

# Mass Manipulation and Group Performance

## Adorno's 'Freudian' Theory of Fascism

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**Abstract:** This article provides an overview of Adorno's adoption of Freudian group psychology in "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" and other works – and the application of its tenets to fascism and fascist propaganda. Adorno conceives of the latter as the artificial, instrumental activation of collective psychology for political purposes. Fascist leaders employ rhetorical techniques that are devoid of programmatic content, but that are modeled after Freudian psychology. Adorno also revisits Freudian psychology: he sticks to its central theoretical tenets but applies them to fascism against the backdrop of a wider sociological framework. On the one hand, Adorno understands individual psychology as activated, manipulated by the agitator for political ends and in a way abolished to the extent that it is manipulated; on the other, he underlines that this manipulation occurs in the specific context of modern mass society, in such a way that the group is destructive, self-destructive and irrational because the (artificially created) libidinal bonds which ground it are recognized by all parties as purely *performative*. Individuals, in other words, play a part in the process of their own subjugation. Adorno thus employs psychoanalytical tools while providing an explanatory framework that is much more concerned with the sociological presuppositions for the effectiveness of the psychology under exam than the original. While Freudian psychology is confirmed as substantially correct, it is applied to a certain extent against Freud, or at least as a complement to Freud's arguable lack of interest in the social and political consequences of his theory.

**Keywords:** Freud; Adorno; Fascism; Authoritarianism; Group Psychology.

### Introduction

With the global rise of far-right populist actors today, we would do well to turn to Adorno's prescient contributions for valuable insight into the nature of fascism and authoritarianism. In this article, I provide an overview of Adorno's adoption of Freudian group psychology in a number of texts, most notably "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" – which is for the most part an application of Freud's *Group Psychology*

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and *Analysis of the Ego* [Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse] to fascism and fascist propaganda.

It is argued that Adorno conceives of the latter as the artificial, instrumental activation of collective psychology for political purposes. Fascist leaders employ rhetorical techniques that are devoid of programmatic content, but that are modeled after Freudian psychology. It is also argued that Adorno rereads *and* reinterprets Freud: he sticks to its central theoretical tenets but applies them to fascism against the backdrop of a wider sociological explanatory framework. He opposes Freud insofar as Freud considered the modern, liberal individual to be less, and not more, susceptible to complete subsumption under the mass. For Adorno, the individual's integration into the fascist group is artificial and 'phony' – as is their identification with the leader – but no less powerful because of it. Adorno thus revisits Freudian theory by understanding individual psychology as activated, manipulated by the agitator for political ends, to the point that individual psychology, is, in a sense, abolished in favor of pure heteronomy; and by noting that this manipulation occurs in the specific context of mass society. The irrational and destructive group can be characterized as such to the very extent that the (artificially instituted) libidinal bonds which sustain it are recognized by all parties as phony – a performance.

The article is divided into four sections. The first analyzes Adorno's reading of *Massenpsychologie*, focusing specifically on identification, idealization, issues surrounding the proper understanding of the ego ideal, and the way in which these phenomena relate to the processes of group formation. It also accounts for Adorno's interest in the Freudian theories of the primal horde and hypnosis. The second section delves into the ways in which Adorno's application of Freudian theory to fascism and its propaganda consists of both a revision and a reversion of the theory itself. While Freudian psychology is not at all discounted, and actually confirmed as substantially correct, it is applied to a certain extent against Freud, or at least as a complement to Freud's arguable lack of interest in the social and political consequences of his theory. The third section reviews Adorno's conception of the authoritarian personality and the ways in which the latter relates to Freudian psychoanalysis, thus expanding on the important tensions between sociology and psychology that Adorno's works question. Finally, the fourth section concludes by bringing into relief the problematic relation of sociology and psychology, as well as Adorno's considerations regarding the possibility that, granted that social determinations are to be thought of as more important than psychological ones, a subjective perspective might still be of a certain usefulness.

## 1. Adorno Reader of *Massenpsychologie*

### 1.1. Libidinal Bonds: Identification and Idealization

Adorno signals Freud's prescience regarding the emergence of fascist mass movements and considers him to have laid the theoretical foundations for understanding the psychological mechanisms leading to fascism. In multiple texts, and chiefly in "Freudian Theory and the Patterns of Fascist Propaganda", Adorno draws on Freudian group psychology to elucidate such mechanisms. Before moving on to Adorno's own theory of fascist propaganda, it is worth briefly moving through Adorno's own understanding of Freudian theory, so as to better highlight the revisions and reversions that Adorno operates.

Adorno begins by noting how Freud's theory overcomes the flaws of Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules*, thanks in part to the absence, on Freud's part, of contempt for the masses themselves. Freud also explicitly wanted to move beyond 'magic words' such as suggestion and suggestibility in favor of a proper understanding of "what makes the masses into masses", cognizant of the role of the leader and the psychological mechanisms underlying group (or mass) formation<sup>1</sup>. For Adorno, Freud does not explain the behavior of individuals subsumed under the mass formation in terms of their pre-existing primitiveness, but rather suggests that it is the mass formation itself that catalyzes their regression from rational individuals to a previous phase in their psychological development. As such, Freud's interest lies in what characterizes the mass formation, what holds it together and encourages said regression. For Freud, this glue is libidinal in nature.

Primary libidinal – or sexual – energy (libido) is transformed by certain psychological mechanisms into feelings that hold the mass together. These feelings constitute the so-called *libidinal bonds* tying leader to followers, and followers to each other. By adopting and explaining these energies and bonds, Freud's investigation aims to overcome the limits of 'magic words' such as suggestion and suggestibility. According to Freud, however, the group leaders themselves conceal love relations behind these vague terms, given that it is imperative that such relations be kept at the unconscious level:

love relationships (or, to use a more neutral expression, emotional ties) also constitute the essence of the group mind. Let us remember that the authorities make no mention of any such relations. What would correspond to them is evidently concealed behind the shelter, the screen, of suggestion<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno (2020, 135).

<sup>2</sup> Freud (1955, 91).

