that the published work did not represent the implementation of a well-laid out "grand design"; instead, it described a research effort that had grown over the years from a rather limited initial question, widening enormously with the addition of new personnel and financial support. The seminal work (Levinson & Sanford, 1944) had been carried out by a Berkeley graduate student and his professor, who had been offered \$500 by an anonymous donor for activities aimed at combating anti-Semitism and who had decided instead to construct a scale to *measure* anti-Semitism (Sanford, 1956). The expanding project (Frenkel-Brunswik & Sanford, 1945) soon became linked with a set of ideas (and persons working on these ideas) that had first emerged more than a decade earlier and had—at least in explicit form—barely included anti-Semitism at all. The initial problem had been the mass appeal of fascism in the Germany of the early 1930s, which Wilhelm Reich attempted to explain in his 1933 book *Die Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*.

³Although Smith (1950) had anticipated it in an early review.



Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism*

The young Reich had been one of the rising stars of the Vienna psychoanalytic circle in the 1920s. Before the end of the decade he had also become an active Marxist and affiliate of the Austrian Communist party, involved in efforts to provide health care and political enlightenment to the workers. Developing Freudian ideas beyond Freud (which soon got him into difficulties with the psychoanalytic establishment), he embarked on an attempt to integrate psychoanalysis and Marxist theory. His focal problem was the failure of the working class to rise to its historic revolutionary role in the face of the appropriate "objective conditions." This failure of class consciousness, and with it the apparent failure of Marxist theory, was the subject of several of Reich's works between 1929 and 1932. They hardly mentioned the threat of fascism; instead, they developed psychological ideas intended to explain the cleavage between the economic situation and the workers' false consciousness that prevented the overthrow of capitalism. Conceding that part of the population had been bought off by political moves toward the welfare state, Reich nonetheless diagnosed *sexual repression by society* as a major contributor to the political passivity—repression that instilled in the child a deep anxiety, insecurity, and the need to internalize society's prescriptions. In the course of his argument he touched on several themes that became more pronounced later: a conceptual shift from capitalist society to patriarchy as the crucial structural factor, an awareness of women and their doubly oppressed situation, and some marginal attention to the lower middle class as the most problematic sector of society. He also had begun to use the term *autoritär* (Reich, 1966, pp. 109, 248).

After moving to Berlin in 1930, Reich soon found himself expelled from the ranks of both the psychoanalysts and the Communists for his lack of orthodoxy. Much worse, his career was overtaken by Hitler's rise to power in January 1933. Beginning the life of an emigré, he moved from country to country until finally settling in the United States. He also started to write, in the early months after the Nazis' "Machtergreifung," his *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, in which he elaborated his earlier ideas into a theoretical account of the appeals of National Socialism (Reich, 1933). Rejecting facile explanations that either focused on Hitler's magical personality or invoked a simple "befogging" of the masses by Nazi propaganda, he found the deeper roots of the catastrophe in the character structure of lower middle-class and "integrated" working-class Germans. In patriarchal society, the family became the factory in which the state's structure and ideology was molded. It reproduced the authoritarian character structure by embedding sexual inhibition and fear in the child. Although one might expect the largest amount of rebellion in the most oppressed group—i.e., in working-class women—in fact sexual repression on top of economic exploitation produced conservatism, fear of freedom, and not only passive submission but active sup-



port for the authoritarian order. The repressed sexuality turned into powerful yearnings after vague, mystical ideas: of nation, duty, honor; religion, motherhood—ideas that Nazi propaganda exploited to the fullest. Militarism, race theory, and anti-bolshevism were allied themes, sadistic aggression their derivative. *Sexual politics*—a term apparently coined by Reich—was for him the key to understanding as well as combating fascism.

The impact of the book, although difficult to determine, appears to have been small. Published on the run and, together with Reich's other works, promptly banned in Germany, it did not appear in English until 1946 (in revised form, eliminating Marxist language; cf. van Ginnéken, 1984) and produced few comments; by then, Reich's preoccupation with the "orgone" theory had pushed his reputation beyond the pale. But a decade earlier, the original *Massenpsychologie* had been reviewed briefly by Landauer (1934), Fromm's training analyst as well as Horkheimer's, in the *Zeitschrift fuer Sozialforschung* (the house organ of the Frankfurt Institute). Landauer's positive comments about the broad and acute vision of this "loner" and "fighter" ended with an objection to his overemphasis on genital sexuality. A similar criticism of Reich's thinking appeared two years later in Erich Fromm's social psychological essay in the Frankfurt Institute's volume on *Autorität und Familie* (Horkheimer, 1936), the next stage in the development of the idea.

