This is my attempt to reconstruct Fromm's argument from the first four chapters of *Escape from Freedom*. The intention is to offer it as a kind of grounding for going forward with the reading. I know we have said in our discussions how amazing it is that an eighty year old work is so relevant for the world in which we live. I want to emphasize this with a quote from the chapter "Freedom and Democracy":

". . .there is no graver mistake and no graver danger not to see that in our own society we are faced with the same phenomenon that is fertile soil for the rise of Fascism everywhere: the insignificance and powerlessness of the individual."[[1]](#footnote-2)

In *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm argues that the rise of fascism[[2]](#footnote-3) in Europe (the U.S. and Japan) in the first half of the Twentieth century, and the potential for fascism beyond, even in so-called liberal democracies, can be understood through an analysis of the ways in which the transformation of Western society from feudalism to capitalism created the conditions for the emergence of a certain type of person, with specific personality traits, what he calls the authoritarian personality.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Fromm adopts a social psychological approach as the means for analyzing the transformation of Western society. Fromm is not only a social theorist, but a psychoanalyst who had been committed to a Freudian paradigm for understanding and analyzing social phenomena. In 1936 he explained the emergence of the authoritarian personality in Freudian terms and within the family structure.[[4]](#footnote-5) Early in *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm explains the difference between the Freudian approach and the social psychological approach that he adopts in the work. The main difference, he argues, is that the Freudian approach to understanding the relationship between human beings and society is fixed.[[5]](#footnote-6) On the other hand, his approach is dialectical and dynamic[[6]](#footnote-7). That is, his social psychological approach assumes a relationship between history, social forces and human beings with agency**.** Fromm argues that human beings can act individually and collectively to change the world in which they live, and create the conditions necessary for a fully human life. But he also argues that while human beings have agency, they are primarily social selves and that they embody personality/character traits that are very much a product and a reflection of the social world in which they live.[[7]](#footnote-8) And depending upon the social world in which people live, these traits can be determinative, that is, reduce a dialectical relationship to a fixed relationship.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Fromm argues that the transformation of Western society from feudalism to capitalism was two sided. The Protestant Reformation[[9]](#footnote-10), the political revolutions[[10]](#footnote-11), the industrial revolution/science and technology [[11]](#footnote-12), and capitalism[[12]](#footnote-13) created what society now calls the individual. The individual is free from political oppression, free to stand in personal relationship with God, free from scarcity, and free from the constraints of the feudal economy. The individual is not only free from external oppression, but also free to act within this new social world: free to establish a personal relationship with God, free to collectively shape the world in the new liberal democratic political system, free to pursue their own interests economically, free to dominate nature through science, and free to succeed and advance in wealth and status.

The other side of this transformation, according to Fromm, is that it left the modern individual, isolated, anxious, and powerless. While the Reformation freed the individual from the power of the Catholic Church and created the possibility of a personal relationship with God, the Reformation’s emphasis on original sin, salvation through faith, and God’s grace, left the person powerless to affect their own salvation. A question arose, theological and personal, a question that created even more anxiety; it was that of predestination. Theologically, the question of predestination revolves around God’s omniscience, knowledge of all things, and an understanding of history and each individual life as being part of God’s plan, Providence. Then, accepting this understanding, individual salvation, as part of an omniscient God's plan, must already be determined. For the individual, this understanding of predestination obviously created more anxiety. If the individual's salvation is predetermined, there is absolutely nothing that the individual could do, either good works or faith, to affect the outcome. But, at least, one might know whether one was saved or not, if there were an indicator, something in this world that might reveal that one was saved. The answer was success in the newly emerging economic system. Success in worldly activity could be the indicator that one had been chosen for salvation. Then, according to Fromm, the person began to engage in continuous, frantic economic activity toward the accumulation of wealth, toward the goal of being successful;[[13]](#footnote-14) not successful in the sense of accumulating wealth for wealth's sake, or for display, or for social status, but accumulating wealth as an indication of one's salvation. The individual's free relationship to God ends with submission to unending worldly activity.

The Reformation, according to Fromm, serves as an early example of the consequences of the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, but also as an essential aspect of the historical transformation of Western culture and the emergence of the authoritarian personality. The progressive development of human freedom, freedom from external force and freedom to shape one's own live, leaves the modern individual alone, anxious, powerless and seeking to escape from freedom.

