Article

Democracy Rots from within: Capitalism, Crisis Character, and Reactionary Mobilizations

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Abstract

Right-wing populist movements have gained support and power in several countries. Why have so many supported reactionary movements? Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli pointed out problems with democracy, but to understand what's happening Marx offers a starting point in the 18th Brumaire. The Frankfurt School, updating Marx, integrated a psychodynamic perspective that suggested that in face of crisis, people felt alienated and powerless. Given fear, and anger, reactionary, authoritarian politics was a palliative to the duress. Authoritarianism, a disposition of individuals to seek submission to superiors and/or domination over inferiors and direct anger/ aggression to outsiders disposed authoritarian ideologies promising redemption, movements offered a sense of belonging and leaders promised a restoration of past greatness and revenge to the enemies. Today, (1) globalized neoliberalism, fostering inequality and precarity, has created wealth for the few but hardships for the many; (2) cultural changes challenging heretofore unquestioned, essentialist, hierarchical identities have evoked ressentiment, fear of replacement, shame, and necrophilia that have moved many people to support reactionary movements. These crises have led many to support reactionary governments, which tend toward cronyism, corruption, and incompetence, and ultimately engender progressive counterreactions. This is evident in the youth movement that generally supports progressive policies.

Keywords

reactionary populism, critical theory, authoritarianism, neoliberalism, crisis, identity, character, emotion, hope

Introduction: The Rise of Democracy—And its Critique

In the past decade or so it seems as if democratic governance based on fair and honest elections to determine political leadership through popular elections according to constitutional rules has faced serious attack from various right-wing authoritarian, populist movements impelled by several

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economic as well as cultural grievances. Various reactionary populist, nationalist, neofascist, and even fascist organizations have disdained democratic governance and its elites as being indifferent to the 'real people'; they seek to establish conservative if not reactionary governments led by authoritarian 'strong men', saviors, articulating a hegemonic masculinity who can represent the aggrieved, victimized peoples, promise amelioration—at any cost—that might include dictatorial powers. We have seen movies starring reactionary leaders from Mussolini to Trump (Ben-Ghait, 2020). The polarization between left and right in America has been perhaps unprecedented since the civil war and many critics fear that another civil war might be possible. Some, like Barbara Walter (2022), have gone so far as to suggest that 'a toxic mix of political extremism and polarization, social and cultural tribalism, popular embrace of conspiracy theories, proliferation of guns and well-armed militias and the erosion of faith in government we may be near a civil war'. Why has this happened in so many of the 'advanced', seemingly democratic countries of Europe and the United States as well as developing countries as diverse as Brazil and India. As will be argued, the challenges to democracy come from a number of economic, cultural, and moral grievances from within addressed by reactionary forces rather than external threat. But we would begin by noting that the critique of democracy is practically as old as democracy itself as it first emerged in Greece about 2500 years ago.

Solon and Cleanthes encouraged popular democracy, as a challenge to existing elite rule thereby ending oppressive laws. But this democracy was soon critiqued by Plato, for whom, the good society, a Republic, was organized so that every person got his or her due (justice), but such a society required leaders who were wise, talented, and might not personally profit from their policies. Accordingly, they would live in a quasi-socialist community so their political decisions might be untainted by economic self-interest. But in a democracy, the demos, the many, might be uncritical and easily swayed by powerful, emotionally charged oratory. Aristotle echoed Plato; the demos could be swayed by trickery, by charismatic demagogues, offering false promises, payments for votes, and often both. This was clearly the case according to Aristotle when Peisistratos and Celon who appeared as democrats but were tyrants. Neither the rich few nor poorer should have power-reflecting Aristotle's preference for the middle. The rich might use wealth and power to become or influence leaders and legislators to support policies that would enhance their wealth, reduce their taxes, and eliminate if not minimize regulations that might reduce their incomes, in other words, to eliminate if not minimize regulations that might lower profits. They would use democracy to subvert democracy. Did he anticipate the Marxist critique of the State as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, now fully realized as when Citizens United gave corporations the rights of persons with free speech, enabling huge contributions to the politicians that would support their power, profits, taxation reduction, and undermine costly regulations that might, nevertheless, serve the public good. On the other hand, while the uneducated poor might be easily swayed by the trickery of corrupt, malevolent leaders who might often be criminals when in office. Instead, of a democracy, Aristotle favored an oligarchy that followed the constitutions, the 'ancestral laws'. He saw that the qualities of leadership, virtue, merit, and cultivation of the arts (aka 'cultural capital') were more typical of the 'best' that might come from wealthier families but not necessarily nobility.

The Demise of Feudalism—The Rising Bourgeoisie

The growing trade between Europe, namely Venice, Florence, and the Ottomans and Levant, a trickle in the 9th century, expanded, especially after the Crusaders returned from the holy lands with silks, spices, and ceramics. Towns along trade routes became cities and with the growth of trade came the trade of ideas especially with the preservation of the Greco Roman texts, texts that had been preserved by the Muslim scholars. The bourgeoisie embraced the rationality in these writings, especially sciences, and applied them to business as a more efficient ways of commerce, from double-entry bookkeeping to the joint share corporation, the forerunner of the modern corporation

and the development of commercial insurance (Weber, 1978). These innovations led to greater wealth for the bourgeois classes who would eventually challenge the power of the landed aristocracies. To paraphrase Marx, the growing bourgeois class would batter down the Chinese walls and become a global system. But this period was one of wars and conflicts over resources and power, and with rapid social change came instability. Moreover, the recovery of these ancient writings, including philosophical discussions, including the nature of democracy, would foster the Renaissance. Soon, the bourgeoisie would attempt to forge their own identity apart from the dynastic rulers or the peasants. This would pave the way for the Enlightenment and the philosophy including political theory. While at first the nobility aided the merchants, providing them with military to protect their caravans and fleets, but eventually they woould challenge dynastic rule. The embrace of Reason not only led to progress in sciences such as astronomy, physics, and metallurgy, which enabled the development of steam power and in turn industrialization which in combination with imperialism enabled the bourgeois countries to flourish economically (Weber, 1978).

Enter Machiavelli

While best known for *The Prince*, his general term for rulers, that sometimes seemed to justify tyranny, the end justifying the means, and oft cited, the ruler should be feared rather than loved. But for our purposes, the *Discourses on Livy* (1998 [1531]) by Machiavelli, looking at the history of the Roman Republic, clearly advocated for democratic republics but feared they might descend into tyranny, oligarchy, or anarchy unless a wise leader serves all the people, but at times the preservation of democracy may require extreme measures. Having well studied Roman history, the uncertain times of social change, what would later be called 'interregnums' by Gramsci or legitimation crises (Habermas, 1991 [1975]), he claimed that chaos and disorder might require less than democratic rule to achieve or maintain democracies.[1] As Clark (2013) suggested,

> Machiavelli seems to reposition himself as a conservative of sorts—not an exponent of a radically new political ethic, but a defender of the traditional virtues of ancient Rome. Asserting that republican citizens should 'always have recourse to those judgments or those remedies that were judged or ordered by the ancients', he appears to defend the reinstatement of glory as a legitimate object of human endeavor together with the various beliefs, dispositions, and practices that Romans associated with a life of honor and esteem. (p. 317)

