

The Appeal of the Fascist Leader

by

Henry J. Els

A thesis accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in German

Thesis Committee:

Jeffrey Librett, Chair

Miriam Chorley-Schulz, Member

Kenneth Calhoon, Member

University of Oregon

Summer, 2025

© 2025 Henry J. Els

THESIS ABSTRACT

Henry J. Els

Master of Arts in German

Title: The Appeal of the Fascist Leader

How the fascist Leader and fascist propaganda seek to circumvent rationality through psychological manipulation and emotional training to create, cultivate, & maintain a following.

Important Disclaimer:

The following discussion seeks to analyze how fascism and the fascist demagogue create an appeal. Although it will be commenting frequently on the psychological mechanisms used to manipulate individuals and whole groups, these tactics of manipulation do not in any way alleviate the responsibility of individuals who choose to tolerate or support such a movement. In the case of Hitler and Germany especially, many Germans profited greatly and far too willingly from Nazi crimes. Too often has it been claimed that many of those who supported Hitler were in some way ‘tricked’ or that they might otherwise be relieved of responsibility for the crimes associated with the regime. This defense is a dangerous one, as it relegates responsibility solely to those at the top of the fascist hierarchy. It suggests that individuals who supported or even tolerated Nazi rule were somehow lacking agency. While the elite certainly warrant blame for the crimes they designed and advocated for, any discussion of this nature must take into account the inherent responsibility of others in enabling and executing these crimes. The crimes of fascism cannot be laid solely at the feet of any one individual (the Leader) or any one group of individuals (the party elite.) Society as a whole—meaning every individual—bears responsibility for resisting fascism and the crimes it seeks to perpetrate. This discussion is intended to shed light on what it is about fascism that so many people seem drawn to, but it is not a defense of those who fall for it. If anything, it is intended as a warning against the dangers of pleading ignorance in the face of calamity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Intro	6
I. Creating Masses	8
II. Narcissism & Love	18
III. Hierarchy	25
Part 1: he must be ‘on top’.....	26
Part 2: Why him specifically?.....	30
IV. Ideology	33
V. Making Subjects	38
Conclusion	44
Bibliography	46

Intro

Despite the self-serving and highly destructive nature of fascism, which often works to the detriment of societies in which it takes hold, fascist demagogues like Adolf Hitler have had repeated success dominating entire societies, often with enthusiastic support from many. What is it about a demagogue such as Hitler—who makes no secrets of his dangerous and destructive intentions—that convinces millions of people to at least tolerate, if not outright support and aid his agenda to their own detriment? Analyzing the central role of the Leader figure is key to understanding the nature of this appeal to understand how otherwise rational societies can be manipulated into following an extremist ideology headed by a self-serving narcissist. The following will seek to explore the appeal of the fascist Leader, guided (among others) by the psychoanalytic framework set forward by Theodor W. Adorno's 1951 essay titled "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda."

Adorno describes the ways in which fascist propaganda (and fascism in general) manipulates whole societies. This manipulation is necessary for the movement to have any appeal at all, as any 'rational' evaluation on the part of a potential follower would likely see the demagogue for what he is—a self-serving narcissist driven by hate and a delusional interpretation of reality. They would likely recognize that this ideology is rooted firmly in an oversimplified worldview dominated by a belief in eternal conflict and violence that will inevitably make victims of its own following as much as its professed enemies. It therefore relies on circumventing rationality through the creation and repetition of false narratives that appeal to basic aspects of psychology—especially feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration—to gain a popular following. Though policy is not entirely absent from a fascist movement, its support is not drawn from the persuasiveness of *how* it will do things. It's drawn from *what* it promises to

do. Namely, its promise of action. What kind of action is of secondary concern. It's *what* fascism promises to do, not *how* it promises to do it.

Additional disclaimer:

Throughout this paper, the 'fascist Leader' will frequently be referred to using masculine pronouns (he/him/his). This is because the following discussion deals with the specific example of a male figure—Adolf Hitler. It should not be assumed that the 'fascist Leader' must necessarily be a male or that fascist tendencies must necessarily be unique to any one particular identity.

I. Creating Masses

The fascist Leader's appeal must first and foremost be separated from the expectation of rationality, for there will be little of that to be found here. Fascist propaganda is, as Adorno points out, "...rarely concerned with concrete and tangible political issues."¹ It is highly repetitive and its promises are left dealing in generalities. Even in their beginnings, Hannah Arendt notes; "...the Nazis were prudent enough never to use slogans which, like democracy, republic, dictatorship, or monarchy, indicated a specific form of government."² The purpose of fascist propaganda is not to detail actual, rationally sensible arguments. Its statements are typically directed *ad hominem*—meant as an attack of some kind, to elicit an emotional response. The overwhelming majority of fascist agitators' statements are, Adorno continues, "...obviously based on psychological calculations rather than the rational statement of rational aims."³ His essay describes the theories posited by Freud, discussing how said agitation appeals to psychological factors. Precisely this dynamic is what we shall now seek to examine further. For if the intent is not to 'gain followers through the rational statement of rational aims,' what is the intent? How is it that a fascist demagogue like Hitler can amass such a significant following, and how can he do so despite having a platform that lacks any rational appeal?

Adorno and Freud have provided us with a framework with which to psychoanalyze the propaganda of the fascist Leader and with which we might better understand how a society can find itself in the clutches of a demagogue. Although the following will be dealing primarily with the example of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement in Germany, its observations can be applied

¹ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 118.

² Arendt, "*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*" 357.

³ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 118.

to other contexts where fascist demagogues are concerned. This view is supported by Adorno's own position on the matter. "The similarity of the utterances of various agitators... is so great that it suffices in principle to analyze the statements of one of them in order to know them all."⁴ He surmises that the strategies employed by fascist demagogues and their propaganda are consistent through different examples. Their approach is "...truly systematical and follows a rigidly set pattern of clear-cut 'devices.'"⁵ These 'devices,' consistent throughout different contexts and particularly present in the case of Hitler and Nazi Germany, will be the focus of the following discussion.

"Hitler responds to the vibrations of the human heart with the sensitivity of a seismograph ... proclaiming the most secret desires, the least admissible instincts ... His words go like an arrow to their target, he touches every private wound in the raw, liberates the mass unconscious ... telling it what it most wants to hear."⁶

– Otto Strasser commenting on Hitler's speeches

One fundamental assumption made by Adorno (which we shall likewise assume) is that it is the goal of the agitator to do exactly that—agitate. To purposefully promote an atmosphere of 'irrational emotional aggressiveness.'⁷ Fascist propaganda needn't be "...concerned with tangible political issues"⁸ to be effective. Its effectiveness is measured by how successfully it can agitate and, through mass agitation, instigate what is commonly known as the 'psychology of the

⁴ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 119.

⁵ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 119.

⁶ Ben-Ghiat, "*Strongmen.*" 103-104.

⁷ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 119.

⁸ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 118.

masses’—since Gustave Le Bon’s famous 1895 book of the same name. That is all to say, fascist propaganda does not need to be greatly concerned with rationality, because its goal is not to persuade individuals with reason. Its goal is to turn individuals into a so-called *mass* by appealing not to their rationality, but to something deeper, something more unconscious.

Where Le Bon laid much groundwork for the psychoanalysis of the mass mind, later authors like Sigmund Freud have done much to expand on it. His book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, published as early as 1921, constitutes, in Adorno’s summation, “...a dynamic interpretation of Le Bon’s description of the mass mind...”⁹ Dynamic in the sense that it seeks to apply Le Bon’s description of the mass mind and, importantly for our discussion, addresses the question of how *masses* come to be in the first place. It is, after all, the primary goal of the fascist Leader to turn individuals into a *mass*. But how does he accomplish this? What turns individuals into a *mass*?

