Introduction

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In view of everything that is engulfing Europe and perhaps the whole world, our present work is of course destined to be passed on through the night that is approaching: a kind of message in a bottle.

— Horkheimer, 1940

One of the most famous messages from the Institute for Social Research is that liberal-democratic societies tend to move toward fascism. With the recent surge of far-Right populism throughout the West, this Frankfurt School warning reveals its prescience. But there is much more than this. A wealth of insights pertinent to authoritarian and populist trends is contained in their writings. In view of everything that is engulfing Europe, the United States, and perhaps the whole world, the work of the early Frankfurt School demands concerted revisiting. Such is the purpose of the present volume. Before providing an outline of its contents, I will briefly define ‘Critical Theory’ and ‘authoritarian populism’ as they are used here, and then provide a rough chronology of the early Frankfurt School, focusing on their writings about authoritarianism, prejudice and populism. 

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1. Definition of Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism

Early articulations of Critical Theory can be found in Horkheimer’s 1937 ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ and Marcuse’s 1937 ‘Philosophy and Critical Theory’. Horkheimer identified Critical Theory with several purposes, including interdisciplinary scholarship, intercourse between theory and empirical research, and exposition/overturning of domination. Marcuse described Critical Theory as a movement of philosophy away from rationalism/idealism, toward the practical development of a utopian, post-capitalist world. He said Critical Theory always points beyond present facts, locating them in historical context, between past conditions and future possibilities. Later on, Adorno equated Critical Theory with his own project of ‘negative dialectics’, digging beneath the surface of received truths to show their immanent contradictions (Adorno 1966, 2014). Suffice it to say here that in the present volume the meaning of ‘Critical Theory’ is circumscribed to the work of the ‘Horkheimer Circle’ and their colleagues, the first generation of the Institut für Sozialforschung (IFS).

The term ‘authoritarian populism’ goes back to Stuart Hall’s work on British Thatcherism in the late 1970s. Our use of the term here is consonant with his, although it may be overstating to say we ‘adhere’ to it. While Critical Theory on authoritarianism, prejudice and populism focused mostly on Nazism, ‘authoritarian populism’ has broad meaning. In the pages that follow, to be ‘authoritarian’ is to seek social homogeneity through coercion. ‘Populism’ is defining a section of the population as truly and rightfully ‘the people’ and aligning with this section against a different group identified as elites. Together, ‘authoritarian populism’ refers to the pitting of ‘the people’ against ‘elites’ in order to have the power to drive out, wipe out, or otherwise dominate Others who are not ‘the people.’ Generally, this involves social movements fuelled by prejudice and led by charismatic leaders that seek to increase governmental force to combat difference. It is commonplace for governments under the direction of authoritarian populists to condense and centralize authority, so that more power rests in the hands of fewer people.

2. Historical Outline of Critical Theory on Authoritarianism, Prejudice and Populism

In 1918, Germany erupted in revolution, the year after Lenin’s Bolsheviks successfully instituted – nominally, at least – a dictatorship of the proletariat. For a brief period, it was possible that the German revolution could have a similar result. Yet the outcome in 1919 was a wide compromise spearheaded by the Social Democratic Party (SPD): the Weimar Republic. Five years later, the Institute for Social Research was formed, as a locus for the study of socialism and
workers’ movements from a Marxist perspective, under the directorship of Carl Grünberg.

2.1. Early Writings

In 1925, Reich, a young associate of Freud, published a book on the ‘impulsive character,’ building from Freud (1908), Jones (1918) and Abraham’s (1923) theory of the ‘anal character.’ The book was widely regarded and influential (Sharaf 1983; Boadella 1973). Starting here, Reich worked toward a broader character typology, eventually forming an entire approach to psychoanalysis.

In the late 1920s, Fromm – a colleague of Reich’s developing a separate character typology (Fromm 1932) – launched the first large empirical research project of the Frankfurt School. In the survey data collected from German workers, Fromm predicted that respondents’ explicit political leanings would match their larger – and somewhat unconscious – character structures (Fromm 1984; Thomson 2009). The empirical investigation of espoused values vis-à-vis underlying character remained a major theme in the Institute’s future studies of anti-Semitism.

In the early 1930s, lFS’s new director Horkheimer steered the Institute toward interdisciplinary collaboration (including psychoanalysis) and combining theoretical and empirical investigation. Also, at this time, Walter Benjamin produced ‘Theories of German Fascism’ (1930/1979), the first published work of the Frankfurt School explicitly on fascism. It was a scathing review essay on German nationalist writings. Benjamin derided Nazism’s romantic mythologizing of war. ‘Until Germany has broken through the entanglement of such Medusa-like beliefs that confront it in these essays, it cannot hope for a future […] If this corrective effort fails, millions of human bodies will indeed inevitably be chopped to pieces and chewed up by iron and gas’ (Benjamin 1930, 128).

Three years later, in January, 1933, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. The Institute relocated, eventually to Columbia University. The group became less focused on why the German communist revolution failed, and more centred on Nazism and why it prevailed. Also in 1933, Reich published Character Analysis and The Mass Psychology of Fascism. In Character Analysis, Reich outlined several character types, locating their origins in how they were parented (Reich 1949/1980). One of these types, ‘the masochistic character,’ would soon be reflected in Fromm’s ‘sadomasochistic character,’ which would remain central throughout Fromm and Adorno’s work on authoritarianism. In Mass Psychology Reich merged Marx and Freud to create a comprehensive theory of character, social structure, and sexuality. The Marx-Freud combination was novel at the time, and it profoundly influenced lFS.