The Frankfurt Institute and *Escape from Freedom*

Erich Fromm was, like Reich, a trained psychoanalyst turned Marxist, although in an earlier period he had been more involved with religion. Around 1930 he joined the institute, where he helped introduce Freudian ideas into what was called informally the "Café Marx" (Loewenthal, 1980, p. 47). In 1932, Fromm published two articles in the *Zeitschrift* dealing with social psychology and, like Reich's essays, trying to integrate Freudian and Marxian ideas by linking the libidinous structure of the individual to the social structure—without, as yet, advancing the concept of "social character." It is impossible to tell from the available sources how much Reich influenced Fromm and vice versa, though Reich seems to have been a step ahead chronologically. Allegedly the two had met and discussed their ideas in Berlin in 1931 (I. O. Reich, 1969, p. 43; see also Dubiel, 1978, p. 28). Fromm's early articles, like Reich's, hardly mentioned fascism at all even as late as in the fall of 1932.⁴ Instead, their problem and examples involved the character and "spirit" of capitalism and bourgeoisie. Only in a final footnote did he call attention to the "anal" characteristics of the *petit bourgeois*, who displayed "reverence for paternal authority and longing for discipline in a strange union with rebellion" (Fromm, 1932b, p. 275, trans.

⁴It is not clear whether he failed to see the coming storm, or whether he did not want to "mix science with (dangerous) politics" in public.



F.S.)—the ambivalence that was to become the nucleus of authoritarian personality dynamics. Fromm's emphasis on the mediating role of the family as the psychological agent of society in the formation of character structure was similar to Reich's (whose contributions he commended as well as criticized in his part of a few footnote exchanges).

Four years later, the by-then exiled Frankfurt Institute had made extensive efforts to clarify the issues of family and authority, and published its progress report (Horkheimer, 1936)—which, however, never appeared in English. Horkheimer and Marcuse contributed theoretical-historical essays; Fromm expanded his earlier ideas into a long social-psychological treatise analyzing "the psychological impulses which cause people to submit to authority" (p. 908). Freudian conceptions were developed into the theory of the "autoritär-masochistische" character, with passing references to Reich's, and more detailed discussions of Karen Horney's, formulations of masochism. But there was no mention of the *Massenpsychologie*, though it is hard to imagine that Fromm, familiar with Reich's other works, would not have seen at least the review in the *Zeitschrift*.

The second part of *Autorität und Familie* reported on the institute's first major empirical study: an exploratory questionnaire survey of German blue- and white-collar workers. In addition to a brief discussion of methodology, this preliminary report listed the 270 factual, behavioral, and attitudinal-projective questions asked to ascertain the workers' situation as well as mentality, and presumably to permit inferences about their "psychic structure." But the survey's results were presented only in the form of sample answers from 15 subjects, separated into three types: the "revolutionary," the "authoritarian," and the in-between, "ambivalent" character—each diagnosed through an intuitive interpretation of the answer patterns. (Such intuition was not really needed; question IV, 36, on party membership easily separates the groups into Communists, Deutsch-Nationale or apoliticals, and Social Democrats.)

Although Fromm was listed in 1936 as the editor of this section, it is not at all clear who had constructed the original questionnaire, or what had been the initial objectives of the survey. No contemporary documents seem to exist, and later descriptions are confusing.⁵ My best guess is that the study was initiated in

⁵In Fromm's 1936 introduction, Hilde Weiss was named as responsible for carrying out the survey; the data were said to reflect attitudes held in 1930/31 (Fromm, 1936, pp. 239, footnote 1, and 240). In his 1941 book, Fromm made no mention of Weiss, gave 1929/30 as the time of data collection, and Hartoch, Herzog, and Schachtel as his collaborators (p. 212, footnote 2). Another 30 years later he wrote that the study was begun in 1931 and "planned and directed by Fromm in collaboration with Ernest Schachtel, Anna Hartoch, and the counsel of Paul Lazarsfeld. . . ." He also claimed that "the immediate reason for the study was the interest in knowing how many of the German workers and employees were reliable fighters against Nazism" (Fromm & Maccoby, 1970, p. 24). If this was indeed the reason for the survey, it had remained a well kept secret for a long time (cf. Fromm, 1963, pp. 147–148). I have so far been unable to trace Weiss beyond 1936 in Paris (Rigaudias-Weiss, 1936) and would be grateful for any relevant information on her fate.



