

Void and Idol: A Critical Theory Analysis of the Neo-fascist “Alt-Right”

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“I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”

—James Baldwin (1984, p. 101)

INTRODUCTION

This article’s critique of the neo-fascist “alt-right” employs philosophical methods located at a point of intersection between humanist Marxist and spiritual existentialist frameworks, by relying on two radical twentieth-century philosophers of Jewish descent: Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Simone Weil (1909-1943). What could a Marxist Critical Theorist (Fromm) and a Christian mystic (Weil) share in common, that could somehow help explain what is going on with a bunch of rebranded fascists (the “alt-right”) today? This peculiar convergence is born in part of a surprising synchronicity, revolving around a single term: “the void.”

As we shall see, at least two former neo-Nazis who are now helping people leave hate groups, use the term “the void” to describe an experience of meaninglessness, social isolation, and depression that individuals pass through after leaving hate groups and before being fully reintegrated into society. The void is also a central concept in Simone Weil’s philosophy and stands at the intersection of her work in the philosophy of religion and her political and philosophical critique of fascism. Weil’s work helps to explain not only the voids of meaning that former fascists may experience on their journey out of hate, but also the voids of meaning (at both societal and individual levels) that contribute to *building* fascist movements in the first place. Seemingly independently of Weil, Erich Fromm developed a highly similar analysis of fascism and the void. Although the term “the void” does not feature prominently in Fromm’s writing, his theory of the “escape from freedom” turns on the same notion of fascism as an attempt to fill a void of meaning. Moreover, both Fromm and Weil use the terms “idolatry” and “destruction” (or “destructiveness”) to describe the means by which fascism stuffs voids with simplistic ideologies and then defends (or enforces) those ideologies with violence and cruelty. Fascism, including in its latest local iteration as the “alt-right,” is a failed attempt to fill voids in advance of facing their reality, I will argue. The only way out of fascism (for individu-

als leaving hate groups, but perhaps also for societies seeking to overcome fascism's threat) is to face the void one initially sought to flee. This initial "void," I contend, is in some sense rooted in the human condition itself, but it manifests itself in a particular way in modern late capitalism that, converging with certain individual psychological factors, leads certain individuals to evade it by means of fascism specifically.

The article has three parts. In the first part, I begin with a retrospective on the Institute for Social Research's empirical studies on the authoritarian personality and U.S. anti-Semitism, before explicating some relevant concepts from Erich Fromm's seminal philosophical and psychoanalytic study of fascism, *Escape from Freedom*. In the second part, I further develop the theoretical framework needed for subsequent critique, relying on both Fromm and Weil, and exploring the concepts of idolatry and destructiveness in relation to the void. Finally, in the final part of the article, I apply Fromm's and Weil's concepts to a critique of the contemporary United States alt-right, looking at both economic and psychological factors.

I take the term "alt-right" to refer to a resurgent racist movement in the United States that should be seen as a rebranding of past neo-Nazi and white nationalist movements rather than a wholly new phenomenon. Throughout this article, I use a variety of terms for roughly the same category of people and movements. The term "alt-right" is used when it is clear that I am referring to certain recent trends and organizations that I will address, most specifically those around the white nationalist group Identity Evropa and Richard Spencer's National Policy Institute. However, to avoid confusion about the alt-right's ideology, I also frequently use terms like "neo-fascist," to clarify that they are not engaged simply in "edgy" rebellion, but belong to a social movement seeking power, whose goal of creating white "homelands" is unachievable without genocide.

There are alternatives—successful paths through the void. Today's resurgent fascism and white supremacy are failures to hold open the void, instead stuffing the void with hateful mythologies, slogans, pseudo-science, and eventually violence. The refusal to "sit with" the void, to be present and wait for reality to present itself, leads to stuffing the void with reified identities that are always at risk of coming apart, leading the ideologists of hate to employ intimidation and cruelty to prevent anyone from pulling away the mask and revealing a self that is still void. Weil and Fromm suggest that the only way out of the void is *through* it. Both Weil and Fromm distinguish idolatry from a true encounter with transcendence, and distinguish mere fanatics from genuine revolutionaries, who are motivated by love and by their ideals and not by a desire to destroy. By communities working together to hold open the void and to not leave individuals alone in their confrontation with the void, we can draw people away from neo-fascist ide-

ologies and help them continue in their commitment to our shared humanity. At the conclusion of the article, I briefly discuss Erich Fromm's proposal for a shared "struggle against idols" that can be the basis for constructing a movement that resists hate. The question of the "void" and Fromm's and Weil's critique of "idolatry" have implications for the left's strategy in the struggle against fascism. While protest is important, it is also necessary for the left to build alternative spaces, narratives, and communities so that the angry and the alienated do not find the far-right to be the only source of meaning offered, and thus the only way to cope with the void. However, this paper remains primarily an analysis and a critique, leaving specific strategic implications as a topic for future research.

The analysis and critique offered here, stand within the tradition of Critical Theory as founded by the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School contributed some of the most seminal and important studies on fascism in the twentieth century. Since the election of Donald Trump, a new cottage industry of books in the United States have sought to explain the "alt-right," yet few make use of the Frankfurt School. More work needs to be done to bring the resources of Critical Theory to bear on the current far-right resurgence, nationally and globally. In addition to being a contribution to current Critical Theory's work on the resurgence of fascism and the far-right, this article also straddles the subfield of Critical Theory that has become known as the "Critical Theory of Religion," a broad category that includes not only the application of Critical Theory to religious topics, but also the study of Frankfurt School members' own engagement with religious or theological concepts in relation to social and political theory.

ERICH FROMM, CRITICAL THEORY, AND THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY

When Erich Fromm was recruited by his friend Leo Lowenthal to join Max Horkheimer's Institute for Social Research, Horkheimer tasked Fromm with contributing to the Frankfurt School a project in which Fromm already engaged: synthesizing Marxism and psychoanalysis. The lengthiest contribution Fromm made to this project during his time working for the Institute was his seminal 1930s study of the "authoritarian character" in Weimar Germany.

Based on a series of lengthy "interpretive questionnaires," Fromm found that roughly 10% of 1930s Germans were "authoritarian," roughly 15% were "democratic"/humanistic, and 75% were between the two extremes on the spectrum (Fromm, 2004b, p. 123).¹ The authoritarians, Fromm predicted, would support the Nazis, while the humanists would stand up and oppose the Nazis. On the face of it, these odds looked good:

The authoritarians were clearly outnumbered, and the people in middle were politically opposed to fascism. However, Fromm found that the humanistic 15% might prove unable to defeat the authoritarian 10%, if the 75% in the middle were psychologically unprepared to resist the authoritarians and decided to submit and thereby cooperate with them. Concluding that the large middle majority did not have the psychological strength to resist the Nazis, Fromm realized that the results of the study boded ill for the Institute (as Jews and Marxist intellectuals) in Germany, and the Institute soon began plans to move to the United States.