On this matter, there have been a multitude of theories proposed. We shall, like Freud, firstly reject the notion that the creation of modern *masses* can be explained by biology or by ‘comparison with biological phenomena.’ The notion that the creation of a *mass* in a modern, post-industrial society can be sufficiently explained by magic words, hypnotism, or some ‘prehistoric or primitive tendencies’ ingrained in humans *will not* suffice as an explanation for the appeal of modern fascism. Such an assumption would presume a certain ‘primitive’ or ‘less capable’ quality about the individuals in question, but it would be a mistake to assume that individuals in such a *mass* are primitive, or lesser for it. “...those who become submerged in masses are not primitive men but display primitive attitudes contradictory to their *normal*

⁹ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 120.

rational behavior.”¹⁰ It is not primal desire that is responsible for modern fascism, as Freud and Adorno observe.

Freud does not believe that humans are simply ‘hard-wired’ to want to submit to authority out of some primordial instinct. Even if it were the case that such a prehistoric inclination towards submission did exist, it would not explain why fascism can have such an appeal in a modern society of *rational* individuals. That is an important distinction to make—that individuals can be considered ‘rational’ and yet still fall victim to fascist propaganda. We, like Freud, are looking to “...find out which *psychological* forces result in the transformation of individuals into a mass.”¹¹ [italics added] As such, we shall proceed under the assumption that a modern society consists primarily of individuals who can, generally speaking, be considered ‘rational.’

So how is it, then, that a modern *mass* is formed? Freud posits that to turn individuals into a *mass*, there must be some force powerful enough to unite them and hold them together. In the case of a fascist mass, this is particularly relevant, as there must be some uniting forces capable of circumventing their otherwise rational nature. He refers to these uniting forces as a *bond*. “If the individuals in the group are combined into a unity, there must surely be something to unite them, and this bond might be precisely the thing that is characteristic of a group.”¹² It is a shared *bond* between individuals that creates and maintains a *mass*, and it is the fascist Leader who synthetically creates this *bond* to build a following subordinate to himself.

To create the *bond*, the Leader relies on propaganda. This propaganda is highly repetitive and—reflective of the inherently artificial nature of the *bond*—intended to convince its subjects

¹⁰ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 122.

¹¹ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 121.

¹² Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 121.

of fictions. “At its core, propaganda is a set of communication strategies designed to sow confusion and uncertainty, discourage critical thinking, and persuade people that reality is what the leader says it is.”¹³ Propaganda is the means by which the Leader is able to manufacture his fictions, and, through endless repetition, distort the masses conception of any rational reality other than the one he desires for them to believe.

Having recognized that the *bond* is instrumental in a fascist Leader’s appeal, the nature of this *bond* now becomes of particular interest to our discussion. Answering the question of what creates this *bond* is, as Adorno describes, “...tantamount to an exposition of the fundamental issue of fascist manipulation.”¹⁴ By this he means that understanding the nature of the *bond* sheds light on the nature of manipulation and deceit inherent in fascist propaganda. After all, how can the fascist demagogue create the *bond* necessary to get millions of rational people to follow him against their own interests? In short, by manufacturing it. The *bond* is a lie.

It is this inherently artificial quality of the *bond* to which Adorno refers when speaking of ‘the fundamental issue of fascist manipulation.’ Since the individuals in question are regarded as ‘rational,’ they must be convinced by this *bond* to act against their own self-interest. “For the fascist demagogue, who has to win the support of millions of people for aims largely incompatible with their own rational self-interest, can do so only by artificially creating the *bond* Freud is looking for.”¹⁵ The *bond* is entirely fictional—manufactured through deceit and promoted by the Leader and his propaganda to serve his own ends. It must be artificially created, because its entire purpose is to convince otherwise rational individuals to forgo ‘sensitivity’ and act *against* their own ‘rational’ self-interest. Only by creating a *bond* that appeals to other aspects

¹³ Ben-Ghiat, “*Strongmen*.” 93.

¹⁴ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*.” 121.

¹⁵ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*.” 121.

of an individual's psychology can the fascist demagogue hope to accrue a following actually willing to accept the false reality sold to them and act against their own best interests to serve him.

How is it, though, that the fascist Leader—who makes no secrets of his extreme intentions—is able to circumvent the rationality of so many individuals? How can he present himself to them as a somehow positive force? Surely such individuals are not unaware of what the Leader's professed aims entail. Indeed, they are typically quite aware, as Hannah Arendt notes. "The continuous danger of war inherent in fascism spells destruction and the masses are at least preconsciously aware of it."¹⁶ Yet the Leader can still amass such a large and passionate following despite this. Do these individuals possess some specific psychological dispositions that make them overlook this inherent danger or that make them 'naturally' inclined towards fascism? That is to say, in the context of Hitler, is there something about Germans specifically having a psychological disposition that makes them inclined towards following a demagogue?

If we continue to follow the approach of Freud, Adorno, and others, no. Psychological dispositions are *not* the cause of fascism. Rather, as Adorno describes it, "...fascism defines a psychological area which can be successfully exploited by the forces which promote it for entirely nonpsychological reasons of self-interest."¹⁷ It is not a matter of any specific disposition that gives fascism its appeal, nor is it a phenomenon unique to any one national, ethnic, cultural, or any other identity. The fascist Leader exploits aspects of basic psychology to create and manipulate masses to his own ends. Although the strategies employed will be tailored to fit its audience (in the case of Hitler, the audience being Germans), the process hinges not upon their

¹⁶ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 134.

¹⁷ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 135.

national identity but upon the psychological mechanics of group dynamics. “The psychology of the masses has been taken over by their leaders and transformed into a means for their domination.”¹⁸ Self-interest and the experience of pleasure—especially those associated with being part of a group—are a focus of fascism’s approach.

Surrendering to a group can, for many individuals, be a very affirming and pleasurable experience. Even to the point that the potential pleasure of being publicly affirmed in one’s choices and one’s identity can “...override or derail a rational assessment of the available options.”¹⁹ The experience of pleasure and of the ‘pleasure principle,’ as Freud describes it, is a defining characteristic of the *bond*. Pleasure is an essential part of creating the *bond* the Leader needs. The experience of joining his *mass* must be tailored to evoke a pleasurable enough experience in the individual to help overcome their rationality. Freud believes that the *bond* “...which integrates individuals into a mass...” is of a “libidinal nature.”²⁰ Which is to say, it appeals to the less conscious urges of individuals—urges that make it pleasurable to become part of a larger group. Other, earlier psychologists have “...hit upon this aspect of mass psychology.”²¹ As Adorno observes. He cites psychologist William McDougall’s opinion that “...it is a pleasurable experience...” for an individual to surrender themselves to the group and to “...lose the sense of the limits of their individuality.”²² McDougall’s commentary is in line with Freud, who goes beyond these observations and explains the coherence of masses altogether “...in terms of the pleasure principle, that is to say, the actual or vicarious gratifications individuals obtain from surrendering to a mass.”²³ But what is pleasurable about surrendering to

¹⁸ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 135.

¹⁹ (Stanford Encyclopedia 3.1 – end of 4th paragraph)

²⁰ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 121.

²¹ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 121.

²² Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 122.

²³ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 122.

a mass such as this? What is pleasurable about submitting oneself to the will of a madman like Hitler with clearly violent intent?

