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Source: *Grey Room*, No. 21 (Fall, 2005), pp. 21-25

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442700>

Accessed: 29/12/2013 05:00

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Theses on the New European Fascism

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TRANSLATED BY ALESSIA RICCIARDI

1. At the turn of the century, European fascism is the twin brother, which is to say the terrifying “double,” of the most radical instances of freedom and community that arise in the crisis of the labor-based society. It is the malignant caricature of what men and women could do in the epoch of generalized communication, when knowledge and thought present themselves neatly as a *common good*. It is the transformation into nightmare of what Marx called “the dream of a thing.”

Postmodern fascism does not thrive in the closed rooms of the ministry of the interior, but rather in the kaleidoscope of metropolitan forms of life. It does not develop in the always-frightening context of institutional apparatuses, but relates to what ought to be worthier of hope: collective behaviors subtracting themselves from political representation. It is not a ferocious footnote to constituted power, but the eventual configuration of popular “counterpower.” It might become a physiognomic trait of subaltern classes, the way in which they exorcize and confirm at the same time their subalterity. In brief, the new fascism presents itself as a civil war within the field of dependent work informed by the tempest of technology and post-Fordist ethics. It very closely concerns mass intellectuality, the autonomist and antistatal impulses, any “ordinary singularity,” and citizens made shrewd by the society of the spectacle.

Confronted by fascism, the Left has insisted on demarcating an insurmountable distance, if not an anthropological difference; on the contrary, it is now a question of recognizing fascism’s nature as a distorting mirror. Which is to say, its proximity to the productive and cultural experiences from which even revolutionary politics proceeds. Only a gesture of approach can provide adequate countertoxins. To look one’s twin brother in the face means positioning one’s own praxis in a state of exception in which the most promising course is always on the verge of bifurcating into catastrophe.

2. The European fascism of the turn of the century is a pathological response to the progressive, extrastatal dislocation of sovereignty and the obsolescence that is the evident character of work under a boss in this day and age. Already

for these very reasons, it stands at the antipodes of historical fascism. Every echo or analogy suggested by the term is misleading. And yet the use of the term is appropriate—appropriate to indicate, today as much as in the 1920s, a phenomenon essentially different from a conservative, illiberal, repressive inclination on the part of government. Indeed, to indicate a twin brother that is robust and frightening.

3. The metamorphosis of the social systems in the West during the 1930s has been designated at times with an expression as specific as it is paradoxical: socialism of capital. This phrase alludes to the decisive role assumed by the state in the economic cycle at the end of the liberal era of *laissez-faire*, to the process of centralization and planning guided by public industry, to the politics of full employment, to the dawn of welfare. The capitalist response to the October Revolution and to the crisis of 1929 was a gigantic socialization (or, better, statalization) of the relations of production. To agree with Marx, what took place was “an overcoming of private property on the very terrain of private property.”

Historical fascism, as is well known, represented a variant or an articulation of the “socialism of capital.” Hyperstatalism, the militarizing of work not unconnected to its exaltation, public support for the effective demand, political Fordism (which is transposed into a form of government): these are some of its salient characteristics. The model elaborated by Lord Keynes found a practical realization not only in Roosevelt’s New Deal but also in the Third Reich’s economic politics.

The metamorphosis of social systems in the West during the 1980s and 1990s might be synthesized in the most pertinent way with the expression “communism of capital.” This means that the capitalist initiative orchestrates, for its own benefit, precisely those material and cultural conditions that from the communist perspective would ensure a calm realism. Let’s think of the objectives that constitute the “substance of hoped-for things” of modern revolutionaries: the abolition of that intolerable scandal that is the persistence of wage labor, the extinction of the state as the industry of coercion and “monopoly of political decision,” the valorization of all that makes unrepeatable the life of the individual. Well, in the course of the last decade, a tendentious and terrible interpretation of these very same objectives has been propounded. First of all, the irreversible contraction of socially necessary work time has occurred at the same pace as the increase in the hours of “insiders” and the marginalization of outsiders. Even, and especially when it is assaulted by overtime, the assemblage of dependent workers presents itself as a surplus population or “industrial army in reserve.” Second, the radical crisis or, better, the splintering of nation-states can be explained as a miniature reproduction

of the form of the state in the manner of Chinese boxes. Third, after the fall of an actual, effective “universal equivalent,” we witness a fetishistic cult of *differences*. Only the latter, claiming an artificial substantive foundation, gives rise to all variety of discriminatory and oppressive hierarchies.

European fascism at the turn of the century nourishes itself with the “communism of capital.” It plays its game on the uncertain border between work and nonwork, organizes in its own way surplus social time, supports the cancerous proliferation of the state form, offers mutable shelters from the marginalization and the uprooting that arise from living the structural condition of “overpopulation,” marks ephemeral and yet threatening “differences.”

4. Max Horkheimer, in his 1942 study of the authoritarian state, characterizes the material bases of fascism as the systematic destruction of the sphere of circulation in the ambit of *Liberté* and *Egalité*.¹ According to Horkheimer, the concentration of the process of production on the side of monopolies repudiates that appearance of “just exchange” between equal subjects on which juridical equality and the whole “Eden of bourgeois rights” are founded. With the decline of free competition, freedom tout court is ruined. The factory-regime’s despotism, instead of remaining an occult and unrepresentable truth, comes to the foreground, theatrically submits itself to the ambit of circulation, becomes an institutional model, affirms itself as the authentic *nomos* of the earth. The operative modes of mass production erupt into politics and the organization of the state. Procedures based on consensus (whose model is the exchange of equivalents) are followed by prescriptive procedures of a technical character, changed by the concrete connections of the work process.

