CHAPTER 2

The Persistence of the Authoritarian Appeal: On Critical Theory as a Framework for Studying Populist Actors in European Democracies

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2.1. Introduction: Populist and Authoritarian Politics in the Twenty-first Century

The rise of illiberal, authoritarian populist candidates, parties and movements has profoundly unsettled liberal democracies across the globe. This process is epitomized by Donald Trump's ascendancy – firstly by serving as the candidate of the Republican Party, then to the American presidency – and by dramatic gains of populist contenders in Europe in recent years. They pretend to oppose 'the establishment' and propose nationalist and authoritarian policies in the name of 'the people' – or rather a very particular, narrow ethnic conception thereof. In light of the scope and depth of the cultural backlash which these actors mobilize and represent, there are few indicators that the success of populist actors is a passing phenomenon, or just signifying temporary 'protest votes' (Inglehart and Norris 2016). No longer are illiberal, authoritarian populist voices relegated to the political margins. Instead, authoritarian demagogues,

who often invoke in Schmittian language claims to a 'true democracy' based on ethnic substrates, have by now consolidated as serious challengers to democratic politics and systems as such, and the hard-fought societal achievements which they embody.[1] Thriving on political polarizations and crises of democratic legitimacy, these authoritarians have reached the centre of political life and debate in European democracies and beyond, from the AfD in Germany to the PVV in the Netherlands, from the Front National in France to the Lega Nord in Italy, from Hungary's Fidesz to the FPÖ in Austria (see Abromeit et al. 2015; Mudde 2007). Their electoral success and rising leverage raise fundamental questions about the origins, dynamics, and attraction of this political phenomenon today – but also about the persistence or recurrence of an authoritarian appeal even *within* constitutional democracies.[2]

Against this backdrop, this chapter argues that it is worth revisiting the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory because it provides a resource to develop and reconstruct a framework for the study of contemporary populism.[3] The Frankfurt School, I suggest, still has much to offer to explain the force of the authoritarian populist agitators and their attraction. Illuminating the multifaceted potential of Frankfurt School Critical Theory for theorizing and interpreting the political psychology of contemporary authoritarian populist mobilizations, I will primarily point to three paths or directions. In so doing, I turn especially to various writings on the subject of authoritarian and anti-semitic politics published by Adorno and Löwenthal in and since the 1940s.[4] They point to socially generated, persistent socio-psychological dispositions of authoritarianism in modern societies; the significance of authoritarian politics and political propaganda in actualizing and mobilizing those dispositions; and to the societal conditions and underpinnings that can help enable the resurgent success of authoritarian, nationalist and populist appeals within democratic societies in post-Holocaust Europe and beyond. Employing the initially pathbreaking work of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School's empirical study of authoritarian demagogues within modern democracies thereby constitutes, I suggest, an important element to better understand both the societal undercurrents and foundations, as well as political and psychological dynamics of authoritarian politics – and their resurgence, or persistent potential, in political modernity (Rensmann and Gandesha 2012).

In the following text, I will take three steps towards a reconstruction of a critical theory of authoritarian politics, which grounds a framework for studying contemporary populist actors in European democracies. Drawing connections to current populist demand, I will first turn to the Frankfurt School's specific theorizing of modern authoritarianism and the 'authoritarian syndrome.' Secondly, in view of contemporary right-wing populist actors in Europe I will explore features, standardized mechanisms, and dynamics of authoritarian demagoguery – as presented by original Critical Theory – that mobilize and actualize persistent authoritarian undercurrents.[5] Thirdly, I will point to social theory models about the dialectics of objectification, fetishization, and social

domination advanced by Adorno, as well as Horkheimer's racket theory – understood as potential elements for a reconstructed theory of authoritarian politics of unreason in our time.

I will conclude by suggesting some general implications of the Frankfurt School's work for examining current forms of authoritarian politics and right-wing populism under conditions of contemporary European democracies.

2.2. The Authoritarian Revolt: On the Resilient Lure and Social Psychology of Authoritarianism

A first path is a close re-reading of the features Adorno and others identified as constitutive for the authoritarian syndrome. It suggests that there are strong affinities between this diagnosed syndrome, on the one hand, and the expressions, dispositions, actions, and aggressions articulated among populist crowds, voters, and supporters, on the other hand – as well as publicly among populist demagogues themselves (on social media and elsewhere). At issue are for Adorno shared qualities of an ideal type, the internal network of associations that makes up an 'authoritarian personality,' exhibiting a 'relatively rigid, unchanging structure that appears time and again and is everywhere the same,' in contrast to the 'free human being, who is not blindly tied to authority' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1975, 367 and 361). To capture and describe this structural disposition as an individual and widespread social phenomenon, Adorno also deliberately uses the terms 'anti-democratic syndrome' and 'prejudiced personality.' These terms indicate that Adorno theorizes, and tries to measure, an underlying organization displaying ego weakness, lack of integration of the drives and lack of self-reflection, and a hardly internalized superego or conscience. It points to a psychosocial framework, a context within which – to varying degrees and in various forms – particular personality structures crystalize. Adorno's model claims that there is a structural, general disposition to hatred of democracy, modernity, non-conformity, societal difference, Others, of those who 'deviate from the norm.' Even though Adorno also uses at times 'the anti-Semite' interchangeably with 'the authoritarian,' the model is not, first and foremost, about particular prejudices, resentments, and ideologies – though there are clear susceptibilities – but the underlying susceptibility to prejudiced thinking, anti-democratic behavior, and hate speech.