While Machiavelli favored republicanism over the more despotic Medici rule, allied with the Church, he also realized its problems (echoing the Greek critique). As Clark (2013) concludes,

> Machiavelli understands republicanism to be a politics of limits or a form of collective life in which power is always bounded and contained. The modes used to limit the application of coercive power in a republic must be numerous and mutually reinforcing to guard effectively against the desire for pure domination that provides an inexhaustible source of energy to a few. For all his criticism of Rome, Machiavelli admired this city for its dedication to the prospect of subjecting power to the rule of law and its effort to bring the various dimensions of its political, social, cultural, and religious life to bear on that endeavor. Machiavelli also recognizes that Rome's effort to contain power was ultimately, and disastrously, unsuccessful. He devotes as much of his intellectual energy to understanding this failure as he does to anything else. Of particular interest to him are the numerous tensions between Rome's cultural ideal of manliness (*virtus)* and republican liberty manifest even in the supposedly nostalgic and idealizing texts of Livy and Cicero. In Machiavelli's view, Rome's ethic of reciprocity stood as a critical gap in the bulwark of its moral and cultural defenses, and he writes the *Discourses* in order to expose its dangers to a readership for whom it was still very real and consequential. Republicanism is sometimes associated with forgotten culture of personal trust and loyalty, one that liberalism has since displaced with its distinctive emphasis on individualism, contractualism, and rational self-interest. (p. 321)

The Demise of Dynastic Rule

As the wealth and power of the European bourgeoisie grew, in part thanks to the military protection afforded to them by kings and queens, the bourgeoisie became increasing influenced by a variety of secular philosophers, Rousseau, Montaigne, Locke, who were not affiliated with or necessarily supportive of the Church. The early Enlightenment was basically emancipatory freeing people from the domination of tradition, religion, or hereditary nobles. The bourgeois philosophers became increasingly critical of the landed aristocracy and increasingly supported various types of democratic rule by consent of the governed (as was especially clear in Locke's *Second Treatise on Government).*

Enter civil society, a realm of social relations outside family and kin that were based on various kinds of associations especially commerce. In turn, this enabled the 'public sphere', a realm of 'undistorted communication' where the educated bourgeoisie politely debated various 'truth claims' (Habermas, 1974 [1962]). The wealthier and typically more literate merchants, who were typically exposed to a variety of books, letters, and pamphlets expressing political ideas, might gather in pubs, restaurants, salons, or even the lobbies of symphony halls where they would rationally debate political issues and attempt to achieve some kind of consensus. Surely Rousseau, Hobbes, and Locke had a strong influence.[2] Eventually this became 'public opinion' and while materially based became an ideological force impacting politics. The bourgeoisie, forging temporary alliances with working and popular classes, initiated what would become widespread revolutions promising democracy for all. Think of the United States, 1776, or perhaps France, 1789. And as the bourgeoisie gained political power, they used that political power to sustain, indeed enhance their economic interests, but at the same time to thwart the democratic fervor of the revolution they inspired; economic elites rarely support the people, except when forced to make concessions (Beard, 1935 [1913]; Mills, 1956).[3]

But that said, as Marx would later show, the history of all societies was a history of class conflict. With industrial capitalism, especially as the bourgeoisie purchased the labor power of workers to produce commodities to create surplus value, the capitalists gained wealth and the workers faced poverty and alienation. The system was inherently crisis-prone. Marx's initial analysis of capitalist crises was the coup of Louis Bonaparte France, in 1851–1852, precipitated by a fundamental conflict between financial and landed capital. The nephew was 'a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part'. Nevertheless, he was widely supported by the petty bourgeois farmers, burdened by taxes and mortgages, now yearning for the return of the original Napoleon Bonaparte who had confiscated the land of the nobles and distributed it to the peasants. *Redonner sa grandeur à la France* (Make France Great Again). They were joined by elements of the lumpen proletariat, paid for in sausages and beer. After Napoleon established the Second Empire, we began to see the outlines of modern dictatorship what Marx called 'Bonapartism'. A rule of domination was sustained by terror enforced by secret police. Here we see the prefiguration of modern fascism.

In *Kapital*, Marx further develops analysis of capitalist crisis, especially falling rates of profits, overproduction, and inevitable business cycles.[4] While there has been a cottage industry of Marxist analysis of capitalist crises at this point, to lay the foundations of the subsequent argument, I would like to move toward critical theory and the early studies on authoritarianism that suggested that the face of various social changes and crises, people felt alienated, powerless, and angry, fostering what Fromm called 'mechanisms of escape', including authoritarianism, that ameliorated the fears and angers through the submission to a 'powerful' leader, domination over subordinates and sadomasochistic aggression disposing the embrace of reactionary ideologies (designating enemies), and membership in a great national community, which Fromm saw as idolatry, as group narcissism.

Developing the insights of Marx and the research and theory of the early Frankfurt school, Habermas (1974 [1962]) developed his theory of legitimation crises, economic, political, cultural, rationality, and so on. Crises of legitimacy foster grievances, discontents, fear, and anger and in turn social movements that would change the nature of society. A social order needs to be considered fair, just, and generally accepted. But with 'legitimation deficits', there is general loss of confidence in the system and a withdrawal of loyalty when (1) the economic system fails to sustain growth and/or does not fairly distribute resources for all; growing inequality raises questions of system legitimacy; (2) the political system fails to provide conditions for steering economic growth that leads to general improvements in the standards of living; the State must both regulate businesses but to ensure profitability, it must ensure fair distribution, grant entitlements, and benefits whose costs do not threaten economic growth, and finally State must provide rights and legal systems to secure justice; (3) the cultural system (identities, meanings, and values) must encourage motivation for work along with meaningful identities, lifestyles, and values that secure solidarity. (Alienated labor regardless how economically rewarding can ever provide genuine fulfillment.) Dysfunctions and failures at the level of the system engendered crises that migrate to lifeworlds of experience impacting identities, motives, and emotions. But the emotional responses to political or economic crisis are likely to be shaped by ones underlying social character, which acts like switchman on the tracks of history. Authoritarian characters have an 'elective affinity' returned to embrace authoritarian ideologies, movements, and leaders that emphasize power, hierarchy, order and stability, tradition, and unquestioned loyalty to the ingroup. The more democratic character types seek more egalitarian leaders and ideologies that value individual freedom, curiosity, sharing, and caring for other people. Lakoff (2016) has contrasted more traditional 'strict father' morality employing strict socialization practices including physical punishment, if needed, so the children can grow up to take care of themselves in a tough world. In a large-scale study of American voters in 2016, authoritarianism was a better predictor of voting for Trump than any of the demographic factors (Smith and Hanley, 2018). The nurturant parenting family encourages empathy, creativity, and self-fulfillment to prepare the child for a more democratic kind of political orientations. As Inglehart (1981) has suggested, many of the activists of the 1960s generation were socialized by parents who followed Dr Spock and were more democratic in their child-rearing patterns, less likely to use coercion, and more concerned with encouraging the child's self—fulfillment, curiosity, and caring and sharing as opposed to obedience and conformity.

