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**Erich Fromm and Contemporary American Politics**

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**Introduction**

The last few years have witnessed a general movement toward more conservative if indeed, extremist, reactionary, perhaps neo-fascist governments in Europe, Asia, South America and even the United States, along with growing trends toward authoritarian populisms, ethnic nationalisms, racism, misogyny, and xenophobia. The current wave of these movements tends toward authoritarian, anti-democratic politics and especially both punitive and sadistic aggression toward “Others” who lay outside the “policed boundaries” of the socially constructed “we.” When society allocates vast resources to a military that produces mass death and destruction and leaves few resources for the enhancement of personal and social life, such societies not only thwart human fulfillment, but might very well be considered “sick societies” as Erich Fromm described them, societies in which the typical character structure distorts the self into commodity-centered nihilism, a quest for empty pleasures that serves the accumulation of profit and also thwarts genuine human fulfillment. This “pathological normality” often shades into intolerance for difference and dissention, sometimes into hatred and the quest for death and destruction. Today we face major economic dislocations, environmental despoliation, and the possible collapse of civilization, yet we avidly persist in practices that hasten our collective demise.

Consequently, we argue that the social and political polarization today constitutes a fundamentally new conflict that far transcends conservative versus liberal dynamics and rises to a much more profound battle between those who continue to worship white male nationalism, wealth, and violence on one side, and those who seek a sense of community and inclusive relationships that cross racial, religious, ethnic, and gender lines—progressive lifestyles that provide meaning rather than wealth and American Empire. Does the future hold bleak and authoritarian dystopias, or more joyous and egalitarian utopias?

Erich Fromm considered this question in 1941 as World War II raged. In the aftermath, nations built massive nuclear arsenals and prepared for global annihilation, both democratic and totalitarian countries alike, because the leaders and the citizens were beholden to primitive myths, idols, and a lust for power as Fromm argued—either to wield it directly, or to share in it through submission. People embraced the passions of irrational destruction, the glory of conquest and annihilation, and all the while ignored the spiritual calls for peace and community from the religions of Jesus, Muhammed, and others. Amidst the mid-century atomic age, Fromm revisited the issues of 1941: “How can humanity save itself from destroying itself by this discrepancy between intellectual-technical over-maturity, and emotional backwardness?” (1993 [1965, 1941]: xvi). In our view, we find ourselves perpetually at the precipice—Armageddon by nuclear war, endless war, resource depletion, pollution, the global heat trap (the original name for global warming), mass impoverishment, maybe all of the above. The US devotes ever more resources to endless war and billionaire tax cut policies that have bankrupted the country—current US national debt is 21 trillion dollars (usdebtclock.org) plus trillions more for credit card, homeowner, and student loan debt. Donald Trump and his followers who never waiver stand at 41.5% of the US population (Fivethirtyeight.com), the embodiment of a lust for power and fame and the minions who crave fulfillment through his arrogant and belligerent antics. Speaking from the mid-Twentieth century, Fromm offers a starting point for our discussion of the present day, centered on the social-psychological intersection where everyday people recreate the systems upon which they both depend, and which may very well destroy them.

**Erich Fromm Then**

In the 1950s and 1960s, Erich Fromm was one of the most widely read and recognized public intellectuals of his time. His book, *The Art of Loving,* sold over 22 million copies. Yet today, very few recognize the person or his works, which have broadly influenced much of Sociology and Psychology.

Born in Frankfurt Germany March 23, 1900, he pursued a Ph.D. in Sociology and then went for psychoanalytic training to become a practicing psychoanalyst. In the early 1930’s, when Max Horkhiemer became the director of the Institute for Social Research, Erich Fromm became a member of the Institute and introduced psychoanalytic theory into the developing critique of domination. In particular, Fromm introduced the concept of authoritarianism in his contribution to *Studien über Authorität und Familie* (Horkheimer, et al. 1936). In his section entitled, “*Sozialpsychologischer Teil”* (Social-Psychological Aspect), Fromm argued that the nuclear family structure of the petty bourgeois classes and significant numbers of the working classes instilled high levels of authoritarianism, both in terms of domination and subordination as well as aggression toward out groups. This social-psychological structure transferred readily to mass support for Hitler and fascism. Given their Marxist and mostly Jewish backgrounds, Fromm and the others of the Frankfurt School fled the rise of Nazism and moved to France and then to the United States. As a professor at Columbia University, Fromm became a very successful psychoanalyst and a major public intellectual. In his first book in English, *Escape from Freedom* hebrought a neo-Marxist and Freudian approach to society, he noted three “mechanisms of escape” from the materially expansive, emotionally oppressive roles of modern capitalist society—authoritarianism, conformity, and aggression from which followed his concept of necrophilia—love of cold process, death and destruction.

