FASCIST PROPAGANDA AND THE IDEA OF NARCISSISM

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Abstract:
Is Fascism over? The pan-European movement which developed in the early twentieth century and culminated into World War II is not the thing of the past. In fact, it is very much present albeit in a covert manner in the contemporary world where we see the rise of Right-wing governments all around the globe. Set in an ideological framework, the paper tries to decode the psychological patterns which can lead to the fascist rule. Building on Theodore Adorno’s assessment of narcissistic tendencies which turn ‘masses into masses’ and Giorgio Agamben’s decisive concept of ‘state of exception’, the paper explores the scenario where the false propaganda leads to mental conditioning of the masses and their idealization of the authoritarian father-figure. This absolutely narcissistic primal father-figure then demands abject submission of will and creates states of exception where the inside and the outside blur into each other. Finally, by eliminating any alternative mode of thinking, one-dimensional men are created following a single ideology that is, of fascism. Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man (1964), which is discussed in the later-half of the paper, portrays the dreadful consequences when such one-dimensional men are created in a society.

Throughout history men have struggled, suffered, and died under various oppressive regimes. The term ‘fascist’ (derived from the Italian word fascio) represents a significant breaking-point in the history of struggle against organized forces of repression. A pan-European movement which developed in early 1920s fiercely espoused anti-democratic and ultraconservative beliefs of ideologues like Count Joseph Gobineau in his “Essay on the Inequality of Human Race” (1853) and William Marr’s “The Victory of Judaism over Germanism” (1873). It launched a scathing attack on socialism which was steadily developing in the 1880s and condemned it as materialist, unpatriotic and weak. The fascist movement led to the rise of the authoritarian personalities (General Franco in Spain, Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy) which eventually and inevitably led to World War II.

My aim in this paper is to look at the social patterns and more importantly the psychological patterns that led to the rise of fascist rule in which the power and ideology of fascism couldn’t be challenged. I want to re-assess Theodor Adorno’s argument about how the tendency towards narcissism provided the psychological ground for the development of fascism. Giorgio Agamben’s state of exception will serve as my point of departure since in a state of exception, the law truly “has no existence in itself, but rather has its being in the very life of men.” The law and fact becomes totally indistinguishable. To develop the idea of the narcissistic personality
which ultimately changes into an authoritarian one, an extension of which is a fascist state, I will base my argument on Adorno’s essay, “Freudian theory and the pattern of Fascist propaganda (1951)” followed by a discussion of Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man (1964).

In 1926 the Fascist regime in Italy issued a judgment which, as Agamben states in the State of Exception (2005), “established that, upon deliberations of the council of ministers, ‘norms having force of law’ could be issued by royal decree” when the government implements them “within the limits of their delegation” and/or in extreme situations which demand immediate and absolutely necessary action. As this judgment had to be tabled in the parliament for its conversion into a law, the disregard for the parliamentary procedures and its eventual loss of power rendered the whole activity superfluous. Since then the practice of executive absorbed the legislative power of the parliament and transformed the country into an absolute fascist state. (SE 18) In other words, the deliberate coincidence between the realm of bare life and political life rendered the law and fact totally indistinguishable. As a result, necessity permeated violence and deemed it thoroughly legitimate. Every other law was discarded as it created a law of its own. This led to the creation of a “zone of indifference” where inside and outside blurred into each other effectively leading to a state of exception.

This shows that oppression just can’t be abolished so long as the causes which ultimately make it inevitable remain. As the causes reside in the objective (material condition) and subjective (psychological condition) realms, a reciprocal relationship between the two realms needs to be examined afresh, unless we prefer to close our eyes to the events that took place in the twentieth century. Theodor Adorno, known for his critical theory of society, in his essay, “Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda” analyses the social-psychological conditions of the modern authoritarian states. Eric Fromm, the psychoanalyst and the full member of the Institute for Social Research, who first attempted to link Freud and Marx, consciously avoided giving psychoanalytic answers for societal problems where adequate sociological answers existed. Adorno, on the other hand, tried to find out the reason behind the crowds resorting to violent methods and creating the atmosphere of pogrom at the libidinal level. Adorno argues about the monotonous but remarkably similar utterances of various “agitators, from much-publicized figures such as Coughlin and Gerald Smith to provincial small-time hate mongers” having a commonality, “be it conscious or unconscious, which determines every word that is said.” (119) Adorno insists that Freud turned his attention to narcissism and ego problems for a specific reason, that is, to trace the individual instincts which “yield unquestionably to powerful outside, collective agencies.” (120) Freud, according to Adorno, distanced himself from the traditional feeling of contempt towards the masses and worked in the spirit of enlightenment by asking “what makes masses into masses?” (121) The quest to uncover the unconscious instincts (unmasking the libidinal bond between the leader and the masses) which is responsible for the transformation of individuals into a mass would, Adorno states, lead to an exposition of the fascist agenda.