Les Trente Glorieuses

For a variety of reasons, after World War II, especially the embrace of Keynesian economics, a massive influx of government support expanded benefits and pent-up demand, and the US industrial base that had been relatively unscathed by the war mass produced new products and changed production techniques (some inspired by the production of war materials). There followed a 30-year period of growing equitably distributed prosperity. Not particularly notable at that time, in 1944, the Bretton Woods Conference was established to facilitate peaceful trade between nations. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) would become the major regulatory and investment agents of globalized capital.

The GI bill enabled vast numbers of white GIs to gain college educations while corporations expanded, creating a large segment of educated workers. Many chose to live in the mushrooming suburbs thanks to government supported Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgages. As Europe and Japan were slowly rebuilt, namely factories and infrastructure, with well-trained workers, there was an increased flow of imports to the United States. Eventually, more complex products were produced and sold abroad—Volkswagen cars, Leica cameras, Zeiss optics, steel from

Nippon Steel, and electronics from Sony. Meanwhile, slowly but surely, many production facilities, especially in the Midwest and Eastern cities, began to move factories and assembly plants to the Southern states where labor was cheaper and right to work laws limited unionization. At the same time, there we began to see several companies expanding their operations overseas. Eventually, we would see 'the Deindustrialization of America' as rusting hulks of factories spread across the industrial heartland of the nation (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). Many industrial workers lost their jobs due to plant closings, more advanced automation (CAD/CAM), and at the same time, the mechanization of agriculture, except at harvesting times when many Mexican workers, *braceros*, were invited to do the difficult, tedious, stoop labor.

While on the surface, everything seemed to be coming up roses, beneath the tranquility, the rumblings of social change were stirring. As was noted, capitalism was inherently crisis-prone and this was already seen in 1972 when Nixon abandoned the gold standard. By the late 1970s, it was already evident that Keynesian economics faced the crises of extended periods of stagflation. To resolve this crisis, given the backdrop of globalization, there was a renewal of classical Smith–Ricardo economics and the embrace of a renewed liberalism, neoliberalism, largely due to the ideas of von Mises, Hayek, and Friedman that placed primary emphasis on the profitability of corporations by reducing if not eliminating government regulations, reducing various government programs, cutting benefits and entitlements, and privatizing resources. While the inklings of change were evident in the Carter administration, neoliberalism was strongly embraced by Clinton and subsequently Obama. One of the major consequences was that the working classes, miners, and factory workers were thrown off the bus—discarded by the Democratic Party that had previously been very supportive of workers and unionization. At this time, we began to see major changes in global capitalism, especially after the barriers between banking and investment were shorn.[5] There began a period in which financialization quickly grew through various financial activities such as mergers and acquisitions, the derivatives market, investment, and holding companies, such as BlackRock and Kohlberg, Kravis, Roberts.

Perhaps, the most notable transformation of the economy, increasingly necessary for globalized commerce, has been the explosion of the derivatives market, basically bats on future exchange rates, stock prices, and so on, which is now approximately, 600 trillion dollars, about 12 times the GNP of the world. But neoliberalism as the current iteration of capitalism remains especially crisis-prone and it was very clear in 2007–2008 when the housing market imploded and the recently deregulated banks faced massive crises of liquidity, losing trillions of dollars.[6] What next? Back to Keynes and the US treasury printed trillions of dollars to bail out the banks that included bonuses for the bankers behind what were clearly criminal acts beginning with impossible to sustain teaser rates that brought millions of people into the housing market who could clearly not afford mortgages that sometimes cost three or four times as much as the teaser rate. Iceland knew how to deal with the fraudulent banksters-jail!

The important point to draw from the radical changes in capitalism of the last several decades has been the intersection of globalization and financialization which, on the one hand, as neoliberalism promised, several people would become very wealthy billionaires. Today seven or eight men have as much wealth as the bottom half of the world. But the majority would find their incomes stagnant, and many people lost not only their jobs but many benefits that came with those jobs. And while there have been major expansions in the workforce, most of the new jobs have been precarious, rarely stable, gig jobs, and rarely well paid, for example, gig jobs like child care, elder care, dog walking, ride shares, or food deliveries (Standing, 2011). Today we see the first generation that will not find the economic success of their parents—indeed one-third of young people are still living with their parents being unable to afford to repay student loans, an increasingly greater rental. (NB! We will see the consequences below.) It is thus obvious that one of the major consequences of neoliberalism has

been to undermine the capacity of many nations to sustain let alone expand the middle classes but, nevertheless, the wealth of the billionaire classes has been expanding—this radical change, along with progressive cultural changes, has disposed a global move to the right.

There Goes My (Essentialist) Identity

If we go back to the early 1960s, the progressive movements, then limited primarily to a small number of young college students, sometimes joined by progressive minorities (BlackstoneRangers), mobilized for a variety of progressive political and cultural changes. Marcuse (1969) called these movements and mobilizations 'great refusals' prefigurations of major social transformation to post capitalist society with a new kind of person with what he called a 'new sensibility' different kind of person more concerned with human fulfillment not competition with others, valuing creativity rather than the accumulation of material things. These movements from civil rights promote greater racial equality/toleration for difference; feminism seeking greater agency for women to control their own bodies, their sexuality, and destinies; and growing toleration for LGBTQ and even environmental movements. These progressive cultural values reflected changes in underlying character, moving toward what Erich Fromm (1947) had called the 'productive character' who loved life, people, and Nature so he could realize his or her full human potentials. Marcuse (1969) had called a new 'sensibility', which enables us to understand how the Enlightenment basis of rationality, its one-dimensional thought, and repressive desublimation sustained domination and thwarting of self. That sensibility

> emerges in the struggle against violence and exploitation where this struggle is waged for essentially new ways and forms of life. . . sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful become forms of existence and thereby the Form of the society itself.

But the essential point here is that the traditional, indeed authoritarian, characters and identities were more typical in the 1960s, but since then, society has changed and the progressive trends have been more broadly accepted; as such, they challenged and undermined the traditional essentialist, hierarchical, privilege granting identities, values, and lifestyles. This was initially seen in the growing backlash against the hedonistic (read erotic) counterculture, the civil rights movements pushed for voters' rights legislation, the sexual revolution (empowering women), and especially the anger at the 'unpatriotic' communist students protesting America's imperialism in Vietnam. The backlash against these progressive movements was seen as the support for Richard Nixon in 1968. Faludi (1999) noted how the various male power movements, especially the militias, were hypermasculine reactions to growing feminism that many men resented. Many rural, typically older, typically less educated men, often overweight, donned camo and retreated to the woods to engage in quasimilitary training ready to fight the Communists, Socialists, and other 'enemies of America' who might come to Northern Michigan.

Nevertheless, as time wore on, more and more of the population, especially the younger cohorts, became more socially progressive as seen in the election of Obama, the first African American president. But the election quickly gave rise to a right-wing reaction, as the Koch financed Astro-turfed Tea Party, ostensibly a movement against the expansion of government health care, but upon closer examination, the movement was fundamentally a racist reaction to the idea of poorer people, especially people of color gaining taxpayer-supported health care (cf. Langman and Lundskow, 2012; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). Moreover, the early Tea Party was largely organized by members of evangelical Protestant churches who were also opposed to the overturning of Roe V Wade and elimination of prayer in the school. There was strong opposition to satanic music, aka rock 'n' roll, marijuana, and of course the likelihood that young people might discover sex. And while these movements

were clearly authoritarian, we should note that even authoritarianism is changed over time. As Thompson (Forthcoming) has argued, in the face of neoliberalism, especially as it fragments the social and celebrates the individual, authoritarianism has taken on a new iteration.

