Traditional fascism and authoritarian populism in liberal democracies: In terms of a Frommian critical social theory of narcissism
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Abstract
My presentation, in terms of a Frommian theory of narcissism, theoretically examines the socio-psychological base of current political phenomena that are generally categorised as authoritarian populism including both left- and right-wing populism and extremism, as can be seen particularly in Western liberal democracies, thereby seeking to illuminate what current populist movements share with traditional fascism and what they do not through developing Erich Fromm’s critical social theory. From Fromm’s socio-theoretical perspective, narcissism, especially in the form of group narcissism, sometimes brings about a pathological politics, particularly when it is transformed into a malignant kind that can contribute to inducing fascism in conjunction with the authoritarian orientation (Sakurai 2018a, 2018b). However, Fromm, albeit acutely aware, did not manage to explain this mechanism sufficiently while he succeeded to a certain extent in integrating his conception of alienation, a Marxist notion, into the psychoanalytic theory through transforming his main subject from an analysis of the psychological base of fascism to that of psychopathologies of liberal democracy (Fromm 1947, 1961, 1976; cf. Deguchi 2019; Sakurai 2018a, 2018b). This clearly shows that Fromm’s social theory is based essentially on the Freudian psychoanalytic concept of narcissism. From this perspective, I argue that in Fromm’s terms it is to a certain extent possible to see populism as an extension of a fascist development even in liberal democracies, and that the theoretical scope of Fromm’s critical social theory is precisely that it seeks to shed light on social and political phenomena in historical continuity, thereby identifying the sources of fascist orientations that seem to be democratic practice and finding remedies for the problems. Through this discussion, I conclude that in Frommian terms, theoretically, authoritarian politics emerges even in advanced liberal-democratic countries, particularly in the form of authoritarian populism, based on narcissistic character structures intertwined with the authoritarian orientation.
Objectives

Fromm is adequately considered a Critical Theorist as often as he is counted as a Neo-Freudian, particularly as an extension of his being a psychoanalyst. This is best explained by the fact that essentially he did academic activities between Marx and Freud. It should be noted, however, that many of his writings are not tackled by so-called social theorists despite his significant contribution to the early Frankfurt School; indeed, this is primarily why he is sometimes called a ‘forgotten intellectual’ (e.g. McLaughlin 1998). From this perspective, it is appropriate to consider that it is of great value to raise his forgotten critical theory from the ashes, particularly by realising his full potential as a Critical Theorist while drawing attention to his Freudian conception of narcissism that is to be enhanced by his other Marxist conception of alienation. In this light, my presentation, focusing on his socio-psychoanalytic conception of narcissism, seeks to elaborate the theoretical scheme of Fromm’s critical social theory while analysing the current socio-pathological phenomenon of authoritarian populism.

References