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Commentary

Understanding Authoritarianism from a Socio-Psychological Perspective

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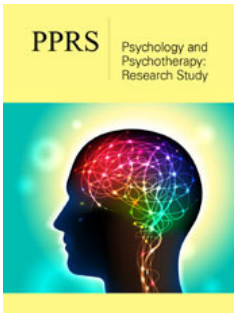

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Introduction

What is the phenomenon to be explained? It is referred to as "authoritarianism," but what does this term entail? If, at the level of constitutional theory, it is assumed that life practice (Life practice) is characterized by the contradiction between the compulsion to decide (Forced to make decisions) and the obligation to justify (Obligation to give reasons) [1], then it can be said that the phenomenon of authoritarianism is grounded in the following: A life practice delegates its inherent capacity to make autonomous decisions-and to bear the associated responsibility, which manifests itself not least in an obligation to justify-to another authority (instance). The decision, as well as the responsibility tied to it, is relinquished to this authority; The life practice defers to it and aligns its actions with its dictates. With this basic consideration, the phenomenon of authoritarianism is, of course, far from fully grasped. However, it already underscores that authoritarianism constitutes a specific social phenomenon-a relationship between multiple actors who, on the one hand, can each be understood individually as constituting a life practice in their own right. On the other hand, because these actors enter into a relationship with one another, a practice emerges simultaneously-namely, a collective practice, and one that is hierarchically structured within itself.

Research on authoritarianism is primarily concerned with understanding phenomena in modern societies that, on the basis of a specific ideology, represent a collective practice-a "movement" characterized by being directed against modernity, specifically against a particular manifestation of modernity: Democracy. How is it, the central research question of authoritarianism studies asks, that individuals in modern societies are willing to surrender their autonomy and delegate decisions to others? How do movements arise that are characterized, on the one hand, by individuals claiming the right to make decisions for others and, on the other hand, by individuals being ready to relinquish their autonomy? It is evident that answering this question allows for-and indeed requires-the integration of different perspectives. First, there is the question of the societal conditions that must be present for authoritarianism to emerge. This question is primarily addressed to sociology, which can provide the model of charismatic action developed by Max Weber to theoretically model the relationship between the "leader" (Führer) and the "following" (Following) [2]. Second, the question arises as to what conditions must exist on the part of the individuals for authoritarianism to occur. This question is directed at psychology, particularly psychoanalysis, which can contribute to the understanding of authoritarianism in a twofold manner: First, drawing from Sigmund Freud's reflections on the psychic structure of the individual, intrapsychic conflicts, and dynamics; Second, drawing from Freud's insights into mass psychology (Massenpsychologie/group psychology). Finally, a third perspective is indispensable, as the question of authoritarianism cannot be answered without considering the political structures within which a hierarchically organized life practice takes shape. Ultimately, authoritarianism is a matter of relations of dominance (Power relations): it emerges on the basis of specific relations of dominance and, in turn, reacts back upon them.

In the following, a proposal for theoretically grounding authoritarianism research will be critically discussed-namely, the proposal recently put forward by the sociologist and social psychologist Markus Brunner. Positioning himself within the tradition of "Critical Theory," Brunner, in his study Social Psychology of Authoritarianism: On its Relevance Today der Authoritarianism research der Frankfurter Schule [3] (Social Psychology of the Authoritarian: On the Contemporary Relevance of the Frankfurt School's Authoritarianism Research), attempts to combine a sociological perspective with a psychoanalytic one. He begins by offering a sophisticated overview of the research conducted by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (Institute for Social Research), discussing the various concepts developed by authors such as Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, and others. He also demonstrates how these concepts have been further developed up to the present day. Crucially, he identifies a fundamental distinction: on the one hand, there is the attempt to investigate personality structures at the individual level that may constitute the prerequisite for individuals' willingness to surrender their own autonomy, to listen to, and to follow a "leader"-that is, investigations at the level of characterology [4]. On the other hand, there are attempts to make the psychology of "masses" (or groups) the object of investigation. This path-the path of mass psychology-had already been taken by Sigmund Freud in his essay Mass psychology und Ich-Analyse [5] (Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego). Brunner's proposal is to pursue this path further, and to ask: What does this proposal look like in concrete terms? How can a mass psychology of the authoritarian be theoretically grounded today? Brunner proposes understanding authoritarianism in its dynamics as the interplay of various aspects-more precisely, of five distinct dimensions: 1. a general crisis situation, 2. individual dispositions, 3. various conflict-resolution strategies, 4. propaganda, and 5. mass dynamics.

