Castration anxiety, COVID-19 and the extremist right

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In this article, I draw on Theodor W. Adorno’s psychoanalytically inspired works on (neo-)fascism and psychoanalytic theory to outline the threat of castration in contemporary capitalist societies on economic, interpersonal and bodily levels. I then explain how the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened people’s castration anxieties on all three levels in a class- and gender-specific way. Finally, I expose how the right extremist president of the United States, Donald Trump, and the right extremist leader of the Austrian Freedom Party, Norbert Hofer, utilised castration anxieties in their psychologically oriented tricks to strengthen their base and capture new followers.

Key words castration anxiety • extremist right • COVID-19 • adorno • psychoanalyses

Key messages
• Outlines castration anxieties prevalent in capitalism.
• It shows how the pandemic heightened castration anxieties.
• Discusses how the extremist right utilized castration anxieties to catch followers.

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Introduction

Theodor W. Adorno, in his Aspekte des Neuen Rechtsradikalismus (Aspects of New Right Extremism, 2019), 1 explains the growing successes of the right extremist National Democratic Party of Germany (NDP) in 1960s Germany. He points out that the propaganda technique used by new right-wing extremist parties and movements to capture followers, which aims at certain formal aspects and isolated contents, ‘is based on a relatively small and repeated standardized and completely objectified tricks, which are very poor and thin, but which on the other hand because of their permanent repetition win a propagandistic value for these movements’ (Adorno, 2019: 43–4).
Fascist agitators used the same standardised tricks during the National Socialist regime and ‘little new has been added to the old repertoire’ (Adorno, 2019: 37).

This article draws on Adorno's psychoanalytically inspired work and on psychoanalytic theory to expose how current right extremist leaders utilise fears and anxieties around the COVID-19 pandemic in their psychologically oriented propaganda tricks. I show that these tricks activate deeper and unconscious fears of castration anxieties in capitalist societies on economic, interpersonal and bodily levels, which the pandemic has heightened. People fall for the tricks of the right extremists because they quell their castration anxieties.

To support my theoretical argument, I analyse how Donald Trump, the extremist right president of the United States, utilised his COVID-19 infection as a means to appeal to voters. I also analyse an interview with the current leader of the extremist right Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (Freedom Party Austria, FPÖ), Norbert Hofer, in the so-called Sommergespräche from August 2020, in which he discusses the Freedom Party’s response to the pandemic.

While the tricks current right extremist leaders use are psychologically oriented, I am not suggesting that the emergence of new global extremist right can be reduced to a psychological problem only. As Adorno rightly points out, ‘right extremism is not a psychological and ideological problem but a highly real and political one. But the falseness and untruth of its own substance forces it to operate with ideological and propagandistic means’ (Adorno, 2019: 54).

Although Adorno makes clear that new right extremism is not a psychological problem, he insists that it must operate with psychologically oriented propaganda tricks to cover over the falseness of its claims, which promise potential followers a better life, while it ultimately aims at the destruction of the same subjects it aims to capture. The above quotation does then not confirm Peter Gordon’s recent argument that Adorno, in his attempts to explain (neo-)fascism, dismissed psychology in general and psychoanalyses in particular (Gordon, 2018: 55). Only an understanding of psychoanalytic theory can help us grasp the deeper mechanisms that make people fall for right extremist propaganda tricks.

The paper is composed of four sections, excluding the introduction and the conclusion. The first, Castrating conditions of capitalism, outlines how castration anxieties are salient on economic, interpersonal and bodily levels in a particular, namely capitalist society. The second, Castration anxiety and COVID-19, explains how the pandemic heightened castration anxieties prevalent in capitalism. The third, Phallic little man: Trump and COVID-19, examines the tricks Trump uses in dealing with his COVID-19 infection to catch new followers. Finally, the last section, Terror of the castrated man: Hofer and COVID-19, outlines the tricks Hofer uses in his response to virus to strengthen his base and win new followers.

**Castrating conditions in capitalism**

It is not a question of whether castration is really carried out; what is decisive is that the danger is one that threatens from outside and that the child believes in it … fear of castration is one of the commonest and strongest motives for repression and thus for the formation of neuroses. (S. Freud, 1989: 108)
The Authoritarian Personality is a collaborative project of a group of psychologists and psychoanalysts, who examine the potential for fascist victory in the United States in the 1940s. Adorno, who was lead author of several chapters, brought to the project his deep interest in psychoanalytic theory, as well as his sensitivity to philosophical and sociological questions.

The authors of The Authoritarian Personality point out that since fascism needs a mass base, but favours the few over the many, it cannot appeal to rational self-interest. Instead, it must appeal to ‘emotional needs, – often to the most primitive and irrational wishes and fears’ (Adorno et al, 2019: 10, emphasis added). People allow themselves to be deceived by fascist propaganda, because of ‘long established hopes and aspirations, fears and anxieties that dispose them to certain beliefs and make them resistant to others. The task of fascist propaganda, in other words, is rendered easier to the degree that antidemocratic potentials already exist in the great mass of people’ (Adorno et al, 2019: 10, emphasis added).

Robyn Marasco rightly points out that Gordon’s (2018) reassessment of The Authoritarian Personality in the age of Trump, which asserts that Adorno distanced himself from this project because of its psychological focus, is incorrect, because ‘far from disavowing or distancing himself from the project Adorno invoked the idea of the authoritarian personality on several occasions after the book’s publication in the 1950s’ (Marasco, 2018: 792).

In Aspekte the Neuen Rechtsradikalismus, Adorno repeatedly refers back to The Authoritarian Personality to explain the new extremist right’s emergence. Here, he begins by elaborating how frustrated economic hopes and aspirations contributed to the rise of the new extremist right in Germany and Austria in the 1960s.

