

# FENDING OFF AMBIGUITY AT ALL COSTS: WHY WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO THE FAR RIGHT

*Huir de la ambigüedad a toda costa:  
Por qué la extrema derecha atrae a las mujeres*

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## ABSTRACT

Why do women support far-right leaders, movements, and parties, given their anti-feminist agenda that perpetuates women's oppression? Women are drawn to the far right because they have a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity. Those who find ambiguity threatening tend to think in rigid categories, which implies their acceptance of binary oppositions, their acceptance of black-and-white solutions, and their total and unqualified acceptance or rejection of other people. In contrast, women with a character structure that can admit ambiguity are less prone to fall for the propaganda tactics of the far right. The far right effectively lures women with a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity to the far right because it offers them rigid binaries, including rigid male/female, friend/enemy, and ingroup/outgroup binaries that allow such women to fend off any ambiguity, which is overwhelming for them. In this paper, I draw on the work on fascism of the Austrian psychoanalytic thinker Elke Frenkel Brunswick and critical theory to provide a psychoanalytically inspired framework that helps explain why any ambiguity is overwhelming for such women and why they must fend off ambiguity at all costs.

*Keywords:* women, far right, psychoanalysis, critical theory, aggression.

## RESUMEN

¿Por qué las mujeres apoyan a líderes, movimientos y partidos de extrema derecha, dada su agenda antifeminista que perpetúa la opresión de la mujer? Las mujeres se sienten atraídas por la extrema derecha porque tienen una estruc-

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tura de carácter que no puede admitir la ambigüedad. Quienes consideran la ambigüedad como una amenaza tienden a pensar en categorías rígidas, lo que les lleva a aceptar oposiciones binarias, soluciones en blanco y negro, así como la aceptación o el rechazo total y sin matices de otras personas. Por el contrario, las mujeres con una estructura de carácter que puede admitir la ambigüedad son menos propensas a caer en las tácticas propagandísticas de la extrema derecha. La extrema derecha atrae eficazmente a las mujeres con una estructura de carácter que no puede admitir la ambigüedad porque les ofrece oposiciones binarias rígidas, tales como hombre/mujer, amigo/enemigo y grupo interno/grupo externo, que permiten a esas mujeres eludir cualquier ambigüedad, lo que les resulta abrumador. En este artículo, me baso en el trabajo sobre el fascismo de la pensadora psicoanalítica austriaca Elke Frenkel Brunswick y en la teoría crítica para ofrecer un marco de inspiración psicoanalítica que ayude a explicar por qué cualquier ambigüedad es abrumadora para estas mujeres y por qué deben evitarla a toda costa.

*Palabras clave:* mujeres, extrema derecha, psicoanálisis, teoría crítica, agresión.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Women are present and actively involved in all far-right contexts. They vote for and hold offices in far-right political parties and are members of far-right movements (Fangen and Skjelsbæk, 2020; Blum et al., 2024). Furthermore, they help recruit new followers and engage in all forms of far-right illegal activities, including violent ones (Sigl, 2016). Why are women attracted to, join, and actively support the antifeminist far right, which proposes regressive policies and defends a politics that is aversive for women?

Despite women's active involvement in far-right parties and movements, the literature that aims to explain why women are attracted to the far right is scarce,<sup>1</sup> and there is currently no theoretically inspired work in general and one that draws on psychoanalytic thought in particular existing that explains why women flock to the far right. Literature on the far right has repeatedly pointed at the antifeminist agenda of the far right, which includes a rejection of feminist and gender equality

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Rebekka Blum, Julia Haas, and Michaela Köttig (2024) make the argument that women are drawn to the far right because it offers them specific opportunities for participation, and thus also a way to distinguish themselves and gain acceptance within far-right groupings and parties, despite the far right undermining their equality, self-assertion, and self-determination as women. However, such a framework does not explain why these women do not join other movements, such as the feminist movement, which would also offer them similar, if not better, opportunities for participation without undermining their equality, self-assertion, and self-determination as women.

policies, the affirmation of binary gender structure, heterosexuality, and a reactionary gender order, where women occupy a quasi-natural and inferior position below men (Blum and Rahner, 2020). Most importantly, antifeminists reject the idea that gender is a social construct, and they insist that gender roles are biologically determined (Lang and Peters, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, scholars have pointed out that having an *unambiguous* gender identity is a pillar of far-right thought (Hermann, 2020; Schutzbach, 2019). The far right imagines differences as an essence or nature of the sexes. It believes that there are only two genders, and men and women have complementary characteristics (women are emotional, passive, and caring, while men are militant, rational, and strong). Also, while women must bear children and bring them up, men are the defenders of women (Beck, 2021). Their natural difference attracts them to each other and allows them to bring children into the world, which secures the growth of the white people's community (Goetz, 2017: 258; Haas, 2020: 57).

Scholars on the far right have also pointed out that women who join the far right oppose feminism and support misogynous and racist ideologies (Dietze and Roth, 2020). However, they have so far not theoretically connected that having an *unambiguous* gender identity is the core reason why women flock to the far right and support misogynous and racist ideologies and why they oppose feminism.

In my recent book (Leeb, 2024), I developed a theoretical framework that draws on psychoanalytic and critical theory to explain why the far right attracts women to its antifeminist agenda that is aversive for women. In this paper, I will further, and in more detail, develop such a theoretical framework. My framework also explains why women who join the far right do not join feminist movements - they do not allow them to do away with ambiguity. Feminism's theoretical focus on foregrounding gender as a social construct and denaturalizing gendered and sexed binary oppositions promotes gender ambiguity, which is why they flock to the far right instead - the far right's antifeminism allows them to cope with ambiguity, which is overwhelming and threatening for them.

