

The Authoritarian Character Redux: The Later Fromm and the Culmination of the Frankfurt School's Studies on Authority

Nathisvaran Govender, Richard Sivil, and Gregory Morgan Swer

Abstract: The early Frankfurt School's Studies in Authority sought to understand modern society's susceptibility to authoritarian leadership. This research project resulted in two major works in 1936, Fromm's *Studies on Authority and Family* and Horkheimer's *Egoism and Freedom Movements*, and produced the concept of the Authoritarian Character. After 1939 the project was abandoned, Fromm and the Frankfurt School went their separate ways, and the Frankfurt School's research focus turned in a new direction. This paper argues that, appearances notwithstanding, research on the Authoritarian Character did not end in 1939 and that Fromm's later work on necrophilia and biophilia in the 1960s-70s should be reconsidered as his attempt to complete the Frankfurt School's research project on the Authoritarian Character.

Keywords: Authoritarian Character, Erich Fromm, Frankfurt School, necrophilia, sadomasochism.

I. Introduction

The concept of the authoritarian character was the product of the early Frankfurt School's studies in authority. These studies were carried out between 1930 and 1939 and were motivated by the need to understand the susceptibility of individuals and social groups in the Weimar Republic to the appeal of authoritarian leaders. They developed and employed a singular blend of historical materialism and Freudian psychoanalytic theory as their mode of analysis and produced two significant theoretical works, Erich Fromm's 1936 *Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociological Dimensions* and Max Horkheimer's 1936 *Egoism and Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era*. The Frankfurt School's research into the authoritarian character came to an end in 1939 following the expulsion of Fromm from the School, and the School's theoretical reorientation under the influence of Friedrich Pollock's concept of state capitalism. Subsequent work by the first generation of the Frankfurt School focused on the critique of instrumental reason, and the School's earlier work on the authoritarian character came to be viewed as something of a theoretical dead end. This negative reputation was only reinforced by Herbert Marcuse's public condemnation of Fromm's work in the pages of *Dissent* in 1955-6 for neo-Freudian

revisionism.¹ Fromm's modifications to Freudian psychoanalytic theory were deemed heretical and politically suspect. In addition to placing his post-Frankfurt School works beyond the pale, this air of disapprobation seems to have retrospectively tainted Fromm's theoretical contributions whilst still a member of the School. Whilst the Frankfurt School did produce work on authoritarianism in American mass culture after 1939 it never again employed the Freudo-Marxist method or central concepts that defined the authoritarian character research project.²

However, reports of the death of the authoritarian character project have been greatly exaggerated. We argue that research into the authoritarian character continued post-1939 in Fromm's work on necrophilia. Fromm's work employed the same method and concepts as the School's 1930s authoritarian character research and was motivated by the same concerns. Namely, to understand modern society's predisposition to authoritarianism, to critique its social causes, and to offer practical guidance for their overcoming. In this way, we argue that Fromm's later works, particularly his *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), represent not merely the continuation but the culmination of the authoritarian character research project begun by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. For in his later works Fromm not only diagnoses and critiques the social causes of the authoritarian character but also proposes a practical method for their treatment. And in so doing Fromm provides the practical dimension of critique promised but never delivered by the School's descriptive and normative research into authority of the 1930s. Consequently, the history of research into the authoritarian character should be viewed as spanning from 1930 to 1973.

We begin by detailing the three key features of the Frankfurt School's early research on authoritarianism. Firstly, the distinctive Freudo-Marxist method of investigation and analysis that it employed. Secondly, the concept of the social psyche, the class-specific shared consciousness of a social group. And thirdly, the concept of the authoritarian character, the sadomasochistic character traits that

¹ Marcuse, in his attack on Fromm, was echoing the sentiments of both Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (McLaughlin 2017, 482). Funk (2024) suggests that Adorno's invective against Karen Horney's neo-Freudian theory in 1946 was really directed against Fromm and his concept of the social character.

² After Fromm's departure the Frankfurt School developed the concept of the authoritarian *personality* (Adorno et al. 1950). Whilst this work derived from the School's earlier work on the authoritarian character, albeit in a bowdlerized fashion more palatable to an American audience, it has a significant difference. In attempting to identify the character traits that predispose a person towards fascism, Adorno and Horkheimer shift the analysis of authoritarian tendencies into the realm of the psychic, and leave aside the analysis of the specific socio-economic conditions that facilitate their expression. In effect, they retain only the psychoanalytic features of the social psychology that had earlier been used to analyse the authoritarian *character*. Alternatively, for a detailed account of the authoritarian personality that lays emphasis on its continuity with the Frankfurt School's early work on the authoritarian character, see Boucher (2021).

typify the authoritarian character. We then show the presence of the same features in Fromm's post-Frankfurt School work on necrophilia. We argue that Fromm's later work still employs a method that, in its fundamentals, is a synthesis of historical materialism and psychoanalytic theory. We also argue that his later concept of a social character corresponds directly to the earlier concept of a social psyche, and that his concept of a necrophiliac character corresponds directly to the earlier concept of a sadomasochistic/authoritarian character. We then demonstrate that with the addition of Fromm's concept of biophilia, Fromm's later work provides the practical response to the socio-economic conditions that produce the authoritarian character that was the unfulfilled objective of the original Frankfurt School research project.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section reconstructs the key theoretical features of the Frankfurt School research into the authoritarian character through an analysis of Fromm's *Studies on Authority and the Family* and Horkheimer's *Egoism and Freedom Movements*. It details the Freudo-Marxist method of macro and micro level analysis into the socioeconomic roots of authoritarian character traits. It then explains the social psyche, the concept of a shared social consciousness formed by the socio-economic status of a group that contributes to the formation and gratification of sadomasochistic traits. And then it provides an account of the authoritarian character concept, a set of sadomasochistic traits that predispose the individual to seek gratification through obedience and submission to authority.

The following section examines Fromm's later post-Frankfurt School writings, particularly with regards to his analysis of necrophilia. It identifies and details three key theoretical features, a Freudo-Marxist (albeit without the theory of the drives) method of analysis, and the concepts of the social character and the necrophiliac character. It then notes that these 3 features correspond *mutatis mutandis* to key features that characterised the Frankfurt School's early research on authority. In light of this it is argued that Fromm's work on necrophilia can be considered to be the continuation of the Frankfurt School project, not only in terms of its conceptual framework, but also in terms of its objectives.

The paper then discusses Fromm's concept of biophilia, which he puts forward as a constructive and life-oriented counterpart to the death-directed concept of necrophilia. Fromm's biophilia we argue is not merely a conceptual tool for the analysis of character traits, it also represents the outlines of a programme for the cultivation of biophiliac traits and the eradication of necrophiliac traits. We then suggest that, with the addition of this practical component, Fromm fulfils the theoretical objectives that motivated the original Frankfurt School research into the authoritarian character. Namely, the provision of an emancipatory social critique that is descriptive, normative and practical.

II. Key Features of the Authoritarian Character

The following section details the three key elements drawn from *Studies on Authority and the Family* that together constitute the authoritarian character concept and its mode of analysis. Namely, the Freudo-Marxist method of analysis, which is essential to the conceptual formulation and analysis of the authoritarian character, the concept of sadomasochism, and the concept of a shared social psyche, which is key to understanding the susceptibility of certain societies to the appearance of the authoritarian character.³

The Freudo-Marxist Synthesis

It is the Freudo-Marxist method of analysis that characterises the authoritarian character research project. The project's purpose was to understand the predisposition of individuals and societies to seek their own oppression by pursuing the security of authoritarian leadership and the Freudo-Marxist method of analysis was employed to analyse this predisposition through macro and micro-level dialectical analysis.

