Contested Common Ground and the Question of Emancipatory Value: Applying Fromm's Radical Humanism and Social Narcissism to the Discourse on Refugees and the Nation

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Abstract: Universality is being deconstructed within contemporary social struggles. Focusing on struggles around the discourse on refugees and the nation, and so-called »welcome culture« in the German context in particular, questions arise regarding the emancipatory potential of emerging narratives of a contested common ground (Hark et al. 2015). This article proposes Erich Fromm's understanding of »radical humanism« (1968a) and its line of argumentation towards »global solidarity« (Wilde 2013) instead of national »group narcissism« (Fromm 1964a) as a normative base to evaluate the emancipatory value of emerging narratives.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, universalism, contested common ground, radical humanism, welcome culture, group narcissism.

In a 2015 position paper, German sociologists Hark et al. introduce the concept of a *contested common ground* (German: das umkämpfte Allgemeine). In various social struggles, so goes their claim, universality is put into question. Drawing on post- and decolonial theory (cf. Balibar, 1995, Chakrabarty, 2000, Grosfoguel, 2012), it becomes clear that hegemonic epistemology claiming universality often would be better understood as particularism in the sense that it represents the perspective and interest of a particular group in power:

> »If universal truth is constructed through the epistemology of a particular territory or body (whether it be Western, Christian, or Islamic), and through the exclusion of others, then the cosmopolitanism or global

proposal that is constructed through this abstract universalist epistemology will be inherently imperialist/colonial.« (Grosfoguel 2012, p. 94.)

The deconstruction of universalism as particularism that is »inherently imperialist/colonial« necessarily leads to the question of alternatives. Within post- or decolonial schools, we can find different answers, among them Aimé Césaire's *universal concrete*, »un universel riche de tout le particulier« (1957, p. 15), the concept of *transmodernity* by Enrique Dussel (2012), or *pluriversalism* by Walter Mignolo (2000). These authors have in common, not to dismiss the idea of a universal in total, claiming disconnected particularisms, but to aim for decolonization of universalistic epistemology instead.

Observing a disruption of the old *common ground* within various social struggles, Hark et al. do not dismiss the idea of universality either. Aware of the post- or decolonial critique, in their article, they call for a critical analysis of emerging narratives claiming universality instead. By pointing out that a *new common ground* (German: das neue Gemeinsame) is neither predefined, nor necessarily inclusive or fair (Hark et al. 2015, p. 102), questions regarding the basis to evaluate emancipative potential of such narratives of a *new common ground* arise.

Focusing in this paper on contemporary discourse on refugees and the nation and in particular on »welcome culture« as one influential narrative in this context in the German discourse, the concept of a *contested common ground* is useful to grasp the plurality of discursive formations aiming for hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe 2006). It becomes clear that the same configuration promotes a wide range of oppositional conceptions. Increasing nationalism, calling for national isolation, fighting everyone perceived as other, here »the refugee« as constructed »total other,« and granting human solidarity only within national confines, is one prevalent expression of contemporary struggle for a *new common ground*. Citizens showing solidarity with non-citizens, seeking asylum in Germany would be a different and opposing example of social struggle, contesting the *common ground*. While it seems plausible to dismiss the first example as non-inclusive, this paper will concentrate on a critical analysis of the more complex second case. At this point, it is important to stress the fact that transnational solidarity in the context of flight-migration, understood as struggle towards a *new common ground*, takes on many different forms. These forms are neither predefined nor naturally emancipative. The Frommian concept of social narcissism shall be proposed as theoretical and simultaneously normative approach to analytically distinguish different forms as well as to evaluate their emancipative potential. In order to comprehend the normative side, I will start with a brief introduction to Fromm's perception of radical humanism.

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The concept of Radical Humanism in Erich Fromm's Work