1929 (Fromm, 1983, pp. 7, 60). But Fromm did not become a member of the Institut fuer Sozialforschung until 1930 (Fromm, 1980, p. xix), although he had been acquainted with Lowenthal for a while and had lectured in the preceding year at the new Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute, which was housed in the building of the Institut fuer Sozialforschung (Schivelbusch, 1983). The earliest published reference to empirical surveys (without mentioning specifics) appears in Horkheimer's (1972) January 1931 Inaugural Lecture at the Institute, which also outlined the theoretical problem of the relation between economic conditions, cultural products, and changes in the "psychic structure" of individuals. On the other hand, even Fromm's 1932 articles, laying out the problems for a new *Sozialpsychologie*, still talked about either libidinal structure or psychosexual character types and did not mention any empirical research. In other words, authoritarianism may have been an afterthought rather than the focus of the *enquete*, which apparently was begun earlier in the Gruenberg era of the institute (Migdal, 1981, p. 111); the interpretation of its results in terms of quasi-political character types may have been superimposed on the data later, a guess made more plausible by the extraordinarily diffuse contents of the questionnaire that aimed largely at descriptive information. Fewer than 15% of the questions asked were eventually judged relevant to the alleged theoretical focus of the study by its analysts (Fromm, 1983, pp. 41, footnote 49, and 310–313). The results were correspondingly meagre (Speier, 1936), if perhaps not any more so than other first attempts at empirical research.

In any case, a more complete report of the results, promised for the future, was delayed and did not appear in print until half a century later as a posthumous publication (Fromm, 1983). Instead, Fromm (1941) published a reformulation of his theories in his book *Escape from Freedom*. Since the Reformation, modern man (sic) had acquired more and more freedom from constraints, but he had also become increasingly isolated and lonely. Several mechanisms of escape from this isolation had developed over time: (a) the authoritarianism of the ("symbiotically") sado-masochistic character; (b) destructiveness; and (c) automaton conformity, the solution adopted by the majority in modern democratic society. In this analysis, Fromm introduced his new concept of "social character" and expanded his neo-Freudian ego psychology, coupled with a deemphasis of sexuality that had—withstanding his criticism of Reich—still played a major role in 1936 (e.g., pp. 96–97 and 104–105). Responding to his new American environment as well as returning to his initial concern with capitalist society, he now saw the greater challenge not in the threat of fascism but in the transformation of democracy's lonely citizens into more spontaneous, loving, and creative personalities. Fromm had drifted from the critical theorists of the institute toward a more optimistic, transcendentalist orientation. Indeed, by 1963 he defined the "revolutionary character" not as one who participated in political revolutions or fought fascism, but as "the sane, alive, mentally healthy person" (p. 165).



Although Fromm personally remained politically engaged, his more popular social psychology was moving, like the field as a whole during this time, in the direction of “interpersonal relations.”

The Fascist Character in Berkeley

The critical theorists themselves, headed by Horkheimer and later joined by Adorno, had also moved to the United States, establishing a headquarters at Columbia University and a colony on the West Coast. In 1939 they outlined a research project on anti-Semitism (International Institute of Social Research, 1939), a topic that had played almost no role in the 1936 volume on authority and family. There had been only one oblique reference to anti-Semitism in Fromm's 1936 essay (p. 115; cf. Jahoda, 1954, p. 14; Jay, 1980). Having discovered the need to develop more empirical methods for their undertakings in order to obtain an American audience as well as financial support (American Jewish Committee Archives, 1939–1955; Frank N. Trager, Memorandum, 10–9–1942; cf. Adorno, 1969, pp. 113–148), the critical theorists reformulated the project several times and eventually succeeded in obtaining a research grant from the American Jewish Committee (Institute of Social Research, 1941; American Jewish Committee Archives, 1939–1955). Work on the project began in Los Angeles, in cooperation with J. F. Brown, F. Hacker, and others (Adorno, 1969, p. 136). In 1943 Horkheimer was brought into contact with Nevitt Sanford, who had been interested in the problems of personality structure and ideology for some time, and was then in the process of constructing the anti-Semitism scale. After some delay, a cooperative research plan was developed by the Berkeley group and the institute, in the context of the project on social discrimination funded by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and directed by Horkheimer. Adorno was the member of the critical theory group directly involved in the study of what was initially called the “fascist character,” then the “anti-democratic,” and eventually the “authoritarian personality.”⁶

One of Adorno's main functions was to teach the American academics some critical and Marxist theory (Sanford, personal interview, August 18, 1972). But the end product did not show much impact of this effort.⁷ The anti-type to the pre-fascist had changed from the “revolutionary” to the “genuine liberal”; the historic social forces determining character and ideology had been reduced to amorphous “antecedent sociological and economic factors,” passed over quickly in the introduction; class and class consciousness had in effect disappeared;

⁶Stagner (1936), Edwards (1941), and Maslow (1943) had, of course, published on this subject earlier.

