



## Post-Truth Politics as a Pathology of Normalcy: Beyond Alienation and Narcissism in the Age of Globalization

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine post-truth politics using Erich Fromm's theory of narcissism and showing a route towards a sane society in Fromm's sense. Post-truth situations are generated by negative synergistic effects between narcissistic psychological tendencies and social media. Both of them have so-called filter bubble effects which segregate people from inner and outer reality. The process of integrating an

unknown experience or reality into the self produces a new experience. That is a definition of Fromm's love and the way to overcome narcissism.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, post-truth politics, narcissism, alienation, self-love, self-interest.

### Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine post-truth politics using Erich Fromm's theory of narcissism and to show a route towards a »sane society,« in Fromm's sense.

»Post-truth,« according to Oxford Dictionaries, refers »to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than the appeals to emotion and personal belief.« The United Kingdom's European Union membership referendum and the 2016 United States presidential election are often considered exemplary political events driven by this phenomenon. In Japan, since the Brexit Referendum and the 2016 US presidential election, *Posuto Shinjitsu*, or Post-truth, has become a popular topic of discussion among



the general population. It is true that some Japanese media researchers say that the Japanese political climate is relatively free from post-truth situations because Japan is linguistically and geopolitically isolated from European countries and the U.S. However, post-truth political scenarios can also often be observed in Japan. For example, hate speeches based on a misunderstanding of colonial history, made by right-wing politicians and activists against Korean people living in Japan, are a serious problem. The Korean population in Japan are the descendants of people who emigrated from the former colonial Korean Peninsula to the Empire of Japan before and during the Second World War.

My paper is divided into four parts. First, I will explain what »post-truth« is by focusing on the architecture of social media, including Twitter or Facebook. Post-truth situations are generated by negative synergistic effects between narcissistic psychological tendencies and social media. I will argue that social media give rise to a »filter bubble.« Second, I will re-construct Fromm's narcissism theory as a critical social theory by describing the theoretical development from Sigmund Freud to Erich Fromm. Here, I will pay special attention to three key points, namely self-relation, self-interest and group-narcissism. Third, I will diagnose post-truth politics as a pathology of »normalcy.« Finally, I will argue that Fromm shows a way to recover from narcissism through individual self-transformation and social movements.

## Post-truth politics and social media

The Oxford Dictionary definition and the above-mentioned events show us that in post-truth situations people disrespect or distort objective facts and they are divided into friends and enemies who are emotionally opposed to each other. This indifference to objective facts and emotional cohesion are brought about by the architecture of social media. First, users make friends only with people who have similar political beliefs or personal preferences and, consequently, read only their favorite posts or news. Second, users can easily share or retweet contributed articles with the push of one button and, therefore, these articles are spread widely and instantly without any fact-checking. Third, by using website algorithms, social media cannot only selectively block news and posts which individual users dislike but also distribute only the information that users want to read.

By combining these three aspects, social media provide their users a personalized »filter bubble.« Filter bubble refers to a situation in which people are surrounded by facts they want to know regardless of whether or not these facts are true.



Furthermore, in post-truth politics it is no use denying subjective reality by showing objective facts, because people do not merely disrespect facts but actively believe in »alternative facts,« which are »objective« from their perspective.

Briefly, post-truth politics has two characteristics: first, it binds people together and forms a very emotional aggregate where groups are isolated from each other, and second, people believe in their own objective facts which are psychologically real for them.

### **Narcissism from Freud to Fromm**

Fromm himself regards narcissism as one of Freud's great findings in psychoanalysis. For Freud, narcissism is immediately related to his libidinal theory. He postulates the existence of two types of drives: one is ego-instinct or psychological interest and the other is sexual instinct. Narcissism can be defined as a state of individual mind in which the libidinal sexual instinct, which has been withdrawn from the external world or objects, has been directed to the ego.

To develop Freud's clinical theory of an individual pathology into a critical social theory using Fromm's theory, I will introduce three concepts: self-relation, self-interest and group narcissism.