Adorno states that since the libidinal bond is of “uninhibited sexual nature,” the “love relationship” has to remain at unconscious level. He cites Freud’s example of “organized groups such as the Army or the Church” where love is completely excluded or merely mentioned/
expressed in an indirect manner. (123) It has to be repressed and molded into obedience to fall into the pattern of fascist propaganda. Adorno compares the fascist demagogues with the hypnotist:

who awakens in the subject a portion of his archaic inheritance which had also made him compliant towards his parents and which had experienced an individual re-animation in his relation to his father: what is thus awakened is the idea of a paramount and dangerous personality, towards whom only a passive-masochistic attitude is possible, to whom one’s will has to be surrendered...It is only in some such ways as this that we can picture the relation of the individual member of the primal horde to the primal father...The primal father is the group ideal, which governs the ego in the place of the ego ideal. (Adorno 124)

The formation of the father-figure ideal which reanimates the threatening primal father to whom “one’s will has to be surrendered” is, according to Adorno, the true nature and content of fascist propaganda. The mechanism, recognized by Adorno, which transforms libido into a bond, is that of “identification.” (125) This identification “helps to bring about the separation of the leader image as that of an all-powerful primal father, from the actual father image.” (125) He further states that this act of identification is based on certain primitive narcissistic desires and provides clue to the fact as to why the image of the leader and the overwhelming love for it is seen as an “enlargement of the subject’s own personality, a collective projection of himself, rather than the image of the father whose role during the later phases of the subject’s infancy may well have decreased in present day society.” (125) Under the fascist rule, then, this results in the convergence of people’s world-view with the leader’s point-of-view and no other vision of the world seems possible.

Adorno’s rationale is that attitudes to authority are learned or conditioned in childhood, where the parent serves as the first model of authority. Allan How, in his seminal book Critical Theory (2003), states that the idea of the narcissistic personality (equally shared by the masses and their leaders) derives from Freud’s theory about the process of mental growth from childhood to adulthood. The baby gradually has to move on from being completely dependent on its mother to a stage where it recognizes its “separateness and potential autonomy.” This sudden loss of omnipotence of the mother’s figure who is the prime nurturer and sole provider of every basic need gives rise to infantile narcissism. (How 95) The word ‘narcissism’ itself derives from a Greek myth in which the Greek god Narcissus became so enchanted with his own reflection in the pool of water that he fell in love with his own image. Since then he couldn’t bring himself to understand the objective reality other than the mesmerizing power of his reflection and unable to curb his strong urges, he drowned himself in the pool of water. However, while the child has to come to terms with the reality, rather painfully, that “it is not at the centre of things, but one ego amongst others,” sometimes adults show signs of “pathological narcissism” resulting in the identification which the fascist leader tries to promote in his followers. This then leads to a conditioning and reflecting of a general mentality of the population, which influences the socio-political structures of the society. (How 96)
Freud argues that central to the development of narcissism is the Oedipus complex when the individual deals with issues like fear, anxiety, love and hate. At this stage, he sees the mother as object of love and desire and has to give up this desire in order to avoid a conflict situation with the father. The father appears as “something of an ogre, the disciplinarian who admonishes the child for being tied to his mother’s apron strings.” (How 96) This competition, Freud argues, can entail a fear of castration on the boy’s part and so he represses his desire and begins to identify with his father and his principles. How states, “This ego-ideal, or what the child wants to be like, becomes the foundation for a strong, autonomous ego in later life.”