For one thing, feelings of pleasure in submitting to the Leader should not be mistaken for *love* of the Leader. It is not necessarily love, but what Erich Fromm would describe as a ‘sado-masochistic attachment.’²⁴ Particularly powerful for individuals who experience significant feelings of aloneness and insignificance. They might try to overcome these feelings by getting rid of their self—as a psychological, not as a physiological entity—to relieve themselves of this burden by submitting to a Leader who they see as powerful.²⁵ These masochistic strivings have, as Fromm writes, one aim: “*to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself; in other words, to get rid of the burden of freedom.*” This aim is obvious in those masochistic strivings in which the individual seeks to submit to a person or power which he feels as being overwhelmingly strong.”²⁶ Such feelings are particularly powerful when applied to a community, where they can be identified with similar feelings in others. “If the individual finds cultural patterns that satisfy these masochistic strivings (like the submission under the “leader” in Fascist ideology), he gains some security by finding himself united with millions of others who share these feelings.”²⁷ Surrendering to the Leader offers the pleasure that comes with a clear sense of identity and the feeling of belonging. Followers can identify themselves in relation to the Leader and, by extension, to the community he represents (shared *bond*.)

But it also offers the comfort that comes with having answers—a way of making sense of the world. Fascist ideology offers an oversimplified interpretation of the world largely devoid of nuances. It provides its following with a worldview characterized by extremities that it crafts and

²⁴ Fromm, “*Escape From Freedom.*” 115.

²⁵ Fromm, “*Escape From Freedom.*” 153.

²⁶ Fromm, “*Escape From Freedom.*” 151.

²⁷ Fromm, “*Escape From Freedom.*” 152.

repeats to no end through propaganda. It is a worldview spun around an ‘us vs. them’ narrative. If you’re not with ‘us,’ you’re with ‘them.’ Hannah Arendt comments on the effect of this oversimplified outlook on the world. “From the viewpoint of an organization which functions according to the principle that whoever is not included is excluded, *whoever is not with me is against me*, the world at large loses all the nuances, differentiations, and pluralistic aspects which had in any event become confusing and unbearable to the masses who had lost their place and their orientation in it.”²⁸ [italics added] Since the Leader is characterized through repetitive propaganda as the representative of the whole movement, he effectively is the ‘us.’ So you are either with ‘us’ (the Leader or with ‘them’ (the enemy.) If Hitler *is* the nation, then loyalty to him and loyalty to the nation can more easily be equated as one and the same. It follows, then, that disloyalty to Hitler is perceived as a betrayal of not just him, but the nation as well.

For an opportunistic demagogue like Hitler, however, who is driven by self-interest and whose appeal rests upon the idea of an ‘us vs. them’ conflict, there is little to prevent the already vague definitions of ‘friend’ vs. ‘foe’ from changing to better suit his own needs. Not belonging to the defined ‘in-group’ may be enough to have one deemed an enemy. “whosoever is not expressly included is excluded.”²⁹ Arendt comments on Hitler’s stating as early as 1922 that “...it is not necessary to be an enemy of the Jew to drag you one day...to the scaffold...it is quite enough...not to be a Jew: that will secure the scaffold for you.” What Hitler actually meant by this, per Arendt, was, “One day, it will not be necessary to be an enemy of ours to be dragged to the scaffold...”³⁰ For an ideology whose worldview is one shaped by conflict and violence, devoid of nuance, there can exist only the extremes of ‘friend’ and ‘foe.’ Though due to the

²⁸ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 380-81.

²⁹ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 377.

³⁰ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 377.

nature of fascism, 'friend' mostly implies 'not currently an enemy' more than it does any kinship or obligation that might at some point become inconvenient and reversed to better suit the purposes of the Leader or the movement.

II. Narcissism & Love

“Goebbels built Hitler’s personality cult, presenting him as the embodiment of Germany’s national destiny. Nazi art often depicted him as a superman or a figure touched by divine benediction, but the Führer was approachable enough to those who asked him to be their children’s godfather and sent him herbal teas or honey if he sounded hoarse.”³¹

Narcissism is a defining characteristic of the fascist Leader and his appeal. He can reliably be characterized as an opportunistic narcissist. These qualities are necessary, as his appeal relies upon his following narcissistically self-identifying with him. They must view him as strong but not out of touch. He must be both King Kong and the suburban barber, as Adorno describes. That is to say, he must be envied, admired, and respected, but simultaneously, he must feel relatable and representative of the ‘common people.’ Though before discussing the role of narcissism as it pertains to the fascist Leader, the meaning of the term must first be clarified.

While the term ‘narcissist’ is most typically understood as referring to a person who loves only themselves, there is a slight, yet significant, amendment to be made to this understanding of the term, especially for the sake of our discussion. Erich Fromm, on the common understanding of narcissism, writes that “While on the surface it seems that these persons (narcissists) are very much in love with themselves, they actually are not fond of themselves, and their narcissism—like selfishness— is an overcompensation for the basic lack of self-love...He loves neither others nor himself.”³² This distinction—that a narcissist loves neither themselves nor others—

³¹ Ben-Ghiat, “*Strongmen*.” 102.

³² Fromm, “*Escape From Freedom*.” 116.

accurately reflects the nature of narcissism present in fascism and the nature of the Leader as a supremely narcissistic individual. It also helps to understand the behavior of the Leader and his followers, on whom he can seemingly turn at any time to suit his own needs. How, then, are *masses* able to feel such attachment and reverence for a demagogue who lacks the ability to love them and who is driven purely by his own self-interest?

Freud characterizes the libidinal *bond* between members of *masses* and the Leader as a so-called ‘love-relationship.’ So do followers ‘love’ the fascist demagogue? In a way, but on a more nuanced level. For the Leader needs to be ‘loved’ to be followed, but not out of any romantic or genuine love. The followers must love their perceived *image* of the Leader. As mentioned previously, this ‘love’ is more akin to a sado-masochistic attachment to a fictionalized idea of the Leader than it is any love of his actual person. But ‘love’ as a concept is absent from fascism. Naturally, this is not to suggest that the appeal of the fascist leader is of an explicitly sexual nature; it isn’t. Hitler’s popularity most certainly was not a product of his personal sexual appeal. No, the libidinal *bond* of which Freud speaks is not of an uninhibited sexual nature. It is, in fact, hidden from the conscious mind almost entirely.

It is essential, writes Freud, that the ‘love relationship’ remain unconscious—hidden by the screen of ‘suggestion.’³³ References to ‘love’ by the fascist leader and his propaganda are present but appear only in certain contexts. When ‘love’ is referenced openly by the fascist Leader and his propaganda, it is relegated to abstract notions—say, love of the nation—and is, as Adorno observes, “...seldom mentioned without the epithet of “fanatical” through which even this love obtained a ring of hostility and aggressiveness against those not encompassed by it.”³⁴ It’s not that love, as a concept, is absent from fascism. Rather, it is incorporated very

³³ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 123.

³⁴ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 123.

intentionally to best serve its own needs, just so long as it is kept somewhat ‘hidden.’ Love, in fascism, serves a critical purpose. It is present (albeit typically masked through suggestion) and even utilized, just so long as it still ultimately serves the purposes of the Leader. “It is one of the basic tenets of fascist leadership to keep primary libidinal energy on an unconscious level so as to divert its manifestations in a way suitable to political ends.”³⁵

This ‘love’ that the Leader cultivates among his following is born of utility. It is not benevolent or caring. It is inherently authoritative and domineering. Despite what his propaganda might have often tried to suggest, Hitler had no interest in loving or caring for his following, as though he were some benevolent paternal figure. It was not that kind of love relationship. He wanted to dominate. Adorno observes, “Hitler shunned the traditional role of the loving father and replaced it entirely by the negative one of threatening authority.”³⁶ This is a manipulation of love intended to subdue and subjugate its targets. Adorno continues, “...the more mass manipulation becomes the sole aim, the more thoroughly uninhibited love has to be repressed and moulded into obedience.” Going on to say, “There is too little in the content of fascist ideology that *could* be loved.”³⁷ This last observation is particularly poignant. For the role of ‘love’ in fascist ideology and the role of the Leader is to manipulate the *masses* and be ‘moulded into obedience.’