The concentration of capital means the possibility of a permanent declassing of those classes who are in their subjective class-consciousness bourgeois (Adorno, 2019: 11). Furthermore, ‘despite full employment and the prosperity symptoms the specter of technological unemployment is going around to such an extent, that in the age of automation … also those people who are in the production process must feel themselves already as potentially superfluous … as potentially unemployed’ (Adorno, 2019: 12).

There are no full employment and no prosperity symptoms in today’s capitalist societies – of the kind Adorno encountered in the post-Second World War era in Europe and the United States – going around. Rather, since at least the economic crisis in 2008 (but even before that), instead of full employment, we encounter rising unemployment, job insecurity, and the trend to part-time or unpaid work with reduced or no benefits, problems heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic’s extreme impact on economies worldwide.

However, Adorno rightly warns us to not turn to easy economic explanations. We should not, for example, blame the rise of neo-fascism (or right extremism as I call it in this paper) on economic interests, because ‘[fascism’s] apparatus always has a tendency to become independent of the existing economic interests’ particularly once it has established itself as the dominant political force (Adorno, 2019: 16). New right extremism does not appeal to rational (economic) self-interest, but taps into fears and anxieties, and here in particular castration anxieties, which are salient in a particular society, namely, the capitalist kind.

In Die Revidierte Psychoanalyse (The Revised Psychoanalysis, 1962), Adorno points out that Freud clearly understood the societal Verstümmelung (mutilation) people
experience in late capitalist societies. He suggests that revisionist ideas of neo-
Freudians, which aim to do away with the ‘terrible and unmistakable phenomena
such as the threat of castration’, castrate psychoanalysis itself because they do away
with its critical *Stachel*, that is, its sting (Adorno, 1962: 123).

*Verstümmelung* in German draws on the term the *Stummel*, which signifies a shrunk/
cut-off/short phallus, in contrast to the *Stachel*, which signifies a functioning/strong
phallus. Insofar as subjects find themselves *verstümmelt* or castrated in late capitalist
societies, the idea of a ‘totality of character’ created by continuous societal experiences,
as defended by neo-Freudians, is for Adorno fictitious.

For him, it is the traumatic conditions in late capitalist societies that makes us
experience society from childhood on through a series of ‘shocks and abrupt pushes’,
and which generate our character, or our personality, as ‘a system of scars, which we
can only through suffering, and never completely integrate’ (Adorno, 1962: 122–3).

This ‘system of scars’, through which society manifests itself in subjects, generates
neuroses and other personality disturbances, which fascist forces can utilise. As
Adorno puts it, ‘castration in the age of concentration camps is more characteristic
for social reality than competition’ (Adorno, 1962: 130). By this, he means that it is
not competition in capitalist societies, as neo-Freudians suggest, which activates the
potential of hostility in subjects and which we see in full force in fascism. Rather,
subjects’ hostility gets activated because they live in a capitalist society held together
It is such threats of castration that activate the anti-democratic potential in the great
mass of people.

Adorno also points at another aspect of capitalism, specifically, subjects’ isolation
from each other, which constitutes castration on an interpersonal level. He explains
that Freud clearly understood how subjects are atomised and divided from each
other through an unbridgeable gap (Adorno, 1962: 133). In capitalism, relationships
between humans are the result of economic conditions that ‘sich über ihre Köpfe
durchsetzen’ (‘prevail above their heads’; Adorno, 1962: 133).

Because we face almost insurmountable difficulties in trying to establish spontaneous
and direct relationships to other people, we must direct our libidinal energy towards
ourselves. According to Adorno, this explains the sociological origins of narcissism
(Adorno, 1962: 131). It is such narcissistic love that, as I will show in this paper, can
be manipulated by new extremist right forces.

In the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1998), Adorno and
Horkheimer elaborate on how capitalism castrates us on a bodily level. Capitalism’s
culture industry shapes our minds and bodies and produces subjects that can be easily
deceived by fascist propaganda. The authors point out that ‘the threat of castration’
is the essence of the culture industry, *which functions as a tool to keep subjects of

Based on sexual refusal, the culture industry produces masochistically mutilated
eunuchs, whose main concern revolves around the coitus because they are ‘never
allowed to pass’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1998: 150). Consequently, ‘in their reality,
in what became of them, all (wo/)men are mutilated’ (Adorno, 1973: 297).

Furthermore, the culture industry massacres and dismembers thought, and leads to
the *Verkümmerung* (atrophy) of the imagination and spontaneity, and the *Verstummnung*
(silencing) of language (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1998: 146). *Insofar as an intact
imagination, the ability to think coherently and speak effectively, and the possibility
to act spontaneously is for Adorno central for critical thinking and resisting the status quo, the culture industry produces castrated subjects who become easily susceptible to fascist propaganda.

Lacan helps us further understand how the threat of castration and castration anxieties are connected to subject formation in general and male subject formation in particular. In Lacan’s thought, the signifier (or the concept, such as one’s given name) brings subjects into being, which underlines the ways how language constitutes subjectivity. However, because there is a hole in the signifier, which Lacan termed the moment of the Real (and which parallels Adorno’s notion of non-identity), the subject, who emerges via the signifier, remains what Lacan calls ‘a subject-with-holes (sujet troué)’ (Lacan, 1977 [1973]: 182).7

The subject’s confrontation with the hole at its centre is a traumatic moment because it confronts her with the fact that she will never become whole. Two affects are connected to the moment of the Real: desires and anxieties. Lacan distinguishes desire from need and relates it to the fundamental hole in the whole of the signifier (Lacan, 1991: 227).

