

The Will to Be Ruled: Totalitarianism and the Fantasy of Freedom

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Abstract

Modern liberalism rests on the fiction of the autonomous self – the rational chooser imagined to act freely within a stable moral order. Yet under the pressures of uncertainty and social disintegration, this ideal collapses into its opposite: the craving for authority. This essay traces how the Enlightenment’s myth of autonomy generates the psychological, libidinal, and linguistic conditions for totalitarianism. Drawing on Fromm, Arendt, Adorno, Reich, Han, and Desmet, it argues that instability and isolation drive individuals to seek coherence through obedience, moralising submission as voluntary freedom and even as pleasure. The paradox of the self-governed subject – *I choose to obey, therefore I am free* – forms the emotional and moral grammar of modern authoritarianism. Totalitarianism thus emerges not as a historical aberration but as the logical endpoint of Enlightenment individualism: a collective escape from the unbearable weight of self-creation. Within this framework, *Dis-Integrationism* reframes ethics as maintenance rather than mastery, proposing responsiveness over redemption – an attentiveness that keeps the field open in the half-light where the self still flickers.

Keywords: Anti-Enlightenment, agency, autonomy, obedience, totalitarianism, mass psychology, authoritarian personality, escape from freedom, *causa sui*, herd behaviour, moral economy, Dis-Integrationism, Enlightenment critique, political psychology, collective responsiveness

Preamble

Modern liberal democracies continue to venerate autonomy as their founding myth: the self-determining subject capable of rational choice and moral self-legislation. Yet the very conditions that produce this ideal – individualisation, secularisation, and economic precarity – also erode the psychological ground required to sustain it. The Enlightenment’s sovereign self was always a construction, but under contemporary instability it reveals itself as untenable fiction. What emerges in its place is not emancipation but exhaustion, and with exhaustion, a longing for external authority.

This dynamic – the retreat from freedom into obedience – constitutes the emotional infrastructure of totalitarianism. As Fromm, Arendt, and Adorno each observed, the modern subject seeks relief from the anxiety of self-creation by submitting to a higher organising principle, whether political, religious, or technological. The rhetoric of freedom thus conceals its inversion: submission reimagined as agency, conformity recoded as moral clarity, even pleasure. Recent analyses of mass formation (Desmet, 2022) echo this pattern, describing how destabilised individuals coalesce into collective certainty around charismatic authority, finding in synchrony the ecstasy that reason could never provide.

The following essay examines this paradox through the lens of *Dis-Integrationism*, situating totalitarianism not as a historical aberration but as the pathological fulfilment of Enlightenment individualism. It traces the gradient by which autonomy becomes obedience, freedom becomes loyalty, and pleasure sanctifies submission. In closing, it offers not redemption but maintenance: an ethic of responsiveness in the half-light where the myth of the self flickers, still visible, as the dark gathers.

I. The Paradox of the Self-Governed Subject

Modern political philosophy begins with a hallucination: the rational chooser who governs himself. Locke imagined a mind as private property—‘every man has a property in his own person.’ Kant refined it into moral self-legislation: the will as both subject and sovereign

(Locke, 1690; Kant, 1785). Together they built a metaphysics of autonomy, a miniature *causa sui*. Having dethroned God, they enthroned His likeness inside the skull.

The rational agent was a convenient fiction for systems that required calculable responsibility. Law needed intention, economy needed consent, morality needed guilt. Agency became the hinge on which accountability could turn. Its freedom was never ontological – it was administrative. *Against Agency* traced this double bookkeeping: autonomy functioning as the alibi by which institutions disguise coercion as choice (Willis, 2025). The sovereign chooser is simply the subject rendered legible to contracts, courts, and creditors. Every online ‘terms and conditions’ box re-enacts the ritual: a gesture of consent so automatic it no longer registers as submission. Freedom here is a keystroke – recorded, timestamped, and archived as evidence of self-determination.

Psychology has long whispered what philosophy refuses to hear: the autonomous self does not exist outside its scaffolding. Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* describes the dizziness that follows emancipation from authority (Fromm, 1941). What Enlightenment celebrates as self-governance the psyche experiences as vertigo – a sudden absence of handrails. The organism built for interdependence finds isolation intolerable; the will, detached from community, begins to wobble. Freedom, far from a triumph of maturity, becomes a symptom of displacement.