⁷Buck-Morss (1977), however, sees many traces of Adorno's thinking in the book; perhaps it takes a specialist to find them.



and ideology had become anybody's "organization of opinions, attitudes and values"—as long as the correlation coefficients were high enough. Reich's original problem had been transformed to fit a liberal, empiricist, individual-psychology framework; indeed, at one time it was in danger of being subsumed under the categories of psychopathology (AJC Archives, 1939–1955: M. Horkheimer to T. W. Adorno, October 11, 1945, and Adorno's memo, no date, p. 3).

Denouement

But even these adaptations were not sufficient. Although the F scale became, for a while, an extremely popular instrument among liberal social psychologists, employed to predict just about everything undesirable in sight, a two-pronged attack on *The Authoritarian Personality* developed within a few months of its publication. The first attack involved politics more or less directly (Eysenck, 1954; Kecskemeti, 1951; Shils, 1954). Adapting the "totalitarianism" theory of fascism then developed by Arendt (1951) and others, its basic charge was that the Berkeley group had concentrated exclusively on "right-wing" authoritarians, while ignoring the "authoritarians of the left": the Communists. Although the two groups might differ for doctrinal reasons on surface attitudes such as anti-Semitism or ethnocentrism, they were said to be rather similar in the core characteristics of authoritarianism, power orientation, rigidity, and so forth. In this vein Shils (1954, pp. 32–42), reversing his earlier evaluation of the work, now made what he called the "reasonable interpretation" that the interview responses of some of the "deviant" low scorers (labeled "Rigid" Low scorers by Adorno) had been produced by the five "Leftists" in the sample, even though he had no evidence at all about the identity of the interviewees nor any other concrete data showing that in fact Communists possessed these psychological characteristics. Complaining about the naive left-right scheme and other assumptions of the Berkeley group, which was "holding fast to a deformed intellectual tradition" (p. 31), Shils concluded his argument by rejecting any possibility of a real threat coming from American nativist-authoritarians; on the contrary, "even authoritarian personalities are especially useful in some roles in democratic societies and in many other roles . . . at least harmless" (p. 49). Eysenck (1954), going Shils one better, did present some data allegedly showing that both English Communists and Fascists scored high on his "tough-mindedness" factor and thus "proving" that even the F scale was "essentially a measure of tough-mindedness rather than of Fascism. . . ." (p. 132, but see footnote 8 below):

Although published in fairly polite language, some of these charges had been toned down only after some prepublication negotiations (AJC Archives, 1939–1955: correspondence 1950); they were not purely academic either. At the



height of the cold war, with efforts to rearm the defeated Germans under way, the Berkeley group was at least implicitly accused of facing the wrong enemy (see AJC Archives: S. Flowerman to E. Cohen, 11-1-1950); the authoritarianism of the left, that is, Communism, had been completely disregarded when it was the greater threat. Such naiveté or disloyalty could only play into Moscow's hands at a time when the Congress for Cultural Freedom, secretly supported by the CIA (Dittberner, 1979, p. 110), was trying to rally the intellectuals of the free world, and various agencies of the U.S. government selected ex-Nazis and collaborators as their best allies in anti-Soviet activities (Loftus, 1982; see also the recent Klaus Barbie affair, "Ex-US Agents," 1983).

Apparently there were some protests in private (Shils, 1980, pp. 408-409). But the public record shows only a rather limited reaction to these criticisms of the Berkeley group. It amounted mostly to agreement (Christie, 1954, p. 132), without any research evidence,⁸ to what was becoming a truism (Stone, 1980): that Communists were indeed authoritarians even though they might reject the right-authoritarian F-scale items for ideological reasons, or at least to the side—by then obligatory—establishing one's anti-Communist credentials (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1954, p. 254). Only Sanford, who earlier had refused to sign the California Loyalty Oath, stood his ground, countering with a comment on the "similarities between the Communists and cultist anti-Communists . . . both . . . attacking liberals" (1956, pp. 264, 292-294).

