

## ***Black Holes of Politics: Resonances of Microfascism***

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The focal point of this essay is politics, specifically the proliferation of micropolitical fascisms around the American presidency of Donald Trump. Guattari thought it was a good idea to discuss the topic of fascism freely while it was still possible to do so. This ominous remark opened an intervention he made in 1973 on the occasion of an Italian conference on “Psychoanalysis and Politics.” It is worth noting that this talk eventually gets translated into English under the title “Everybody Wants to be a Fascist,” while the more pedestrian title “The Micro-Politics of Fascism” is also in use by other translators.<sup>1</sup> It is the former provocative title that quickens the pulse because it seems to implicate us all in an attraction that on the face of it we purport to resist. The key question for Guattari is, then, the relationship between desire and fascism. Let me put it somewhat simply, but nonetheless poignantly: fascism is immanent to desiring-production: fascism “seems to come from the outside, but it finds its energy right at the heart of everyone’s desire.” (Guattari 1995: 245) Fascism is everywhere and to desire is to activate it in some measure at different scales within a microphysics of power relations. Fascism is not merely a historical phenomenon (with German, Italian and Spanish varieties) that has passed away and will never happen again; it is not outside, that is, retrievable and renewable like a complete artifact, in that respect. Guattari will outline three approaches to fascist movements in order to develop his own theory of micropolitical fascisms relevant to his and our contemporary contexts. His approach is neither historical nor sociological; indeed, it is not a political theory that defines fascism “macropolitically” in relation to the totalitarian state, which with which it shares certain features. Guattari believed it was necessary to conduct a micropolitical examination of the molecules of fascism because it has survived its historical mutations and adapted itself to contemporary institutions, knowingly or unknowingly clinging to subcultural and political expression: “it passes through the tightest mesh; it is in constant evolution....” (Guattari 1995: 244) Guattari’s approach

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<sup>1</sup> “Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist,” in *Chaosophy*, ed. S. Lotringer, New York: Semiotexte, 1995, pp. 225-50; “The Micro-Politics of Fascism,” in *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, trans. R. Sheed, Harmondsworth: Penguin/Peregrine, 1984, pp. 217-32.

[It’s worth noting that the 1995 translation is from the first version of the talk published in 1974 and that the 1984 one is the translation of the 1977 augmented republication, but which doesn’t include the discussion. In French, there’s also a third version published in 1980 that is slightly shorter than the precedent. N.D.E.]

renders moot the question whether fascism can rise again, and dispels the naïvité of those who are astonished that their beloved democratic institutions could ever support it, in any form.

### **Three Approaches**

Guattari's first approach to fascism is to develop a threefold typology of how its forms are typically analyzed. He starts with a sociological category, based on analytical-formalist distinctions that identify species of fascism (national historical types), finds common traits among them, and then describes small differences between them. Differences are minimized the more commonness is elevated, and differences are magnified the more they help to isolate layers and kinds. He finds little of interest in this approach.

The second approach he notes is neo-Marxist thought grounded in a synthetic-dualist paradigm. The approach here is to appreciate both how to acknowledge the revolutionary desire of the masses and recognise the mediations from Marxism's theoretical vocabulary imposed upon them, indeed, 'massifying' mass-desire: "restored to standardized formulations whose necessity is deemed to be justified in the name of the cohesion of the working class and party unity." (Guattari 1995: 229) Overcoming the distinction between theoretical description and revolutionary praxis, yields only the dualist trap of the code-wielding political caste and the obedient mass followers, which is played out reductively and its impotence multiplied along a series of "schematic oppositions" (ie., city/country; good and bad camps) and a unique third object (the power of the State) that gives meaning to them. He wishes to outflank such dualisms and their distancing mechanisms.

