

Book review: *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, edited by Jeremiah Morelock

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Abstract: *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* (2018; University of Westminster Press), edited by Jeremiah Morelock, brings together the work of sociologists, political scientists, historians, and philosophers attempting to revitalise the empirical and theoretical work on antidemocratic trends of the early Frankfurt School, or Institute for Social Research. They do so in the analytic context of contemporary, globally observed ‘authoritarian populist’ movements, in which political (often right-wing) agitators pit a symbolically-constructed national ‘people’ against purported corrupt elites and minority scapegoat groups. The chapters cover wide ground and can be contrasted to some extent in terms of whether they frame the contemporary moment as highly similar to the era of the Great Depression and 1930s Fascism, or emphasise the unique nature of neoliberalism as a historical backdrop. Notable strengths of the volume include Morelock’s systematic introductory overview of early Frankfurt School work, as well as a thematic section on “Digital Authoritarianism” which resurrects the Institute’s tradition of propaganda content analysis for the social media era. *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* offers a highly comprehensive picture of the current geopolitical nightmare and the conceptual tools for attacking it, and serves as a welcome corrective to several recent simplistic applications of the authoritarianism concept in popular science outlets.

Keywords: critical theory, authoritarian populism, early Frankfurt School, Institute for Social Research, digital authoritarianism, propaganda

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a global rise in the second element captured in the title *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*. The contributors to this edited volume use the term to denote “the pitting of ‘the people’ against elites in order to have the power to drive out, wipe out, or otherwise dominate Others who are not ‘the people.’” (Morelock, xiv). While the term was first prominently used by Stuart Hall in the context of 1980s Thatcherism (see Morelock and Narita, 139), the sociologists, political scientists, historians, and philosophers writing in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* most commonly refer to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, but also a host of instances in which right-wing factions have gained political ground across Europe, South America, and Asia since the turn of the century. What unites these authors is their understanding of this grim time in light of the work of the early Frankfurt School. As editor Jeremiah Morelock writes, “A wealth of insights pertinent to authoritarian and populist trends is contained in their writings. In view of everything that is engulfing Europe, the United States, and perhaps the whole world, the work of the early Frankfurt School demands concerted revisiting” (xiii).

Clearly, the larger scholarly community and even lay public have taken note of the authoritarian bent in the politics of today. A number of articles have appeared since 2016, in both academic journals and popular press outlets, framing the ‘Trump phenomenon’ through authoritarian categories. More surprisingly, perhaps, the

Frankfurt School – previously resigned to obscurity outside humanities departments – is sometimes acknowledged in these treatments, although usually as part of an underdeveloped, pejorative narrative (e.g., Steven Pinker’s disparaging remarks in *Enlightenment Now* (2019, 396-97)). In contrast to these over-simplified accounts, *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* is truly a breath of fresh (nay, vital) air, bringing between two covers much of the most sophisticated work being done to apply the Frankfurt School’s research and analyses to the unravelling of the current geopolitical nightmare.

Morelock’s introduction is one of the highlights of the volume. It provides a compact but comprehensive historical and bibliographic overview of the work of the early Frankfurt School, or Institute for Social Research. Given its brevity, this piece might be the single best survey introduction to the early Frankfurt School available, if for example one were trying to select a reading assignment for an undergraduate course.

For any readers who happen to be relatively unfamiliar with this body of work, I will provide a brief summary (after which they should turn to Morelock’s piece). In the 1920s, Felix Weil created an independent research centre for Marxist scholarship at the University of Frankfurt. Max Horkheimer soon assumed leadership of the Institute for Social Research (ISR) and ushered in the first wave of critical research on authoritarianism. He steered the Institute toward an ambitious empirical study of the proletariat in Weimar Germany to determine whether they were in fact prepared to support a socialist revolution. The ISR rapidly developed a method of ‘interdisciplinary materialism’ that cross-pollinated Marxist thought, Enlightenment philosophy, psychoanalysis, and empirical research. During the late 1920s and 1930s several notables affiliated with the ISR, including the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, literary scholar Leo Lowenthal, political theorist Franz Neumann, and philosophers Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse.