Even if we leave aside for a moment the contested psychoanalytic assumptions and theoretical undercurrents about the nature of this syndrome, nine key features of this syndrome which Adorno identifies seem consistently present if we analyse current populist crowds, and interviews and surveys of populist voters:

1. *rigid conventionality*, that is, the unreflective attachment to social norms and dictates, and conformism that produces anxiety at the appearance of any social deviation' (Silbermann 1981, 40);

2. *authoritarian submissiveness*, i.e. the 'uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup' (Adorno et al. 1950, 248), measured, like conventionality, by support of statements like 'obedience and re-spect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.' (Adorno et al. 1950, 231, 248);
3. *authoritarian aggressivity*, that is the tendency to seek, condemn and punish anyone who violates conformist morality or authoritarian norms, as measured by support of claims like 'sex crimes, such as rape and attacks on children, deserve more than mere imprisonment; such criminals ought to be publicly whipped, or worse.' (Adorno et al. 1950, 240, 248, 250);
4. the *lack of intraception* and 'opposition to the subjective, the imagina-tive, the tender-minded' (Adorno et al. 1950, 249), as well as unqualified coldness and narrowness with regard to emotions and social questions, as expressed in statements such as 'One main trouble today is that peo-ple talk too much and work too little';
5. infatuation with *power and toughness*, coinciding with individual feel-ings of powerlessness, that is, the preoccupation with a 'dominance-submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension,' reflected for instance in agreement with the statement 'most people don't realize how much our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret by politicians' (Adorno et al. 1950, 249, 250) and 'people can be divided in two distinct classes: the weak and the strong' (Adorno et al. 1950, 249);
6. *destructiveness paired with cynicism*, disclosing an underlying, 'general-ized hostility, vilification of the human' (Adorno et al. 1950, 249), meas-ured through support of claims such as 'the true American way of life is disappearing so fast that force may be necessary to preserve it' (Adorno et al. 1950, 250);
7. stereotypical, '*stereopathic' thinking*, combined with an incapacity for self-critical reflection and feelings of solidarity;
8. linked to that *projectivity*, i.e. the 'disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world,' 'the projection outward of uncon-scious emotional impulses,' (Adorno et al. 1950, 250–51) and suscepti-bility to prejudice, manipulation, and narcissistic valorisation;
9. *fixation on sexuality*, expressed in an exaggerated concern with anything sexual. The correlation of both anti-Semitism and (racist) ethnocen-trism with these features, characterizing the F-scale, prove to be particu-larly prominent according to Adorno, but also point to the susceptibility to collective self-aggrandizement and social paranoia (the social origins and psychological micro-dynamics of authoritarian dispositions I have discussed elsewhere).

What is striking about this, to name just one contemporary empirical refer-ence, is shown in a 2016 study of core Trump supporters (one year before the November election). Matthew MacWilliams has demonstrated in a statistical

analysis that only one trait predicts if you are a Trump supporter, and it is not class, race, or age but: *authoritarianism*. It is measured by MacWilliams in four questions pertaining to child rearing that could have been written by Adorno, including: whether it is 'more important for the voter to have a child who is respectful or independent; obedient or self-reliant; well-behaved or considerate; and well-mannered or curious' (MacWilliams 2016; Pettigrew 2017). Moreover, qualitative analyses indicate that many or most of the measured statements are present, recurring, and highly frequent among core voters and likely voters of authoritarian populists in Europe, U.S., and among Erdogan supporters living in the EU – without even the need to adopt questionnaires and measures in place since the 1940s (Wodak 2015; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Pettigrew 2017).

Of particular relevance for understanding and theorizing the new authoritarian populism is Adorno's analytic description of the features of the authoritarian 'rebel,' as part of the Frankfurt School's theory of authoritarianism. Contemporary populist mobilizations thrive on 'breaking the rules,' ridiculing civilizational democratic norms and standards as 'taboos,' and expressing a conformist 'rebellion' against the 'liberal elite.' This resurgence points to what Adorno conceived as the 'rebellious' type, who is ready for an authoritarian revolt or anti-liberal, anti-democratic counter-revolution. His revolt is directed against social value change as well as established authorities and orders perceived as weak – with the goal to replace such authority while 'rehabilitating' certain conformist ideals and repressive, exclusionary group norms. The type or syndrome of authoritarian rebellion may be of particular importance as a tool to describe and understand the current populist crowd(s). In this case, authoritarian aggression is discharged in a markedly free and unsublimated form, provided that it is legitimized by new, apparently stronger authority figures who take the place of the old authorities. The theory of authoritarian rebellion describes an authoritarian admixture of conformism and revolt: a rebellion is carried out against societal authority figures – sometimes against the State itself. The rebellion might come about because the established authority is suddenly unable to radiate the strength that was once both admired and feared, the power to create order and to clamp down. This process of replacing one authority with another, Adorno maintains, is 'facilitated by the "externalized" superego structure' that is common to all prejudiced individuals (Adorno et al. 1950, 762). The rebel syndrome, the type Adorno also calls the 'Tough Guy,' is viewed as less rigid than the 'conventional' authoritarian:

Here, the superego seems to have been completely crippled through the outcome of the Oedipus conflict, by means of a retrogression to the omnipotence fantasy of very early infancy. These individuals are the most 'infantile' of all: they have thoroughly failed to 'develop,' have not been moulded at all by civilization. They are 'asocial.' Destructive urges come to the fore in an overt, non-rationalized way … Their indulgence in persecution is crudely sadistic, directed against any helpless victim; it is unspecific and hardly coloured by 'prejudice' (Adorno et al. 1950, 763).[6]

'The more conciliatory and weak authority appeared,' Erich Fromm argued when he first identified this type in the Weimar Republic, 'the more grew their hatred and disdain' (Fromm 1984, 226). While identification with the existing order is, in most cases, a component of authoritarianism, Fromm argues that the usual authoritarian assent to the status quo and to those in power can be revoked if the existing societal authority is partly democratized and thus fails to fulfill the expectation of implacable hardness: 'Many intermediate steps lead from this type of rebel to the individual who abandons the current authority figure, only to submit, simultaneously, to a new authority … Often … the cause lies in the fact that the existing authority has forfeited its defining quality of absolute power and superiority, and in so doing, inevitably loses its psychological function' (Fromm 1993, 129; trans. Kizer Walker). New authorities and ideologies that replace the old satisfy 'two needs at the same time – rebellious tendencies and the latent longing for comprehensive submission' (Fromm 1984, 227). Affect control through the agency of the super-ego appears particularly tenuous in the case of the authoritarian rebel, while the sadistic, destructive and distorted strivings of the id, that stand in contrast to established civil norms, are especially intense – apt abruptly and flagrantly to erupt, they are held in check only by external power but can also be mobilized by admired group leaders who encourage and help unleash precisely such social transgressions. They seem especially driven and attracted by fantasies of unmitigated violence against those representing social difference and freedom, the despised 'weak' and 'corrupt elite,' intellectuals, media, religious or ethnic minorities, Jews; against the many constraints of civilization, constitutional democracy, and modernity. The diehard, incorrigible believers and hard core of today's authoritarian populist's followers, particularly enjoying rebellious acts of social transgression, indeed often seem to represent rebellious tough guy types aiming at an *authoritarian revolt*.

'It is hardly adequate,' Adorno insists to be sure, 'to define the forces of fascist rebellion simply as powerful id energies which throw off the pressure of the existing social order. Rather, this rebellion borrows its energies partly from other psychological agencies which are pressed into the service of the unconscious' (Adorno 2001, 137). Adorno alludes here to the ostensibly 'civilizing' agencies, the ego and the super-ego, which impart societal constraints to the individual. Authoritarian destructive energies, in this view, are also a product of the surplus repressions of a civilizing process that remains entangled in unreflective social domination.

2.3. The Appeal of the Agitator: Understanding Authoritarian Politics and Mobilizations in Democracies

This leads me to a second, arguably most interesting path for the reconstruction of a critical theory of contemporary populism after Adorno. The strikingly

recurring elements of the anti-democratic syndrome in virtual and actual populist crowds (or multitudes) and individuals – understood as a disposition towards projectivity, aggression, and submission – and the potential for an authoritarian revolt find an outlet in populist propaganda and politics 2.0. To an understanding of their political-psychological dynamics Adorno's and Löwenthal's empirical works may have the most to offer. In particular, they studied the patterns, techniques, and standardized tropes employed by authoritarian demagogues in order to mobilize support among audiences – Adorno, like Arendt, would have employed the old-fashioned and somewhat problematic notion of 'the mass' and 'masses' – within (American) democracy. Adorno asks how these mobilizations are preconditioned and how they operate.

The main argument is that such mobilization is about unleashing anti-civilizational discontent and offering psychological gains. It is not about material gains and better or different or more just policies, as many left-wing critics believe, but delusions of socio-psychological origins that defy facts, issues of material well-being, and the better argument – the more apparent the lies and untruth of the argument, the harder they stick to the delusion. The authoritarian revolt that populist demagogues seek to stir and feed is catering top-down to bottom-up social resentments against 'Others,' conspiracy myths explaining a complex modern social world and its malaise, and diffuse opposition to the 'establishment' and liberal democracy. It primarily appeals to secret or forbidden wishes, desires and fantasies as it reinforces social fears; no matter how far such psychological needs are also engendered by, and objectified expressions of, economic conditions and material insecurity. Rather than striving toward rational programs, all forms of demagogy trade in resentment and home in on anxieties and unconscious emotions, which they aim to intensify: 'The movement is presented as a value *per se*, because it is understood that movement implies violence, oppression of the weak, and exhibition of one's own power' (Adorno 2000, 32).