It is in *Studies on Authority and the Family* that we see the first concerted effort by the Frankfurt School to uncover the set of traits that constitute the authoritarian/sadomasochistic character. Fromm argues that it is within the typical family structure that one is first exposed to authority relations in the form of inter-personal relations with the father. The developing child begins at this stage to experience the desire to emulate the authority figure. The child encounters external force in the form of the father and, out of biological dependence on him, chooses to identify with the father. His commands and prohibitions are then internalised by the child as features of its super-ego. Consequently, paternal authority is transformed from something external to the child to an internal psychic entity. The child then acts upon those internalised authority structures, obeying them not out of fear but out of psychic necessity.

However, for Fromm, the authority that the father holds is ultimately grounded in social authority, and thereby the father's location in the class structure. The child models and internalises authority through its emotional relationship with the father. And this relationship itself, Fromm argues, reflects the wider social structure. A peasant father, for instance, views his children in terms of their utility-potential as a source of labour, whilst a petty bourgeois views his as domestic compensation for his own lack of social status and power. In each case, the child's affective relationship to the father changes accordingly, and so too does the formation of its super-ego. And thus, the formation of the super-ego and the child's primary relationship to authority are not naturally occurring processes

³ The content in the following section is abstracted from a more detailed treatment of the early Frankfurt School's research on the authoritarian character (Govender, Sivil, and Swer 2024).

but rather are contingent ones, determined by the father's status within the social hierarchy.

Studies on Authority and the Family emphasises the dialectical relationship between social authority and the super-ego. Having internalised external authority in the form of the super-ego, the individual then projects their super-ego onto the dominant power within society. And with this transfer, the qualities of the super-ego and the individual's irrational emotional responses to it are imbued in the authority figure. The individual's relationship to that figure then takes on the features of their relationship to their super-ego, and the authority figure appears to them as inherently trustworthy and beyond rational critique. This affective relationship to authority enormously increases authority's power, and it is in this 'transfigured' form that authority is then re-internalised and used to support the individual's super-ego (Fromm 2020, 16). The process of internalisation, projection, and re-internalisation of authority continues for as long as the external authority is perceived to wield genuine power, and thereby threaten genuine danger to the individual.

Thus the amount of fear to which an individual is subject is itself socially determined. In a class society, the ruling classes will experience the least amount of fear and the greatest sense of agency. Whilst the lower classes will experience the greatest amount of fear and least amount of agency. This in turn leads to weak ego development. The individual comes to depend upon the super-ego and authority to control their drives, as the ego lacks the strength to do so. In this process of repression, the expenditure of psychic energy further weakens the ego, thereby increasing the reliance on authority in order to carry out psychic functions. And in an authoritarian society, the lower one is placed in the socioeconomic hierarchy, the more fearful and more helpless one becomes, and the more one's existence appears to be incapable of self-direction and utterly subject to the caprice of fortune.

Sadomasochism

The sadomasochistic character represents the conceptual core of the authoritarian character research project (Fromm 2020, 37). The satisfaction of authority and the dominance of the super-ego are responsible not only for the repression of drives but also the creation of character traits. In the first case, on Fromm's account of masochism, a degree of gratification results when an individual with these masochistic traits submits to authority. This gratification results in an individual taking pleasure in obedience, submission and the surrender of their personality. These are traits of a masochistic character structure and are developed through psychic processes, just like any other character trait. Whilst conventional psychoanalytic thinking held that submissive traits were the product of the drives, and thereby inherent, Fromm argued that such traits are both contingent and historically specific (2020, 37). What leads human beings to gratify masochistic traits, as opposed to repressing them, is the

pleasure derived from appeasing the super-ego and the authority located within. As mentioned previously, in the absence of a strong ego and with the repression of drives, there is a higher functionality of the super-ego and the authority located within it. We gratify the super-ego by submitting to and obeying authority, and ultimately find pleasure in this submission to an external dependency. And this in turn creates masochistic traits.

As stated before, for Fromm the existence of masochistic traits necessitates the existence of sadistic traits (2020, 40). The gratification of authority and authoritarian structures necessitated by the internalisation of authority relations leads to the creation of sadomasochistic traits that then form the authoritarian (or sadomasochistic) character. It must be noted that there are significant differences between sadistic and masochistic traits, the first having the aim of “making another person into a dependent and defenseless instrument of one’s own will, dominating the other absolutely and without restriction, and in extreme cases, forcing him to suffer and express that suffering,” and the second with the aim of encouraging the subject “to lose themselves in power, and through this surrender, which in pathological cases can lead to physical suffering, find pleasure and gratification” (Fromm 2020, 41). However, like Freud, Fromm finds that while both sadism and masochism are present together, in some instances the masochistic traits are suppressed, and sadistic traits are exacerbated. Whereas with the authoritarian character, there are instances where both sadistic and masochistic traits are present, specifically within societies that have conditions that gratify sadomasochistic traits. “This has the important socio-psychological consequence that a society which produces sadomasochism as the dominant drive structure must provide opportunities that gratify both sides of sadomasochism” (Fromm 2020, 41).

The Social Psyche

Having analysed the psychic mechanisms leading to the formation of the authoritarian/sadomasochist character, Fromm goes on to detail the social conditions that give rise to and gratify these sadomasochistic traits. Fromm reminds us that while individuals gratify authority and authoritarian structures by satisfying their super-ego, it is society (and the concept of authority that exists within the social structure) that we initially perceive within our super-ego. It is the idea of authority drawn from the social structure, developed by socio-psychological and socio-economic factors, which leads in turn to the creation of sadomasochistic traits. Fromm writes, “In authoritarian society, the sadomasochistic character structure is generated by the economic structure, which necessitates the authoritarian hierarchy” (2020, 43). These hierarchies are inherent within any society that has a ruling class with subordinate classes. The subordinate individual’s apparent helplessness within society leads to the adaptation of sadomasochistic character. And whilst existence within authoritarian social structures gratifies both masochistic and sadistic yearnings,

this gratification significantly affects masochistic character types. For Fromm argues that they perceive their subjection not as a contingent state of affairs brought about and maintained by authoritarian social structures but rather as their inevitable destiny. "He loves not only those conditions that constrain human life and limit human freedom; he also loves being subjugated to a blind and all-powerful fate" (2020, 43).

Although analysed thus far as traits within the individual psyche, Fromm holds that the sadomasochistic character traits also form a part of a larger, class specific, shared social consciousness which we term the social psyche which arises due to the particular 'economic and social situation' of that class (2020, 19). As we have seen, Fromm holds that the repression of drives strengthens the super-ego in developing sadomasochistic traits, and increases eagerness to gratify authority. This scenario is most prevalent in classes that do not have the economic or social means to satisfy their drives. "The dependent class must suppress their drives to a greater degree than the ruling class" and thus the lower class develop a shared social psyche unique to their own social and economic situation (Fromm 2020, 30). The opposite holds for those in the upper classes as they have the means to gratify their drives due to their higher social and economic standing. As they are able to gratify their drives instead of repressing them, the development of the ego is more psychologically significant in these classes as their super-ego does not gain the advantage over their ego. This results in ego development that is greater than that of the lower classes and is one to which the lower classes aspire.

The objectification of the ego development of the ruling class and the super-ego development of the lower class is a dialectical process. The ego development of the ruling class creates a new objectified culture. The lower classes, unable to engage with this culture due to their social and economic situation, have to repress the drives that seek to satisfy their urges, urges derived from the culture of the ruling class. This repression of drives leads the lower classes to develop sadomasochistic traits and seek greater gratification of authority, which leads to more significant ego development within the ruling class, which in turn leads to a new objectified culture.