The concept of self-relation aims to shed light on the relationship of the self to the self itself. Put simply, the relationship of the subject to the object can be never separated from the relationship of the subject to the subject itself. We can find this idea clearly in Fromm's distinction between selfishness and self-love. According to Fromm, Freud is strongly influenced by the bourgeois materialism of his age and, consequently, cannot think of psychological power without material power. Freud identifies the psychological instinct with sexual energy because psychological and physical behaviors are strongly interrelated in sexual phenomena. Based on this, Freud concludes that the more people love themselves, the less they love others, because the total amount of sexual energy derived from the libidinal instinct is relatively constant.

Fromm thinks that sexual desire and love are often mixed, but they must also be separated in that, while sexual desire aims exclusively at being satisfied, love is an expression of life itself and the power to generate something new, such as thoughts, emotions and experiences, both in the subject and the object of love. In other words, the relationship of the subject to the object can be never separated from the relationship of the subject to the subject itself. Fromm suggests that people who can love others can also love themselves, while on the other hand, people who fail to love themselves are also unable to



love others, because both the self and others are the object of the love of the self. It follows from what we have discussed above that in Fromm narcissism involves psychical tendencies caused by the lack of self-love, while Freud regards narcissism as loving the self too much.

Fromm explains narcissistic people's emotional attachment to themselves, to their own group or to what they have through overcompensation. People who cannot love are not able to generate anything on their own. Thus, they cannot but make up for their inner emptiness with overestimations of themselves or the group to which they belong. They may also appear selfish because they must satisfy their vanity.

Now that we have established that the narcissistic psychical tendency of selfishness is caused by a lack of love for both self and others, the next step is to investigate narcissistic people's subjective reality. Fromm himself pays attention to historical changes in the ethics of self-interest. Fromm's concept of self-interest appears in the form of »selfishness, self-love and self-interest« in *Man for Himself* (1947a), a revised version of »selfishness and self-love« coined in 1939 (Fromm 1939b).

Fromm argues that the meaning of self-interest has changed drastically from ancient Greek philosophers, through Spinoza, to modern culture. Fromm notes, like Michel Foucault in his later writings, that in ancient Greek self-interest refers to the care of the self. This idea can be seen in the Stoic School of Cicero and Seneca. In Spinoza, self-interest is identical to self-preservation or the ego-instinct in the Freudian sense and refers to the full development of human potentialities. Fromm names these ethics »the art of being.«

However, in modern culture the meaning of self-interest has evolved into selfishness or »subjective« interest in material goals: status, honour, success, power, money and so on. Consequently, paradoxically, self-interest assumes an ethically negative character. By contrast, ancient Greek philosophers and Spinoza consider self-interest an objective goal. To realize this goal people should have knowledge of themselves; in our modern society self-interest is just a collection of »subjective« preferences. Material goals outside and transcending individuals are much more »real« and ironically more »objective« than inner self-interest.

From the criteria of modern culture, narcissists are seemingly too interested in themselves; however, from the perspective of Fromm's art of being, narcissists lose objective goals and do not take care of themselves and are occupied, or rather, alienated, by various kinds of outer goals and idols which transcend themselves.

It may also be noted that instead of the ego-instinct Freud himself uses an expression of »ego-interest« or »psychical interest.« We could say that Fromm



also understands Freud's ego-instinct or self-preservation within the stream of ethical thought on »self-interest« from ancient Greece to modern society.

In summary, Fromm's considerations of self-interest show us that the »subjective« reality of our everyday life can conceal our objective self-interest. This perspective constitutes a critical base for analyzing social phenomena. We shall return to this point later.

Let us now leave self-interest and turn to group narcissism. Fromm distinguishes group narcissism from individual narcissism in *The Heart of Man* (1964a). To establish a critical social theory of narcissism, it is important to examine the gap between the individual and the collective levels. Fromm does not develop a thorough theoretical explanation here; however, we can conclude the following of both the societal and individual processes.