> the authoritarianism of the mid-twentieth century was characterized by a weakened ego's need for self-aggrandizement via an identification with the leader, I believe what we are witnessing today is a transformation of authoritarianism: one that is characterized by a more robustly sado-masochistic character. . . . characteristic of the new authoritarianism is the centrality of a more generalized sado-masochistic impulse within the self that is driven by the forms of extractive competitiveness of neoliberal economic life in general. With the rise of social inequality has gone anxiety not only about status but in terms of the prospects of securing life itself. Sadism emerges in us as we seek to fend off those forces that we feel will annihilate us, defeat us, out-compete us for some resource or good.

What is important for us is that in a large group there is typically a bell-shaped distribution of authoritarianism and most people do not fall into the extremes where people tend to be fairly stable.[7] But let us note that authoritarianism as a psychological quality of an individual person is not an either/or quality, some people can be malleable depending on social circumstances.[8] Rather, as Fromm (1941) pointed out, adverse social conditions such as major crises that led to fear, anxiety, anger, feelings of powerlessness, and so on shift some people to embrace authoritarianism as a palliative 'mechanism of escape' from the unpleasant emotions; extreme authoritarian characters are tend to be characterological, rigid, and inflexible. Thompson's characterization of the new psychological profile of today, including group narcissism as compensation for the decline of social life, has been paralleled by the work of a number of academic social psychologists who have talked about the emerging 'dark triad' of offensive, not necessarily pathological qualities (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulation and exploitation of others, indifference to morality, lack of empathy, and a strategic focus on self-interest (Christie and Geis, 1970). In a similar vein, Kohut (1972) has suggested that today few patients tend to be classical neurotics but instead suffer from narcissistic personality disorder, and they tend to be self-centered, grandiosity, prideful, filled with entitlement, egotism, and constantly demanding recognition of their 'superiority'. They are prone to rage when not given the attention and recognition they feel they deserve. The final component tends to be psychopathy, meaning that such people tend to be selfish, impulsive, prone to antisocial behavior without guilt or remorse, impulsivity, ness, callous and unemotional traits, and remorselessness. 'People with dark triad traits, have little empathy for other people, rate high in their willingness to exploit anyone to get ahead and experience little remorse when they cause harm to others. They can also be deceitful and aggressive' (Booth, 2024).[9] Whether or not such characters are more frequent today than in the past cannot accurately be gauged, but what is clear is that the conditions of neoliberalism are especially conducive for this kind of person to be highly 'successful' in business or romance, and a complete failure as a human being. She or he can engage in practices in which many people lose jobs or perhaps keep jobs with extremely dangerous conditions, while she or he is totally oblivious to the human cost while securing vast profits.[10] Yes, 'greed is good' for the pockets of the elites. Similarly, such personalities, tupically authoritarian narcissists, tend to have more frequent sex partners, and while that may not necessarily be pathological, it reflects the fragmentary social relationships in general today (Kouhut, 1971).

The Double Whammy Strikes

For many workers, especially those with no more than high school education, who have either lost jobs or faced job cuts especially in hard-hit rural communities often in the Southern states,

abandoned by Democrat's embrace of neoliberalism that encouraged import substitution/job exports in then privatized services and pushed massive retrenchments in social benefits, has led to a great deal of fear, anxiety, and anger.[11] Having been betrayed by the Democratic Party, now beholden to more educated affluent and socially liberal constituencies, they have slowly but surely many moved to the Republican Party that offered 'explanations' for their financial duress and denigration of their culture, blaming the age-old typical scapegoats starting with lazy minorities, dangerous immigrants, unscrupulous globalists typically socialists if not communists which became the code words for the Jews, as was described in that classical propaganda piece, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

But the other moment of the 'whammy' was the growing assault upon heretofore (socially constructed) traditional essentialist, hierarchical, and privilege granting identities, and that are more typically embraced by authoritarians. Consider whiteness where the privilege of skin color is unrecognized by the privileged, sexism as 'superiority' of masculinity, or heteronormativity—the 'God-given' superiority of straight people over gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or trans. The problem is not simply economic, but the denial of heretofore recognition—of privileged status, 'badges of identity' that grants a degree of self-esteem, supports frameworks of understanding and meaning— is articulate lifestyles and incorporation into a group. This was first evident in the backlash against the civil rights movements, think only of George Wallace, 'segregation forever', as well as the Selma March across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, when peaceful, nonviolent demonstrators were brutally attacked by the police using dogs and water cannon. There followed a backlash toward women by anti-feminist working-class men (Faludi, 1999).[12]

While alternative, progressive values, identities, and lifestyle are initially limited to very small minorities such as Bohemian subcultures, the 'Beat Generation' of the 1950s and even the countercultures and progressive politics of the 1960s were not yet prevalent in the larger population, but these trends move from deviant to acceptable, and in some cases even typical, at least among younger cohorts. Furthermore, following a series of social movements often aided and abetted by court cases and legislation; racial, gender, or gender orientation discrimination were outlawed.[13] These two factors, (1) economic and the growing inequality, declining incomes and precarity for many, experienced as fear, anxiety, and anger, together with (2) challenges to traditional identities and values, contributed to the political backlash culminating in the support for Trump in the United States. But many of the same factors have been seen Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey, and Modi in Egypt (cf. Norris and Inglehart, 2019). And of course, the overthrow of Roe V Wade and granting women the rights to control their own bodies and their sexuality were challenges by a dedicated pro-life movement. And they finally got their political payoff when the Trump Supreme Court overturned Roe V Wade.

Following crises of the Fordist–Keynesian decades, 'stagflation ' led to the embrace of neoliberal globalization, with its market fundamentalism, privatization of various services, the retrenchment of social investments, and as combined with laborsaving automation, the export of jobs to low-wage countries/regions and digital communication has led to rapid economic growth at least for the capitalist class. But the other side of that growth has been growing inequality and precarity, evoking fear, anxiety, and resentment which in turn foster the conditions for the rapid rise in discontent that in turn fosters social movements. For authoritarians, those deemed responsible, for what they perceive as their economic and/or cultural 'victimization', were seen as dangerous enemies, as 'replacements' dragging the society down as a godless, multicultural, multiracial, multigendered society of antifa communists, 'deep state' traitors, lazy parasites demanding expensive social benefits. Multiculturalism, derided as 'woke', rests more upon a highly mistaken perception that racialized minorities have prospered, often via crime, while hardworking, 'real Americans', aka white men, have been left behind.[14]

The Four Horsemen of Democratic Decline

Let it be made clear, the various supporters of the right wing are hurting, they are in pain. And while we might sympathize with the reality of their economic fears if not the actual hardships experienced because of neoliberalism, they little understand the nature of neoliberal capital. At the same time, we deplore their authoritarianism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, the disdain of science, facts, and reason, and hence the designated targets of anger and blame. As the early studies of the rise of fascism showed, these are the ways that many people managed to deal with genuine economic pains as well as those based on authoritarian intolerance, especially as social/cultural changes that challenge heretofore taken-for-granted privileges. Reactionary populists easily support, if not actually participate in, various forms of violence to express both revenge and a means to halt if not reverse social economic distress. Psychologically, authoritarian projection and the embrace of violence connect *Kristallnacht* in 1938 to the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, 2017.

