



## Fromm's Contribution to the Analysis and Critique of the Ongoing Rise of Right-Wing Movements

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**Abstract:** One of the most important political changes in Europe, the USA and beyond is the growth of nationalistic parties and authoritarian structures within states. This contribution aims to demonstrate how a Frommian perspective on basic psychological needs,

asynchronicity and alienation could contribute to a social-psychological understanding of nationalistic trends. At the end of the paper, we present some conclusions drawn from this social-psychological point of view concerning the development of a sane society.

**Keywords:** Erich Fromm, nationalism, right wing movements, social change, alienation, sane society.

The rise of right-wing movements and authoritarian structures within states is one of the most significant contemporary changes in Europe, the USA and beyond. To explain the success of right-wing movements and parties, country-specific reasons can be found. As many authors rightly point out, very different phenomena and national identities are at work behind right-wing movements in different countries (cf. Wiegel 2018, Minkenbergl 2011, Kühn 2015).

At the same time, it is obvious that the success of right-wing nationalism is not only a phenomenon of a specific nation nor a specific group of people within this nation, but—if we look at Europe and the USA—is a concept with which one is able to win elections, and therefore is often supported by the majority of the prevailing society. Trump in the USA, Erdogan in Turkey, Putin in Russia, Orbán in Hungary, PiS in Poland, Brexit in the UK, AFD and PEGIDA in



Germany, Lega Nord in Italy, Le Pen in France—are all examples of such global tendencies of nationalism and many times of violent and hateful exclusion of the constructed stranger.

This transnational phenomenon seems to reflect, apart from all specific reasons, a general unease of ongoing social change in contemporary societies. In order to understand it in-depth, within this article, I argue that it is very useful to look at three mainly social-psychological concepts of Erich Fromm.

1. The understanding of nationalism as a satisfaction of the psychological basic need for relatedness, belonging and rootedness.
2. The concept of asynchronicity between social-economic development with modern value orientation and traditional social character in today's society.
3. The experiences of alienation as a result of late-capitalist modernity. Here I would like to discuss feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and indifference.

In this paper, we will introduce these three concepts and show the actuality of Fromm's approach by using current scientific research (mainly from Germany). At the end of this paper, we present some conclusions, which can be drawn from this social-psychological point of view concerning the development of a sane society.

To start with, it is important to explain the basic approach of Erich Fromm when it comes to the analysis of societies. Fromm postulates that one always has to look at human relations, which are fostered by the prevailing society, when analyzing societies and their changes.

In the manifesto *Let Man Prevail: A Socialist Manifesto and Program*, which Fromm wrote in 1960 as part of his engagement in the SP-SDF (Socialist Party-Social Democratic Federation) in the US, he stated:

»Every social and economic system is not only a specific system of relations between *things and institutions*, but a system of *human relations*. Any concept and practice of socialism must be examined in terms of the kind of relations between human beings to which it is conducive.«  
(Fromm 1960b, p. 30.)

In line with Fromm, one can certainly add, that the theory and praxis of every social system, not only socialism, should be examined regarding the relationships between human beings produced by the system. This is an important addition to classical inequality research, since, first and foremost, it is not about



economic growth or who owns something, nor is it about whether this is fair or not, but it is about what kind of sane or pathological relationships to oneself, to others or to the world one is likely to have in different social circumstances. The human being, according to the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2018), and his or her relationship to the world are put in the center of the analysis.

Putting the analysis of human relations into the center of the analysis of social structures is a specific quality of Fromm's. Following Fromm's tradition, the following question is of importance: What are the (institutional) relationship structures one has to oneself, to others and to nature, which support a return or as, Zygmunt Baumann (2017) says, an orientation towards »Retrotopia,« towards modern versions of old nationalist concepts?