Indeed, the fascist Leader does not love others, but per Fromm’s observation, neither does he love himself. Adorno and Freud express similar conclusions. Freud writes, “...the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader; but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterly nature, absolutely

³⁵ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 123.

³⁶ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 123.

³⁷ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 123.

narcissistic...”³⁸ Adorno likewise comments on this aspect of the Leader’s narcissism in cultivating his appeal. “...the leader can be loved only if he himself does not love.”³⁹ Taking these observations together, we can conclude with certainty that not only can the fascist Leader be squarely classified as a narcissist, but also that narcissism is of great importance to his whole appeal to help manipulate the ‘love’ of his following.

But how? How is it that the Leader being an absolute narcissist could possibly *contribute* to his appeal? If anything, one would think that, ‘rationally’ speaking, the Leader being a narcissist would harm his appeal. But here again, rationality has little to do with his appeal.

Freud’s theory of *idealization* addresses the essential role of narcissism in the formation of fascist groups: “We see that the object is being treated in the same way as our own ego, so that even when we are in love a considerable amount of narcissistic libido overflows on the object.” Going on; “It is even obvious, in many forms of love choice, that the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own.”⁴⁰ It is not love *for* the object (in this context, the fascist demagogue) that creates his appeal. If we follow the theory posited here by Freud, it is one’s own narcissism that allows for identification with, and thereby ‘love’ of, the Leader.

Adorno addresses this effect in his commentary on Freud’s theory of *idealization*. “In order to allow narcissistic identification, the leader has to appear himself as absolutely narcissistic...”⁴¹ Essentially, the Leader *must* be a narcissist because it is necessary for his following to narcissistically self-identify with him. He is depending upon the narcissism of his following. They must see themselves in the Leader—or at least, see their ego-ideal in him.

³⁸ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 126.

³⁹ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 127.

⁴⁰ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 125.

⁴¹ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 125.

So what is it people see in a narcissistic demagogue? They see themselves, in a way. They see their own ego-ideal, and they feel love for it. But it is one thing to theorize this process and another to practice it. The followers must be able to narcissistically identify with the Leader, but they cannot feel too close to him. A balance must be struck so that the Leader can be identified with but still remain unquestionably ‘more than’ the follower.

In cultivating his appeal, one of the most important tasks for the fascist Leader is to strike a balance in distance to his followers. Finding this balance has the capacity to make, or potentially break, the whole movement. Naturally, it is all a performance, carefully curated and maintained by propaganda, but it is an important performance nonetheless. The artificial nature by which the Leader’s image is crafted does not reduce its overall importance.

He must be viewed by his following as strong and as a figure of absolute authority. But at the same time, they must view him as relatable enough to still narcissistically self-identify with him. He can’t seem totally out of touch (his following can’t see him as out of touch, anyway, even though he often is rather out of touch, but that doesn’t matter to the following, since it’s the appearance that matters.) Adorno observes, “While appearing as the 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.”⁴² Indeed, he must be a composite of ‘King Kong’ and the ‘suburban barber.’ But what exactly does Adorno mean by this?

By ‘King Kong,’ he means that the Leader must appear above, or ‘more than,’ the follower. A Superman, as Freud describes it (referring to Nietzsche’s Superman/Übermensch), so that the follower can view him as a substitute for their own unattained ego-ideal. “We love it [the object, in this case the leader] on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for

⁴² Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 127.

our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism.”⁴³ The Leader must appear to be a superman for his followers to look up to him. But he must still resemble them. He must appear like the follower, only ‘more.’ As Adorno puts it, “For the sake of those parts of the follower’s narcissistic libido which have not been thrown into the leader image but remain attached to the follower’s own ego, the superman must still resemble the follower and appear as his ‘enlargement.’”⁴⁴ Followers have to feel they can ‘look up’ to the Leader, but he must still remain ‘in sight,’ so to speak.

The ‘suburban barber’ half of the equation, as Adorno puts it, means the Leader has to still maintain a degree of ‘closeness’ in his public image. In order for the followers to still identify with him, he needs to feel to them like one of the ‘Volk.’⁴⁵ Someone they can identify with and relate to. Someone who works, and lives his life, just like you. Someone who you could imagine living right around the corner from. Maybe someone who you might go to to cut your hair. Without this more relatable and sympathetic half of the image, he would just be a tyrant and could not leverage the same passion from his following.

Both sides of this equation are important, and they must be sufficiently balanced by the Leader and his propaganda to create his appeal. Adorno refers to this balancing act as the ‘great little man’ concept. “... one of the basic devices of personalized fascist propaganda is the concept of the “great little man,” a person who suggests both omnipotence and the idea that he is just one of the folks... untainted by material or spiritual wealth.”⁴⁶ By crafting this image, the

⁴³ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 125-126.

⁴⁴ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 127.

⁴⁵ *Volk* meaning ‘people’ or ‘folk.’

⁴⁶ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 127.

Leader "...gratifies the follower's twofold wish to submit to authority and to be the authority himself."⁴⁷

Through this contradiction—by appearing to be *of* the Volk, yet *more* than the Volk—he satisfies the follower's narcissism despite making no secret of his desire to ruthlessly oppress. Yet people obey. "The people who obey the dictators... reconcile this contradiction through the assumption that they are themselves the ruthless oppressor."⁴⁸ By identifying with the Leader—who seeks to oppress—followers feel like they too are the oppressors. Better to be the oppressor than the oppressed. This is often one of the greatest deceptions of the fascist Leader: that by supporting him, one is on his side and safe from the dangers of his desires. But as a narcissist, incapable of loving himself or others, the fascist Leader has few qualms about making his following a target of his oppression as well, should it ever suit his needs. (Which it often does.)

⁴⁷ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 127.

⁴⁸ Adorno, "*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*" 128.

III. Hierarchy

“...the Leader’s position can remain secure against chaotic palace revolutions not because of his superior gifts, about which the men in his intimate surroundings frequently have no great illusions, but because of these men’s sincere and sensible conviction that without him everything would be immediately lost.”⁴⁹

–Hannah Arendt–

Association is a key source of the Leader’s authority and legitimacy. He is to be understood as a physical manifestation of the party, the nation, and the people. As such, he can leverage the legitimacy and validity of pre-established and often popularly held traditions or memories. Creating a direct link between himself and the nation as a whole allows for any collective achievement to be credited directly or indirectly to him. If the Leader *is* the nation manifest, loyalty to him *is* loyalty to the nation. Likewise, a lack of loyalty to his person is then a betrayal of the nation as well.

While the previous chapter discussed the role of narcissism and the unconscious appeal, this chapter will focus on the role of more conscious associations in creating the Leader’s appeal and upholding his place at the center of fascist authority dynamics. Narcissism and unconscious identification are significant, but on their own are not enough to implement the fascist vision. There must also be a clear hierarchy—one featuring the importance of the Leader—that his followers can accept.

⁴⁹ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 374.

It is the ultimate desire (and not a very secret one) of the fascist demagogue to dominate and oppress, but for his followers to accept this & act upon it, he must justify this domination and oppression. He must emotionally train his subjects to submit to a new social order. To accomplish this, he must first; ensure that authority dynamics are clearly defined—namely, it must be clear that *he* is the ultimate authority figure. There can be no question about his position of power in relation to his subjects or the rest of the movement. Second; he must justify why it is *him* specifically—and that it cannot be anyone else—that is the ultimate authority. Both depend heavily on propaganda helping to cultivate the right image through associating him with ‘the nation’ as closely as possible, as though he were its physical manifestation.