With the rise of Fascism in Germany, Horkheimer relocated the Institute and several affiliates, first to Columbia University and then to Berkeley in the 1940s. During their exile, Horkheimer and his inner circle turned all their attention to the problem of authoritarian tendencies in the middle and working classes. The result was a collaboration between Horkheimer, Adorno, Lowenthal, political economist Friedrich Pollock, political scientist Paul Massing, psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik, and colleagues in public opinion research at Berkeley. This marked the second wave of critical research on authoritarianism, producing the interdisciplinary five-volume series *Studies in Prejudice*, of which *The Authoritarian Personality* has had the widest influence.

At the same time, the inner circle’s scholarly efforts were increasingly dominated by a new theory of modern ‘state capitalist’ or ‘totally administered’ society articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In 1950, Horkheimer re-established the Institute in post-war Frankfurt and, with Adorno and Pollock, trained a new generation of German social scientists. The third and final wave of the early ISR’s critical research program on authoritarianism consisted of the development of a novel ‘group experimental’ method to investigate public opinion, which the researchers saw as increasingly reflective of a society in which individuals had lost much of their ability to critically resist the propagandistic techniques of mass consumer culture.

2. Theory, Practice, and the Way Forward

An animating principle of *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* is the need for social philosophy to re-engage with structural and economic conditions (i.e., empirical data) after wandering in postmodern, identity-political wilderness. Reclaiming the early

Frankfurt School – in particular, its emphasis on multi-level empirical analyses uniting Marxist and Freudian perspectives – is positioned as an invaluable path forward. Nowhere are the contributors clearer on this point than when they critique the ‘second’ and ‘third’ generation developments of critical theory after the 1950s, e.g., in the work of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth – what Michael Thompson has called *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (2016).

The attempt by more recent theorists [...] to place Critical Theory on firm ‘normative’ foundations has diverted attention from real, existing catastrophic tendencies. Like the utopian socialists of old, the normative theorists think they can tell us the way society *ought* to be developing, but they are at a loss to explain why it is actually moving in the opposite direction (Abromeit, 22).

Dynamic structural interconnections and real material inter-dependencies exist in society and in nature. Only this ‘deeper probing of the real world’ makes theory *critical* [...] Postmodernism’s linguistic turn is actually an anti-foundationalist evasion of philosophy and critical political economy [...] Over the last several decades there has been a regression in the comprehensiveness and materiality of critical philosophy...A comprehensive critical social theory [...] must help us to apprehend the dialectic of the historical and material world and the changing social condition of humanity within it (Reitz, 108-109; 118).

As Christian Fuchs points out (160-161), one of the primary problems with social theory that is insufficiently empirical and critical is that it risks a relativistic stance in which all ideologies and worldviews are equated as similarly “biased” – thereby robbing the theorist of the ability to attack the rootedness of ideology in structural violence and reducing qualitative political differences to apparent quantitative equivalence. Charles Reitz (110) observes how Marcuse developed the concept of “repressive tolerance” to problematise the false equivalency of destructive and generative ideologies in the public sphere. Indeed, the early Frankfurt School embraced multi-method empirical research precisely to prevent regression to such “naïve value-freedom” (in Weber’s sense) and to maintain theory’s critical edge.

As a way of handling this issue and plugging theory back into reality, several of the present contributors grapple with frameworks that permit meaningful distinctions between right- and left-wing variants of populism.

Left-wing populism involves the revolt of ‘the people’ against the elite. Right-wing populism involves the revolt of ‘the people’ against the elite *and an underclass or scapegoat subpopulation*, ‘the people’ viewing the elite and underclass/scapegoat as in association [...] right-wing populism is authoritarian *by definition*, whereas left-wing populism may or may not be authoritarian (Morelock and Narita, 137; 140).

While right-wing or authoritarian populism defines the enemy in personalized terms [...] left-wing populism tends to define the enemy in terms of bearers of socio-economic structures and rarely as particular groups. While the right, in a tradition stemming back to Hobbes, takes insecurity and anxiety as the necessary, unavoidable, and indeed favourable product of capitalist social relations, and transforms such insecurity into the fear of the stranger and an argument for a punitive state, the left seeks to provide an account of the sources of such insecurity, in the processes that have led to the dismantling of the

welfare state, and corresponding phenomena such as ‘zero-hours’ contracts, the casualization of labor, and generalized precarity, and proposes concrete policy solutions to these (Gandesha, 63).