In the postwar period, antifascism becomes aware of the material conditions that had dictated the shipwreck of liberal regimes. As a consequence, in order not to be tricked by words, it conceives democracy first of all as industrial democracy. The owners of citizenship in a strong sense are no longer atomized individuals interacting in the market but producers. Working identity and democratic identity tend to coincide. The individual is represented by his or her work, the work of the state. This is the global plan, at times realized, at other times disregarded, but provided at any rate with constitutional dignity. The sunset of the first Italian republic is not something different from the conflagration of this plan, from the failure of its very foundations. And it is on the ruins of industrial democracy, or working democracy, that we are given to see the silhouette of postmodern fascism.

The merely residual weight of work time in the production of wealth, the decisive role that abstract knowledge and linguistic communication play in it, the fact that processes of socialization have their center of gravity outside the

factory and the office, the civil contempt for every repositioning of the “ethic of work,” all this and something else again makes politically unrepresentable the post-Fordist workforce. If this unrepresentability does not become a positive principle, a constitutional axis, a defining element of democracy, it can, as a mere “no longer,” determine the condition for a drastic restriction of freedoms.

Postmodern fascism has its root in the destruction of the work sphere as the privileged locus of socialization and of the acquisition of political identity.

5. Marx said the workforce cannot lose its noncapital quality, its virtual “negation of capital,” without immediately ceasing to constitute the leavening for the process of accumulation. Today we should say that the post-Fordist workforce cannot lose its *nonwork* qualities—that is, it cannot stop participating in a form of social cooperation larger than capital-producing cooperation—without losing at the same time its valorizing virtues. In the factories of “total quality” or in the culture industry, a good worker is one who turns against the execution of his or her assigned attitudes, competencies, know-how, tastes, inclinations matured in the vast world outside the time specifically dedicated to “work.” To merit the title of Stakhanov today is to bring to professional fruition an acting-out of concept that exceeds (and contradicts) the restrictive sociality of the given “professions.”²

State politics aims at starting over from the beginning each time that social cooperation exceeds labor cooperation, imposing on the one the criterions and the unities of measurement of the other. Fascism at the turn of the century, on the other hand, gives direct expression to the excess of cooperation, but gives it a hierarchical, racist, despotic expression. It makes of socialization outside work a feral and deregulated sphere predisposed to the exercise of personal domination; it installs the myth of ethnic determination, of rediscovered roots, of “blood and soil” supermarket rhetoric; it reestablishes in its folds familial links between sects and clans destined to achieve that disciplining of bodies which is no longer provided by work relations.

Fascism at the turn of the century is a form of the barbaric colonizing of social cooperation outside work. It is the Grand Guignol parody of a politics finally not of the state.

6. The main orientations of European culture over the last decade do not offer an antidote, nor even an indisputable point of resistance, to the new fascism. On the contrary, this new fascism disfigures and reutilizes, as a sort of outrageous nemesis, concepts and images of the world that are on loan to celebrate the “end of history” and its bloody rites. Postmodern thought, which has described the reduction of knowledge and language to wage labor as a liberating eruption

of “differences” that resembles a euphoric passage from the one to the many, particularly cannot be said to be innocent, because it is indeed in the many that fascist forms of the microphysics of power affirm themselves.

7. The crisis of representative democracy is interpreted, in Italy, by the Leagues and by the company party, thus by the “baby kissers” of the “second republic.” These are different voices that, in fact, even compete with one another, but all of them facilitate the coincidence of the decline of political representation (of representability itself) and the shrinkage of participation in the public sphere. Bear in mind, we are certainly not dealing with fascist “positions” but with projects whose realization determines that empty space, which is to say that no-man’s land, in which fascism at the turn of the century can effectively become stronger.

Today, radical antifascism consists in conceiving the crisis of representation not as an inevitable sclerosis of democracy, but on the contrary as the extraordinary occasion of a substantial development. To put it differently, becoming immune to the “twin brother” today means elaborating and experimenting with organisms of *nonrepresentative democracy*. Confronting the furious quarrel between those in favor of a proportional electoral system and those in favor of a majoritarian one (yesterday), as well as between proponents of a single-ballot system and of a second-ballot system (tomorrow), it seems appropriate, and not at all beside the point, to bring attention to a question of a different substance.³ Namely, the following: How to organize the soviet of mass intellectuality and of the whole of post-Fordist work? How to articulate a radically extraparliamentary public sphere? Which democratic—and precisely on this score nonrepresentative—institutions can give full political expression to the current intertwining of work, communication, and abstract knowledge?

Notes

1. Max Horkheimer, “Autoritärer Staat,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1987), 293–319.

2. Aleksei Grigorievich Stakhanov (1906–1977) was a coal miner in the Soviet Union whom the Communist Party promoted as “a model worker” and eventually made a Hero of Socialist Labor. His example gave rise to the Stakhanovite movement, which emphasized Taylorist scientific management techniques and technological efficiency to boost production. *Trans.*

3. In a single-ballot system, voters cast their vote just once, and the candidate with the most votes wins, even if this number is less than a majority. In a second-ballot system, a first round of balloting is held and, if no clear majority winner is elected, a second round is held in which only the two candidates who gained the most votes in the first round are allowed to run. *Trans.*