Participants in Fromm's study answered numerous open-ended questions in their own words, and Fromm paid close attention to how answers were formulated. He found, for example, when asked about their heroes, some listed Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin among their heroes, unsurprisingly for Germany at that time. However, *how* the participants listed Marx mattered a lot. While one cited as his or her heroes, "Marx, Lenin, Caesar, and Napoleon," another listed, "Marx, Lenin, Einstein, and Beethoven." The first list, focusing on power and military might, Fromm classified as an authoritarian list, while the latter list implied admiration for "benefactors of humanity" (contributors to thought, politics, science, the arts, and so on) (Braune, 2017b, p. 75).

Fromm found that most that scored high on the authoritarianism spectrum were politically on the right, but he also identified left-wing authoritarians (such as the individual who admired both Marx and Napoleon). Fromm understood that authoritarianism could not be measured solely by professed beliefs or political affiliation. Some authoritarians are "rebels" who defy authority but are merely resentful of the powerful because they desire power for themselves. Other authoritarians may be "fanatics," appearing radical due to their passion and single-minded devotion to a cause, but who are cold and mechanical, viewing people as instruments for their aims rather than dignified ends in themselves. Rebels and fanatics can appear anti-authoritarian but each is highly authoritarian (the rebel because the rebel desires power for him or herself, the fanatic because the fanatic is submissive to the authoritarian power of his or her "great cause") (Fromm, 2004b, pp. 125-6). Such rebels and fanatics can appear on the left (and no doubt Fromm sees this as part of the problem with Stalinism); all fascists are authoritarians, but not all authoritarians are fascists.

Fromm's authoritarianism study, later published as *The Working Class in Weimar Germany*, formed a significant basis for the Frankfurt School's 1940s studies of U.S. anti-Semitism, studies leading to Theodor Adorno, et. al.'s (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality* and Leo Lowenthal's (1949) study of the anti-Semitic "agitator," *Prophets of Deceit*. In *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950, p. 608), Adorno concluded that the social "func-

tion” of anti-Semitism was “as a device for effortless ‘orientation’ in a cold, alienated, and largely un-understandable world”—a pathological way of coping with capitalist alienation. Lowenthal (1949) similarly wrote at length about the fascist agitator’s appeal to the audience’s sense of “malaise” and “homelessness.”

Although not cited by Adorno and colleagues (1950) or Lowenthal (1949), Fromm’s best-selling *Escape from Freedom* had earlier addressed the same theme of fascism as an adaptation to feelings of malaise and homelessness or to a world apparently lacking in meaning. Expanding on his study of Weimar Germany, Fromm published *Escape from Freedom* in 1941, arguing that fascism emerges partly from a desire to flee the burdens of freedom. Fromm writes, “The structure of modern society affects man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more independent, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid” (Fromm, 1969, p. 124). The experience of freedom created by the modern world is incomplete, leaving the individual with many negative freedoms—e.g., the *freedom from* the state’s encroachment on freedom of speech or religion—but without a sense of “positive freedom,” a sense of what freedom can be *for*. Contemporary humanity, according to Fromm, has gained freedom of religion but “lost to a great extent the inner capacity to have faith in anything which is not provable by the methods of the natural sciences,” and has gained freedom of speech but “has not acquired the ability to think originally,” submitting instead to the “anonymous authorities” of “public opinion and ‘common sense’” (Fromm, 1969, p. 125).

In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm identified three interrelated “mechanisms of escape” from freedom: sadomasochism, destructiveness, and automaton conformity. These three mechanisms work together, playing off one another, and Fromm would probably hold that an individual with strong tendencies toward a particular mechanism is likely to have characteristics belonging to the other two as well. Of the three, “destructiveness” is closest to the nihilistic violence of the neo-fascists. Neurotic “destructiveness,” according to Fromm, arises from feelings of powerlessness, fear (“feeling . . . threatened by the world outside”), and the stifling of life opportunities or potential (Fromm, 1969, p. 204). Together with sadomasochism, which views humanity as classifiable according to two static categories—the good, strong winners, and the bad, weak losers—destructiveness is often a defining feature of the authoritarian personality and of the fascist, according to Fromm.²

Not all acts of aggression are evidence of a destructive personality, according to Fromm; in his later work *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm carefully distinguished between “benign aggression” and “malignant aggression” (Braune, 2017b; Fromm, 1974). Thus, according to

Fromm, action in self-defense or fierce competition in a game, for example, are not evidence of a destructive personality (or malignant aggression). By contrast, the destructive personality has a more totalizing destructive aim. The destructive personality takes vengeance on the world for its own “unlived life” (Fromm, 1969, p. 207).

According to Fromm, destructiveness has its roots in a range of social conditions. While destructiveness can arise from repression of sensuous desires, such repression has decreased since the early, puritanical period of the Protestant Reformation. As later capitalism relied on spending rather than saving, an ethic of restraint was replaced by frenzied consumerism, as Max Weber predicted (Weber, 2002). However, as capitalism has transformed from exulting restraint to license, people still have “unlived lives” to avenge due to other factors. Among these factors is economic poverty, but also forms of alienation and loneliness; these latter can impact those who are not suffering from crushing poverty, but can also have economic and political bases (Fromm, 1969, pp. 207-8). Today, the escape mechanisms of neurotic destructiveness and sadism might be found in various forms of group hostility, such as those of white supremacists, as well as those calling enthusiastically for war, for torture of terrorists, for harsher immigration enforcement, or for harsher punishments for crime. In his early writings on criminology, contemporary with his study of the German working class, Fromm made a similar point, seeing war and the state’s punishing apparatus as outlets for vicarious sadistic enjoyment by the public (Anderson & Quinney, 2000). As a humanistic psychoanalyst, profoundly influenced by Freud but critical of Freud’s theory of the death drive, Fromm did not believe that sadism or destructiveness were “natural.” Instead, like many theorists studying hate today, Fromm believed that sadism and destructiveness were responses to social conditions, particularly as shaped by economic conditions.

SIMONE WEIL AND ERICH FROMM ON DESTRUCTIVENESS

Like Fromm, philosopher, spiritual writer, and social activist Simone Weil engaged in a study of the “destructive” character structure of some fascists. Also, like Fromm, Weil came from a left-wing Jewish background. (While Fromm was raised as a religiously practicing Orthodox Jew in Germany, Weil, in France, was raised by secular Jewish anarchists.) Weil’s own social action included some brave experiments in solidarity and suffering (“affliction”), including working as a factory worker and writing about factory conditions, before later joining the resistance to Franco’s fascism in the Spanish civil war. Following an unexpected religious experience in a Portuguese fishing village, Weil’s writing took a Christian turn—she identi-

fied Christianity as “pre-eminently the religion of slaves . . . Slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others”—and she sought to synthesize her religious experience with her commitments to worker solidarity and social action (Weil, 1951, p. 67).