Explored throughout the rest of his career, in brief the authoritarian seeks security and meaning through submission to perceived superior power, and simultaneously through domination of anyone perceived as inferior; the conformist tries to become a nameless, faceless person in the crowd, and the necrophile attempts to destroy anyone or anything that makes them uncomfortable. Each type reinforces the others and is often found in combination. When we read his analysis today, we find that much of it still resonates with the conditions of our time as more and more nations, facing economic uncertainties, embrace various right wing movements and leaders: Brexit, alt.right, The National Front, and perhaps most of all Donald Trump as president of the USA.

In his subsequent writings Fromm uncovered the historical development of authoritarianism as a type of social character, and that every historical era had a particular social character that corresponded to a particular social order. Both fulfilling and oppressive at the same time, Fromm called this pattern “pathological normality” by which he meant that most people were not necessarily mentally ill, but necessarily accepted the dominant social order that was the basis of their own ambivalence and misery. By the mid-Twentieth century, Fromm showed how contemporary people had become alienated and estranged from themselves through a consumer-oriented industrial society coupled to aggressive nationalism as a new religion. People worshipped military power, nuclear arsenals, and world domination as expression of this new divinity. As in previous eras, the general support for such policies not only thwarted individual happiness, but supported a social tendency toward war, death and destruction.

Fromm’s views generated a great deal of controversy. Much of Psychology rejected his shift in psychoanalysis from a theory of biologically-based drives to socially based tendencies, and many Marxists rejected his embrace of pantheistic, humanistic versions of religion. In the years following his death, we’ve seen the rise, demise and fall of a number of social theories, including structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, certain versions of identity politics, and post-colonialism—many of them not so much disproven or surpassed, but rather, crudely replaced by newer names in the rush to publish or perish. The current age of globalization, digitalization, and financialization seemingly precludes the many insights of classical critical social psychology, which is no longer the latest flash in the pan. Not currently popular, perhaps, but still mightily relevant we contend.

Based in Fromm, we look at the contemporary conditions of our times, the growing inequality, alienation, and perhaps above all, neoliberal legitimation of global capitalism that produces vast amounts of wealth as well as suffering and injustice. Yet we feel that a world historical event is now in process. The adversities of precariat employment, poverty, environmental despoliation, reactionary religion, enduring racism, and gender inequality has mobilized growing numbers of younger cohorts (and their older allies) who will no longer tolerate social dissatisfaction and injustice revitalizes the Frommian perspective. His fears of 75 years ago have become the new normal.

**Fromm in Today’s World**

Even in the best of times, Fromm consistently emphasized the disjuncture between the individual and the various institutions and social systems that people require to create a livelihood. Starting with the end of World War II, Fromm argued that most of these institutional and cultural systems in the United States greatly expanded the material quality of life for vast new segments of the population (at least for white males). However, human fulfillment remained elusive, and indeed, the very system that delivered material prosperity inherently diminished human fulfillment. Consequently, a person had to be two fundamentally different people—a calculating, obedient, and self-centered employee while earning a livelihood, and something more compassionate, affectionate, and supportive with family and friends. In other words, a person needed to cultivate what Fromm called *The Art of Loving* (2006 [1956]) as a counter-point to a dehumanized political economy. Yet, how does prosperity reduce fulfillment? The answer is alienation. As people become objects in order to sell themselves to an employer, the employer in turn further dehumanizes them to exploit them as profit-making devices, and profit is the first and only requirement of any and every business.

This political-economic relationship separates people from each other and replaces relationships between people with relationships of people to commodities. People lose meaningful social relations (because commodities have no thoughts or feelings) and in the process, we lose our own sense of creativity and empowerment. Intense competition and compulsive pursuit of material wealth and self-advancement with no respect for the lives of others creates loneliness, isolation, meaninglessness and indeed despair—consider only the recent spikes in opioid addictions and overdoses, depression, alcoholism, and suicide. Capitalism created a monstrosity of selfhood that sought to assuage its misery in compulsive and alienating labor, and in turn an obsession with commodities and consumption. To escape the autonomy, isolation, powerlessness, and meaninglessness of capitalist society, people seek authoritarian leaders (such as Donald Trump) or religious dogmas, such that blind conformity and emotional desires to dominate anyone perceived as inferior and to submit to anyone perceived as superior seem normal in a “sick society.” Mutual respect and cooperation seem like pathologies.

