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On the Reissue of The Authoritarian Personality

[Review of: T.W. Adorno, E. Frenkel-Brunswik, D.J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford (2019) The Authoritarian Personality]

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DOI
10.21827/krisis.41.1.37213

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Krisis : Journal for contemporary philosophy

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Niklas, S. (2021). On the Reissue of *The Authoritarian Personality*: [Review of: T.W. Adorno, E. Frenkel-Brunswik, D.J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford (2019) The Authoritarian Personality] . *Krisis : Journal for contemporary philosophy*, *41*(1), 202-209. https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.41.1.37213

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Download date:10 Oct 2026

Krisis JOURNAL for contemporary philosophy

Krisis 2021, issue 1

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Stefan Niklas

Krisis 41 (1): 202-209.

Review of Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson & R. Nevitt Sanford in collaboration with Betty Aron, Maria Hertz Levinson, and William Morrow (2019) *The Authoritarian Personality*. With an Introduction by Peter E. Gordon. London/New York: Verso.

Keywords

Critical Theory, Authoritarianism, Antisemitism, Frankfurt School, Theodor W. Adorno

DOI

10.21827/krisis.41.1.37213

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On the Reissue of *The Authoritarian Personality*

Stefan Niklas

Every new edition of a classic – one that at some point is no longer read but only obligatorily referred to – must present something 'new' about it, to prove the book is still relevant (which is usually emphasized as 'more-than-ever'). In the case of *The Authoritarian Personality*, which has now been re-published by Verso, the timeliness of the book might almost go without saying: common intuition, supported by quite some evidence, tells us that we are experiencing a new rise of authoritarianism across the globe. Yet, the new edition of this voluminous book, originally published in 1950, recommends and legitimizes itself by including not only an introduction by Peter E. Gordon, who certainly belongs to the leading Adorno/Frankfurt School scholars these days, but also a hitherto unpublished text by Adorno himself. The latter is simply called "Remarks on *The Authoritarian Personality*" and is the actual 'sensation' of this new edition.

Besides its timeliness in terms of the political situation, the re-release of *The Authoritarian Personality* also means drawing attention to an important but rather neglected document of the history of the Institute for Social Research. While it is mostly the more essayistic and speculative texts by Adorno (either with Horkheimer or as a stand-alone author) that are associated with this phase of the Frankfurt School, collaborative empirical research was a central preoccupation of the Institute from its very beginning in the 1920s, and a cornerstone of the program of Critical Theory. Whereas the reception of the first generation of the Frankfurt School is often focused on Adorno as its central figure, he was but one (presumably difficult) member among others in this Berkeley-based project – even though he gave shape to the theory design of the study in a decisive way. It is therefore most welcome that Gordon, in his introduction, briefly highlights the biographical backgrounds of the other contributors to this study who are also part of the history of what is called the Frankfurt School: Else Frenkel-Brunswik, a psychologist from Vienna who fled the Nazis as did most of the Institute's members; Daniel J. Levinson, a psychologist at Berkeley; and R. Nevitt Sanford, professor of psychology at Berkeley who would later become a vocal opponent of McCarthyism.

Gordon's very helpful introduction rightly emphasizes the *anthropological* character of this study in political psychology. That it is anthropological means that this collaborative research project was concerned with deep-lying structures of the psyche that arise under the conditions of modern society, and which dispose individuals to authoritarianism and its political expression: fascism. To be disposed to such attitudes, however, does not mean to subscribe to a political ideology; rather, such psychological dispositions are, as Gordon says, *pre*-political (cf. xxiii, xxx). Thus, the study asks how receptive a given individual is to an ideology that speaks to such pre-political dispositions, and which are indicated as follows: (1) conventionalism; (2) submissiveness; (3) aggression; (4) anti-intraceptivity (i.e. the antipathy towards tender-minded feelings, self-reflection as well as what today is called 'mindfulness'); (5) superstition and stereotypy; (6) toughness; (7) destructiveness and cynicism; (8) projectivity; and (9) occupation with sexual "goings-on" (cf. 228, where the different indicators are broadly explained as to their more detailed meanings; see also Gordon's summary, xxix). These nine indicators are the ones of which the famous 'F-scale' is compiled (wherein 'F' means, of course, Fascism). Though not the only scale which the study introduces for measuring authoritarian character traits – there are also the AS-scale (Anti-Semitism), the E-scale (Ethnocentrism), and the PEC-scale (Political-Economic Conservatism) – it marks the culmination of all the scales used, and it is indeed the study's most original contribution. The aim is to identify characters that are potentially fascistic according to the indicators of the F-scale. And yet the point is not to single out such individuals, but rather to understand the constellations of character traits which potentially make an individual become a fascist, if the respective dispositions are politically stimulated; and if it should be possible to identify the type of a potentially fascist character, then it should also be possible to find the kind of constellation of character traits that is most likely to *resist* fascism. This indeed is the very hope which drives this empirical inquiry into the authoritarian personality: finding the residues for resisting fascism within the same deep-lying structures of modern society which make fascism possible.