Contemporary cognitive science deepens the wound. The ‘decision’ precedes awareness by milliseconds (Libet, 1983; Soon et al., 2008; Wegner, 2002); intention is a *post-hoc* narrative pasted onto neural noise. Our cherished autonomy is a coherence illusion that keeps the social machine from panic. Without it, law and economy would lose their protagonist – the accountable *I*. With it, they gain a figure who can be praised, taxed, punished, or saved.

Hence the paradox: the more fiercely autonomy is asserted, the more elaborate the dependencies required to sustain it. The Enlightenment subject is self-governing only insofar as infrastructures – juridical, economic, linguistic – govern on its behalf. To speak of a self that

causes itself is to mistake echo for origin. Freedom becomes a style of obedience performed convincingly enough to be mistaken for authorship.

The Enlightenment called this dignity. We might call it exhaustion. The modern subject, still chanting its independence, drags behind it the administrative paperwork of its own creation. The myth of autonomy endures not because it is true but because without it the entire edifice of modern reason would have to confess its dependence. It is this frail construction – heroic, overworked, and terrified of collapse – that later sections will follow as it seeks relief first in fear, then in obedience, and finally in the ecstatic dissolution of the self it could never sustain.

II. The Fear Reflex and the Flight from Freedom

The Enlightenment's self-governed subject begins bravely enough – upright, articulate, and convinced of its independence. But the slightest tremor in its environment exposes how fragile that posture always was. Autonomy, when tested, proves to be a thin membrane stretched over panic. Beneath the rhetoric of self-determination lies the reflex of the frightened animal: to seek shelter in hierarchy.

Freedom is metabolically expensive. It demands attention, time, and the capacity to navigate uncertainty without external command. Under pressure – economic, cultural, or epistemic – the rational subject reverts to an older instinct. The same mind that once declared its independence now searches for a stabilising force to which it can safely surrender. The political theorists of the twentieth century merely documented what biology already knew: that chaos provokes the need for order, and that the fantasy of control sedates fear more effectively than reason ever could.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) first described the broader logic of reason turning into domination, and Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) later gave it psychological form in *The Authoritarian Personality*: the psyche that finds relief in obedience, mistaking submission for strength. The authoritarian type does not reject freedom because he despises it; he rejects it because he cannot endure its ambiguity. The demands of self-authorship

exceed his psychic budget. Arendt, observing the ruins of European liberalism, called this condition *loneliness* – the isolation of individuals severed from the common world, craving structure even at the cost of truth (Arendt, 1951). In her analysis, totalitarianism arises not from collective passion but from the exhaustion of meaning. The lonely mind, stripped of shared reality, welcomes command as reunion.

In the twenty-first century the same reflex operates through subtler machinery. The algorithm now performs the work of the priest. Faced with the vertigo of infinite information, the user turns to digital order: personalised feeds that narrow chaos into certainty. The YouTube rabbit hole, the curated outrage of social media, the endless cycle of threat and reassurance – each converts anxiety into coherence. What looks like autonomy – the freedom to scroll, to post, to choose – is a choreography of attention written elsewhere. We no longer obey monarchs or clerics; we obey metrics. The command is invisible, which makes it feel voluntary.

Fromm foresaw this transition when he wrote that modern man ‘was freed from the external bonds of pre-individualistic society only to be isolated, anxious, and powerless.’ Freedom without anchorage becomes indistinguishable from abandonment. The liberated subject, alone with its choices, begins to long for constraint as reassurance. It is easier to be told what to think than to risk thinking wrongly, easier to obey than to endure the burden of perpetual self-legislation.

Here the Enlightenment’s project begins to invert itself. The reason that once promised mastery now performs triage on its own anxiety. What began as confidence in human rationality dissolves into the craving for paternal control. The mind seeks protection from the very freedom it was taught to cherish. And so, when the Enlightenment’s child gets scared, it doesn’t grow up – it calls for its parents.