Most right authoritarian populist movements have certain integral features in common. Almost 100 years ago, Carl Schmitt (1996 [1932]) decried liberal democracies that didn't represent the 'will of the [true] people', who were exploited at best, victimized at worst, by their enemies who were often their own elites. The values and identities of 'the people' had been ignored, challenged, or subverted by self-serving, indifferent, inapt, and/or corrupt elites; indeed, these enemies of the 'the people' use their wealth and power to support 'unpopular' economic, social, political, and cultural agendas, including rigging of elections to secure 'unpopular' and often cosmopolitan agendas like 'political correctness' or 'woke' agendas (cf. Langman, 2025). A common complaint of many reactionary populisms is that the policies of corrupt, establishment elites have enabled subaltern Others, 'inferior' minorities of color, 'pushy' women, 'perverted' gays, and even undocumented immigrant 'criminals' to 'step in line' and get ahead of the 'real people' who have worked hard to get where they are (Hochschild, 2017). Reactionaries typically feel that their moral community of 'the real people' have been injured, victimized by political and cultural elites who support 'unpopular' policies and/or 'dangerous Others' who may be minorities, immigrants, gays, trans, and so on.

Populists are generally anti-pluralistic, anti-democratic, anti-elitist, intolerant, and authoritarian (Müller, 2016). Only a strong, powerful leader, a hypermasculine 'strongman', can be the Savior of the people and best realize the will of the ordinary people and she or he adroitly uses electoral politics to gain power, and subsequently uses that power to erode democratic freedoms and subvert the democratic process and practices that undermine the 'people' (Ben-Ghait, 2020).[15] Central to every reactionary movement, as Schmitt claimed, there is a fundamental dichotomy of friend and foe, and that designated enemies are often the elites who have victimized 'the real people'; they are 'enemies' who are legitimate targets for anger, hostility, opprobrium, and indeed justifiable violence ranging from expulsion to extermination. Reactionary leaders promise that vengeance and retribution, and quite often, in power fulfill the promise—Hitler is the prototype.

The expansion of democratic political rights enabled 'the revolt of [right-wing] masses', defending their identities, values, and/or lifestyles. (But we also saw how the expansion of voting rights for minorities fostered backlash.) Thus, we have witnessed economic, cultural, and opposition in which various right-wing authoritarian populisms and ethno-religious nationalisms promise to halt and restore a glorious past that never was, but in that imaginary, prosperity was ensured and there were few challenges to the 'dominant' identities and values. While the macroeconomic structural factors as legitimation crises may well evoke powerful emotions from what was said, the way these events are interpreted as lead to action is based on characterological factors, we have noted especially authoritarianism. Thus, we must note the power of emotions in general and the tendencies for emotions to triumph over reason, facts, or evidence and embrace the rationale:

Anger, anxiety, shame and ressentiment have led to a variety of reactionary populisms, ethno-religious nationalisms, neo-fascisms that involve aggression, bullying, Othering etc. One common feature of these movements is that they appeal to certain kinds of people; reactionary ideologies and movements resonate with people who have underlying authoritarian character structures that willingly reject factual evidence and/or logic. Thus, they readily embrace a variety of clearly irrational beliefs. While economic factors cannot be ignored, research has shown that most right populists are not economically distressed. Rather they are respond ing to social and cultural change. . . . Thus, we now see widespread *ressentiment* toward 'corrupt' if not evil political and cultural elites indifferent to the 'true people' who find the right populists promise of a better future by restoration of a glorious past, punishing ignominious elites above and thwarting the encroachments by heretofore, subaltern Others appealing. (Langman and Schatz, 2021: 168)

Ressentiment

Following Nietzsche (2013), ressentiment has a specific meaning, not simply disdaining or not liking something or someone, but an intense visceral loathing and disgust toward the illegitimate elites and the desire for revenge. The anger rage and potential loss over the loss of privileged identities, especially among the lower middle classes, already located in a tenuous social position between the working classes and underclasses below as well as the upper middles classes they rarely enter; thus, their anger shades into *ressentiment*. To summarize and simplify, the once powerful warriors—conquerors of Israel—had themselves been conquered by the Roman warriors who personified and celebrated wealth, power, and free sexuality.

The now subjugated Jewish priestly class, poor, powerless, and ascetic, then embraced a 'herd mentality' of subjugation and victimization that made virtues out of necessity as they saw themselves as 'morally superior' (religiously) to the wealthy, powerful and hedonist and polytheists Roman idol worshipers. This compensatory ressentiment provided an alternative, commentary 'status', an elevated 'moral superiority' for subalterns rooted in the desire for revenge and sadistic cruelty and denigration of Others as compensatory forms of self-esteem. The Jewish priests did not simply resign themselves in humility to their inferior social position. They had a deep sense of self-esteem and pride, and this fueled a simmering rage at their situation and hatred toward their conquerors. An account of the heart would not be complete without an investigation of the corrosive condition of ressentiment. (Morelli, 1998)

The same circumstance fuels contemporary *ressentiment* articulated in the authoritarian right populisms' anger toward existing, indifferent, onerous, if not traitorous political and cultural elites, typically more affluent, cosmopolitan, and urbane who ignore if not malign the concerns of the 'real people', especially their progressive values of toleration and inclusion, supporting feminism, LGBTQ derided as woke, that challenge heretofore seeming fixed (perhaps God given), privileged identities (Langman, 2025). Thus, their anger, vitriol, and disdain toward blameworthy 'establishment' elites who have screwed them over economically and culturally deserve sadistic punishment, as do dangerous subalterns who may be welfare cheats, thieves, rapists, terrorists, and thugs. And above all are the dedicated communists and socialists of the 'deep state' who threaten the nation with moral and cultural decline.

For Nietzsche, the spirit of revenge and hatred of the powerful was typical of subordinates thwarted in their 'will power'. Trends toward equality, inclusion and tolerance for difference, and for the religious right, the growing acceptance of erotic hedonism, especially premarital sex, pornography, and toleration for LGBTQ, are cast as evils, challenging their heretofore privileged identities and 'God-given' values.[16] Their authoritarian desire for sadomasochistic revenge provides compensatory self-esteem for those groups who feel they are being 'left behind', losing their 'country' as their formerly privileged, 'esteemed' identities based on race, gender, heteronormativity, and/

or religion. Reactionary populisms defend and celebrate identities that heretofore provided racial and moral 'superiority' and economic status but are now fearing unpleasant 'extinction anxieties' (see below) become transformed into gratifying forms of punitive aggression to the 'enemies' while providing new forms of solidarity based on common hatreds. A recurrent theme of their posted views is 'owning' the libs, denigrating, humiliating anyone to the left of Genghis Khan. Trump suggested that anyone who voted against him was a Marxist.