The passage from libido to libidinal bonds, the glue holding the mass together, occurs by means of the two processes of identification and idealization. Identification, in *Massenpsychologie*, denotes at least three distinct processes, only one of which is directly consequential to the study of fascism. The first is as the earliest expression of an emotional tie, which plays a role in the Oedipus complex (the boy identifying with the father and desiring the mother) and genetically pre-dates object-choice and thus object-cathexis. Identification can also be defined in a second way as the regressively obtained substitute for a libidinal object tie (as one's ego introjects the object and some of its characteristics). The third notion of identification is that of a process arising in light of perceived commonalities with other individuals whom the subject does not invest libido onto; that is the case when the ego discovers a particular quality in another individual that it shares. It is this third form of identification that occurs, in different ways, between the followers and their leader, and between the followers themselves in light of their love for the leader.

Idealization, on the other hand, refers to processes of libidinal overvaluation or overestimation of certain objects on the part of the subject. Freud explains idealization through the example of 'falling in love', where the phenomenon is most apparent. In brief, the subject redirects an amount of narcissistic libido onto the loved object in such a way that the latter is treated as its own ego. The object is rendered immune from criticism, and is loved "on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism"<sup>3</sup>. As Spruiell notes, from the point of view of drive theory, narcissistic libido flows over onto the subject, while "from the viewpoint of self-object relations, the self- or object representations either remained or became aggrandized"<sup>4</sup>. Sexual overestimation can however extend beyond the simple idealization of the object: in extreme cases of being in love such as fascination and infatuation, Freud notes that, if the tendency towards *direct* sexual gratification is further pushed back, the subject develops a relationship of devotion to the object, which ultimately impoverishes the subject.

Both idealization and identification occur throughout group formation, and as such they must be properly distinguished. Freud explains the difference between the two by asking whether the object in question has

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<sup>3</sup> Freud (1955, 112-3).

<sup>4</sup> Spruiell (1979, 786).

been “put in the place of the ego or of the ego ideal”<sup>5</sup>. Before discussing group formation, a brief digression on this faculty is necessary.

## 1.2. Ego Ideal(s)

Freud notes that the *ego ideal* arises initially from processes of introjection—itself a form of identification. The ego ideal is defined by Freud as “the heir to the original narcissism in which the childish ego found its self-sufficiency”, and this is the original sense in which it was conceived<sup>6</sup>. Given the presence of a series of “demands which [the] environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to”, which result into unsatisfied ego frustrations, a separate faculty breaks off of the original ego and allows the individual to achieve some indirect gratification of their narcissism<sup>7</sup>.

That said, Freud’s distinct (earlier) topographical and (later) structural models of the psyche, and the ambiguity of his terminology, complicates this straightforward reading. The ego ideal is in fact also defined as the faculty to which functions of “self-observation, the moral conscience, the censorship of dreams, and the chief influence in repression” are assigned<sup>8</sup>. This second sense is coherent with Freud’s structural model of the psyche, whereby the *superego* replaces and incorporates the repressive, self-critical and reality-testing functions of the ego ideal. The term *superego*, as noted by Rosenfeld, had yet to appear in 1921, at the time *Massenpsychologie* was written: “The term *superego* was introduced as an alternative to the term *ego-ideal* in 1923 with the implication that the *ego-ideal* and the *superego* were identical. On the other hand, the term *ego-ideal* which Freud originally introduced in 1914 had an entirely different meaning”<sup>9</sup>. Yet, the transformations of the old topographical model, and with it the old concept of the ego ideal itself, were already underway, and they are fully visible in *Massenpsychologie*.

Earlier, Freud had distinguished the ego ideal from the moral conscience, and had related it instead to an attempt to recover the lost childhood narcissism to compensate for the frustrations stultifying the adult individual. Rosenfeld notes that “[t]his explanation would suggest a con-

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<sup>5</sup> Freud (1955, 114).

<sup>6</sup> Freud (1955, 110).

<sup>7</sup> Freud (1955, 110).

<sup>8</sup> Freud (1955, 110).

<sup>9</sup> Rosenfeld (1962, 258).

nexion [sic] between the ego-ideal and omnipotent phantasies of early infancy when the baby phantasies himself in the role of an omnipotent ideal figure”<sup>10</sup>. However, one must recognize that this earlier meaning is, if not contradictory, at least patently different from the (later) repressive sense.<sup>11</sup>

The distinction of the (regardless of how it is understood) narcissistic construct and the self-critical and repressive faculty that will later form the superego is important because it allows for different readings of the relationship between the leader and the follower. In *Massenpsychologie*, as well as in other texts, Freud adopts the term ego ideal to refer to both faculties, leaving unclear in what sense it is being adopted. In unpacking the processes of identification and idealization leading up to mass formation, we will thus have to be cautious about how this conceptual murkiness regarding the ego ideal plays out.

### 1.3. The Ego Ideal and the Process of Mass Formation

While detailing his theory of idealization, Freud notes that, in extreme developments such as infatuations, the ego ideal ceases to operate and the loved object functionally *consumes* the ego. This is relevant to group formations because the relationship that develops between followers and leader in a group bears the marks of both identification and idealization. Through idealization, the individual ego ideal is replaced by an external object – the leader – and its critical faculties are silenced: the followers identify themselves with the leader, and treat the latter as if it were their own ego. The leader’s ego then acts as an idealized version of their own ego, which finds itself no longer inhibited by those daily frustrations that impede the satisfaction of narcissism.

The idealized leader thus becomes an outlet for such narcissistic libido. Followers also manage to identify themselves in one another to the extent that the replacement of the ego ideal with the leader figure has occurred

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<sup>10</sup> Rosenfeld (1962, 258).

<sup>11</sup> Rosenfeld also notes that “[i]n the *New Introductory Lectures* in 1932 Freud introduced a distinction between the two terms and a different meaning for the term ego-ideal”, describing “the superego as a vehicle of the ego-ideal by which the ego measures itself and whose demand for perfection it is striving always to fulfil”. Against this reading, we submit that the purely narcissistic ego ideal as an expression of the child’s omnipotence does not contradict its later delineation as a formation split off from the ego out of the mounting frustrations relating to unattained ego-demands. Narcissistic libido, in these two usages, is still central, and the matter of their differentiation only relates to the nature of the introjected objects making up the idealized construct that the ego adopts to achieve indirect satisfaction.

in each individual follower's ego, according to the third understanding of identification we have described. The conflict between individual narcissistic ego-demands and the conscious component of the ego (on which rest rationality and self-preservation) is ultimately resolved by granting to the individuals the capacity to love themselves without regard for the discontent and frustration related to their empirical selves.