The increase in security of the ruling class leads to greater rational efforts to suppress the dominated class upon whose obedience the ruling class depends. And the increasing suppression of the ruled increases the pleasure of the sadomasochistic character in absolute submission to and sympathetic identification with the rulers. However, in addition to providing means for the sadomasochistic character to gratify its masochistic urges, the authoritarian society must of necessity also provide opportunities to gratify the sadistic ones. And here the authoritarian character can compensate for its utter submission to authority by directing its hatred against those that it views as helpless. Then the authoritarian character can experience the power and control that the authority epitomises, and that they themselves so manifestly lack, through the torment of the weaker party. The objective of this behaviour is not the destruction of the

weak, but the experience of power through control which necessitates the continued existence of those subjected to it. Both masochistic and sadistic traits express the same joy in domination, the former in being dominated and the other in dominating.

The authoritarian character can exhibit destructive aggression. However, Fromm notes that this urge is experienced not in relation to those viewed as weaker, but rather against those in authority. The sadomasochistic character develops in response to fear of authority, but the negative feelings are repressed in favour of feelings of love and admiration. These negative feelings however remain and can be expressed, under the guidance of the authority with which one identifies, against rival authorities be they individuals, social groups, or concepts. Then the destruction of that authority is the end sought, and is likely to be pursued in a manner equally as irrational and intensely emotional as was the reverence of the primary authority.

And this in turn has direct political implications for any sort of liberatory praxis directed against the ruling authority. The sadomasochistic character lacks the capacity for independent action, in thought or deed, against authority. However, it can be stimulated to action against authority if there is a significant change in social circumstances, presumably one that caused the authoritarian character to question the effective power of the authority and, detecting weakness, to express the repressed negative emotions towards them. This rebellion, however, is not motivated by the desire to remove authority such that the individual can be free from subjugation and to determine their own course of action. Rather it is motivated by the desire to remove an authority that no longer provokes fear, and through fear, reverence. Though such individuals might join revolutionary members of their own class on the barricades, their motive is not revolution and freedom but a restoration of the oppressive status quo ante, albeit under new management. Fromm comments that the authoritarian character “may well be driven under certain circumstances to a defiant revolt against the existing authority, but as a rule he will then prescribe himself a new one” (2020, 42). Thus, a social group of sadomasochistic character always represents a reactionary political tendency against innovative social change.

III. Fromm and the Authoritarian Character: After the Frankfurt School

This section demonstrates the conceptual continuity between the early Frankfurt School’s work on the authoritarian character and Fromm’s later, post-Frankfurt School work.⁴ We focus on two key concepts on Fromm’s later work, the social

⁴ We do feel that a strong case could be made for continuity between the Freudo-Marxist theoretical framework that guided the Frankfurt School’s research into the authoritarian character and the theoretical framework of Fromm’s post-Frankfurt School work. Making such a case however would involve revisiting the debate over the Fromm’s ‘Neo-Freudian’ status. And so, for reasons of space, we have chosen here to focus on two other components of the

character and the necrophiliac character. We argue that the social character should be viewed as a further development of a key concept of the Frankfurt School's authoritarian character research, the social psyche. The social character, developed in *The Sane Society* [1955], details the collective character of a society and the role that it plays in the development of the authoritarian character. The necrophiliac character, developed in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* [1973] is Fromm's Neo-Freudian account of the death instinct. It details a love for all that is inorganic coupled with an appetite for destruction that exceeds all natural forms of aggression.

By the 1950s western society's technological capacities had developed significantly from the time in the early 1930s when the Frankfurt School devised and carried out its research on authority. And as a consequence, the socio-economic factors that had been instrumental in understanding the development of the authoritarian character had been altered and extended by the greater social reliance on technology and the increased availability of information. The post-War world, while free of fascism, was according to Fromm a more anxious one. And this anxiety was symptomatic of a modern existence that freed the individual but left them isolated and anxious, separated from the social totality by the post-War social order. According to Fromm, this social order exacerbates the deeply rooted trends predisposing one towards authoritarianism. Whilst the original purpose of the Frankfurt School's studies on authority was to understand why this predisposition towards authoritarianism exists, Fromm's post-Frankfurt School mission was to analyse the conditions within contemporary industrialised society that aggravate those tendencies that drive individuals and society towards authoritarian demagogic figures.

The Social Character

In this section we detail the social character, a Frommian concept developed in the 1950s, and argue that it represents a conceptual evolution of the social psyche. The concept of the social psyche posited a shared consciousness within various classes or social groups. It specifically analysed the character of the lower classes as they, according to Fromm, were more susceptible to the formation of the authoritarian character. This was due to their 'economic and social situation' which created a distinct character shared by the members of that class (Fromm 2020, 19). More specifically, the inability to satisfy their social and economic needs led to their becoming a dependent class, and in turn the inability to satisfy their urges resulted in the gratification of sadomasochistic traits and a greater desire to gratify authoritarian figures.

The social character became central to Fromm's post-1939 conceptual development, gradually displacing Freudian libido theory as the primary driver of

Frankfurt School's authoritarian research, the social psyche and the sadomasochistic character, as their points of continuity with Fromm's later work are more obvious and less contentious.

character traits. The first explicit use of the social character occurs in Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom* (1941). He states that:

In studying the psychological reactions of a social group we deal with the character structure of the members of the group, that is, of individual persons; we are interested, however, not in the peculiarities by which these persons differ from each other, but in that part of their character structure that is common to most members of the group. We can call this character *social character*... The social character comprises only a selection of traits, the *essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group*. (Fromm 2001, 238)

Fromm here defines the social character as a collection of character traits that form the core psyche of most people within a society. He also emphasises its importance for the analysis of the psychological reactions of a given social group and in turn that this analysis is to be centred on the understanding of the impact of life experiences, i.e. socio-economic factors, of a given social group upon the shared character of that group.

Key to an understanding of Fromm's concept of social character is an appreciation of the centrality of the idea of freedom in his post-Frankfurt School work. Freedom, for Fromm, has both a positive and a negative form. Fromm argues that with the end of feudalism, the coming of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and the concomitant shift from a feudal to a bourgeois social order, the majority of society experienced an increase in freedom. However, what followed the end of feudalism was not positive freedom, i.e. freedom *to*, but rather negative freedom, freedom *from*. In other words, after the feudal system was overthrown, people were not free to shape their own destiny, they were merely free from an oppressive feudal system. In *The Fear of Freedom* [1941] Fromm analyses the impact the Reformation had on the modern individual, saying that:

Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of this freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realisation of positive freedom which is based on the uniqueness and individuality of man. (2001, ix)

Fromm here makes the point that along with greater social freedom came increased anxiety and a feeling of powerlessness which expressed itself in the urge for security and thereby for submission.

The impact of this freedom *from* on the social character is as follows. For Fromm a key influence on the formation of the social character is the route society takes when choosing between the avoidance or the realisation of positive freedom. Fromm argues that those living within capitalist democracies in the 20th century have sought to escape the burdens of freedom and at the core of this escape is alienation. Fromm states that, "After the great European Revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries failed to transform 'freedom from' into

‘freedom to’, nationalism and state worship became the symptoms of a regression to incestuous fixation” (1991, 58). People, frightened by the loss of existential security resulting from the end of the feudal social order and without the effective social power to create new identities, sought existential protection under the aegis of nationalist figures. Alienation is thus central to Fromm’s characterisation of the modern age, and it is this alienation that is reflected ultimately within the social character of a society. And so, as we shall see, the fear of freedom becomes the driving force behind the allure of authoritarian leadership in Fromm’s later work.