Part 1: He must be ‘on top.’

He has all the power. It comes from where?

For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.⁵⁰

Consolidation of power is a defining characteristic of the fascist approach. Particularly consolidation in the person of the Leader in pursuit of its authoritarian aims, as Adorno mentions. “The libidinal pattern of fascism and the entire technique of fascist demagogues are authoritarian.”⁵¹ Although the extent to which a fascist state, like that of Hitler, might be considered completely ‘authoritarian’ or ‘totalitarian’ might be subject to some debate, it is in the nature of fascism to strive to be these things. Again, the image created by propaganda is often of

⁵⁰ The origin of this phrase is a matter of some debate. Most sources attribute it to either Peru’s General Óscar Benavides or Brazil’s President Getulio Vargas. Both were notable Latin American right-wing authoritarian figures of the 20th century.

⁵¹ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 123.

greater importance than reality. Forging a fascist hierarchy is a central part of this process. Adorno goes on to note, “The less hierarchy within the set-up of a highly rationalized and quantified industrial society is warranted, the more artificial hierarchies with no objective *raison d’être* are built up and rigidly imposed by fascists for purely psycho-technical reasons.”⁵² The value is, as he notes, ‘purely psycho-technical’ more than it is a reflection of reality.

Adorno goes on to cite Hitler’s own famous formula, “*Verantwortung nach oben, Autorität nach unten* (responsibility towards above, authority towards below)”⁵³ which speaks to the authority structure desired by the demagogue. It doesn’t actually imply that the Leader necessarily needs to be all-powerful, just that he appears so relative to everyone else. He needs to be the highest authority figure in this hierarchy. Hannah Arendt comments on this dynamic: “Naturally, for the stability of totalitarian regimes the appointment from above is a much more important principle than the ‘unlimited authority’ of the appointed official. In practice, the subleaders’ authority was decisively limited through the Leader’s absolute sovereignty.”⁵⁴ The Leader, as she notes, does not need to be all-powerful as much as he needs to be the source of power for all lower levels of the hierarchy. Any lower representatives or functionaries of the state/party must owe their appointment to the authority above them, culminating in the Leader as the origin of all appointments and thus, all authority within the state.

Laws become of secondary importance. As the wielder of ultimate authority, the ‘will of the Leader’ dictates governance. In Hitler’s Germany (described by Ernst Fraenkel as a “double state”) “...the regular government administration was often superceded by an ad hoc hierarchy that bypassed legal decision-making avenues and, invoking the authority of the Führer himself,

⁵² Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 128.

⁵³ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 128.

⁵⁴ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 365.

ruled by decree.”⁵⁵ The Leader does not adhere to the ‘rule of law,’ since his will effectively *is* the law.

How he wields his authority is likewise of secondary importance. Adorno describes how his appeal, in this context, is not derived from how effectively he leads, as much as it is from his being idolized as a representative of the larger group. “Fascist agitation is centered in the idea of the leader, no matter whether he actually leads or is only the mandatary of group interests... This is the ultimate root of the otherwise enigmatic *personalization* of fascist propaganda, its incessant plugging of names and supposedly great men, instead of discussing objective causes.”⁵⁶ Adorno was right to classify the fascist agitator’s approach as following a ‘set pattern of clear cut ‘devices’ because here, again, fascist propaganda shows its blatant ignorance of reality or ‘rational arguments.’ Its focus remains upon the repetition of themes meant to elicit an emotional response. Its emphasis of the Leader as the paramount figure of authority is reflective of this trend.

So the Leader doesn’t actually have to literally be all-powerful, yet he is the source of power and authority for the movement. What, then, is the *appeal* of making him the figure of ultimate authority? It is not his person that is powerful; it is all that with which his person is associated. He takes advantage of broader traditions—that often already have considerable popular appeal—by linking them to himself. Basically turning the support for one of these concepts into support for him personally.

The more the Leader’s image can be associated with popular sentiments or pre-existing traditions, the more their appeal can be leveraged to support himself and the movement.

Traditions such as nationalism, anti-Semitism, were present, and often prominent in Germany,

⁵⁵ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute.*” 37.

⁵⁶ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 124.

well before the Nazi rise to prominence. The Leader (and the movement more generally) will promote their own interpretation of these elements, naturally, like with their highly extremist and highly racist, anti-Semitic brand of nationalism. As Jeffrey Herf notes; "...the Nazi propagandists were administrators of already existing traditions. But they were distinct within the panoply of German nationalism for the emphasis they placed on anti-semitism and the biological foundations they gave to German technological advance."⁵⁷ Not only is their brand of nationalism a distinctly racist one, but it is also often aggressive and never satisfied with the nation as it is.

Propaganda would associate popular sentiments that already have an established appeal—such as an express desire to ‘restore’ the nation—as closely as possible with the movement and with the Leader. Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes, “Nostalgia for better times is also part of the equation, since the ruler’s vow is to make the country great *again*.”⁵⁸ Full of grand promises, this propaganda cannot be satisfied. It depends upon stirring frustration about a given issue in order to suggest itself as the solution. Like Nazi propaganda’s obsession with not just ‘restoring’ their vision of the nation—a racially pure one, at that—but expanding it. “In Nazi Germany, the fascist linkage of national greatness and racial purity reached its fulfillment, as did the geopolitical imperative to expand to get the land and resources the country needed.”⁵⁹ For propaganda designed around garnering support by stoking dissatisfaction to promote itself as the solution, there could be no true satisfaction.

These characteristics are some of the few ‘tangible policies’ that Hitler and the Nazis would repeat ad nauseam, and not by accident. Adorno notes that the “...constant reiteration and

⁵⁷ Herf, “*Reactionary Modernism*.” 208.

⁵⁸ Ben-Ghiat, “*Strongmen*.” 67.

⁵⁹ Ben-Ghiat, “*Strongmen*.” 72-73.

scarcity of ideas are indispensable ingredients of the entire technique [of fascist agitators].”⁶⁰

‘Constant reiteration’ isn’t just because fascist propaganda deals, as discussed, in abstracts as opposed to rational arguments and so lacks many talking points. It’s also because repetition helps to reinforce the association between these sentiments and the movement. The Leader in particular must be so incessantly associated with these sentiments that his image cannot be separated from them. (If he’s the *most* nationalist nationalist, then supporting nationalism means you must surely support him. If he *is* the nation and you don’t support him, you must hate your nation, by this logic.) His appeal comes, in part, from association with these sentiments and their popularity, as he is so incessantly associated with them so as to be viewed as their physical manifestation.

Part 2: Why him specifically?

Why not anyone else? Because he effectively *is* everyone else.

As the centerpiece of the movement, the Leader is a unique figure—not just because of what he does but, most importantly, because of what he represents. He is the origin and foundation of the nation. His image is crafted and repeated by propaganda, often using pre-existing traditions to illustrate the fiction. It would have him appear as a special, semi-divine figure—a savior of the nation. Not unlike a fairy tale prince on a mission to rescue a princess in peril.

⁶⁰ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 119.