Desire is the wish of the subject to do away with these holes and become a whole subject. However, the traumatic confrontation with the Real tells the subject that she cannot become whole, no matter how much she desires it. The impossibility to become whole generates anxieties. While all subjects feel anxious when confronted with the moment of the Real, because it tells them that they remain subjects-with-holes, men feel particularly anxious, because the ‘phallus’ is on man’s side in Lacan’s schema of becoming a subject (Lacan, 1998: 8).8

For Lacan ‘the phallus is a signifier’ and as such does not refer to the organ (Lacan, 2002: 275). The phallus signifies the moment of the Real, which is when meaning ‘slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including precisely those that are the most essential, those that are constituted by the agency of the signifier’ (Lacan, 1992: 314). Since the phallus stands for the anxiety-provoking moment of the Real, as Renata Salecl points out, men cannot be happy about having the phallus on their side (Salecl, 2002), because the phallus refers to ‘an image whose reality is its incompleteness’ (Lacan, 2002: 273).

For Lacan, the phallus is fallible and confronts men with their incompleteness precisely with the signifier, which is supposed to guarantee their masculinity/manhood. As Lacan puts it in his seminar on anxiety, ‘(t)he fact that the phallus is not found where we expect it to be, where we require it to be … is what explains that anxiety is the truth of sexuality’ (Lacan, 1963, cited in Salecl, 2002). Although both men and women are exposed to the threat of castration in capitalist societies, the fact that we require men to have the phallus, which denotes their incompleteness, heightens men’s castration anxieties on economic, interpersonal and bodily levels, which new right extremist forces can manipulate for their own political and economic interests.

COVID-19 and castration anxiety

The pandemic has heightened the already existing castration anxieties in capitalism and added new ones, providing ample fuel for the psychologically oriented tricks found in extremist right propaganda. These effects can be felt by all subjects in three areas: first, the economy; second, in interpersonal relationships; and third, the body.
Let me begin by considering the first area: the pandemic has heightened castration anxieties around the economy in a class-specific way. To be a non-castrated or ‘whole’ subject subjectively identified with or objectively part of the bourgeois class, you need to hold on to or strengthen your class position and the privileges and social status associated with the bourgeois class (Adorno, 2019: 11). To be a non-castrated and ‘whole’ subject from the poor and working classes, you need to secure a job, which allows you to not only survive, but also maintain a decent livelihood and the possibility to ‘move up’ the economic hierarchy.

For subjects identified with the bourgeois class, the pandemic has heightened the threat of castration, because it has made the threat of becoming declassed a reality or moved it closer to reality. For this class, the pandemic implies the threat or the actual cutting off of their ‘phallus’ in an economic sense. Such potential or actual castration also meant the potential or actual loss of their class privileges and associated social status, making it more difficult if not impossible for them to strengthen their class position.

Small business owners, who had to close and could not reopen their businesses, were confronted with the reality of economic castration in particular. The castration anxieties of subjects from the poor and working classes have also been heightened with the pandemic. Many have lost their jobs. Others cannot get a job that allows them to not just survive but make a decent livelihood. The pandemic affected particularly the gendered and raced proletariat – those women and men, often of minority backgrounds, working in the service industry. It has also further frustrated working class hopes and aspirations to ‘move up’ the economic hierarchy.

Although the capitalist ideology of class mobility remains intact, the pandemic has made the idea that it is the individual’s fault that she is not doing better economically less convincing, because the pandemic made it more obvious that objective conditions are responsible for the individual’s economic misfortune. Furthermore, the pandemic moved the spectre of becoming homeless and living on the streets closer to reality, particularly in the United States. The spectre of becoming homeless also compounded castration anxieties, especially for the poor and working classes, insofar as becoming homeless is a core expression of finding oneself ‘economically castrated’ in capitalist societies.

The pandemic has also heightened castration anxieties on an interpersonal level. While we are already atomised in capitalist society, the pandemic has further divided us from other people. Through lockdowns and social distancing measures, COVID-19 has tangibly widened the already ‘unbridgeable gap’ between people. The pandemic has made it obvious that relationships between people result from social and economic conditions that have ‘prevailed above our heads’ (Adorno, 1962: 133). It has exacerbated the difficulties of establishing spontaneous and direct relationships to other people and, with that, interpersonal castration anxieties (Adorno, 1962: 131). The lockdown increased the isolation we experience in capitalism, because we are not allowed to meet those people we regularly used to meet outside of the home, for example, at work or social events. Even our relationships with people in our home – partners, children, parents, roommates – have been affected, since any sign of COVID-19 meant self-isolation from other members in your household to avoid endangering them.

Furthermore, for those without and looking for a partner, COVID-19 meant not being able to go on dates, likely intensifying feelings of isolation. Partners, friends and colleagues became potential threats, and since asymptomatic people can spread
the virus too, it is virtually impossible tell who is safe and who is not. Because the pandemic made it more difficult if not impossible for us to turn libidinal energy towards other people, it forced us, perhaps more so than ever before, to turn our libidinal energy towards ourselves. As I will show in the coming section, it is such narcissistic love that the extremist right utilises for its purposes.

The pandemic has also amplified the castrating impact of the culture industry on our bodies and minds, because the sites where relationships with co-workers, colleagues, friends, students, and potential partners are established and maintained have shifted. For many people, their relationships rely almost exclusively on the main element of today’s culture industry, the internet. Given that many people now spend most of their days on the internet to meet their social needs, the culture industry, which bombards us with ads whenever we are online, has an even stronger and more intrusive presence in our lives than Adorno could have imagined.