Although the void can be seen as an ongoing theme for mystics through the centuries, the question emerged for Weil due to her social, economic, and political context. Simone Weil’s work, as well as Fromm’s, was in many ways a response to a crisis of capitalism and the void of meaning opened by that crisis. Following World War I, Europeans and Americans were recuperating from a situation of acute emotional, physical, and social trauma and loss of life, when they were also hit with an economic crash. Just following the point at which hopes were high for international workers’ revolutions against capitalism, millions of working-class soldiers had died fighting each other in the trenches, energized by nationalism, in a senseless war for capitalist gain. It was a crisis that touched the “whole person” for the left-wing intellectuals who sought to understand it—it was a spiritual crisis as well as a political one. There was a sense in some philosophical, religious, and artistic circles that something may have gone wrong with time itself, that history had somehow stalled, or that reality had somehow “ruptured,” since the Enlightenment ideal of progress that had sustained past hopes seemed to have gone so terribly awry, and since the promise of some Marxist rhetoric that the revolution was nigh had fallen short. The “lost generation” of the 1920s hungered for meaning and for answers, and there was sometimes a sense that something transcendent (whether divine or human) might be lurking beyond the horizon, preparing to enter and save a humanity gone tragically wrong. This sense of expectation for outside help, of course, had devastating consequences, especially where it took the form of fascist dependence on a leader as rescuer. Keenly aware of this flight into submission but touched by her own mystical encounter with the transcendent, Weil sought frantically to turn the tide, hoping to help the workers distinguish authentic belief from the clinging to idols. She was convinced that entering into that encounter with the transcendent required a self-emptying or “de-creation” achieved partly through a spiritual asceticism, but also through a relinquishment of wealth and a commitment of solidarity to suffering with and for the oppressed.

Like Fromm, Weil classified destructiveness as one of various possible “compensations” which is similar to Fromm’s “escapes from freedom”. Through compensations, the individual replaces a frightening encounter with reality by a safer encounter with deadened ideas or “idols.” We might add (and Weil would likely agree) that modernity increases the temptation to rely on compensations, since societies do not come with obvious narratives of meaning attached, and in modern multicultural societies, there are

many more narratives available for selection, to be freely chosen and publicly lived out. Late capitalist modernity creates greater pressure to select and then cling to some sense of identity, as social relationships are fractured by competitiveness and commodification, and work life is characterized by a sense of alienation and powerlessness; in order for it to have staying power, this sense of identity, it seems to me, must be “reified”—must be made to seem natural, despite being artificial. However, the lack of pre-assigned meaning that makes this quest for identity possible is also to some extent endemic to the human condition, as Weil and Fromm understood, even if it is certainly exacerbated by present conditions. There is always a sense in which reality exceeds any explanations offered for it. Idols provide temporary relief from the void of meaning that rests at the heart of reality and at the heart of each human being’s struggle to make sense of the world. This void should not to be bypassed, Weil argues, but is the point at which the divine reveals itself and at which the sacredness of each human being can be known. I will show that both Fromm and Weil see destructiveness as resulting from a type of “idolatry” that serves as a means to flee this “void.”

Weil, like Fromm, saw destructiveness as a response to suffering. Weil wrote that, “whoever suffers tries to communicate his suffering (either by ill-treating someone or calling forth their pity) in order to reduce” his suffering (Weil, 1986c, p. 196). According to Weil, when we try to expel our suffering through inflicting suffering on another, we do so because we know that it unfortunately *works*, at least in the short run; we do feel a sense of relief (Weil, 1986c, p. 196). The continual downward distribution of suffering that results “is a factor making for social stability,” maintaining order and comfort at the upper levels of society, with nearly everyone able to displace suffering onto someone lower down in the social hierarchy (Weil, 1986c, p. 197). When one is unable to command sympathy from others or is unable to sufficiently expel one’s suffering onto victims through small, subtle acts of sadism, Weil suggests, a nihilistic type of violence emerges. Then, according to Weil, “we attack *what the universe itself represents for us*. Then every good or beautiful thing is like an insult” (Weil, 1986c, p. 197).

According to Weil, destructiveness is a way of “compensating” for the void. She identifies other possible compensations, including “mindless pleasure” and a shallow “hope, either for oneself or for one’s children, of occupying a different place in society” (Weil, 1986b, p. 246). (Note that both these compensations become less widely accessible in periods of economic decline.) “Revolution” can also be a compensation, which as a way of filling the void “is ambition transposed to the collective level” (Weil, 1986b, p. 246). Although some might read such a critique of “revolution” as

an indication of conservatism in Weil, one can also read her critique of revolution as “compensation,” as a critique of revolution as *idol*.

Here a parallel between Weil and Fromm becomes clear. The Marxist Fromm (2004b) echoes Weil’s critique of revolution as compensation or idol, in his essay on the “Revolutionary Character,” contrasting the true revolutionary with the fanatic. The fanatic is “exceedingly narcissistic” and “extremely unrelated, as any psychotic person is, to the world outside.”

The fanatic . . . has chosen a cause, whatever it may be—political, religious, or any other—and he has deified this cause. He has made this cause an idol. In this manner, by complete submission to his idol, he receives a passionate sense of life, a meaning of life; for in his submission he identifies himself with the idol, which he has inflated and made into an absolute.

If we want to choose a symbol for the fanatic, it would be *burning ice*. He is a person who is passionate and extremely cold at the same time. He is utterly unrelated to the world, and yet filled with burning passion, the passion of participation and submission to the Absolute. (Fromm, 2004b, p. 126)

The fanatic’s narcissism is idolatry; “idolatry” in Fromm’s sense of the term is not tied to specific religious practices or beliefs, but is a technical term akin to the Marxist term “reification,” referring to human submission to the authority of mere things and concepts, products of humans’ own creative action (Fromm, 2004a, pp. 37-8). Through idolatry, the self is deadened, becoming lifeless like the products of its labor, “worshipping” its own product by submitting to an unjust economic system that is itself merely a creation of human activity (Fromm, 1994, p. 97). Idolatry for Fromm includes nationalism, racism, and “priestly” (blindly bureaucratic, institutional) loyalties (Fromm, 2010).

For our purposes here, we note that idols include objects of devotion created by human beings, including their socially-constructed nation or race. Clearing away idols is not about removing symbols of transcendence, or about preventing the activity of relating to objects or symbols as manifestations of divine or transcendent realities. Rather, the struggle against idolatry in the Frommian and potentially Weilian sense, is a process of *exposing illusions so that the truth can be known*, an impulse that lies at the heart of many types of religious practice and many philosophical and scientific endeavors.