In Critical Theory's understanding, many of the psycho-technologies of authoritarian demagoguery thus remain uniform across the most disparate political conditions. While their effectiveness and impact may vary strongly depending on different political contexts and cultures, the standardized techniques tend largely to be the same everywhere. They are best understood, as Löwenthal aptly puts it, as 'psychoanalysis in reverse' (Löwenthal cited in Jay 1973, 173). They apprehend psychological dispositions. But rather than illuminating, they obscure and exacerbate them. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that 'unchanneled longing is guided into racial-nationalist rebellion' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969, 144). Although 'the mentality of the fascist agitator resembles somewhat the muddle-headedness of his prospective followers and … the leaders themselves 'are hysterical or even paranoid types,' Adorno argues, such authoritarian propaganda is 'by no means altogether irrational' (Adorno 1994, 130). Neither the 'structural similarity of followers and leader,' nor the agitator's 'own neurotic or psychotic dispositions' prevent him from consciously planning

his agitation. The agitator is fully capable, Adorno insists, of employing his 'own neurotic or psychotic dispositions for ends which are wholly adapted to the principle of reality […] The fascist agitator is usually a masterly salesman of his own psychological defects' (Adorno 1994, 130). Let me address five of these dynamic features that can also be detected in current populism.

First, Adorno insists, *the method, the "how", is more important than the contents, the "what"* (Adorno 2000, 28; emphasis in original). A principal method of such propaganda is the endless repetition of an extremely limited inventory of themes (Adorno 2001, 148), standardized answers to the social discontent and psychosocial deprivations of potential followers. A key element of addressing problems and discontent is by the recurring method of *personification*. When the agitator raises the question of the cause of social problems, his answer, as Löwenthal notes, invariably indicates a '*who*,' rather than a '*what*' (Löwenthal 1987, 21; emphasis in original). Every social phenomenon is reified, and every anonymous, complex social process or structure is personalized and ethnicized – and thus also simplified.

Appealing to and mobilizing emotions, political demagoguery can satisfy demands for group narcissism and superiority by denigrating or demonizing Others. Personification is consistently paired with dehumanization of the alleged 'enemies of the people.' In addition to, most prominently, 'the Jews' (or coded terms hinting at them) as the force of all presumed evil in the world foreigners and refugees are charged with the image of the enemy. Löwenthal argues that for 'the agitator, the refugee is the most fearsome version of the foreigner. The very weakness, the very plight of the refugees is an argument against them … The refugee becomes identified with the parasite who seeks dupes to do his dirty work' (Löwenthal 1987, 59). 'In portraying the enemy as ruthless,' Löwenthal adds, 'the agitator prepares the ground for neutralizing whatever predispositions for sympathy for the underdog his audience of underdogs may feel' (Löwenthal 1987, 82).

The pleasure of excluding and discriminating bolsters narcissistic aggrandizement and, second, through identification with the group a 'delusion-like security' (Adorno et al, 1950: 619). When the agitator offers 'a sense of belonging, no matter how counterfeit it is,' Löwenthal explains:

> …his words find response only because men today feel homeless and need a new belief in the possibility of social harmony and well-being. And when he calls upon them to depend on him, he capitalizes on both their *revolt against the restraints of civilization* and their longing for some new symbol of authority. That which they utter under their breaths, the sub rosa thoughts that they are hardly ready to acknowledge to themselves become the themes flaunted in agitation. What the agitator does, then, is to activate the most primitive and immediate, the most inchoate and dispersed reactions of his followers to the general trends of contemporary society (Löwenthal 1987, 151).

An 'enlargement of the subject's own personality, a collective projection of himself' (Adorno 2001, 140) allows him to take part in the power that lifts him up. The 'narcissistic *gain* provided by fascist propaganda,' Adorno argues, 'is obvious. It suggests continuously and sometimes in rather devious ways, that the follower, simply through belonging to the in-group, is better, higher and purer than those who are excluded. At the same time, any kind of critique or self-awareness is resented as a narcissistic loss, and elicits rage. It accounts for the violent reaction of all fascists against what they deem *zersetzend*, that which debunks their own stubbornly maintained values, and it also explains the hostility of prejudiced persons against any kind of introspection' (Adorno 2001).

Thus, third, the demagogue helps create a political climate that reinforces and promotes prejudice and anxiety (real or irrational), and encourages transgressions of political norms. To suspend existing rational and moral limitations, articulating and legitimizing anti-civilizational, anti-humanitarian transgressions – hence the lack of introspection and self-reflection – is part of the lure. This is why excessive vulgarity, displaying aggressive hypermasculinity and uninhibited sexual prowess, and mocking minorities often do not alienate core voters. Rather, certain bold transgressions of social norms are part of the agitator's very attraction. Popular stereotypes, writes Löwenthal, are 'inadequate representations of reality' that might potentially 'serve as starting points for analysis of the economic and political situations,' as confused points of departure toward a more complex understanding of social reality. Instead, authoritarian agitation employs them 'only to encourage the vague resentments they reflect.' (Löwenthal 1987, 33) In this way, agitation lends political articulation to latent 'anti-Semitic potential' (Adorno 1963, 109; translated by Kizer Walker). When the latter is 'adopted by politics,' as Horkheimer and Adorno put it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a 'system of delusions' can become 'the reasonable norm in [the] world' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969, 154).