Fromm argues that as the transformation continued both liberal democracy and capitalism created the modern individual. Liberal democracy freed the person from the oppressive power of the Church and King, and introduced the idea of equality, the idea of individual rights, the idea of rational legal authority, and the idea of citizenship tied to an open civil society[[14]](#footnote-15) where people could come together and collectively participate in shaping the world in which they live. Likewise, the emergence of capitalism created the economic individual who was free to take advantage of the opportunities open to all: free to create, free to work, and free to succeed. However, both liberal democracy and capitalism created immense bureaucratic structures and power arrangements that far exceeded those of the Catholic Church and the monarchy. And the transformation from feudalism to capitalism has introduced, according to Fromm, new more sophisticated systems of power, internal power, propaganda and consumerism. The individual stands before this new social formation, free, but powerless, alone and anxious.[[15]](#footnote-16) In feudal society, a religious world view, the Great Chain of Being and a belief that history was Providential, God’s plan, and part of the plan included every person, gave everyone a place, an identity, and a meaning that transcended everyday life, salvation. This has been called the “sacred canopy.”[[16]](#footnote-17)

The transformation of western society from feudalism to capitalism destroyed the sacred canopy, and offered instead what Fromm calls means for “overcoming"; examples are wealth, power, family, consumption, and nationalism. None of these are adequate, in fact in so far as they work at all, according to Fromm, it is on a superficial level, conscious level, unconsciously these means of overcoming serve to reinforce the psychological traits of the authoritarian personality.

The economic individual's unending pursuit of wealth and success, and the worker's free but alienated labor, isolate people from each other, undermining any idea of community, solidarity and genuine relatedness. The political system and the idea of the open society has been reduced to televised political advertising, which in other societies would be called propaganda, and reduced citizenship to the occasional act of voting. And commercial advertising targeting the unconscious, has undermined critical thinking, and has transformed the person into a consumer whose agency is limited to freedom of choice in consumption. Alone, anxious, powerless, the authoritarian personality seeks mechanisms of escape. Fromm analyzes these mechanisms in the next chapter, and then in following chapters analyzes how these mechanisms of escape functioned in relation to fascism in Nazis Germany, and how they functioned in liberal democracies then[[17]](#footnote-18) and still today.

1. Fromm, "Freedom and Democracy," pp239-40, in *Escape from Freedom*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Fascism is a mass based movement that is much more than a political movement. The ultimate goal of fascism is a totalitarian transformation of all of society. Its appeal is based on a mytho-ideology that Hannah Arendt calls "the lying world." This mythology offers the authoritarian personality what is lacking in capitalist modernity, a narrative that gives their lives meaning, and a movement and authority structure to which they can submit. See Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*; Berlet and Lyons, *Right Wing Populism in America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Just for clarification, the authoritarian personality has the character traits of one who seeks to escape from freedom by submission to authority, whether the charismatic leader, conventionality, or fascist mythology (see above mythology of fascism). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See *Studies in Authority and the Family*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. As Choi and Calvin pointed out in our discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Even though Fromm distances himself from the Freudian, superego, ego, id psychological model, he still retains the earlier Freudian model of the structure of the human psyche, the conscious and unconscious, but he retains it as a social psychological concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Fascism above [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. The Protestant Reformation occurred in the 16th century. The leaders of the Reformation, Luther and Calvin, though by no means in agreement on everything theological or political, argued that original sin made it impossible for good works to be adequate for a person to achieve salvation. Salvation could only be possible through affirmation of faith and God’s grace. In other words, one’s relationship to God was personal, one of conscience, and whether or not one was saved was in God’s hands. This challenged not only the Catholic doctrine of good works, and its claim that the sacraments, mediated by the priests were adequate in the question of salvation, and it further raised the question whether or not the Catholic church was even necessary, or, at least, "divinely" necessary, as it claimed. See Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, "Freedom in the Age of Reformation." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The political revolutions in England, France and the United States, revolutions that overthrew monarchies, and created liberal democracies occurred in the middle of the 17thcentury, the English Revolution, and the late 18th century, the U.S. and France. See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*; Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*; Kirkpatrick Sales, *Rebels Against the Future.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies.* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See Franz Kafka, *The Castle*. This novel Illustrates, better than any philosophical theory, the powerlessness of the person before the huge bureaucracies of capitalist modernity. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy.* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See Berlet and Lyons, "Driving Out the Money Changes: Fascists Politics in the New Deal Era" in *Right Wing Populism*; Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)