The stronger exposure to today’s culture industry on the internet increases its castrating capacities. It has now more opportunities to mutilate our critical thinking, atrophy our imagination, and silence our critical voice, so we cannot imagine anything beyond what the culture industry impels us to want and buy. Moreover, these conditions also create opportunities for the new, internet savvy extremist right to catch new followers, particularly on social media. It is no coincidence that the new extremist right aims to capture people’s minds (and bodies) precisely with the technology that contributes towards stifling critical thought, and that its psychologically oriented propaganda tricks work with the same tricks as advertising as Adorno shows us in his *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses* (2000).

Finally, the pandemic has heightened bodily castration anxieties that are not salient in capitalism per se, but that are COVID-19 specific. The pandemic created anxieties around getting the disease itself of course. After all, it is a disease with no known cure. The emergence of new mutations keeps introducing new unknowns about infections, mortality, vaccine efficacy, and so on. Furthermore, the virus attacks the body, rendering it sick, with the potential of death looming.

Insofar as the healthy (and young) body is a standard for everyone in capitalist societies, and that having such a body defines one’s ‘wholeness’ as a subject, the potential attack on one’s body by the COVID-19 virus has heightened castration anxieties on a concrete, bodily level. Certainly, capitalist ideology demands that particularly bodies of the gendered and raced proletariat are young and healthy, so they can be exploited by what Marx calls the ‘vampire capital’ (*Marx, 2001 [1947]: 247*). A potentially sick proletarian body infected by the virus, which is incapable of work, frustrates the capitalist thirst for blood.

Also, while the pandemic has heightened (class-specific) castration anxieties for all, it has heightened male castration anxieties particularly. This is because, as mentioned, we require men to have the phallus, to denote their completeness. In contemporary capitalist societies, the signifier phallus, which does not denote any positive meaning, is ‘filled up’ with and refers to three meanings. These meanings all pertain to standards of masculinity and manhood in such societies: first, they demand men’s ability to have ‘economic success’; second, they demand men’s virility, which implies men’s capacity to be sexually potent; and third, such standards demand a ‘strong and healthy’ male body.11
The pandemic has heightened men’s castration anxieties, which revolve around these three interconnected meanings of the phallus on the economic, interpersonal and bodily levels outlined above. First, although the pandemic has heightened the threat of declassing for all subjects of the bourgeois class, the threat of economic castration is stronger for men from this class, because society often views them as being responsible for maintaining or strengthening the privileges and social status associated with the bourgeois class (although it is more and more women who take over this function). And while all subjects from the gendered and raced proletariat experience heightened economic castration anxieties, such anxieties are specific for proletarian men, as there exists still the expectation that they are the ‘breadwinners’. However, it is more and more women from the poor and working classes who carry out this function.

Second, the virus heightened men’s castration anxieties in the second sense outlined above, as having a sick body implies the potential threat of losing male virility. Men – and here particularly working class and minority men, which underlines their sexual objectification – are defined (and often define themselves) by their male virility. Becoming infected with the virus potentially diminishes men’s sexual capacities, and quarantine measures make it more difficult if not impossible for them to engage with or find sexual partners, who confirm their virility.

Finally, because the phallus is on men’s side, men of all classes perceive themselves and are perceived by others as whole male subjects only if they have a ‘strong, healthy male body’, the pandemic, which threatens to render the male body sick and weak, has heightened male castration anxieties around their bodies. Moreover, masculinity implies ‘fighting back’ against a threat. But the virus, which we still do not fully understand, does not allow such a strategy, compounding further men’s castration anxieties.

**The phallic little man: Trump and COVID-19**

The psychoanalytic thinker Anna Freud in her *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* outlines that it is ‘anxiety which sets the defensive process going’ (A. Freud, 1993: 57), and details the different defence mechanisms that allow us to cope with our anxieties. She points out that the core defence mechanisms we use to deal with castration anxiety is denial. As she explains, ‘(t)he method of denial, upon which is based the fantasy of the reversal of the real facts into their opposite, is employed in situations in which it is impossible to escape some painful external impression’ (A. Freud, 1993: 93).

She provides the example of a boy who aimed to master his castration anxiety by denying that objects are anxiety-provoking, which he achieved through transforming them into friendly beings that either protect or obey him (A. Freud, 1993: 115). Denial is then a strategy to cope with anxiety-provoking external realities, such as the coronavirus, which heightens our castration anxieties on bodily, interpersonal and economic levels.

The core defence strategy the extremist right offered its (potential) followers in its psychologically oriented tricks utilising the heightened castration anxieties in capitalism provoked through the COVID-19 pandemic has been denial. From Trump in the United States to Bolsonaro in Brazil, to Hofer in Austria, extremist right leaders recommended or enforced policies that denied the pandemic’s severity.
Denial was implicit in policies that recommended not wearing masks and not getting vaccinated, lifting the lockdown, going back to work, allowing gatherings of larger groups of people, disregarding social distancing measures, and ignoring travel bans.

Although these behaviours and policies likely contributed to worsening the pandemic, they have assisted extremist right leaders in capturing (new) followers, because they allowed their followers to quell heightened castration anxieties on bodily, interpersonal and economic levels. These policies allowed them to reverse reality, in which the heightened threat of castration through the coronavirus turned into something, as Trump put it, one ‘does not need to fear’.

The recommendation to not wear masks and not get vaccinated, which denies the reality that the virus spreads and how one might be able to protect oneself from it, allows one to cope with the threat of an actual attack on the body, and that one might get sick and thus become castrated on a bodily level through the virus. The recommendations to disregard the lockdown, social distancing and travel bans, and allow gatherings of larger crowds, deny how such recommendations heighten the possibility of becoming infected. However, they allow those plagued with interpersonal castration anxieties and fears of heightened isolation to cope with such anxieties and fears.