Authoritarian populisms can be seen as 'slave revolts' that would displace the corrupt, albeit weak elites with the strong, the powerful, and superior identities of the 'real people' while disdaining foreign interlopers. While *ressentiment* toward elites is an essential part of various right populisms which tend to be highly authoritarian, their subjugation is to their 'legitimate' authorities, who represent the 'people' was already noted in the early studies of authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950; Fromm, 1941). *Ressentiment* is closely intertwined with sadomasochistic authoritarian aggression, necrophilia that seeks to punish if not destroy the enemy.

Replacement Theory—The Fear of Death

One aspect of populist anger regarding challenges to traditional, authoritarian identities can be seen in their embrace of the 'replacement' theory of Renaud Camus which 'explains' how the French reactionary followers of Marine Le Pen fear that Moslems would take over their country and France would lose its secular culture. As Mitchell (2020) described it,

> Its basic contours are this: 'indigenous' white populations, and their cultures, societies, and institutions, are being replaced by a tide of racial others—Black people, Africans and Muslims. Moreover, this is happening not because of any natural demographic trend, but because enemies within have willed it, not only through weakness but through a suicidal, self-hating malice towards the civilization of which they are a part. (Mitchell, 2020)[17]

Replacement theory triggers a very primal fear, 'extinction anxiety', the fear of death, a powerful existential anxiety over the fragility and future of one's very identity, values, and lifestyles based on essentialist notions of white identity, gender identity, and Christianity that face challenges, decline, and perhaps demise.[18] For Becker (1973), the embrace ideologies/institutions seen as eternal like nationalism, religion, or mixtures assuage fear and anxiety. Like caged animals facing threats to their very survival, the various reactionary mobilizations violently lash out to defend their cultures, identities, and lifestyles through reactionary social or political mobilizations along willingness to use violence to fight progressive leaders and the normative trends they regard as immoral, unnatural, and indeed, evils that must be eradicated, through whatever means are necessary. As was noted earlier, this might portend violence against the various enemies. And as we have seen, this combination of cultural changes along with economic fears, if not actual duress, has played out in electoral politics that would disdain the very democracy that permits reactionary votes, such as the election of Trump.

Thus, we can better understand the extreme emotional intensity behind the 'culture wars' in which cultural challenges to rigid, essential categories of self, identity, and values evoke both fear and anger. Accordingly, intense homophobia, especially toward the transgendered, and indeed conservative Republicans consider gender fluidity, LGBT, and 'woke' culture, and same-sex bathrooms as a more serious problem than the pandemic. The changing nature of the economy, along with social cultural changes, including immigration and the fears of such changes, has thus generated and precipitated cultural backlashes throughout much of the world (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Shame

De Tocqueville noted that for all their affluence, freedom, and democracy, Americans were sad and gloomy people. Why? In France, status was ascriptive and permanent, even if one's fortunes waned, one remained a duke or duchess that commanded some deference. In the United States, status, as merit, was problematic, based on one's attainments and accomplishments and one could always lose his or her farm, business, or job. While he did not use the term, he implied that the loss of status, or even potential loss, was a basis of shame. Fast forward to today, between the economic uncertainty, if not realities with stagnant or lowered income and being 'left behind' in the neoliberal economy, and along with the challenges to more traditional identities and values, there is an unknowledge shame. Thomas Scheff (1994) and Jonathan Turner (2007) argued that unacknowledged, unconscious shame, qua denigration of self, led to violent aggression as a way of overcoming that shame. Salmela and von Scheve (2017) suggest that

> . . . authoritarian populists mobilizations are characterized by repressed shame that transforms fear and insecurity into anger, resentment, and hatred against perceived 'enemies' of the precarious self. Shame is a pivotal emotion of contemporary societies where principles of competition and market exchange have spread from the economy to all domains of life (Bauman, 1998). Here, shame emerges as an emotion about actual or anticipated losses stemming from the larger political economy for which individuals blame themselves. Anticipatory shame, or shame-anxiety, may not be as intense as actual shame, but it resembles the latter in its unpleasant hedonic quality and negative implications for the self. This is because it signals an expected loss rather than a possible loss or social exclusion. . . . For Nietzsche the spirit of revenge and hatred of the powerful, typical of subordinates thwarted in their 'will power'. . . . In general, the more the domains of life in a society that operate on the principles of competition and market exchange, the more chances there are for failing to live up to the constitutive values of one's salient personal and social identities, and, consequently, for shame about this actual or anticipated incapacity, and for the repression of shame. For some it may mean limited income and/or mobility, for others, insufficient recognition, and for academicw it is not enough publications or citations. As argued by Scheff (1994) and Turner (2007), the repression of shame can be considered as part of a general emotional pattern modern of (Western) societies. Since shame is seen and culturally framed as a deviant, despised, and socially undesirable and therefore is an inexpressible emotion. However, repressed shame does not disappear, but persists, becomes more intensive, and transforms into anger, hate, and *resentment* (e.g., Hoggett et al., 2017). The idea is that psychodynamic processes of change, both the emotion expression (from shame to anger, hate, and *ressentment*) and its intentional object (from self to other), with the purpose of protecting the vulnerable self. This mechanism is similar to Scheler's *ressentiment* because the repression and transmutation of negative emotions, as well as, a shift in their intentional directedness are central to that concept as well. Turner remarks that once 'shame is repressed, it can be manipulated by those with an interest in deflecting this anger onto chosen targets; typically this manipulation involves the symbols of one social identity and juxtaposes this identity through narratives about the evils of another social category or social identity' (Turner, 2007: 521–522).[19] Repressed shame therefore constitutes a social mechanism that may mediate between the emotional patterns of contemporary societies on the one hand and support for right-wing populisms on the other hand. We suggest that the rhetoric of these parties is carefully crafted (a) to contribute to the repression of shame and (b) to deflect shame-induced anger and hatred away from the self and instead toward the political and cultural establishment and various others, such as immigrants, refugees, and the long-term unemployed. (Salmela and von Scheve, 2017).

Necrophilia

In his *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Eric Fromm (1973) rejected Freud's idea of innate human aggression, but rather, he rethought aggression and destructiveness in a more relational

context. For Fromm, when one is thwarted in his or her self-fulfillment, failing to realize one's potential, the resulting *ressentment*, replacement anxiety, and shame ultimately begin to shade into what Fromm (1973) called necrophilia, the love of death and destruction, as evident in reactionary gatherings such as Nurenberg Rallies, Trump rallies, or the Charlottesville torchlight parades, and of course, January 6th. This can be clearly seen in the destruction if not just defacing of Churches, synagogues, or mosques; but random shootings of Jews, Moslems, and so on; bombing schools, Churches, synagogues, or mosques. And the Ur symbol of hate and death, the swastika has become ever more visible. A Braune has pointed out,

> Fromm contrasts the healthy 'biophilic' character orientation, which is open to growth, change, and the future, with the unhealthy 'necrophilic' character, which is characterized by sentimentality, dwelling upon the past, and an attempt to render the world static, fixed, predictable, and dead. While the former is future-oriented, like Fromm's messianic hope, the latter attempts to flee the burdens of personal responsibility, freedom, and individuality through psychological regression into the past. . . . He is describing a general psychological orientation towards the world, characterized by an attraction to all that is static, mechanical, dead, predictable, and easy to control. Fromm writes that the necrophiliac is 'fascinated by all that is dead', feels drawn 'to corpses, to decay, to feces, to dirt', and '[loves] to talk about sickness, about burials, about death'. He or she is attracted to darkness, night, caves, and hiding places. Fromm's interpretation of 'necrophilia' clearly has political implications. For example, Fromm writes that the necrophiliac loves 'law and order' and bureaucracy (Braune, 2011: 1).

