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Untitled (Notes on Fascism This Time)

The strategic adversary is fascism . . . the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective.
—Michael Foucault, preface to *Anti-Oedipus* (1983)

Ten years is a time span long enough to animate questions such as how to write about this situation without repeating what seems to have become a mantra, that is, without accusing political theorists of ignoring (excluding) how the social categories—gender, race, culture, class—have remapped the political terrain in the past sixty years, and which are in fact crucial to the current reemergence of fascism, as it thrives on old fellows such as white supremacist and misogynist discourses. This is a crucial aspect of this current moment because the fascist option is explicitly defended and justified as an attempt to correct the missteps of past governments that have supported the demands for social justice—in terms of equality, representation, recognition, that is, inclusion in its many guises—theorized by what some call “cultural marxists.” Though borrowing from the Nazi and fascist discourses and strategies of the early twentieth century, this new iteration is not the same, a mere repetition, or a faithful copy. They do, however, express the post-Enlightenment political architecture in the same manner. As if, after several decades of rejection, the core of the fascist program, that is, the one that ended (well, was driven underground everywhere) after the Second World War, now resurfaces untouched.

Ten years is long enough to serve as the marker for attaching the term “historic” to an event. It is, however, far from enough, in spite of attempts to explain such an event, to try and identify its distinguishing features, and place it under a category or concept. Ten years (unfortunately in this case) have not given enough elements for, for instance, deciding whether this is the return of fascism or some kind of authoritarianism, and whether figures such as Rodrigo Duterte and Recep Erdogan (to proceed with Hanna Arendt’s typology [e.g., Arendt 1956: 403–17]) are run-of-the-mill tyrants. I have in mind how, for about ten years, many have sought to make sense of Donald Trump’s inheriting the white supremacist right agenda from the Tea Party and Jair Bolsonaro’s consolidation of the evangelical-criminal right hijacking of the June 2013 and 2016 Insurrections. In a way, those attempting to think this moment are in a position similar to Gramsci’s, whose main contributions to historical materialism appear in his prison writings, in which he theorized the proletarian revolution and the political situation in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, in which fascism emerges, spreads, and consolidates.

For this reason, because our analytical tools cannot break through their own infrastructure, I thought that instead of directly commenting on Jair Bolsonaro’s political phenomenon, I could try out the sketch of an approach to his and similar lethal projects that focuses on their ontoepistemological conditions of possibility.



Thinking, considering, the current political situation from and with Brazil has a significant advantage and a telling disadvantage. The advantage owes to how the Brazilian version of the national text has been assembled. Both versions of the Brazilian national text—the whitening thesis (late nineteenth century) and the racial democracy thesis (1930s)—include social scientific and historical signifiers to describe a historical trajectory that results in the obliteration—through miscegenation and starvation—of physical (racial) traces of africanity and indigeneity but keeps their spiritual (cultural) attributes, which enter in the constitutions of the Brazilian nationality under the racial and cultural Portuguese leadership. This national text manifests the logic of obliteration, as unceasing cases of police brutality show, as it operates unhindered within the tools of raciality (Ferreira da Silva 2007). To be sure, the version of the Brazilian text that was celebrated by most until very recently (ten years or so), and remains the one preferred by Jair Bolsonaro’s project, the racial democracy, is a helpful guide into the analysis of this

moment precisely because of how its celebration of paternalism—which, according to its main framer, the Brazilian anthropologist and student of Franz Boas, Gilberto Freyre, expresses the country's democratic orientation—throws blacklight onto the post-Enlightenment political discourse.

The image Freyre offers of colonial Brazil, which was to be reproduced and celebrated, is that in which the political subject, the citizen of the republic to come, was a patriarch, ruling over his plantation, on expropriated indigenous land and its members, wife, children, servants, slaves. Now a significant characteristic of Freyre's account, which cannot be separated from its anthropological trust, is that it is a nostalgic description of a long gone past, which celebrates obedience to hierarchical order because it allowed for the intimate and peaceful racial intermingling, out of which the Brazilian nationality was born. Incidentally, the sociology of race relations also found that as long as this traditional/racial order (Park called it racial etiquette) was undisturbed in the US South racial harmony prevailed. In any event, the point here is that Brazil's racial democracy and the US South's racial etiquette theses provide descriptions of a political situation—with its economic, juridic, symbolic, and ethic components—in which the political entity, the subject of rights, is not presented as an abstract rational thing that relinquishes part of its liberty to assure the security provided by the law and the State. Instead, the image Gilberto Freyre assembles is that of the subject of rights, who retains (limited by law) liberty and authority over its personal (bodily) and familial holdings (domestic property).