## 1. The satisfaction of the psychological basic need

Fromm's first observation is that the orientation towards nationalism is a reaction to, as Fromm calls it, the »human condition« which consists of the fact that the human being is a part of nature but also is not. Human beings have to reflect on their own actions and need to establish their own meaning of life, and find their own ways to establish identity and relatedness. To put it in Fromm's words: »Man is the only animal who finds his own existence a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape.« (Fromm 1955a, p. 24.)

To deal with this situation is, in Fromm's sense, the universal human necessity. According to Fromm, nationalism is one form to establish the basic psychological need of rootedness and a sense of belonging (cf. Fromm 1955a, pp. 38 ff.). In »The Sane Society« Fromm indicates: »The average man today obtains his sense of identity from his belonging to a nation, rather than from his being a »son of man«« (Fromm 1955a, p. 58).

As we know from Benedict Anderson and others, nation is an *imagined community* (cf. Anderson 1988; Kühn 2015, p. 107). If you ask a nationalist to characterize members of his group, they will name criteria that seem arbitrary, but positive with regard to the group. Surprisingly often, it does not matter if one really behaves within the defined categories as long as one does not doubt the whole story of national glory and can identify oneself with the national values as the ideal ones. They may name »blond, intelligent, beautiful, strong and disciplined« as a criteria, or even »democratic, orientated on equality and rational.« But it is basically this same principle; Nationalism is not a descriptive category, but always goes hand in hand with a claim of »how to be.«

Certainly, it matters, which one of the many possible variations of nationalism is developing. Erich Fromm himself distinguishes between malignant and



benign nationalism (cf. Fromm 1964a, p. 77 ff.). The latter refers to its own efforts and merits, while the former asserts the natural superiority of its own nation, culture or ethnic group. The psychological effect of malignant nationalism is a simple one: through the devaluation of the other, one's own value can be increased without effort. From this point of view, we are experiencing at the moment the rebirth of a malignant manifestation of nationalism, including explicit xenophobia.

In Europe there is a new right-wing movement called »die Identitären«—The Identitarian. Identity here means literally to become one with ones »own« ethnic group and »own« culture. The supposed principles of the »own« ethnic group and the individual should merge, so to speak. Their symbol is a Lamda, which refers to the shield of Sparta's warriors who defended their people against the Roman Imperium. This example shows two characteristics of the symbolic politics of right-wing populism in general: they represent themselves to be a fighter for their »own« homogeneously imagined culture and to act in self-defense as a victim of aggressive strangers. If an identification with one's nation, culture or ethnic group takes place in this way, it will be directly connected to one's own emotions. Thus, if for example the national glory is called into question, it will also be seen as an attack on one's own identity and it will lead to aggressive reactions.

Fromm marks this as a regressive way to establish relatedness to oneself, to others and to the world (cf. Fromm 1955a, pp. 58 f.). In the end, it (this regressive way) not only damages one's relations to others (to the »strangers«) but also keeps one dependent. Self-esteem is easy to destabilize as long as it builds on the group and is not based on the development of one's own abilities. In Fromm's eyes, people act like a child that does not want to become an adult. »This incestuous fixation not only poisons the relationship of the individual to the stranger, but to the members of his own clan and to himself.« (Fromm 1955a, p. 58.)

In this way, with Fromm we can make an ambivalent diagnosis: on the one hand, nationalism is a social-psychological phenomenon to establish self-esteem by harming others and oneself and keeping oneself dependent, narrow-minded and anxious. On the other hand, humans are social beings who need a sense of relatedness and rootedness that in one way can be satisfied by nationalism. From this perspective, the rise of right-wing populism can also be seen as a sign that contemporary societies have failed to provide spaces and resources for emotional cohesion, care and solidarity between independent and at the same time social, and therefore interdependent, human beings. Erich Fromm offers here a second in-depth analysis, which seems central to explain the phenomenon of rising right-wing movements.



## 2. The concept of a-synchronicity within social change

A very modern thought in Fromm's work, and later strongly represented by sociologists such as Bourdieu or Foucault, is the idea that modern societies legitimize their hierarchical structures with the inner agreement of most members of the society. In Fromm's understanding, it is the social character, which manages adjustment between the individual and society.