Reich introduced the concept of ‘the authoritarian family’ as ‘the foremost and most essential source of reproduction of every kind of reactionary thinking’
(Reich 1946/2007, 60). He noted the authoritarian family was patriarchal and most prevalent in the lower-middle class. Reich lucidly describes the relationship the patriarchal family to the economy and to the socialization of characters amenable to fascism:

In the figure of the father the authoritarian state has its representative in every family [...] [T]he father holds the same position that his boss holds toward him in the production process. And he reproduces his subservient attitude toward authority in his children, particularly his sons [...] [T]he sons, apart from a subservient attitude toward authority, develop a strong identification with the father, which forms the basis of the emotional identification with every kind of authority. (53–54)

Marcuse’s 1934 *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (the Institute’s journal) article ‘Der Kampf gegen den Liberalismus in der totalitaren Staatsaufassung’ criticized Nazi political existentialism, as embodied in Carl Schmitt’s writings. Echoing Benjamin’s earlier articulation of fascism’s romanticisation of war, Marcuse explained German totalitarian thought arose from a heroic-vitalist and irrationalist reaction against the sterile rationality of modern life. Nazism framed the fascist state as beyond rational or moral criticism; instead it was claimed as self-justifying, a direct, authentic relation between ruler and ruled. This meant decisionism at the top: rulers did not need to justify their actions or adhere to established guidelines. Marcuse argued fascism was a stage in capitalist development, rather than a break from it. Neumann and Kirchheimer provided similar assessments in following years.

In 1936, Horkheimer’s ‘Egoism and Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era’ was published in the *Zeitschrift*. Horkheimer’s method of ‘anthropology’ was first given concrete implementation here. It became a mainstay of Critical Theory in years to come (Abromeit 2011), influencing a variety of publications (see Jay 1982) including Adorno et al’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Horkheimer envisioned a focus on the psychologies prevalent among particular groups in specific political-economic times and places. In ‘Egoism and Freedom Movements,’ Horkheimer articulated trends of populist leaders who ‘portrayed themselves as champions of the “people”’ but ‘once the leaders had come to power, they began to oppress the masses, thereby revealing their own true character and the dominant tendencies within the movement as a whole’ (Abromeit 2011, 270). Here Horkheimer also discussed the oratorical techniques of authoritarian demagogues. The analysis or authoritarian populists’ public speech also continued in future publications, including Löwenthal and Guterman’s *Prophets of Deceit* (1949).

As mentioned above, Reich influenced Fromm’s theory of the authoritarian character. Fromm’s character typology developed as he analysed the data from Weimar workers. Here Fromm distinguished three main ‘syndromes’ or personality types: 1) authoritarian, 2) radical (revolutionary), and 3) ambivalent.
The revolutionary valued equality, peace and tolerance, while the authoritarian opposed them. The ambivalent could not fit clearly as authoritarian or revolutionary. 15% of respondents were revolutionary, congruent in political leanings and character structures. 10% were authoritarian, congruent in politics and character. 75% were ambivalent. A number of the ambivalent espoused leftist politics but exhibited authoritarian tendencies. Fromm hypothesized members of the ambivalent group may be emotionally susceptible to Nazi propaganda, regardless the political beliefs they reported (Fromm 1984; Thomson 2009).

Fromm's characterology was similar to Reich's, but without the centrality of sexuality and its repression. Though then unpublished, Fromm's research project on German workers informed Studien über Autorität und Familie, the collaborative IfS work-in-progress published in 1936. The collaboration was also informed by Horkheimer's 'anthropology.' In Fromm's contribution to the Studien, he criticized Freud for ignoring social conditions – which change throughout history – on people's psychological relationship to authority. Fromm attributed authoritarian tendencies to a sadomasochistic character, which he claimed would be more common in more hierarchical societies. Also in the Studien was an essay by Horkheimer where he pointed to the progressive transfer of the family's socialization function along with the patriarchal father's authority to extra-familial institutions. Horkheimer's family theory was similar to Reich's in the function identified with the patriarchal family – connecting political and economic structures with socialization. Yet unlike Reich, Horkheimer exhibited ambivalence toward the traditional bourgeois family. While its decline was liberating in ways, the family was also mediator between the individual and an increasingly rationalized capitalist society (Jay 1973).

In 1934 Löwenthal completed an essay called ‘Toward a Psychology of Authoritarianism’ for the Studien, but it was not included. It is reproduced in False Prophets, a collection of his works on authoritarianism (Löwenthal 1987). During the 1930s Löwenthal published several articles tying literature to fascism. Others articulated relations between fascism and art. Adorno connected Wagner's aesthetics and Nazism in his 1938 work In Search of Wagner (1952/2009). In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ – written in 1935 and revised in 1939 – Benjamin declared: ‘The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life’ (Benjamin 2008, 41). Humanity's 'self-alienation has reached a point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism' (42). In the late 1930s, Adorno and Lazarsfeld participated in the 'Radio Research Project' investigating how popular radio impacts society. Adorno analysed rhetorical strategies used by far-right radio personality Martin Luther Thomas in radio addresses from 1935. He wrote up the results (Adorno 2000) in 1943, two years after he left the Project. The monograph was published posthumously, but a short 1946 article by Adorno called ‘Antisemitism and Fascist Propaganda,’ largely distilled the main takeaways from the Thomas study.
Similar themes as in the theoretical Studien essays were in Fromm’s 1941 Escape from Freedom. Here Fromm tied Nazism to growing alienation under late capitalism. Fromm theorized freedom and security together in a kind of existential rivalry. Emerging from the ‘primary bonds’ of family, the child progressively acquires greater independence and loses security. Newfound freedom can create anxiety, and the child may respond through attempting to retreat back into the security of primary bonds. Emerging from the security of traditional society, people are less tied to families and communities of origin, and have to decide what to do with that freedom. Fromm identified four significant ‘mechanisms of escape’: domination, submission, destructiveness, and ‘automaton conformity’. Desires for domination and submission tend to coincide as sadomasochism, which typifies the authoritarian character. Destructiveness tends to overlap with authoritarianism. Conformity increases anxiety and primes people for masochistic submission, and thus for a Führer.