Expectedly, this image has the disadvantage it inherits from its sociological and anthropological sources: on the one hand, it draws from the sociology of race relations' writing of the racial as both a datum (natural, not scientifically constructed but empirically given) and residuum (historical leftover of a traditional past to be overcome); and, on the other hand, it inherits from the anthropological text and the sociological modernization theory the view that non-European modern social spaces, like Brazil (and the US South, for that matter), retain traditional aspects (racial and patriarchal ones) which will disappear with further education of its populace in the modern principles of liberty and equality. Put differently, the disadvantage is that, as we know, political theorizing does not seem able to attend to the colonial unless it is identified with feudalism, which is the social formation preceding the properly political modernity. The same occurs in the case of the racial and the patriarchal, as we know, which, unfortunately, I do not have space to consider here.

What I propose here then is a brief study of how the post-Enlightenment ontoepistemological infrastructure—that is, the micro elements of thinking and metaphysical and epistemological descriptors (such as interior-

ity, identity, unity, and equality) that modern philosophers have assembled over the past four hundred years of so—operates in the fascist program. Emulating the Kantian exercise, as I map the conditions of possibility for this reemergence, I identify the elements and movements of thinking itself, including analytical unpacking and conceptual building, it shares with the arsenal of political theory. Tracking how interiority, unity, identity, equality enter in the composition of the fascist statement, I find, is a needed groundwork for an analytical intervention able to capture how fascism is a coherent specimen of the modern political discourse, which is a first and necessary step of the task of undermining it.



Reading the lines of Michel Foucault's preface to *Anti-Oedipus* in the epigraph to this essay, I wonder about how this naming of fascism as an "other within" has impacted the critical programs designed in the second half of last century. For brevity's sake let me just say that, among all the numerous and crucial aspects of it, I will focus on what this gesture presupposes, namely, something like an "in us," "in our heads," that "causes us to love power," "to desire." That thing, which is not the *object* of but the *cause* of desire for something else, does its work from the inside of me, us, him, according to Foucault. Whether or not Foucault finds it to be really the case, the whole statement makes sense because the interiorizing gesture that would mark post-Enlightenment thought, in the twentieth century, is constitutive of the political itself. Here I am not speaking solely about poststructuralist critiques, such as Foucault's and Deleuze's that address precisely the thing that is nothing but the figuring of the subject as/in interiority, namely, subjectivity. That concern with interiority is characteristic of the Frankfurt School and twentieth-century versions of Marxism such as Antonio Gramsci's, Louis Althusser's, Frantz Fanon's, Raymond Williams's, Stuart Hall's, to name a few. Key here, however, is not only the fact that these thinkers' versions of the critical text do presume it but that interiority is perhaps the main constitutive component of the ontoepistemological context, in which something like fascism could emerge and flourish, even after driven underground, as it was in the past sixty years or so.

In this context, I highlight two aspects, which appear in these lines of Foucault's preface, namely, that fascism is an *other* of sorts—an efficient cause for something we do, as such different from us and from that something—which operates from *inside you*. This comment is exemplary of the treatment received by fascism (and other authoritarian modalities) since the early twentieth century, when they emerge. I am thinking here of course

of classic studies such as Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, and Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Exemplary of the interpretive episteme, these works foreground interiority when posing the question of the conditions of possibility of fascism while at the same time highlighting how it departs from proper modern mental contents or forms of thought. Fascism, whether in itself a totalitarian political project or as a species of authoritarianism, is treated as an expression of an irrational mental process, whether a leftover from a previous stage of European moral development (antisemitism, highlighted by Arendt and Adorno) or an expression of a pathological mind (by Reich). Accepting Foucault's proposition that something *inside us* accounts for fascism's ability to take a hold, I move to describe the ontoepistemological intra-structure, the apparatus of rational thought, that renders fascism and other similar projects, which foreground authority, a feature of the post-Enlightenment political architecture.