Fromm also links idolatry to ideology. Ideology in the traditional (Marxist) sense of the term implies a false belief system and is not a neutral term applying to any worldview. Ideology depends upon the “idolatry of

words,” having the power to detach words from their affective meaning, leading individuals to repeat doctrinal platitudes that lack bearing on one’s life praxis. For example, in the 1950s, Fromm notes that a majority of Americans, if asked whether “all men are created equal,” would agree (Fromm, 1956). After all, this is a central professed belief for many, found in the Declaration of Independence as well as religious traditions. However, this slogan remained just that—a mere slogan or idol, not a “living idea” that could have bearing, for example, on perhaps the most crucial question of the 1950s context, namely segregation and Jim Crow. Although all might agree that “all men are created equal,” the idea behind the words did not affectively impact all.

Weil engaged in a similar critique of ideology. In her essay “The Power of Words,” Weil wrote that the worst and bloodiest conflicts center around words whose meanings are elusive or non-existent (Weil, 1986a, p. 222). Nationalism in particular served to fuel conflicts around unclear ends. “It is the very concept of the nation that needs to be suppressed—or rather, the manner in which the word is used,” she wrote. “For the word national and the expressions of which it forms [a] part are empty of all meaning; their only content is millions of corpses, and orphans, and disabled men, and tears and despair” (Weil, 1986a, p. 225).

To return to the compensations for the void, clearing away “idols” such as nationalism and white supremacy is a revelation of reality, a reality initially experienced—as Medieval mystics suggested, and Fromm and Weil apply to their context—as empty, dark, and “void.” On Weil’s account, personal identity cannot be uncovered through the manufacture of lost ethnic identities or veneration of the nation-state, because one’s true identity is uncovered only through self-emptying, or what Weil calls “decreation” (de-creation). Self-emptying (*kenosis*) has a role in Christian theology; in Philippians 2:5-7, Jesus is described as having “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,” and followers are exhorted to a similar self-emptying. This biblical reference, as well as Friedrich Nietzsche’s rejection of Christianity’s affinity for the masses and the weak, calling it a “religion of slaves,” is likely the root of Weil’s statement that she felt she belonged to Christianity as “the religion of slaves.” Here Weil was making a not-too-subtle critique of Nietzsche, of whom many fascists of the time were fans. Slaves, too, Weil would have known, were the heroes of the Hegelian Marxist master-slave dialectic. Despite the slave’s oppression, the slave has greater insight than the master into human nature and the struggle for freedom; the slave learns that is only by risking everything, even life itself, that freedom can be won.

Weil distinguishes decreation from destruction (Weil, 1977b, p. 350). Decreation is not violence turned inward against the self, but a creative

principle that stands in relationship with non-being. According to Weil's philosophical theology, God himself must be engaged in decreation, since only by withdrawing in part from creation can God (who is Being) create something other, a composite of being and non-being (Weil, 1977b, p. 351). Human beings can participate with God in creating by decreating themselves, withdrawing from their ego and their identification with self-descriptions (Weil, 1977b, p. 351).

What holds us back from decreation is our knowledge that after clearing away idols, reality is initially experienced as empty, dark, and "void," as some mystical traditions teach. We know about the void in advance of fully facing it, these mystics would argue, because we periodically experience the terror of the void when we momentarily release our grip on our idols or glance away from them momentarily before turning back to them in fright. Periodic loss of one idol may lead us to quickly replace it with a new one. For example, consider how quickly recovering addicts tend to convert to religions; no doubt some of these conversions reflect sincere confrontations with the void—some peered into the void without the help of their past crutches, and something appeared there to them—while others may in fact have rushed into the arms of faith in pursuit of a new compensation for the void. The existential freedom of choice combined with apparent meaninglessness that one experiences with the loss of idols can be terrifying, leading one to seek out new authorities (divine, human, or otherwise) to which one can submit.

According to Weil (1977b), we instead need to hold the void open to *let the void speak*. Filling up the void with whatever we can quickly find only succeeds in drowning out the voice of the afflicted (the suffering or oppressed ones) and the voice of God or truth. Filling the silence with the noise of slogans and certainties, we sacrifice our freedom for a tyranny of false ideas.

Although Fromm abandoned theism in his late twenties and moved away from the Orthodox Jewish religious practice of his upbringing, he speaks in a similarly mystical way about what Weil calls the void. A number of influences are at play, including Fromm's continued appreciation for the tradition of Jewish negative theology, especially as found in Moses Maimonides in the Middle Ages and the adoption of Maimonides' work by Jewish neo-Kantian socialist philosopher Hermann Cohen in the early twentieth century, who saw Maimonides' negative theology as a humanism (Cohen, 1995, p. 311; Fromm, 1994, p. 143). In this tradition, the refusal to describe God is a refusal to limit God, and a similar commitment can be applied to human potential and the aims of social struggle. Despite not being a religious believer, Fromm never lost a passion for the power of the mystical negative way. He found elements of the same in Zen Buddhism, as

well as in the philosophies of Marx and Meister Eckhart. Fromm's extensive correspondence with Trappist monk, writer, and Catholic peace activist Thomas Merton may also have influenced Fromm's interest in the *via negativa*, and it may have been Fromm who first introduced the work of Simone Weil to Thomas Merton (Braune, 2014a).

Towards the end of his life, Fromm began work on a book on Karl Marx and Meister Eckhart, arguing that the nineteenth-century radical philosopher and economist Marx and the Medieval Christian theologian and mystic Eckhart shared a common commitment to "being" over "having," to an encounter with a changing reality that cannot be possessed, as opposed to identification with fixed and static objects (whether one's personal ego, God as an object, commodities, or reified ideologies). Fromm wrote (1994), "Both [Marx and Eckhart] were radically anti-authoritarian, spokesmen for the independence of man, for his active use of his essential powers, for life against death, for being against having" (pp. 114-5). Fromm identified an atheistic character in the writings of Christian mystic Eckhart and a religious "messianic"³ quality in the writings of the atheist Marx (Fromm, 1994, p. 115). Fromm's work on Marx and Eckhart forms a humanist counterpart to Simone Weil's view that some of those who profess atheism may simply be devoted to the non-personal attributes of God, such as being, goodness, and beauty. Both Weil and Fromm complicate the usually stark conceptual division between atheism and theism, not because they find the question of God's existence meaningless, nor to trick atheists into theism or vice versa, but because Weil and Fromm are both more concerned with the true faith of the individual, underlying his or her ideological slogans (idols). Thus, from Weil and Fromm's perspective, the white supremacist who claims to be motivated by a love of his own race or "heritage" as opposed to "hate," is operating at the level of ideology, for example; the white supremacist's true faith is in hate, not in a love of heritage. According to Weil, religion as mere compensation for the void is less like real faith than sincerely professed atheism. Weil (1977a) wrote:

Religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true faith; and in this sense atheism is a purification. I have to be an atheist with that part of myself which is not made for God. Among those in whom the supernatural part of themselves has not been awakened, the atheists are right and the believers wrong. (p. 417)

Similarly, Weil (1977a) writes in the same essay:

The role of the intelligence—that part of us which affirms and denies, formulates opinions—is solely one of submission. All that I conceive of as true is less true than these things of which I cannot conceive the truth,

but which I love. That is why St. John of the Cross calls faith a night. With those who have received a Christian education, the lower parts of the soul become attached to these mysteries when they have no right at all to do so. That is why such people need a purification of which St. John of the Cross describes the stages. Atheism and incredulity constitute an equivalent of such a purification. (p. 418)

In this piece, atheism plays a role in leading the individual into the void through which the divine can be encountered. Atheism as a “purification” is one means of clearing away idols. Of course, Weil also realized that atheism, like religion, can serve as a mere compensation, a stuffing of the void with ideology as opposed to an encounter with the real in all the terror it can invoke.

It is worth briefly noting here that today, seemingly liberal New Atheists such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Bill Maher have been influential on some on the far-right, which is an interesting paradox considering the far-right’s tendency to present themselves as defenders of Tradition and the West, which have been so profoundly shaped by religious faith. Some New Atheists share a similar mockery of Islam to that occurring in alt-right and alt-lite circles. It is likely no accident that Milo Yiannopolous and Bill Maher hit it off so well on Maher’s television show in February 2017. The flashy right-wing provocateur and the liberal partisan of “political incorrectness” found a common bond in their scorn for Islam and PC-culture. What do Milo Yiannopolous, who (with some inconsistency no doubt, considering his rejection of social justice principles, for example) often claims that “Catholicism is right about everything,” and Bill Maher, director of the film *Religulous*, have in common? What is the relationship of each to their beliefs? Is it possible that what Yiannopolous finds in Catholicism and what Maher finds in atheism is the same thing, a sense of identity that can be exploited as a bulwark against outsiders who threaten to reveal a fundamental void of meaning? I will leave this as a mere hypothesis here. In the following, third and final part of this paper, I return to the question of identities defined in relation to perceived external threats.

A mysticism that seeks God in sacrifice, self-emptying, poverty, and conceptual silence is nothing new. Weil’s mysticism resembles that of Saint John of the Cross, Saint Theresa of Avila, or Meister Eckhart. Perhaps the twentieth century contributed very little to Christian mysticism of the dark night. However, few recent thinkers have applied such mysticism to a study of social and political problems, and especially to the problem of resurgent nationalism. Weil’s attempt to do so is a major reason why her theoretical and spiritual work is an original contribution. Nor do we think very often of who our natural allies become if we ground our worldviews on a refusal to

fill the void, or on what Fromm called “the common struggle against idolatry.” If Weil and Fromm are correct in their distinction between idolatry and genuine belief, then a Christian like Weil may have more in common with an atheist like Fromm than either of them does with nationalists, whatever the latter’s professed faith. Both the Weilian mystic and the Frommian atheist refuse to fill the void. In the next section, I look at recent research as well as some case studies of current and recent members of fascist movements that suggest that underlying the ideology of the alt-right is an attempt to fill the void, a void conditioned by both economic and individual psychological factors.

THE CONTEMPORARY ALT-RIGHT: ECONOMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Today’s resurgent fascism and white supremacy are failures to hold open the void, instead stuffing the void with hateful mythologies, slogans, pseudo-science, and eventually violence. The refusal to “sit with” the void, to attend and wait for reality to present itself, leads to stuffing the void with phony identities that are always at risk of coming apart. To prevent anyone from pulling away the mask and revealing a self that is still void—rather than “very deep,” as Richard Spencer insists white identity is—the ideologists of hate employ intimidation and cruelty.

These phenomena are clearly multi-sided. On the one hand, generally speaking, individuals who engage in hate and violence can and should be held morally responsible (and legally responsible, when applicable). Economic or psychological influences are not morally exculpatory. The decision to expel one’s suffering onto another to avoid the reality of the void is a decision which one can potentially forgo. On the other hand, the rage, entitlement, or frantic clinging to “identity” found among neo-fascists and white supremacists do have causes, beyond some individual propensity to evil. These causes are both psychological *and* economic. In some sense, it may seem psychologically irrelevant which outlet is chosen for hate and violence. After all, a quest for meaning, community, identity, and an outlet for aggressive rage, might drive one person to join white nationalist group Identity Evropa, another to join the Bloods, and another to join ISIS. (Perhaps similar motives could also lead certain individuals to join certain left-wing groups, although one should be careful in one’s choice of examples.)

Michael Kimmel’s new book *Healing from Hate* focuses on neo-Nazi but includes a chapter arguing that ISIS recruiters and neo-Nazi recruiters use similar tactics, manipulating shame about failure to achieve socially accepted versions of masculinity (Kimmel, 2018). Life After Hate, an organization of former white supremacists that helps others leave such

groups, tends to take a similarly broad view. Seeing white supremacist violence as a manifestation of “violent extremism,” they observe that the same psychological influences draw individuals to a wide range of organizations. They are not incorrect—they speak compellingly from personal experience as well as from studies showing that the same sorts of factors drive individuals to hate and violence—but their analysis needs to be supplemented with a study of what makes neo-fascism unique and the economic conditions that give rise to it as a possibility. I will briefly address these economic conditions, before examining some statements from recent and current members of white supremacist and neo-fascist organizations that reflect the view that joining such organizations results from a tendency to flee the void or to “escape from freedom,” through clinging to a false sense of personal identity. Fromm’s and Weil’s analysis, we shall see, remains urgently relevant.

Economic Conditions

Economists and social theorists have pointed to the growing impoverishment, social atomization, loss of meaning, and rage being produced by neoliberal capitalism. David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* identified a dialectical creation of the social breakdown of meaning under neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism breaks down social institutions such as church and family as well as traditional values, even as neoliberalism also often parrots its support for traditional institutions and harnesses them for its own ends. Although this breakdown of institutions is liberating in some ways, it leaves a dangerous vacuum behind, and when consumerism and the economic rat race inevitably fail to satisfy the individual’s hunger for meaning, resurgent right-wing ideologies can emerge. Interestingly, Fromm (1969) in *Escape from Freedom* reflects on the same fundamental problem, writing over fifty years earlier.