Fourth, however, authoritarian agitation in democracies partly relies on, and draws its success from, both such transgressions appealing to the listener's stereotypes and *insinuations* that serve as psychological stimuli for resentful fantasies, such as the notion of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. 'The lure of innuendo,' Adorno ascertains, 'grows with its vagueness. It allows for an unchecked play of the imagination and invites all sorts of speculation … '(Adorno 2000, 54) The agitator might refer to 'dark forces' determined to 'undermine' the nation's culture, 'and the audience at once understands that his remarks are directed against the Jews' (Adorno 1994, 135). This has the effect of elevating the status of the audience, which is 'thus treated as an in-group who already know everything the orator wishes to tell them' (Adorno 1994, 135). It is, as Jack Jacobs observes, the 'latent rather than the manifest meaning of the agitators' speeches that is of import – and the latent meaning is one that can be deciphered by use of psychoanalytic insights' (Jacobs 2015, 98). The authoritarian demagogue thus affirms and amplifies the everyday resentments of his audience 'and seemingly paves the way for the relief of the malaise through

discharge of the audience's aggressive impulses, but simultaneously he perpetuates the malaise by blocking the way toward real understanding of its cause' (Löwenthal 1987, 28). This is also expressed in the use of and pleasure in caricaturing Jews, minorities, those who are different. 'If the agitator cannot promise his adherents a greater share of the good things of life,' Löwenthal suggests, 'he can suggest that the good life consists in something else, the gratification of repressed impulses' (Löwenthal 1987, 38).

Fifth, the agitator himself can advance to the status of a superman and yet, at the same time, assume the function of an augmented ego for his followers, offering himself as an object of identification, protesting 'that he is quite the same as the mass' of the population (Löwenthal 1987, 131). The agitator's appeal and mobilization capacity thus depends to a considerable extent upon an amalgam of closeness and distance, familiarity and superiority: 'One can identify oneself with the great "little man" and still look up to him: he satisfies the requirement for closeness and warmth, and after affirming what one is already, he also satisfies the need for an ideal figure to which one will gladly subject oneself' (The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research 1972, 172). Adorno discerns in the imagined figures of the leader and the nationalist collectivity a close connection to the 'conception of Big Brother,' which Adorno maintains amounts to 'an infinitely expanding projection of the weak ego' (Adorno 1975, 377). The key psychological mechanisms hereby are, once again, personalization and identification: 'fascist leaders are personalized as attractive authority figures … The follower is able to identify with the leader through identification with an idealized version of him or herself' (Kellner 1989, 119). In addition to reference to the powerful political group, ethnicity or nation, the constructed image of the leader thereby plays a decisive role in the production of a collective 'we' feeling, 'the identity that [the leader] verbalizes, an identity the listeners feel and think, but cannot express' (Adorno 1963, 132).

Technological and socio-political changes notwithstanding, the authoritarian dynamics presented by Adorno still seem to have some analytic validity. The authoritarian imago and 'glue' that constitutes the group (again, in a more complex understanding than group pressure or blind submission to authority) is reflected in current populists' posturing: their alleged defiance and rebellion against 'dark forces' and the 'deep state,' the 'tough guy' attitudes of someone proudly and with pleasure transgressing 'soft' and wimpy civil norms, rules, and rights, breaking free from civilizational pressures and mocking propriety, immigrants, Jews, the disabled; their appeal to physical strength and power against intellect, weakness, tenderness, mediation, reflection, criticism, and 'just talking.'

2.4. The Primacy of the Object(ified) World: Rethinking Social Reification and the Racket

A final significant path to be developed for a critical theory of populism after Adorno to which I can only allude here is to situate these insights in the

context of Adorno's social theory models about the dialectics of objectification, fetishization, and social domination. For Adorno, authoritarian revolts against modernity and (the restraints of) civilization function 'directly in the service of domination' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969, 152). They seek to further harden and totalize exclusion, oppression, and destruction. They are not just a return of the repressed and the archaic but cannot be untied from existing patterns of modern social domination shaped by economic imperatives, as well as the wholesale reification of social relations and the object world: 'As a rebellion against civilization fascism is not simply the reoccurrence of the archaic but its reproduction *in and by civilization itself*' (Adorno 2001, 137; emphasis LR). For Adorno, it is the dominant objectifying identity logic, with its blind effect against non-identity and social difference that helps engender such regressive collective rebellions based on pathic or false projection and social or group paranoia: 'Because paranoiacs perceive the outside world only in so far as it corresponds to their blind purposes,' Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, 'they can only endlessly repeat their own self, which has been alienated from them as an abstract mania' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969, 157).