Socio-Economic Influences and Alienation

A further point of continuity between Fromm’s social character [1955] and the earlier social psyche [1936] concerns the role of socio-economic influences. Fromm combines his new, post-Frankfurt School, focus on existential alienation and interpersonal relations with the early Frankfurt School’s focus on the influence of socio-economic factors on the development of the social character. In feudal society, Fromm observes, the artisan was able to produce a product by their own hand for a small group of customers, and they were also able to set the price at a rate that allowed them to generate profit but only enough to maintain their livelihood in accordance with their social status. Everything was done with the knowledge and understanding of the artisan. In contrast to this precapitalistic way of doing business, modern businesses exist with complex mechanisms that account for all economic occurrences, where the balance sheet, not the artisan, is the final authority. We are now able to quantify every aspect of the business to ensure a profit is made. This is what Fromm terms the *quantification* of the economic process. He states that:

The modern businessman not only deals with millions of dollars, but also with millions of customers, thousands of stockholders, and thousands of workers and employees; all these people become so many pieces in a gigantic machine which must be controlled, whose effects must be calculated; each man eventually can be expressed as an abstract entity, as a figure, and on this basis economic occurrences are calculated, trends are predicted, decisions are made. (Fromm 1991, 108)

Modern capitalism relies on the quantification of the economic process in order to meet the demands of modern business. However, in doing so it removes the human element from the economic process, turning human input into an abstract entity while requiring human input to function.⁵ This leads to the next element of Fromm’s theory of alienation, the *abstractification* of the economic

⁵ This is the Marxist concept of alienation which Fromm described as a process whereby the world has “become alien to man. He does not experience himself as the subject of his own acts, as a thinking, feeling, loving person, but he experiences himself only in the things he has created, as the object of the externalized manifestations of his powers. He is in touch with himself only by surrendering himself to the products of his creation” (2009, 35).

process. On Fromm's account the division of labour, a key feature of the capitalist system, exaggerates the abstractification of the economic process. In the precapitalistic era, when an artisan made something, for example, a sword, a blacksmith would work directly with the sword from start to finish. Granted an apprentice might assist in the preparation of the metals before the sword was made, but ultimately control of the production of the sword was in the hands of the blacksmith. Today the division of labour is such that if a sword was made, it would have passed through several hands along a production line before the product was completed. This further abstractification disconnects the worker from the 'fruits of their labour.' No longer does the worker have a concrete grasp of the product of their labour. Instead, their products also become abstract.

This abstractification in the labour process has wider social effects. Fromm states that:

Undoubtedly without quantification and abstractification modern mass production would be unthinkable. But in a society in which economic activities have become the main preoccupation of man, this process of quantification and abstractification has transcended the realm of economic production, and spread to the attitude of man to things, to people, and to himself. (1991, 110)

For Fromm the economic objective to maximise profit and comprehensively quantify the economic process is transferred beyond the strictly economic sphere as quantification and abstractification permeate all social processes. For example, after a catastrophic flood, newspaper headlines speak of the 'multi-million dollar catastrophe of the floods.' Thereby rendering abstract a traumatic event in which many people died and many more were negatively affected. And this, for Fromm, is symptomatic of a society that is mentally unhealthy, if not insane. Fromm states that, "While our eyes and ears receive impressions only in humanly manageable proportions, our concept of the world has lost just that quality; it does not any longer correspond to our human dimensions" (1991, 116). The penetration of abstractification into the social process results in the alienation, not just of the worker from the product of their labour, but more importantly, of individuals or social group from the concrete reality of their existence. In this way Fromm's concept of the social character [1955] can be seen as a further elaboration of the means by which the economic process becomes imprinted upon the social psyche.

Dependency and Existential Anxiety

One characteristic of social character [1955] that does deviate from the social psyche [1936] concerns the conditions necessary for the formation and expression of sadomasochistic traits. The Frankfurt School's research on the social psyche held that the lower classes are dependent on the cultural development of the ruling classes for the development of sadomasochistic traits. Fromm's conceptual development post-Frankfurt School, however, shows a clear move away from this understanding of the creation of narcissistic character traits, of which sadomasochism is but one type, as being dependent on a ruling class.

Instead, the urge within individuals and social groups to gratify authoritarian traits is to be understood as the result of alienation, that is, the creation of existential anxiety within the social character.

Fromm argues that people alienated from the social process do not see themselves as the masters of their own destiny and have no awareness of self. Alienated from their own creative potential they turn to external sources of power and authority who offer to guide their destiny for them. This is how dependency-seeking underlies the enthusiasm for populist, demagogic leaders. As Fromm puts it:

What is common to all these phenomena – the worship of idols, the idolatrous worship of God, the idolatrous love for a person, the worship of a political leader or the state, and the idolatrous worship of the externalisations of irrational passions – is the process of alienation. It is the fact that man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished 'thing,' dependent on powers outside of himself, unto whom he has projected his living substance. (1991, 120)

This further demonstrates the central role that alienation now plays in Fromm's post-Frankfurt School analysis of the allure of authoritarian leaders. For Fromm those who cannot bear freedom *from* often find themselves drawn towards a nationalist leader or state. Those alienated from the social totality yearn for an external saviour. And for Fromm the alienation of modern society is almost total. Humanity has become abstracted from the concrete reality of its own social structures. As Fromm puts it, "He does not feel himself as a creator and center, but as the servant of a Golem, which his hands have built" (1991, 121).

There is a pronounced existential dimension to the later Fromm's account of alienation with its focus on the meaning that individuals ascribe to their existence. And this existential element is directly connected to Fromm's understanding of societal mental health and his account of the socio-economic origins of social character. Fromm states that:

The problem... of the socio-economic conditions in modern industrial society which create the personality of modern Western man and are responsible for the disturbances in his mental health require an understanding of those elements specific to the capitalistic mode of production, of an 'acquisitive society' in an industrial age. (1991, 80)

Fromm holds that human existence is necessarily uncertain and that humans are compelled to find means whereby they can manage that insecurity. Historically humans found this existential shelter in social groups where their identity was secured by virtue of their membership of the group. However, with the development of modern society these primary bonds were dissolved:

Modern man is essentially alone, he is put on his own feet, expected to stand all by himself. He can achieve a sense of identity only by developing the unique and particular entity which is 'he' to a point where he can truly sense 'I am I.' (Fromm 1991, 191)

There is a contradiction in the quest for security in modern society, which Fromm believes to be inherent in all free people. For in order to exist in a modern society, one must separate from one's primary bonds. Which in turn leads to a sense of alienation from the social totality. Thus, a modern existence does not align with a mentally healthy existence. For in order to tolerate the insecurity that is inherent in a modern existence, Fromm argues, the alienated individual chooses conformity, i.e. to conform to the social character. Social conformity brings existential security by securing one's identity. Non-conformity risks marking oneself as a minority and opening oneself up to criticism and, thereby, to insecurity. For the security of a stable identity in this conformist-mode of social existence is entirely dependent upon external factors, namely the validation of others. And this pushes the individual to conform precisely to the character that society creates for them. However, this too is a contradiction as "this craving for conformity produces in turn a continuously operating, though hidden, sense of insecurity" (Fromm 1991, 191). The sense that any deviation from the line of conformity will trigger existential anxiety and insecurity increases one's dependency upon external validation. And, Fromm argues, as with any other kind of dependency in this process one's own sense of the self becomes increasingly diluted.