Stale or inaccessible consumerism exposes the contradictions within a class society that lead to a number of crises both economic and spiritual, which challenge the established social order and its legitimacy. In such times, a socialist-humanist system offers to reconcile people and the means by which they maintain their quality of life. Thus, Fromm envisioned a “sane society,” a utopian vision of a post-capitalist world in which “(wo)man relates to (wo)man lovingly, in which s/he is rooted in bonds of brotherliness and solidarity, a society which gives him/her the possibility of transcending nature by creating rather than by destroying, being versus having, in which everyone gains a sense of self by experiencing himself as the subject of his own powers rather than by blind conformity, in which a system of orientation and devotion exists without man's needing to distort reality and to worship idols.” (Fromm 1966, p. 354).

There would be no loneliness, no feelings of isolation, no despair nor attempts to “escape from freedom” through blind conformity, domination and subordination, or aggression toward others because people would experience such things as moral obligations to oppose. Everyone would have an equal chance to become fully human. This final point requires a system of devotion, which most Marxists and other leftists mostly or completely dismiss. Alienation is both a consequence and a problem that perpetuates its creation, and as an emotional-spiritual state, Fromm contends that alienation requires a progressive system of devotion to overcome and in turn challenge the capitalist world order.

Why address alienation and not global economics? While alienation in part originates in economic class relations, people understand and relate to emotions first and to their origins in family, friends, in the world of their lived experience. They understand the social and emotional degradation and disconnection they see and feel. Rational critiques, policy formulations, and complex theories will not rally the multitude, but spirituality has and might yet again, and here, Fromm’s unique insight proves most useful, that human beings have fundamental desires for relatedness, connections to others, and connection to the world that allows broader social ties, a sense of identity, a frame of orientation and devotion (a topic to which we will return) excitation and stimulation that impel agency. At the same time, the ways in which one’s character, the totality of one’s personality at both a conscious and unconscious level, one’s desires and defenses, identity and modes of relatedness depend in large part on the historical context of the social system, and one’s class/gender/racial/and other status location in that system. The process of socialization shapes one’s character by historical context of structural inequality and domination, such that the normative values of that structural systems become internalized within the actor. Shaped by Feuerbach’s notion of religion as the externalization of human sentiments, Fromm suggested that people actively produce and reproduce the social system in the actions and interactions of everyday life with only cursory knowledge at best of historical forces or institutional priorities. People thus produce systems of economic and cultural domination that shape their own character structure in such ways that sustain elite wealth and power but at the same time thwart their human fulfillment, and it all thus feels normal and natural to be unhappy.

As Fromm (1990 [1955]) put it, there are potentially five distinct, variable types of social character, each specific to dominant historical systems: 1. A medieval passive-dependent and receptive traditional character; 2. An early adventure-capitalist selfish character premised on fixed values of perpetual gain; 3. A mid entrepreneurial capitalist hoarding character who seeks to accumulate things to gain a feeling of control; and 4. the marketing personality who sells his/her soul for wealth, power, and status. But for Fromm, each of these four types, shaped by the dominating structures of the age, thwarts genuine gratification, and so such people exemplify what Fromm called “pathological normalcy” in which systems of domination and alienation manifest as racism, xenophobia, callousness, and quite often aggression toward others that culminate in what Fromm (1992 [1973]) calls “necrophilia,” the love of death and destruction as compensation for thwarted self-realization and relief from loneliness and anxiety.

Nevertheless, there is a fifth type, the productive character, built on intellectual imagination and loving relationships with others, and indeed concern about humanity in general. While indeed quite rare, such people embrace moral values of community and inclusion, and seek a social system and collective values that permit more freedom in general, and allow each individual the opportunity for the realization of his/her own human potentials. Such people often face many obstacles, social pressures, marginalization, demonization and at times, persecution for questioning the class structure and normative values that produce the “pathological normality” of the capitalist economic system and the normative values of hegemonic domination that sustain that system—perhaps even facing torture and death.