My core argument is that women are drawn to the far right because they have a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity. Those who find ambiguity threatening tend to think in rigid categories, which implies their acceptance of binary oppositions, their acceptance of black-and-white solutions, and their total and

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars have also pointed out that antifeminism is an ideology that functions internationally as a link between different political movements (Blum 2021, Blum et al., 2024)

unqualified acceptance or rejection of other people. In contrast, women with a character structure that can admit ambiguity are less prone to fall for the propaganda tactics of the far right. However, a character structure that cannot (or can) admit ambiguity is *not* the result of any nature or essence – in the sense that such women are born with a character structure that attracts them to the far right. Instead, the inability to admit ambiguity is the result of capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist societal structures and their effects on family structures that mold women's characters.

People with a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity are attracted to the far right because the far right provides them with what they need to fend off any ambiguity – rigid and hierarchical gender roles, a rejection of any forms of sexuality that are not unambiguously heterosexual, rigid definitions of friends and enemies, and black and white solutions to complex social, political, and economic issues.<sup>3</sup>

Although the far right's defense of rigid and hierarchical male/female and other binaries can appeal to anyone who finds ambiguity threatening, it's more complicated to explain why it would appeal to women given that such binaries place women in an inferior position below men and are therefore aversive towards women and anti-feminist. The far right effectively lures women with a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity to the far right because it offers them rigid binaries, including a rigid male/female binary, that allow such women to fend off any ambiguity, which is overwhelming for them and which they must fend off at all costs. In this paper, I provide a psychoanalytically inspired framework that helps explain why any ambiguity is overwhelming and *why* these women must fend off ambiguity at all costs.<sup>4</sup>

I am basing my theoretical framework on the contributions of Elke Frenkel-Brunswick, an Austrian psychoanalytic thinker, to the Authoritarian Personality (AP), which studies the character structures that render people susceptible to fas-

<sup>3</sup> Frenkel-Brunswick points out that we find an intolerance to emotional and cognitive ambiguity in the Nazi ideology of professional psychology. For example, E.R. Jaensch rejected the school of Gestalt psychology because of its stress on ambiguity (Frenkel-Brunswick 2019: 464).

<sup>4</sup> My theoretical framework also explains why the far right's outspoken hostility towards transgender people allows it to attract people to its regressive political goals. Transgender people denaturalize the binary male/female opposition, which is particularly threatening for women (and men) with a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity. The far right's rejection and demonizing of transgender people is attractive for such women (and men) because it allows them to fend off and deny the ambiguity the male/female opposition implies.

cist propaganda and the potential of fascism in the United States of America.<sup>5</sup> I also draw on her earlier work in which she examines the connection between what she calls the intolerance of ambiguity and prejudice.<sup>6</sup>

Although there has been a recent return to the AP study, particularly to Theodor W. Adorno's contributions, to explain the resurgence of the far right today,<sup>7</sup> the contributions of Elke Frenkel-Brunswick have only received marginal attention.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, her work on ambiguity and prejudice has yet to find entry into the critical theory literature on the far right. Although some work in critical theory draws on Frenkel-Brunswick to explain the resurgence of the far right today, such work does not foreground the centrality of not being able to admit ambiguity for such resurgence.<sup>9</sup>

While Frenkel-Brunswick returns to the topic of ambiguity in the AP study, such a topic is more central in her earlier work on ambiguity. Also, while her earlier work on ambiguity<sup>10</sup> hints at psychoanalysis as an explanation for being able (or not) to admit ambiguity, such an explanation is more salient in her contributions to the AP study. Furthermore, while her earlier work on ambiguity and fascism is gender-neutral, her contributions to the AP study examine the susceptibility to fascism from a gender-differentiated perspective.

My core theoretical task for this paper is the following: first, to bring Frenkel-Brunswick's earlier work on ambiguity in conversation with her contributions to the AP study to provide a psychoanalytic explanation of the connection between ambiguity and resurgence of the far right today; second, such framework will allow me to explain why woman support the far right although the far right politics is disadvantageous for them. I develop these two core points in five sections and a conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> The AP study was conducted from 1936 - 1945 and published in 1950. The researchers based their research results on the culture of the urban and suburban population on the West Coast of the United States.

<sup>6</sup> It is based on experiments with 1500 public schoolchildren between the ages of 11 and 16 years, which were carried out at the Institute of Child Welfare of the University of California in the 1940's. The results are based on experiments, in-depth interviews, psychological tests, and interviews with parents; Frenkel-Brunswick, E. (1948).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, a selection of essays in *Political Theory* (2023) and the collection of articles in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Frenkel-Brunswick, E. (2019) (her contributions).

<sup>9</sup> Robyn Marasco (2018, October).

<sup>10</sup> one reason for this is that her research on ambiguity is based on psychological experiments that do not lend themselves easily to a psychoanalytic explanation.

In section one, “The Avoidance of Ambiguity: Rigid Binaries”, I outline some of the characteristics of people who cannot admit ambiguity. In section two, “Authoritarian versus Egalitarian Family Structures and Ambiguity,” I explain how the ability to admit or deny ambiguity results from authoritarian versus egalitarian family structures. In section three, “Ambivalence and Ambiguity,” I explain how the ability to admit (or not) ambiguity toward parents is connected to a character structure that can (or cannot) admit ambiguity. In section four, “Aggression and Ambiguity,” I outline how the inability to admit ambiguity is connected to the difficulty of monitoring one’s aggressive drives. In section five, “Ambiguity and the Externalized Superego,” I outline how an externalized superego contributes to a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity. Finally, in the conclusion, I provide some hints of what we can do, based on my analyses, to undermine the growth of the far right today.

## 2 THE AVOIDANCE OF AMBIGUITY: RIGID BINARIES

What are some of the characteristics of women (and men) who cannot admit ambiguity, which renders them susceptible to fascist propaganda? The AP study revealed that prejudiced women and men avoid ambiguity and show more rigidity, and unprejudiced subjects tend to accept ambiguity and greater flexibility (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 463).