On this account the urge towards authoritarianism is no longer to be understood as resulting from an underdeveloped ego that must be supported by a strengthened super-ego which in turn uses external authority to buttress its psychic efficacy. Rather it stems from a diminished sense of self in the face of social alienation under present socio-economic conditions. The insecure individual tries to flee from their own freedom. It is the line of flight chosen, and the attendant mode of conformity, that leads these individuals towards authoritarianism in the form of the sadomasochistic character. Fromm's later account of the social character thus replaces the social psyche's Freudian tripartite ego with existential and psychological insecurity as a motive force behind the allure of authoritarianism. For Fromm, as Rickert notes, "A particular social character... does not develop because of certain experiences of overstimulation or frustration during one of the phases of libidinal development" (Rickert 1986, 360). Instead it is formed by the experience of a social reality constituted by a specific socioeconomic system. However, with the social character as with the social psyche, the forms of authority modelled by the individual are drawn straight from the social structure. And that social structure is directly conditioned by the economic structure that underlies it. As a result, repression and its psychic consequences are no longer ahistorical givens but retain 'an intrinsically historical dimension' and thus "can take a manifold set of social forms" (Bronner 1994, 214).

IV. Necrophilia

In this section, we detail Fromm's post-Frankfurt School concept of necrophilia. We argue that Fromm's necrophiliac character [1973] is a conceptual evolution of

the authoritarian/sadomasochistic character [1936] that was central to the early Frankfurt School's studies on authority. Fromm was motivated to develop the necrophiliac character after observing the destructiveness of World War Two and the increasing mechanisation of social existence (Du Toit 2019, 138). Fromm believed that the sadomasochistic character could not adequately explain the type of malignant aggression he saw exhibited during the war, and thus that a new character trope was required to understand this increased appetite for destruction.

The concept of the sadomasochistic character employed by the Frankfurt School to describe the authoritarian character drew heavily on Freud's analysis of moral masochism in *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (1986) in two regards. Firstly, on the idea that moral masochism is distinct from sexual masochism. In that moral masochism by contrast does not seek unhappiness as a roundabout means to achieve pleasure but rather seeks unhappiness as the end itself. And secondly, on the idea that the existence of masochistic traits in an individual necessitates the presence of sadistic traits (Fromm 2020, 40).

Whilst sadism and masochism are located in different parts of the psyche, masochism in the super-ego and sadism in the ego, the two combine to create the sadomasochistic character. The Frankfurt School's sadomasochistic character uses this Freudian interpretation of sadomasochism to explore how sadomasochistic traits are developed in the shared social psyche of a particular social group through a dependency on the ego development of the ruling classes. Thus, the lower classes due to their constrained socioeconomic circumstances are unable to match the ego development of the ruling classes and are instead driven to satisfy authoritarian drives located within the super-ego. In turn the gratification of the super-ego leads to the development of sadomasochistic character traits. Psychoanalytically the sadomasochistic character details a character trait that turns "another person into a dependent and defenseless instrument of one's own will, dominating the other absolutely and without restriction, and in extreme cases, forcing him to suffer and express that suffering" (Fromm 2020, 41).

Whilst Fromm believed that sadism exists within most human beings, he viewed the destructiveness exhibited in the 20th century to be without historical precedent. The very possibility for death and destructiveness on an industrial scale seemed to lie outside the boundaries of established notions of sadism. Fromm's later conceptual development, post-Frankfurt School, can be understood as in large part motivated by the desire to understand this radical expansion of the human capacity for aggression and destructiveness. To this end Fromm developed his narcissistic scale. This scale documents aggression, which ranges from the anal character at the lower end of the scale, then the sadistic character (part of the sadomasochistic character), and finally the necrophiliac character. The key innovation to note is the distinction between the sadistic and necrophiliac characters. Sadism, as Fromm described, is the innate desire to control others

completely without however destroying them (Fromm 1973, 348). Domination is the objective rather than annihilation. In this regard the concept of sadism employed here does not differ significantly from that employed in the Frankfurt School's account of the authoritarian character. However, Fromm wanted to understand the type of destructiveness and aggression that exceeded the conceptual boundaries of sadism and this is where Fromm's necrophiliac character comes in. Necrophilia, the act of loving that which is dead or inorganic, is commonly understood as a sexual act. However, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* [1973], Fromm describes necrophilia as a non-sexual act of loving that which is dead. The necrophiliac character's aim "is to transform all that is alive into dead matter; they want to destroy everything and everybody, often even themselves; their enemy is life itself" (Fromm 1973, 348). Fromm understands necrophilia as a character orientation. In other words, as a way in which an individual relates to the world outside of themselves. And a person's character orientation can gain or lose significance according to socio-economic environment within which they operate.

The necrophiliac character, a Neo-Freudian concept, developed out of the concept of the death drive put forward in Freud's later theory. Freud's earlier work was based on libidinal drives. However, this libidinal drive theory lacked a substantive understanding of aggression, and led Freud to develop the death drive in order to account for it. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1961), Freud argued that the development of modern civilisation was increasing the likelihood of expressions of aggression and death while diminishing the constructive forces of Eros.

Freud believed that the death drive resulted in either inward destruction and/or outward aggression. Regardless of whether the drive expresses itself inwardly or outwardly, its objective remains the same, namely to drive living organisms towards an inorganic state (Freud 1961, 63). It is this precisely this drive towards the inorganic that Fromm termed the necrophiliac character. He states that:

Necrophilia in the characterological sense can be described as the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. (Fromm 1973, 322)

Thus both Freud's death drive and Fromm's necrophilia analyse the more destructive traits of an individual or society. Thanatos details an account of aggression that is driven by a desire to reduce living organisms to an inorganic state. And necrophilia details an account of malignant aggression driven by a love for that which is dead or inorganic.

The Narcissistic Scale

In this sub-section we examine Fromm's narcissistic scale. In so doing we will establish that Fromm's necrophiliac character was a development of the sadistic character from the Frankfurt School's research on authority in the 1930s, which itself was a development of Freud's concept of the anal character. In so doing we demonstrate that Fromm's account of malignant aggression in the necrophiliac character represents a conceptual evolution of his account of sadism as put forward in *Studies on Authority and the Family* [1936].

The necrophiliac character is understood as a more malignant form of the anal character, more specifically the anally-expulsive. This character type is characterised by a fixation on expelling faeces during the stage when psychosexual development is focused on the anal zone. This fixation on the expulsion of faeces results in personality traits that are aggressive and disorderly. The anal character lies on the scale of narcissism which will eventually lead to the the necrophiliac character at the far end of the scale.

The next stage of development in this narcissistic evolution, following the anal character, is the sadistic character. Fromm describes sadism as:

the passion to have absolute and unrestricted control over a living being ... To force someone to endure pain or humiliation without being able to defend himself is one of the manifestations of absolute control, but it is by no means the only one. The person who has complete control over another living being makes this being into his thing, his property, while he becomes the other being's God. (1973, 289)

This analysis of sadism from Fromm in 1973 is extremely similar to the account of sadism he gave in 1936, where he describes sadism as the urge to dominate "the other absolutely and without restriction, and in extreme cases, forcing him to suffer" (Fromm 2020, 41).

The sadist is not one that destroys but one that controls totally, for instance by exercising control over the amount of pain and humiliation that their victim feels. Essentially the sadist wants to control the entirety of life, and in doing so, they gain pleasure in choking life, humiliating, and torturing. Given that the sadist aspires to the total mastery of another's life, it would be counterproductive for the sadist to destroy that life. Fromm says that:

The sadist wants to become the master of life, and hence the quality of life should be maintained in his victim. This is, in fact, what distinguishes him from the destroying person. The destroyer wants to do away with a person, to eliminate him, to destroy life itself; the sadist wants the sensation of controlling and choking life. (1973, 291)

In a warped way the sadist is invested in the continued existence of life. So, the sadistic character represents a further development on the narcissistic scale from the anal-expulsive character in that in addition to being aggressive, it is also controlling.