2.2. Theories of the Nazi State

The IfS also analysed the Nazi state. The major pivot of this discussion was Pollock’s theory of ‘state capitalism’ (which I explain below). The Frankfurt School was split on the state capitalism theory; Horkheimer and Pollock on one side and Neumann, Kirchheimer and Gurland on the other. The debate flourished in 1941, but articles in prior years led up to it. Concurring with Marcuse’s 1934 description of the Nazi state as a continuation of late capitalism with decisionism at the top, was Neumann in his 1937 Zeitschrift article ‘Der Funktionswandel des Gesetzes im Recht der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft.’ Nazi law was a farce. Decisionist rule on top of monopoly capital was the modus operandi of the Nazi state. In the final chapter to Punishment and Social Structure (Rusche and Kirchheimer 1939) and in his article ‘Criminal Law in National-Socialist Germany’ (1939) Kirchheimer provided an assessment of Nazi law consonant with Neumann’s.

Pollock’s theory of state capitalism departed from the more orthodox Marxist perspectives of Neumann and Kirchheimer. He provided the germ of his theory in articles for the Zeitschrift in the early 1930s, but his mature statement appeared in ‘State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations’ (1941), and the first article in Zeitschrift IX(2) (by then renamed Studies in Philosophy and Social Science). Pollock identified a growing trend: advanced industrial societies were converging in basic structure, toward a durable state-controlled market. States might be authoritarian or democratic, yet the ‘primacy of the political’ – the ‘power motive’ over the ‘profit motive’ – was increasingly ubiquitous. Under this category he subsumed Nazism, Soviet communism, and the New Deal.

Studies in Philosophy and Social Science (SPSS) IX(2), where Pollock’s ‘State Capitalism’ article appeared, was a special issue on authoritarianism. Following
Horkheimer’s preface and the aforementioned Pollock article was ‘Technological Trends and Economic Structure under National Socialism’ by Gurland, who – like Neumann and Kirchheimer and in contrast to Pollock – claimed that Hitler’s Germany was still monopoly capitalism. The remaining articles were Kirchheimer’s ‘Changes in the Structure of Political Compromise,’ Horkheimer’s ‘Art and Mass Culture’ and Adorno’s ‘Spengler Today,’ the following – and final – issue of SPSS, largely continued the theme of IX(2). Here appeared Horkheimer’s ‘The End of Reason,’ Adorno’s ‘Veblen’s Attack on Culture,’ Marcuse’s ‘Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,’ Pollock’s ‘Is State Capitalism a New Order?’ and Kirchheimer’s ‘The Legal Order of National Socialism.’

Neumann (1944) provided the most outspoken argument against Pollock’s theory in his 1942 Behemoth, a meticulous empirical and analytical study of the Nazi state. In contrast to Pollock, Neumann showed monopoly capital was very much operative in Nazi Germany, and the class structure – far from being eradicated – sharpened. The material contradictions of capitalism remained, along with the vulnerability to crisis and collapse. Neumann denied Pollock’s ‘new order’ claim, and instead of ‘state capitalism’ offered the term ‘totalitarian monopoly capitalism.’ The Nazi state stripped the institutional machinery that mediated between individuals and state power. Domination was increasingly direct, stark, and even lawless.

2.2.1. Working for the OSS in World War II

The same year Behemoth and SPSS IX(3) came out, Neumann went to work for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) – a precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – in the U.S. government. Behemoth had gained him recognition; due to its merits he was assigned to a series of senior positions. In 1943 he was appointed deputy chief of the Central European Section of the Research and Analysis Branch (R&A); the former having the responsibility of analysing Hitler’s Germany, the latter being a massive collection of intellectual workers created to help defeat the Nazis in World War II. Marcuse, following his 1941 Reason and Revolution, also left the Institute to work for the U.S. government, in the Office of War Information (OWI). In 1943 he joined the Central European Section of R&A at OSS. Kirchheimer joined in 1944. Löwenthal, Gurland and Pollock also sometimes worked for U.S. government during this time period. At R&A, Neumann, Marcuse and Kirchheimer created a series of reports on Nazi Germany. Following WWII, the OSS was disbanded by President Truman. Neumann had already resigned in favour of an academic career, but Marcuse and Kirchheimer followed R&A to its new housing in the State Department. In 1946, under mounting anti-communist pressures, R&A was disbanded.
2.3. Continuing Potential for Authoritarianism

'[F]ascism’ is only the organized political expression of the structure of the average man's character, a structure that is confined neither to certain races or nations nor to certain parties, but is general and international. Viewed with respect to man's character, 'fascism' is the basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man of our authoritarian machine civilization and its mechanistic-mystical conception of life.

—Reich, 1942

With Hitler’s defeat in World War II, the immediate threat of the Nazi state ceased to be the primary focal point for the Institute's work on authoritarianism. Instead, the Frankfurt School focused on the continuing threat of fascism, due to the tendency of advanced industrial societies – whether ostensibly ‘capitalist’ or ‘communist’ – to become authoritarian. In the 1940s Reich developed related theories of the ‘little man’ and the ‘emotional plague.’ The ‘little man’ was somewhat akin to Fromm's sadomasochistic character: ‘Fascist mentality is the mentality of the 'little man,' who is enslaved and craves authority and is at the same time rebellious’ (Reich 1946/2007, xv). Yet the syndrome Reich pointed to was much more generalized than Fromm's authoritarian sadomasochist. Fromm's sadomasochist was just one character among a typology of possibilities, echoing Reich's earlier methodology. By contrast, Reich's 'little man' was a universal type, existing in everyone to some degree (although more pronounced in some people), embodying pettiness, anxiety, vindictiveness, selfishness, self-hatred, and conformism. Little men in high social positions are 'little big men,' who little men want to follow or become. Little men will also follow 'great men,' but they cannot follow truly great teachings appropriately. 'For centuries great, brave, lonely men have been telling you what to do. Time and again you have corrupted, diminished, and demolished their teachings; time and again you have been captivated by their weakest points, taken not the great truth but some trifling error as your guiding principle' (64–65).