Association with, and co-opting of pre-established (and often popular) cultural traditions is a favorite tactic of fascist propaganda. In part because most of the work has already been done. Fairy tales were familiar to German society at almost all levels. They were a cultural staple, even for the youngest members of society. This was not lost on Nazi propagandists. A 1936 Nazi book on pedagogy reads, “No fairy tale cries out more for ethnic interpretation than *Sleeping Beauty*... In that story, we reexperience our national impotence and reawakening. Hitler is the hero who has rescued our people from sleep of death into which it had sunk under the evil influence of foreign races....”⁶¹ This analogy, that of Hitler as the ‘prince come to save the nation from the influence of foreign races,’ reflects the importance of the image promoted of him by his propaganda, for which no facet of life is off limits. All of society is subjected to reiterations proclaiming the fiction that the Leader is a ‘savior’ and that he is ‘special.’

Hannah Arendt describes the so-called ‘Leader principle,’ which is to say, the movement depends upon him being the ‘special’ figure around which the rest is organized and upon which all else depends. All the fictions of the movement rest upon him, because he defines the movement. He is also the ultimate authority within the movement. As such, he can be credited—directly or indirectly—with any successes or accomplishments. However, he is then also responsible for any shortcomings. Arendt notes; “The Leader represents the movement in a way totally different from all ordinary party leaders; he claims personal responsibility for every action, deed, or misdeed, committed by any member or functionary in his official capacity.” Thereby also effectively relieving functionaries of responsibility, or perhaps ‘absolving them of their sins’ should they be directed to do things that otherwise may be considered unjustifiable. She notes how important this function is for the rest of the movement. “This total responsibility

⁶¹ Allert citation; Rudolf Schmidt, *Der praktische Schulmann* (Frankfurt: Friedrich Brandstetter, 1936), 98.

is the most important organizational aspect of the so-called Leader principle, according to which every functionary is not only appointed by the Leader but is his walking embodiment, and every order is supposed to emanate from this one ever-present source.”⁶² He acts as the ‘special’ binding force for the rest of the movement. Again, not necessarily because of his capabilities, but because of the fiction spun around him by propaganda—and trained into his subjects through endless repetition—that emphasizes his importance and authority as a ‘special savior.’ “In the sacralized social order of the Nazi regime, people came to define themselves in a radically altered way. They became tools, vessels for the will of the leader, their god.”⁶³

⁶² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 374.

⁶³ Allert, *The Hitler Salute.*” 69.

IV. Ideology

“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”⁶⁴

—Hannah Arendt—

Being independent of rational arguments or tangible policy for support, the Leader is subordinate to ideology—and little else. He, and the movement more generally, is highly opportunistic, self-serving, and often self-contradictory, as is the case with Hitler and Nazism. Jeffrey Herf describes their complex and often counterproductive relationship to technical innovation and strategic thinking. Herf credits the analysis of Hannah Arendt in surmising that the actions of National Socialism were “...driven by a set of ideological absolutes that were antiutilitarian in the extreme.” (Herf, 228) While the actions of a fascist Leader or state may often appear contradictory or nonsensical, they need only be justified in terms of ideology—an ideology that originates with the Leader, but is designed for the subjects.

The fascist Leader, for however much power he may possess, is not capable of forcing each individual to act out his will. He is only one person. Even with the rest of his party, it simply is not feasible to maintain constant oversight over hundreds, thousands, or even millions of individuals. To dominate a whole society, individuals must be compelled (or rather,

⁶⁴ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 474.

manipulated,) to act on their own, without needing a ‘cop behind every one of them.’ This is the role of fascist ideology. As Louis Althusser describes it, “...the individuals in question ‘go,’ and it is ideology which makes them ‘go.’”⁶⁵

Ideology, defined by one of Althusser’s central theses on the matter, “...represents individuals’ imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence.”⁶⁶ The phrase ‘*imaginary* relation’ here being of particular emphasis for the sake of our discussion. Fascist ideology is necessarily an *imaginary* relation to reality and not an actual reflection of reality as it truly is.

Here, again, we see the recurring trend of fascism relying upon fictions and lies to create its appeal, since, as Adorno describes, “...it would be impossible for fascism to win the masses through rational arguments, its propaganda must necessarily be deflected from discursive thinking...”⁶⁷ It consists—as is a theme throughout Nazi propaganda—of *fabricating* a specific interpretation of reality that validates its own extremist and violent worldview. Althusser goes on to add that such ideologies [in this case, fascist ideologies] “...do not correspond to reality and, accordingly, constitute an *illusion*...” while still recognizing that they “...do make *allusion* to reality and that we need only ‘interpret’ them to discover the reality of this world beneath the surface of their imaginary representation of it (ideology = illusion/allusion).”⁶⁸ While the ideology preached by the Leader and his propaganda undoubtedly spin fictions, it is not created out of nothing. It is very much shaped *by*, but above all *for*, its intended subjects. Since, as Althusser puts it, “...there is no ideology except by the subjects and for the subjects.”⁶⁹ Fascist

⁶⁵ Althusser, “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.*” 180.

⁶⁶ Althusser, “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.*” 181.

⁶⁷ Adorno, “*Freudian Theory, and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.*” 134.

⁶⁸ Althusser, “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.*” 181.

⁶⁹ Althusser, “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.*” 185.

ideology makes *allusion* to reality to create the *illusion* of its own fictional reality. It is the way in which fascism would like its subjects to see the world.

“If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it...

And you will even come to believe it yourself!”

–Joseph Göbbels–

Reichspropagandaminister (Reich propaganda minister)

Fascist ideology presents an ‘*imaginary* relation to the real world’ for its subjects, who live and operate according to their imagined relation to that world. This understanding of the fascist worldview may help to make sense of some otherwise seemingly irrational tendencies. Because ideology is an *interpretation* of reality, the ‘dominant’—the Leader, as well as party elites—do not operate according to what is ‘rational.’ At least, not what an outside perspective might consider ‘rational.’ The fascist elite are no less subject to the effects of their propaganda than the masses for whom they create it. They are made subjects of their own illusion. They thus operate according to what is ‘rational’ based on their own skewed understanding of the world.

This understanding is, as previously discussed, an imaginary interpretation spun by propaganda to control the dominated masses. But it is one that influences the dominant as much as it does the dominated. The dominant are perhaps even more prone to ‘rationally faulty ideology’ than the dominated.⁷⁰ They typically will see in the world what they wish to see and are so thoroughly already subjects of their own fictions that they do not imagine a reality outside of this narrow lens. “The outstanding negative quality of the totalitarian elite is that it never stops

⁷⁰ Stanford Encyclopedia 3.1.2

to think about the world as it really is and never compares the lies with reality.”⁷¹ They are left dependent upon the rest of the ruling apparatus to confirm or contradict these views.

However, because of their obsession with rigid hierarchy that depends upon functionaries owing their position to the figure above them, culminating in the Leader as the source of authority, the dominant will often find themselves surrounded by ‘unreliable narrators.’ Essentially, yes-men & women who tend to tell the dominant what they want to hear. Often because these individuals are fed & believe falsehoods themselves, but also because they can expect little chance of retaining their position—let alone rising in rank—if they suggest an outlook that conflicts with their superior’s skewed relationship to reality. It’s not by contradicting and exposing party ideology that one rises through the fascist hierarchy. Party leadership is increasingly isolated from reason the higher up in the hierarchy one goes.

The result is an elite with concentrated authority—isolated from the truth in echo chambers that reinforce their inaccurate perception of the world—that operates in ways that are irrational and often even counterproductive to their own aims. Herf notes the effects of the Nazi elite’s tendency to ‘get high on their own supply.’ “Although Nazi ideology may not have drugged the entire German people, it certainly acted as an opiate of the Nazi political elite, one that made them oblivious to the catastrophic consequences of Germany’s ideology, technical deficiencies, and totalitarian leadership.”⁷² Herf concurs with Hannah Arendt’s summation that the actions of National Socialism were “...driven by a set of ideological absolutes that were antiutilitarian in the extreme.”⁷³

⁷¹ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 385.