»I call the blending of the individual psychological sphere and the socioeconomic structure *social character*. The socioeconomic structure of a society molds the social character of its members so that they *wish* to do what they *have* to do. Simultaneously, the social character influences the socioeconomic structure of society, acting either as cement to give further stability to the social structure or, under special circumstances, as dynamite that tends to break up the social structure.« (Fromm 1976a, pp. 133 f.)

The function of the social character is twofold: on the one hand, individuals are able to satisfy their basic needs by adapting to social requirements; on the other hand, society is able to unfold its productive forces due to the appropriateness of the individuals. As long as both social as well as individual needs are fulfilled, the structure is consolidated (cf. Fromm 1941a, p. 282). But social change during the last decades seems to cause an asynchronicity between social-economic development with modern value orientations and former hegemonic traditional social characters. In recent years, economic globalization and social change has challenged the basic institutions of modernity—as Ulrich Beck (et al 2004, pp. 32 ff.) calls them: The heterosexual nuclear family, the male-dominated normal standard employment contract and the nation-state.

Even if those have not disappeared, they have at least been weakened. Gender and relationships become more diverse, working life becomes fragmented and in some respects more insecure (fewer jobs are determined by collective wage agreements, more people working part-time, more subcontracted workers, etc.) and the national ability to control its own work structures seems to get lost by being embedded into global and European affairs as well as international financial markets.

More important in our context is the feeling many have that the old values and ideas about how to live are losing institutional weight. Value-based, normative state regulations, e.g. concerning different family constellations and sexual orientation were relativized or completely abolished in law. Values such as diversity, flexibility, a certain kind of multiculturalism and cosmopolitan



habitus have become guiding principles and important subjective orientations. Such values also fit better to export-oriented, global operating companies. Fromm's concept of asynchronicity regains importance in today's society. The dissatisfaction about the needs inherent in the traditional social character orientations leads to many people becoming more and more dissatisfied with the existing conditions, and the needs anchored in the character change from a cohesive to a disintegrating element that threatens the existing society (cf. Fromm 1992e [1937], pp. 63 ff.).

Through this Frommian perspective of asynchronicity, one can partly understand the disturbing increase of nationalistic movements. At this moment in history, nationalist movements are gaining ground, paradoxically because some of the nationalists' ideologies are in conflict with the current social-economic development and a new understanding of values within economically and politically ascending groups. In this sense, we come to understand that there is not a rising number of people who turn to nationalism, but rather those people participating in nationalistic movements have always believed in the nation-state.

In various places on the globe, the human need of social relatedness and the fear of losing the old nationally structured social bonds lets people fight for the nation state and against everyone they regard as a threat. Recent research seems to confirm this perspective. According to quantitative analyses, the sociologist Holger Lengfeld comes to the conclusion that class variables (such as income and education) have hardly any direct influence on the approval ratings of the AFD in Germany (cf. Lengfeld 2017). Rather, he emphasizes that there are AFD voters in all strata. He stated that their anger feeds on cultural disappointment. It is not primarily the economically dependent who are currently rebelling in Germany (and elsewhere), but, above all, those »culturally dependent« (ibid., p. 3) who realize that their orientations are losing their institutional weight.

In a qualitative study with potential AFD voters Wakenhut and Vogt come to a similar understanding: »Values that are particularly emphasized in modern, globalized societies were not considered relevant by any of the participants.« (Wakenhut and Vogt 2017.) They conclude that this feeds the increasing dissatisfaction with the societal development.

Based on data from the European Social Survey 2002–2014, focusing on an analysis of the election decisions for populist parties in Europe, Inglehart and Norris (2016) conclude that the rejection of certain cultural processes such as changing gender relations, openness to multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are crucial to the emergence of right-wing parties. »This perspective emphasizes the popularity of a long-term process of value change, the ›silent revolution,«



which has transformed Western cultures during the late twentieth century« (Inglehart and Norris 2016, p. 13).