In her work on ambiguity, Frenkel-Brunswick further explains what such rigidity means: prejudiced female and male children (or teenagers)<sup>11</sup> who cannot admit ambiguity have a tendency of dichotomizing, which implies their acceptance of binary oppositions, such as male/female, good/bad, as well as their acceptance of black and white solutions and their total and unqualified acceptance or rejection of other people. Prejudiced children who cannot admit ambiguity also dichotomize in the social field, where they ascribe all the “good” characteristics to the ingroup and all the “bad” ones to the outgroup (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 119).

Furthermore, and most worrisome, the tendency to dichotomize also comes with a *neglect of reality*. As Frenkel-Brunswick puts it, maintaining black and white solutions “requires the shutting out of aspects of reality which represent a possible threat to these solutions” (1948: 115). Therefore, the inability to admit ambiguity generates a *reality inadequate approach*, where prejudiced children tend to focus on

<sup>11</sup> The “children”, as Frenkel-Brunswick calls them, were between 11 and 16 years old.

crude, relatively trivial aspects, which they combine with glaring omissions of facts (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 134). Frenkel-Brunswick points out that the reality inadequate approach is also salient in Nazi ideology and behavior, where “the fidelity in small matters often goes hand in hand with gross errors in the understanding of the most essential aspects of reality” (1948: 136).

In addition, for prejudiced female and male children with a tendency to dichotomize, concepts appear as *closed*, and they “cannot be modified by new experiences, which are immediately viewed from the standpoint of the old set and classified in the same way as the previous ones” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 120). The appearance of concepts being closed is what makes them “rigid”, which is also why they provide a defense against ambiguity.<sup>12</sup>

Here is also a connection to Adorno, who points out that stereotypes will not disappear through personal contact with the stereotyped object because experience itself is predetermined by stereotypy, and the prejudiced person is incapable of experience. As Adorno puts it, “there is no simple gap between experience and stereotypy. Stereotypy is a device for looking at things comfortably; since, however it feeds on deep-lying unconscious sources, the distortions which occur are not to be corrected by taking a real look. Rather, experience itself is predetermined by stereotypy” (Adorno, 2019: 617). In all situations where the prejudiced subjects of the AP study were introduced to racial minorities who were very different from the stereotyped view they held about them, they would interpret whatever the minorities were, said, or did through the lens of the stereotype and hold it against them.

Also, the far right today focuses on trivial aspects, which goes hand in hand with a glaring omission of facts, and their reality-inadequate approach attracts women and men who cannot admit ambiguity. Also, the need to fend off ambiguity leads to a scenario where women unambiguously accept the anti-feminist far right. They also unambiguously reject the far right's designated enemies – primarily immigrants and migrants, which has the convenient side-effect that they can feel superior to such enemies, which also helps to cover the inferior position the far right relegates to them. Since women who support the far right must shut out any reality that might let any ambiguity leap through, such as the far right being aver-

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<sup>12</sup> Another characteristic of prejudiced women (and men) who cannot accept ambiguity is compensation of rigidity by often exaggerated flexibility (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 131). Prejudiced women that cannot admit ambivalence show either more rigid thought patterns with the tendency to dichotomize, or they move from extreme rigidity in one area to extreme flexibility in another. Therefore, extreme flexibility is part of the underlying character structure that does not accept ambiguity

sive for women and that immigrants and migrants are not bad as the far-right brands them, they must turn into rigid and uncritical defenders of the far right's regressive anti-feminist and racist policies.

In the AP study, Frenkel-Brunswick further points out that prejudiced women and men show a greater overall rigidity (2019: 464), and prejudiced women adhere to a rigid femininity and prejudiced men to a rigid masculinity. Prejudiced women display what she calls pseudo femininity – they think of themselves as “feminine and soft” and do not admit and repress any stereotypical masculine trends (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 428).

If we connect that result with Frenkel-Brunswick's work on ambiguity, then the prejudiced woman's rigid adherence to stereotypical femininity and her repression of stereotypical masculinity is the result of her inability to accept ambiguities, which they aim to get rid of by clinging to a rigid male/female binary opposition. Such women are attracted to the far right because it offers them rigid binaries, including the male/female binary, which allows them to fend off ambiguity, even if such opposition is aversive toward them as it places them “naturally” below men.

In her work on ambiguity, Frenkel-Brunswick points out that prejudiced subjects rigidly adhere to clearly delineated norms (such as the norm of femininity and masculinity) even if this implies restrictions and disadvantages for the own group. “Thus, not only boys but also girls exhibiting the need for dichotomizing subscribe to restrictions for women rather than expose themselves to more flexible but at the same time more uncertain norms” (1948: 117).

Therefore, prejudiced girls (and later women) adhere to rigid and hierarchical gender norms *even if such norms are disadvantageous* for them because they allow them to eliminate ambiguity, which is more important than the disadvantage they face. Here we also have an explanation of why (grown-up) women would support the anti-feminist far right, whose policies are disadvantageous for them – it provides them with rigid binaries, including rigid and hierarchical male/female binaries, which are aversive toward them, but which allow to fend off any ambiguity.

In contrast, unprejudiced women (and men) have an emotional and cognitive structure that can admit ambiguity, and they tend toward greater flexibility (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 463). Therefore, they are less prone to dichotomize and develop an inadequate approach to reality. Unprejudiced women and men also show more openness to conflicts and doubts and they are more unwilling “to take over



traditional or fixed concepts and ideals without scrutiny” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 463).

Also, unprejudiced women could admit stereotypical masculine trends without resorting to rigid and counter-phobic defenses (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 441). Furthermore, they conceptualized sex roles in less rigid and dichotomous ways and displayed an open conflict over their “femininity”. Also, unprejudiced women refrained from taking over concepts and ideals (such as ideals of femininity) without scrutiny (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 463).

In addition, unprejudiced women often rejected the “feminine” role (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 429) and did not repress but accepted and sublimated their “so-called masculine interests and activities” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 477). As Frenkel-Brunswick puts it, unprejudiced women “are touched by the difficult situation imposed upon them by our civilization, but instead of giving preference to the idea of a restricted role for women (as the prejudiced women do), she has preference for a vaguely defined role, and she is more ready to take on the conflict and face it openly” (2019: 478).