⁷² Herf, “*Reactionary Modernism.*” 197.

⁷³ Herf, “*Reactionary Modernism.*” 228.

Hitler and the Nazi elite's fanatical subordination to ideology as their 'substitute reality' would repeatedly prove to be a great hindrance to fulfilling their own aims. Herf describes how their obsession with ideology contributed significantly to their own backwardness. "In weighing the causes of German technical backwardness, political terror and persecution must be placed alongside the generally antiintellectual and antiscientific ideology of the Nazi regime."⁷⁴ Their insistence upon adherence to ideology in all facets of life, beyond just the elite and party members had serious repercussions for the scientific and technical competencies (among others) of not just the party, but the whole nation. "German engineers... subordinated their knowledge of technical realities to the demands of Nazi ideology."⁷⁵ Ultimately limiting the nation's capabilities, Herf notes how this ideological fanaticism may have also contributed greatly to their own demise. "One of the most fortunate ironies of modern German history was that the Nazi's anti-Semitism sent much of the physics community into exile, thereby hindering the development of the real "wonder-weapon," the atom bomb."⁷⁶ Fascism contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. In this case, its neglect of strategy for ideology very sharply curtailed the tools with which its proponents could enact its vision, but it also is part of what makes it so dangerous.

⁷⁴ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism.* " 202-203.

⁷⁵ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism.* " 204.

⁷⁶ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism.* " 214.

V. Making Subjects

Emotional Training through Practice & Repetition

Repetitive displays of loyalty feature heavily in the cult of the fascist Leader. They visibly and publicly demonstrate and reinforce loyalty, as well as submission to the Leader. Now basically synonymous with Nazism, the ‘Heil’ salute is a prime example of such a display. Often borrowed from previously established traditions, they directly associate individuals and groups with the Leader. In the case of the Heil, the everyday nature of its use also serves to isolate community members from one another in favor of strengthening their shared bond to the Leader. Failure to perform such displays then allows for the easy identification of potential enemies of the movement.

Fascism is not content with radicalizing the minority of people directly associated with the party. It seeks to completely transform society as a whole—a process that requires constant practice and reinforcement. The psychological mechanisms previously discussed must be hammered into each individual ‘*ad nauseam*.’ To this end, performative rituals are just as important to the Leader’s power as any police force. There is perhaps no better example of this than the famous—or rather, infamous—Heil. Ruth Ben-Ghiat describes rituals like the ‘Heil Hitler’ salute as “...central to the effort of collective transformation. They help to train the bodies and minds of his people.”⁷⁷ Even its mention likely conjures images of Hitler and Nazism

⁷⁷ Ben-Ghiat, “*Strongmen*.” 65.

in the minds of most—a testament to its effectiveness and an illustration of its usefulness in emotionally training so many people. But how is it that such a basic gesture could be so effective a tool for so heinous a purpose? Where did it come from, and how is it that a ‘simple greeting’ could do so much to transform a society?

For one thing, the Hitler salute was more than a ‘simple greeting.’ It was a tool of domination and indoctrination for the Leader. It served to politicize every social encounter, reminding individuals of their common obligations to the Leader and the community associated with him.⁷⁸ Furthermore, it strengthened the shared bond to the Leader while distancing individuals from one another, isolating them from any community other than the cult. More than just a ‘simple greeting,’ its real aim was “...to sap everyone’s dignity and damage the bonds of civil society—a crucial goal of every authoritarian regime.”⁷⁹

As with a great many fascist traditions, the Heil was not an entirely new creation. It was based on other, pre-existing traditions that were reinterpreted by the Nazis to better fit their own needs. The word *heil* itself has a long history in the German language with a variety of meanings.⁸⁰ It means “...not only “hail,” but also “heal,” “cure,” “mend,” “close,” or “remedy.””⁸¹ The religious contexts in which ‘heil’ is also used, in combination with ‘Heil Hitler’s’ replacement of traditional greetings such as ‘*Grüß Gott*,’ also implied a semi-divine aspect to its use. By having his name evoked (often in the place of God,) with each greeting, Hitler became “...not only the patron saint of the human encounter but also its medium, and in this way superceded reality itself.”⁸² (Reinforcing the idea of the ‘superman.’)

⁷⁸ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute*.” 49.

⁷⁹ Ben-Ghiat, “*Strongmen*.” 66.

⁸⁰ In fact, the various linguistic incoherencies of the phrase ‘*Heil Hitler*’ supplied Germans with fodder for all manner of jokes throughout the Nazi era.

⁸¹ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute*.” 6.

⁸² Allert, “*The Hitler Salute*.” 44-45.

The accompanying gesture of raising one's right hand in salute, likewise, was not invented by the Nazis. Hitler borrowed it from the Italian fascist movement of Benito Mussolini, making it mandatory within the NSDAP in 1926, despite complaints that he was imitating Il Duce.⁸³ The physical part of the salute was not limited to just a raising of the right hand. Tension and rigidity were important elements of the performance. In this regard, Allert notes, "...the Hitler greeting resembles the classic military salute, in which physical posture emphasizes hierarchy."⁸⁴ Showcasing again, in this regard, fascism's obsession with strict hierarchy. Allert goes on, "The salute divided all of German society, including civilians, into two groups—those who gave orders and those who obeyed them..."⁸⁵ In this way, the salute reinforces the supremacy of the Leader and cannot be understood independent of its reverence for his authority and status.

Following the Nazi rise to power nationally, its implementation was quickly expanded further. "On July 13, 1933—a scant six months after Hitler became German chancellor and one day before all other political parties were banned—the Reich issued an edict defining the Hitler greeting as a general civic duty and making its use mandatory in all party and state buildings and at commemorative sites."⁸⁶ It became 'a norm and civic duty.'⁸⁷ The new standard greeting—mandatory or otherwise—across German society, replacing all other forms of greeting. A directive by the National Socialist German Students' League proclaims, "The German greeting must become second nature to you. Discard your *Grüß Gott, Auf Wiedersehen, Guten Tag, Servus.*" ('*Grüß Gott, Auf Wiedersehen, Guten Tag, Servus*' being other common German

⁸³ Ben-Ghiat, "*Strongmen.*" 65.

⁸⁴ Allert, "*The Hitler Salute.*" 46.

⁸⁵ Allert, "*The Hitler Salute.*" 46.

⁸⁶ Allert, "*The Hitler Salute.*" 30.

⁸⁷ Ben-Ghiat, "*Strongmen.*" 65.

greetings/goodbyes.) While the use of other greetings did not disappear entirely, the use of any other greeting became a taboo and a show of defiance.⁸⁸ The same directive goes on to say, “All who wish to avoid the suspicion of consciously obstructionist behavior will use the Hitler salute.”⁸⁹

Whether its use was officially mandated or not in a given situation (though it most often was,) it pervaded every aspect of life. For as long as the Nazi state existed, it transformed the nature of every possible interaction. “...for the span of twelve years, [the Heil] politicized all communication within German society.”⁹⁰ Every social interaction began and ended with a reminder—welcome or not—of the Leader’s cult and of the ideology being imposed upon society. It was, as the Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter* described in 1935, a “...bit of practical National Socialism that everyone can perform.”⁹¹ And indeed, it was expected of everyone. Performing simple rituals like the Heil was a method to get even the reluctant to conform and confirm their place in the cult. A person may be opposed to the salute within their own home, but would still be expected to perform it enthusiastically in public—be it at work, on the street, or in the lobby of their apartment building.⁹²

Its simplicity and everyday usage contributed to its effectiveness. “Every act of greeting someone, or refusing to do so, is an act of individual self-definition.”⁹³ As a greeting used frequently, individuals would constantly have to define themselves in relation to the Leader and be reminded of his seemingly constant presence. Allert comments; “In the case of “Heil Hitler,”

⁸⁸ The use of other greetings did not disappear entirely and, in fact, remained commonplace despite the institution of the Heil as the ‘politically appropriate’ form of greeting. Allert describes how in private encounters, “...“normal” greetings were often used in tandem with the Hitler salute or would immediately follow it.” (Allert, 44)

⁸⁹ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute.*” 6-7.