According to Brunner, the first prerequisite for the emergence of authoritarianism is the presence of a societal crisis situation. He thinks primarily of economic crises, though these crises can, of course, be of a different "nature." While such crises, when they occur, are objectively given, they by no means lead to authoritarianism as a matter of course. Rather, the decisive factor is how an individual is affected by them, how they perceive a crisis-and this, in turn, depends, on the one hand, on their specific social location and the expectations associated with it ("What do I have to lose in this crisis, and what might I gain?"), and, on the other hand, on the respective psychic disposition of the individual. Fundamentally, societal crises carry the probability that things will change, which can invariably cause insecurity. This insecurity, in turn, can evoke a variety of emotions, both negative and positive (anxiety, anger, and despair, but potentially also hope and euphoria). Naturally, in any societal crisis, an individual has different options for reacting: They can either attempt to find a solution to the crisis independently and autonomously for themselves or for others, or they can react by delegating the resolution of the crisis-that is, leaving it to others whom they follow. At this point, it already becomes clear that it is necessary to take the respective social and political structures into account. The delegation of crisis resolution to another authority by no means has to culminate in authoritarianism, as it is entirely possible for an individual in a crisis to seek solutions for their own life, on the one hand, while on the other hand leaving the resolution of the crisis-as a societal or purely politically solvable matter-to others, particularly within the framework of democratic relations.

The second prerequisite consists in a specific psychic disposition of the individual who is part of the society that has fallen into crisis. This psychic disposition is said to have emerged within the framework of socialization processes, but must be understood, according to Brunner, as something that is not rigid and unchangeable-akin to a fixed "authoritarian character"-but rather as something that can change. Brunner does not rule out the possibility that an "authoritarian character" may be formed, but argues that it is not necessarily already present before a societal crisis occurs; rather, it might only emerge within the situation of the crisis itself. How the psychic disposition of an individual is constituted, and which internal conflict situations are constitutive of their personality structure, is of significance for how the individual reacts in a crisis situation. Here, too, there is of course no automatism; more precisely, reactions are not determined by an individual's psychic disposition. However, certain personality structures favor certain reactions, increasing the probability that the insecurity evoked by a crisis might lead to irrational reactions and to fantasy overlaying reality. It can then happen that the individual becomes passive with regard to their own life and expects the crisis to be resolved solely at the societal or political level. This expectation can then be coupled with the notion that a "leader" is needed for this purpose, whom the individual is ready to obey.

Interestingly, Brunner distinguishes at this point between a "primary" and a "secondary leader." To sharpen this distinction, a recourse to sociology would have been helpful. With Max Weber, the "primary leader" can be understood as someone who wins a following through their person, through the persuasive power of their word-that is, through their charisma. Meanwhile, the "secondary leader" stands for something ideal, for a purely conceptual proposal for a solution (e.g., a religious or political one) [6]. It is actually this ideal element from which the individual promises themselves a solution, and they are willing to follow the "leader" because the latter claims to place themselves in its service-in the service of the practical realization of this purely ideal vision. As a third prerequisite, Brunner adduces "societal images revolving around the in-group and out-group" (116) and adds that narratives are also included here. He conceptualizes these as "proffered resources for both ego-strengths and objects of aggression, as well as for objects of fusion (merger)." These images and narratives have their origin in the psychic development of the individual, in the ego-ideal (Self-ideal) that every individual forms and gradually modifies in its confrontation with reality, as well as in desires that have been defended against (repelled), or in super-ego (Superego) elements perceived as restrictive. In short: the origins lie in intrapsychic conflict situations of the individual and their defense structure (Defensive structure), and their function within the framework of psychic development is to enable or stabilize these.