This necrophiliac character is the last evolutionary stage on the narcissistic scale. The necrophiliac character is the most narcissistic character, utterly unrelated to the social process and the most destructive. Essentially the necrophiliac character is, Fromm tells us, '*the malignant form of the anal character*' (1973, 349). The concept of the necrophiliac character is thus a further development of the concept of sadism that Fromm believed could account for the malignant aggression and destruction he had observed in contemporary events. And as such it is a conceptual outgrowth of the sadomasochistic character that comprised the conceptual core of the Frankfurt School's earlier analysis of the authoritarian character.

Gratifying the Economic Structure

In this sub-section, we will examine the ways in which Fromm's necrophiliac character is driven to gratify economic structures. This departs from the sadomasochistic character of the early Frankfurt School work on authoritarianism, which was driven by libidinal drives to gratify authoritarian structures within society, structures which arose in turn from the economic structure of the society. Fromm's post-Frankfurt School work, we argue, still views authority as a social structure that is ultimately subordinated to the economic structure. But now Fromm has reversed his conceptual framework. Rather than the biological drives being primary, and the social relations secondary, it is the social relations that are primary.⁶ It is the socioeconomic structure of advanced capitalism, Fromm now argues, that produces alienation and existential anxiety. It is these two features that enable necrophilous traits to be gratified.

In Fromm's later work the individual is driven by the need to relate; to themselves, to others, and to the things of the world, rather than by instinctual compulsions. The necrophiliac character of *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* is a character orientation, which while applicable to individuals, must also be understood in relation to the social character of a society. However, one cannot speak of the individual without speaking of the society and vice versa. As mentioned earlier, the idea of a character orientation is a means to understand how an individual or society relates to the world outside of their own. In the case of the necrophiliac character orientation, there is a negative relation between the individual or society and the world outside. This hearkens back to the idea of Freud's death instinct and how the outward expression of the death instinct is characterised by aggression. At its core, the necrophiliac character is malignant aggression; just as the sadist character is a level higher than the anal character, so too is the necrophiliac character a level higher on the aggression scale when compared to the sadist character. Aggression for Fromm was not typically

⁶ Fromm here stresses the historical contingency of the psyche. It is most definitely not the case that, as Held claims, Fromm in his post-30s work "was more and more committed... to the idea of an essential human nature" (Held 1980, 114).

spontaneous but instead came about as a defence against threats to one's own interest (Fromm 1973, 435). Malignant aggression, on the other hand, is not an innate capacity but develops through the penetration of socio-economic factors into the psyche. In other words, Thanatos is not present simply by virtue of our biological nature, but is rather a pathological form of human relations produced by the attempt to find meaning under the socio-economic conditions of late capitalism.

Fromm argues that it is through the exploitation and manipulation associated with alienation that aggression starts to develop in a malignant form. This is notably different from the 'normal' aggression I mentioned earlier. There are clear similarities here between malignant aggression and Fromm's views on modern society's mental health. The factors that contribute to an insane society are the same factors that contribute to the development of malignant aggression. The greater the alienation and existential anxiety felt, the more severe the development of malignant aggression. And in the most extreme cases this malignant aggression becomes necrophilous. Essentially, Fromm indicates, an insane or mentally unhealthy society if left unchecked will produce a necrophiliac character (1973, 355). For necrophilia is not some instinctual drive, but the result of a corrupted drive towards human relatedness under specific historical conditions.

Fromm developed his later concepts in a social context that was highly industrialised and increasingly technocentric. Whereas hitherto aggression typically manifested when an individual's interests were threatened, the increase in reliance on technology has led to a techno-bureaucratic society that is alienated to the point that it is unable to comprehend the destructiveness of its actions. Fromm states that modern aggression bears witness to:

the technicalization of destruction, and with it the removal of the full affective recognition of what one is doing. Once this process has been fully established there is no limit to destructiveness because nobody *destroys*; one only serves the machine for programmed-hence, apparently rational-purposes. (1973, 348)

Fromm here draws a clear connection between the rise of necrophilia and spirit of modern industrialised society, as evidenced in the changed behavioural and affective relations between individuals and the inorganic objects that populate their world. This is not to suggest that the individual who loves an inorganic object more than an organic one will necessarily develop a necrophiliac character. Fromm's point rather is to draw attention to the extent that love for inorganic objects has become a substitute for interest in life and the exercising of human functions in modern industrialised society. The necrophiliac individual is one whose interest in the inorganic totally replaces "their interest in what is alive and who deal with technical matters in a pedantic and unalive way" (Fromm 1973, 343). Necrophiliac characters flourish under societal conditions that gratify them. And, Fromm claims, the technicalization of society exacerbates this drive towards necrophilia. He states that, "We must conclude that the lifeless world of total

technicalisation is only another form of the world of death and decay" (Fromm 1973, 351). In modern technological society, alienation "is no longer confined to the objective effects of the division of labor or any particular class," but rather afflicts all social levels (Bronner 1994, 222).

In the Frankfurt School's research on authority in the 1930s, the sadomasochistic character was gratified by authoritarian structures within society, which themselves were a consequence of the underlying economic structure. Whereas the necrophiliac character of Fromm's later work is gratified by the techno-economic structures within society. This alteration stems from the complete lack of relation felt by the necrophiliac towards the social process as a consequence of alienation and existential anxiety. The necrophiliac identifies more easily with the technological forms of industrial capitalism than with the flesh and blood authority figures of the ruling class revered by the sadomasochistic character.

V. Biophilic Praxis

The goal of the first-generation of the Frankfurt School was to develop concepts that would provide a liberatory theory for the emancipation of all within a society. Such a liberatory theory would need to perform several functions. It would need to be descriptive in detailing oppressive social reality and in describing the circumstances that brought that reality into being. And it would need to be normative in its critique of the ways in which contemporary social formations block or diminish the potential for human liberation. Most important, however, is for a genuinely critical theory to provide the practical steps towards the emancipation of all within society. This need is underlined by Horkheimer, who said that the role of Critical Theory would be:

To strive for a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression, in which an all-embracing subject, namely self-aware mankind, exists, and in which it is possible to speak of a unified theoretical creation and a thinking that transcends individuals – to strive for all this is not yet to bring it to pass. (2002, 241)

This goal for a 'state of affairs' in which an emancipated society can be realised would be done by developing practical steps for the realisation of emancipation. This would enable Critical Theory to "move from fundamental structure to concrete reality" (Horkheimer 2002, 225).

As Govender puts it, a liberatory theory "in principle, aims at stating what is wrong with the current oppressive social reality, and identifies key actors that can change it... while still providing concise normative guidance and attainable practical goals for the emancipation of society" (2020, 208).

Viewed in the light of these criteria, the Frankfurt School's early research on the authoritarian character was incomplete. It offered an historical account of the rise in authoritarianism in a singular historical context that identified its psychosocial roots in a specific socioeconomic formation and provided a

trenchant critique of the deformations of human potentiality involved in its perpetuation. It, however, did not provide any concrete guidance on how this current state of social and psychological domination might be overcome. And thus it only meets the descriptive and normative criteria of a critical theory. In large part this was due to the fact that the authoritarian character research project was cut short by the Frankfurt School's new conceptual direction in its studies on authoritarianism. This new direction replaced the Frankfurt School's psychoanalytical foundations in favour of an almost purely socio-economic, materialist dialectic understanding of domination and authority. So, by accident rather than design, the early Frankfurt School's research on the authoritarian character never delivered its practical objective.