Such political attacks in their historical context, including difficulties and dismissals of psychologists for alleged or demonstrated left-wing involvements (Finison, 1983; Sargent & Harris, 1986; also Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958, for a more general descriptions of these "difficult years"), apparently put some "chill" on further discussion and research on this and related issues (see Fishman's comment above)—although it is, for obvious reasons, hard to find any clear-cut evidence in the journals (cf. Melby, 1953, p. 2; also Gundlach & Riess, 1954). There were, of course, other constraints. Given the reigning climate, just to find American Communists for an empirical study of their psychological makeup would have been impossible. Beyond this technical problem, the involvement with left-wing causes or ideas, not rare among social psychologists of the Depression and anti-fascist years, had been followed by the disillusionment with Stalinism and the integration into the national war effort, together with the need to distance oneself from one's youthful political errors when the cold war started to produce heat. One of the more visible consequences was that mention of Marx and Marxist ideas disappeared almost completely from the literature (cf.

⁸The only data available (Eysenck's), which had to be imported from England, were eventually controverted in an extended exchange in the 1956 *Psychological Bulletin* too involved to cite fully (Rokeach & Hanley, 1956, *et seq.*). The deadly serious issue had its opera buffa aspects, too. (For a revival of this argument, see Stone, 1980:)



the editorial comment in Sargent & Bramelt, 1955, p. 54) until the late 1960s. This development is obliquely reflected in the striking data concerning "conformity pressures," the "decline of left-wing ideology," and their relation to SPSSI functioning that appeared in the SPSSI self-survey (Katz, 1958, Table 6, p. 19),⁹ as well as in the two issues of *Journal of Social Issues* addressing the problem under different labels: "Academic Freedom" and "Anti-Intellectualism" (Smith, 1953; Sargent & Bramelt, 1955). The earlier promise about "dealing boldly with vital and 'dangerous' issues" (SPSSI: SPSSI pamphlet, no date [1939], p. 5) was not an easy one to live up to.

Upon further reflection one is also struck by the almost total absence from the social psychological literature (including *The Authoritarian Personality* itself) of studies of anti-Communist attitudes (for an exception see the sociologist Stouffer, 1955), an absence all the more striking if one considers that anti-Communism has played at least as important a role in American attitudes and politics as anti-Semitism, and that it might be theoretically relevant to social psychology for a number of reasons (cf. Allport, 1958, pp. 179–182, 244–247; also Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956, for work carried out earlier in a less tense atmosphere). But liberal, and staunchly anti-Communist, social science had found it more appealing to attack (contrary to Horkheimer's claim) the dwindling number of *old-style* bigots from the moral high ground of antiracism. After all, the popular American notion of Hitler focuses much more on his anti-Semitism than on his anti-bolshevism, even though the latter theme had played, arguably (Gordon, 1984), a greater role in his rhetoric and his political appeal; indeed, he had often combined the two into one pungent phrase.

"The End of Ideology"

Whereas the first attack on *The Authoritarian Personality* sought to redirect, with mixed success, the *political* impact of the data, the other line of criticism, more indigenous to psychology, took the opposite tack. It tried in effect, if perhaps not in a deliberate reaction to the ideological pressures, to drain the phenomenon of all political meaning. Positivist-empiricist researchers had already reduced the complex Berkeley project to the "California F scale," a handy data-generating tool. Realizing that all the F-scale items were worded in the same direction, they then proceeded to "demonstrate" that the scale did not measure ideological content but only a tendency to agree—with anything (e.g., Bass,

⁹What is a bit surprising today is the absence of *any* commentary on the rather lopsided responses concerning the decline of left-wing ideology and its relation to SPSSI functioning. Perhaps it was not possible to do so in 1958, and it may be problematical even today. But the question, how much or how little effect the repercussions of these developments had on the general direction in which the field moved after the war, will have to be explored carefully and soberly some day, even if it may involve reopening some painful or distasteful issues.



1955). Ignoring the original authors' treatment of the problem of item direction (Adorno et al., 1950, pp. 161, 280; Levinson & Sanford, 1944, pp. 341–343), as well as the rather questionable nature of the evidence for its biasing effects (Samelson, 1964; Samelson & Yates, 1966), the consensus declared the F scale invalid: There were no real pre-fascist authoritarians, only agreeable persons without strong opinions, or in one variant of this depoliticization process, only a deliberately formal, apolitical (and transhistorical) dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960).