At the societal level, through the introduction of the theory of the social construction of reality, it can be argued that reality is essentially subjective but becomes objective through the intersubjective process of interaction. At the individual level, narcissistic people who share the same beliefs or preferences bind together in an extremely tight way because such people tend to be fond of those who are similar to themselves. In addition, since narcissistic individuals who belong to the same aggregate think and behave as a collective and in similar ways, the psychologies of individuals are applicable to the collective phenomenon.

## Subjective reality and alienation

Now we must return to and diagnose post-truth politics from the perspective of a critical social theory of narcissism. People in post-truth situations experience a subjective reality surrounded by a filter bubble and also form tight emotional binds with people who share their beliefs or preferences. In other words, they are included within another, bigger bubble which separates the in-group and the out-group. Under these circumstances, brought about by social media, narcissistic psychological tendencies such as overestimation of the self and one's membership group, or one's attachment to subjective reality are strengthened. The same tendencies in turn increase one's dependence on social media.

Before we address the move towards a sane society, I would like to return to Fromm's self-relation or self-love and self-interest as discussed above. From the ethical point of view, narcissistic tendencies are generated by a psychological state which is alienated from self-love and self-interest. To Fromm, love is an expression of life itself and the power to generate something new. By realizing self-love, people can have the new experience of producing ideas and



emotions, which is the experience of »becoming« or *Werden*. We can say briefly that through self-love and self-interest people will be able to move out from self-alienation and emancipate themselves from narcissistic tendencies such as »subjective« overestimation at the individual level. To clarify this emancipatory process, I will address Fromm's concepts of being conscious and unconscious.

For Fromm, it can be said that our subjective reality is constructed and maintained by the filter effects of language and grammar. People cannot necessarily perceive our whole experience of our inner and outer worlds. Due to the filter effects of language and grammar, some aspects of our experience are accessible to us but others are not. Consequently, we are »conscious« of the experience of realities which we can approach; however, other aspects of our reality remain in our unconsciousness.

To make this process clear, Fromm refers to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis from cultural anthropology. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that everyday ways of living and thinking are closely connected to language and grammar. Differences in culture and ways of life depend on different languages and grammars. Put another way, the realities in which people live vary from culture to culture. There is no sole and objective reality; rather, there exist various realities. Fromm adds social character (personality structure) and the repression of society to language and grammar as cognitive filters. Social character and repression also give rise to collective consciousness, or a »social consciousness,« which people in certain groups or societies cannot perceive.

Within the individual self, there exist two kinds of cognitive objects: one of which we are conscious, and the other of which we are unconscious. They are distinguished from each other by language, grammar and social character, which function as filters. In this sense, narcissistic people in post-truth circumstances are surrounded not only by the outer filter of social media but also the inner filters of language, grammar and social character. Hence, these people cannot fully access their own experiences and, consequently, construct a distorted reality.

### **Towards a sane society**

The way to control narcissistic tendencies is to expand the conscious against the unconscious. For Fromm, the conscious and the unconscious experience of reality are not firmly disconnected. Fromm refutes a spatial image of the unconsciousness and warns us that we should not think of the unconscious as a secret underground room which people can never access. We can recover from narcissistic tendencies to an extent we can become aware of the uncon-



scious and can integrate it into the conscious. The more clearly we are aware of the unconscious, the more objective we can be. However, it is impossible to be objective at a point distant from the subjective self. Therefore, being objective means that we experience an ongoing process of being conscious of the unconscious and by doing so, subjectivity is opened towards an unperceived experience and decentralized.

At the societal level, Fromm says that it is relatively easy to direct narcissistic energy to challenges which human beings must deal with: starvation, disease or disaster. If we can cooperate and produce something important, we can be proud of it together. We must here again return to self-love and self-interest. The process of integrating an unknown experience into the self and the de-centralization of the subject produce a new experience. In conclusion, we can say the best way towards a sane society or a society free from narcissism is, both at individual and societal levels, to produce something new through the cooperation or unification of heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting elements. That is the definition of love in Fromm's sense.

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