Fascism conceives of the State as an absolute, in comparison with which all individuals or groups are relative, only to be conceived of in their relation to the State. The conception of the Liberal State is not that of a directing force, guiding the plan and development, both material and spiritual, of a collective body, but merely a force limited to the function of recording results: on the other hand, the Fascist State it itself conscious, and has itself a will and a personality—thus it may be called the “ethic” State. . . .

The State, as conceived of and as created by Fascism, is a *spiritual and moral* fact in itself, since its political and economic organization of the nation is a concrete thing: and such an organization must be in its origins and development a manifestation of the spirit. The State is the guarantor of security both internal and external, but it is also the custodian and transmitter of the *spirit of the people*, and it has grown up through the centuries in language, in customs and in faith. And the State is not only a living reality of the present; it is also linked with the past and above all the future, and thus transcending the brief limits of individual life, it represents the immanent spirit of the nation. The forms in which State express themselves may change, but the necessity for such forms is eternal. It is the State which educates its citizens in civic virtue, gives them a consciousness of their mission and welds them into *unity*.

—Benito Mussolini, *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism* (1933)

In the pamphlet *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*, first published in English in 1933, Mussolini describes his and his movement's trajectory, and distinguishes it from competing governing projects, such as Marxism and

Liberal Democracy. Though, according to him, fascism rejects liberal principles such as peace and advocates the benefits of war, the equation of well-being and happiness, and “affirms the immutable, beneficial and fruitful inequality of mankind,” it consists in “an organized, centralized and authoritative democracy” (Mussolini 1933: 14). I quote from Mussolini at length because I find that this classic fascist statement teaches us a great deal about its present iterations. Beyond the unsurprising realization that the latter rehearses the letter and spirit of Mussolini’s project, in particular the claims listed in the above paragraph, Mussolini’s text includes elements that indicate how the practices and projects of the nationalist movements he and Hitler led are not dissimilar from the version of the Brazilian text articulated by Gilberto Freyre.

Expectedly, for what distinguishes the national text, as it was framed from late nineteenth century through the beginning of the Second World War, is exactly the resolution of *identity* as *unity* effectuated by Hegel’s rewriting of the Kantian (already interiorized) notion of *transcendental* in the figure of Spirit. That resolution, which results from the efficient movement of self-actualizing spirit, or sublation, gathers the multiplicity characteristic of existence into a qualitative unity. Or rather, it consists in the recognizing that that which appears distinct (an other immanent one [I]) is only a yet-to-be identified presentation of itself. As the transcendent One (I), spirit is but that which holds the unity of diversity (the manifold, all the many ones) that characterizes existence. In the Brazilian national text, as Freyre postulates, the superiority of the Portuguese Spirit warrants that it remains the leader and the unifying (ethical) force in the comingling with “inferior black and indigenous races.” Though in the 1930s, as the racial democracy version of the national text was assembled, Brazil was experimenting with its own version of a fascism-flavored government, that of Getulio Vargas, it is important to note the differences between it and the fascist version of the national text. In particular, I have in mind something that the Brazilian national text/racial discourse did not, because it could not, claim, due to the risk of being placed outside whiteness/Europeanness, that is, the claim to racial purity or integrity. That claim, which, as Nahum Chandler (2013) aptly describes, is key to the US national/racial discourse, indicates another articulation of *identity*, which is the one that conflates it with *integrity*. In the fascist version of the national text, it appears in activation of the State’s role as a self-preserving entity—responsible for “security internal and external”—when naming it “the custodian and transmitter of the Spirit of the people.” In fact, by naming the fascist State the “ethic” State, Mussolini is effectively collapsing the State and the Nation. That is, in the pamphlet, the State is described

as protector and preserver of its own *integrity*, and as Mussolini equates the State and the Spirit of the people, that also means the protector of its own *identity* (= unity = integrity).



The Fasci di combattimento were born in the aftermath of the war. They were imbued with the petit-bourgeois character of the various veteran's associations which arose at that time. . . . They emerged during the same period when the rural landowners were feeling the need to create a White Guard to tackle the growing workers' organizations. . . . Fascism still conserves this trait of its origins. . . . These rural groups are engaged in a fight against the poor peasants and their organizations. They are acutely anti-union and reactionary.