Thirdly, Guattari mounts what he calls an analytic-political approach that he makes his own. He does not abandon the question of what kind of State is built under fascism, but he reserves this investigation for elsewhere in *A Thousand Plateaus*, to which I will return momentarily. In the meantime, the third approach launches a series of provisos: "a micropolitics of desire would no longer present itself as representing the masses and as interpreting their struggles." (Guattari 1995: 230) At the same time he doesn't entirely reject the need for a political analysis of party lines and actions, and underlines the importance of diversifying and pluralizing any already formed and centralizable wholes into social groupings beyond the working class and its set task of dissolving the contradiction it embodies, refusing to yoke it to dominant expressions of its character, whatever these might be, that allow it carry out unique tasks according to stated objectives of its party in relation to the mediations of the transcendent object of the state. No more Leninist exhortations straight out of the "April Theses" of spring 1917 to make

the masses see the true form of revolutionary government and to interpret their practical needs in this light. (Lenin in Zizek 2002: 58) Instead, a conception of desire without an object, without a centre either in a person or in a body constituted as ideally pre-unified. Desire is multiple and different; it consists of singular intensities that combine with one another in incompatible ways, rather than in terms of identities that may be totalized by a party apparatus, that is, “by the totalitarian machine of a representative party.” (Guattari 1995: 231) Lenin it may be said tried to tap into the molecular revolutionary forces that expressed themselves in a unique moment of hope, and for this he was considered to have gone mad. This is the Lenin Slavoj Zizek admires and wants to regain; yet as I just pointed out, the contrary tendencies at play in the “April Theses” are just as strongly expressed through specific representations and interpretations, that is, direction and explanation of the non-spontaneous awakening of desire of a mass of proletarians as it is coaxed into existence and led to make the right choices by the mobilized party.

Nevertheless, Guattari claims mediators must be bypassed in the relationship between social objectives and praxis. Desire tends to wander and to get off topic and away from readymade encodings. A micropolitical analysis of desire doesn't represent what is already formed, but contributes to the formation and thus is “immediately political.” What does Guattari mean when he claims that “when saying is doing” micropolitics is immediately political? No more specialists either of saying or of doing. Collective assemblages (rather than individual idiolects) within the mass find their own means of expression, perhaps combining fragments of archaic discourses, recontextualized images, slang, and recycled codes. A rehearsal of the correct slogans is not required. It is theoretically messy to give permission to the masses to speak. There are no guarantees. The crystallization of situational collective desires in utterances and other semiotic materials always struggle with the influence of dominant overcodings, and are directly linked into machinic processes of all kinds, like mangling auto-correct functions, that underlines the distorting a-signifying elements of contemporary communication. Theorists of digital disobedience, especially distributed denial of service attacks, note that the a-signifying dimension of disabling and “disrupting” servers is closely tied to the imperative to communicate in contemporary capitalism, and with the focus on circulation over meaning, breaking the “reproducible signal value” of messages, that texting and social media have perfected, acquires a powerful effect of redirecting attention away from the usual suspects of the sending and receiving estates in the name of new stakeholders. (Sauter 2014: 28-31)

There are all kinds of fascisms: “A micropolitics of desire means that henceforth we will refuse to allow any fascist formula to slip by, on whatever scale it may manifest itself, including within the scale of the family or even within our own personal economy.” (Guattari 1995: 239) Fascism is irreducible to historical

phenomena like National Socialism. Its study is not the purview of professional historians. No one should bury it in historical periodicity and feel relief that it is over, the good guys having triumphed in the end in the beautiful confluence of the Red Army and Allied forces at the River Elbe and then the heads of state at Yalta. There wasn't only one Nazi party: Guattari wants to avoid simplifications that make us blind to how the elements of certain historical forms of fascism continue to exist. Fascism leaps transhistorically between generations and adapts itself to new conditions along the way: "what set fascism in motion yesterday continues to proliferate in other forms, within the complex of contemporary social space." (Guattari 1995: 236)<sup>2</sup> Fascisms proliferate and never stop adapting.

### **America, The Ugly**

Updating Guattari, the icons of Hitlerism may be combined with Donald Trump's name by those, for or against him, who have no need of any firm ideas about Nazism. To see a graffito like swastika-r.u.m.p. as a micro-crystallization of fascism adapted to our contemporary political landscape requires a reflection on the digital source materials for semiotic production. Indeed, a good place to begin is Dale Beran's attempt (2017) to formulate an interpretation of Trump's appeal through the mutations of 4chan – the "opprobrious" image board and sprawling forums/chat site launched in 2003 and known for its incivility and creativity as incubator of Anonymous, trolling, rickrolling, memes and just doing it for the lulz. (See also Coleman 2014: 41) The Guattarian theory of desire both de-centres the individual person as source and the object as lack instead positing an assemblage of mutable heterogeneous components as a process that is auto-organizing but also influenced by dominant historical trends, such as the mutual imbrications of humans and machines in the time of immaterial labour and production. But Guattari is a kind of Arendt in full reverse. If humans are cogs, and they are machinically enslaved, there is potential there, because they no longer have the kinds of social identities that are easily alienated. On 4chan, anonymity is the goal but not always the rule, but based on a local ethic, individuation is strongly denied to persons and persona, until games of status erupt and off-line events intervene to manufacture celebrity. These are still largely anathema. The fusion of the post and the subjectless subject or Anon, releases intense flashes of desiring production, which can only be described as a "cesspool." For Beran, Trump is the alpha and beta, the fantasy of winning and the despair of losing, both at once rolled into the loser who won. He builds an analogy