Idealization and identification with regards to the leader (1) allow for the shutting off of the self-criticism, conscience, and repression constitutive of the structural model's understanding of the ego ideal as part of the superego, and (2) satisfy the narcissistic libido which was associated with the topographical model's understanding of the ego ideal as the heir to childhood narcissism, and therefore serves as a reiteration of that complex. Hence, the group is libidinally defined as "*a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego*"<sup>12</sup>.

What are we to make of the usage of the term 'ego ideal' in the context of group formation? Ought the replacement of the ego ideal by the leader, the external object, to be understood in terms of the second (repressive), or the first (narcissistic) ego ideal? It is reasonable to assume once again that both meanings are being adopted: fascination results in "the functions allotted to the ego ideal entirely ceas[ing] to operate", with conscience and criticism silenced at least when it comes to the object's behavior<sup>13</sup>; yet, it is also said that "the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego of our own", whom, as we noted earlier, "we love [...] on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism"<sup>14</sup>.

The ego ideal allows for certain indirect satisfactions but also exercises repression and is part of the individual's moral conscience—faculties that are silenced when an external object is invested with narcissistic love and ends up replacing it. As such, these usages are not contradictory, and a partial harmonization might even be possible. We could in fact say that the narcissistic formulation *presupposes and leaves room* for its second, superego-related sense. In fact, it represents an unreachable and always longed-for ideal for the ego (whether it expresses childhood omnipotence or an idealized version of the ego modeled on the parents' perceived perfections), but it also incorporate the very social instances blocking the realization of

<sup>12</sup> Freud (1955, 116); italicized in the original.

<sup>13</sup> Freud (1955, 113).

<sup>14</sup> Freud (1955, 112-3).



these narcissistic fantasies, those critical and moral elements that will later be incorporated into the superego as a repressive and self-critical faculty. As such, we might conclude that the narcissistic ego ideal and the repressive one are, in *Massenpsychologie*, already thought of as merged, although the superego is still yet to appear. The ego ideal is here both the heir to childhood narcissism and the faculty of self-criticism, and that is why the term itself becomes conceptually murky.

Indeed, this is the only coherent use of these notions once we relate the ego ideal to the libidinal structure of the group, and the influences exerted on the followers by the group leader. Freud takes the libidinal bond that is instituted between followers, as well as between followers and the leader, to be the cause of mass regression to archaic instincts—the reawakening of a portion of the subject’s “archaic inheritance” also accomplished by the hypnotist<sup>15</sup>. He suggests that the regression to archaic mass drives is the consequence, and not the cause, of mass formation and the individual’s abandonment to the group.

Updating the picture painted by previous studies on gregariousness and the herd instinct, Freud defines the human as a “horde animal, an individual creature in a horde led by a chief”<sup>16</sup>. He does so coherently with one of the leading insights of *Massenpsychologie*, namely that the issue with most earlier accounts of group psychology is the absence of the leader, who constitutes for Freud the very core of the mass formation. Upon this definition of the human, he goes on to conceive of the group or mass as “a revival of the primal horde”<sup>17</sup>. The primal horde is defined as a ‘reaction-formation’, born out of a desire for justice, as well as feelings of envy and jealousy related to the primal, omnipotent father’s treatment of the group of horde brothers. Briefly put, the group is formed and bound by mutual identifications over the common subordination to the leader, and these ties weaken negative feelings among the brothers and translate their relationship into one marked by equality. Glossing over debates as to the historicity of the creation of the primal horde – there exist already plentiful critiques of Freud’s anthropology and the specific ways in which it articulates the genetic significance of supposed historical events to certain social-psychological processes – we might focus instead on the idea that, following the parallel traced by Freud, the group’s leader might directly or indirectly come to represent the primal father, and that the libidinal struc-

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<sup>15</sup> Freud (1955, 127).

<sup>16</sup> Freud (1955, 121).

<sup>17</sup> Freud (1955, 123).



ture of the group might be thus modeled around the original relationship of the primal father to the horde brothers. As Freud puts it:

The uncanny and coercive characteristics of group formations, which are shown in their suggestion phenomena, may therefore with justice be traced back to the fact of their origin from the primal horde. The leader of the group is still the dreaded primal father; the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force; it has an extreme passion for authority; in Le Bon's phrase, it has a thirst for obedience. The primal father is the group ideal, which governs the ego in the place of the ego ideal<sup>18</sup>.

Freud thus stresses the importance, for group psychology, of the figure of the leader through the elucidation of the primal horde. In conjunction with his delineation of the ego ideal, he also explores the subject of hypnosis, and presents it as further evidence of the specific relationship between leader and followers that he argues in favor of. Notably: "Hypnosis is not a good object for comparison with a group formation, because it is truer to say that it is identical with it. Out of the complicated fabric of the group it isolates one element for us – the behaviour of the individual to the leader"<sup>19</sup>.

Hypnosis is defined as occupying a middle position between being in love, from which it is distinguished because the erotic ties that it establishes are entirely aim-inhibited, and the group, from which it is distinguished in light of the number of people it involves. Unlike non-pathological forms of being in love, moreover, hypnosis involves a replacement of the ego ideal by the object – a trait hypnosis also shares with the group. We will come back to hypnosis later, as Adorno makes use of Freud's position on the matter to describe the group in such a way that Freud's thesis on the regression of the ego and its subsumption under the group ideal is somewhat tempered, if not reversed.

We now move on to overview the ways in which Adorno applies Freud's group psychology to describe the workings of fascist propaganda, and the consequences that this application has for group psychology itself.

## **2. Adorno: Fascist Propaganda from a Freudian Perspective?**

### **2.1. Personalization and Führer Ideology**

Adorno is interested in the libidinal bond and its relation to individual regression because he considers the libidinal bond to be at the heart of

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<sup>18</sup> Freud (1955, 127).