**American Social Character and Morality**

Social character explains the similarities among members of a group, in contrast to individual character that explains the differences from one person to another. For example, some people find cooperation appealing (as with church groups who volunteer their time and energy to feed, house, and clothe strangers), while others embrace competition (as required of anyone in business, because success means the failure of competitors). Similarly, social character differentiates people who wield religion as a weapon and bludgeon of domination, while others practice religion as a means to unify people in mutually productive and fulfilling relationships. Research shows that, among American evangelicals for example, some commit to social improvement and justice because it is right and good, while others see religion as a tool to increase the power of what they see as the one exclusively true faith and way of life (Khoury, Struthers, Santelli, and Marjanovic 2012; Mavor, Macleod, Boal, and Louis 2009; Perry, Sibley, and Duckitt 2013). No doubt the Trump administration chose pastors Robert Jeffress and John Hagee to open and close the ceremonies at the new US embassy in Jerusalem on May 14, 2018 to feed the American religious right wing, Trump’s true believers. Jeffress and Hagee both support Israeli domination in the entire Levant, but for their own cynical reasons; they believe that the modern state of Israel must eventually control all of the Middle East in order to fulfill Biblical prophecy of the End Times that culminates in the battle of Armageddon that destroys the world. Jeffress and Hagee both condemn Judaism (and all other religions) as Satanic, but in the meantime, the Jews have a role to play in Christian destiny.

Jeffress and Hagee are authoritarian character types (right-wing authoritarians—RWAs) who see morality as an instrument of domination and religion as a means to power in order to enforce their moral domination more broadly. In authoritarian morality, either a person submits to the one true moral order, or they are its enemy who must be eradicated. There can be no compromise on God’s alleged truth. To be clear, Donald Trump has no sense of moral commitment, religious or otherwise, nor makes any distinction between truth and lie. Trump is a social dominator orientation (SDO) interested only in his own personal success, which in his case centers on money and public acclaim. Because SDOs typically embrace power and control to achieve their own selfish ends and annihilate anyone in their way, they often resemble RWAs in behavior, but a dominator has no commitments to anything beyond themselves so they are quite capable of challenging or more typically undermining power relations if necessary to advance their own interests. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seeks greater political power, Trump seeks popular acclaim, and the US religious-right seeks to advance its moral authority and dreams of destruction. These actors and their minions invoke religion to dominate and destroy as a means to power, acclaim, or both. This collusion between Authoritarians and Dominators arises from opportunity and not from shared values or commitments.

In contrast, people like Martin Luther King invoked religion to both undo domination and elevate the lives of people in general. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) started as a civil rights movement but as it gained support from other groups, such as SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), and various anti-war groups, the Civil Rights movement evolved into a much broader movement against the military-industrial complex. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X both recognized that the final injustice will likely not be white versus non-white, but rich versus poor. Through all the tumult, through the beatings, attack dogs, fire hoses, incarceration and murder, would King and others have risked their lives for a good idea, derived from astute intellectual reasoning and rigorous peer review? We think not. As their anti-war ally and Jesuit Priest Daniel Berrigan believed, good action justifies itself. King and Berrigan both believed that a transcendent truth of universal human rights justified civil disobedience and direct action against the State and its political-economic system. Both King and Berrigan exemplify the progressive social character, one that derives gratification through selflessness that improves the lives of others.

Before King and Berrigan, we see the same character type among the suffragettes and abolitionists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, as well as Civil War protestor Ann Jarvis who worked to reconcile families who fought on opposing sides, and whose daughter Anna Jarvis founded Mother’s Day as part of an anti-war movement, which then included notables such as Jane Addams, Ida Tarbell, Lillian Wald, and Jeannette Rankin (the first woman elected to Congress and the only member to vote against US entrance into both World Wars). All of these people promoted the Social Gospel, the belief that all people are morally obligated to serve others for the improvement of all, and to orient society towards a mutually prosperous and harmonious future (White, Hopkins, and Bennett 1976). They not only opposed war, but supported labor unions, welfare and wealth redistribution programs, and heavy taxes on the rich.

Whether oppressive or emancipatory, the direction depends on what people worship as sacred as the center of the social relations and character that defines their sense of community, as argued earlier. Although we use religious phrasing, the sacred can be deistic in one way or another, entirely atheistic (such as in several of the Eastern religions) or some blend. The key factor is transcendence—the notion that larger and universal principles govern all of us, and we must therefore respect and work to protect and promote the rights and dignity of all people everywhere. At least in the United States, religion infused all progressive social movements that created lasting change, and in a roughly sequential order—Emancipation (anti-slavery) inspired the suffragette and early women’s movements, which opened the door for the Social Gospel and the Progressive era, which coincided with anti-war movements during WWI. Following the WWII period, the Civil Rights movement expanded progressivism and became a model for the anti-war movement of the 1960s and early 70s, with related environmental and the second wave of women’s movements, as well as the Jesus movement which had various crossovers to the broader counter-cultural wave throughout the 1970s.