Left-leaning economist Mark Blyth recently helped many to understand why recent populist shifts have sometimes taken a nationalistic form. Blyth referred to a shift away from the political center, with some moving to the left and some to the right, with both trends driven by a phenomenon he called “global Trumpism.” (As the left attempts to rekindle working class solidarity against the capitalist class, the right turns to nationalism against the “globalist” power structures.) Blyth wrote;

The global revolt against elites is not just driven by revulsion and loss and racism. It’s also driven by the global economy itself. This is a global phenomenon that marks one thing above all. The era of neoliberalism is over. The era of neonationalism has just begun. (Blyth, 2016, para 15)

Because political moderates in the capitalist class across Europe and the United States had tried to sell the workers of their countries on the promises of globalization, and those promises plainly fell flat for many people, and as an inescapable burden of debt increased on the working class, workers began to turn against what Blyth (2016) called the “technocracy,” the structures that had arisen to enforce globalization and neoliberalism. The Scottish independence movement, the revolt against the European Union (including the anti-EU Brexit vote), the rise of left-wing parties like Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, and the rise of right-wing figures like Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump, are all related to the same revolt against the technocracy, in Blyth’s view. In a popular YouTube video, Blyth explains:

For the past 25 years, particularly the center-left has told the bottom 60% of the income distribution in their countries the following story: “*Globalization is good for you. It’s awesome. It’s really great. We’re going to sign these trade agreements. Don’t worry; there will be compensation. You’ll all end up as computer programmers. It’ll be fantastic, right?*” . . . And you take the bottom 30% of the income distribution and you say, “*We don’t care what happens to you. You’re now something to be policed. You’re now something to have your behaviors changed*” . . . It’s a very paternal, very patronizing relationship. This is no longer the warm embrace of social democracy, arm in arm in solidarity with the working classes. No, they’re there to be policed and excluded in their housing estates so that you feel safe in your neighborhoods, so you can have your private schools, and they have their public schools, which you don’t really want to have to pay taxes for anymore. So once this is evolved over 20 years, you have this revolt. . . It’s not about the EU. It’s about the elites. It’s about the 1% (Cahill, 2016).

The point to take away from Blyth’s analysis is not that the far-right is a product of a working class revolt; after all, the far-right has powerful and wealthy backers. However, the point to keep in mind is that as what has become known as mainstream politics collapses by demonstrating its lack of commitment to working people and its inability to deal with economic crisis, in the absence of a well-organized left, there are definitely people who will seek solace on the far-right, and there are far-right organizations that know how to appeal to those individuals’ sense of hopelessness and malaise.

Several years earlier, Guy Standing’s (2011) *The Precariat: The Dangerous New Class* also identified the trend that Mark Blyth would classify as global Trumpism. Guy Standing articulated the rise of a new “precariat” class, whose lack of job security and bondage to lifelong debt made them increasingly vulnerable. Although many Marxists and others objected in

response that the proletariat has always had a “precarious” existence and that the precariat is not a “new class,” Standing at least seems correct that the precariat is a “dangerous class” in two senses. Like Blyth, Standing realized that the question is whether the precariat will choose the left, and thus be “dangerous” to neoliberal capitalism, or whether the precariat will choose the right, and be “dangerous” to tolerance and democratic ideals.

Standing (2011) explains that young workers in the first world are being left jobless and economically dependent, even long after college, and they are now without some of the strong social structures of the past that might have been able to provide them with support (p. 112). The growing economic crisis also creates a crisis for masculinity:

What then of young men moving into the precariat? . . . Insecurity is connected to fear of losing what one has. More men are in that position, by comparison with their own past, previous generations of men, and the expectations and aspirations instilled in them by their families and cultures. As the precariat grows and career jobs evaporate, loss of face compounds the loss of income and the status trappings that go with it. With the world generating precarious labour, men attuned to a self-image of stability and career progression are in danger of being traumatized. Moreover, the dismantling of occupational communities and the disruption to old notions of occupational careers produce status frustration effects as men confront the reality that their careers are truncated. (Standing, 2011, pp. 108-9)

As Angela Nagle (2017) points out in her critique and analysis of the right, one can hardly find a better illustration of the rage of the aimless, economically insecure young male than that expressed in Chuck Palahniuk’s popular novel *Fight Club*. *Fight Club*’s nihilistic and mentally ill protagonist forms a secret organization of men who fight one another to recapture their lost masculinity, before progressing to acts of terrorism. The novel has been popular in far-right internet niches (Nagle, 2017, p. 114), and former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon allegedly called his far-right website *Breitbart* “fight club” (Victor & Stack, 2016). *Fight Club* is likely also the source of the right-wing’s condemnation of liberal “snowflakes,” a reference to the novel’s blunt assertion that people are not special, unique snowflakes, despite what their society has taught them to believe. In the novel, the main character speaks about the modern age:

Slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need. We’re the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War’s a spiritual war . . . our Great Depression is our lives. We’ve all been raised on television to believe

that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off. (Nagle, 2017, pp. 114-5)

Note that it is not desperate poverty, necessarily, that is the driving factor here—it is the growing gap between what the system claims to offer and what it actually delivers. The alt-right is not necessarily “poor.” Alienation impacts individuals under capitalism at all levels of economic power. At the same time, a loss of economic security for some may certainly contribute, as the growing gap between what one has and what one feels one *ought* to have (in order to “be a man,” for example, or to be a successful adult) certainly seems likely to cause shame. This shame in turn generates an increased desire by the individual to flee any void of meaning, by clinging to any sense of personal identity that can restore the individual's sense of self-worth.

Psychological Factors

A significant number of those recruited into fascist movements in the present and recent past seem to have been drawn in less by the particulars of the ideology than by a pursuit of belonging, meaning, and an outlet for repressed rage. This harmonizes with Fromm's and Weil's views on fascism as an escape from freedom, or as an idol used to fill a void of meaning. Individuals' continuing involvement in fascist hate groups after their initial recruitment, as well as the rhetoric of their spokespeople and promotional materials, repeats the same pattern of a search for meaning, belonging, and an outlet for rage. The particular outlet chosen for rage, however, as we have seen, is strongly tied to economic and social conditions. As Fromm and Weil would have agreed, fascism emerges as an option only under particular conditions.