The ‘let’s get back to work’ strategy denies the reality that such strategy, particularly when leaders enforce it prematurely, heightens the risk of escalating the pandemic. However, it allows subjects of all classes, who are struggling with heightened economic castration anxieties, to cope with such anxieties, making them potential extremist right followers. Insofar as men have the phallus (which, again, refers to the anxiety-provoking moment of the Real) on their side, the pandemic has particularly heightened their castration anxieties on bodily, economic and interpersonal levels.

To fully grasp how extremist right denial strategies turn into effective psychologically oriented tricks, which allow the extremist right to recruit new followers and strengthen its base, we must consider how castration anxieties are connected to deeper fears around people’s subjectivities. COVID-19 has heightened subjects’ anxieties around their fundamental impossibility to become ‘whole subjects’, also heightening their desire to become whole. Here the extremist right provides its (potential) followers with the object that allows them to become or feel themselves like a mirage as whole and non-castrated subjects: objet petit a.

In the Lacanian theoretical framework, objet petit a is the historically contingent and unconscious fantasy object that provides the subject with the illusion that she can, after all, become whole. This fantasy object fulfils the subject’s desire for wholeness and allows her to get rid of her anxieties that reaching wholeness is impossible. As Lacan puts it: ‘The objet petit a is what falls from the subject in anxiety. It is precisely that same object that I delineated as the cause of desire’ (Lacan, 1990: 82, emphasis added).

Extremist right propaganda techniques provide (potential) followers with unconscious fantasy objets petit a, which allows them to feel as whole subjects and deal with castration anxieties salient in capitalism and increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. These fantasy objects conceal the impossibility of becoming whole (Lacan, 1977 [1973]: 103). One unconscious fantasy objet petit a that the extremist right offers to its (potential) followers is the leader himself.\textsuperscript{13}

The leader as objet petit a is, for example, salient in the standardised ‘great little man’ trick, which fascist leaders have previously used. It implies that fascist agitators
portray themselves in the contradictory image as strong and at the same time weak (Adorno, 2000: 19). In *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda* (2002: 141), Adorno further explains this trick: ‘While appearing as a 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.’

The leader must appear as a strong or ‘phallic superman’, so the follower can transfer her (in capitalism frustrated) libidinal energy to the leader. This transfer of libidinal energy creates a strong and lasting libidinal or love bond between the followers and the leader (S. Freud, 1989: 31). In this process, the follower replaces their ego-ideal, which is the result of what society demands from them (such as being economically and personally ‘successful’), but to which she cannot live up to, and which creates feelings of failure frustrations, with that of the leader, so the strength of the leader becomes their strength.

Simultaneously, the leader must appear in the contradictory image of the ‘suburban barber’, who is, just like the followers, weak. 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 ego, the superman must still resemble the follower and appear as his “enlargement”’ (Adorno, 2002: 142).

In Lacanian terminology, the followers ‘fall in love’ with the leader, because he provides them with the unconscious fantasy objet petit a, which allows them to feel like a mirage as whole subjects again. Such love is purely narcissistic (Lacan, 1998: 7), because the (potential) followers fall and stay in love with the leader only, because he allows them via objet petit a to quell their castration anxieties. As Lacan puts it, ‘I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the object petit a – I mutilate you’ (Lacan, 1977 [1973]: 263).

In their responses to COVID-19 pandemic, extremist right leaders used the ‘great little man’ device in their psychologically oriented tricks, because it allowed (potential) followers to deny the threat or their actual castration. For example, Trump created the fantasy image of himself as objet petit a, as the ‘phallic superman’ by showing that he was not afraid of the virus, which he reinforced through not wearing facemasks and organising rallies during the pandemic, and calling those that wear masks as weak. The underlying message is that he does not need any protection against the virus, because as a ‘phallic superman’ he has a ‘strong and healthy’ (male) body.

Trump also created the image of himself as objet petit a, the ‘phallic superman’ who is also living up to other male standards in capitalist society. He repeatedly foregrounded his virility as a man through sexist remarks and that he is ‘economically powerful’. The potential follower, threatened with castration anxiety on bodily, economic and interpersonal levels, can cope with this anxiety by transferring his libido to the leader, and which allows him to feel herself like a ‘phallic superman (or woman)’.

That the ‘phallic superman’ image deceives especially men is to be expected, because the phallus is on their side, and which, as discussed in the previous section, heightens their castration anxieties on all levels. It is thus unsurprising that men are less likely to wear a mask.\(^{14}\) Wearing a mask signifies in the extremist right rhetoric that you are weak, diminishing your manhood/masculinity. If you refuse to wear a mask, you are like your leader: a ‘phallic superman,’ with a strong, virile male body.\(^{15}\)

When Trump got infected with the virus, it seemed that the image of the ‘phallic superman’ was tainted. As such, Trump did everything to project that he is still the ‘phallic superman’ that his followers are in love with to deal with their castration
anxiety, including returning home early from the hospital, tweeting ‘Don’t be afraid. You’re going to beat it’, and pointing out that he is a ‘young and healthy’ man, which is why he beat the virus so easily.\(^{16}\)

He even made plans during his stay in the hospital, that on leaving, he would initially appear frail, but then he would pull open his shirt to reveal a Superman top as ‘a show of strength’. Although Trump later dropped the idea (most likely due to his advisors telling him that this was not such a great idea), he still managed to make a carefully orchestrated ‘show of strength’. On release from the hospital and arrival at the White House South Lawn, he took off his mask and saluted from the South Portico balcony, while the helicopter took off.\(^{17}\)

However, Trump needed not be so worried to appear as a weak man, because of the second part of the ‘great little man’ psychologically oriented device: while the leader must appear as strong, he must at the same time appear as weak. ‘Even the fascist leader’s startling symptoms of inferiority, his resemblance of and asocial psychopaths, is thus anticipated in Freud’s theory’, Adorno points out. He adds that for the sake of those parts of the follower’s narcissistic libido that have not been transferred to the ‘phallic superman’ leader image, but remain attached to the follower’s ego, the fascist leader must appear as ‘a person who suggests both omnipotence and the idea that he is just one of the folks, a plain, red-blooded American, untainted by material or spiritual wealth’ (Adorno, 2002: 142).