Only by embracing a critical perspective on identity can it become something more than an experiential given and a natural fixed attribute. Identity will then involve an ethical choice among what are often mutually exclusive (reactionary and progressive) traditions within what is supposedly the common history of a community, ethnicity, gender, nation, or religion (Bronner, 102).

Thus some contributors stress the latent potential of left-wing populist movements (e.g., Occupy Wall Street; the Bernie Sanders campaign) to not only combat authoritarian forms but to transform the exploitative status quo manufacturing the space in which they arise. This argument is perhaps presented most fervently by Charles Reitz (117-127), who makes a case (rooted in Marcuse) for the advocacy of a “Green Commonwealth” practicing decommodification and an orientation toward public works, the provision of a minimum income, ecological stewardship, and general multicultural education.

While Reitz provides a compelling counter-vision to the pervasive politics of fear, it remains unclear whether, in the jungle of ongoing social and communicative devastation, the sheer elaboration of such a program will be enough to break down authoritarian psychology. Accordingly, other contributors promote as the best way forward a recovery of the early Frankfurt School’s analytic map of the enemy terrain.

3. Populism Old and New?

One of the fault lines running beneath the chapters is the question as to whether the early ISR made an error when it shifted its focus away from the class-based and propagandistic dynamics that led to 1930s authoritarianism and toward theories of the culture industry and the end of the individual in the 1950s. The stances taken towards this question reflect broader differences of opinion as to whether the current counter-revolution against neoliberalism represents more of the same (in the sense of Marxian recurrent crises) or a radical disjuncture in the course of capitalism. The former, ‘orthodox Marxist’ position, as epitomised by David Harvey, views neoliberalism as a class war, the orchestrated vengeance of the capitalists against Keynesianism; whereas the latter position, represented by more Foucauldian thinkers or the cultural studies approach (e.g., Stuart Hall), emphasises how the identity politics of the 1960s were co-opted by a nascent neoliberal cultural psychology (Gilbert 2017; Stimilli 2019). The Foucauldian position stresses three aspects of neoliberal economics and culture that might question the applicability of traditional Marxism:

1. The disappearance of class-based consciousness under neoliberalism
2. The changing relation of base (economy) to superstructure (political and juridical institutions) in the emergence of the ‘managerial state’
3. The transformation of individual psychology into the uniquely alienated state of ‘self-entrepreneurship’

Several of the contributing authors (perhaps most notably Abromeit and Rensmann, Chapters 1 and 2) tend toward the Marxist position and see in the neoliberal moment a return to the crisis and resultant populism of the 1930s. They therefore suggest that the Institute’s “early” studies, essentially *Authority and the Family* and the *Studies in*

Prejudice, are better tools for understanding this moment than the “later” works (e.g., *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *Group Experiment*). This position is well articulated in Abromeit’s essay:

Pollock’s state capitalism thesis [...] reflected the new hegemony of the Fordist-Keynesian model of capitalism that developed in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, and was consolidated in Western Europe after World War II. From our vantage point today, we can see that this period of twentieth-century capitalism, which lasted through the end of the 1960s in Europe and the United States, was an anomaly [...] Three and a half decades of neo-liberal hegemony have created conditions – rising levels of poverty, insecurity, hopelessness – that resemble the 1920s and 1930s more closely than the 1950s and 60s. For this reason, I think it is also worth revisiting what I have called elsewhere the model of early Critical Theory, which guided the Institute’s work in the 1930s and which explored the relationship between capitalist crisis and authoritarian social movements (Abromeit, 7; 12).

