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Re-Contextualizing Fascism



In her recent book, *‘Being Numerous: Essays on a Non-Fascist Life,’* Natasha Lennard expresses dismay that her joyful reaction to the video of alt-right poster boy Richard Spencer being punched in the face in 2017 was not wholly shared by the liberal establishment. Let me state at the outset that I shared Lennard’s joy and found the video hilarious.

Her piece on fascism and anti-fascism – which can be found in earlier article-form [here](#) – explores the apparent motivations for fascism developed by Wilhelm Reich (‘The Mass Psychology of Fascism’), Michel Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari (henceforth: D&G) – who all find its roots within the personal traits of people living in capitalism.

Following Reich, Lennard treats fascism as a pathology. My argument below attempts to indicate that fascism is best not considered a pathology, but a consequence of the

inevitable instances of the failure of Representative Democracy. Furthermore, we have misunderstood fascism because we have, despite Jean-Jacques Rousseau's early advice, misunderstood the State and Democracy. Bear with me on this!

The rejection of the notion of political motivations – that we find objectionable – being determined by pathology is expressed by Jan-Werner Müller in his treatise, 'What is Populism?' Müller argues that populism is “the permanent shadow of representative politics” in which it is always possible “for an actor to speak in the name of the ‘real people’.” He contends that it is not “a kind of pathology caused by irrational citizens,” and that if one wants to engage populist voters they should be “understood as free and equal citizens, not as pathological cases of men and women driven by frustration, anger and resentment.” Müller's thesis can be extended to fascism. He argues that the real threat of populism is its anti-pluralism: “Populists are not against the principle of political representation; they just insist that only they are legitimate representatives.” So, one can see how fascism begins in populism but doesn't stay there. What fascism adds to the populist strategy is the eventual closing down of pluralism and Representative Democracy.

When Reich writes: “In its pure form fascism is the sum total of all the irrational of the human character... Fascist mentality is the mentality of the ‘little man,’ who is enslaved and craves authority and is at the same time rebellious” – we can get an inkling of Reich's feeling of superiority over those not as enlightened as himself. And when he writes: “In our society, love and knowledge still do not have the power at their disposal to regulate human existence” – we can discern that Reich sees himself as central to the task of raising up humanity.

Indeed, his project was not only directed against fascism. He argued that the Russian “masses” of the 1920s and '30s demonstrated that humanity was still too “structurally” immature to escape their cravings for authority because they failed to eradicate capitalism.

Reich locates the root of political fascism in the repressed psyche of ordinary ‘little’ people. D&G do the same thing, but they would call the root a rhizome. All three effectively demonstrate and encourage – despite D&G's more cautious articulations – an attitude of intellectual, emotional, and rational superiority over ‘ordinary’ people. Should we follow the course marked out by them? Should we self-appoint ourselves as the only

ones who really know what is wrong with the world and how to put it right? Or would putting ourselves on such a lofty shelf just be inviting a long fall?

Reich writes: "Fascism is the basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man of our authoritarian machine civilization." D&G write: "What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular [personal traits] or micropolitical power." This is what they term 'micro-fascism' and, for D&G, it explains why 'the masses' can't help but "desire [their] own repression." It is when these traits link up, they argue, that things get really nasty:

"Fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, before beginning to resonate together in the National Socialist State. Rural fascism and city or neighborhood fascism, youth fascism and war veteran's fascism, fascism of the Left and fascism of the Right, fascism of the couple, family, school, and office: every fascism is defined by a micro-black hole that stands on its own and communicates with the others, before resonating in a great, generalized central black hole."

In the preface to D&G's 'Anti-Oedipus,' as Lennard notes, Michel Foucault suggests the work is an "Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life," and D&G explain in their follow-up book, 'A Thousand Plateaus': "It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar [citizen] level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective."

It is this struggle with the 'inner fascist' that Lennard is seeking to pursue on a practical and day-to-day level. But while this is a worthy way to behave I am not convinced that people can change themselves before their circumstances are changed. That is, I think that change happens on other levels to that of the human will. We are all social functions of the society we inhabit and everything we do in a capitalist society is used and recuperated by capitalism. Capitalism always benefits from the revolutionaries who claim to oppose it and the charities that claim to put people before profit. An awareness of the stifling absurdity of our social situation in capitalism should not, however, prohibit us from doing kind things. Though one should always place one's actions within a context of meaninglessness that confers upon oneself no nobility and no sense that what one is doing is right and/or good in ultimate terms.

When people provide solutions to 'problems' they generally only create new problems. Lennard quotes Paul Virilio: "When you invent the plane, you also invent the plane crash." We could also examine how the various 'solutions' of people such as Jesus

Christ, James Watt, the Jacobins, or the Bolsheviks panned out. And one cannot, for example, cure one's genuine grief by rationalizing it or trying to expunge it by sheer force of will. The 'cure' arrives on different levels: that of time and changed circumstances. We cannot make people 'nice' – and to try to do so would, if one maintains the notion of micro-fascisms, merely be another micro-fascism.

Foucault writes, "The Christian moralists sought out the traces of the flesh lodged deep within the soul. D&G, for their part pursue the slightest traces of fascism in the body." So, however they put it, the message is that fascism is a corporeal sickness. This is consistent with their philosophical premise that everything in human society is already there in the human being, waiting to be crystallized or enabled.