Asked by One People's Project's Daryle Lamont Jenkins what he was getting out of this, a member of white nationalist group Identity Evropa answered without hesitating: “Purpose, identity, community—what everybody wants” (OnePeoplesProjecttv, 2016). In fact, Identity Evropa and Richard Spencer's similar National Policy Institute, both express this theme in their online promotional videos and literature. For example, National Policy Institute video “Who are We?” begins with Richard Spencer asking, “Who are you? I'm not talking about your name or your occupation. I'm talking about something bigger, something deeper. . . Today, we seem to have no idea who we are. We are rootless” (NPI / Radix, 2015). In a summer 2017 speech at a “Free Speech Rally,” Nathan Damigo, founder of Identity Evropa, polemicized, “Fuck your freedom! Give me responsibil-

ity!” to cheers from the small crowd (Free Speech Rally – Nathan Damigo). Although he clarified concerning his support for freedom of speech, a talking point of the alt-right rally, Damigo stressed a fidelity to past and future white generations as a substitute for freedom. Although “responsibility” might on the surface sound like what the person escaping from freedom seeks to avoid, when counter-posed with freedom in this way, responsibility implies submission. Submission to a cause, group, or leader can be the sort of “responsibility” that stands opposed to freedom; like Erich Fromm’s “fanatic,” Damigo is an authoritarian, escaping from freedom by submitting to the power of his “great cause.” “We aren’t fighting for freedom . . . we aren’t fighting for the Constitution,” Spencer offers in another speech. “We are fighting for meaning in our lives” (Free Speech Rally – Richard Spencer). Despite the frequent defense of “facts” in the rhetoric of today’s fascists, who fetishize debunked scientific studies like Charles Murray’s *Bell Curve*, fascists are in fact driven not by a socially unconcerned use of scientific reason so much as by a coldly passionate (“fanatical”) defense of their idols. They must constantly be assuring themselves that “white identity is very deep” and complex (Richard Spencer), and shoring up feelings of devotion to their ideological idols. Otherwise, their frame of orientation, which has become their new sense of personal identity, is at constant risk of dissolution. The fragility of this new identity is brought home by remarks by Patrick Casey of Identity Evropa, who uses the term “void” in a May 2018 podcast shared on Twitter: Casey’s interlocutor asks about the problem of “suicide by alt-right, where people obliterate themselves by adopting the most ‘edgelord’ tactics and language. . .to make sure they can never have any social standing.” Casey responds, “When you’re on the dissident right . . . it’s almost as if there’s this void in the middle, or a black hole, and you’re dancing around it, and that’s just the chaos of the times that we live in.”

Listening to Richard Spencer’s speeches, one gets the impression that Spencer’s two favorite words are “deep” and “interesting,” as though constantly trying to convince his listeners that his ideology is not shallow and banal. The white race and white self are “deep,” according to Spencer, which one gets the impression he hopes will be believed on faith. The alt-right articulates the supposed depth or meaning-giving ability of whiteness mainly in relationship to its perceived enemies; that is, the condition of being “white” is to be loved and protected because of the ways in which it is perceived as endangered. However, for Spencer’s Nietzschean fascism, what makes whiteness worth defending is also something predating Judaism and Christianity, grounded in “another morality. . .immune to guilt in general.” Spencer characterizes white people as “decadent” and “sick with guilt”; although their sense of conscience has made them “deep” and “inter-

esting,” according to Spencer, whites have forgotten their identity. He argues for a return to a Nietzschean “master morality,” based on the understanding that, “We are strong. We rule. We are good. They, the others, are weak. They are bad” (American Renaissance, 2015). Notice this is almost a word-for-word repetition of Fromm’s description of the sadomasochistic authoritarian, who Fromm says believes in two kinds of people: strong, good winners and weak, bad losers.

It is also worth looking back at the statements of founders of Life After Hate who entered the racist skinhead and neo-Nazi groups of the 1980s and 1990s as youth, and who have left these ideologies behind, expressing remorse for their past involvement. The rebranded “alt-right” is too new to have mature, self-reflective defectors, and those currently involved in the alt-right are less likely to be sufficiently thoughtful or honest about the darker sides of their motivations for joining the movement. Although the contemporary “alt-right” is in some ways a new neo-fascist political formation, it is in some ways connected to the 1980s and 1990s racist skinhead and neo-Nazi movements. At that time, racist skinheads were already rebranding, shifting away from the image of the young street gang, and encouraging young recruits to wear suits and ties, to go to college, to “mainstream” the ideology (Upworthy, 2016).

Christian Picciolini was a depressed latch-key kid smoking a joint behind his home in Chicago when he first met a neo-Nazi recruiter. Picciolini commented:

When I joined America’s first neo-Nazi skinhead group, suddenly I felt like I could conquer the world. I had been kicked out of four high schools, one of them twice, and I met some individuals, and they promised me Paradise. They promised me that the bullies would go away, that my life would get better, that I’d have a family, and that I would have a sense of purpose. Being a skinhead . . . gave me the sense of power that I was lacking when I felt the most powerless. (Upworthy, 2016).

In his memoir, Picciolini speaks of needing to confront and pass through a “void” on his journey out of hate, comparing facing the void to driving off a cliff:

The French have a saying, *l’appel du vide*, “the call of the void.” It describes that tiny voice in your head that even the most rational people might hear, that taunts you to jerk the steering wheel into oncoming traffic, or the feeling when you look over the edge of a steep precipice and become gripped with the fear of falling, but the terrifying impulse to throw yourself off the edge still beckons. In the five years since I had left the [neo-Nazi] movement, I had heard that nagging little voice constantly, always whispering in my ear to find a way to try to kill what I’d

helped create, but I was frightened of the consequences. . . It was time to face the truth. I stepped hard on the gas and drove off that metaphorical cliff. I floored it, content that the demons inside of me were falling to their death. And only then, when I'd allowed that painful, symbolic death to occur—the twisted hunk of my former self burning on the sharp rocks below—only when could I rise from the rubble and begin anew. (Piccolini, 2017, pp. 251-2)

Arno Michaelis says of his involvement, “I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I didn’t have the courage to acknowledge that” (The View, 2017). Michaelis was recruited into the racist movement as an alienated teenager and high school bully who lacked a sense of identity. He reflected:

I heard this white power skinhead band that told me all this violence that I was already familiar with, all this hate that I felt, was because I am a warrior fighting for my people. And there’s this majestic cause [fanatical authoritarianism, in Fromm’s terms], and if I fail, the white race will be wiped out, off the face of the earth. And it was all very melodramatic and very seductive, and as an angry teenage kid, who felt disconnected from my family, from my society, from the rest of the world, this was the connection that I was looking for. (The View, 2017)

Michaelis had found a way to temporarily fill the void and to expel his rage with his new identity (“a warrior fighting for my people”).

Linking involvement in hate groups to “toxic shame,” feeling unlovable and powerless, Tony McAleer felt “less than,” he says, and “the ideology told me I was ‘better than’” (Matter of Fact, 2017). “I was an emotionally sensitive kid growing up in a household where it wasn’t safe to be sensitive” (Matter of Fact, 2017). Like Michaelis, he was drawn into the skinhead movement more by its angry music than by its ideology.