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<sup>2</sup> [Its worth noting that Guattari is here misquoted: instead of « what set fascism in motion », we should read « what fascism set in motion ». Nevertheless, we consider that the argument of the author is still relevant. NDE]

based on Charles Bukowski's novel *Factotum* in which two underpaid warehouse workers devise a scheme to accept money from their coworkers to bet on horse races but all the horses selected never win, because the bets are never placed. In the words of Manny and Henry:

"Hank, we take their bets."

"Those guys don't have any money – all they have is the coffee and chewing gum money their wives give them and we don't have time to mess around with the two dollar windows."

"We don't bet their money, we keep their money."

"Suppose they win?"

"They won't win. They always pick the wrong horse. They have a way of always picking the wrong horse."

"Suppose they bet on our horse?"

"Then we know we've got the wrong horse." (Bukowski 2002: 106-107)

This is the pathetic reality of the Trumpians, according to Beran: "younger Trump supporters know they are handing their money to someone who will never place their bets—only his own—because, after all, it's plain as day there was never any other option." Further, Beran concludes: "Support for Trump is an acknowledgement that the promise is empty." Trump's bizarre behaviour leads Beran to state "Trump is 4chan ... a labyrinth with no centre" of swastikas, sexist jokes, and posturing. There is nothing really discordant about how this works. This is the Guattarian theory of machines (some highly abstract, others highly technical) that constantly seek out dis/connections (breaks and flows and residualities) with other machines for which they are flows. It's not exactly a Goldberg machine, but a 4chan contraption in which anonymous processes of subjectivation subsist in the bowels of unfettered digital desire: where semiological powerlessness meets machinic superpower, with strange results. The more the machine goes off the rails, the better it works, the more collectively enunciative 4chan becomes as its denizens take new formations, much to their own surprise: unstructured, ad hoc, short-lived assemblages, some of which are offline! The foundation of Trumpian politics might very well be the cesspool in which microfascist forces connive and collide. The cesspool is not empty. It attracts and holds of the attention spans and affects of many. Guattari called this a black-hole effect: a phenomenon of subjective collapse that is attached to empty promises, and spectacularized policy, like televised executive orders that are reproduced widely in the post-mediasphere. The memefication (Sad Frog Meme) of Trump as Pepe the Frog, the spectre of this prank invoked by Hillary Clinton as a white supremacist figure, and unleashed into the wild by alt-right appropriators and anti-defamation league critics alike, demonstrated the semiotic potentiality of comic strip characters

to interact with wildly diverse components from across the political spectrum. (Chan 2016, “Nazi Pepe Controversy” 2016) The black hole both swallows up empty promises and groundless pronouncements, racist and paranoid POTUS tweets, the laments of the frog’s creator Matt Furie, and spits out newly charged semiotic components that liberate the desire immanent to the political landscape and make it resonate across the alt-right mediascape.

Intense attachment fosters belonging and forgetting, and echoes them in public reproductions of the signifiers of rampant misogyny and raging xenophobia. As Bruce Bennett put it, Trump’s body is a “semiotic salad” (Bennett 2016) that fails to cohere; and this is part of the appeal as every effort to discredit him at once builds his legitimacy among astonished believers and detractors. Mass processes of subjectivation are given but one option to align with the resonances of undelivered wagers and belligerently confirm their impotence. This is how Deleuze and Guattari define microfascism: it occupies micro-black holes and resonates among them acting on the masses through millions of catastrophes. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 214) Black-holes are not exactly empty, and this where Guattari helps us to refine Beran’s insight; they absorb the energy of empty promises, the unplaced bets, as it were, and trap subjectivity in their resonances across the social field, interacting with a range of political beliefs: ‘50s nostalgists; emptiness is good for business yahoos; and maybe, for the millennials, a vote for emptiness is a “defiant expression of despair,” as Beran describes them. It even suggests the revenge of Oedipus: help me again Mommy and Daddy I can’t make it without you!