Attempts to secularize these issues in the 1980s and 90s away from a moral and spiritual battle and into a legal-rational sense of justice to open consumer to anyone with enough money reduced their effectiveness. Without a moral contention, the most recent manifestations of resistance in the form of Occupy Wall Street in 2011-2012 and the latest iteration of the gun control movement across high schools in the Spring of 2018 have failed after a brief public flourish of anger and sadness—a powerful characterological expression but in the form of personal emotions disconnected from political-economy and spirituality. In contrast, the gay rights movement achieved legalized same-sex marriage and increasingly equal protection under the law precisely because it switched from a purely legal argument and incorporated a moral one, that gay people are in fact people and as consenting adults have the unalienable and transcendent human right to love each other as they see fit.

In our earlier work (Langman and Lundskow 2016), we suggested that there were distinctive aspects of American “social character” that that inspired the backwater English colonies of North America to become a major economic Colossus of the world with a conservative religious moral system that remains a significant aspect of economic motivation, politics and governance. Similarly, rooted in the relationship of violence toward indigenous peoples as well as African slaves, a highly aggressive form of phallic masculinity developed that worshiped the gun, a necessary device for a colonial culture that sought to conquer the new world, and later the rest of the world during imperialist expansionism. This legacy has shaped a particular and often violence-prone “tough guy,” a kick-ass character type and allied with the Protestant ethic of work that sacralized endless acquisition. Together, the unbridled quest for affluence became a measure of moral virtue and personal fortitude, because God only rewards the righteous and the tenacious. America quickly became an affluent society that celebrates various expressions of violence as moral redemption for the individual and godly punishment for the lazy sinners (Slotkin 1992). Given a history of military victories, growing affluence, and the democracy of the “first new nation” (Lipset 1979), Americans believed they were blessed by God and destined to lead the world toward peace, freedom, equality, and justice for all, but from a dominant American perspective, in that what’s best for the United States is best for everyone, even if they don’t know it. Fromm (1955) thus argued that the true religion of the US is not really Christianity, but nationalism:

Nationalism is our form of incest, is our idolatry, is our insanity. ‘Patriotism’ is its cult...Just as love for one individual which excludes the love for others is not love, love for one’s country which is not part of one’s love for humanity is not love, but idolatrous worship.

Although universalist in application, American nationalism is really an ethno-nationalism of white male privilege and superiority against the multitude, many of whom sacrifice life and limb for the sake of an imperialism that primarily benefits the rich and the military-industrial complex. This ethnonational fascism fosters a mass psychology of compliance and strong support for policies that inflict death, destruction, and displacement through wars and mass incarceration that benefit very few and drain resources that could otherwise benefit vast numbers of people. Collectively internalized as an aspect of character, white ethnonationalism instills an authoritarian obedience and compliance to leadership, excludes non-whites and women, and systematically enforces a dogmatic ideology impervious to reason and the ability to fully see the adverse consequences of such human tragedies, which limits the legitimacy of peace, freedom, and democracy. In short, America rose to power with a religion of white males, Guns as sacred violence, Gold as self-justifying wealth, and Glory as death in service of the first three. Anything contrary to this religion seems pathologically deviant and threatening.

Ironically, the very same aggressive aspects that enabled America’s rise to economic, political, and cultural dominance now undermine that strength and power. Still enshrined politically, the frontier belligerence of earlier centuries governmentally serves the needs of the rich and ignores the needs of the multitude, which over time undermines our educational progress in science and social development to the point where no other country has a major political party (or even dictator) so devoted to religious denial of global warming and other scientific facts as the Republican party in the United States. Long a part of American identity, anti-intellectualism in general and the disdain of science in particular intensifies social problems, hastens environmental devastation, and transfers technology, jobs, and profits to other countries. Still committed to yesterday’s technologies of fossil fuels for example, the US has ceded solar technology to China and advanced battery technology to South Korea. Based on religious belief, US social policy punishes the poor for being poor by denying various forms of support, including healthcare and education. This has created a large underclass that thwarts vast amounts of human potential and entraps perhaps 40% of the American people within cycles of poverty from which few can escape. The compulsive quest for wealth for those with the possibility of success, and the worship of wealthy individuals for those who don’t, has led to unprecedented inequality in the United States, in which a variety of policies from import substitution, financialization, and the retrenchment of social benefits has allowed the three wealthiest people in the United States—Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett—to own more wealth than the entire bottom half of the American population combined, a total of 160 million people or 63 million households. About 21% of white US households have negative net worth, the “under water households,” 30 percent of black households, and 27 percent of Latino households.