<sup>19</sup> Freud (1955, 115).

fascist manipulation. Indeed, the libidinal bond in question is *artificial* in nature when it comes to fascism, to the extent that the rhetorical devices employed by fascist actors are brought together by a sole underlying objective: creating said bond on the basis of pre-existing primary libido. The bond is thus artificial insofar as identification and idealization are *artificially engendered* processes.

In “Freudian Theory” as well as earlier texts, Adorno underlines and expands upon Freud’s aforementioned libidinal model of the group, to which “[t]he fascist *community of the people* corresponds exactly”<sup>20</sup>. Common qualities between the leader and followers are exalted by fascist propaganda so as to engender a partial identification which soon turns into an idealization. Fascism actually *exploits* the overvaluation of the leader by his followers. It does so through the collection of techniques that Adorno calls ‘*Führer ideology*’—a construction that is primarily organized around the manipulation of the followers’ libidinal drives.

We will come back to the idea of manipulation—and what it entails for psychological theory itself according to Adorno—shortly. Before doing so, it must be noted that this ideology is characterized by two essential features. On the one hand, it is “*personalized* propaganda, essentially non-objective”<sup>21</sup>. On the other, it functions through standardization and repetition: fascist propaganda material is characterized by an “amazing stereotypy” whereby “[n]ot only does each individual speaker incessantly repeat the same patterns again and again, but different speakers use the same clichés”<sup>22</sup>.

As we noted, fascism’s irrational aims are obtained by instigating individual regression to a prior stage of psychological development through propaganda. The archaic heritage reawakened in this regressive process is exploited to dominate the regressed subjects, as witnessed by the fact that the fascist leader has to constantly work to reanimate the idea of the primordial horde father: omnipotent and uninhibited. What obtains is a leader image sewn around the idea of the *great little man*, the leader who resembles their followers but also act as their aggrandized ideal in order to accommodate both identification and idealization—and the latter through the former:

[Leaders] identify themselves with their listeners and lay particular emphasis upon being simultaneously both modest little men and leaders of great calibre. They

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno (2020, 141).

<sup>21</sup> Adorno (1994, 162).

<sup>22</sup> Adorno (1994, 168).

often refer to themselves as mere messengers of him who is to come—a trick already familiar in Hitler’s speeches. This technique is probably closely related to the substitution of a collective ego for paternal imagery<sup>23</sup>.

As such, “while appearing as a superman, the leader must at the same time work the miracle of appearing as an average person, just as Hitler posed as a composite of King Kong and the suburban barber”<sup>24</sup>. The leader is recognized as a common man, one with his people to the extent that he is part of the people. His grandeur and splendor ought to be taken as an ideal, so as to satisfy the follower’s narcissistic drives along the two separate axes of submission to, and embodiment of, authority: “the leader image gratifies the follower’s twofold wish to submit to authority and to be the authority himself”<sup>25</sup>.

Coherently with Freud’s depiction of the primal horde father, the leader is also purely and absolutely narcissistic, devoted to nothing but himself, which accounts for the fact that the movement has no objective idea underlying it and amounts to nothing more than the leader image itself. In this sense, individual narcissism is made to flow onto the leader image, and the leader is idealized according to the two lines of submission to authority and a wish to express the same narcissistic omnipotence. Hence, as anticipated earlier, the ego ideal, once replaced by the leader, is allotted the functions of self-criticism and repression at the same time as it expresses the longing for unbridled omnipotence typical of childhood narcissism.

## **2.2. Manipulation: Revising Freud**

We have briefly overviewed the workings of fascist propaganda, its stereotypical techniques and the aims it furthers. Exactly *why* these techniques work so well to begin with is a different matter – and we shall study Adorno’s answer to this question later. For now, we are already in a position to see that, to the extent that the very fact of engendering processes of identification and idealization through personalized propaganda implies an exploitation, on the part of the leader, of psychological theory – the precise functioning of this exploitation having to be further specified – the notion of *manipulation* must be central to the decryption of fascist propaganda.

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<sup>23</sup> Adorno (1994, 163).

<sup>24</sup> Adorno (2020, 141).

<sup>25</sup> Adorno (2020, 142).

If little to nothing could be (rationally) loved about the movement, as Adorno shows, objective aims and ideas ought to be rearranged into pure obedience to the leader (heteronomy), who constitutes what little is left of the notion of an 'objective idea' grounding the movement itself. Since the movement's authoritarian aims cannot be instilled by rational conviction, individuals are pushed into regression through an array of psychological mechanisms meant to transform the leader into a mirror of the primal father and to stimulate obedience through the silencing of the critical faculties of the ego ideal. This is a form of manipulation insofar as the bond sustaining the formation of the group is *artificially* created in such a way that individual regression to a prior stage of enlightenment (as Adorno names it) or consciousness (as Freud names it) is instigated, and individuals are made to support a movement whose long-term goals are incompatible, if not harmful, to their very own.

The manipulation of the unconscious for political ends is a central element in Adorno's reinterpretation of Freud: the fact that fascist propaganda works to the extent that it exploits psychological theory, and thus to the extent that psychological theory is valid, leads us to Adorno's central argument. He writes:

fascism as such is *not* a psychological issue and that any attempt to understand its roots and its historical role in psychological terms still remains on the level of ideologies such as the one of 'irrational forces' promoted by fascism itself. [...] Psychological dispositions do not actually cause fascism; rather, fascism defines a psychological area which can be successfully exploited by the forces which promote it for entirely nonpsychological reasons of self-interest<sup>26</sup>.

The leader thus exploits his own psychology to act on his followers and is successful to the extent that this is done in accord with psychological theory. Fascist propaganda could be defined as an exercise in applied psychological theory; however, in defining it as such, we must recognize that Adorno has operated a complete reversal of Freudian theory, to the point that he proclaims that the top-down manipulation of psychology ultimately amounts to its very *abolition*.

### 2.3. The Modern Individual and the Abolition of Psychology

Why should the leader's exploitation of his own psychology – and consequently of their followers – amount to an abolition of psychology? Chiefly,

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<sup>26</sup> Adorno (2020, 150-1).

because the individual psyches of the followers, turned against their own interest and deprived of their self-critical faculties, are made to depend on the leader's. The unspontaneous revitalization of the regressive aspects of the individual psyche implies that "[t]he psychology of the masses has been taken over by their leaders and transformed into a means for their domination"<sup>27</sup>.