And yet another of the contributing authors, Samir Gandesha, raises the question in a separate article whether the state capitalism thesis might accurately capture certain aspects of neoliberalism that have been observed by many theorists, notably the transition in the state’s role towards direct interference in the (global) economy to the benefit of the capitalist class (Gandesha 2018). Indeed, Friedrich Pollock’s original formulation of the *totalitarian* version of state capitalism (intended at the time to describe Nazi Germany) sounds like it might have been written by a contemporary theorist of neoliberalism:

The state is the power instrument of a new ruling group, which has resulted from the merger of the most powerful vested interests, the top-ranking personnel in industrial and business management, the higher strata of the state bureaucracy (including the military), and the leading figures of the victorious party’s bureaucracy. Everybody who does not belong to this group is a mere object of domination (Pollock 1989/1940, 96).

Similarly, the final 15 pages of Horkheimer’s chapter “Rise and Decline of the Individual” in *Eclipse of Reason* (1947, 145-161) read almost like an early treatise on neoliberal economy and culture. He highlights in succession

1. The erosion of class consciousness: “The rise of the workers from a passive to an active role in the capitalistic process has been achieved at the price of integration in the general system [...] the ideas of the workers tend to be molded by the business ideology of their leaders” (147-149);
2. The closure of the gap between base and superstructure: “There is a crucial difference between the social units of the modern industrial era and those of earlier epochs [...] There was still a cleavage between culture and production. This cleavage left more loopholes than modern superorganization, which virtually reduces the individual to a mere cell of functional response” (144-145);
3. The importance of financialisation and mechanisms of private debt and risk: “The deterioration of the individual is perhaps best measured in terms of his utter insecurity as regards his personal savings. As long as currencies were rigidly tied to gold [...] its value could shift only within narrow limits [...] Even the members of the middle class must resign themselves to insecurity” (157-158);

4. The advent of a regnant psychology of self-entrepreneurship: “The modern criterion and sole justification for the existence of any individual [...] inheres in the ability to be ‘one of the boys,’ to hold one’s own, to impress others, to ‘sell’ oneself, to cultivate the right connections” (154).

Certainly, Horkheimer’s and Pollock’s analyses bespeak certain limitations of historical viewpoint. They could not fully foresee the neoliberal system that arose out of Fordism – how strategies of globalisation and financialisation ‘fixed’ the limitations imposed on market capitalism by the state model while simultaneously exploiting the latter’s powerful potential (Harvey 2018/1982). At the same time, however, this very observation brings into relief two aspects of the early Frankfurt School’s work that should not be forgotten. First, it was deeply sensitive to historical development: it sought constantly to adapt Marxist/Freudian categories to contemporary economic and social forms. Second, we should not justify neglect of the ‘later’ ISR works with hasty diagnoses of historical boundedness or undue pessimism. Seeing in contemporary authoritarian populism only a dynamic of ‘Fascism redux’ obscures the ways in which the past half-century of neoliberalism, identity politics, and the colonisation of the lifeworld by technology and the culture industry have permitted this resurgence and neutralised what might have been previously available alternatives. While a return to what Abromeit (12) calls “the model of early Critical Theory” is certainly necessitated by our times, the late works of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock may also offer essential keys to unlocking the specifically neoliberal form of populism. In particular, it might be argued that these scholars presciently understood the dangerous potential that could be unleashed once the capitalist classes seized hold of the apparatus of state-managed capitalism:

What measures are necessary to guarantee control of the state by the majority of its people instead of by a small minority? What ways and means can be devised to prevent the abuse of the enormous power vested in state, industrial, and party bureaucracy under state capitalism? [...] How will the roots from which insurmountable social antagonisms develop be eliminated so that there will not arise a political alliance between dissentient partial interests and the bureaucracy aiming to dominate the majority? Can democratic state capitalism be more than a transitory phase leading [...] to total oppression? (Pollock 1989/1940, 115)

In this connection, it is interesting to note that Morelock and Narita in Chapter 7 emphasise the Habermasian themes of the “colonization of the lifeworld by system” and the decline of the public sphere as important “preconditions” for the rise of authoritarian populism.

We propose that the separation of system world from lifeworld might be viewed as one of several non-deterministic *preconditions* for populist movements [...] Whether a charismatic leader arises and whether identity narratives and their tensions are strong enough to inspire revolt by a subgroup self-identifying as ‘the people’ cannot be answered through predictions based on structural preconditions. However, the theoretical analysis of preconditions may be useful in understanding what structural conditions may be particularly vulnerable to populism and its authoritarian varieties (Morelock and Narita, 142).