Koppetsch (2017) states that it is not just cultural disappointment, but primarily the feeling of belonging to a descending social group that loses privileges and enjoys less and less social recognition, which leads to the support of right-wing movements.

»Those with an outmoded habitus do not believe in a better societal future, but look to the glories of bygone times, to the former order, the former position, whose relevance is often equated by many supporters of right-wing populism with the meaning of their own nation. Their own decline and the decline of the economic power and glory of their own country seem to be inseparable.« (Koppetsch 2017, p. 227.)

This leads to the third analytic category of Fromm.

### 3. The experiences of alienation

According to the above, it may seem as if globalized capitalism would go hand-in-hand with values like creativity, spontaneity, self-fulfillment and tolerance, while some people with their social character orientations remain in the era of post war boom nationalism. While to a certain point this seems accurate, it still rests an insufficient explanation.

Rather, market processes were and still are intensified in many ways. They, on the one hand, were accompanied by a relative indifference towards traditional values and so allowed more diversity in lifestyles, on the other hand, being financially successful became more and more the only benchmark of life. In this way what Erich Fromm has described as a marketing character orientation (cf. Fromm 1947a, pp. 67 ff.; Funk 1995, pp. 34–41) is socially consolidated. Above all, this is characterized by an orientation towards economic success and efficiency and leads to treating and feeling oneself and each other as more or less valuable goods, which is in a Frommian perspective a non-productive, alienated way to relate to oneself, others or the world. Human beings lose contact to themselves, their »own« emotions, longings, plans and abilities and they become more and more driven to permanently optimize themselves to be well placed in the market. The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2012) argues that experience of alienation increases in western societies today, as the gap between the claim to lead an autonomous and authentic life and the possibility to do so grows.



In »Escape from Freedom,« Erich Fromm writes after he presented the liberating effects of capitalism on modern people: »Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless.« (Fromm 1941a, p. x.) Feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and indifference, in this sense, seem very important to explain the success of nationalism. Fromm pointed out that these three feelings are embedded in our social and economic structures. People internalize them and they become part of their psychic structure and basis for interaction with other humans.

## Anxiety

Contrary to the hegemonic ideology, even late modern capitalism continues to operate mainly with existential anxiety as the main driving force for gainful employment. In Germany, the fear of sliding down the social ladder increased with neoliberal reforms of the welfare state in the 2000s. The reforms should have helped to establish a low-wage market-sector, but they were introduced under slogans such as empowerment and emancipation through gainful employment. This led to a paradox: on the one hand, authentic autonomy within gainful employment can be seen as the highest social ideal, on the other hand, fear and pressure are still the basic tools to motivate people. In reality, it is becoming even more difficult for many to believe that their job is a suitable and meaningful activity, or to achieve a job with sufficient economic income. To picture this, the sociologist Oliver Nachtwey uses the image of an escalator, which for large part of the population is beginning to descend. Many people have to make much more effort to stay at the same level (cf. Nachtwey 2016).

The fear of the potentially rapid social decline in the modernized welfare state also leaves the middle classes in particular open to nationalistic ideologies, which claim to be able to save the welfare state by limiting it to German nationals as much as possible. According to a qualitative study by the Hans Böckler Institute »concerns about the reliability of one's own employment future« (Hilmer et. al 2017, p. 7) can be used in Germany as a driving force by nationalistic movements. Hence, Hannah Arendt's observation gets new actuality, that there is nothing worse for a society based on labour markets than that it runs out of work (Arendt 1958). The potential increase in efficiency due to digitalization 4.0, which is increasingly present in public discussions, can thus offer no perspective with regard to liberation from the compulsion to work, but at least in some parts of the population, it creates one thing above all: the fear of being left behind in the future.