III. Manufactured Threat and Escalating Commitment

Fear is never wasted; it’s monetised. Once the craving for authority exists, a market forms to supply it. Every age breeds its own emotional entrepreneurs – priests, demagogues,

influencers – who package instability into something consumable. The modern variant sells reassurance under the brand name of vigilance. Crisis becomes the product; obedience, the subscription model.

The mechanism is elegant in its simplicity. A population raised on the promise of self-mastery discovers it cannot control the world, and so it seeks compensation through spectacle. The demagogue steps forward as both mirror and antidote: a man who embodies the chaos while pretending to command it. He names the enemies, defines the danger, and in doing so restores the illusion of coherence. Le Bon saw this more than a century ago – crowds do not reason; they resonate (Le Bon, 1895). The individual, stripped of complexity, fuses with the group's mood and mistakes resonance for truth.

Karen Stenner's research on the authoritarian dynamic gives the same process empirical weight (Stenner, 2005). When confronted with novelty or ambiguity, many experience it not as stimulation but as contamination. Complexity itself feels menacing. The foreigner, the dissenter, the data that refuse to fit – each becomes evidence of threat. The demagogue exploits this cognitive allergy, translating anxiety into moral certainty: the good are under attack; only unity can save them.

Modern media architecture accelerates the loop. A single fabricated outrage can cycle through a population in minutes, igniting outrage and allegiance simultaneously. Political movements, click-bait journalism, and moral panics over imagined enemies all feed the same economy of affect. 'Crisis' trends, ad revenue spikes, and the emotional entrepreneur reaps both power and profit.

The pattern remains current. In 2025, a national survey on executive power found public anxiety at record levels, with majorities reporting both heightened fear of governmental overreach and a simultaneous desire for stronger leadership (Carpenter, 2025). Moral panic, it seems, is not a relic of history but a renewable resource.

Fromm's insight endures: submission feels like safety, and safety feels like virtue. The follower experiences dependence as restoration – an end to the intolerable ambiguity of freedom. The leader, meanwhile, feeds on devotion, mistaking adoration for legitimacy. Both find temporary relief, and both become addicted to the ritual that provides it.

The logic of escalation follows naturally. To maintain belief, the threat must never subside. Every reprieve endangers the narrative, so new perils must be conjured, new scapegoats named. The demagogue survives by inflating the peril that justifies him. Doubt becomes blasphemy; moderation, betrayal. Once allegiance is publicly declared, withdrawal feels like self-annihilation. Having staked identity on faith in the saviour, the believer cannot renounce him without erasing himself.

Thus, the spectacle perpetuates itself: fear curated, crisis mass-produced, obedience rationalised as participation. The Enlightenment's rational subject, promised mastery over the world, now finds mastery delivered as a service – auto-renewing, algorithmically optimised, and billed monthly to the soul.

IV. The Totalitarian Gradient

Panic, once manufactured, must find a resting place. The crowd cannot stay frightened forever; it must convert anxiety into structure. What follows is not rebellion but liquefaction. Individuals stop behaving as discrete moral agents and begin vibrating to a shared frequency of reassurance. Totalitarianism does not arrive with tanks and decrees; it seeps in as therapy. The cure for isolation is belonging, and belonging – under the right narrative – requires surrender.

Fromm described the first motion of this drift as the *escape from freedom*: the terrified self trading autonomy for certainty. Arendt charted its social form – *loneliness*, the collapse of the shared world that once held meaning in common. Adorno located its temperament – the *authoritarian personality*, rigid yet sentimental, unable to tolerate ambiguity. Desmet, updating the same anatomy for the digital public, calls the final stage *mass formation*: atomised individuals coalescing into a single emotional organism governed by suggestion.

These are not competing theories but stations on a single gradient. The process begins in the nervous system and ends in politics: anxiety seeking relief, relief solidifying as consensus. At a political rally, a stadium concert, or even the viral swell of an online movement, the pattern is visible – the moment when thousands inhale in anticipation and exhale together in recognition. In that instant, thought dissolves into rhythm, and rhythm feels like truth.

The strongman doesn't seize power; he's invited to hold it while everyone finally exhales. His ascent is the collective wish for closure, the longing for an ending that relieves the burden of interpretation. The leader's charisma is the reflection of his followers' fatigue. Authority here is not domination but anaesthesia – the steady hand that assures the trembling body it can stop shaking now.