D&G, I think, got over-excited by their post-Heideggerian ('always already'), post-Reichian (machine civilization/desire) enthusiasms and only managed to spread more confusion. It is a lot less mystifying – and more practical: we cannot make people nice – to simply treat fascism as an ever-present political threat in a Representative Democracy. Earlier I mentioned that the reason we tend to misunderstand fascism is because we misunderstand the State and we misunderstand Democracy. Most narratives of the emergence of the State begin with the rise of a chief who bullies people, which leads to a Royal Family, which leads to a retinue that eventually forms a bureaucracy. It is this bureaucracy that then wields the real power. The bureaucracy spreads out over the land and becomes a kind of closed proto-democracy. Eventually there are so many people helping to run the State directly through supervisory – the nascent 'middle class' – and entrepreneurial means that it becomes clear to them that the real power is in their hands and that they should have that power recognised. They begin a movement based on the new circumstances. Oliver Cromwell was landed gentry. Gerrard Winstanley – the leader of the Diggers, the far left of the revolutionists of the 'English Civil War' – was a middle-class businessman. Robespierre was a lawyer. Lenin was famously middle-class. Castro was born into a prosperous farming family and studied law at university. Guevara was a doctor. The workers and peasants get behind them because they also like this new 'democratic' idea and because they need some improvement in their lives. There is a revolution (we are not talking about 'revolts' here), sometimes it is bloody. The new leaders realise that the workers and peasants had a slightly different idea about how things should proceed and begin a clampdown. Often the first leaders of the revolution are kicked out, and new people, with a more reasonable agenda step in.

I agree with the whole of this narrative except for the very first part. My research into how peoples prior to the rise of a State (including present-day ‘uncontacted tribes’) organised themselves socially shows how one of the priorities was to keep group numbers small, and if numbers did start to escalate these groups would ‘fission’ – they split. Robin Dunbar has famously done work on optimal group sizes and he argues that for humans to operate successfully without coercion they must be able to have regular face-to-face interactions – everyone must know everyone else. Once the group becomes too numerous for everyone to know each other it becomes necessary for laws to be laid down.

My research suggests that the key element in the emergence of a new State – Mesopotamia, the Indus, Mesoamerica, etc – was not agriculture or alluvial valleys but the fact there was a rise in the population and for some unknowable reason the group was unable to split.

The classic narrative for the rise of a chiefdom/State is that a rapacious thug organises a group and takes over the tribe. But the anthropological record suggests that humans were able to resist vainglorious thugs for thousands of years. And how come there are ‘egalitarian’ tribes outside of States right now? There must be something else. Many anthropologists and historians suggest that advances in technology – for example, irrigation – led the way for numbers to rise and for people to become enslaved. But how come modern ‘uncontacted tribes’ haven’t invented modern farming techniques, increased their numbers and set up a ruthless dictatorship to serve under? Are they just stupid? No.

The reason powerful Chiefs emerged was because the populace reluctantly agreed that the new circumstances demanded a new way of organising things. Everyone did not know everyone else anymore and so people could get away with things, cliques could form, ‘crimes’ could be committed. Laws had to be made and people had to follow them – but the people who didn’t like the laws just ignored them. Finally, and this probably happened very quickly, a charismatic person seized the chance for self-aggrandisement... and in the end the populace agreed. A strong leader backed up by thugs would at least keep some peace.

Of course, the power would usually go to the Chief’s head and atrocities would be normalized, and if the people weren’t totally down-trodden they might support a rival

Chief's bid to topple the present one... and so history was written... right up to Representative Democracy.

The State itself is neither evil nor good, it is a managerial solution to the problem of a large population. Imagine the scene: "Yeah, Bob and his gang reckon they can sort out all the problems as long as everyone does what he says and gives him a tribute by sending daughters and sons to work for him, and building him a really good place to sleep in. The whole place will be a lot easier to live in, less chaos, but we'll have to stay where we are and work harder to make sure he gets enough recompense for his trouble. We don't want him to put his thugs on us, but it will be good if he sorts out those lazy thieving bastards who live up by the chickpea bushes..."

The State is often viewed as an obstacle to the ideals of peace and love – and communism – but maybe there is no escaping an authoritarian State when there are so many people jammed together? Perhaps this is one of the many lessons of the Russian Revolution? (Anyone who suggests here that perhaps the way to peace, love, and communism is therefore to reduce the human population is – apart from articulating real evil – missing the point that as functions of capitalism they would merely be recreating capitalism in a new situation, just as the Bolsheviks did in 1918.)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau opined for the freedom had before the advent of the State and civilization, but he recognized that living in a society where everyone – no matter their place in the hierarchy – was dependent upon everyone else meant that humans could not go back. He decided that we had to make the best of a bad job.

When things in society start to get tough or confusing and political leaders show no real capability or honesty then the opportunity for populism is provided. When people see that things are not being managed well – which becomes evident when politicians all look the same and government appears weak and flabby – then they may tend to favour a populist leader over the pluralism that just offers continued chaos or the same-old-same-old. The Clinton's and Obama (same-old-same-old) paved the way for Trump. But, if populism enables an actual fascist takeover then the people become trapped and must simply work out a way to survive as enthusiastic or reluctant functions of that dictatorship, or as opponents.

Fascism is not a pathological desire deep within us that only the enlightened can control. And to categorise supporters of fascism – or populism – as being unable to control an illness is an elitist mystification we don't need.

We have all the means to fight populism and fascism if we want to – without becoming holier-than-thou about our motives: 'the fight against fascism begins with the fight against capitalism,' etc. But we may lose, and we may have to endure. We should recognise, however, that the fight against fascism can never be about making a revolution that brings peace, love, and equality to the Earth: because our mass society denies that Enlightenment delusion. Rousseau was right: the only way to proceed – like Greta Thunberg appears to be doing – is to tenaciously attempt to keep the bastards, and ourselves, honest.

Despite this, as I am sure Lennard would agree, punching a fascist in the face – for an instant and no more – puts one on the side of the angels.

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