⁹⁰ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute.*” 6.

⁹¹ (Allert, 33. From the Nazi newspaper; the *Völkischer Beobachter* circa 1935.)

⁹² Allert, “*The Hitler Salute.*” 8-9.

⁹³ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute.*” 30.

the laws mandating its use forced Germans to define themselves and their values in relationship to the Führer, bringing him as the unseen mediating third party into every social encounter.”⁹⁴ The dominance of such a ritual did not allow for any kind of interaction or social relations that were not in some way political. It created a rift, separating individuals from one another.

“What we call isolation in the political sphere, is called loneliness in the sphere of social intercourse.”⁹⁵

Isolating individuals is a key way in which fascism strips communities of their capacity to resist. “Isolation may be the beginning of terror... isolated men are powerless by definition.”⁹⁶ Undermining the capacity for collective resistance is critical for a totalitarian movement to maintain control. Using the Hitler salute was, “...tantamount to disassembling one’s own distinct identity. Instead of coming closer to one another, the participants in the greeting distanced themselves in the very moment of encounter.”⁹⁷ One’s identity would, through practicing such displays, be defined in direct relation to the Leader and not to any other community.

The Heil forced all members of society to repeatedly profess their submission and loyalty to the Führer, but it also isolated individuals from one another. Both metaphorically and quite literally. “Substituting for the humanizing handshake, the Hitler salute also aimed at accelerating Nazism’s emotional training of Germans.”⁹⁸ The nature of the salute meant that individuals were quite literally distanced from one another. Where once you might greet your neighbor good

⁹⁴ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute.*” 30.

⁹⁵ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 474.

⁹⁶ Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism.*” 474.

⁹⁷ Allert, “*The Hitler Salute.*” 51.

⁹⁸ Ben-Ghiat, “*Strongmen.*” 66.

morning, and potentially establish a physical connection like a handshake, there now was a distance. Greeting your neighbor became a political act and a reminder that you were separated by the invisible presence of the Führer. A person may feel personally opposed to performing it, but was expected to anyway, and if both you and your neighbor must perform publicly, it may not be easy to tell how one might feel behind closed doors. The greeting became "...a distancing ritual initiating a relationship of mistrust and disregard."⁹⁹ Every time you greet your neighbor, your shared bond with one another is weakened. Distanced physically and by mistrust, in favor of strengthening your shared bond to the Leader.

Frequent—and public—repetition also had a normalizing effect. It numbed individuals to the ‘new normal’ of a fascist society and made it easier to accept the values being pushed. The greeting "...worked automatically to suppress ethical qualms and foster indifference toward the moral implications of the practice itself,"¹⁰⁰ making it easier to accept submission to the Leader and simultaneously to accept his agenda. "It modeled their bond with the leader and their distance from everyone else—estrangement being a useful emotional state for overlooking your Jewish colleague’s persecution or the disappearance of your disabled neighbor."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Allert, *The Hitler Salute.* 68.

¹⁰⁰ Allert, *The Hitler Salute.* 53.

¹⁰¹ Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen.* 66.

Conclusion

So how does the fascist demagogue create and maintain a following? By manufacturing synthetic *bonds* that unite individuals into a *mass* and make them subordinate to himself. He does this by appealing not to their rationality, but to primarily unconscious urges. The language of his propaganda is meant to foster these bonds by agitating and eliciting emotional responses rather than being concerned with any tangible policy. These *bonds* cultivate a powerful relationship between Leader and follower, but it is one built through manipulation and not any real love.

The Leader is inherently an opportunistic narcissist, incapable of loving himself or others. He relies on the narcissism of others to help create his appeal. It's not that he actually loves his followers or that they actually love him. They project their own ego-ideal onto an image of him created by propaganda. Any mention of love remains hidden behind 'suggestion' and rarely appears without the epithet 'fanatical.' Like 'fanatical love of the Fatherland.' To allow for narcissistic self-identification, the Leader must be unquestionably 'more than' the regular individual, but still resemble them enough to be identified with. Adorno describes this as the 'great little man' concept. He must be of the Volk, yet more than the Volk. Relatable and likable, but unquestionably powerful and special in relation to everyone else.

Fascism is obsessed with hierarchy. It is a significant part of the Leader's role. He doesn't want to love; he wants to oppress. He must be the source of all authority in the movement, and everyone must owe him. (Verantwortung nach oben, Autorität nach unten.) His propaganda associates him with pre-existing traditions to leverage their legitimacy for his own

image. Only he can fulfill this role because the propaganda also creates an image of him as a special, almost divine savior figure. Not unlike the ‘prince who comes to save a sleeping princess,’ even though this understanding is predicated on a false worldview, characterized by fictions and extremes, since this dynamic is only visible through the lens of a fascist worldview.

Ideology is the lens through which the Leader & his followers see the world. It is an inherently false one, dependent upon fictions. Elites like the Leader are just as subject to the effects of their propaganda that promotes this image as the masses for whom it is created. They find themselves in echo chambers reinforcing this worldview. The actions they take according to their ideological absolutes are often ‘antiutilitarian in the extreme.’ This oversimplified and fictional worldview is what makes individuals continue to ‘go’ without a ‘cop behind them.’ It makes subjects out of individuals.

But to radically change society the way fascism desires, people must be constantly emotionally trained to be subjects. Rituals like the ‘Heil Hitler’ salute are important for this training. The Heil—also taken from pre-existing traditions and itself nonsensical in many ways—politicizes every interaction, isolating individuals from each other in favor of reinforcing their shared bond to the Leader and the cult he represents.

The Leader ultimately becomes a uniting force for the nation—even presented as the physical manifestation of it—so long as the nation (or enough of it) subscribes to the fictions he and his propaganda manufacture. It is through these methods of psychological manipulation that fascism is able to circumvent the rationality of so many for its own self-serving and violent purposes.

Bibliography

Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda – Theodor Adorno, 1951.

Full: Theodor W. Adorno, “*Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*,” (1951)

Strongmen – Ruth Ben-Ghiat 2021

Full: Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen; Mussolini to the Present*, (New York: Norton & Company, 2021).

Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema – Linda Schulte-Sasse

Full: Linda Schulte-Sasse, “*Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema*.” (Duke University Press, 1996.)

Escape From Freedom – Erich Fromm

Full: Erich Fromm, “*Escape From Freedom*.” (New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks Publishing, 1941.)

Reactionary Modernism – Jeffrey Herf

Full: Jeffrey Herf, “*Reactionary Modernism*.” (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984.)

On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses – Louis Althusser

Full: Louis Althusser, “*On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.” (London: Verso Publishing, 1971.)

The Origins of Totalitarianism – Hannah Arendt

Full: Hannah Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism*.” (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1968.)

The Hitler Salute – Tilman Allert

Full: Tilman Allert, Translation by Jefferson Chase, “*The Hitler Salute*.” (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008.)

Massenpsychologie und IchAnalyse – Sigmund Freud

Full: Sigmund Freud, “*Massenpsychologie und IchAnalyse*.” (Norderstedt, Culturea Books, 1921.)