What begins as psychological adaptation matures into political order. The gradient ends where individuality does: in the tranquillity of conformity. The Enlightenment's rational subject, once imagined as self-governing, dissolves into the comfort of being governed by the self of the crowd. The will to be ruled has found its equilibrium – obedience that feels like peace.

V. The Ecstasy of Submission

The gradient ends in pleasure. What began as the fear of freedom resolves into the joy of relinquishment. Totalitarianism persists because it gratifies. The surrender of agency is not only a reprieve from anxiety; it is a source of pleasure. The moment the self stops insisting on its separateness, a current of relief runs through the body. The tension of choice dissolves, replaced by the steady pulse of the collective. The individual, long trained to bear the weight of autonomy, discovers the exhilaration of letting it drop.

Wilhelm Reich called this the *libidinal economy* of fascism: the eroticisation of hierarchy, the translation of domination into intimacy (Reich, 1933/1970). Obedience becomes a shared secret – an exchange of submission that masquerades as devotion. Arendt's *lonely masses* did not merely flee isolation; they found communion in synchrony, a heartbeat amplified across millions. In the roar of a rally, the chant at a football match, the algorithmic surge of a

viral movement, the same pattern emerges: rhythm dissolves individuality. What appears from the outside as coercion is experienced from within as participation, even grace.

Neuroscience would map this to the dissolution of the self–other boundary, the brain’s reward circuitry lighting up in the presence of rhythmic unison Neuroscience would map this to the dissolution of the self–other boundary, the brain’s reward circuitry lighting up in the presence of rhythmic unison (Konvalinka et al., 2011; Hasson et al., 2012; Durkheim, 1912; Reich, 1933). Theology would call it rapture – the ecstatic relief of being momentarily unmade. Whether through chanting crowds, military parades, or algorithmic chorus lines online, the pattern repeats: identity melts into collective vibration, and that vibration feels divine.

This pleasure is what the Enlightenment could never supply. Rational autonomy offered dignity but not joy. It promised moral worth, not transcendence. Totalitarianism, by contrast, offers transcendence without metaphysics – the thrill of unity with no theology required. To dissolve into the group, the flag, the chant, is to touch a counterfeit infinity that feels more immediate than thought itself.

Hence the difficulty of disillusionment. The ecstasy of submission is chemically, emotionally, and socially reinforced. It satisfies the nervous system and sanctifies belonging; it binds participants to the structure that exploits them. Fromm’s escape-from-freedom thesis must therefore be amended: submission does not merely anaesthetise fear; it generates positive affect. It is not absence but abundance – the pleasure of finally being used.

The will to be ruled is not a defensive reflex; it is an ecstatic impulse. Its devotees do not simply hide from freedom – they dance in its ruins, radiant with the joy of having nothing left to decide.

VI. The Moral Economy of Obedience

Every regime of power requires a theology, and the modern one builds its altar from moral accounting. Once the pleasure of submission has taken hold, it must be dignified; ecstasy

alone is unstable. The state therefore moralises dependence, turning obedience into currency. Loyalty buys belonging, and belonging purchases absolution.

In this economy, submission is no longer shameful – it is sacramental. Obedience becomes patriotism, conformity becomes courage, and silence becomes civic virtue. The rhetoric of sacrifice fills the vacuum where conscience once stood. To obey is to participate in a collective moral project; to dissent is to injure the body politic. The Enlightenment’s self-governing subject, imagined as autonomous creditor of his own worth, is recast as debtor to the community that sustains him. His freedom is a loan he repays through loyalty.

Reich saw this clearly in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*: the erotic charge that binds follower to leader must be disciplined into duty (Reich, 1933/1970). Desire, left unregulated, threatens the hierarchy it sustains. Hence the continual conversion of libido into labour, of longing into obligation. The citizen learns to sublimate rapture into service. To obey becomes to love responsibly.