When I got involved with the skinheads, my bullying survival strategy was, ‘Befriend the bully, become the bully.’ . . . For someone for whom violence was new, I’m going to be honest, I liked it. And every step I went deeper, I got a greater sense of power, and thrill, and intoxication. (Matter of Fact, 2017)

Just as Simone Weil asserted that we seek to expel our suffering through causing another to suffer, McAleer sees the violence of organized hate as a transfer of pain, although this may not fully account for the sense of satisfaction one may receive in inflicting suffering on others: “We take our own negative experiences and feel that we need to project them [enact them] onto other people” (Matter of Fact, 2017). McAleer also discusses the

necessary experience of loneliness and loss that occurs between leaving hate groups behind and reconnecting to humanity (Matter of Fact, 2017).

McAleer also uses the term “void” to refer to the period between engagement in violent extremism and reintegration into society. McAleer was asked whether he got the term from Simone Weil or any other literature that he could recall, and he said he did not; it is his own term for this experience. (Perhaps Picciolini picked it up from McAleer.)

Remarks from these and other ex-hate group members online, as well as Michael Kimmel’s (2018) research, seem to reveal that the reasons people leave such groups are not many in number, including:

- Incarceration, or the sense that one’s life is headed for prison or death;
- Death or incarceration (or threat of death or incarceration) of fellow group members;
- The unexpected feeling of love and protectiveness towards one’s newborn child or a desire to raise one’s child in a more positive environment;
- Exhaustion from a lifestyle of constant fear, hatred, and violence;
- Impatience with the hypocrisy of group leaders;
- In the case of women, misogyny and violence against women within the movement;
- Surprising compassionate outreach from, and relationships built, with members of groups they claimed to hate

Of course, exiting hate groups meant leaving behind one’s sense of personal identity before having a substitute, and since members of such groups had generally cut themselves off from previous family and friend connections, it meant leaving behind one’s whole social circle, and stepping alone into a world perceived as both meaningless and hostile. Unsurprisingly, depression at this stage is common, and the temptation to return to the racist movement can be very strong. Leaving hate behind requires passing through a void that one may have initially fled.

As the alt-right and related fascist and proto-fascist movements become increasingly normalized in U.S. politics, and as their tactics often strive to remain within the law or to receive sanction from authorities—a 2017 report indicated that the alt-right believed Trump and Steve Bannon were keeping FBI attention away from them, allowing them free reign (Sheffield, 2017)—the danger of death or imprisonment decreases, and the social costs of involvement are less great. This means that human connection, mercy, and compassion from others may play an even more important role in helping people to leave these groups behind.

The need for human connection, mercy and compassion, does not mean that is safe for activists and members of scapegoated groups to inter-

act with members of hate groups, seeking to change them. Therapist and long-time activist against white nationalism Cristien Storm (2018) argues that individuals' lack of appropriate boundaries is leading to risky behavior, giving white nationalists spaces and platforms when these should be denied. Building on Storm's work, I would suggest that any message of "compassion" towards fascists and the violent far-right needs to be presented with care, particularly in order to avoid victim-blaming—the reason that people are fascists is not that members of marginalized groups are not being nice enough to them. Further, telling individuals whose work already revolves around responding to trauma that they need to show more compassion, and that their lack of compassion may be the source of oppression around them, could create damaging psychological impacts. It is not the moral duty of activists or members of targeted groups to actively offer compassion to fascists.

Nor does the need for human connection, mercy and compassion mean that absolute pacifism or forgiveness in the face of far-right violence should be the only socially acceptable response to increased aggression by the far-right. Leftist resistance, including the Antifa movement, is much misunderstood by some well-meaning moderates and often misrepresented in the media, and organized left resistance should not be dismissed as equal to or worse than the actions of fascists whom they are protesting. Protest and organizing against the threat that fascists pose to vulnerable communities is incredibly needed. Members of fascist hate groups are not only individuals in search of meaning, belonging, etc.; they are also participants in a growing social movement that seeks political power to further its genocidal aims, and which has support and backing in high places.

Nevertheless, the search for meaning and identity that draws people into hate groups, and the fact that compassion and mercy are one of the chief factors in their leaving, *does* mean that fostering a climate of compassion in society and keeping attention focused on love and joy as the aim of social transformation, is important. Increased rage and militancy are not necessarily more "revolutionary" when it comes to dealing with hate and can in fact be signs of mere fanatics or rebels on the left, rather than the genuine revolutionary, who Fromm says is motivated by a love for life. Overcoming fascism requires more than direct confrontation; just as essential is the cultivation of culture, spaces, and dual-power alternatives so that the angry and alienated do not find the far-right to be the only source of meaning or belonging on offer.

Matters of left strategy lie mostly beyond the scope of this paper, which has an objective of critique and analysis, laying bare the causes and mechanisms of neo-fascist idolatry and its resultant destructiveness as a means of fleeing the void. It bears remembering, however, that the void is

not the ultimate aim, and that individuals need not struggle wholly alone in their confrontation with it.

THROUGH THE VOID

Although according to Simone Weil the void is felt as a separation from others and from God, this separation reveals a “something more,” a yearning of the human heart that makes what lies beyond perceptible through its absence. In her essay “Metaxu,” she famously writes, “Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate. . .by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link” (Weil, 1977c, p. 363). The loss of idols is not a loss of truth and meaning but reveals the fundamental need for human meaning and the ways in which that meaning cannot be filled with superficial ideologies. It is the absence of past idols that reveals reality, that allows it to breathe and speak.

Weil’s philosophy intentionally offers a psychological and spiritual antidote to fascism, but it is Fromm who offers perhaps the clearer articulation of a broader social movement that can confront the void and ultimately liberate us from it. Refusal to fill the void can be the basis of what Fromm calls “the common struggle against idolatry:” the formation of new communities, identities, and social movements around the shared project of embracing “living ideas” and unfolding traditions, not dead concepts and idols. This common struggle unites humanists of all stripes in defense of reason and compassion. “Those who participate [in the common struggle against idolatry] must be able to talk from their heart and to the heart. They must not fear to displease anybody, and must consider that reducing hate and arrogance within themselves must be one of their daily efforts,” Fromm writes (Fromm, 1994, p. 99). These two radical thinkers, Weil and Fromm, were students of the many social conditions that give rise to hate. However, they also showed us the nature of the ethical or spiritual journey through which we may transcend those conditions both individually and socially.

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NOTES

1. A recent study in the U.S. relying on the simpler “Feldman test” concluded that 19% of white U.S. Americans are likely authoritarian. Although the different methods make comparison difficult, this statistic is concerning. (Taub, 2016).
2. Sadosomochism for Fromm is not so much about sexual desire as about the desire to exert and submit to power.
3. Fromm’s defense of “prophetic messianism”—Fromm saw Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, among others, as “prophetic-messianic”—is not obscurantist but a highly practical defense of the role of hope in radical politics (J. Braune, 2014b).