I concur with the contributors to this volume that the early ISR studies on the psychological readiness for and propagandistic foment of authoritarianism are highly useful for understanding the emergence of authoritarian populism in particular settings. But I would also suggest that the later studies of the Institute on the “decline of the individual” (Horkheimer 1947) under conditions of state capitalism go a significant way toward theorising the “preconditions” for the neoliberal form of populism, with which we must now come to terms.

4. The Modern (Digital) Propaganda Industry

Arguably the stand-out contribution and through-line of *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* is its revitalisation of the ISR’s tradition of content analyses of antidemocratic propaganda. In the empirically-oriented disciplines (such as psychology and political science) that have been at least indirectly influenced by the Institute’s early research, this aspect of the *Studies in Prejudice* project has been almost completely sidelined, whereas the attempt to trace populist or fascist tendencies to personality factors (e.g., *The Authoritarian Personality*) has been a mainstay. In short, whereas the original plan of the *Studies* was to comprehensively investigate not only the psychological or “response” side of the equation but simultaneously “the external stimuli to which the predispositions within the individual have reacted and continue to react” (Horkheimer and Flowerman 1950, vii), subsequent empirical research has disproportionately neglected this latter ‘stimulus’ side.

Fortunately, the present contributors recognise the limitations of such a one-sided approach, as well as the remarkable prescience of the Institute’s propaganda analyses in the era of Fox News, talk radio, and the Trumpian Twitterverse. The original studies (largely of anti-Semitic radio agitators in the 1930s United States) converged on the principle Löwenthal aptly summarised of propaganda operating as “psychoanalysis in reverse” (see Rensmann, 35). The antidemocratic leader or agitator operates through a politics of fear (see, e.g., Gounari, 210-211), solidifying public support by stoking the anxieties of their base and systematically refusing to address (via policy) the structural factors that objectively underpin those anxieties, thereby ensuring an ongoing vicious cycle of self-fulfilling resentment. A paradigmatic example on today’s scene is Trump’s rhetorical insistence on building a border wall to address a purported national crisis, while simultaneously promising to cut aid funding for Central American countries. He thus exacerbates the structural conditions underlying the alleged problems that motivate his base, while providing scapegoats onto which his base can direct their compensatory fury, which is a surprisingly effective way to maintain power (one that can only be understood, as the Frankfurt School recognised, if due attention is paid to ‘irrational’ psychological factors).

Keeping with the theme of ‘old and new’ from the foregoing section, some scholars focus on the continuous applicability of old Frankfurt School propaganda categories to the current material. For instance, they note the tactical use of the ‘great little man’ theme by Trump and other agitators who present themselves as outsiders to politics and alternate between self-glorifying affiliation with the rich and famous and ‘common-man’ postures (e.g., eating fast food in the White House), a strategy originally identified by Löwenthal and Guterman in *Prophets of Deceit* and Adorno in *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses* (see Rensmann, 38; Kellner, 74; Fuchs, 173; Gounari, 221-223). Another chestnut dusted down by today’s agitators is the discursive mobilisation of resentment against a class (or classes) of exploitative ‘elites’ and ‘parasites’ (usually, a combination of career politicians and a scapegoated

minority group) who are in league against the common man, discussed originally in the propaganda studies as well as the Institute's unpublished study of anti-Semitism in the US labour force (see Abromeit, 10-19; Rensmann, 36; 43-44; Bronner, 89; Morelock and Narita, 142). Donald Trump has clearly been able to embody and self-present with these strategies to a far greater degree than any prior US President, and understanding their psychological appeal goes a long way toward understanding his electoral 'upset'; but as the contributors point out, these strategies have also been adopted (more or less deceptively) by many right-wing politicians and their media-agitator accomplices in Europe and elsewhere.