A radical humanistic position is central to large parts of Erich Fromm's writings (Durkin 2014). In the following, four key features of radical humanism as outlined by Fromm in his book *The Revolution of Hope* (1968a) shall briefly be introduced. Firstly, a radical humanism to Fromm means overcoming isolation, by surmounting one's own ego, greed and selfishness. »This transcendence is the condition for being open and related to the world, vulnerable, and yet with an experience of identity and integrity« (Fromm 1968a, p. 139). The overcoming of »egomania« (ibid.), Fromm defines as modus of to *be*, juxtaposing it with to *have* or to *use*. As second principle of radical humanism, Fromm describes the rejection of idolatry, connecting it to alienation in a secular context. Idolatry or alienation, he sees among others within the worship of political leaders or human made institutions like states and nations. As a third feature of radical humanism, Fromm defines a »hierarchy of values in which those of lower orders follow from the highest value« (ibid., p. 139) and points out their binding character. In this regard, Fromm also stresses the importance of the »principle of *practice*« over the principle of »submission to *an ideology*« (ibid., p. 140). A radical humanism to Fromm is concrete and current action rather than an idealistic conception of the future. While ideas are important to unify people in order to create a radical humanistic movement with according practice, they always have to be bound to real activity in order not to get lost to idolatry. As a fourth feature of radical humanism, Fromm defines solidarity to all humans and loyalty to life and humanity. In this sense, he defines true love to another human being always as love and recognition of entire humanity, recognized within this person. Differentiating true solidarity from narcissism, Fromm states:

> »True solidarity exists by sharing deep and authentic human experiences, not by sharing ideologies and common fanaticism which in its very root is narcissistic and hence does not create solidarity any more than common drunkenness does.« (1968a, p. 152.)

A radical humanism, in this sense, strives for »global solidarity« (Wilde 2013) as it requires love for humanity, beyond social group or identity affiliations like nations.

Furthermore, Fromm conceptualizes radical humanism as »truly international« (1968a, p. 42), as he sees it appear in all countries and religious communities. In his writings, he refers to different cultural and religious contexts,

quoting from Jewish, Christian and Buddhist ethics. In this sense, the concept could hold as a »pluriversal« (Mignolo 2000), claiming universality by acknowledging a broad, exceeding the western epistemological basis. In his analysis of contemporary examples of radical humanistic struggles, Fromm focuses on his own, the US-American context, while an understanding of radical humanism as pluriversal concept would still require and enormously profit from a broader and more diverse empirical basis of concrete radical humanistic practice.

The Theory of Social Narcissism

Fromm's dedication to radical humanism, as outlined above, plays a key role in his normative evaluation of social narcissism. In *The Heart of Man. Its Genius for Good and Evil* (1964a) Fromm explains social narcissism in analogy to individual narcissism as a form of psychic energy, that—besides its destructive parts—can also be understood as preserving force of the individual or group. It is the transformation of individual into social narcissism that allows people to equally strive for the persistence of the group, if not prioritize the group over their own lives. Furthermore, group narcissism can be a resource to protect the hurt individual ego. For the economically and culturally disadvantaged classes, group narcissism, according to Fromm, provides a strong imagination of belonging to a superior group. Not being excluded along class-lines but rather called in, as part of »one great nation« or »one superior race,« could compensate for the individually felt and structurally embedded inferiority:

> »A society that lacks the means to provide adequately for the majority of its members, or a large proportion of them, must provide these members with a narcissistic satisfaction of the malignant type if it wants to prevent dissatisfaction among them. For those who are economically and culturally poor, narcissistic pride in belonging to the group is the only— and often a very effective—source of satisfaction.« (1964a, pp. 75 f.).

Addressed in this quotation is a normative distinction of a malignant from a benign type. The malignant form of narcissism, according to Fromm, focuses on the alleged given, the group in its alleged primordial form, the fame and glory of past times. Subject of malignant narcissistic satisfaction is nothing to be achieved, but rather something pre-given. In this concentration on the rigid, Fromm especially sees danger of exclusion and destruction. People are not able to recognize »the other« as a valuable human being, with potential for creation, similar to their own, but rather emphasize their differences and

strengthen an ideology of pre-given human hierarchy, in which they themselves take the lead. Benign narcissism, on the contrary, Fromm understands as a pride towards achievements of one's own social group, combined with an urge to create. This urge for creation makes it indispensable to see beyond one's own social group, to cooperate with others and therefore recognize their human potential. In the context of nations as social groups, this Frommian idea of benign social narcissism similarly can be found in Habermas' (1976) argumentation for constitutional, instead of national, patriotism. Here, we find the idea of redirecting social pride away from a group, conceptualized as an essentialistic, closed entity, towards a created constitution as binding force to a voluntary group of people, joined in the positive formulated goal of human striving.

The Frommian distinction of benign and malignant narcissism contains a normative hierarchy, the benign narcissism allegedly being a less severe form. It could be argued that this hierarchization holds a class bias (McLaughlin 1996), ascribing severe narcissism especially to lower classes resulting from dissatisfaction due to class oppression, as in the quotation above. In this regard, it seems necessary, not to undermine the influence of middle-class participation in nationalistic movements in the past and present, as one form of severe narcissistic exclusion and devaluation of »the other« (Koppetsch 2017).