The core reason why unprejudiced women can prefer a vaguely defined gender role that does not reduce women to stereotypical feminine traits and activities and that allows them to openly face the conflict that comes with challenging their “femininity” is their emotional and cognitive structure that can admit ambiguity. Such emotional and cognitive structure is also the core reason why they are less prone to fall for far-right recruitment tactics that prey on women (and men) who cannot admit ambiguity.

### 3 AUTHORITARIAN VS. EGALITARIAN FAMILY STRUCTURES AND AMBIGUITY

Why can certain people not admit ambiguity? Frenkel-Brunswick provides some hints in her *Intolerance of Ambiguity*, including that there are many conflicts and confusions present in subjects who cannot admit ambiguity, which leads to their resorting to dichotomizing and stereotyping. As she puts it, “Too much existing emotional ambiguity and ambivalence are counteracted by denial and intolerance of cognitive ambiguity. It is as if everything would go to pieces once the existing discrepancies were faced” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 134). Since “everything would

go to pieces” if one admits ambiguity, it is no surprise that ambiguity is threatening and must be fended off at any costs.

To avoid ambiguity, prejudiced women (and men) fend off ambiguity by dichotomizing and adopting a reality-inadequate approach, which implies selecting clear-cut – either too general or else too concrete – aspects of reality. She also points out that a “Greater rigidity of defenses is necessary to ward off the danger of becoming completely overwhelmed by the repressed forces” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 134). While she hints in this citation at a psychoanalytic explanation, such explanation is further developed in her contributions to the AP study. Here, we get a better understanding of what a “greater rigidity of defenses” and “repressed forces” mean and why prejudiced subjects become easily overwhelmed by repressed forces.

In the AP study, Frenkel-Brunswick argues that what makes people susceptible to fascist propaganda (or not) is connected to authoritarian vs. egalitarian family structures. Authoritarian family structures generate prejudiced female (and male) children (and later adults) who are susceptible to fascist (or far-right) propaganda tactics. Since she merely hints at how authoritarian vs. egalitarian family structures impact peoples’ ability to admit or reject ambiguity, I will further develop such a connection in this section. Authoritarian family structures generate children who cannot admit ambiguity. Because of that, such children (and later adults) become susceptible to far-right propaganda tactics that allow them to deny any ambiguity that is threatening to them.

Also, Frenkel-Brunswick did not reduce fascism to family structures alone. Instead, throughout her contribution to the AP study, she returns to the centrality of socioeconomic conditions leading to fascism. For example, she points out that focusing on family structures “does not exclude recognition of the larger socioeconomic determinants which may well be responsible for the organization of society and that of the family” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 370).

She repeatedly points out how status anxiety, which is connected to larger socioeconomic determinants or a class structure in capitalist societies, contributes to generating authoritarian family structures. Here, it is important to recognize how national origin and race-ethnicity impact family structures. For example, her work on ambiguity outlined that immigrant families in the United States of America are often economically and socially more marginal, and therefore have more status anxiety. Consequently, they develop more rigid patterns to cope with such anxiety, which contributes to creating children with the inability to admit ambiguity.

Authoritarian families tend towards father (or mother) domination (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 371).<sup>13</sup> Here, one finds a dichotomous and hierarchical conception of sex roles and a relative separation of the sexes. Often, we encounter a domineering and stern father, who makes all the decisions, and a submissive mother.<sup>14</sup> In the authoritarian family, the parents signal to their children that interrelationships are based on clearly defined roles of dominance and submission (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 370, 387).

However, mother figures can also take on the domineering role in authoritarian families. Here, it is important to note that prejudiced women describe their mothers as restricting and domineering (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 367). While prejudiced men experience the father, prejudiced women experience the mother as the central figure in the family. Furthermore, while the men have a stronger tie to the father, the women have a stronger but *ambivalent* tie to the mother (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 371). All of these aspects underline the centrality of a domineering mother for generating a character structure in women that cannot admit ambiguity and that renders women susceptible to fascist propaganda.

In contrast, egalitarian families are not father-dominated, but mother-oriented rather than mother-dominated (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 370). Here, the sex roles are less rigid, and the family is centered around a mother whose primary function is “to give love rather than to dominate, and who is not too weak and submissive” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 371).<sup>15</sup> Here, the parents signal to their child that interrelationships are based on egalitarian policies. Also, unprejudiced women see their mothers as warm and loveable (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 368).

In her work on ambiguity, Frenkel-Brunswick also hints at the centrality of the authoritarian family in generating a character structure in their children that cannot admit ambiguity. Here, she points out that the requested submission to parental authority is only one of the many external, rigid, and superficial rules that such a child learns: “Dominance-submission, cleanliness-dirtiness, badness-goodness, virtue-vice, masculinity-femininity are some of the other dichotomies customarily upheld in the homes of such children. The absoluteness of each of these differ-

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<sup>13</sup> Also the mother can take over the threatening and punishing role in the family.

<sup>14</sup> I suggest that a mother who is submissive towards the father can also often take on a dominating role towards the children, in part because she is displacing the aggression towards the father onto the children.

<sup>15</sup> At times Frenkel-Brunswick establishes gender binaries in her work. For example, she never talks about how the father's role is to give love to the children.

ences is considered *natural and eternal*, excluding any possibility of individuals trespassing from the one side to the other" (Frenkel-Brunswick 1948: 117, emphasis added).

Therefore, the authoritarian family offers their children a worldview full of rigid dichotomies to avoid ambiguity. Insofar as the authoritarian family presents such dichotomies as natural and eternal, any ambiguity, which implies the very possibility of crossing from one side of the other, threatens those raised with such a worldview. Admitting ambiguity, such as the ambiguity of one's gender or sexuality, would mean that one is "abnormal". Furthermore, questioning one binary threatens to open the door to questioning all of them. Therefore, ambiguity must be fended off at all costs.