The little man is responsible for authoritarianism, and consequently, to end authoritarianism the little man must be overcome. This is no simple matter, however, because the little man is the result and expression of 'the emotional plague,' a deeply rooted physical-psycho-social condition particularly resistant to intervention. The emotional plague is in essence a fear of life's fullness within oneself. The response is hiding one's fullest, truest self from oneself, manifesting most immediately in a physical 'armoring' that prevents the free flow of life's energies. Yet emotional plague sufferers maintain an underground desire to free their bottled-up energies. 'Basically, therefore, the individual afflicted with the emotional plague is characterized by the contradiction between an intense desire for life and the inability (because of the armor) to achieve a corresponding fulfillment of life. To the careful observer, Europe's political irrationalism was clearly characterized by this contradiction' (Reich 1945).
Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/2002) is also very broad in scope and concerns the continuing potential for fascism. It displays influence from Pollock’s state capitalism thesis, but departs from the political-economic approach that Pollock and more orthodox Marxist members of IfS retained. Horkheimer and Adorno focus more on the rationalization of society (Jay 1973). Instead of class domination, they discuss domination over nature: both inward nature – our nonrational aspects – and outward nature – the environment (Wiggershaus 1995). Desire to dominate nature is central to Enlightenment. Scientific reason aims at control. In our quest to dominate nature through reason, we inevitably turn that quest on ourselves (Jay 1973). Enlightenment inherently contains authoritarian tendencies and the potentiality for fascism.

Enlightenment’s dialectic with myth plays out over history. Myth is Enlightenment’s origin, and already contains elements of Enlightenment. Domination of nature is progressively attained, yet paid for in renunciations. Controlling outward nature requires self-renunciation. We subject ourselves to instrumental rationality. Just as myth contains and leads to Enlightenment, Enlightenment contains elements of myth and reverts back into it. Unquestioning belief in scientific reason is a form of mythology, where science and rationality are believed superhuman and fit to rule society. We believe modernity progressively improves, and that, one day, society may reach ‘perfection,’ or utopia. We believe it is our right – perhaps even our purpose – to dominate nature, whose objects are inferior, external to us and without moral weight, rightfully at our disposal. Despite honouring reason and the myth of its forward trajectory, our conceptual thought is shrunk and closed down, eclipsed by the spread of pure calculation (Jay 1973).

Modernity deadens, dominates and confines us within impersonal social structures. As Horkheimer (1947, 160) describes: ‘The hypnotic spell that such counterfeit supermen as Hitler have exercised derives not so much from what they think or say or do as from their antics, which set a style of behaviour for men who, stripped of their spontaneity by the industrial processing, need to be told how to make friends and influence people.’ We accept our deadening as necessary and mythologize it as a moral good. Art, absorbed into mass culture, becomes hollow and impersonal. ‘Today works of art, suitably packaged like political slogans, are pressed on a reluctant public at reduced prices by the culture industry; they are opened up for popular enjoyment like parks […] The abolition of educational privilege by disposing of culture at bargain prices does not admit the masses to the preserves from which they were formerly excluded but, under the existing social conditions, contributes to the decay of education and the progress of barbaric incoherence’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947/2002, 130). We are neutralized, without independent thought or will to resist. Even radical intellectuals are compromised: ‘Ambition aims solely at expertise in the accepted stock-in-trade, hitting on the correct slogan […] Stalin only needs to clear his throat and they throw Kafka and Van Gogh on the rubbish-heap’ (Adorno 1951, 207).
New technologies facilitate saturation of life with mass media. ‘In the total assimilation of culture products into the commodity sphere radio makes no attempt to purvey its products as commodities. In America it levies no duty from the public. It thereby takes on the deceptive form of a disinterested, impartial authority, which fits fascism like a glove’ (129). Hardened, conformist, apathetic and pacified, we are primed for authoritarianism. Total administration continues the logical progression (Kellner 1989). ‘In fascism the radio becomes the universal mouthpiece of the Führer; in the loudspeakers on the street his voice merges with the howl of sirens proclaiming panic, from which modern propaganda is hard to distinguish in any case’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947/2002, 129).

Reaction against modernity is also tempted toward fascism. The wish to overcome modern alienation and anxiety can lead to authoritarianism, fascist mythologies awaiting the demoralized. Devotion to demagogues, the imagination of organic ethnic superiority and unity, narratives about reclaiming a lost golden age, the rightful ascension to global rule, and so on, may all offer cognitive palliatives. We have only to transpose our myths about superiority over nature and our dominating, instrumental relations toward it onto a segment of humanity to readily accept their genocide. For Nazism, it was the Jews.

Jews were blamed on both sides: vilified and envied as the threat of unrepressed nature against superior, self-renouncing modern people; blamed for levelling tradition, furthering scientific reason and bureaucratic capitalism. ‘[T]he dilemma of the Jew was that he was identified both with the Enlightenment and with its opposite’ (Jay 1973, 233).28 Psychic problems of Enlightenment the basis of Nazi anti-Semitism, Hitler’s defeat only removed one manifestation, symptomatic of pervasive underlying transnational conditions.

2.4. **Empirical Work, 1944–1951**

In 1944, IfS conducted a large study of American workers’ anti-Semitism. They obtained hundreds of interviews from industrial workers in different cities. In 1945, a huge report called *Anti-Semitism Among American Labor*, in four volumes and close to 1,500 pages, was written by Pollock, Löwenthal, Gurland and Massing. They found evidence of an alarmingly high rate of anti-Semitism: close to 70% of interviewees, 30.8% of these classified as ‘actively hostile to Jews’ (Wiggershaus 1995). It was never published in full, but recently a new analysis from archival materials of this ‘Project on Anti-Semitism and Labor’ was published (Worrell 2008). Löwenthal’s ‘Images of Prejudice: Anti-Semitism among U.S. Workers during World War II,’ a part of the original report, was included – with his 1945 article ‘Terror’s Dehumanizing Effects,’ on reports from concentration camp survivors – in *False Prophets* (Löwenthal 1987).
2.4.1. Studies in Prejudice

In 1949 and 1950, supported by the American Jewish Community and the Jewish Labor Committee, Max Horkheimer (with Samuel H. Flowerman – not part of IfS) edited a book series on *Studies in Prejudice*. The series consisted of five volumes, including two seminal works by IfS members: *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950) and *Prophets of Deceit* (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949).