Due to its psychological perspective on a matter that concerns modern society as a whole, the study of the *Authoritarian Personality* must rely on the techniques of constructing types and paradigmatic exemplars. Two cases called "Mack" and "Larry" represent the respective poles of the continuum between a pathological personality very prone to becoming a fascistic

individual (Mack), and one being potentially resistant to fascism (Larry). But even Larry is far from being an outspoken anti-fascist, as especially the detailed comparison written by Nevitt Sanford shows (chapter XX.). While his portrait serves as a depiction of more hopeful possibilities, it does so within the deep-lying structures of the authoritarian personality. Larry, in other words, represents the residue which allows for any hope at all, but not the opposition to a society shaped by authoritarianism. Whereas Gordon emphasizes the optimistic spirit of the collaborative research project (cf. xxxii), one might as well highlight how thin (not to say desperate) this hope is after all, and that 'optimism' might be too big a word to describe it.

However, looking for such psychological resources to resist fascism from within is what *The Authoritarian Personality* is designed to do. It thereby demonstrates a dialectical understanding which continues the project of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*[1] – despite the striking differences between a book of *Philosophical Fragments*, and a rigorous study in which, to use Gordon's words, the "remarkable abundance and detail of empirical research […] was matched by the theoretical sophistication of its interpretive chapters" (xxxi). But the *Dialectic* already recognized the necessity of empirical research as well as the means of conceptual classification – as long as classification is not confused with knowledge itself (cf. DoE, 182). This acknowledgement of conceptual classification appears in the seemingly least systematic part of the *Dialectic*, namely the "Notes and Sketches", which its authors have themselves identified as mostly relating to "dialectical anthropology" (DoE, xix) as the study of the structures that condition human life within modern society. The way the empirical project of the *Authoritarian Personality* relates to the program set out in the *Dialectic* is the underlying topic of Adorno's "Remarks", which are now published for the first time in this reissue of the *The Authoritarian Personality*.[2]

The very fact that Adorno felt the urge to write some further remarks on the purpose and design of the study, as well as the fact that these remarks did not get published, confirm the not altogether uncomplicated nature of Adorno's contribution to it. Though he is quick to assure the intention behind some of the crucial choices the study makes, the first section of the "Remarks" is mostly about what is lacking and limiting in it. This concerns, first of all, the focus on the subjective (psychic) aspects which Adorno seeks to delimit by emphasizing that it is actually "the 'objective spirit' of today's American society" (xlii) which is supposed to be measured

indirectly in these subjective traits: "We are convinced 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" (xlii). And he goes on: "we regard the analysis of objective social forces which engender prejudice as the most pressing issue in contemporary research into anti-minority bias" (xlii). Yet the "we" in this quote might express the understanding of the inner circle of "Frankfurters" around Horkheimer rather than the collaborating group of researchers conducting the study which, after all, remains very much within the subjective focus. Adorno, whose "Remarks" at times oscillate between justification and rectification, explains this rather cumbersomely with regard to the psychoanalytic perspective which the authors took "too seriously to play around with it" (xlvi), whereas playing around would mean to straight-forwardly sociologize it. To nevertheless secure the sociological interests of a study that uses mostly psychological categories, so Adorno explains, the ideas of a "prejudiced character" or a "fascist character" must be shown to be quantitatively relevant: "our concept of the fascist character can become productive only if and insofar as we succeed in demonstrating that it is truly a 'type', that the traits, attitudes and opinions which we regard as being linked together by deep necessity, actually obey this necessity" (xlvii). It might come as a surprise that Adorno, who was highly critical of a quantifying scientific practice which orders everything according to preconceived types (in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* this is called the "principle of immanence"), now seems to advocate precisely that. And Adorno indeed needs to explain this tension – which he already tries in the published chapter on "Types and Syndromes" (chapter XIX.). His overall point is that the methodical use of types only makes explicit the single option left for individuals in mass society, namely, to act and (unconsciously) conceive of themselves according to the types which they have in fact turned into. In other words, scientific description does not impose social types as abstract classifications, but rather expresses the actual reification and self-alienation of subjects under the conditions of modern society itself.

This assertion, however, leaves Adorno and his colleagues with the problem of how to determine the correct types, the ones people have actually become. *The Authoritarian Personality* cannot fully resolve this problem, but it responds to it – at least as far as Adorno is concerned – by way of the qualitative interpretation of the quantitative material. This is to say that the social types are supposed to not only be used as instruments, but to be shown in – and ideally

be gained from – the description of the stories and statements of test persons like "Larry" and "Mack". These paradigmatic subjects are conceived as not just heuristically representing, but manifestly displaying the dispositional syndromes which are grasped in terms of scoring high or low on the F-scale. Yet the identification of epistemic types with their social substrate remains a problem of methodological justification due to the difficulties in proving (or falsifying) the existence of a proclaimed type. As a consequence, the subjective focus of the *Authoritarian Personality* is bound to the continued demonstration of such types and syndromes in particular cases. However, from Adorno's point of view this proves to be precisely an advantage of the psychological perspective, and a reason for keeping the inquiry "within the limits of specialization" (lii): As is well known, Adorno trusted that truth can only be revealed in the particular, and accordingly that particular cases can say more about the totality of society than abstraction ever could.