Even those not underwater hold the greatest household debt as well as student debt ever, yet with the highest corporate profit rates ever (and before the most recent corporate tax cuts), and consequently the greatest wealth inequality in the United States since 1867 (Collins and Hoxie 2017). The US spends roughly 62% of the discretionary budget (nationalpriorities.org using OMB data) on the military, which amounts to a military budget that is larger than the next 10 countries combined (SIPRI 2017), maintains close to 1000 military bases throughout the world, with United States military forces actively involved in over 100 “actions” and conflicts and supporting many more. Even with a military victory such as in Iraq, the only decisive outcome has been millions of people killed and displaced, wrecked countries, and decaying infrastructure, schools, and communities at home.

**The Crises of Legitimacy and Response**

This raises the question as to the psychocultural factors that cling to outdated and dysfunctional values that legitimate the established social order even as national decline continues. So as Habermas (1975) argues, a systemic crisis of legitimacy occurs subjectively through identity, emotion, and motivation. This systemic crisis began after World War II.

The first stage began after rebuilding Europe and Japan, whose new factories began to produce a number of products from raw materials to high-quality cars and cameras at relatively less cost than American products. This in turn foreshadowed the “de industrialization” in America that shuttered a number of older, less efficient factories that created the Midwestern “rust belt.” Throughout the 1980s, incomes stagnated for most industrial workers, and declined for many others—especially urban minorities. As neo-liberal policies and practices spread as de-regulated markets, the expansion of financialization, privatization, retrenchments of benefits, union-busting, reduced corporate taxation, profits grew substantially in the financial sector and empowered a new “casino capitalism” of currency speculations, hedge funds, leveraged buyouts, and derivatives secured by mortgage debt. Then came 2008 when prime and subprime mortgages alike melted down and financial markets collapsed worldwide. With household wealth turned back to 1993 levels but prices at 21st century levels, people borrowed about 12.7 trillion to pay for college, healthcare, and to maintain living standards (Corkery and Cowley 2017) which has created what Harvey (2003) calls “accumulation to dispossession” and a vast multitude of underemployed precariat, gig jobs, and retrenchments of social benefits coupled with ballooning debt that not only makes economic life more difficult for ever more people, but also undermines spiritual and emotional health.

Following the white-male posturing and militarism of George W. Bush, the seemingly outsider African-American Barack Obama became president and expanded the conventional neoliberal imperialism of earlier decades. He proved far less progressive than his supporters hoped, and far less liberal than is detractors claimed. Despite his affinity for the rich and powerful, his African-American heritage marked him as an intruder responsible for the decline of white privilege and prosperity—Obama the individual and not the neoliberal system. He conveniently embodied the fears of whites who imagined a vast conspiracy of civil rights groups, affirmative action, women’s movements, and non-white immigrants. Right-wing movements such as the Tea Party, the alt.right and the election of Donald Trump, as well as the progressive Occupy, followed by the rise of Bernie Sanders, BLM, #MeToo and Never Again, both the left and the right continue to challenge the legitimacy of “politics as usual” but with completely different explanations for the decline of the middle class and visions for the future.

What should we do, and how should we live? What is good? What is evil? Every person believes that their actions are justified—not necessarily good actions—but justified actions that constitute some form of justice in a larger sense. This includes those who would liberate people as well as exploit them. Whether part of a mass movement or as individual actors, those who perpetrate benefit or harm feel justified. Every mass shooter feels their action are justified and acts of justice (Singular and Singular 2015). Let us agree that goodness requires something social, in addition to sincere personal commitment. The Muslim scholar Eboo Patel (2012) measures religion with a faith line, the concept that either a person’s faith derives from love, or from hate. Do we seek to help others, to liberate people from their burdens and help them achieve greater fulfillment, or do we seek to dominate, exploit, or destroy people?

Religions have and continue to serve both purposes, so religion by itself, whether as emergent or as an established system, tradition, or institution cannot inherently achieve progressive outcomes any more than sincere individual actors can achieve social change. Rather, we should understand progressive religion and goodness as a social commitment, a sacred canopy as Peter Berger (1990 [1967]) called it, as a social covenant as Robert Bellah (1992 [1975]) called it, we argue that progressives of whatever type and focused on which ever particular issues are part of a larger social mobilization looking for a new sacred social covenant—a fundamentally new and different worldview and morality that premises selfhood on giving and caring for other people and life in general, as every progressive religious and humanist leader has argued and lived—see Fromm’s summary in *To Have or to Be?* (1997 [1976]: 127-136). Yet given that people can interpret beliefs in various ways, the fact that some people commit to progressive action does not preclude commitment to oppression for others. In other words, a social contract is only as strong and as widespread as the people who uphold it, and that strength comes from social, not individual character.