*The Authoritarian Personality* is the most well-known and influential volume in the series. Unabridged it is close to 1,000 pages. The basic premise of the book owes a great debt to Fromm's theory of the authoritarian/sadomasochistic character articulated in the *Studien* (and thus also to Reich), and the overall approach also channelled the *Studien*. As Jay (1973, 241) describes it, 'the basic assumption was the existence of different personality levels, both manifest and latent. The goal of the project was the exposure of the underlying psychological dynamics corresponding to the surface expression of a prejudiced ideology or indicating a potential for its adoption.' Other elements were highly influenced if not simply inherited from the *Studien*, including some study participants and some questions they were asked. Data for *The Authoritarian Personality* was gathered through 2,099 surveys administered from 1945 to 1946, and subsequent interviews and projective tests with eighty high or low scorers. The surveys contained four scales: anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, political and economic conservatism, and fascism (the ‘F-scale’). The researchers identified nine variables associated with authoritarianism (see Rensmann, this volume).

They devised a typology of eleven ‘syndromes’ of amounts and configurations of the nine variables. It was bifurcated into high vis-à-vis low scorers. The “‘authoritarian’ syndrome” (361) had the highest potential to authoritarianism, likened to Fromm’s ‘sadomasochistic character’. The “‘manipulative’ type’ – another high scorer – was ‘potentially the most dangerous’ (369). Rather than emotionally driven to domination and destructiveness, this type was instrumental reason, all the way down, reflecting the numbness and dehumanization described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This type would not turn into a passionate and committed fascist, but would readily accept genocidal practices that appear effective for given purposes.

They denoted ‘pseudo-conservatism’ as ‘most expressive of the personality trends which the F-scale measures’ (194). Unlike the ‘genuine conservative’ who is in politics and personality aligned with following and preserving tradition, the pseudo-conservatives’s professed values are disconnected from underlying motivations. Pseudo-conservative use conservative beliefs as rationalizations. They pass as conservative, using it as cover for underlying aggressive and destructive proclivities (Adorno et al. 1950/1982, 50; Wiggershaus 1995). Conservatism is not the only mask for authoritarianism; liberal politics work too.
Members of syndrome type “rigid” low scorers, are ‘definitely disposed towards totalitarianism in their thinking; what is accidental up to a certain degree is the particular brand of ideological world formula that they chance to come into contact with’ (Adorno et al. 1950/1982, 374).

Adorno et al. trace the authoritarian personality back to the influence of childhood socialization. Strict, rigid parents with ossified values unaligned with children’s lived experience promote passive obedience, and suppression and displacement of anger. The focus on the authoritarian family is reminiscent of Reich’s *Mass Psychology*. As Jay (1973) points out, the patriarchal family may have become increasingly authoritarian as its function as mediator between child and society declined. The authoritarian family might be partly symptomatic of the obsoleting of the patriarchal family Horkheimer described in the *Studien*.

Wiggershaus further underscores Adorno et al. do not limit the authoritarian personality to Nazism, anti-Semitism or any particular historically-bound manifestation. To Adorno et al., anti-Semitism ‘was part of a general attitude affecting not just Jews, and even just minorities in general, but rather mankind as a whole, history, society, and nature’ (Wiggershaus 1995, 415). The authoritarian personality was more an ‘anthropological’ type, in the tradition of Horkheimer’s 1936 ‘Egoism and Freedom Movements.’

In *Prophets of Deceit*, Löwenthal and Guterman present their content analysis of radio addresses, pamphlets and newspapers from thirteen public figures who had ‘professed sympathy for European totalitarianism or avowed anti-Semitism’ (Löwenthal 1987, 155). They offered a psychoanalytic interpretation, decoding various rhetorical strategies. Adorno (1991) synopsizes their findings with his own similar work in his 1951 ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.’

### 2.4.2. Group Experiment

Also in 1950, Horkheimer, Adorno and Pollock returned to Frankfurt with the IfS. In winter 1950–1951, IfS members studied German attitudes on the Nazi demise and Allied occupation. They called the study ‘group experiment’ (Pollock et al. 2011). Led by Pollock, they arranged 137 discussion groups of generally eight to sixteen, to meet in public and discuss the recent past. To motivate discussion, they were read a phony letter allegedly by ‘Sergeant Colburn’ of the Allied occupation. The discussions were recorded. Typical with empirical IfS studies, they amassed much data: transcribed, almost 6,400 pages. Their results included prevalence of defensiveness and ‘antidemocratic’ attitudes, and scarcity of guilt or accepted responsibility. In ‘Guilt and Defense’ – Adorno’s report on the qualitative analysis of discussion transcripts – Adorno (2010, 139) bleakly surmised ‘the receptiveness to totalitarian systems was built into the psychology of the individual through sociological, technological, and economic developmental tendencies and continues to exist to today.’
2.5. The 1960s, the New Left, and the University

2.5.1. Marxism contra Stalinism

In February 1956, Khrushchev gave his speech ‘On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences,’ reporting on Stalin’s abuses of power and heatedly criticizing his late 1930s purges. Then in spring 1956, Adorno and Horkheimer discussed co-writing what Adorno considered an updated Communist Manifesto more appropriate to the mid-twentieth century. In these discussions – recorded, transcribed, and published posthumously – they expressed needing to clearly articulate Marxism in contrast to Stalinism.