Other analyses focus more squarely on how the current digital environment of political discourse has fundamentally altered the ways in which agitators disseminate their message and populism operates. The concluding section of the volume addresses "Digital Authoritarianism", with authors like Panayota Gounari (in Chapter 9) illuminating how social media represents "*one-dimensional discourse*" and "a kind of new symbolic 'machine', an effective political instrument that, in the context of advanced capitalism [...] dehumanizes politics and struggles" (213). Drawing substantively on the work of Fuchs (Chapter 8), Gounari concludes:

Mass culture and digital media play mostly a fundamental anti-pedagogical role: instead of producing critical analyses and interventions in the public sphere, these [...] new sites of anti-pedagogy have the force not just to counter knowledge, but to produce and legitimize new knowledge. Twitter and other social media create the illusion of active participation when, in fact, what is mostly happening is a closing of the universe of discourse and independent thought (223-224).

The contributions of Gounari and Fuchs in this section are particularly welcome, insofar as they represent short empirical, content-analytic studies in the spirit of the Institute's early work. Fuchs analyses a large body of comments posted by users on the Facebook pages of Austrian nationalist (FPÖ) politicians, uncovering – among other disturbing findings – that "the Internet will always provide possibilities for anonymity, so there will always be loopholes for militant online fascism" (184). Gounari offers a detailed breakdown of several of the authoritarian themes recurring in the thousands of Tweets authored by Donald Trump during his campaign and time in office. The authors converge in their understanding that the contemporary political environment is uniquely characterised by what Rensmann (in Chapter 2) calls an "*authoritarian politics of delusion*", where proliferating social media outlets and widespread distrust of mainstream journalism permit substantial blurring of "the distinctions between fact, opinion, fiction, and propaganda" (43). In his contribution to this section, Muelrath (238-240) describes how this state of affairs is facilitated by the "anti-pedagogical" digital setting, which seemingly equilibrates news from major journalistic outlets and from sources like InfoWars. Thus,

The challenge of image projection technology (i.e., television or any internet gadget and the software that powers it) – the way in which it represents the world, and the influence it has on our perception of the real – has once again become an issue similar to the challenge addressed in Plato's Cave: the challenge of illusions projected over the real (229).

Muelrath is one of the authors who recognises the ways in which the 'late' works of the early Frankfurt School – e.g., *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's musicological

scholarship – also provide important tools for confronting authoritarian populism, particularly in its neoliberal variant. Adorno's (1989/1967) late writings on the culture industry anticipate the social-mediatised Internet as an anti-pedagogical space where the illusion of democracy is propagated exactly as the public sphere is closed:

The masses are not primary, but secondary; they are an object of calculation, an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would like to have us believe, not its subject but its object [...] Human dependence and servitude, the vanishing point of the culture industry, could scarcely be more faithfully described than by the American interviewee who was of the opinion that the dilemmas of the contemporary epoch would end if people would simply follow the lead of prominent personalities [e.g., Trump] (129, 134).

5. Conclusion

Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism makes a highly compelling collective case for the relevance of the first-generation critical theorists and researchers to understanding today's slide toward right-wing extremism and neo-fascism. Interdisciplinary scholars should seek it out for sophisticated understandings of problems such as the role of the digital 'public sphere' in promoting extremism, or the contributions of the neoliberal period to undermining collective psychologies that might otherwise be mobilised toward alternatives to exploitative market capitalism. Above all, the book and its authors epitomise the necessity of grounding critical social philosophy in an ongoing engagement with multilevel empirical methods and data – the vision that set the ISR apart as a historical anomaly from the earliest days of Horkheimer's directorship.

Two anecdotes will attest to this book's importance and its rare enjoyability. While standing in line in a coffee shop reading it on my university campus, I was asked by an unfamiliar student who saw the cover, "Is that for fun or for school?" The fact that a contemporary undergraduate momentarily contemplated that I might be leisurely engaging with such a volume is strong proof of the widespread relevance and appeal of at least its central themes.

And, outside of Nietzsche, I have never laughed so hard while reading a scholarly text than when, after working through a Frommian characterological analysis of Trump, I observed the great Doug Kellner lose all sense of academic restraint: "His executive orders undoing progressive legislation and regulations established by the Obama administration exhibit his malignant drive to destroy U.S. liberal democracy, as does his daily attacks on the media, Congress, the judiciary, and whoever dares to criticize King Donald the Dumbass" (79). What did Nietzsche say about "whoever fights monsters"...?

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