**What Is to Be Done?**

The legitimacy crises portend major shifts in society, and despite the general pessimism of our times and the growing tendencies toward authoritarian populisms, ethno-nationalisms and racism, it becomes all too easy to ignore the many progressive mobilizations that are taking place whether the Bernistas, (Our Revolution) #MeToo, BLM, the Parkland students demanding gun-control, and perhaps most importantly, that the majority of millennials (52%) support socialism more than they do capitalism (47%) (Harvard Youth Poll 2018). Growing cooperative movements and collectives ranging from employee-owned businesses and benefit corporations to consumer collectives distributing agricultural products. While most of these mobilizations do not fundamentally critique capitalism, they do transform consciousness and collective identities that make participants and often supporters more critical of adverse social conditions and open to considering alternative forms of society and social life. They also lower prices and create local earnings stability.

How can progressive movements sustain themselves in battle against the political-economic and cultural establishment? Without a strong sense of transcendence, no social movement can achieve lasting progressive change. As Erich Fromm argued, a healthy society consists of three main and interconnected systems—socioeconomic, characterological, and spiritual. Socio-economy (more commonly called political-economy) allows for the production and distribution of goods and services. Spirituality (usually in the form of religion) provides a frame of reference, “we need an object of devotion in order to integrate our energies in one direction, to transcend our isolated existence, with all its doubts and insecurities, and to answer our need for a meaning to life” (Fromm 1997 [1976]: 113). Political economy makes a higher quality of life possible, but spiritual devotion tells us who should benefit and how much, and whether some should suffer and whether we should even care. The characterological aspect unites the other two, as only people can have thoughts, feelings, and values, although society instills and either inhibits or promotes certain character types compared to others. In Fromm’s view, human systems are not inherently just or unjust, but depend on the real (not just the proclaimed) moral system that justifies how we treat each other.

In the modern era, the US proclaims a loving and forgiving Christianity and universal sense of fairness, but in fact practices a harshly judgmental, unforgiving, racist and misogynist morality devoted to the accumulation of profit and power—the aforementioned white male ethnonationalism. Thus, the true characterological system is a “fear of and submission to powerful male authorities, cultivation of guilt for disobedience, and dissolution of human bonds by the supremacy of self-interest and mutual antagonism” (Fromm 1997 [1976]: 119). This kind of social character makes the modern human functional within a capitalist political-economy, and either relegates a loving religion to weekend services or transforms religion into an aggressive theology of domination and conquest, such as with the wealthy pastor Creflo Dollar (his real name) who committed to raising 65 million dollars because God allegedly told him to buy a personal luxury jet (Ohlheiser 2015), or the even more wealthy pastor Rod Parsley, who preaches that the US was created to destroy Islam (Pollitt 2008).

Nevertheless, no movement can claim a moral high ground and therefore the justification for social change if its members and especially its most prominent actors lack their own moral commitments. People like Eric Schneiderman and his predecessor Elliott Spitzer, both Attorneys General of New York and effective adversaries to corporate power and both resigned from office over sexual impropriety charges, or Anthony Wiener (a politically progressive US Representative who sexually harassed women with nude photos of himself), can justify their own moral contradictions on the grounds that their public actions at least counter-balance their personal and private transgressions. While that may inspire some degree of forgiveness towards the individual, contradictory behavior will not sustain a movement. To overcome exploitation and power, progressives must replace it with something better, rather than a new form of power that forces a different but no less oppressive conformity. As ardent atheists, the Bolsheviks believed they could create an entirely secular state founded on advanced intellectual principles, and for a short while, this appeared to succeed. For example, they legislated the equality of women and legalized homosexuality in 1917. Neither reform lasted past Lenin’s death in 1924, and both were broadly hated (Figes 1996). In sharp contrast to the ideals of the Revolution, Russia today punishes homosexuality as a crime and vast social inequality more closely resembles the Czarist era than the socialist utopia its founders attempted to deify. The priority to enforce a monolithic and elitist intellectual vision steered the Soviet Union into a bleak and oppressive state apparatus that offered only the promise of greater power to motivate its leaders and apparatchiks—any vision of a better quality of life long since negated by the time the empire fell in 1991.