Marcuse was ambivalent about the USSR. In his 1958 Soviet Marxism, he described Stalin’s ‘socialism in one country’ as a somewhat necessary yet deeply problematic response to the reality of the times, having to exist – and compete – in global capitalism. He kept some hope for the possibility of the eventual transformation of the USSR away from authoritarianism and toward a liberated socialism. Marcuse’s sentiments were not unlike Lukács’, who in 1962 pointed to the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact as strategically sound in the geopolitical short-term (to ward off a hypothetical partnership of the USA and Germany against the Soviets), but ultimately detrimental to the socialist platform. Stalin’s ruthlessness and willingness to partner with Hitler sabotaged Soviet credibility as anything but totalitarian. The need to distinguish Marxism from Stalinism had also been articulated by Fromm and Korsch. Horkheimer and Adorno’s ambivalence toward the far-Left continued. While in their 1956 discussions they likewise voiced the need to contrast Marxism and Stalinism, they soon went further than Lukács, Korsch or Fromm.

2.5.2. The Student Movement

Marcuse’s commitment to the far-Left also continued. The 1960s Frankfurt School benefited – and suffered – from increasing public attention, stemming from the New Left’s reverence for Marcuse (Wheatland 2009). Marcuse’s 1965 ‘Repressive Tolerance’ (in Wolff et al.) argued for repression of intolerant voices. It was widely read and celebrated in the New Left. Habermas was somewhat ambivalent about the German student movement, at times acting in support, but also publicly characterizing a speech of a high-profile student activist as ‘left-wing fascism.’

Adorno was consistently negative, not just of student activists but – similar to Reich – of authoritarian tendencies among the far-Left in general. In his 1960 radio address ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’ Adorno (1998, 94) said ‘Authoritarian personalities are altogether misunderstood when they are construed from the vantage point of a particular political-economic ideology; the well-known oscillations of millions of voters before 1933 between the National
Socialist and Communist parties is no accident from the social-psychological perspective either [...] Basically, they possess weak egos and therefore require the compensation of identifying themselves with, and finding security in, great collectives. In his 1968 radio address ‘Resignation,’ he denoted an ‘authoritarian’ tenor in Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, and decried Russian repression of dissent. Adorno was especially critical of students’ anti-intellectualism, prematurely jumping to action instead of attending to theory (Adorno 1991).

He was critical of the university as well. In 1959, predicated on ideas from Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno (1993) articulated a theory of pseudo-education/culture (Halbbildung) criticizing late capitalist formal education: Modern education operates like popular culture – students instrumentally acquire knowledge-as-commodity, striving pragmatically for career success. They fail to engage in critical, independent thought, and are not transformed by education into culturally intelligent and engaged citizens, as in traditional Bildung. Formal education fosters instrumentality and internal numbing – priming students to accept authoritarian rule.34 In a 1966 radio address – ‘Education after Auschwitz’ – Adorno insisted the most important thing formal education can do is prevent another Holocaust.35 Students need to be encouraged to think independently and to be critical of society rather than just dispassionately gathering information about it.36

2.6. After the Horkheimer Circle: Passing the Torch

Adorno died in 1969, Horkheimer in 1973. The torch of leading the Frankfurt School passed to Habermas, who moved away from Marx and Freud. He also moved away from the explicit discussion of authoritarianism, prejudice and populism; focusing more specifically on social prerequisites for rational democratic deliberation. He explicitly distinguished his ideas from Freud and psychoanalysis in Knowledge and Human Interests (1971). In the 1970s he proposed a ‘reconstruction’ of Marx’s theory of history, influenced by Mead and Kohlberg (1975a). His theory of Legitimation Crisis (1975b) retained remnants of Pollock’s state capitalism theory, and dealt with the possibility of popular uprising, associated with lack of faith in the elite and prevailing social order. Habermas’ crisis theory returned in his magnum opus The Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987), wherein he briefly discussed the temptation under crisis conditions for authoritarian attempts to return to less modern ways of life. He looked at styles of authority, organization, communication and rationality, but questions of economic exploitation and social oppression largely faded from view.

Fromm, who remained estranged from the ‘Horkheimer Circle’ since the late 1930s, returned to the topic of authoritarianism in The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (1973/1992). Here he presents a theory of ‘malignant aggression,’ influenced by his prior work on character types and existential needs. Fromm describes malignant aggression as when people harm others for pleasure, and
he claims it is rooted in deleterious social conditions that channel humanity’s existential needs into destructive directions. He outlines two prone character types: the ‘destructive character’ who is sadistic, and the ‘necrophilious character’ who loves death. Illustrating the former, Fromm provides brief exposés of Stalin and Himmler. For the latter, he gives an extended example of Hitler including a biographical and analytical outline of his character development from birth to young adulthood.

In comparison with the surge of popularity in the 1960s, in the 1970s the work of the older Frankfurt School fell out of popular focus. In the German student movement, Leftists gravitated to orthodox Marxism. In the USA, an economic decline and a new wave of conservatism set in. This does not mean the work of the Horkheimer Circle and their associates had no presence in academia after the 1960s. Rather, their ideas were taken into the academy in simplified and diluted form (Wheatland 2009).

While Marcuse was gaining an activist following, Althusserian Marxism and French poststructuralism were beginning to bloom. Influenced by Marx via Gramsci and Freud via Lacan, these movements were somewhat distant cousins to Critical Theory. Gramsci, imprisoned by Italian fascists in 1926, wrote about fascism in *Prison Notebooks*. Poulantzas (1970) and Deleuze and Guattari (1972) wrote on fascism in the early 1970s. Generally speaking, however, Althusserian (structuralist) Marxism fed into and then took a backseat to poststructuralism, which tended toward relativist linguistics and identity politics, away from directly critiquing political economy, authoritarianism and populism. One important exception – especially for the present volume – was in Stuart Hall’s (1978/2013) work in the late 1970s when, analysing British Thatcherism, he coined the term ‘authoritarian populism.’