For Fromm, necrophilic authoritarians show a 'yearning for yesterday', a psychic regression to an earlier, imagined, better day. Trump captures this quite clearly as MAGA, implies there was a 'better time', while perhaps the 1950s or early 1960s when it seems as if everything was fine in America, before minorities, women, gays, secular people, and environmentalists started 'casing trouble' with all that woke socialist stuff.[20] But we have seen that same kind of social psychic regression with the French peasant support for Louis Bonaparte as yearning for the days when his uncle confiscated aristocratic land and redistributed plots to the peasants. The Italian fascist hopes to restore the glory of Rome, Hitler envisioned restoration of the great days of Valhalla. To be sure, the prototypical form of this psychic regression is to return to the womb, the world before birth, isolated from the conditions of reality, and completely provided for by the mother. For Fromm, [The] 'escape from freedom', that is, to flee the burdens of individual freedom, responsibility, and loneliness, often through regression to a childlike dependence upon leaders or other societal influences, or through politically reactionary efforts to reinstate some lost golden age of ancient history or prehistory (Braune, 2011: 2).

One might speculate that for the current reactionary populist movements, this regression is to dim awareness that their cultural days are numbered increasingly. Women are assuming higher levels within the workforce, especially in professions such as law, medicine, and hard sciences. Many countries now have women presidents or prime ministers—in the United States we almost had one. The homophobia, especially the fear that most teachers are 'grooming' young children for homosexuality and or gender transition, is a counterphobic reaction to the increasing acceptance of gays in media, culture, and growing numbers of the general population. The reactionary authoritarians are especially upset when large corporations are publicly gay-friendly such as Walt Disney, Budweiser beer, and Pride marches that are now a feature of many large cities are generally attended by governors and mayors, and sponsored by major banks, airlines, and so on. But as we see, authoritarians are not about to give up without a fight and a dialectical view of history suggests that fight is already over as the older, more reactionary, more fundamentally religious sectors of the population age and die off to be replaced by younger more progressive cohorts.

Conclusion

At this point, we might remember the wisdom of earlier thinkers beginning with Plato and Aristotle, who each in their own way saw the 'good life' in terms of the political life but they were quite wary of democracy that might grant political power to the less educated who were easily swayed by emotional messages. Similarly, the wealth of the rich might grant inordinate political power to the few who then used the power to benefit themselves and not the general good. As Machiavelli noted, the Republic was a superior form of governance, but it required order and stability. Contemporary neoliberal capitalism is not only episodically crisis-prone, but has 'normally' generated vast amounts of economic inequality and precarity that has evoked a great deal of suffering. At the same time, progressive changes and cultural values have challenged various traditional value orientations, lifestyles, and identities. Today, various reactionary, authoritarian populist social/political movements can be seen as collective attempts to defend certain aspects of waning privileged identities, lifestyles, and values that groups fear are being challenged and undermined. Otherwise said, the erosion, decline, and challenges to essentialist-based privilege granting identities have heightened of narcissism and led to a feelings of victimization and in turn unleash a variety of fears anxieties and anger toward the woke 'enemies' of heretofore essentialist privilege (Langman, 2025). This 'backlash' has of course stoked a variety of intense emotional responses such as *ressentiment*, an intense hatred of the elites (Nietzsche), the fear of the death of one's culture identities and values (Terror Management Theory), shame over real or potential loss of status, and necrophilia as the love of death and destruction among those thwarted in fulfillment (Fromm, 1973).

Authoritarians, who would preserve their privilege granting identities, are basically waging a war against racial, ethnic, and gender minorities such as feminists especially those demanding equality and control over their own sexuality and bodies, queers, and for some, this might include environmentalists, health care advocates, and/or disabled. Anti-wokeism is not only directed toward various Others, but now extends to attempts to control libraries—removing and often burning books and eliminating courses from kindergarten to graduate school that might teach racial history, or any references to any sexuality, especially queer, or trans. The anti-woke struggles now go so far as to attack various mainstream corporations that support multicultural employment, and even perish the thought and support Pride marches and even direct advertising toward queers—who are typically without children and often, have more sophisticated, read: costly consumer tastes. Consider for a moment the extreme irony of reactionary Republicans attacking corporate America. (But the MAGA Republicans are surely not traditional, business-oriented Republicans.)

Is there hope? Let us note, there's certain strands of critical theory that have emphasized a more hopeful perspective based, in part, on a dialectical perspective of history, made especially clear by Herbert Marcuse (1941) who saw Hegel as an ardent defender of rationalism and individual freedom. For Hagel, the dialectic of spirit moving through history had a telos of freedom and absolute knowledge which, for Marx, was seen as the overcoming of the capitalism and its classes and the inevitability of a socialist society perhaps hinted at in the Paris commune. Thus, in face of some of the most horrendous moments of history, World War II, Holocaust, nuclear bombings. Scholars such as Bloch, Marcuse, and Fromm could remain optimistic.

> Hege's philosophy held to the progressive ideas in Western rationalism and worked out their historical destiny. It attempted to light up the right of Reason and its power and the developing antagonisms of modern society. There was a dangerous element in his philosophy dangerous to the existing order, that is, which derived from its use of the standard of Reason to analyze the form of the State. Hegel endorsed the State only insofar as it was rational, that is, in so far as it preserved and promised individual freedom and the social potentialities of men. (Marcuse, 1941: 389)

The argument that I've attempted to make has been clearly dialectical, in which the 'double whammy' beginning with the fact of the contradictions of Fordist Keynesian capitalism led to neoliberal globalization, and especially the role of financialization, creating huge amounts of wealth concentrated among a small cadre of but not producing value, or perhaps more important with complete indifference of the consequences of creating great inequality and precarity that has fostered reactionary movements of the dispossessed, threatened, and anxious authoritarians, facing both financial hardships and even in many cases not so much actual duress as fear and anxiety. At the same time, as the economic and technical changes imperiled workers, the logic of neoliberalism, especially its radical individualism and entrepreneurialism, led to the retrenchment of social benefits that has had harsh economic effects. But, meanwhile, there were major secular challenges to the more traditional identities because of the major social changes prompted by the social movements that were taking place in the 1960s that have since then become widely embraced in some sectors, if not normative that inspired a variety of progressive movements especially since the late 20th century and early 21st century.