—Antonio Gramsci, "The Two Fascisms" (1921)

A democratic solution? Right, Lacoste concedes; let's begin by exterminating the Algerians, and to do that, let's arm the civilians and give them *carte blanche*. The Paris press, on the whole, has welcomed the creation of these armed groups with reserve. Fascist militias, they've been called. Yes; but on the individual level, on the plane of human rights, what is fascism if not colonialism when rooted in a traditionally colonialist country?

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

Returning to Foucault's words, I would respond to the question he does not ask (because he assumes interiority as a given), which is, what makes possible and effective political statements where the spiritual (cultural) (in the case of Mussolini) and the physical (racial) (in the case of Hitler) constitute the political collective on the basis of an *interior* identification with the State, the figure that liberal thought has always met with suspicion? Educational practices and objects, the propaganda machine, social scientific tools, artworks, and visual signifiers play a role as they do in the very constitution of subjectivity itself. What we need to consider is how subjectivity itself became something that could be formed. That, I find, becomes possible thanks to the ontoepistemological infrastructure of modern thinking, through which linearity plays its productive role, that is, obtains unity (as in the line that encloses a multiplicity) and identity (as the line that signals continuity). For fascism, as Mussolini's statement indicates, counts on the interiorizing of unity in/as the identity of a final cause, spirit, in which the State represents the moment of absolute self-identification (of citizens with the political authority), which is also that of its self-realization (as freedom). What, one must ask, accounts for the assembling of the State as an ethical (final) and not only juridical (formal)

entity? That I think has to do with how *equality*, as positive (geared to implementation) and not only as a formal negative principle, has been fought from very early on in the post-Enlightenment political context.

When considering how thinkers like Gramsci and Fanon, both of whom adjust the original version of the historical materialist text to deal with contexts that greatly differ from the nineteenth-century England “model” Marx examines in *Capital*, approach fascism, one has to first deal with the fact that one wrote while fighting against it and then while imprisoned by Mussolini’s government and the other wrote after its defeat but in a context in which security and the collapsing of the State and the ones it protects, the settler, was in full force but was not called by the name. Each, however, provides helpful clues regarding how to assemble a critique of fascism that does not take subjectivity and identity as given, that is, natural and fertile ground for authoritarian political projects. (Which is something difficult to avoid as a main source of tools for thinking critically subjectivity, Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalysis but also Foucault’s notion of discursive formation, do indeed describe it as a ground for power to take hold, under the guise of the Law of the Father [Freud], Name of the Father [Lacan], and Discourse [Foucault]). Instead, they guide us to take a step back to consider the context in which this lethal statement on the *identity* of the State with the People would take hold of the liberal political text, and what renders it an attractive option every time demands for equality went beyond equal protection onto demanding that the juridical body curbs capital’s extractive, exploitative, and expropriative inroads.

More precisely, I find that with both it is possible to attend to the significance of the colonial and the racial in the constitution of the twentieth-century political context. From the early moments, Gramsci’s writings, in particular in regard to the role of the intellectuals, indicate an awareness of how the symbolic—even if only through historical signifiers—played a crucial role in class domination and in how the State attends interest of capital. At the same time, he was also paying attention to the role of fascist violence in support of the interests of the rural cadre. Recall that the ground for something like a fascist project to emerge and grow had been sowed in the previous century, in particular in the decades that followed the 1848 revolutions, with the articulation of a version of the nation modeled after Hegel’s spirit of people, one in which identity (in spirit) and not equality (in society) constituted the guiding principle. Not surprisingly, the fascist project would target precisely the political entities, the socialist and the communist parties and labor unions, which carried on with the most progressive demands of those revolutionary projects

many decades before. That the resurgence of fascism this time also follows, is framed and mobilized explicitly against, a sixty-year time span during which some demands for equality from gender-sexual and racial subaltern persons and populations have been met is not surprising. What is surprising is that we meet it, as if it could not have been conceived as a possibility, precisely because, as noted above, fascism and similar political projects are considered foreign and incompatible with the liberal political architecture.