In recent years, with reference to the ascendance of the European and American far-Right, a host of public voices have cropped up arguing for a return to the early Frankfurt School. While Honneth has discussed racism in his writings on recognition (Honneth 1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003), neither the second nor third generation of the Frankfurt School has truly carried on the critique of authoritarianism that figured so prominently in the earlier IfS work by Horkheimer and colleagues. It is clear to growing numbers that their theoretical and empirical insights were very prescient and instructive, and are now of utmost pertinence. I hope that in the above pages I have conveyed something of the enormity of their accomplishments in the study of authoritarianism, prejudice and populism. The articles that follow in this volume are arranged to explain and exhibit the fruitful applicability of the work of the early IfS to the study of authoritarian populism in the twenty-first century.

3. Outline of the Present Volume

The first section, *Theories of Authoritarianism*, contains articles arguing for applications of early Critical Theory to contemporary authoritarian populism.
John Abromeit looks at the development of the Frankfurt School’s work on authoritarian populism within its political and historical context, and argues for its current pertinence due to current European and American trends. The surge of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s has helped to generate a state of Euro-America similar to the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, he recommends revisiting the 1930s theoretical work of Horkheimer – particularly his essay ‘Egoism and Freedom Movements’ – and of Fromm, both of which treat the relationship between capitalist crises and authoritarian populist movements, pressing realities for them during those years. After exploring Horkheimer’s ideas from ‘Egoism,’ Abromeit brings together ideas and findings from Dialectic of Enlightenment, The Authoritarian Personality, Prophets of Deceit and the study of American workers’ anti-Semitism during WWII. Against this background he analyses the USA today – specifically the Tea Party and Trump – exhibiting the fruitful applicability of several concepts from the aforementioned works. An earlier version of Abromeit’s chapter, titled ‘Critical Theory and the Persistence of Right-Wing Populism,’ appeared in Logos 15 (2–3), 2016, available at: http://logosjournal.com/2016/abromeit/.

Lars Rensmann extracts from the writings of Löwenthal, Horkheimer and Adorno the key themes of the characteristics and techniques of populist leaders, the nature of authoritarian governance, and the psychological appeal of authoritarian populist leaders to their followers. He identifies various elements that reflect the techniques and psychosocial make-up of far-Right populist movements today across Europe, and reconstructs them into a unified framework for studying authoritarian populism in the contemporary moment. He divides the reconstruction into three paths: a) the ‘authoritarian syndrome’ from The Authoritarian Personality, b) psychological techniques of demagogic authoritarian populist public speakers, as described in Prophets of Deceit as well as several of Adorno’s writings, and c) a combination of Adorno’s dialectical theories of objectification, fetishization, and social domination, and Horkheimer’s racket theory of government.

Samir Gandesha argues against two recent theoretical perspectives on populism, and argues instead for Critical Theory from the 1930s and 1940s. The first theoretical perspective is from Norris and Inglehart, who discuss populism (too narrowly) as a right-wing cultural backlash from an older generation of European and American white men who resent their loss of authority as progressive values have gained among younger generations. Gandesha describes their argument as underdeveloped, and warns it is dangerous to passively accept the view that ‘progress’ will naturally happen with changing generations. Once in power, authoritarians can change the rules of the game, with influence beyond their immediate time and demographic. The second perspective is from Laclau, who discusses populism (too narrowly) as a left-wing phenomenon. Laclau’s take is rooted in the philosophical lineage stemming from Gramsci and Lacan, much more sophisticated than Norris and Inglehart. Yet Laclau ventures
too far into unanchored, open-ended poststructuralism, ignoring important historical continuities. Neither Norris and Inglehart’s nor Laclau’s theory sufficiently addresses economic conditions or group/mass psychology. By contrast, IfS thinkers such as Adorno and Fromm do. Gandesha proceeds to distinguish qualities associated with left-vis-à-vis right-wing populisms.


The next section, **Foundations of Authoritarianism**, focuses on using Critical Theory to illuminate the historical roots of authoritarian populism.

Stephen Eric Bronner presents us – in kinship to the tradition stemming from Horkheimer’s ‘Egoism’ essay – with ‘the bigot’: an anthropological type along the lines of Fromm’s ‘sadomasochistic character’ and Adorno et al.’s ‘authoritarian syndrome.’ Bronner identifies capitalist modernity as underlying the bigot’s emergence, and colourfully exposes bigot psychology. In the Western past, women’s rights and tolerance of diversity were minimal, and much prejudice and inequality was as common and normalized as to be invisible, or at least unarticulated as problematic. Modernity destroys that cosy ignorance, and benefits of hierarchy are stripped from the privileged, who are consequently not as privileged as they would like, and not as privileged as afforded their perceived ilk historically. Modernity also erodes family, small-town community, and much tradition. The bigot wants to halt these erosions and retreat back to old ways which seem more solid. Out of this angst grows intolerance for social change and for Others with different ways of life. Bronner closes with a brief history and critique of post-WWII identity politics, which he describes with sympathy, but warns of its divisive propensities; identity politics fight and feed bigotry simultaneously. Bronner’s chapter was originally published as ‘Modernity,’ the opening chapter of his 2014 *The Bigot: Why Prejudice Persists*, Yale University Press.

Charles Reitz argues for looking beneath the appearance of authoritarian populist movements, to understand the historical material conditions that generate them. The dynamics of capitalist development must be recognized as primary determinants of these reactionary movements. Reitz champions Marcuse’s ideas, surveying a wide range of his writings and showing his prescience and immediate pertinence. Decades ago, Marcuse foresaw where the West
was headed, and forecast the struggles which we now face. Reitz insists that recognizing capitalism as driving authoritarianism begs that we build an alternative world-system. He proposes a vision influenced by Marx, Marcuse, and ecological philosopher Aldo Leopold: ‘Green Commonwealth.’