In the course of the socialization process, these elements are then socially coded; the binary distinction between the self (your own) and the other (the other) is transferred onto collectives that stand in a tension-filled relationship with one another-onto political, religious, or other collectives. Brunner understands this as a mass process, more precisely as a "silent mass process" (silent mass process), "which turns us into members of collectives that have put the same object (...), namely the idea of the nation, gender, religion, etc., 'in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego' (Freud 1921, p. 128) [5]." As a member of the mass, the individual shares a "collective identity" with others, through which the perception of their own biography, the perception of others, and indeed the entire environment is structured (which includes projective and boundary-drawing processes).

Sociologically speaking, what Brunner has in mind here can be viewed in connection with the problem of forming one's own identity, and thus also with the search for an answer to the elementary questions: "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?" [7]. The answers an individual finds to these questions require validation (evidence). To attain this, the individual has the option of acquiring it through communalization (Communalization). In conversations, through reading, and through the use of social media, answers are sought, compared with existing ones, integrated into them, or simply adopted. This can either be conducive to the development of the individual's autonomy or lead to its restriction, or even its loss. Brunner identifies the fourth prerequisite in "authoritarian propaganda." This utilizes already existing images and narratives of the self and the other, or rather their social coding. In times of crisis, it offers a proposed solution that enables the individual to transpose their intrapsychic conflicts onto a collective level, to perceive them at this level, and to act them out (to act out). The real crisis is cast into an apocalyptic perspective, thereby evoking, intensifying, and channeling feelings, and pointing out avenues for their discharge. In what is no longer a "silent" but a "loud mass" (noisy mass) (119), a mutual seduction (seduction) between an agitator and the individuals as members of a mass can then take place.

What is designated as "seduction" from a psychoanalytic point of view can be conceptualized from a sociological perspective as a communicative process in which expectations are articulated, through which the positions of leader and following are generated in the first place and subsequently enter into a dynamic process. These can be analyzed empirically [8] as well as with the help of speech act theory [9]. The final prerequisite that, according to Brunner, must be added is that the dynamics arising in the exchange between an agitator and a mass become regressive. Brunner first describes how the individual finds support as part of a mass, is stabilized by the mass, can identify with it, and can gain a sense of power. The images or narratives of the self and the other-more precisely, their coding as collectives standing in a state of tension with one another-then offer the opportunity to discharge aggression. However, new anxieties can also emerge: the fear of being marginalized and subsequently becoming a victim of aggression oneself, or the fear of being swallowed up by the mass, thus losing oneself within it. Yet even then, membership in the mass offers the opportunity to play out these newly emerged internal conflict situations on a different level-namely, the level of the mass's relationship to its environment. "The dynamics of splitting, projection, and mass formation are thus intensified once again." (121) Furthermore, the desire for fusion with the mass can arise, which then potentially has the consequence that everything perceived as disruptive to the longed-for unity-doubts, ambivalences-is split off (split off) and projected onto others. At that point, the regressive tendency of the mass can become extremely dangerous. It is somewhat surprising that Brunner, whose proposal has been roughly summarized and commented upon here, has not consistently integrated sociological reflections into his proposal, despite being a sociologist (as well). As previously mentioned, Weber's model of charismatic action would be highly suitable for this purpose. One reason why Brunner did not consider this model may be that it was neglected in the past, playing scarcely any role even in the research of the Institute for Social Research. However, if authoritarianism is to be investigated interdisciplinarity, the inclusion of this model can be highly fruitful-as Rainer Lepsius's study titled sociology des National Socialism [10] has convincingly demonstrated. With its help, it would also be possible to bridge the gap to the sociology of religion, which could contribute to a clearer demarcation of different forms of following-formation (Followership building). To this end, a perspective that allows for the consideration of the respective political contexts in which processes of following take place-and thus also authoritarian ones-would additionally be helpful. This would also allow the danger they pose to a democratic order to be highlighted more clearly.

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