Although 1939 marks the official end of the School's research on the authoritarian character, we have argued that in the years following his expulsion from the Frankfurt School, Fromm continued to work on the subject using the same theoretical framework. We now further argue that Fromm's later work can be viewed as attempting to provide the missing component of the original authoritarian character research project by developing practical guidance towards the liberation of society from the authoritarian character.⁷ This liberating praxis is presented by Fromm in the form of biophilia, or the love of life, which is the conceptual counterpart to necrophilia. Fromm's praxis for emancipation is negativistic in that it seeks to minimise domination by reducing malignant aggression, thereby enabling the realisation of human potential.

Biophilia as a theory of liberation aims to provide practical steps towards the emancipation of modern society by negating the narcissism inherent to the authoritarian character. More specifically, by inhibiting the development of the types of narcissistic character traits detailed up to this point, namely sadism and necrophilia. Fromm's biophilia has obvious similarities to Freud's life drive or Eros. And just as Eros and Thanatos are juxtaposed in Freudian theory, so too are Fromm's concepts of biophilia and necrophilia. Eros for Freud was the process of combining organic substances into even greater unities, whereas Thanatos was the process of breaking these entities down through the disintegration of living structures (Fromm 1973, 365). Similarly, Fromm's biophilia is the love of all that which is organic with an innate desire to enable further growth, whereas necrophilia is the love of that which is inorganic and is destructive in nature (1973, 365).

Necrophilia and biophilia are driven primarily by socio-economic factors which exacerbate either of the character orientations. Fromm states that:

The malignant forms of aggression... – sadism and necrophilia – are not innate; hence, they can be substantially reduced when the socio-economic conditions

⁷ Michael J. Thompson's (2024) "Critical Theory and Radical Psychoanalysis: Rethinking the Marcuse-Fromm Debate" provides a truly informative overview of Fromm's psychoanalytic theory as liberatory praxis.

are replaced by conditions that are favorable to the full development of man's genuine needs and capacities: to the development of human self-activity and man's creative power as its own end. (1973, 436)

If one views the appearance of the authoritarian character as the expression of aggression, as Fromm does, then one can treat the authoritarian character as a syndrome with the use of biophilia. Biophilia is a character orientation that has a positive relation to the world outside their own and that, instead of being driven to destroy as with necrophilia, is driven to create, enabling further positive growth. It is the conditions detailed by Fromm that gratify the biophilic character orientation that are of particular relevance. The conditions that satisfy the individual's full, 'genuine' development for Fromm are those that gratify a drive towards further growth. In this regard Fromm's biophilia has echoes of Horkheimer's description in the 1937 essay, *Postscript*, of critical theory as an "effort to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of men." (Horkheimer 2002, 245)

Whereas necrophilia was considered to be the result of "stunted growth ... an outcome of un-lived life, of the failure to arrive at a certain stage beyond narcissism and indifference," biophilia was viewed as a 'biologically normal impulse.' (Fromm 1973, 366) Fromm states that:

Destructiveness is not parallel to, but the alternative to biophilia. Love of life or love of the dead is the fundamental alternative that confronts every human being. Necrophilia grows as the development of biophilia is stunted. Man is biologically endowed with the capacity for biophilia, but psychologically he has the potential for necrophilia as an alternative solution. (1973, 366) [italics removed]

In effect, biophilia and necrophilia are dialectically linked. An increase in the socioeconomic conditions that gratify necrophiliac traits will simultaneously stunt the expression of biophilic traits, and vice versa. So, developing a society that inhibits the development of the necrophiliac character orientation will lead to greater biophilic character orientations developing within a society, as biophilia is a natural disposition. If biophilia is the 'tendency for all living organisms to live' then a humanist society that gratifies the development of the biophilic character would be one that actively encourages growth and positive living for living's sake and not for the sake of gratification through the alienating pursuit of economic and materialistic goals (Fromm 1965, 45). This humanist society would provide the necessary conditions for the 'full development of humanity's needs,' thereby creating a society geared towards the fulfilment of positive growth of humankind. These conditions exceed the merely socioeconomic according to Fromm. He states that:

This humanist radicalism goes to the roots, and thus to the causes; it seeks to liberate man from the chains of illusions; it postulates that fundamental changes are necessary, not only in our economic and political structure but also in our values, in our concept of man's aims, and in our personal conduct. (Fromm 1973, 438)

Fromm anticipates two possible critiques of biophilia, one pessimistic and the other optimistic (Fromm 1973, 436). The pessimist claims that it is unrealistic to expect an improvement in humanity, as human nature is inherently evil. The pessimistic, in more Frommian terms, maintains that individuals always have the capacity for malignant aggression (Fromm 1973, 437). Central to Fromm's account of destructiveness is the position that malignant aggression is not innate to human nature but rather a response to contingent social circumstances. However, this position does not open the door to blind optimism, such as an irrational faith in the goodness of human nature. Such a faith, Fromm argues, is also detrimental to the development of a humanistic society that gratifies biophilic character traits in that it reinforces the status quo (1973, 437). Whereas the pessimist says that nothing can be done, the optimist says that nothing needs to be done. The propagation of irrational faith, which characterises the optimist, is thus no less destructive to liberation than the opinion of the pessimist. As Fromm elaborates, "Optimism is an alienated form of faith, pessimism an alienated form of despair" (1973, 436).

Against the pessimist and the optimist Fromm advocates rational faith. Fromm believes that in order to actualise a humanist society that gratifies the biophilic character, societal change is essential. Specifically, the socioeconomic structures that have brought about the political and psychological conditions that obstruct the fulfilment of humanity's genuine needs must be removed (Fromm 1973, 436). And at a more personal level, one must hold onto the faith that humankind has the capacity to remove itself from the trap that it has created for itself.

It is only through rational faith in the ability of humankind to achieve its maximum potential and satisfaction of genuine needs that an appropriate socioeconomic structure can be developed and the political and psychological blocks to liberation be cleared. In short, it is through rational faith that a humanist society can be developed. And only such a humanist society can push back the narcissistic encroachment of the authoritarian character at the individual and social levels, and ultimately prevent its development.

Whilst Fromm claims that biophilia is a praxis for emancipation, the practical steps required to achieve a biophilic society are sketched rather hazily.⁸ Fromm advocates for the restructuring of existing economic and political structures within society, and argues that this restructuring will require a change in mindset of the individual within a society to one of hope and rational faith. Fromm explains that:

⁸ At least in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. A case however could be made that taken collectively Fromm's works (especially *The Art of Loving*, *To Have or To Be?*, *The Art of Being*, and *The Heart of Man*) lay out a programme for biophilic praxis of considerable detail. Considerations of space prevent us exploring this possibility here.

To have faith means to dare, to think the unthinkable, yet to act within the limits of the realistically possible; it is the paradoxical hope to expect the Messiah every day, yet not to lose heart when he has not come at the appointed hour. This hope is not passive and it is not patient; on the contrary, it is impatient and active, looking for every possibility of action within the realm of real possibilities. Least of all is it passive as far as the growth and the liberation of one's own person are concerned. (1973, 438)

This positive change in mindset, Fromm asserts, would ease the existential anxiety created by modern industrialised society and enable the full development of human potential. However, a change in mindset alone cannot fully develop a biophilic society. Above all, if an appreciation for the organic is a defining attribute of the biophilic orientation, then the highly consumerist society in which we live is in no way compatible with a biophilic society. And it is hard to imagine how such an orientation towards the organic could ever begin, let alone flourish, under such conditions.