What Fanon offers, I find, is precisely a way to cut through this hysterical blindness that seems to afflict otherwise composed critical thinkers when it comes to attending how coloniality and raciality support the liberal political subject and the architecture in which it thrives. He does so in many ways. Here I will mention only two. The first I will comment on in this section and the second in the following. The equation of fascism and colonialism in the quote above must be considered in light of Fanon's description of the colonial context, in the opening of the same chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here we can think of Mussolini's description of the fascist state, in particular of its role in security, in its identification with the nation, in the ways in which the colonial police force protects the property the colonizer/settler (with whom it is identified both nationally and racially) expropriated from the colonized. My point here is not to suggest that colonialism equals fascism but just to remember how, since its early moments, liberal political philosophy, and the political architecture it envisions and supports, has always and comfortably encompassed a juridical force which functions on the basis of the threat and actual deployment of lethal authority. Consistently, its lethality becomes more conspicuous and increases when those under its control, in an organized or spontaneous fashion, make mundane demands such as self-determination, civil rights, or equality of opportunity, to use the nineteenth- and twentieth-century terminology. That Fanon was thinking precisely one of such circumstances, the Algerian War, must be taken into consideration when one reads his equation of colonialism and fascism.



We should flatly refuse the situation to which the Western countries wish to condemn us. Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories. For centuries the capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped world like nothing more than war criminals. Deportations, massacres, forced labor, and slavery have been the main methods used by capitalism to increase its wealth, its gold or diamond reserves, and to establish its power. Not long ago Nazism transformed the whole of Europe

into a veritable colony. The governments of the various European nations called for reparations and demanded the restitution in kind and money of the wealth which had been stolen from them: cultural treasures, pictures, sculptures, and stained glass have been given back to their owners. There was only one slogan in the mouths of Europeans on the morrow of the 1945 V-day: "Germany must pay."

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

Let me close with a disclosure and an acknowledgment. Not long ago during a Zoom meeting, my friend and collaborator, the Berlin- and Oslo-based artist Susanne Winterling, said as we were ending the conversation something like "Fanon helps us to understand this." I told her that I was working on a short paper, in which I include Gramsci's and Fanon's commentary on fascism, in which I was using the quote I include in the opening of the previous section. I asked her to elaborate on her comment, which she did, and then she reminded me of the passage from *The Wretched of the Earth* I used in this one. "Reading Fanon in these times of persistent crisis and mostly only reactions of a totalitarian, proto-fascist, and often fascist way to it," his pointing to the "interconnectedness of fascism and colonialism," she tells me, help her to make sense of the "even more brutal combination of fascist and colonial methods being induced not only in Israel and Puerto Rico but also in Norway and Germany." Now as fascism raises its face once again, deploying the same strategies as it did one hundred years ago, we could heed Fanon and have raciality (as a political symbolic arsenal, of which Hitler made deadly use) and coloniality (which Mussolini explicitly claimed in his statements of Empire as the highest form of the ethic authority) guide the analysis of the global present.

What that will tell us about the present is less important than what it may make available for thinking the present. That, I find, includes the fact that precisely as the local and regional wars of global capital and the havoc of global warming have been displacing an increasing number of persons from their homes in the global South, in the global North we find this reemergence of fascism with the same protective claim now against precisely those displaced, who are the descendants of former colonized populations. There is no quick recipe for how to do this because any such a strategy would more likely than not err by taking racial and cultural difference as datum and residuum and move on to explain fascism as a reaction to the foreign ways of the newly arrived racial other, as if descendants of European colonizers in the global North and descendants of former colonized populations have just met. To be sure the very living conditions migrants from the global South

seek in the cities of the global North have been possible thanks to centuries of extractive and expropriative activities and mechanisms supported by the colonial apparatus of violence and now endless regional and local wars. Migrants are not other but indeed they register the very conditions of possibility all Europeans deem dear, which is also what reemerging fascist programs across the continent claim to be the only ones able to protect.

How to do it? How to read this time with Fanon? How to break through a century-old habit of thinking that seem unable to take raciality and coloniality as constitutive of the post-Enlightenment political context? Kant's and Hegel's moves to interiorize universal reason are the crucial culprits here. To properly appreciate it, however, takes a shift in thinking that I can experiment with but not describe. Hence, I close by offering the preceding paragraphs as I do my own artistic interventions. Which, I find, resonate with interventions by other contemporary artists, such as Susanne Winterling, the Otolith Group, and many others that will remain unnamed, whose work also reports on colonial and ecological violations that they connect to the current resurfacing of fascism in Europe. As it should be the case, the kinds of connections that artworks invite, and many times demand, do not translate into the grammar of critical commentary. I do think, however, that they can inspire and inform the assembling of other critical tools and strategies. This, by the way, is how I envision this short text be received, and why "untitled" is the only appropriate name for it.

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