However, with the decline of the patriarchal order, the child feels plagued with the feelings of emptiness, numbness in a ‘fatherless’ society. The reason being the absence of feelings of anger and jealousy at the oedipal stage (developed from the internalization of authority) which would have provided “an inner sense of purpose and self-direction.” (How 97) Adorno is of the view that the “tendency towards narcissism provided the psychological ground for its development.” He believes that the fascist propaganda which lacks any rational content still contains an overwhelming appeal because it is projected through an awe-inspiring leader. Such a figure fills up the vacuum left behind by the lack of identification with the actual father-figure during the oedipal stage. The irrationality of the whole propaganda is a necessary condition to finally make the masses “one with an all-powerful parent.” (How 98)

Adorno suggest that the role of narcissism is clearly recognized in Freud’s theory of idealization. The object is treated with so much affection that “considerable amount of narcissistic libido overflows on the object” so much so that the object becomes a “substitute for some unattainable ego ideal of our own.” (125) This idealization of himself is promoted by the fascist leader because he gains power with the transfer of the narcissistic libido of the masses to the object, namely the leader himself. (126) Furthermore, this idealization is a collective enterprise and “is effective in vast number of people with similar characterological dispositions and libidinal leaning.” (126) To establish the identification between him and the masses, Adorno argues, the leader himself has to appear as “absolutely narcissistic” in essence for him to be seen as the primal father:

He, at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the Superman whom Nietzsche only expected from the future. Even today, the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader; but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterly nature, absolutely narcissistic, but self-confident and independent. We know that love puts a check upon narcissism, and it would be possible to show how, by operating in this way, it became a factor of civilization. (Adorno 126)

Adorno further argues that the leader must appear simultaneously as the superman “expected from the future” as well as the average person to facilitate his role as the group ideal. This “gratifies the follower’s twofold wish to submit to authority and to be the authority himself.” (127) The people simply obey the dictators because they identify themselves with the ruthless oppressor. Oppression proceeds exclusively from the conditions of existence and since the leader
alone exercises the monopoly over such conditions, the hierarchical pattern remains intact even when Freud’s identification principle continues to function. Italian fascism particularly, embraced the idea of leadership by an elite where power runs from the top down. ‘Believe, obey and fight’ became the credo to unite the masses much in the same way as the bundles of firewood was used by the workers in the Sicilian sulphur mines from which the word ‘fascist’ derives its meaning. The same pattern is seen in Germany where Hitler’s famous formula, ‘responsibility from above, authority towards below’ rationalizes the sadomasochistic character and hierarchical differentiations.

All fascist demagogues, according to Adorno, employed the pseudo-natural criterion of race to mercilessly create boundaries between the inside and outside and which acted, throughout Europe, as a negatively integrating force. He quotes Freud’s explanation of the hostility against the out-group with narcissism:

In the undisguised antipathies and aversions which people feel towards strangers with whom they have to do, we may recognize the expression of self-love---of narcissism. This self-love works for the self-assertion of the individual, and behaves as though the occurrence of any divergence from his own particular lines of development involved a criticism of them and demand for their alteration. (Adorno 130)

Thus, the narcissistic gain effected by the fascist propaganda creates a sense of superiority in the people belonging to the in-group over those who are excluded. The workings of a fascist group are not subject to question since, like Narcissus, only its own image is the reality that exists. In fact, any challenge from the excluded group is likely to be met with a violent reaction as it will be experienced as a “narcissistic loss” that “elicits rage.” (130) The leader represents the masses psychologically and is “distinguished from them by a capacity to express without inhibitions what is latent in them, rather than by any intrinsic superiority.” (132) His appeal has been standardized through a process of “freezing” employed in modern mass culture which is similar to the advertising slogans which proved to be most valuable in the promotions of business.” (133) The standardization is based on the stereotypical thinking which, Adorno argues, is susceptible to the fascist propaganda and rule which exercised “power unhampered by rational objectivity.” Adorno concludes his arguments in the essay by stating that the arrested psychic development of individuals in the fascist societies produced by their substitution of an object in place of their superegos gives rise and firmly relies on “each particular trait of the authoritarian character which is itself the product of an internalization of the irrational aspects of modern society.” The secret of fascist propaganda is that it “takes men for what they are: the true children of today’s standardized mass culture, largely robbed of autonomy and spontaneity…” (134)

What is remarkable about the Fascist rule is that it has its roots in anti-Semitism, xenophobia and fervent nationalism which can easily be categorized as popular products of culture industry (Adorno’s term) because they appeal to the same narcissistic tendencies in the human subject. The modern day culture too is narcissistic in its essence by paying too much emphasis on
appearances (as is the case in Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, 1964). For instance, Success is defined as what appears popular, desirable, and so forth.

Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, written amidst the Cold War and Space Race between USA and USSR, issued a damning indictment of contemporary Western societies. Marcuse argues that "advanced industrial society” created false needs (much like ideology which creates false consciousness as professed by Frederic Jameson), which integrated individuals into the “existing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought” and behavior while almost obliterating any other mode of thinking thereby creating one-dimensional men in society. Marcuse in the prospectus for the novel states:

…the chief characteristic of this new mode of thought and behavior is the repression of all values, aspirations and ideas which cannot be defined in terms of operations and attitudes validated by the prevailing forms of rationality. The consequence is the weakening and even the disappearance of all genuinely radical critique, the integration of all opposition in the established system.” (Marcuse xii)

Marcuse argues the two features that the most advanced areas of industrial society exhibit are: “a trend toward consummation of technological rationality, and intensive efforts to contain this trend within the established institutions.” (Marcuse 19) The culture industry and commodity fetishism integrates individuals and the technology restructures labor and leisure in the society. It’s all a “conquest of the unhappy consciousness” since everything is being governed by the “logic of domination” and “abstractness is the very life of thought.”

Brad Rose argues in his essay, “The triumph of social control? A look at Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, 25 years later (1990)” that advanced industrial society, as depicted by Marcuse, is “the most recent expression of a ‘specific historical project’ at the center of which is the ‘experience, transformation and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination.’"

As the project unfolds, it shapes the entire universe of discourse and action, intellectual and material culture. In the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. The productivity and growth potential of this system stabilize the society and contain technical progress within the framework of domination. (Marcuse xlvii)

Marcuse argues that the advancement in the industrial society has closely paralleled, rather led to the development of commodity fetishism. “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed…” (Marcuse 11) Moreover, this promotes attitudes of compliance which even Adorno highlights in his discussion of the culture industry and critique of consumer society. The human ability to manipulate things is not peculiar to capitalism and fascism alone; it extends even to the industrial society depicted in *One-Dimensional Man* where the “profit motive” surpasses everything. Marcuse further argues that the “technological reality” of advanced industrial society has
invaded and altered the human capacity for critical thought by its manifold methods of “...scientific management and organization.” As a result, it has led to an increasing identification of human subjectivity with the technological reality. It is important to draw attention here to the Freudian concept of identification and idealization which Adorno cited in his essay and how it worked in the similar fashion under the fascist regime. Rose further stresses Marcuse’s point that even after such proliferation of commodities alienation has not ceased to exist as expected rather it has risen to disturbingly new heights of perfection:

I have just suggested that the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation. The latter has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. (Marcuse 13)

The total and absolute social control and the widespread alienation prevalent in the society has led to the creation of one-dimensional thought and behavioral pattern which are reconstituted and redefined by the rationality of the given system. Ultimately, Marcuse proposes that “there is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal, the ‘false consciousness’ of their rationality becomes the true consciousness.” (Marcuse 13) Marcuse argues that the welfare state of the contemporary Western societies bred the attitude of compliance which has led to the political and social integration of the working class nullifying pluralism and “opening of the bedroom to the media of mass communication.” (Marcuse 21)

In the chapter "The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness," even the arts, Rose postulates, now take their place "...in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference.” (Marcuse 64) Rose argues that the desublimation of art directly corresponds to the desublimation of human sexuality to inculcate the purpose of pacification and social control. A repressively desublimated sexuality poses no risk and “sex is integrated into work and public relations, and this is made more susceptible to controlled satisfaction” in order to have more effective domination and containment. (Marcuse 78) The continuing commodification of culture and its capability of being reproduced in large numbers to meet demand have stifled the alternatives to the status quo and life has become one-dimensional.

The taming of the libido, triumph of absolute social control, elimination of rational faculties, ruthless oppression, profoundly superficial mass culture are some of the quintessential features which Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man shares with Adorno’s essay, “Freudian theory and the pattern of Fascist propaganda.” The inability to identify with a strong parent and child’s sense of anger on his/her parent is compensated by an outward projection into the world about fantasies of wealth, beauty and omnipotence. As a result, superficial traits of personality have taken place of the fundamental traits of character. The central factor or construct that has emerged from the above investigation of the idea of narcissism arising either from psychologically or culturally propagated manner is the authoritarian personality which seeks to present repressive
egalitarianism while openly oppressing people and crushing opposition. The libidinal tie that the group ideal share with the masses guides, rather instructs them that “no one must want to put himself forward, everyone one must be the same and have the same” and they must do violence to the other (excluded) out-groups, the intellectuals, the socialists, the foreigners, the refugees, the pleasure seekers, the Jews since narcissistic personality involves avoidance of, not embroilment in intimacy.

Work Cited