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Foreword:
Fascism, Yet?

■ Last week as I was waiting for the subway at Times Square station, I noticed a woman as she was coming off the train, fixed as I was by the enormous purple button pinned to her coat. In large white letters it asked, "Is It Fascism Yet?" I exchanged a knowing glance with a fellow passenger as we pushed into the car. "It's getting there," he said wanly as we pulled away.

Fascism—as name, idea, political system, worldview, culture—seems ever to produce the difficulty of knowing whether or not it has arrived, yet. Historically referencing Germany and Italy circa 1930, ever beholden to particular European times and places, fascism provokes uncertainties about its reach, metaphorical and otherwise. How will we know when it's fascism? Just like the question "Are we having fun yet?" the question "Is it fascism yet?" spurs us to wonder "Well, *is* it?" ("Well, *are* we?"). Or, alternatively, of course, with the barb already embedded in the question, we feel sure of the implied irony: we know that it is fascism, already. How much fascism is necessary before one can answer the question in the affirmative? When do we know fascism is fascism?

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One possible answer is that we know fascism is fascism when it's too late, always after the fact. What my moment on the subway and others disclose is that fascism is a notion that outstrips its historical reference, one that has a theoretical and reflective afterlife that can allow us to think about a range of problems that weren't, aren't, thinkable otherwise. Like other comparative concepts—*modernity*, for example—the notion of fascism generates comparative frenzy and anxiety, a constant search to find and verify just one more fact that would allow us to claim that Japan, say, was a fascist state. Indeed, as Alan Tansman shows in his introduction to this volume, by the mid-1980s there was a "consensus" that the term *fascism* was not applicable to Japan. That consensus is no longer unbroken (if it ever was); as these essays and others seek to reveal, the arrival of fascism, the fantasy and culture of fascism, is known by its aftereffects and signs, its traces and remainders in domains seemingly distant from that of the political.

I can't think about fascism without thinking about Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno and their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the legacy of other, related critical theorists—notably, Walter Benjamin, of course, but also Ernst Bloch. For them, fascism had and has everything to do with the limits of capital, with the attempt to overcome those limits through the uncanny twins of gleaming technology and bloody archaism, both made productive through the spectacle of mass culture and its technological reproducibility.

As many have remarked, most vividly Slavoj Žižek in recent years, fascism describes an attempt to have capitalism without capitalism—to have your capitalism and eat it, too, at the same time as it most assuredly devours you. As he states, "The fascist dream is simply to have *capitalism without its 'excess,' without the antagonism that causes its structural imbalance*."[1] What would capitalism be without excess? It would, in a sense, be a "capitalism without capitalism." It would be a capitalism without the specter of class division and all its implications. It would be a capitalism without the terror of labor unrest, of revolution—and the trains would run on time. To erase class divisions by appealing to the nation as an organic community that transcends these divisions while keeping in place existing property relations—that, perhaps, is the core vocation of fascism.

Fascism—or perhaps, if we prefer, the fascist fantasy—comes in to regulate the dangerous excesses of capitalism. It is important to remember, however, that the excessiveness of capitalism is its normal state; there is no time when balance and stasis will be or can be reached. Capitalism utterly

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depends on unevenness, and its state of normalcy is one of hysterical, excessive production. And that is why a discourse of the Master or Leader—of the Subject presumed to know—emerges repeatedly to regulate excess, to get rid of social antagonisms. At the same time, this dangerous excess is placed outside the social body.

In Japan, the emperor occupied this position of Master, although not in the same modality as Hitler or Mussolini. The emperor, placed at the point of origin, also became the projected, mass-mediated *effect* of an always existing nation, notwithstanding—or perhaps because of—the reality of his distanced and deferred image. The figure of the emperor was thus both origin and projection, both subject and object. Excess was purged, assigned to the outside, as the foreign: the outside as the West, as the source of capitalist excess, of decadent modernity—or the foreign within: Koreans and communists, most notably. The aversion and fear of this excess was not only of the foreign as such but of that which embodies abstract universality, that which can't be contained within the corporatist fantasy of a community in which all participate as fraternalized beings (here, in the embrace of the emperor). The idea that an "individual can directly, irrespective of his or her place within the social organism, participate in the universal" (for example, as upheld in the idea of human rights) was thus anathema.[2] Such abstract universality is the stigmata of Western modernity; thus, it was this modernity that cried out to be overcome in the name of an organically unified nation-culture.[3] Instead of the ceaseless displacement of capitalism, a formation in which everyone would know his own place was theorized to encompass a global hierarchy. Organic community was restored under the gaze of the Master, who also became the effect of the gaze of the national masses (Takashi Fujitani is to be thanked here for elucidating this dimension of emperorship in Japan).[4] What disturbs this organicism was disallowed—modernity itself (although not technology as such)—and could only be definitively eliminated by the drive toward total war, as developed in the writings of Japanese ideologues and philosophers of the period. (Note that this narrative does not engage the question of how the West, for example, entered and perturbed the existing communal space of Japan; German fascists had their memories of oppression to reference, as well. But the question remains as to how these antagonisms constitutive to capitalism were occluded in Japan.)

