

Erich Fromm on “The Authoritarian Character”

While reading a couple of days ago, I ran into a passage that resonated with me and seemed very timely:

*Not only the forces that determine one's own life directly but also those that seem to determine life in general are felt as unchangeable fate. **It is fate that there are wars and that one part of mankind has to be ruled by another. It is fate that the amount of suffering can never be less than it always has been.** Fate may be rationalized philosophically as “natural law” or as “destiny of man,” religiously as the “will of the Lord,” ethically as “duty”– for the authoritarian character it is always a higher power outside of the individual, toward which the individual can do nothing but submit. **The authoritarian character worships the past. What has been, will eternally be. To wish or to work for something that has not yet been before is crime or madness.** (Added emphasis is mine) ~ *Escape From Freedom*, Erich Fromm*

That passage is from a part of the book where he is describing how masochism and sadism are embraced by some as a way to avoid the isolation of freedom*. The authoritarian character, as he calls it, is sado-masochistic. It seeks out ways to suffer to distract itself from the scary aspects of freedom, and it likes to make sure others suffer along with it.

I see the above traits of the authoritarian character, especially the parts I emphasized, in almost everyone who is promoting statism. You can see it in FB posts, in YouTube comments, in comments left on this blog. and anywhere a no-compromise libertarian point is made. I've come to recognize and expect this tack, yet was surprised to see it– and see it explained so clearly– in a book from 1941.

I don't agree with Fromm on everything. I think he made good observations but came to an erroneous conclusion.

He was a supporter of toxic authoritarianism when he obviously– from his own observations– should have known better. Why? Maybe he was just genetically inclined that way. Maybe he wasn't able to rise above his early brainwashing. But who knows?

You can find truth and wisdom in anyone's words if you look, even if they are wrong about everything else.

I realize I apparently lack the brain software that makes some fear the "isolation" of freedom. Even though I usually feel isolated due to all sorts of other things, I don't mistake those things for freedom. That's like blaming your good health for your fear that you might someday get a disease.

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*Fromm uses the word "freedom" (inconsistently, but at least part of the time) for the concept I call "liberty" but that doesn't alter the truth of these words.