Trump’s sham acting of still being the ‘phallic superman’, a kind of superhuman who was not afraid even after he got infected with the virus, while at the same time being weak just like his followers (insofar as he is a human just like them, who can get sick)\(^{18}\) strengthened the libidinal ties with his followers. It advanced the transfer of their narcissistic libido to the leader,\(^{19}\) while allowing them to still feel that the leader is weak much like themselves. Many Trump followers travelled long stretches to ‘show their love’, or strengthen the libidinal tie to their leader, while he was in the hospital.

For example, Neil Melton, a construction worker from Kansas, said he likes to see the president project strength, such as when Trump walked on the top of the White House staircase and took off his mask after returning from the hospital. Melton is ‘in love’ with Trump because he projects strength. Trump’s ‘phallic superman’ image provides Melton with the unconscious fantasy objet petit a, which allows him to feel himself as a ‘phallic man’ and quell his castration anxieties on economic, interpersonal and bodily levels.

At the same time, argues Melton, he approves of the president, because with the ways he is candid about his experience with the virus, he tries to show us that ‘Hey, I am just like you.’\(^{20}\) Here, this Trump follower clearly expresses that the leader must project the contradictory image of himself as a ‘phallic superman’, and the image of the average, weak man, whose phallus has been or can be cut off at any time. This latter image allows the follower, who has retained some parts of his narcissistic libido attached to his ego, to still experience the president as an enlargement of himself. We can, hence, see how ‘[p]sychological ambivalence helps to work a social miracle. The leader image gratifies the follower’s twofold wish to submit to authority and to be the authority himself’ (Adorno, 2002: 142).

This example underlines that the leader can guess the psychological wants and needs of those susceptible to his propaganda because he resembles them psychologically, and is distinguished from them by a capacity to express without inhibitions what is
latent in them, rather than by an intrinsic superiority (Adorno, 2002: 148). Given how Trump resembles his followers psychologically, it seems that Trump’s idea of appearing at first frail and then revealing a Superman top after his release from the hospital could have been a good idea to strengthen his base after all, but his advisors might not know that.

Terror of the castrated man: Hofer and COVID-19

Norbert Hofer, the Austrian Freedom Party’s current leader, also draws on the ‘phallic little man’ technique in his psychologically oriented trick set to strengthen his base and catch new followers. Hofer portrays himself as the ‘phallic superman’ by pointing out that he would not vaccinate himself because, he declared, ‘I am a healthy man’, which projects a strong and virile male body. He is also against the introduction of mandatory vaccination against the coronavirus for Austrians.21

Given how the ‘phallic superman’ image serves as objet petit a, which allows followers, who are plagued by economic, interpersonal and bodily castration anxieties, to get rid of such anxieties and experience themselves as ‘phallic superman (and woman)’ themselves, it is of no surprise that two-thirds of his Austrian followers are, like their leader, against mandatory vaccination and do not intend to be vaccinated against the coronavirus. Not needing any protection against the virus signifies that they have, like their leader, ‘strong, healthy bodies’ and the actual weakness they experience in their daily lives, like a mirage, disappears.

At the same time, Hofer portrays himself as ‘just as one of them’, by pointing out that he is against a travel warning or ban to countries, such as Croatia, a favourite vacation spot for Austrians, where the virus was not under control at the time of the interview, because ‘one has saved the whole year for one’s vacation’. Hofer’s ‘feeling’ for the enjoyment of the ‘little man’ provides the (potential) followers with the image that Hofer, is (or enjoys himself) ‘just like them’, which they need for those parts of their narcissistic love that they have not transferred to the strong leader image.

Since Austrians view Hofer as a ‘castrated man’,22 the ‘phallic superman’ psychological device is perhaps not as convincing as in Trump’s case, which is why he must draw on additional psychologically oriented tricks to strengthen his base and catch new followers. One salient trick he uses is the ‘freedom trick’. As Adorno explains, here the neo-fascist leader draws on the ‘complex of autonomy’, which is supposed to be guaranteed in democracy, but remains not fully realised in the ruling system (Adorno, 2019: 39). Neo-fascists used slogans such as ‘now one can vote again,’ which was very effective, ‘as it gave people the feeling that one would get into the possession of the freedom, the free decision making, the spontaneity, with exactly the movement, which aims to abolish freedom’ (Adorno, 2019: 40).

Hofer opposes masks mandates, compulsory vaccination, lockdowns and the closure of borders,23 as such measures (which were or would be enacted by the ruling government) ‘restrict the fundamental and freedom rights’ of the Austrian population, which he wants to protect as the leader of the Austrian Freedom Party. Together with the naming of the Austrian Freedom Party, such discourse suggests for the (potential) follower that, if they joins the FPÖ, she can obtain what she cannot quite realise in current Austrian democracy (even without COVID-19): freedom.