#### 4 AMBIVALENCE AND AMBIGUITY

Why is ambiguity threatening for prejudiced women (and men)? In psychoanalytic thought, not being able to admit ambiguity is closely connected to not being able to admit *ambivalence*. In psychoanalysis, ambivalence "is defined by the coexistence, in the same individual, of love- and of hate-cathexis toward the same object. The existence of ambivalence in a person and the further fact of this person's ability to face his or her ambivalences toward others must be considered an important personality variable" (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 115).

The prejudiced female (and male) subject's inability to admit ambiguities results from her initial ambivalence towards her parents. In an authoritarian family, the child is not permitted to criticize her parents and feels intimidated by them. Therefore, she cannot admit her ambivalence toward them (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 451).<sup>16</sup> In her studies on ambivalence, Frenkel-Brunswick revealed that prejudiced children portray their parents in a dichotomous fashion as altogether good or bad, which is an expression of not being able to admit ambivalence.

Furthermore, when prejudiced children portray their parents as all good, they often reveal a negative attitude towards them that remains, however, unconscious

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<sup>16</sup> The AP study further revealed that prejudiced women often glorify their parents as all good but feel resentment towards them that they did not "get enough" things of what they deserved, which remains, however unacknowledged. In non prejudiced women one also finds feelings of victimization, but not so much because they did not get enough "things" but as a reaction of the loss of love, and they do not appear in the same context as the glorification of the parents (Frenkel-Brunswick 2019: 348).

(Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 116). In addition, prejudiced children repress the underlying resentment toward their parents, and as a reaction against the underlying hostility, they rigidly glorify their parents (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 386). Also, the AP study revealed that prejudiced women and men hide their ambivalence towards parents and the other sex (which refer to emotional ambiguity) behind the façade of glorification (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 463).

Furthermore, while prejudiced women often glorify their mothers, they express non-acknowledged feelings of hostility and resentment towards mother figures (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 348), which underlines the centrality of (authoritarian) mother figures for developing prejudice in women. Since prejudiced women are forced into submission to authoritarian mothers, they cannot admit their ambivalence toward them, and their glorification of mother figures is a means to cover over their resentment.

Since the underlying hostility cannot be fully admitted and interferes with the desire to be taken care of by the parents, prejudiced female and male children (and later adults) submit to parental authority on the surface, and the underneath resentment remains active under the guise of the mechanisms of *displacement* (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 357). A prejudiced female (and male) child and later adult subject that cannot admit ambiguity uses the defense mechanism of displacement to eliminate ambivalence.

Here, she displaces the negative side of the ambivalence (her aggression and hostility toward parental figures) onto an "alien" outgroup. Displacement helps her circumvent ambivalence towards parental figures (and later other authority figures that guide her behavior) and keep it unconscious (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 451). The far right's recruitment tactics offer women (and men) who cannot admit ambiguity easy targets to displace their aggression onto, such as immigrants and migrants, who have no real power in society and therefore cannot protect themselves easily from such aggression toward them.

Authoritarian family structures, where the female (and male) child is forced into submission to parental authority, generate the character structure of the prejudiced female (and male) subject that cannot admit ambiguity. The prejudiced female subject's stereotyping, her use of ready generalizations, and her thinking in rigid binaries are attempts to keep ambiguity at bay. As Frenkel-Brunswick puts it, thinking in dichotomies and the inclination towards displacement "help to circumvent

ambivalence or to keep it on an unconscious level” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 451).

The far right preys on prejudiced subjects’ inability to admit ambiguity – it provides them with clear-cut and rigid binaries, such as the male/female, good/bad, ingroup/outgroup, and friend/enemy binarie, which allows these women to circumvent their initial ambivalence toward their parents and cope with their ambiguity.

Furthermore, prejudiced women, besides their parents, also have ambivalence toward men, given their submissive position. The AP study revealed that prejudiced women cling to the image of conventional femininity, which is defined by subservience and admiration of men. At the same time, there is evidence of a non-acknowledged hostile attitude toward men, which underlines their ambivalence toward them (Frenkel-Brunswick 2019: 478).<sup>17</sup>

Far-right recruitment tactics also prey on women's ambivalence around men (which they contribute to creating by relegating women to an inferior position). The far right provides prejudiced women with an outlet (such as immigrants and migrants) to *displace* their ambivalence and hostility toward men, which allows them to dismiss any ambiguity around the rigid male/female binary they adhere to. In addition, the far right portrays "outgroups" as inferior, which also helps them to feel superior and cope with their being relegated to a subservient position by society in general and the far right in particular.

In contrast, in the egalitarian family, dichotomies are less salient and less conceptualized as natural and eternal. Also, because the female (and male) child does not see her parents as too overpowering and frightening, she can express her resentment more readily (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 346). Therefore, “Being able to mobilize rebellion, unprejudiced subjects thus learn to conceive of equality as an alternative to the relationship of dominance-submission” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 346).

Also, since the child can criticize her parents and feels less intimidated by them, she can admit her ambivalence toward them. Therefore, unprejudiced children are more ready to accept ambiguity and can see positive and negative features in their parents (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 116). As a result of being able to admit the initial

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<sup>17</sup> Also, since they renounced their stereotypical masculine inclinations (such as having a career) and the home does not provide them with satisfactory forms of expression, they have exaggerated demands on men as providers and seek to live out her thwarted ambitions through the medium of the man (Frenkel-Brunswick 2019: 478).

ambivalence toward parental figures, unprejudiced women and men can also admit ambiguities. Therefore, they are less prone to fall for far-right recruitment tactics that offer rigidly defined outgroups to displace the negative side of their ambivalence.

In addition, unprejudiced women, because they more readily accept stereotypical masculine traits and activities in them and follow their ambitions – have less hostility toward men. As Frenkel-Brunswick puts it, since the unprejudiced woman can accept her stereotypical “masculine strivings, one important source of hidden aggression toward the opposite sex – and toward other people generally, as it seems – is reduced” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 405). Therefore, unprejudiced women are less likely to fall for the far right's recruitment tactics that prey on women's ambivalence toward men by offering them outlets to displace their hostility.