In contrast, successful social movements draw inspiration from essential populist religious beliefs, which we would broaden to essential transcendent beliefs. This sense of transcendence is not a rhetorical artifice connected to an established institution (a religious doctrine) that many Marxists imagine, but must, as Fromm argued, coincide with genuinely felt beliefs that transcend this reality but are also part of the human experience in this reality. This is the socially unifying force of the sacred as Mircea Eliade (1987 [1957]) understands it, and similar to Durkheim (2008 [1912]) as well, and indeed every emancipatory religious leader—Mohandas Ghandi, Nanak, Yeshua (Jesus), Mohammad, Kung Fu Tzu, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. All inspired their movements and drew great personal strength from sincerely felt religious beliefs and values that spoke to the real-life issues of their day. All advocated and practiced selfless acts and commitment to harmony among people and the earth as a model for others. In other words, they walked the walk.

As anti-war activist and Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan argued, good acts justify themselves and require no further justification. As Berrigan also argues however, wicked actors believe themselves fully justified as well, what Berrigan calls the pathology of power—and what Fromm (2010 [1953]) calls the pathology of normalcy among the followers—that unites leaders and followers with a sense of destructive righteousness. Rather than demonic, evil is a kind of social pathology that views itself as inherently right and never admits any wrong, either moral or practical. Imbued with self-justification and moral righteousness and reinforced by wealth, Berrigan argues that power reinforces stupidity and cowardice: “The king is a slow learner. And cowardly to boot: on his foolish errands, others perish… His motto seems to be: If a given tactic fails, repeat it, enlarge it” (Berrigan 2008: 122).

Not satisfied with one costly war to return a royal family to power in Kuwait and build US military bases in Saudi Arabia as George Bush I did—which inspired the rise of Al Qaeda—his son George Bush II invaded Afghanistan and conquered all of Iraq, actions that further destabilized the region, and inspired the rise of the Islamic State and numerous other extremist militia armies and terrorist groups. The King’s tactic is: Kill or displace millions of people, spend trillions of dollars, fail utterly to achieve any rational outcome, and then do it again for even greater catastrophe and atrocity. Wealth and power shields the Presidents, Kings, dictators and dominators throughout the ages from the suffering they inflict, and allows them to repeat their arrogant mistakes until the money runs out or the people run out—or both—as in World War I the battlefield slaughter continued with no strategic gain for either side until Britain, France, and Germany ran out of money and soldiers (Meyer 2007) rather than any recognition of futility or diplomacy (or humanity). There just weren’t any more young men to kill and no money left to buy the machinery of destruction.

**The 21st Century**

While the activists of decades and centuries past may still inspire the present, our world is not theirs. Yet neither do we differ entirely, so rather than abandon the past, we would like to build from and adapt the best of the past to progressively shape the present. The mid-20th century scholars and activists have informed much of our scholarship, especially the Critical Theorists in general and Erich Fromm in particular. As Fromm argued, everyone worships something. What do we worship? This is not an abstract spiritual question, but a concrete empirical question. What motivates people to get up, go to school, go to work, vote or not vote, how to donate or spend their money and spend their time? The worst possible answer would be ‘nothing in particular.’ Far from a new idea, we could quote Cicero, Shakespeare, Kung Fu Tzu, and many others about the need to stand for something affirmative. We like Abraham Lincoln from a speech in Edwardsville, IL in 1858:

What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, our army and our navy. These are not our reliance against tyranny, because all of those may be turned against us. Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage and you prepare your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of others, you have lost the genius of your own independence and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises among you (Lincoln 2017 [1858]: 41-42).

Lincoln rejects faith in a strong military, which can be deployed against liberty as well as in support of it, and social inequality likewise means that nearly anyone can move from free to slave as long as we accept human hierarchy as legitimate. The key phrase here is that our own liberty “…prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands everywhere.” Rejecting government is not enough (not Lincoln’s point anyway) but we must also stand for universal liberty, for all men (and LGBT) everywhere. Otherwise, we are all too ready to support tyrants who preach ‘us against them’ demagoguery that leads to endless wars and oppression.

Progressive Christians, Jews, and Muslims are working for social change because they believe it is God’s will to celebrate diversity (Ramadan 2009), protect the environment (McDuff 2012), reinforce democracy (Gorski 2017) and end wars and oppression (Gasaway 2014; Meyers 2012). To the secular left, we ask two questions: First, what do we worship? Second, what does our god require of us? The left needs to answer these questions if it hopes to play any role now and in the future. Rather than offer our own program for change, we ask a few broader questions of everyone: Who are you? How do you want to spend your life? What is your basis of right and wrong? Maybe most importantly, what happens when you die? These are reasons for living, and maybe, for challenging power. If we can answer these questions meaningfully, a progressive future becomes possible.

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