However, in what might be called a typical *Adorno-move*, he manages at the same time to defend the methodical restrictions of the psychological perspective, and to nevertheless question the very possibility of psychological research in the future; for if it is the case that true individuality has been corrupted and replaced by social types and tickets, then "psychology may begin to become obsolescent inasmuch as individual actions can no longer be explained adequately in terms of the individual's own psychological household" (lxiii). Psychology, in this sense, would bring about its own abolition since it revealed the disappearance of the proper object of its inquiry: individual souls. One can imagine how such a claim must have raised more than one eyebrow among the collaborators of a study in political psychology and those who commissioned it – which makes it not hard to guess why Adorno's "Remarks" did not make it into the original publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*.

The "Remarks" also reconfirm the great extent to which the theoretical design of *The Authoritarian Personality* is built on the "Elements of Anti-Semitism" (i.e. the fifth chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). This concerns not only the psychoanalytic backdrop against which concepts are developed, but especially the idea of 'ticket mentality' which is very much present throughout the whole study and expressly so in Adorno's chapter on "Politics and Economics in the Interview Material" (chapter XVII). Furthermore, the methodological attitudes which Adorno describes towards economic explanations of antisemitism (l-liii), as well

as the religious thesis about its origin (lvi-lviii), directly flow from the respective theses of the "Elements". There, as here, the economic and religious perspectives are both considered as important but not exhaustive aspects which each explain only a part of the overall syndrome of antisemitism. Moreover, Adorno highlights the study's attitude towards the common sociological approach which, according to Adorno, remains within the realm of general concepts, and searches for social factors of antisemitism instead of acknowledging that the socio-economic system as such is "a self-contradictory totality" whose "intrinsically antagonistic character is the very reason for irrational outlets: discrimination" (lv). A completely new and somewhat surprising facet is added by Adorno's brief discussion of Sartre's existentialist way of explaining antisemitism (lviii-lxi). There is probably no other text by Adorno which allows itself to show such a degree of agreement with Sartre, or the existentialist perspective in general, as this one does. Adorno – speaking vicariously, it seems, for the research group as well as for the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – highlights Sartre's focus on the emotional character of antisemitism and his observation that the antisemite's emphasis is on destruction, since what this personality fears is the discovery "that the world is badly made" (Adorno quoting Sartre, lix). And yet, despite these shared insights, Adorno parts with the existentialist view as regards its insistence on individual decision ("the main tenet of this philosophy", lix) in explaining antisemitism. One might say that Adorno tries to show how Sartre comes to the right conclusions from a wrong premise.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Adorno, while clarifying the relation of psychological theory towards social conditions, takes a brief look at studies about anti-black racism (though he does not refer to it in this way). He thus insinuates that antisemitism and anti-black racism are parallel cases of minority discrimination. This happens only in passing, but the passage (lxi) might nevertheless offer material for extending the Institute's project of investigating structural antisemitism towards a theory and empirical study of structural racism in general – a perspective which is dearly missed in the classics of the Frankfurt School.[3] For as much as there is something specific in antisemitism that distinguishes it from what is specific in anti-black racism, and both from what is specific in other 'branches' of racism, there is also something common, and thus general, in racism which makes it *structural*.

While Adorno's self-critical "Remarks" on the project of *The Authoritarian Personality* did not make it into the original publication of 1951, they are nonetheless still utterly useful today as we look back on this study for finding out what it can mean for an understanding of the global psycho-political situation of our times. The inclusion of the "Remarks" alone is a sufficient justification for publishing this new edition. They highlight the point that a study like *The Authoritarian Personality* is neither about understanding the psychic character of any authoritarian leader (as if denouncing idiosyncratic baby-clown issues would bring about any kind of change), nor about the character of the typical fascist who can easily be identified as such. Rather, it is about the constellations of concrete manifestations of the abstract conditions of the possibility of authoritarianism; and thus, about the empirical grounding of the speculations concerning the psychical deep-structures of modern society. To measure these psychic manifestations means to sound out the conscious or unconscious willingness of a social group (rather than a single person) to support or tolerate – as well as to resist – a movement, a political party, or a specific leader whose program includes antisemitism, prejudice against minorities, and racism. To get a hold on the concrete manifestations of these abstract conditions – one might say: their thickening into actuality – the kind of empirical work is needed which Adorno calls "cultural anthropology" (xlix), and which, I take it, complements the more speculative "dialectical anthropology" of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Whether or not the methods used in *The Authoritarian Personality* are adequate has been debated ever since it came out. One need not even defend the specific approaches it took, the way the researchers designed and executed samples, questionnaires, interviews and interpretations, or the overall assumptions from psychoanalysis, to understand that this extraordinary research project has set the stage within the social sciences for asking the right questions about what makes dehumanizing politics possible.

Notes

1] Horkheimer and Adorno 2002. Quoted as DoE.
2] For further discussion of Adorno's 'Remarks' see Gordon 2018 and Ziege 2019.
3] See Farr 2018.

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Biography

Stefan Niklas is Assistant Professor in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam where he is part of the Critical Cultural Theory group. His work focusses on aesthetics and the critical philosophy of culture.