Strosberg aptly notes that in Adorno's works, the psychology associated with authoritarianism, as well as its rise, point to the ongoing disintegration of the very idea of the individual and of psychology as adequate concepts. He opines that, for Adorno, "the ego itself can no longer be seen as capable of any sort of purity or viewed as distinct from the unconscious"<sup>28</sup>. We have earlier mentioned how for Adorno there might be sociological explanations as to the success of fascism and its propaganda, and we have also noted how fascism represents for him a psychological area that is leveraged against the individual itself by certain actors for reasons of self-interest. Stunted mentalities, continuously frustrated and subjected to the standardizing constraints and enjoinders of modern mass society, contribute to the institution of such a psychological area for Adorno. In this sense, we rejoin Strosberg in arguing that a fundamental conclusion of Adorno's research is that "the loss of autonomy at the core of authoritarianism mimics the process of individuation or rather its perpetual failure"<sup>29</sup>. Fascist propaganda exploits existing issues and mentalities for its own ends: as we have already stated, fascism transforms psychological theory, in its very application, into an instrument of subjugation of the individual to itself, its regressive tendencies, and the leader.

As such, we might refer to an abolition of psychology, following Adorno, consequent upon "the appropriation of mass psychology by the oppressors"<sup>30</sup>. Adorno indeed states:

When the leaders become conscious of mass psychology and take it into their own hands, it ceases to exist in a certain sense. This potentiality is contained in the basic construct of psychoanalysis inasmuch as for Freud the concept of psychology is essentially a negative one. He defines the realm of psychology by the supremacy of the unconscious and postulates that what is id should become ego. The emancipation of man from the heteronomous rule of his unconscious would be tantamount to the abolition of his 'psychology'<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Adorno (2020, 151).

<sup>28</sup> Strosberg (2021, 4).

<sup>29</sup> Strosberg (2021, 4).

<sup>30</sup> Adorno (2020, 151).

<sup>31</sup> Adorno (2020, 151).

Strosberg quotes Adorno in stating as much and concludes by noting that the previous passage highlights a structural but irreconcilable contradiction in psychoanalysis. He interprets Adorno as thereby arguing that “the ‘ends’ of psychology (e.g. an ego unburdened by repression) are also the ‘end’ of psychology (e.g. the elimination of the very defenses that institute a psychological subject).”<sup>32</sup> Surely this is a general idea that Adorno would have defended, following Freud’s own proclamations that “[psychoanalysis’s] intention is, indeed, to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where id was, there ego shall be”<sup>33</sup>. That would certainly represent an abolition of psychology. However, it represents but one among many possible forms of abolition. In fact, Adorno continues the previously cited passage thus: “*Fascism furthers this abolition in the opposite sense* through the perpetuation of dependence instead of the realization of potential freedom, through expropriation of the unconscious by social control instead of making the subjects conscious of their unconscious”<sup>34</sup>. While we agree with Strosberg on the idea of an abolition of psychology entailing that its ends are also its end, we must take care to notice *in which sense* this abolition moves the subject toward. The abolition of psychology that Adorno is referring to is not a movement towards autonomy, and it would be bizarre to take a psychology of fascism or authoritarianism as arguing as much. The abolition of individual psychology is furthered in the opposite sense to that originally conceived by psychoanalysis: by talking of an ‘opposite sense’, Adorno refers to an idea of abolition as a collapse of the ego into an unconscious already taken over by the heteronomous rule of society, and by extension of movements such as fascism that model their own success after society’s effects on the individual psyche. The psychoanalytical ideal of ego emancipation, far from being reached, is turned over its head into the reality of heteronomy.

We must note however that these statements require some correction. Although the term ‘heteronomy’ no doubt applies, is it really the case that the ego has been utterly and completely expropriated? Has the ego itself played no role in its own exploitation? To understand precisely what the ego does, and why, we must turn to the notions of phoniness and performance.

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<sup>32</sup> Strosberg (2021, 6).

<sup>33</sup> Freud (1932, 80).

<sup>34</sup> Adorno (2020, 151, *italics mine*).

## 2.4. Phoniness and Performance

Although Adorno's original idea consisted in showing that only the re-awakened irrationality of otherwise rational individuals will bind them into a unity acting against their own rational interests, we have to account for Adorno's later revisions to this thesis, to the effect that this "is hardly the whole truth, and in any case comes true only *ex post facto*"<sup>35</sup>. In fact, Adorno submits that the unconscious is channeled through propaganda into serving particular interests by having the latter align with the instinctive energies of the id itself. Once the appropriated ego ideal, the leader, enjoins regression being made coherent with the instinctive energies of the id, then we witness the effects of a merger between id and superego": indeed "it is precisely where the masses act instinctively that they have been preformed by censorship and enjoy the blessing of the powers that be"<sup>36</sup>.

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to consider that individual egos become fully engulfed under the control of the leader once the ego ideal is silenced and replaced: the followers' own egos do play an important part in this process by consciously abandoning to it while at the same time *disbelieving* it – being aware of its fictitious nature. After stating that identification with the leader image allows the individual to both submit to and to be themselves the authority, Adorno in fact adds:

This fits into a world in which irrational control is exercised though it has lost its inner conviction through universal enlightenment. The people who obey the dictators also sense the latter are superfluous. They reconcile this contradiction through the assumption that they are themselves the ruthless oppressor<sup>37</sup>.

Evidently, the picture is much more complicated than it would originally appear, and we might venture the hypothesis that Freud himself was aware of this ambiguity. The parallels he instituted between hypnosis and the group already witness to this fact: "Some knowledge that in spite of everything hypnosis is only a game, a deceptive renewal of these old impressions, may however remain behind and take care that there is a resistance against any too serious consequences of the suspension of the will in hypnosis"<sup>38</sup>.

If hypnosis is but a group of two, there is no reason why this ought not apply to fascist formations. The ego, in other words, might be also

<sup>35</sup> Adorno (1967, 80).

<sup>36</sup> Adorno (1967, 80).

<sup>37</sup> Adorno (2020, 142).