## Powerlessness

Erich Fromm pointed out that the feeling of powerlessness is a common experience for subjects within authoritarian states. And even in a democracy, the ideal of democratic participation diverges from the reality, where the individual is separated from the centers of political and economic power. From a Frommian perspective the sensation of powerlessness, the impression that »those up there do what they want to« is not abstract but tied to the experiences of the majority, not least in their everyday work in hierarchical organizations (cf. Fromm 1960b; Fromm 1941a, pp. 273 f.).

Production of goods and services happens in organizations where the majority of employees, according to operational or tariff regulations, have nothing or little to decide. It is normal to follow the orders from the top, because one's own existence depends on the good will of the supervisor. Moreover, one can legitimize one's own actions by referring to the hierarchical structure of decision making within the organization. The supervisors and managers themselves can refer to an anonymous power: the market, the constant competition and the necessity to make a profit. Seemingly, human beings are not responsible for any decision concerning the »who, what, when and how«-questions of the production process. In Fromm's view, this lack of democratization, especially in economic production processes, leads people to the sensation of being powerless in everyday life.

In their qualitative analyses Wakenhut and Faus (2017) find out that, the loss of trust in social actors (like managers, politicians and journalists) is typical for AfD voters in Germany. The skepticism towards established, democratic mandate holders and the media, as well as the feeling that nobody can understand the more and more complex society, increase the desire of many to live under authoritarian leaders, who set and enforce simple guidelines. At the same time, nationalist ideologies can create feelings of superiority and power that counteract the feeling of powerlessness.

## Indifference

Even Erich Fromm describes indifference as a central problem of modern societies (Fromm 1991e [1953], p. 67 f.), again primarily (but not only) based on the capitalist production principle. »It is obvious that the relationship between competitors has to be based on mutual human indifference. Otherwise any one of them would be paralyzed in the fulfillment of his economic tasks—to fight each other and not to refrain from the actual economic destruction of each



other if necessary.« (Fromm 1941a, p. 118.) In my own analysis of interviews with managers, I was able to show that learning to be tough on oneself (and others) is described as an important lesson to reach higher managerial positions in companies (cf. Ehnis 2014).

Furthermore, production and distribution are not primarily orientated to the needs of individuals, nor to universal physiological needs like nutrition or sleep. Rather, the principle »goods for money« is of higher value than the need of individuals e.g. to satisfy their hunger. A violation of this principle would undermine the whole production system and endanger its efficiency. In the end, nothing would function anymore. Goods need to be sold. Non-sold goods need to be destroyed and cannot serve for the gratification of concrete human needs. That is one reason why half of all food in the world ends up at the garbage dump instead of in a belly (cf. Süddeutsche Zeitung 2013). For global economic contexts, sociologist Stefan Lessenich (2016) described this as an externalization-habitus, meaning that the Western world can and wants to outsource the costs of its way of life to the global south, while at the same time, being indifferent to concrete living and working conditions there.

The common principle to attach greater importance to the functioning of systems than to concrete human suffering has an enormous influence on our consciousness. It makes us somehow indifferent to concrete human destiny: we know how our jeans are produced, but we buy them anyway, we see that people drown in the Mediterranean, but we do nothing to stop it, because otherwise the system would no longer work. We see hunger in the world and yet food must be destroyed in order to regulate its value. We see global inequality of poverty and income, but rest idle, because otherwise, the system may lose efficiency. We see the effects of climate change but it is hard to do anything against it because the system works as it does and we need economic growth and so on.