The analysis of desire’s microfascism sounds a bit science fictional, Guattari admits, but he is not deterred, because fascism is for him a dangerous, cancerous molecular phenomenon: “what makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power, for it is a mass movement: a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian organism.” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 215) It is not a question of going small for the sake of minutae, or for that of a Pascalian view of how different things would have been if Cleopatra’s nose had been a bit longer. (Guattari 1995: 237) Adopting the language of mutation, proliferation, and molecularity allows Guattari to think through the capacity of fascism to spread throughout the social body. And eventually try to overwhelm it, or ‘win’ it electorally. This “potentially” gives to desire a fascist inclination since desire is not undifferentiated and instinctual, but results from highly complex and supple micro-formations and refined interactions (like so-called The Great Meme War of 2015-16), the kind we see on Internet Relay Chat on 4chan but just as well on Breitbart News.

For Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, what makes fascism so frighteningly catastrophic for capitalism is that, unlike totalitarianism, especially of the Stalinist type, it liberated the desire of the masses for their own deaths, in spite of themselves. They were neither tricked nor desirous of their own masochistic

repression. They were not driven internally to suicide by a death drive. Rather, fascism constructs a totalitarian State that is suicidal. National Socialism was focused on destruction, of everyone, including all Germans, as a project that would resonate throughout Europe and beyond. Suicide of the State and the end of its own people would be a “crowning glory.” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 231) When there were no means to subdue mass desire to fulfill its own destruction (Guattari calls it a “deadly form of libidinal metabolism”), no deals can be brokered. The only option was an alliance for the United States and United Kingdom with Stalinism, because its brand of terror was acceptable, a more stable and efficient system for controlling mass turbulence (by the working class, colonials and minorities), and it too was threatened by National Socialism. For Guattari, “the last World War will thus have been the opportunity to select the most efficient totalitarian machines, those best adapted to the period. (Guattari 1995: 242) Yet microfacisms have managed to seep into capitalism as Stalinism failed to molecularize its economy and labour force. Capitalism searches for new models of totalitarianism inside itself, and finds all kinds of “new forms of molecular fascism.” (Guattari 1995: 244) These find an environment conducive to infestation in infocapitalism’s forms of affective and communicational labour that are directly productive of value.

## **Conclusion**

New microfacisms find fertile ground in the fast circulating redundancies of Internet memes and other post-media artifacts like the use of echo quotations as anti-semitic signifiers. Extremely involutive black holes draw processes of subjectivation into themselves as their power increases with every iteration of them. Caught up in the pleasures of empty promises, Pepe memes, 4chan rants and actions, combover and spray tan jokes, comedic mimesis and alt-right semiotics, and staging policy by spectacle, with so many supercharges of nothingness to go around, desire cannot extract itself from the echo chamber of emptiness that modulates its existence, making it lose its bearings, finding solace in distress, that travels surprisingly well along the bubbling resonances of social media. For Guattari, “fascism, like desire, is scattered everywhere, in separate bits and pieces, within the whole social realm; it crystallizes in one place or another, depending on the relationships of force.” (Guattari 1995: 245) The Trump presidency is a kind of black hole into which the swirling phenomena of emptiness is drawn, simultaneously providing an attachment that allows belonging and forgetting to coexist, as it emits forged lines of alterity: alternative facts, courtesy of Kellyanne Conway (Counselor to President Trump), and bottomless post-truths that deflect and distract sober investigation and resist analysis.

Guattari reminds us that it incumbent upon theorists of microfascism to search in the most “incomprehensible’ revolutionary transformations” (Guattari 1995: 248) for investments of desire. In the transition from classical types of fascism to molecularized microfascisms, desire is at once liberated and subjected to repressive attributions tailored to new modes of production. This is why the Trump and 4chan hypothesis is so compelling as it directs us to epic fails, perhaps beginning with the inauguration: the more it breaks down the better it works, which is the credo of Deleuze and Guattari with regard not only to capitalism, but to America as well.

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