## 5 AGGRESSION AND AMBIGUITY

“The inability to face ambivalence toward the powerful which leads to socially dangerous forms of displacement of aggression” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 451).

Another psychoanalytic explanation for why a person can admit ambiguity is her ability to deal with her id (or unconscious) impulses, which are her aggressive and libidinal drives, which she has suppressed in her unconscious. However, residing in the unconscious, the id impulses do not lessen their potential force. Instead, they “continue to lead an independent existence. Although repressed, they tend to 'break through' occasionally in an uncontrolled way” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 455).

In an authoritarian family, the parents do not offer female (and male) children to work through their id impulses. In addition, the child develops a considerable amount of aggression towards the parents because of her fearful submission to parental authority (and I would add the lack of affection and love). However, the child cannot express her aggression toward her parents “due to the overpitched intensity of these feelings, so that the fear of punishment is too great to allow their being openly expressed” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 35). Therefore, she represses her aggression into her unconscious (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 482).

Projection is a defense mechanism by which the female (and male) prejudiced subject externalizes what she cannot accept as part of her ego, which is her aggressive impulses. Here, she projects her inner impulses, particularly her aggression towards parental figures, which she cannot express, onto an outgroup that has no real power in society and seems foreign to her. Therefore, it is not herself but the outgroup that appears hostile and threatening to her (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 474).<sup>18</sup> Prejudiced women and men are also attracted to the far right because it provides them with a clearly defined outgroup, upon which they can project and take out their aggression.

In her work on ambiguity, Frenkel-Brunswick hints at the complex relationship between authoritarian family structures, aggression, and ambiguity. She points out that the attempt of the child “to master aggression toward parental figures who are experienced as too threatening and powerful are among the important determinants of the tendency rigidly to avoid ambiguity of any sort” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 117).

Why is it challenging for the prejudiced female subject to master aggression toward her parents (and later other people), which makes them rigidly avoid any ambiguity and which makes them susceptible to fascist propaganda that allows them to avoid ambiguity? The reason for this is, first, the development of a weak ego, which I will explain in this section, and second, the development of an externalized superego, which I will further outline in the next section. Both are the result of authoritarian family structures.

The prejudiced subject, who grew up in authoritarian family structures, develops a *weak ego* because she must repress her id impulses (libidinal and aggressive drives), which include her aggression towards her parents and other authority figures. Frenkel-Brunswick explains that “excessive repression and counter-cathexis of unacceptable impulses requires inordinate expenditure of energy. This, in turn, contributes to the weakening of the ego, increasing the danger of a break-through of some the repressed tendencies” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 457).

Such a scenario generates a vicious circle. Maintaining rigid defenses (such as projecting aggressive impulses onto an outside group) to keep the aggression repressed weakens the ego, which is now more likely to become overwhelmed by the

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<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, she expresses her hostility towards the outgroup without inhibition since she expects that a powerless outgroup will not retaliate against her. Conversely, toward groups with real power in society (and that could retaliate), the prejudiced subject suppresses her hostility and exhibits submission (Frenkel-Brunswick 2019: 485).



repressed id impulses. Here, the prejudiced subject must employ an even greater rigidity of the defenses (since repression does not do away with the underlying cause) to cope with the increased threat, further weakening the ego. “In this vicious circle, impulses are not prevented from breaking out in an uncontrolled way” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 480).

The prejudiced (female and male) subject develops a simple, often stereotypical, cognitive and emotional structure to cope with the threat of id impulses breaking through. As a result, “there is no place for ambivalences or ambiguities. Every attempt is made to eliminate them, but they remain as potentials which might interfere at any time” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 480). Ambiguities must be avoided at any cost because they threaten to undo the simple cognitive and emotional structure through which the prejudiced subject aims to keep her aggression at bay. In addition, since the repression of id impulses takes up an immense amount of energy, there is no place for ambiguity that would also take up further energy that is needed to keep id impulses from breaking through. People who must eliminate ambiguity are attracted to the far right because the far right provides them with stereotypes, ready generalizations, and rigid binaries that allow them to keep their aggressive drives in check.

The authoritarian family structure's model of dominance and submission and the prejudiced subject's weak ego structure also play out on the societal level. For example, the prejudiced subject displays an exaggerated occupation with the strong and weak dichotomy, where she sees the powerful on top and the weak at the bottom. As Frenkel Brunswick puts it, “love, admiration, and readiness for submission are automatically aroused by the power of persons or institutions, while contempt is equally aroused by powerless persons and institutions. The very sight of a powerless person may lead to the urge to attack, dominate, or humiliate him (/her)” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 414).

Here, the prejudiced subject has taken over the orientation toward power and the contempt for all the allegedly inferior and weak from the parent's attitude towards the child. The parents' exploitation of the child's helplessness and forcing her into submission reinforces the prejudiced child's anti-weakness attitude: “Prejudiced individuals thus tend to display a ‘negative identification’ with the weak along with their positive though superficial identification with the strong” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 387). The orientation toward the strong is often expressed in the conscious

identification with the more powerful parent and later with more powerful groups in society (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 387).

Here, the prejudiced (female) subject's own weakness when confronted with the threatening father (or mother) figure and her weak ego structure leads to an exaggerated condemnation of everything weak. She fights her weakness outside instead of inside (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 474). Such a defense mechanism serves the double purpose of externalizing what is unacceptable in her (her weakness) and displacing the hostility and aggression against the threatening parental and other authority figures (and men), which might otherwise turn against the ingroup, onto the outgroup. At the same time, she can remain unaware of her weakness since now she may feel superior to the socially weaker group (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 420).

Also, Frenkel-Brunswick points out that prejudiced men have more possibilities available to compensate for underlying weaknesses (such as asserting their supposed superiority over women). In contrast, "Prejudiced women, with fewer outlets at their disposal for the expression of their underlying feelings, show... stronger underlying hostilities and more rigid defenses than their male counterparts" (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 387). Therefore, prejudiced women have a strong tendency to identify with the strong and dismiss anything that appears as weak. Also, identifying with the more privileged group allows looking down on other groups, which partially compensates for not being at the top of the economic and social hierarchy - at least you're not on the bottom.