Such paranoiac delusions about the world – detached from reality, experience, and better arguments – are inherently destructive and self-destructive. Against the backdrop of these arguments, it is worth theorizing how far today's apocalyptic populist delusions are linked to post-industrial society's patterns of social domination. These include an economically and politically bolstered Social Darwinism, which shows little mercy for those deprived of access to social goods and opportunities, and which operates crudely in objectified economic terms of win or lose, success or failure. The post-modern authoritarians seem to strongly identify with these terms and respective ideologies – even if they are themselves on the losing end. The flourishing fetishization of identity, directed against individuality, pluralistic freedom and diversity, and universal emancipation, is another constitutive feature of political postmodernity mirroring insights into the conditions of political modernity analysed by Critical Theory (Rensmann and Gandesha 2012).

A related analytic path points to new organizational forms that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and seem to celebrate a comeback right now. Horkheimer translates the post-liberal process of social objectification and authoritarian rebellion in the service of domination into a theory of rackets. For him, the concept of the 'racket' provides a theoretical grounding for politics in its modern form (Greven 1994). Borrowing an American colloquialism and adopting a term from the world of organized crime, Horkheimer posits the racket as the basic form of (political) domination; one based on the political violence of those groups that are capable of using it and prepared to foist themselves on society as extortionate 'protectors.' Horkheimer defines the organizational entity of the racket as a powerful closed group or clique, organized strictly hierarchically, that combines power and economic interests and accumulates resources by means of extortion, i.e. by threats, force, and intimidation. The racket excludes and oppresses all those who do not unconditionally

surrender to its rule and power – the Italian mafia is an exemplary form of a racket (see also Granter 2017). A typical manifestation of late capitalism, according the Horkheimer the racket system merges protection of its members with direct coercion and ruthless violence.

Horkheimer hereby insists that 'antidemocratic forces seek to transform man' into a 'deindividualized, incoherent, and fully malleable personality structure' in order to 'conceal … the very possibility of independent thinking and autonomous decision' (Horkheimer, in Löwenthal 1987, 2). Various rival rackets behave as factions, competing against each other to appropriate the extorted political-economic spoils. All social-historical phenomena up to the present have borne the mark of the racket, according to Horkheimer. In the idea of genuine democracy, which survives in a repressed, subterranean state, the dream of a society free of rackets has never been entirely extinguished, Horkheimer maintains. But the racket form has been revived in modern society – organized capitalism – which is again constituted basically along the lines of the racket, particularly in the extreme case of fascism. In this form of social organization, it is rackets, not class contradictions that give rise to the hierarchical structure of the society's internal workings. The mediation forms of bourgeois society, in this view, are partly replaced by a repressive collectivization of the human being that is politically determined, not economically mediated.

2.5. Critical Theory and the Populist Revolt in Europe: Towards a Framework for the Study of Authoritarian Politics in Our Time

Critical Theory's work reminds us that the authoritarian politics of paranoia remain a powerful force in 'enlightened' modern society – one which continues to negatively influence our political environment.[7] This force, which perceives chaos and disorder all around, still finds a fertile soil in modern states and global publics. In Critical Theory's view, an antidemocratic political climate has particular influence on those who, Löwenthal suggests with regard to a group of American workers, are waging 'an inner struggle between reason and prejudice' (Löwenthal 1987, 250). The political collective mobilization of fear by means of authoritarian agitation can actualize both authoritarian dispositions and real anxieties, as Franz Neumann contends,[8] thereby constricting the subject's decision-making abilities. If authoritarian dispositions in a constitutively contradictory modern global society are translated into action depends, in part, on whether anti-democratic discourses enter and seize the public sphere and whether powerful political and economic interests make use of authoritarian politics 'by conscious design or not,' as Adorno puts it (Adorno et al. 1950, 7).

The reconstruction of the analytical paths pointed out here requires more reconstructive work to unfold their full potential in face of contemporary authoritarian populist challenges. I have argued here, however, that original Critical

Theory may provide a rich resource for developing a critical understanding of the rise of 'illiberal democracy' and the potential of authoritarian populist politics in our time. Critical Theory's social theorizing and its reflections on societal conditions, socio-psychological dispositions, and authoritarian political mobilizations, provide a series of conceptual and empirical insights that are fruitful for analysing contemporary right-wing populism in European democracies and beyond. Even though the Frankfurt School may not offer a comprehensive political theory or explanatory framework assessing the role of contemporary authoritarian politics, it provides multiple significant directions for its study.

First, notwithstanding many post-Freudian critiques, Critical Theory offers a still relevant, sophisticated model of authoritarianism as a contradictory socio-psychological force beyond mere conceptions of blind obedience and submission. Rather, it points to authoritarian aggression and wild projections of one's own fears, desires, hatred and problems to the external world.