Jeremiah Morelock and Felipe Ziotti Narita bring Habermas and Wallerstein into conversation, applying their ideas to populisms outside the global core. They argue Habermas’ earlier ideas from *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1991) and *The Theory of Communicative Action* can be usefully applied to populism, yet they would benefit by being paired with Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis. Together they can offer a comprehensive perspective on how populist movements take shape within modernizing nations: rooted in the lifeworld yet instigated and shaped within a changing global division of labour, economic development and urbanization. This can be especially useful for understanding populisms arising in (semi)peripheral areas, such as in Latin America. The authors apply the Habermas-Wallerstein pairing to several movements in Latin American history.

The final section is on **Digital Authoritarianism**, containing articles that apply Critical Theory to authoritarian populism on social media.

Christian Fuchs studies right-wing extremism online, specifically on Facebook. He begins by discussing the concept ‘ideology,’ pointing to lack of consensus on its meaning. He contrasts Gramscian ‘ideology theory’ inherited by Althusser, Laclau, and Stuart Hall, with Lukácsian ‘ideology critique’ inherited by IfS. Fuchs favours ideology critique, which offers a more solid footing to recognize real social struggles and oppose domination. After a critical history of the far-Right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Fuchs uses critical discourse analysis to investigate how voters for the FPÖ candidate in the 2016 Austrian presidential election express their support over Facebook. Analysing 6,755 Facebook comments on the pages for leading FPÖ politicians Strache and Hofer, Fuchs discovers much right-wing extremist ideology. He describes five discourse topics in the data: charismatic leadership, Austrian nationalism, the friend-enemy scheme, new racism (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991), and violence. He presents visual samples of the original Facebook posts from Hofer and Strache. Fuchs’ article was originally published in *Momentum Quarterly: Journal for Societal Progress*, 5 (3), 172–196, in 2016 under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

Panayota Gounari applies critical discourse analysis to Trump’s tweets, informed by *Prophets of Deceit*, Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), and Wodak’s Frankfurt-School-influenced work on right-wing populist discourse. Gounari extracts six analytical categories from Löwenthal and Guterman and Wodak concerning authoritarian populist demagoguery, and several aspects of the ‘one-dimensional discourse’ found on Twitter. Combing through thousands of samples from TrumpTwitterArchive, she finds many instances fitting the categories.
Forrest Muelrath compares the theatrical properties of the Trump social media spectacle and Wagnerian opera as Adorno articulated. Muelrath centres on Benjamin’s and Adorno’s treatment of the concept ‘phantasmagoria’: in Marx, the aspect of commodity fetishism whereby human labour is occluded and commodities are experienced with quasi-mysterious and heightened allure. In Wagnerian opera, Adorno identified phantasmagoria in the dramatism of staged events that hit the viewer with larger-than-life intensity, the processes underlying their appearances being concealed. Muelrath explains how Trump’s social media appearances occlude not only human labour, but also the work of ‘automatic machines’ that regularly operate outside of human observation and direction. In fake news, information technology contributes to the drama of ‘the Trump opera,’ the heightened emotions surrounding it, and the erosion of the capacity of the social media audience to determine reality from fiction.

Notes

1 The is from a letter to Salka Viertel, quoted in Claussen 2008, 161.
3 In this outline I lean heavily on Jay 1973 and Wiggershaus 1995. My debt to these tomes is substantial. I consulted both works very closely throughout writing this introduction.
4 Republished in Horkheimer 1972 and Marcuse 1968.
6 Thus, while many of the Frankfurt School’s insights fit present times, one should not equate, for example, Trump with Hitler.
7 It was unpopular among Reich’s political associates, however, causing his ejection from the German Communist Party. While primarily – and virulently – critiquing Nazism, he had associated Bolshevism with it. He called Soviet communism ‘red fascism,’ in contrast to Nazi ‘black fascism.’
8 Marcuse’s article is republished in English (‘The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State’) in Negations (1968).
9 The Institute planned for publication of Fromm’s results in 1936, but it was deferred, and the work went unpublished until decades later.
10 Much more was included in the Studien, totaling close to 1000 pages.
11 Republished as ‘Authority and the Family’ in Horkheimer 1972.
12 Republished in Löwenthal 1986.
13 In Search of Wagner was translated into English in 1952.
14 Adorno returned to connecting Wagner to Nazism in his 1947 review essay ‘Wagner, Nietzsche and Hitler,’ where he called Wagner a ‘sadomasochistic character’ (156).
By this time Fromm had gone a separate direction from the 'Horkheimer Circle,' namely due to his optimistic humanism, and to his desexualizing of Freud.

In *Man for Himself* (1947/1990) Fromm further developed his character typology. In *The Sane Society* (1955/2012), he expanded his theory of existential needs. He now identified five, each containing a possibility of healthy or unhealthy response: relatedness (vs. narcissism), transcendence (creativity vs. destructiveness), rootedness (brotherliness vs. incest), sense of identity (individuality vs. herd conformity), and frame of orientation and devotion (reason vs. irrationality). Fromm continued to posit that capitalist society compels people to adopt nonproductive orientations and unhealthy responses to existential needs.

This contradicts the classical Marxian prediction of inevitable capitalist crisis and collapse.


The issue also contained an outline of their early plan for a comprehensive ‘Research Project on Anti-Semitism,’ republished in Adorno 1994.

See also Horkheimer’s ‘The Authoritarian State’ in Arato and Gebhardt 1982.

In 1944 Neumann’s book was republished expanded as *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*.

See also: ‘Authoritarianism and the Family Today,’ Horkheimer 1972.

See: Adorno and Horkheimer 1972.


This category is reminiscent of Fromm’s (1980) ambivalent Weimar workers.

See also: ‘Authoritarianism and the Family Today,’ Horkheimer 1972.

See: Adorno and Horkheimer 2011.


See: Morelock 2017 for more on the pertinence of Adorno’s theory of education in light of present day authoritarian populism.

37 Deleuze and Guattari took considerable influence from Reich in their Anti-Oedipus (1972).
38 See also: Hall 1980.

References


Horkheimer, Max. 1995. *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*. Cambridge: MIT.