From a Frommian perspective it can be said: Positions of indifference, fear and powerlessness are deeply embedded in Western capitalist societies and can be particularly activated for nationalism in times of asynchronicity. It is, among other things, these feelings that guide the process of »group narcissism« (Fromm 1964a) and promote the feeling of relatedness and rootedness through the construct of a »national identity.«

### **Towards a sane world society?**

Humanistic solutions seem complicated in comparison to the simple nationalist nostalgic efforts. And it is also clear that solutions cannot be developed on the rostrum, but as Katrin Voigt has worked out (cf. the following contribution),



that the struggle for a new common ground is task of everyday practice and this practice requires an ongoing critical discussion. Nevertheless, we would also like to put some guidelines for discussion with thoughts from Erich Fromm: The first principle would be the need for a strong narrative of solidarity based on the fact that all human beings are placed in the same—as Fromm calls it—»human situation« and mutually recognize each other in this fundamental sense as equals without denying differences, social inequality and different social positions (cf. Fromm 1964a, pp. 319–321). A humanistic search for solutions, if conducted in a comprehensive way, could offer the potential to give many a sense of belonging through a common reflection and practice on the way we want to be in the world.

Politically, Erich Fromm saw advantageous conditions for a productive, human development mainly within a two-fold approach: A first step should liberate humans *from* existence-threatening conditions of work and life. The cornerstones of his arguments were a guaranteed basic income or free food and housing. Furthermore, he argued for a reduction in working hours to reduce the time spent in alienating gainful employment. »A further effect of a guaranteed income, coupled with greatly diminished working hours for all, would be that the spiritual and religious problems of human existence would become real and imperative.« (Fromm 1966c, p. 2) Nowadays, the idea to liberate humans from existence-threatening conditions is still worth fighting for. However, they have to be global regulations and they should lead to a redistribution of income and property from the global north to the global south. In consequence, a democratization of markets by harmonized global income is preferable. The enormous discrepancy of global income and property is not only economically unfair, but also unfair in questions of participation in a global society: Who can and who should decide about the development of the world?

Another significant step for Fromm is the shift of liberty from e.g. existential fear, towards liberty to develop human abilities (cf. Fromm 1965c, p. 220). Fromm sees the key for the shift primarily in forms of participation and democratization especially in the field of labour. In general, Fromm argued that the redirection of production from private to public infrastructures is necessary to enable everyone to benefit in their productive human development.

»A vast change in industry from the production of commodities for individual consumption to the production of commodities for public use: schools, theaters, libraries, parks, hospitals, public transportation, housing; in other words an emphasis on the production of those things that are the basis for the unfolding of the individual's inner productivity and activity.« (Fromm 1966c, p. 4.)



Very important in this sense is the possibility to get education, to be able to use a (health) care system, the right of free speech and the democratization of gainful employment. The participation in production, in Fromm's view, is not the same as nationalization, expropriation or equality of income. Rather, democratic processes are important forces towards the productive development of human values, responsibility and against the feeling of powerlessness and indifference (cf. Weber et al. 2007). In Fromm's view differences of income or property should reasonably be justified by job performance or capacity. They should not be that high, so that all humans still have a similar relation to the world (cf. Fromm 1966c). Guaranteed basic income, reduction in working hours and especially an increasing public infrastructure, participation and decentralization were Fromm's main concepts regarding the road towards a sane, positively activating and liberal society (cf. last chapters in Fromm 1955a, 1968a, 1976a).

Amid ongoing tendencies of globalization, digitalization, as well as climate change, inequality and deficient democracy in different parts of the world, it seems essential to revitalize Fromm's ideas of a socialistic humanism. Such a social utopia, however, is also faced with considerable challenges and ambivalences in a complex, global world, which also requires scientific processing.

With regard to Erich Fromm, the central questions to answer are: What kind of relationships between human beings to themselves, to other people and to nature will be implemented within social change? And in terms of the economy: Who should decide in a humanistic society what goods are when and where produced and for whom?

Thereby, Erich Fromm was conscious of the fact that the road towards a society of productive need satisfaction is a long social process and somehow experimental. He was certain that the human, striving for liberty and solidarity, only by institutional support obtained a strong hegemonical social character. Inversely, humans striving for liberty are needed to construct the structures of a humane society. Fromm therefore was certain, that a long, evolutionary process of reformation, necessarily non-violent and humane, was necessary to gain such a society. The transforming humane attitude needed to be already a part of everyday life, in order to reach a productive, sane orientation both in people and in society.

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