Second, the Frankfurt School theorists describe, explain and reconstruct important features and dynamics of the political psychology of authoritarian agitation linked to the theory of authoritarianism, and of an 'authoritarian revolt' in particular. These features and dynamics resonate and are partly reproduced in today's populist politics. In their empirical work on authoritarian politics the Frankfurt School scholars demonstrate that there are context-independent political dimensions of such politics. Some psycho-technologies of demagoguery appear to function uniformly across the most disparate political conditions. The Institute's researchers observe always recurring patterns, ideological repertoires, and resentful themes and motifs in fascist agitation. This includes a set of standardized, repeated strategies working as devices and organizing principles that can be identified in a variety of political or religious manifestations operating in different political contexts. A recurring guiding principle is 'psychoanalysis in reverse,' that is: hate speech seeks to mobilize unconscious fears and desires rather than making them conscious, and it consistently lacks specific policy programs. Moreover, Adorno and Löwenthal argue that an effective demagogue tends to simultaneously display features of a leader above the pack, and of a common man who is simply 'one of us.' Though often unrecognized, these early groundbreaking findings by the Frankfurt School may thus help continue to guide the analysis of political mechanisms and conditions of hate speech today. For instance, the Frankfurt School illuminates the specific ways demagogues effectively employ innuendo under conditions of liberal democracy. They allude to conspiracies against 'the people' by suggesting dark, sinister, personified forces are at work and responsible for today's social malaise and problems without explicitly naming 'the Jews,' elevating the audience which 'knows' who is targeted and making it thereby part of an in-group. The Critical Theorists also show how demagogues gain support by allowing their listeners to projectively and legitimately indulge in fantasies of oppression, crimes, or sexual violence the followers may dream or wish to commit themselves ('immigrant rape culture'). The Critical Theorists thereby point to a

limited, standardized repertoire of techniques, images, and resentment, which increases its effectiveness through repetition. This also applies to the constantly repeated binary construction between 'us' and 'them,' which simplifies a complex world and its challenges by dividing society into kind-hearted followers and ruthless 'enemies of the people' (in the words of Geert Wilders or Donald Trump in reference to 'the media' and 'the corrupt establishment'). The excitement of populist multitudes susceptible to resentful propaganda, Critical Theory demonstrates, is grounded in psychological triggers and effects that point to conformist wishes to join a powerful nativist collective, as well as hopes to take part in authoritarian aggressions against the 'Others' and the pleasures of legitimate rebellion, of breaking the rules of civilization in the name of restoring social order. In this context, the coarseness of political discourse and the provocative, transgressive 'bad manners' so typical for all authoritarian populists in Europe today can be understood as an effective tool and lure appealing to unconscious desires characteristic of the agitators analysed by the Frankfurt School – from actors defaming immigrants as 'bad sheep' (*Lega Nord*) to the AfD that wishes to 'lock up' political opponents or relativizes the Holocaust. Critical Theory also explains why contemporary populist demagogues may seek to appear, and increase their appeal, as both a 'brother' – someone close to the common people and their language ('some bad dudes out there') – and a superhero or saviour, the last man standing who can save an allegedly beleaguered nation.

Third, Critical Theory turns our attention, conceptually and theoretically, to the broader societal dynamics and to the origins of civilizational discontent and authoritarian rebellions in the age of global capitalism. Hence, the resurgence of authoritarian movements is seen as a potential political force if there are no substantive social and democratic alternatives in sight: 'If no hope of true solidarity is held out to the masses, they may desperately stick to this negative substitute' (Adorno 2000, 62–63).

The Frankfurt School theorists also understand that political factors are also critical with regard to limiting hate speech and authoritarian politics. Its success is therefore to a considerable extent dependent on specific political contexts and actors through which public resentments can be politically instigated or combatted, tolerated or negatively sanctioned. To be sure, for the Frankfurt School 'objective' societal conditions are primarily responsible for a persistent undercurrent of resentments that enable the rise of authoritarian politics within democracies. Societal conditions help reproduce the weakening of individuals and make them susceptible to the authoritarian appeal and aggression. Yet specific political conditions – the political and cultural climate, institutions, and the behavior of political actors – along with semi-public, quotidian, and public discourses facilitated through mass communication, exercise decisive influences on the opportunities for authoritarian aggression and its potential transformation into a politically relevant destructive force. Consequently, from Critical Theory's point of view it is also important to actively delegitimize hate

speech, and to exercise social, legal, and political authority against violent authoritarian politics and hate crimes. A politico-cultural context or social climate that allows such hate speech to flourish without being challenged and ostracized is seen as an enabling condition for the rise of anti-Semitism, and of hate speech in general. Critical publics play a key role in challenging the social and political acceptance of such views.

The new authoritarian demagogues, like the old ones, employ a stark, vertical group dichotomy: the '(corrupt) elite' is juxtaposed to the '(pure) people,' and the former allegedly oppressing and victimizing the latter. The right-wing populists in Europe and America are also distinctively *nativist* or ethnic-nationalist; that is, they employ nostalgic national myths and exclusionary conceptions of the demos as a culturally or ethnically homogenous nation. This implies a second dichotomy – a horizontal binary of 'us' against the 'Others,' the 'nation' against minorities, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Jews, and 'foreign powers.' All new right-wing populist actors mobilize this rhetoric: from the Alternative für Deutschland to Wilders, from the Front National to the Austrian FPÖ, from UKIP in Great Britain to Trump, from PiS in Poland to Viktor Orbàn's FIDESZ (both of which rule with absolute majorities, the latter even since 2010; see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). And third, these populists display *authoritarian* features in their ideology and politics. Portraying themselves as their countries' saviours from what they darkly paint as 'crisis and disaster,' they propose authoritarian actions and measures.