At this moment, we should also look at the social psychological foundations of dialectical change more specifically, as has been noted, the very fundamental differences between what we might call the more progressive, biophilic versus the more regressive, authoritarian, necrophilic characters. But what further needs to be noted is how structural especially economic changes impact character and identity. Harking back to Fromm's work, we might see that, on the one hand, the foundations of character are laid in childhood, but at the same time, he was very clear especially in his study of the Mexican villagers that people might go through what he called 'dynamic character change' in which one social character could change to adapt to different social conditions. We should also note the importance of generational change, what Mannheim (1952) called 'cohort flow', namely that every generation comes to age in a different historical context, war or peace, prosperity or poverty, stability or change. In the past several decades, we've seen major changes in progressive values from racial and/or ethnic toleration to feminism, gay rights, and ever-growing support for environmentalism. But at the same time, it needs to be noted that the degree of flexibility of the individual is somewhat dependent on his or her age and at the time in which individuals achieve a degree of maturity, primarily the late teen age and early 20s is the time in which identities are more or less established, and what has been abundantly clear is that the youth of today, especially what have been termed the Z generation, has been radically different on the progressive social values and even the economic values—most prefer socialism to capitalism—but unfortunately, very few actually understand that socialism is far more than better health care and free tuition. Nevertheless, we have seen how this generation while not yet achieving major power has basically been very supportive of a variety of progressive agendas from gun control to defending women's rights to control their own bodies and reproduction, toleration for difference, and so on. What has been especially clear in various surveys most of the youth strongly oppose the various authoritarian, reactionary leaders, followers, and agendas. While the short term may very well be unpredictable, the political polarization, reflecting underlying social character, is almost unprecedented. It is clear that the older generations tend to be more conservative reflecting the social contexts of the times in which they came to maturity, while the younger generations tend to be more progressive and even in some cases radical. As the progressive generations age and move through the life cycle, the older generations will exit from world history leaving behind them the tragic world of capitalism, nationalism, war, inequality, authoritarian religion, and possible environmental-based extinction. But there is hope that the generations of today spearhead the changes suggested by Marcuse as consequences of the 'great refusals' and the emergence of the new sensibility which is very similar to what Erich Fromm called the 'productive character'.

As this essay began, we noted critiques of democracy as either giving the less informed emotionally driven poor disproportionate political power or the rich and already powerful even more inordinate power. How prescient! Many of the same problems still exist, but in the world of today, electoral power provides many people, typically authoritarians with many grievances, an/or or others who share those grievances to use democracy to gain power, but without a critical understanding , tey reproduce the very conditions that lead to their grievances. And given the Internet we see numerous reactionary populist websites and movements that both disinform and mobilize electoral power to overthrow democracies and establish authoritarian governments that may call themselves 'illiberal democracies' in which authoritarian leaders control the electoral process to ensure their power. In the current world, of greater atomization and fragmentation as of the social, the public sphere has splintered into thousands of websites, mostly disseminating mass disinformation, and at the same time, we have seen the erosion of critical thought. For many authoritarians, the embrace of these reactionary websites leads to joining with other people and finding cohesion solidarity and support as vast numbers easily embrace clearly erroneous information without the capacity to make informed judgments. This was clearly evident in the election and reelection of Donald Trump. But is this the new reality of our times in the future? If we take a dialectical view of history, however, and notice how the authoritarianism of such governments join together cronyism, cronyism corruption, and incompetence, a dialectical perspective on social movements suggests that these reactionary governments will ultimately undermine themselves, and we have seen this happening in Poland, Chile, Bolivia, or Columbia. Given the neoliberalism embraced by many right-wing governments, between their corruption and incompetence, and policies such as environment, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and perhaps most of all environmentalism growing numbers of youth have been mobilizing worldwide support progressive, democratic alternatives. If what Mannheim saw as the generational mediation of social change, then we can be hopeful for resurgence of democracy. As our Arab friends might say, *inshallah*.

Funding

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Notes

1. We often see this pattern repeated in many developed countries where the leadership of revolutionary movements quickly become undemocratic tyrannies to limit the degree of chaos and disorder. The legacies of England, beginning perhaps with the Magna Carta, and surely Cromwell, established elements of what would become democratic republics in the North American colonies. English governors and local parliaments provided the foundation that would enable the Declaration of Independence in the United States and the eventual independence of Canada.
2. American historians have pointed out how Jefferson's constitution was influenced by Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. Beard (1935 [1913]), for example, pointed out the importance of property ownership which was a central theme for Locke.
3. As Machiavelli (1998 [1531]) pointed out when the interests of the nobility and the commons were served, we had social stability.
4. For more expanded, updated discussion of the falling rates of profit, see Smith (2018).
5. The Glass–Steagall bill of 1933 was overturned by the Gramm–Leach–Bliley Act in 1999 which ultimately pave the way for the crash of 2008.
6. For further explanation of and the nature of the derivatives market and 2008 collapse, see Sassen (2018). See also McNally (2010).

7. Most of the research suggest that perhaps 30% of the population are clearly authoritarian.
8. In the aftermath of the meltdown of the economy in 2008, the American people elected Barack Obama the first African American president. In 2024, when a large number of Americans were feeling the adverse impacts of the pocketbook issues, there was less support for an African American/Indian woman.
9. Booth, Stephanie, What Is the Dark Triad and Why Are People With These Traits So Dangerous?https://www.health.com/condition/antisocial-personality-disorder/dark-triad
10. When hurricanes cut Internet service to Florida, Elon Musk, world's richest man, gave people access to his Starlink system—for $400.
11. In many cases, we have seen a wave of suicides and or overdoses among white rural poor that have been called 'deaths of despair' (Case and Deaton, 2020). Parenthetically, when African Americans were likely to be using cocaine or heroin, it was considered a criminal act and imprisonment, but when white Americans were using prescribed oxycontin and or illegally obtained fentanyl, it became a social problem calling for a treatment.
12. As she points out, the backlash against women first emerged in the 1970s spearheaded by Evangelical churches that had a strong embrace of patriarchy justified by fundamentalist, authoritarian Christianity. By the 1980s, it had spread to the militia movements. And given the progress that women have made, whether in professions, careers, education, and so on, there are still sizable numbers of men who really resent female equality. Consider only the popularity of Internet influencers like Jordan Peterson or Andrew Tate.
13. Before the ink was dry in laws prohibiting racial discrimination in schools, throughout the South, several 'religious' schools were established to sustain racial segregation.
14. Samir Gandesha (2018).
15. As she points out, their policies of corruption and censorship typically neglect the public good and generally bring harm to the society and in many cases especially to those likely to be among the strongest supporters.
16. And many Evangelical ministers have proclaimed that hurricanes like Katrina, Sandy, or Milton and even Cov 19 were God's punishment for 'immorality', especially sex (and many young fundamentalists discover sex and lose God). BTW! About 90% of Americans have had sex before marriage and about 70% have cohabited before marriage.
17. Mitchell Peter (2020).
18. More recently, Chauncey de Vega has argued that 'Conservatives—and especially Trumpists . . . are filled with dread, anger and fear about their future In Charleston, the chanted 'Jews will not replace us'. While they often hide their sentiments behind words such as 'tradition' and 'culture', on a fundamental level, white conservatives believe that to be a 'real American' requires a person to be first and foremost straight, white, [male], and Christian. https://www.salon.com/2018/06/26/what-fuels-white-anxiety-the-baffling-hypocrisies-behind-white-paranoia-politics/
19. Turner J (2011).
20. That 'memory' of course ignores the 25% of Americans who were poor, discriminated against, and denied voting or civil rights. And of course, this was a time of McCarthyism when huge numbers of Americans thought their friends, neighbors, or perhaps even family members might actually be communist traitors.

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