<sup>38</sup> Freud (1955, 127).



playing a role, actively deciding to play along with the game of its own subjugation. Adorno confirms as much:

the ego plays much too large a role in fascist irrationality to admit of an interpretation of the supposed ecstasy as a mere manifestation of the unconscious. There is always something self-styled, self-ordained, spurious about fascist hysteria which demands critical attention if the psychological theory about Fascism is not to yield to the irrational slogans which Fascism itself promotes<sup>39</sup>.

The stereotype and standardization of techniques and appeals, to the point that they are taken half-seriously even by the most fervent followers of the movement, is part and parcel of why they are appreciated to begin with<sup>40</sup>. The term Adorno uses to define this condition is *phoniness*. Phoniness is appreciated and relished “cynically and sadistically” to a large extent because it speaks truth to the dominance of “raw power unhampered by rational objectivity” under conditions such as those of Nazi Germany<sup>41</sup>. Even more importantly, it is not only the leader’s propagandistic appeals that are phony: the identification on the part of the followers, and thus of the masses themselves, are defined in these terms. In an illuminating passage, Adorno states:

The category of ‘phoniness’ applies to the leaders as well as to the act of identification on the part of the masses and their supposed frenzy and hysteria. Just as little as people believe in the depth of their hearts that the Jews are the devil, do they completely believe in their leader. *They do not really identify themselves with him but act this identification, perform their own enthusiasm, and thus participate in their leader’s performance.* It is through this performance that they strike a balance between their continuously mobilized instinctual urges and the historical stage of enlightenment they have reached, and which cannot be revoked arbitrarily<sup>42</sup>.

The hypnotic spell – manipulation itself – is thus relished, welcomed, and furthered by the individuals’ egos themselves. These egos, as they come to be subjugated by the leader as appropriated superego and by the libidinal forces of the id, abandon themselves to the subjugation. That said, we must note that the subjects’ urges are not only mobilized by fascist propaganda, and that the latter is not simply *coincidentally* effective

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<sup>39</sup> Adorno (1994, 165).

<sup>40</sup> Adorno (2020, 149) writes: “In National Socialist Germany, everybody used to make fun of certain propagandistic phrases such as ‘blood and soil’ (*Blut und Boden*), jokingly called *Blubo*, or the concept of the nordic race from which the verb *aufnorden* (to ‘northernize’) was derived”.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno (2020, 149).

<sup>42</sup> Adorno (2020, 152, *italics mine*).

in stimulating such abandonment. If fascist propaganda only repeats and adopts already existing mentalities, then we must admit that psychological regression must have already been engendered, or at least facilitated, by the environment surrounding the subjects in question. Manipulable mentalities, reports Adorno, are none other than the psyches of “the true children of today’s standardized mass culture, largely robbed of autonomy and spontaneity”<sup>43</sup>.

Phoniness is a central category in the investigation of fascist propaganda, adequately describing the performative character of the individual’s actions given their psychological structures, because it confirms and perpetuates the very idea of standardization and endless repetition: that nothing ought to change, and that no goals “the realization of which would transcend the psychological *status quo* no less than the social one” are worth pursuing<sup>44</sup>. Fascist propaganda is ultimately comfortable reproducing existing mentalities (the psychological *status quo*) as well as existing social structures: “it need not induce a change – and the compulsive repetition which is one of its foremost characteristics will be at one with the necessity for this continuous reproduction”<sup>45</sup>.

Underlying these considerations is the notion that a stable and well-functioning ego is a liberal fiction, born in the past and confined to Freud’s striving for enlightenment. Indeed, Adorno notes that

It is another aspect of the ‘totalitarian’ nature of present society that, perhaps more completely than in the past, people as such reinforce with the energy of their ego the assimilation society imposes on them; and that they blindly pursue their self-alienation to the point of an illusory identity between what they are in themselves and what they are for themselves. [...] Self-preservation succeeds only to the extent that, as a result of self-imposed regression, self-development fails<sup>46</sup>.

The egos one does actually find in modern society, those deprived of autonomy and spontaneity and willingly reduced to perform their own enthusiastic participation to the destructive and self-destructive rituals of fascism, have already developed a series of characteristics which, in their standardized reappearance individual after individual, ultimately constitute a type: *the authoritarian personality*. Lest we confuse subject for object, however, we are to specify in what sense exactly does this personality exist, and how it is to be conceived of.

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<sup>43</sup> Adorno (2020, 142).

<sup>44</sup> Adorno (2020, 142).

<sup>45</sup> Adorno (2020, 142).

<sup>46</sup> Adorno (1968, 86).

### 3. Social Determinants and Authoritarianism

#### 3.1. The Authoritarian Personality

The ideas of phoniness and performance are not meant to express that the individual is after all autonomous, and that its final subjugation is explainable solely in terms of its complicity. Speaking of phoniness and performance, in other words, should not lead one to think that individuals are to be thought of as spontaneously and autonomously choosing their own subjugation, nor their abandonment to destructive and self-destructive drives. Quite the contrary: “the rationality operative in individual behaviour is, in fact, far from being lucidly self-aware; it is largely the blind product of heteronomous forces and has, to be capable of functioning at all, to join forces with the unconscious”<sup>47</sup>.

A major thesis underlying the texts we have reviewed thus far, but also of Adorno’s later participation in *The Authoritarian Personality*, is that modern individuals have developed authoritarian characteristics foremostly by internalizing the irrational features of modern society, of standardized mass culture. This thesis, however, was reached *in opposition to* the study itself, as we will see in a moment.

In his discussion of Adorno’s relationship with *the Authoritarian Personality*, Gordon notes that the main takeaways of the study are that, on the one hand, a new personality or type has been discovered, and, on the other, that the latter “signifies not merely a type but an emergent and generalized feature of modern society as such”<sup>48</sup>. *The Authoritarian Personality* has for many years been criticized by philosophers and social theorists as ‘psychologizing’, prone to problematic psychological reductionism: “the AP authors seemed to commit an unwarranted reification of consciousness” by referring to the discovery of a new personality or type. The recent publication of Adorno’s *Remarks* on the study, however, have changed Adorno’s perceived collaboration to such endeavors. For instance, in light of such remarks Strosberg reinterprets *The Authoritarian Personality* not so much as a description of authoritarianism as an object but as instead an attempt to find “the *subject* of authoritarianism”, to which he adds that, “according to Adorno, the psychological subject is ineliminable from, but not the answer to, questions of social process, especially where the concept of the psychological contradicts itself and reaches a limit”<sup>49</sup>. Strosberg is re-

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<sup>47</sup> Adorno (1967, 79).