Although a subject who grew up in an egalitarian family does not have a fully integrated personality without repressions, the parents provided guidance and support for the child to work through her id impulses (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019, 387-8). Since the parents offered their child different strategies for working through her aggressive and libidinal drives, she does not have to repress her id impulses drastically. Instead, she can accept and sublimate them, such as in intellectual work and artwork, and so integrate them into her personality (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 456).

Also, a child who grew up in an egalitarian family has greater awareness of the causes of her aggression, directs it against a specific person or the violation of general principles, and avoids destructive manifestations of aggression (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 451). Moreover, since she could express hostility and resentment

from where it originated (her parents), she has less need to carry such hostility into the social sphere (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 485).

In addition, since she does not have to employ rigid defenses to keep her aggressive and libidinal drives repressed and can more readily admit her ambivalences toward her parents, she can develop a stronger ego and a more flexible emotional and cognitive ego structure. Such structure allows her to *accept ambiguities* and develop less dichotomous and polarized thinking. Furthermore, since she did not have to submit to stern paternal (or maternal) authority as a child, "(s/)he can afford in his later life to do without strong authority, and (s/)he does not need to assert (her/)his strength against those that are weaker" (Frenkel-Brunswick 2019: 482).

## 6 AMBIGUITY AND THE EXTERNALIZED SUPEREGO

The inability to admit ambiguity is also the result of the *absence of an internalized superego* in the prejudiced subject, which is also the result of authoritarian family structures. The superego is the mental element in us that allows us to control and monitor our id (or unconscious) impulses, which are our aggressive and libidinal (or love) drives and includes our aggression towards our parents and other authority figures.<sup>19</sup> These drives lie dormant in our unconscious and they can be reactivated at any time - and the tactics far-right forces utilizes to attract followers aim at reactivating them.

The superego is generated internally and externally- internally to *monitor* our id impulses and externally, through values that adults uphold - at first, the child's parents and later other adults, such as educators, which the child internalizes. To generate a superego within the child, the child must establish a genuine identification with the parents (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 455). However, in authoritarian families, the child cannot develop a genuine identification with her parents.

Here the parents, because they are often *socially and economically marginal*, are plagued with status anxiety, which underlines how authoritarian vs. egalitarian family structures are connected to a classed, raced, and gendered structure in capitalist society. Therefore, they tend to force their child into fearful submission to

<sup>19</sup> Freud (1989) outlines two instincts in us, which are the love instinct (Eros) and the death instinct (Death) "Libido" refers to the manifestation of the power of Eros. The aggressive instinct is the primary representative of the death instinct. It manifests in a mutual hostility between people, and our fundamental desire to rob, exploit, humiliate, cause pain, torture, and kill other people.

external, rigid, and superficial rules beyond the comprehension of the child, and they harshly punish any behavior in their child that departs from such rules. Here, the child often experiences discipline as threatening, traumatic, overwhelming, and unintelligible (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1948: 117-118).

In an authoritarian family, the child has difficulties internalizing the values and standards of the adult world and establishing a superego within herself. Instead, she *externalizes* the superego. An externalized superego means the rewarding and punishing authority is located outside rather than inside the child (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 454). Here the primary determinant of the child's behavior continues to be the fear of punishment by external authorities rather than internalized standards from the adult world.

In contrast, the parents in the egalitarian family have less status anxiety because they are socially and economically less marginal. Thus, they are less anxious concerning conformity and social climbing and more accepting of their child's manifestations of socially unaccepted behavior (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 387-8). Here, the parents use a mild type of discipline for the violation of principles, which invites the child's understanding and cooperation, allowing her to assimilate such principles into her ego (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 376).

Since the child did not have to submit to unintelligible external rules and standards and received more unconditional parental love and affection, she could develop a genuine identification with her parents. Therefore, she can internalize the norms and values of her parents (and later other authority figures, such as teachers), which generates her *internalized* superego. Here, the behavior of the child (and later the adult subject) is oriented toward more genuine, intrinsic standards and values rather than toward external authorities (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 454).

According to Frenkel-Brunswick, a subject with an externalized superego is "easy prey to unsound and destructive political propaganda" (2019: 467). In contrast, an internalized superego is the precondition for generating unprejudiced subjects who do not fall for fascist propaganda tactics. Why is this so? A child with an externalized superego continues to depend on external authority figures (at first her parents and then other authority figures) to guide her moral behavior.

Thus, the child (and later female adult) is afraid to voice any criticism of such authority figures. Insofar as she is dependent on others to give her rules, she is not in a position to question or challenge them, which is another reason why such women accept oppressive rules. In addition, she feels resentment toward these

authority figures because she experiences them mainly restricting and punishing rather than rewarding instances (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 455).

Moreover, an externalized superego leads to both an overconformity and underlying destructiveness toward established authority. As Frenkel-Brunswick puts it,

“A person possessed by such ambivalence may easily be kept in check and may even behave in an exemplary fashion in following those external authorities who take over the function of the superego – and partly even those of the ego. In the other hand, if permitted to do so by outside authority, the same person may be induced very easily to uncontrolled release of his instinctual tendencies, especially those of destructiveness. Under certain conditions he will even join forces with the delinquent, a fusion found in Nazism” (2019: 386).

Therefore, the ambivalence towards authority figures is another source of ambivalence experienced by prejudiced women (and men). Such a person might function well if the external authorities that take over the functions of the superego (and even the ego) guide the subject in a non-destructive direction. However, such a person might also have resentments towards such authority figures that circumvent her desire to take out her aggressive and libidinal drives. Thus, she easily backs authorities that offer her some release from the moral restrictions that seem intolerable to her. Today, far-right forces attract people who have challenges monitoring their aggressive (and libidinal) drives, because they promise and offer a release from them.