The original social-political issue itself was not taken up afresh and solved. Instead it slowly disappeared from view, in effect left—personified in the mass media by Archie Bunker. Value-free empiricism had won the day—but only by reducing a genuine and important problem to a meaningless artifact, a “response set,” drained of any interest except for methodologists, in a process seemingly confirming the Frankfurt Institute's allegations about the function of positivist-empiricist research.¹⁰

Implications

What do we learn from this segment of our field's history? (For a more extensive critical analysis of the several theories, see Billig, 1982; for a recent evaluation of the empirical results, see Meloen, 1984.) All the efforts involved a mixture of impressive sophistication and ingenuity with what looks, retrospectively, like some intrusions of naiveté (if not, in today's language, a “fundamental attribution error” seeking the causes of historical events in person characteristics). Also illustrated, but of less concern, is the filiation of ideas or the borrowing of concepts with or without acknowledgment by subsequent authors. What is most striking, however, is the transformation of the problem by different persons in response to different times and circumstances, as well as their varied fate in these settings: The movement of the nuclear idea proceeded from the far left, in the revolutionary and “extreme” formulation by a Communist-Freudian activist, to the milder Marxist-socialist, and incipiently empirical, versions of Fromm and the institute, on to the liberal American social scientists at Berkeley and their epigoni, to end up eventually in the neoconservative camp and in the value-free empirical data-crunching of the late 1950s. Retreating from broad theory and increasingly encapsulated, research interests moved from the events of the outside world toward laboratory-generated problems, a process justified as the way of true science. Yet although the approach became progressively less politically “engaged,” as well as more “empirical,” it would be hard to argue

¹⁰Interestingly enough, the neoconservatives' political argument, in the 1950s insisting on the similarity of right-wing authoritarianism and left-wing totalitarianism, today stresses the important differences between the two.



that this improvement in the objectivity of methods succeeded in solving the problem; instead it defined the problem away.

Also apparent in this history is the immense complexity of the conceptual and empirical task the theorists had set themselves; so is the seeming impossibility to evade political meanings and implications. Even an explicitly apolitical stance may only submerge its ideological assumptions. All the authors believed in their own objectivity; yet looking back we can see the specific historical settings refracted in their work in meaningful ways. Beyond a simple “historical relativism” showing a difference in approaches as well as evaluative criteria, we also get a glimpse of the dynamics of historical change in the phenomena themselves and in the perspectives of the researchers enmeshed in these changes and struggling to comprehend them.

Facing such complexities, should we then drop such issues altogether in exchange for smaller and safer topics, as social psychology by and large seems to have done? On the face of it, the predictions, or fears, implicit in *The Authoritarian Personality* turned out to be unwarranted: obedience corroded into the “crisis of authority,” sexual repression turned into ubiquitous pornography, anti-Semitism into broad-based support for a militant Israel, narrow ethnocentrism succumbed to the blandishments of ethnic foods, rigid sex roles were softening, and gays were allowed to come out of the closet; corruption in high places became a daily news story and prying into private affairs big business: all the F-scale items seemed to lose their meaning, at least for a time. Had the issue itself evaporated?

But the basic problem seen by Reich, Horkheimer, and Fromm concerned not only the still enigmatic question of the psychological underpinnings of a defunct variant of tyranny, memory of which is receding into shibboleth. Behind it stands one of the major questions at the core of our discipline and of SPSSI: how to understand and deal with the interdependencies between individual lives and their—our—societies, caught up in concrete historical developments that impinge not just on our “subjects” but on all of us, researchers included, if perhaps in different ways. Without some insight into the dynamics affecting the direction our field has taken, programmatic pronouncements about the direction it *should* take are likely to be empty exhortations. Neither the SPSSI self-study nor the crisis debate of the 1970s seems to have produced much real change in research practices, even if the shifts in funding did. And Gergen’s rediscovery of “history,” even its newer forms (Gergen & Gergen, 1984), represented only an abstract and truncated version of the larger issue. Did it strike a chord only after a long period of “transhistorical” science, in which the problems of historical change were barely kept alive on the fringes of our field? And did his claim that our knowledge influenced real people seduce us into ignoring the possibility that academic social psychology more often follows than leads (a possibility troubling Fishman in 1956 and hardly challenged by the course of events reported in



the present case study)? The transhistorical validity of our science may be a noble ideal, but in the real world it may also be a gratuitous assumption, directing attention away from historical processes as well as from critical self-examination.

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