Fromm claims that our mindset is determined by social structures (1973, 438). As such the development of a biophilic society will be dialectical in nature. In order for the social structure to change there needs to be a positive change in mindset towards the achievement of humanity's full potential. However, the possibilities for the realisation of that potential is limited by the economic and political structures. As such practical steps must be taken to ensure the change in mindset of each individual is followed up with a change in the structure of economic and political structures. And, as Thompson points out, this is the radical core of Fromm's biophilic praxis, "to cultivate that part of oneself that is able to undermine the pathological tendencies, desires, repetitions, beliefs, needs and assumptions that have made life difficult, ridden with anxiety, or deadened" (Thompson 2024, 9). Only those who have achieved the ability to undo the internalised layers of repressive socialisation and assert their agency have the capacity to realign the social structure.⁹ This realignment has at its core the understanding that these structures must capacitate humanity to fulfil their own needs rather than subordinate them to the needs of the capitalist system. It is not ownership of the means of production that will liberate humanity, but the accompanying and more fundamental insight that those means must be directed primarily towards the fulfilment of the organic needs of humanity. To quote Horkheimer, "to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of men" (2002, 245).

⁹ Fromm's biophilic solution to necrophilia is consistent with the interpersonal focus of his later philosophy. Just as necrophilia results from and reproduces stunted relations with the world, so too does biophilia stem from and react upon individual and social relations. For Fromm both the source of the disease and the path to its cure lie through our relations with others (Cawood 2019, 168).

VI. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that Fromm's post-Frankfurt School work should be viewed as a continuation of the Frankfurt School's research into the authoritarian character project. And that as a consequence the true end of this research project should be viewed not as 1939 but 1973 with the publication of Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. In support of this claim we argued that the central concepts of Fromm's later, post-Frankfurt School work, namely the social character [1955] and necrophilia [1973] are themselves conceptual evolutions of key concepts from the Frankfurt School's authoritarian character project, namely the social psyche [1936] and sadomasochism [1936]. These later conceptual developments all bear witness to Fromm's post-Frankfurt School de-emphasising of the primacy of Freudian libido theory in understanding character development, and yet remain closely akin to their conceptual predecessors nonetheless.

The characteristics of Fromm's social psyche are enhanced in his later concept of the social character through incorporation of additional socio-economic influences, such as alienation, dependency and existential anxiety, that Fromm identified as key features of post-War existence. The modification of the social psyche into the social character was thus motivated by the desire for a more up to date assessment of the ways that socio-economic factors influence the development of character and the alienation that follows. And by the need to capture the pervasive existential anxiety that Fromm viewed as resulting in the gratification of authoritarian traits.

Fromm's later concept of necrophilia did not replace sadomasochism but rather added another level of narcissism beyond sadomasochism. The necrophiliac character orientation was held by Fromm to be the most destructive character orientation and described a character driven by a love of that which is inorganic. Just as the sadomasochistic character was the central concept of the early Frankfurt School's work on the authoritarian character, so too was Fromm's necrophiliac character the central concept of his later theory. A significant development in Fromm's study of malignant narcissism is the subordination of authority to the economic structure. The necrophiliac character receives gratification from the economic structures, rather than from authority structures, having become alienated from all social relations.

We further argued that Fromm's development of the concept of biophilia can be viewed as an attempt to fulfil the original objective of the Frankfurt School's research into the authoritarian character in the 1930s. Fromm's analysis of contemporary destructiveness and the social conditions that give rise to it, by outlining a biophilic praxis which could be used to move society's liberation from fundamental concepts towards a concrete reality, met retrospectively the objectives of a Critical Theory set out by Horkheimer. Fromm's later theory is descriptive in its analysis of the current oppressive situation, normative in its account of what a fully emancipated society ought to be, and practical in that it includes practical steps towards the realisation of that emancipated society. For

these reasons Fromm's later work 1955-1973 should be reconsidered not just as a continuation of the Frankfurt School's research into the authoritarian character but as its culmination.

If, as we have argued here, Fromm's later work on necrophilia is effectively a continuation of his earlier work on the authoritarian character, and the concept of biophilia is Fromm's attempt to furnish the practical aspect that the early Frankfurt School's critique of authoritarianism was lacking, then much work remains to be done in elaborating Fromm's analysis. Firstly, in order to reconsider Fromm's work on biophilia as critical theory, and then to consider it in relation to the problem of the authoritarian character. Also, if the real endpoint of the history of the Frankfurt School's research on authoritarianism is Fromm's work of the 1960s and 1970s, then further work is called for in order to compare Fromm's own version of the authoritarian character 2.0 with the concept of the authoritarian personality that the Frankfurt School developed after Fromm's expulsion.

Beyond this, it is our further hope that an awareness of the expanded temporal and conceptual scope of research into the authoritarian character will provide the contemporary researcher with a greater range of conceptual tools for the analysis and understanding of authoritarianism in the present day. For although the Frankfurt School's research into authority began almost a century ago the tendency at the individual and group level towards seeking domination by authoritarian demagogic figures, as opposed to freedom, still persists. And so too does the need to theorise its causes and treatment.

References

- Adorno, Theodor. 1950. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Norton Library.
- Boucher, Geoff. 2021. "The Frankfurt School and the authoritarian personality: Balance sheet of an insight." *Thesis Eleven* 163 (1): 89-102.
- Bronner, Stephen. 1994. *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cawood, Helem-Mary. 2019. "Fromm's Ethic of Solidarity and the Potential for Critical Communitarianism." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 38 (2): 166-179.
- Du Toit, Jean. 2019. "Between Thanatos and Eros: Erich Fromm and the Psychoanalysis of Social Networking Technology Use." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 38 (2): 136-148.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1961. [1930]. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W Norton & Company Inc.
- _____. 1986. [1924]. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, 157-170. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Fromm, Erich. 1968. [1964]. *The Heart of Man*. New York: Harper Colophon.
- _____. 1973. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

- _____. 1979. [1978]. *To Have or To Be?* London: Abacus.
- _____. 1991. [1955]. *The Sane Society*. London: Routledge.
- _____. 1993. *The Art of Being*. London: Constable.
- _____. 1993. [1956]. *The Art of Loving*. Aquarian Press.
- _____. 2001. [1941]. *The Fear of Freedom*. London: Routledge Classics.
- _____. 2009. [1962]. *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*. New York: Continuum.
- _____. 2020. [1936]. "Studies on Authority and the Family: Sociopsychological Dimensions." *Fromm Forum* 24: 8-58.
- Funk, Rainer. 2024. "Erich Fromm's Contribution to Critical Theory." *Logos. An Online Quarterly Journal of Modern Culture, Politics and Society* 24 (2).
- Govender, Nathisvaran. 2020. "Alienation, Reification and the Banking Model of Education: Paulo Freire's Critical Theory of Education." *Acta Academica* 52 (2): 204-222.
- Govender, Nathisvaran, Richard Sivil & Gregory Morgan Swer. 2024. "The Authoritarian Character Revisited: Genesis and Key Concepts." *Symposion: Theoretical and Applied Inquiries in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 11 (2): 213-238.
- Held, David. 1980. *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Horkheimer, Max. 1973. "The Authoritarian State." *Telos* 15: 3-20.
- _____. 1993. [1936]. "Egoism and Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era." In *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, 49-110. MIT Press.
- _____. 2002. [1937]. Traditional and Critical Theory. In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, 188-243. New York: Continuum.
- McLaughlin, Neil. 2017. "The Fromm-Marcuse Debate and the Future of Critical Theory." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, edited by M. Thompson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pollock, Friedrich. 1982. "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations." In: *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, edited by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, 71-94. New York: Continuum.
- Rickert, John. 1986. "The Fromm-Marcuse Debate Revisited." *Theory and Society* 15 (3): 351-400.
- Thompson, Michael J. 2025. "Critical Theory and Radical Psychoanalysis: Rethinking the Marcuse-Fromm Debate." *Theory, Culture and Society* 42 (3): 59-74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764241299350>.