<sup>48</sup> Gordon (2018, 47).

<sup>49</sup> Strosberg (2021, 4).

ferring to the idea of psychological type or personality as contradicting the very idea of the autonomous subject, even when the psychological sciences – especially those that Adorno interacted and collaborated with throughout the writing of *The Authoritarian Personality* – adopt these very terms to describe the individual psyche. The tensions arising from the study itself, then, can be explained in terms of a “self-reflexivity problems” whereby the stereotypical attitude of the subject who scores high on the famous F-scale, measuring the controversial authoritarian personality, is adopted by the study itself<sup>50</sup>.

Gordon himself conceives of the Adorno’s previously unpublished *Remarks* as “a remarkable statement of methodological dissent”, whereby Adorno distanced himself from the rather psychologizing stances of the social-psychological study and reaffirmed the preeminence of the social dimension over the psychological<sup>51</sup>. According to Gordon, Adorno considered that

the drive to identify psychological types was itself a symptom of typological thinking and therefore betrayed the very same penchant for standardization that it claimed to criticize in social reality. At the same time, however, such a research agenda corresponded to emergent patterns in contemporary social reality. Modern patterns of economic exchange and commoditized cultural experience meant that genuine individuals were gradually being reduced to social types, and this developing feature of society itself served as a realist justification for a research agenda that methodologically compressed individuals into recognizable social types. Lurking in this argument, however, was a far more radical claim that identified stereotypical thinking and authoritarianism with general features of the modern social order itself<sup>52</sup>.

There are two steps to Gordon’s argument. First, types and personalities are now a meaningful object of research insofar as modern mass society, the culture industry, and their standardizing and stereotyping effects have erased, or at least made utopian, the psychoanalytical ideal of the autonomous ego. As such, it makes sense to talk of types because society produces types exactly: and while, methodologically, *The Authoritarian Personality* could be diagnosed with a tendency to typify that well coheres with the tendency of modern individuals to be typified, Adorno did not, substantively, take issue with the very fact of the authoritarian type. Second, claims Gordon, the idea of a typified reality, of standardized thinking, was also connected by Adorno with the concept of authoritarianism: the AP’s con-

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<sup>50</sup> Gordon (2018, 56).

<sup>51</sup> Gordon (2018, 59).

<sup>52</sup> Gordon (2018, 57).

ceptualization of fascism had in fact “mistakenly reversed the directionality of causation. Rather than affirming the authoritarian personality as the source of fascism’s appeal, Adorno insisted that an authoritarian ‘character’ be seen as the introjection of an irrational society”<sup>53</sup>. The authoritarian character, in turn, lends itself to exploitation by fascist forces: the psychological area that fascism was characterized as in “Freudian Theory” might be seen as synonymous with the authoritarian personality itself.

### **3.2. The Preeminence of the Social Dimension**

Mass culture and modern society, makers of an authoritarian psyche, pave the way for fascism to the extent that the latter only has to structure itself after the ways in which authoritarianism constitutes itself as a psychological type to begin with. Earlier, we referred to Adorno’s thesis of an abolition of psychology in the opposite sense from autonomy and emancipation, and towards dependence and heteronomy instead. It should be clear that Gordon’s idea of mass culture as a reversal of the “psychoanalytical ideal”, extended into a “generalized sociological fact”, corresponds to none other than our idea of an abolition of psychology in a heteronomous sense<sup>54</sup>. The heteronomous abolition of psychology, contrary to the psychoanalytical ideal, is an authoritarian exit from the ego.

We had previously put a pin in the all-important question: why are the masses susceptible to these appeals to begin with? We are in a position to respond, although the question ought first to be amended to the following: why are the masses susceptible to these appeals, and why do they abandon themselves to them if they could resist? The key to the success of fascist propaganda, its successful recruiting of both conscious and unconscious faculties to its ends, has ultimately to do with the social origins of the authoritarian personality itself: the consequence of the introjection of an irrational social order. The process of “identification itself is a kind of performance or simulacrum of a psychological bond”, not itself the cause of fascism’s success, and the idea of phoniness reflects the fact that the artificiality of the libidinal bonds<sup>55</sup>.

All that is left is endless repetition, adherence to the status quo, the illusion of authority and the reality of submission to it. All that is left is an ego fed back into the id, of destructive and self-destructive drives melted

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<sup>53</sup> Gordon (2018, 64).

<sup>54</sup> Gordon (2018, 63).

<sup>55</sup> Gordon (2018, 66).

together. All that is left is the internalization of the irrationality of modern society, a contradictory totality that can only express itself through social conflicts bound to be resolved, as we have seen, by the domination of and submission to raw power. As Adorno notes in his *Remarks*, while “prejudice is determined by the total socio-economic system”, this totality is not at all to be conceived of as internally consistent:

On the contrary: its intrinsically antagonistic character is the very reason for irrational outlets: discrimination. The essence of this totality is to maintain itself through the self-interest of those it comprises, but to simultaneously hamper and endanger this self-interest constantly and incessantly<sup>56</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusion: Sociology, Psychology, and the Fight against Fascism**

Analyzing Adorno’s contribution to the study of fascism from a Freudian perspective requires recognizing that Freud’s own theories are not only reinterpreted and reapplied, but fundamentally reversed throughout this application. To understand the way in which this is so, we might simply ask the question that has loomed over this paper: what does Adorno’s psychoanalytical study of fascism say about the relationship of sociology and psychology, and the ways in which Adorno’s relationship to Freudian group psychology is to be understood? The answer is that, to the extent that Adorno gives precedence to social causation and sociological explanation over individual psychology and its consequences, he also has to revisit and correct Freud’s theory away from the latter’s tendency to psychologize social issues, and to extend its reach beyond the restricted domain of the individual psyche<sup>57</sup>.