In contrast, a child (and later unprejudiced adult subject) with an internalized superego can have a more positive and affectionate relationship with her parents and express criticism and resentment towards them. Since she can direct the negative side of her ambivalence (her hostility and aggression) toward where it originated from (her parents) she has less need to displace the negative side of her ambivalence of her parents and other authority figures onto others. Therefore, she is less prone to fall for far-right propaganda tactics that offer her targets to displace her ambivalence of authority figures.

Moreover, since she is less dependent on external authority figures to guide her moral behavior, she can criticize and challenge her parents and later other authority figures (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 476). In addition, since internal standards guide her behavior rather than punishing external authority figures, she also has less

need to find a release from moral restrictions that seem more bearable to her.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the appeal of a release of moral restrictions (offered by the far right) is the result of an externalized superego and standards – since one won't feel such a need for a release from standards one has internally endorsed.

What Frenkel-Brunswick did not further develop is the connection between the ability or inability to admit ambiguity and an internalized vs. externalized superego. The prejudiced female (and male) subject with an externalized superego does not have an internal instance (her internalized superego) that keeps her aggressive drive in check. Therefore, she must expend vast energy to keep her aggressive and (libidinal) drives in check,<sup>21</sup> which weakens her ego and generates the vicious cycle where a weakened ego is further overwhelmed with id impulses that threaten to break through (further weakening the ego).

In such a scenario, it is no surprise that the prejudiced female subject develops a rigid emotional and cognitive structure and makes every attempt to eliminate ambiguities, as any ambiguity undoes her efforts to control her aggressive and libidinal drives that threaten to break through at any time. Therefore, she falls easy prey to the far right, which provides her with stereotyping, ready generalizations and rigid binaries to eradicate any ambiguities. To fend off any ambiguity, she supports the far right even if the far right supports regressive politics towards women. Furthermore, she easily falls for the far right because it offers her a release from having to monitor her aggressive and libidinal drives constantly – it provides her with a release of her aggression and targets to displace and project her aggression onto.

In contrast, the non-prejudiced female subject has an internalized superego and, thus, a mental instance that assists her in keeping her aggressive (and libidinal) drive in check. Therefore, she can develop a less rigid emotional and cognitive structure and a stronger ego that can admit ambiguity. Women (and men) that can admit ambiguity are less susceptible to far-right propaganda, because they do not have or have less need to control their aggressive drives and find a release for them in far-right targets.

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<sup>20</sup> I have outlined the appeal of an authority figure (e.g., Trump) because he provides the followers with a release from their moral restrictions (Leeb, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> An interesting result from the AP study is that prejudiced women and men have a more promiscuous and undirected sexual behavior, which shows the challenge for them to also control their libidinal drive, which breaks through in such instances.

## 7 CONCLUSION: ACCEPTING AMBIGUITY

Based on my analyses, what can we do to undermine the effectiveness of far-right recruitment tactics? At the end of her contributions to the AP study, Frenkel-Brunswick makes two connected points on how we can counter the resurgence of fascist forces. First, one needs to strengthen the liberal view in prejudiced women (and men) and avoid presenting them with more ambiguities than they can absorb. Furthermore, in some spheres one needs to “offer solutions which are constructive and at the same time serve the general need for avoidance of uncertainties” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 486).

Second, she also points out that since it is authority that structures the world of prejudiced women (and men), one must try to reach them through authorities, albeit not necessarily authoritarian ones. As she puts it, “Where public opinion takes over the function of authority and provides the necessary limitation – and thus certainties – in many walks of daily life as is the case in this country, there will be some room for the tolerance of national or racial ambiguities” (Frenkel-Brunswick, 2019: 486).

Frenkel-Brunswick suggests that to undermine the recruitment tactics of the far right we must consider the character structure of prejudiced women and men who cannot admit ambiguity to counter the resurgence of the far right. Either by not presenting them with too many ambiguities or reaching them through authorities that satisfy their need to fend off ambiguity (by offering certainties), people who cannot admit ambiguities might be less prone to join the far right that offers them destructive certainties.

While such a solution seems vital to counter the effectiveness of recruitment tactics, especially concerning the many women and men with a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity, it also raises several questions. First, providing prejudiced people with certainties that allow them to avoid ambiguity implies the danger of cementing binary thinking, which implies thinking in certainties. Therefore, such a strategy might fall into the trap of not allowing ambiguities and portraying all those who do not neatly fall into the binary as wrong.

Second, while I agree with her that one can reach prejudiced subjects mainly via authority, we run into a problem when public opinion does not admit national or racial ambiguities, which is the case in the current Trump era. Therefore, in such an era, external authority plays into and utilizes prejudiced subjects' inability to

admit ambiguity by offering them rigid, raced, classed, and gendered binaries that allow them to fend off ambiguity.

To counter a character structure that cannot admit ambiguity is to make sure that such a character structure does not arise in the first place. Here, we need to take a closer look at the societal and economic structures that generate, via the family, a character in children that cannot admit ambiguity. To begin with, one needs to address and redress capitalist structures that imply problematic standards, including the standard to have economic “success”, which creates status anxiety in marginalized families. As I have shown here, such status anxiety leads such families to adopt rigid rules and a punishing stance toward their children that do not allow their children to generate an internalized superego and make them afraid to address the negative side of their ambivalence toward them.

Besides challenging such standards, one also needs to create conditions that provide such families with economic and social resources that allow them to admit ambiguities instead of adopting a worldview full of rigid binaries. Furthermore, one needs to challenge patriarchal societal structures that generate the backdrop for the authoritarian family – including an authoritarian mother (who might now have any ability to assert her authority outside the home), which is particularly relevant for countering the generation of prejudiced girls and women.

Finally, we need to create a society that admits ambiguity, including gendered, classed, and raced ambiguity, which would make it more difficult for authoritarian families to assert rigid binaries and would provide children from such families an outlet in their culture that would allow them to admit instead of having to deny ambiguities rigidly. I realize that today, we are far away from such a society, and the far right, all over the world, cunningly uses character structures that cannot admit ambiguity for its continuing rise.

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