The "corporatist temptation," the temptation to return to unmediated communal identification, is in fact the "necessary reverse of capitalism,"

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in Žižek's words. Capital always already inscribes the possibility and the *necessity* of this reversal. In its seeming external negation of liberal, capitalist democracy, fascism in fact completes, as its "*internal* negation," the truth of capitalist democracy.[5] That is why Horkheimer and Adorno, generalizing from Auschwitz to the entire Enlightenment project, speak of the dialectical entwinement of myth and enlightenment, of the "wholly enlightened earth . . . radiant with triumphant calamity."[6] And that is why, in their analysis of the American culture industry, they can talk about the virtual fascism of the consumer in the midst of that which many presume to be the obverse of fascism: American liberal democracy. Fascism is the internal negation of capitalism; to negate the negation, something else must occur (in the classic sense, communism). We are ever naive if we think of democracy, that is, as the obverse of fascism.

Japanese fascism (can we call it that?) strove to institute a world where everyone knew his place, while still working to keep capitalist relations of production intact. Thus, the economy had to be subordinated to the ideological-political domain, while the ideological-political domain was stylized through the techniques and technologies of mass cultural production, in turn subordinated to the aesthetic demands of the "mass ornament" and to the codified and singular norms of Japanese beauty.[7]

We see here the contours of a reactionary modernism that was enabled by the spatial bifurcation (one indeed instituted by colonial relations) of the West and the East and the resolution that called for Western technology and Eastern spirit, the Japanese version of the German amalgam of technology and culture. This split position was virtually ordained historically by Japanese attempts to form a national unity in the face of the West (a unity that could not be attained without the powers of capital and technology), and this split position is a fundamental armature of the fascist fantasy in Japan. It is a fantasy that emerges with the placing of Japan within the narrative of global capitalist unevenness.

Ernst Bloch was profoundly attuned to this dimension of unevenness in capitalism, to the antagonisms that cannot be sutured, and to the different forms of temporality that then emerge: what he called non-synchronous synchronicity. He was also attuned to the intoxication of fascism, of folkloric nationalism, and to the spooky repetitions of "old dreams," as he called them. He understood the pleasures to be had in fascist identifications, pleasures that the left could not mobilize.[8] In the archaic revivals of interwar Japan, we find a similar reinscription of ghostliness across the non-contemporaneous contemporaneity of the country and the city,

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the peasant and the petite bourgeoisie. And we find, as well, machineries of desire that proffered the transferential pleasures of identification with power in the guise of the emperor and in the sacrifices of total war.

If we think of the fascist fantasy as an integral part of the structure of capitalism, as a constitutive moment in the dialectic of enlightenment, then we won't find it illegitimate to think of Japan as permeated with something we could call fascism in the interwar years. Nor would we think it strange to ask, "Is It Fascism Yet?" in any existing capitalist nation. That fantasy is always cultural, to the extent that fantasy is symbolic, but more important, it is the fantasy of culture itself that gives shape to many of the aesthetic and philosophical enterprises circulating around the fascist sign. That is, culture—the notion of culture—emerges as that which *also* works precisely to erase the political (that is, class division and unevenness) and the traumas of capitalism (the commodity form itself). While we can invoke "culture" to signify, most broadly, the aesthetic, an awareness of this other nomination of culture is crucial for an attempt to bring together the notions of culture and fascism. With fascism, what is revealed is what was fascistic about culture to begin with (think of the invocations of "German culture" or "Japanese culture"). Attention to the fascistic potential in the modern notion of culture itself, such that the culture of fascism can also imply the fascism of culture; attention to fascism as the internal negation of capitalism; and attention to the synchronous non-synchronicity of the competing temporalities fascist fantasies strive to collapse: these are three forms of attention that will help us determine whether it really is fascism yet, in Japan or elsewhere, then or now.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 210. Emphasis in the original.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Žižek Reader*. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright, eds. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 138.
3. See Harry Harootunian's magisterial *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
4. Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
5. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 210.
6. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.
7. See Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Har-

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vard University Press, 2005). On the place of Japanese aesthetics in fascist times, see Leslie Pincus, *Autheticating Culture in Interwar Japan: Kuki Shūzō and the Rise of a National Aesthetic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

8. See in particular the essays in Ernst Bloch, *The Heritage of Our Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

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