In the *Remarks*, Adorno argues that “the ultimate source of prejudice has to be sought in social factors which are incomparably stronger than the ‘psyche’ of any one individual involved”<sup>58</sup>. Similarly:

While social laws cannot be ‘extrapolated’ from psychological findings, the individual is, on the other hand, not simply individual, not merely the substratum of psychology, but, as long as he behaves with any vestige of rationality, simultaneously

<sup>56</sup> Adorno (2019, lv).

<sup>57</sup> This is not only true when it comes to social theory. In the *Remarks*, Adorno (2019, lxiii) notes: “We are indebted to the Freud who developed the theory of the unconscious and of repression, of the Id, the ego and the superego—not Freud the anthropologist.”

<sup>58</sup> Adorno (2019, xlii).

the agent of the social determinations that shape him. His ‘psychology’, the dimension of irrationality, points back, no less than instrumental rationality, to social moments<sup>59</sup>.

Adorno considers psychoanalytic theory to be true and adequate to the study of its very subject, but does not deem it capable of providing explanations beyond the behaviors it registers, and the pathologies it seeks to treat. However, it would be mistaken to consider that sociology, in the forms Adorno investigates, is alone able to overcome psychology’s limits.

The very idea of a self-contradictory social totality – producing irrationality and thus social conflict that is then channeled by certain actors (notably fascist forces) into their particularistic project – expresses the absence of “harmony between the whole and the particular”, thus the distance “naively expressed by the division of scientific labor into disciplines such as economics and psychology”<sup>60</sup>. However, it problematizes the relation of the two subjects in such a way that the fact of the preeminence of the social dimension does not result in a preeminence of the discipline itself. Given the way in which Adorno theorizes current social arrangements, and the way in which the latter, as we have seen, severely impact individual psyches, we are confronted with a separation of the sociological and psychological sciences that

is both correct and false. False because it encourages the specialists to relinquish the attempt to know the totality which even the separation of the two demands; and correct in so far as it registers more intransigently the split that has actually taken place in reality than does the premature unification at the level of theory<sup>61</sup>.

On the one hand, sociology is plagued by self-referentiality and its own psychologization, and also risks the reification of its own object by treating it as if it were but a scientific object. On the other, psychology mistakenly translates social energies into psychological forces in its attempt to sociologize itself and widen its field of study. We are left with a conundrum: a division that corresponds to actual reality, and the alienation of individual from individual-making society therein, but which is ultimately unable to grasp the totality that ought to be comprehended. While this is true, the problematic nature of the division does not worry Adorno: simply put, “the naivety of the division, namely, the concept that there is economy on the one hand, and individuals upon whom it works on the other, has to be

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<sup>59</sup> Adorno (1967, 73).

<sup>60</sup> Adorno (2019, lv).

<sup>61</sup> Adorno (1967, 78).



overcome by the insight into the ultimate identity of the operative forces in both spheres”<sup>62</sup>.

A partial answer to the riddle of the relation of sociology and psychology thus arises, and points us to the utility of maintaining the division after all. If the operative forces in both spheres are ultimately the same, both scientific paths must lead to similar conclusions – the discovery of such forces. And while psychology must content itself with only dealing with reactions, and not stimuli, this is not to say that it can play no role in scientific inquiry of the kind that Adorno is interested in. The fact that Adorno expresses an interest in maintaining a subjective approach, even when the forces shaping individual behaviors are social in nature, not only has to do with the fact that the same dynamics and mechanisms can be studied from within the individual, since they are of a similar nature; it also has to do with the possibility of mustering up forms of *opposition* to these forces. The very idea of mass manipulation, after all, expresses the potentiality for emancipation, for a psychoanalytically ideal abolition of psychology which ought to be constantly kept under strict control.

Today’s huge increase of social control over the masses equals the pressure potentially exercised by the masses over the social structure. Populations are treated en masse because they are no longer “masses” in the old sense of the term. They are manipulated as objects of all kinds of social organizations, including their own, because their being mere objects has become problematic since they reached—through technical civilization—a stage of enlightenment which would enable them to become true subjects if the control mechanism would be superseded at any point. Even repression in its most ruthless form had to reckon with the oppressed masses. [...] The masses are incessantly molded from above; they must be molded, if they are to be kept at bay<sup>63</sup>.

Phoniness, the artifice of fascist propaganda, the performance of an actual libidinal bond: we might even argue that these ultimately express the somewhat nihilistic emptiness of the individual’s renunciation to engage with the social fruitfully: abolishing the psyche in favor of dependence and heteronomy is possible with the blessing of individuals who are so rugged and individualistic that they become unwilling to consider non-compliance, and who relish the little that they can in their present condition by finding non-direct ways to satisfy their libidinal drives: that is, by idealization and identification, or by giving in to their destructive tendencies.

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<sup>62</sup> Adorno (2019, lv).

<sup>63</sup> Adorno (2019, lxxv).

While control mechanism would have to be superseded in ways that have less to do with individual psychology than with structural change, the subjective focus of psychoanalysis points to the idea of true subject liberation, emancipation from the manipulated magma of the id-superego amalgam, which could be accomplished if only individuals were to give up on their performances. The unstable nature of the latter conceals the very possibility of its renunciation: “Socialized hypnosis breeds within itself the forces which will do away with the spook of regression through remote control, and in the end awaken those who keep their eyes shut though they are no longer asleep”, claimed Adorno at the end of his article<sup>64</sup>. The prospect of giving up on the comforts of a phony slumber is also that of the reappropriation of one’s own psychology.

As such, Adorno’s contribution to Freudian psychology, which can be characterized as its partial reversal, rests on an insightful understanding about the role that psychoanalysis itself is to play in the study of social forces and their consequences – authoritarianism chiefly among them. By broadening the scope of his analysis to the previously overlooked social level, Adorno is able to overcome the limits of psychoanalysis without falling into the trap of sociological reductionism. He is thus able to explain the authoritarian leader’s ability to maintain social dominance over modern individuals by anchoring the psychological instruments and tactics the leader employs to the sociological reasons for these tactics’ success. His study’s relevance, then, concerns not only the proper place and confines of the disciplines of sociology and psychology, but also the emancipatory potential they hold, when appropriately utilized, to overcome current social arrangements, and the dangers lurking behind them.

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<sup>64</sup> Adorno (2020, 153).

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