The rise of fake news and post-factual politics are one of the new major enabling conditions of the current success of what I call, following Critical Theory's understanding of authoritarian agitation, *authoritarian politics of delusion*. Delusions depend on the willingness to follow them but also a broadly legitimizing supply side, or social cosmos. Benefitting from rapidly restructured public spheres, fake media and authoritarian populists – from Donald Trump to Viktor Orbàn in Hungary or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands – jointly seek to blur the distinctions between fact, opinion, fiction, and propaganda. For a long time, right-wing populists have blamed the 'establishment media,' the 'dishonest media,' or the 'Lügenpresse' (the German AfD) for conspiring and deliberately manipulating public opinion and suppressing 'truth' – especially the term 'lying press' has antisemitic connotations and was also used by the Nazis (it traditionally insinuates that 'the Jews' control the media). But only now, with the rise of 'citizen journalism' and grassroots media activism, these sentiments find and generate mass publics (again) in post-War democracies. This prominently entails resentments against immigrants and minorities, 'political correctness' and the 'liberal elite,' feminism and intellectualism, and often even includes conspiracy myths. However, only with the growth and democratization of social media, these sentiments gained a new, unprecedented level of publicity in democracies. There is, consequently, a new, virtual, yet loud-mouthed social media mob denouncing facts and promoting prejudice: the democratization of resentment. Authoritarian populists thrive

on this destabilization of reality and the democratization of resentments through dubious social media sources. They simultaneously legitimize and reinforce it – and they are especially capable of doing so if they hold positions of institutional power.

Leo Löwenthal's and Theodor W. Adorno's empirical analyses of fascist agitators in America disclose what techniques and ideological tropes – from collective self-aggrandizement to conspiracy myths about 'the establishment' – resonate among voters who are yearning for a conformist rebellion and for authoritarian strongmen to 'clean up' a complex, contradictory, globalized world. The Frankfurt School also provides important hypotheses about the sources of the demagogues' appeal that meets the demands of supporters from different social strata. Applying Critical Theory's political, social and psychological insights about the origins and features of authoritarian mobilizations in modern democracies to these contemporary movements helps us better understand the latter. The politics of resentment and its social undercurrents point to the theoretical potential of the Frankfurt School to analyse the rise of illiberal democracy and authoritarian populist success in our time.

Notes

[1] While populist agitators claim to speak in the name of 'the people' and recover democracy as 'the rule of the people,' they mean a Schmittian democracy by acclamation that undermines democratic representation and legitimate rule of law; and they often propose authoritarian measures directed at curtailing liberal rights and freedoms, as well as attacking the underlying universalistic, individualistic and pluralistic features constitutive of robust liberal or constitutional democracies. Cf. Schmitt 1932.

[2] At first sight, it appears particularly puzzling in Europe, with her legacies of Nazi totalitarianism, authoritarianism, total war, and genocide followed by democratization.

[3] Some ideas on political demagoguery in the lens of the Frankfurt School have originally been discussed in Rensmann 2017.

[4] They include his empirical work on fascist radio addresses, his essays on 'Freudian Theory and the Patterns of Fascist Propaganda,' and 'Antisemitism and Fascist Propaganda,' and *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses*. A study that immensely contributes to and advances the first systematic social scientific analysis of modern political hate speech, which is typical for successful right-wing populists in Europe, is what Jack Jacobs calls the 'second most important volume' of the *Studies in Prejudice*: *Prophets of Deceit* by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman (who was closer to the Frankfurt School than many of the collaborators of *The Authoritarian Personality*). On the continuation of this work after Adorno's and Horkheimer's return to Germany see Platz 2012.

⁵ The mechanisms of authoritarian political mobilization may all the more apply to authoritarian modern societies: from Putin's Russia to Erdogan's dictatorship in Turkey.

⁶ The markedly positive connotation that Adorno gives here to civilization's 'moulding' function is curious (although, in fact, this valuation recurs throughout the empirical antisemitism studies). After all, it is Adorno himself who in his social theory situates the unbridled authoritarian character with his weakened drive structure at the very origins of bourgeois subjectivity and the dialectic of the history of civilization. The use of the obscurantist term 'asocial' is also vexing; 'anti-social' would, in any case, be more apt in this context. In the English-language original, it can at least be said in Adorno's defense that the term 'asocial' appears within quotation marks (Adorno et al. 1950, 763); in the unauthorized German translation, such care was not taken (Thanks to Kizer Walker for pointing out these distinctions).

⁷ On the usage of Frankfurt School 'Critical Theory' as a joint actor sharing a common lens of analysis, see Rensmann 2017, chapter 1.

⁸ 'The purpose of the theory is clear: potential anxiety – whose concrete significance still needs to be clarified – is actualized by reference to the devilish conspirators. … ' (Neumann 1957, 284).

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