Byung-Chul Han extends the analysis into the digital present. In *Psychopolitics*, the contemporary subject no longer needs a master; he becomes his own overseer (Han, 2017). The command has migrated inward, disguised as motivation. The slogans of productivity – *be authentic, hustle harder, find your purpose* – translate the fascist imperative into the grammar of self-care. Corporations now moralise exhaustion as virtue; every wellness initiative doubles as an instrument of compliance. Even dissent is curated, sold as ‘ethical consumption.’ Autonomy survives only as brand identity, a performance of freedom that conceals the exhaustion of constant self-measurement.

At this stage, language itself begins to ossify. Words that once marked emancipation reverse polarity. *Choice* becomes obligation, *responsibility* submission, *integrity* alignment. *Freedom* comes to mean loyalty; *truth*, consensus; *courage*, obedience to the prevailing order. The linguistic inversion completes the moral one: the will to be ruled no longer hides in psychology but preaches from the podium – and posts motivational videos about resilience.

What began as fear and matured into ecstasy now culminates as doctrine. The subject, convinced of his independence, kneels willingly at the altar of his own maintenance, thanking authority for the privilege of servitude. Thus, the Enlightenment fulfils itself: not in liberation, but in the perfected etiquette of obedience, where even submission must smile for the camera.

VII. The Collective Solitude of the Herd

The final irony is that no one feels controlled. Everyone is busy declaring independence in perfect synchrony. The age of obedience has learned to shout its servitude in the key of freedom: *Don't tread on me* – but please, tell me where to tread. Autonomy has become choreography, a mass performance of self-direction executed to the same beat.

The spectacle is almost tender. Each participant swears to think for himself while reciting the same slogans, consuming the same fears, resenting the same phantoms. A million timelines pulse with identical outrage, each insisting on its uniqueness. The herd Nietzsche despised (Nietzsche, 1887/1998) has merely changed its costume; it now wears the mask of individuality. He mistook their obedience for cowardice, but it is something quieter – an adaptation. To stand apart is to risk disappearance; to blend in is to survive. The chorus is safer than the solo.

What passes for public discourse is really a synchronised soliloquy, millions speaking at once to confirm that no one is truly alone. The collective hum substitutes for thought, and the relief it provides is genuine. After so much vertigo, who can begrudge the comfort of unison? Yet in this harmony the line between self and world grows faint, and the rhythm that steadies the crowd also erases its pulse.

The Enlightenment's afterimage still lingers, a faint phosphor on the surface of history. One can almost see the outline of the rational subject – upright, articulate, haloed by the light it once mistook for its own. But the glow is fading. The self endures as residue, not presence: a figure still visible after the bulb has gone out, trembling for an instant before darkness settles.

VIII. Coda – The Anti-Enlightenment View

Totalitarianism is not the antithesis of Enlightenment reason; it is its consummation. Once the world is rendered intelligible only through the calculus of rational mastery, the individual becomes a unit of account – separate, measurable, and alone. Atomisation is not a failure of modernity but its method. And when the fragments begin to tremble under their own isolation, the call for reintegration arrives not as revolt but as relief.

Defenders of the Enlightenment will insist that autonomy need not decay into isolation – that its failures are historical, not inherent. Perhaps. Yet the record suggests that reason's triumph repeatedly produces the same residue: a subject emancipated in theory and desperate for containment in practice.

Reason promised emancipation but delivered exposure. In the absence of gods, the self was told to govern itself, to find in cognition what it once found in communion. Predictably, it broke. The craving for order that follows is not regression but continuity – the Enlightenment longing for coherence reappearing in authoritarian form. The will to be ruled is simply reason begging to be whole again.

Dis-Integrationism offers no cure, only maintenance. It declines the fantasy of redemption and attends instead to the cracks: the fragile relations, provisional truths, and contingent agreements that keep the field responsive. Its politics is the minor art of adjustment – tending friction rather than erasing it, keeping dissent audible, preserving permeability against the creep of purity. Its ethic is not mastery but care, an attentiveness that refuses to harden into doctrine. If Enlightenment built the cage in pursuit of clarity, *Dis-Integrationism* oils the hinges so the door still moves.

The essay ends where light fails: with the faint shimmer of reason's afterglow, trembling against the encroaching dark. The self remains visible for a moment longer – no longer triumphant, merely aware. It does not seek salvation in order anymore, only enough openness to breathe before the dark completes its work.

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