Hofer also uses stereotypes in his psychologically oriented tricks, and asserted that the ‘Quran is more dangerous than covid’.24 In The Authoritarian Personality, Adorno
Castration anxiety, COVID-19 and the extremist right

points out that in modern capitalist societies people subjected to social and economic processes, which they cannot control and which is beyond their understanding, because they are that are the result of supra-individual laws. Such a situation leads to an intellectual alienation of the individual from society, which, as he puts it, ‘is experienced by the individual as disorientation, with concomitant fear and uncertainty’ (Adorno et al, 2019: 618–19, emphasis added).

Stereotypes are nothing but a ‘device for effortless “orientation”’ in a cold, alienated, and largely ununderstandable world’ (Adorno et al, 2019: 608). In the Austrian Freedom Party’s discourses, the alienness of Muslims in European and particularly in Austrian society function as a ‘searchlight’. Austrians live in a cold and alienated society, which has become even colder and more alienated since the pandemic. Capitalist society subjects them to social and economic processes beyond their control, which have become even more out-of-control since COVID-19.

The construction of the stereotype of the ‘frightening or castrating Muslim (man)’ allows Austrians to displace their castration anxieties on the most vulnerable groups in society, and find orientation in a world of disorientation. Once one displaces one’s castration anxieties around the virus onto a concrete group of people, one is able to ‘fight back’, which one cannot do with the virus, and which comes in handy to deal with male castration anxieties especially.

Here Hofer, akin to fascist agitators, ‘fights against windmills’ and, as Adorno puts it, ‘builds up a paranoic system which he later attacks. This mechanism is of particular importance, since it shows the deep-rooted tendency in fascism to attack images rather than the reality they may represent’ (Adorno, 2000: 106). The Austrian Freedom Party in general, and Hofer in particular, build up a paranoic system of the Muslim imaginary foe, because the reality of Muslims at the bottom of Austrian society would not provide them with enough objects of hatred.

On the other hand, as Adorno further points out, Hofer, akin to fascist agitators, ‘consciously or unconsciously reckons with a “paranoic” attitude among his listeners, a kind of persecution mania which craves the confirmation of its bogies. Knowing that he can get hold of his followers only by satisfying this craving, he cuts his imaginary to fit their psychological desires’ (Adorno, 2000: 106). It seems that Hofer, by providing his followers with the anxiety-provoking image of Muslims as foes, also seems to reckon with the persecution mania of Austrians, who, since the collapse of the National Socialist regime, seem to have ‘lost’ their favourite bogeyman – Jews.25

In his response to COVID-19, Hofer also uses a set of tricks that Adorno groups together as ‘terror strategy.’ The terror strategy utilises fear and ambivalence by pointing at the threat of an impending catastrophe. It is composed of quasi-rational surface stimuli with which it sets in motion irrational psychological mechanisms. While the emotions this strategy calls forth are distinctly negative, it at the same time promises ‘unconscious gratifications as supplementary effects of the negative statements’ (Adorno, 2000: 54).

One trick in the ‘terror strategy’ is the ‘tingling backbone device’. Here the fascist agitator ‘terrorizes his audience by constantly pointing out all sorts of threats to them. He does not rely so much on their desire for happiness as on their fear that things may become even worse, while ceaselessly stressing that they are desperate even now’ (Adorno, 2000: 62). In the interview, Hofer repeatedly points out and comes back to the argument that one ought not to overestimate COVID-19, as there are
many other dangers, such as the ‘millions of people who have died of AIDS’ as well as many other deadly diseases.

Here he uses large-sounding numbers to terrorise people, who are afraid of all sorts of sicknesses, to give up thinking and react in the Rette-sich-wer-kann (‘save yourself who can’) pattern, which is an attitude favourable to obedience to a leader who promises to think and act for them if only they join the movement (Adorno, 2000: 63–4). Hofer not only terrorises his audience with the threat of bodily castration, but also by pointing at their looming economic castration. Due to the lockdown, he asserts ‘thousands of businesses have a new debt, and there will be a bankruptcy wave … the economy cannot breathe anymore’.

Here Hofer equates the bodily effects of COVID-19 (not being able to breathe) with the “deadly effects” measures to contain the virus could have on the economy. This equation anticipates economic castration of his followers. While the surface effect is for people to join a movement that promises to combat the danger, Adorno points at a more unconscious effect, namely that ‘they enjoy the description of atrocities because they themselves want to commit them some day’ (Adorno, 2000: 61). In the case of COVID-19, the unconscious effect might be that the followers enjoy the prospect of looming bodily and economic castration, because on some level they desire their physical and economic doom.

Adorno points out that psychoanalytically speaking extremist right movements appeal to their followers’ desire for social catastrophe (Adorno, 2019: 19–20). However, Adorno also asserts that such behaviour is not purely psychologically motivated, but has an objective basis:

> The one who does not see anything in front of him[/her] and who does not want a change in the societal basis … wants out of his[/her] own situation the doom (Untergang), not just the doom of the own group, but the doom of the whole if possible. (Adorno, 2019: 20)

Many people, especially those experiencing worsening economic conditions due the pandemic, do not see ‘anything in front of them’. As such, it seems that the new extremist right with its denial of COVID-19 and its policies to address the pandemic (including not wearing masks, not keeping social distance, going back to work, and so on), which all likely worsened the pandemic, played right into doom desires of their followers, and such measurements might have even allowed them to gain new followers.