Nevertheless, apart from this normative hierarchization, the distinction itself poses the opportunity to analyze the phenomena described as »benign« equally as a form of narcissism and in this, as a form of exclusion. In this sense, Fromm distinguishes benign narcissism clearly from his approach of a radical humanistic practice. A person or group within a state of benign narcissism may acknowledge »the other« equally as human being, still, that person or group is far from transcending *egomania*. Within a state of narcissism, love for »the other« as love for humanity cannot be reached, as all libidinous energy is directed to the ego. Love and care for »the other« are just features to underline one's own greatness. Given the destructive energy of narcissism that is still prevalent within its benign form, a different wording could be argued for, in order to prevent misunderstandings regarding severity. Instead, the key feature of distinction between the two phenomena described by Fromm seems to be the role of »the other«. Whereas »the other« is combatted within the malignant type, within the benign type, cooperation is possible, while »the other« still is acknowledged mainly for his or her purpose for the ego. The question of severity should then be left open to be answered by those experiencing the effects of othering.

Benign Narcissism within »Welcome Culture«

Applied to contemporary German discourse on refugees and the nation, the Frommian concept of social narcissism is helpful to criticize an outspoken nationalism in the form of hate and violence towards »the other« as a form of malignant narcissism. Furthermore, by the concept of benign narcissism, it also helps to shed some light on different forms of solidarity with refugees. The Frommian approach underlines the importance of a detailed analysis of such different forms regarding their potential to be truly emancipative, inclusive or fair (Hark et al. 2015, p. 102), respectively radical humanistic (Fromm 1964a, pp. 139 ff.). An in-depth analysis of different forms of solidarity with refugees appears to be a necessary task in order to understand the social and subjective dynamics at play within the struggle for a *new common ground*, as well as to be able to identify potentially emancipative practices. The call to focus on *concrete* struggle (Hark et al. 2015) and radical humanistic *practice* (Fromm 1964a), to aim for a *universal concrete* (Césaire 1957) rather than a new abstract universalism, implies to the social sciences the necessity to ground such research on qualitative empirical data. A study on the field of solidarities with refugees should engage with the following questions: What types of solidarities can be found? What conceptions of the self and »the other« are present in those narratives and what are the consequences in terms of integration or exclusion? And finally, in what way can the emerging narrative be regarded as emancipatory?

The concept of benign social narcissism in such research would help to distinguish rather paternalistic approaches, where the engagement for refugees is used to display the helper's superiority. This superiority could also be felt for the nation. This, for example, could be the case when »welcome culture« becomes nationally framed. Within public German discourse, this term often refers to the executive decision of German state officials in September 2015 to »welcome« refugees into Germany that were held up in Hungary, facing a humanitarian crisis, as well as to the engagement of civil society supporting arriving refugees. Within a nationally framed narrative of »welcome culture,« the engaging individuals are likely to become national subjects and as such their action will become a field for positive national identification and pride. Understood as a form of benign social narcissism, this national narrative of benevolence is proof of national superiority. As opposed to a malignant narcissism, here »the other« does not have to be neglected or combatted, but instead »the refugee,« as victimized »total other,« becomes the necessary object to act out one's own altruism.

Conclusion

Current enforcements of nationalistic movements in numerous places in the world give empirical evidence to the doubt that global solidarity in a radical humanistic sense will become a prevalent practice in the near future. The contemporary global landscape hardly poses an environment in which love for humanity and transcendence of egomania could compete in anyway with the strong affiliation to nations, leading to a polarization of *I* or *us* and *them*. Still, it is important to provide a dialectical perspective on the contemporary that at once focuses on social narcissism, inequalities, alienation and exclusion as well as on concrete struggles for participation and greater human integration. Therefore, it is a great strength of the Frommian approach to simultaneously provide a solid basis for critique of the status quo, and also place the focus on emancipating practices. In this sense, returning to the question on what grounds the emancipative potential of an emerging narrative of a *new common ground* could be evaluated, the Frommian concept of radical humanism poses a possible answer. Still, as Hark et al. (2015) point out, the process of evaluation necessarily has to be understood as an ongoing social discussion, including voices from social struggles of the oppressed. Therefore, Fromm's conception of a radical humanism builds a starting point to argue for global integration, while its concrete realization has to be part of an ongoing discourse. The continuous implementation of critique, e.g. right now from antiracist and feminist movements, would contribute enormously to the emancipative force of a *new common ground*.

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