**Conclusion**

To dissuade people from being captured by new right extremist propagandists, Adorno asserts that we need to make these tricks real, give them a drastic name, describe them in detail, describe their implications, because ultimately nobody wants to be the stupid one or, as one would say in Vienna, to be the ‘Wurzen’ [root]. And that the whole is based on a gigantic psychological root technique, a gigantic psychological rip-off, that is definitely to be shown (Adorno, 2019: 54).
However, Freud helps us understand that just naming these tricks is not enough to make people not fall for them, as they operate on an unconscious level. As Freud points out in his *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* (1958) ‘giving the resistance a name could not result in its immediate cessation. One must allow the patient time to become more conversant with the resistance that is unknown to him/her, to work through it to curb her compulsion to repeat and act out his/her repressed memories (Freud, 1958: 155). Freud means here that if we do not work through but try to forget the shocks we have been subjected to since childhood, which created our ‘system of scars’ we risk repeating our repressed memories. The compulsion to repeat, which takes place under the conditions of resistance, is a way of remembering the ‘shocks and abrupt pushes’ through which we experience society. Freud points out that the subject repeats everything that ‘has made its way from the sources of the repressed into his/her manifest personality – his/her inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his/her pathological character traits’ (Freud, 1958: 151).

The psychologically oriented tricks of extremist right propaganda utilise our ‘unserviceable attitudes and pathological character traits’, which are the result of our ‘system of scars’, through which society has imprinted itself on our bodies (and minds). The COVID-19 pandemic, with its threat of or actual castration on the economic, interpersonal and bodily levels – which meant for many people the threat or the actual loss of jobs and income, loved ones, and bodily vitality – has added another layer to our ‘system of scars’.

Instead of allowing their (potential) followers to work through our resistances, which could have allowed them to integrate their scars (however painful this might be), the extremist right’s propaganda tricks provided these followers with defence mechanisms that allowed them to further forget and repress their ‘system of scars’. This involved forgetting the threat or actual castration during the pandemic through the denial of its existence, displacing it onto vulnerable groups, and playing on followers’ doom desires. Such forgetting also secured that the followers continue to act out their repressed memories about their scars by supporting regressive political parties and movements.

To not fall for the ‘psychological rip-off’ of extremist right propaganda tricks, we must work through the shocks we have been exposed to since our childhood and which have been reactivated through the pandemic. Touching our ‘system of scars’ and remembering their origins is a long and painful process, but one that is worth it because, ultimately, it promises us (to a certain degree at least) to counter the disturbances in our personalities, on which right extremist propaganda tricks prey. Without a working through and getting to know our resistances, we are in danger of repeating the horrors of a not too distant National Socialist past.

However, countering the challenges of a global rise of the extremist right must go beyond a mere psychological solution. We must at the same time expose the castrating conditions of capitalism, which extremist right forces utilise in their propaganda tricks, and do everything to challenge and overturn an economic system, which has proven for a while now to be unable to create a better society for all.

Notes
1 All translations from the German original text into English are the author’s.
2 All translations from the German original text into English are the author’s.
While there was some outcry from the EU when the FPÖ became the junior partner of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) in a ruling coalition in 1999, such outcry was almost completely absent when the FPÖ again became junior partner of the conservative party in 2017. This underlines how extremist right parties have become normalised and acceptable in Europe.

Here I also challenge Samir Gandesha’s (2017) suggestion that we must eschew Freudian psychoanalyses to grasp the rise of the far right.

The term ‘culture industry’ referred in the mid-20th century to Hollywood films, television shows, radio broadcasts, and print periodicals. Today it also refers to the internet, and here in particular to social media.

The German term verkümmern refers to the term Kummer (sorrow) as well as to ‘castration’ (the kümmeliche phallus). Moreover, the German terms Verstummung und Verkümmern both refer to Verstümmelung (mutilation).

Such a view on the subject challenges Gordon’s view that psychoanalyses continue to hold up ‘to society the unrealized ideal of an autonomous individual’ (Gordon, 2018: 63).

To be clear, my argument is that both men and women have castration anxieties in capitalist societies. However, Lacan helps us understand why such anxieties are heightened on the side of men.

I make this distinction, because (especially in the United States) many people objectively part of the working classes identify with the bourgeois class, or hope to move up to that class, because neoliberal capitalist ideology has convinced them that they can make it from dishwasher to millionaire, and they are called ‘losers’ if they fail to move up the class hierarchy (and which covers over existing class, gender and racial barriers to class mobility).

For example, through their children, who despite higher education in the ‘right schools’, might not secure a bourgeois job in the current economic conditions.

There is also a class-specific connotation, as capitalism specifically views working class and minority men as needing such a healthy body, so it can better exploit them.

Lacan (2007: 204) outlines in his reading of Freud’s Dora case that Dora’s wealthy father was a castrated man, because he was sick throughout his life.

Here I would like to note that I and not Lacan argue that extremist right leaders provide themselves as objet petit a for their followers.

It comes of no surprise, that it is ‘hyper-masculine’ men (who are anxious about their masculinity) who voted again for Trump in the 2020 US presidential election.

His suggestion that he is ‘young and healthy’ turns the reality, that he is 74 years old and clinically obese, into its opposite.

Not to mention that their president has access to healthcare treatment and facilities denied to the gendered and raced proletariat in the United States.

Given the heightened isolation people experience during the pandemic, there is plenty of such narcissistic libido available.
Austrians view Hofer a castrated man in a double sense: first, from being the junior partner of the conservative party in the leading governmental coalition, after the ‘Ibiza affair’, which involved the former leader Strache, the Austrian Freedom Party was demoted from a ruling into an opposition party. Second, unlike Hofer’s predecessors, Haider and Strache, who were all considered to be strong leaders and ‘phallic men’, Hofer himself counts as the ‘soft and friendly face’ of the FPÖ and is considered to be a weak leader.

I am putting ‘lost’ in quotation marks, because, although there is a law which forbids Austrians to openly voice anti-Semitic attitudes, there are ways to circumvent such law – such as in indirect remarks and references about Jews, which are also salient in the Freedom Party.

I am indebted to the reviewer for this important insight and the reference to Freud.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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