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Fascism and the Tiny Hands of the Market

Keywords

fascism, market, hybrid, labor, debt, finance

Abstract

In this essay, digital hybridity stands for the perpetual availability of life as both labour and debt for capital, both in real life and online. At the heart of these reflections is the realization that the digital is a regime in which finance capital believes it is finally free from any dependency on social reproduction. With the move from value to price, from labor to debt, from revolution to disruption, and from avant-garde to speculation, the digital evolved as the material of capital and the totality of the social has been replaced by the tidal liquidity of finance; immaterial labor, touching images on the screen, the rhizomatic panopticon of the Internet, shock-work on social media, and cryptocurrencies are all examples of the ways in which the digital and financial shadow each other. This new regime entails a series of conversions that change the ways in which meaning is organized—from the point of production to the point of realization, from strikes to riots, from working class to surplus populations, from solidarity to conspiracy, and from organization to petty sovereignty.

Fašizem in drobne roke trga

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Ključne besede

fašizem, trg, hibrid, delo, dolg, finance

Povzetek

V tem eseju digitalna hibridnost pomeni večno razpoložljivost življenja kot dela in dolga, za kapital, tako v resničnem življenju kot na spletu. V središču teh razmišljanj je spoznanje, da je digitalno tisti režim, v katerem finančni kapital verjame, da je končno

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osvobožen kakršne koli odvisnosti od družbene reprodukcije. S prehodom od vrednosti k ceni, od dela k dolgu, od revolucije k razdoru in od avantgarde k špekulacijam, se je digitalno razvilo kot materialno kapitala, na mesto totalnosti družbenega pa je stopila totalnosti družbenega pa je stopila plimska likvidnost financ: nematerialno delo, dotikanje podob na zaslonu, rizomatski panoptikum interneta, šok-delo na družbenih medijih, kriptovalute, vse to so primeri načinov vzajemnega prikrivanja finančnega in digitalnega. Ta novi režim vključuje vrsto pretvorb, ki spreminjajo načine organiziranja pomena – od točke proizvodnje do točke realizacije, od stavk do nemirov, od delavskega razreda do presežnega prebivalstva, od solidarnosti do zarote in od organizacije do drobne suverenosti.



*If you don't want to talk about capitalism, then you should
keep silent about fascism.*

—Max Horkheimer, “Die Juden und Europa”¹

*The worker was indeed becoming an appendage to the
machine, not because machines had been invented, but
because these machines served the interest of the class that
owned the means of production.*

—Boris Hessen, Director of the Moscow Institute of
Physics, “The Social and Economic Roots of Newton’s
Principia,” The Second International Congress of
the History of Science in London, 1931²

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The manuscript for this text was over the character limit by a few thousand letters. A friend told me I should try to run it through online AI text software such as Claude.ai or Perplexity.ai, to reach the desired word count. And so I did. From what I gather, based on my prompt, it basically sampled some full paragraphs

¹ “Wer aber vom Kapitalismus nicht reden will, sollte auch vom Faschismus schweigen.” Max Horkheimer, “Die Juden und Europa,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8, no. 1/2 (1939): 115, <https://doi.org/10.5840/zfs193981/24>; my translation.

² Boris Hessen, “The Social and Economic Roots of Newton’s *Principia*,” in *The Social and Economic Roots of the Scientific Revolution: Texts by Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossmann*, ed. Gideon Freudenthal and Peter McLaughlin (New York: Springer, 2009), 85.

to make a concise text that summarizes certain themes. Of course, this was not what I was looking for, but it was nice to see. I left it at that and went back to writing and editing on my own word processor. I don't know what the moral of this story is, but as you read this, you might not believe me that it is my own writing, as I have just suggested that some large language model was involved in scanning, sampling, and organizing words according to some kind of proper English grammar and syntax.³

With this in mind, this text you are reading now, like any other text these days, is a parable, both on the collapse of intent and meaning and the supremacy of the a-signifying semiotics of pulses and intensities. The bot stands for the conversion of the self-proclaimed patriot resenting the enemies he finds everywhere (feminists, courts, trans people, Jews, Muslims, people of color, etc.), and the enemy who is interfering and amplifying internal social and political antagonisms through influence campaigns (Russia, Turkey, Israel, the USA, China, Iran)—authentic resentment, and authentic avatars. We experience these discrepancies of meaning, for example, with the unique form of writing on social media which is a kind of a speech-to-text operation (inviting us to re-read Jacques Derrida's differentiation between speech and writing),⁴ or in the collapse of meaning in the form of infrastructure collapse—when, to use Ferdinand de Saussure's example of *la langue* and *parole* for our context, the 08:25 Geneva-to-Paris train is not only late, but is taken off the schedule display, and then its existence is denied as if it never existed (which happens these days for reasons of privatized and semi-privatized operators unwilling to reimburse clients).⁵ The collapse of meaning, on both accounts, is the birthplace of fascist politics.

³ Alix Rule and David Levine's by now infamous text "International Art English" comes to mind here. See Alix Rule and David Levine, "International Art English: On the Rise—and the Space—of the Art-World Press Release," *Triple Canopy*, no. 16 (July 2012), https://canopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english.

⁴ See Noam Yuran, "Being Online," *Social Research* 90, no. 3 (Fall 2023): 515, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2023.a907787>.

⁵ Here, Boris Groys's explanation that the economy works with money and is operated by numbers, while politics works with language and is operated by words, comes to mind. Groys goes on to claim that basically there cannot be any real politics under capitalism: "Another common misconception exists nowadays in which participation in language is understood as access to networks of communication where linguistic commodities circulate under the general conditions of the market." Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, trans. Thomas Ford (London: Verso, 2009), 67.

This essay involves the initial thoughts and afterthoughts that led to and followed the hybrid exhibition *Slime*, which I curated at Secession in Vienna (online and on-site, February–June 2024).⁶ In its structure, the exhibition performed the logic of digital hybridity, having a full program of events at Secession, with an exhibition in the main gallery that dealt with the digital without any screens (as we already bring the digital with us wherever we go), and an online platform that included films and video works along with the documentation of the program that took place on site. Here, digital hybridity stands for the perpetual availability of life as both labour and debt, for capital, both in real life and online. At the heart of these reflections is the realization that the digital is a regime in which finance capital believes it is finally free from any dependency on social reproduction. With the move from value to price, from labor to debt, from revolution to disruption, and from avant-garde to speculation,⁷ the digital evolved as the material of capital, and the totality of the social has been replaced by the tidal liquidity of finance; immaterial labor, touching images on a screen, the rhizomatic panopticon of the Internet, a shock-work on social media, and cryptocurrencies are all examples of the ways in which the digital and financial shadow each other.⁸ This new regime entails a series of conversions that change the

⁶ For more on the exhibition *Slime* (Secession, Vienna, Austria, February 16–June 30, 2024), see the website at <https://slime.secession.at>.

⁷ See Joshua Simon, “Speculation and Counter-Speculation,” *Springerin*, no. 3 (2016), <https://www.springerin.at/en/2016/3/spekulation-und-gegenspekulation>.

⁸ See Seb Franklin, *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2021). Franklin’s point, around a commodity as congealed/computed labor in translations of Marx is accompanied by a presentation of cybernetics and the underlying logic of both finance and the digital. Yanis Varoufakis makes the claim that in China the financial and digital have already converged with WeChat. See Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (London: Penguin Random House, 2023), 152. For a debate on the validity of the term “technofeudalism,” see Evgeny Morozov, “Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason,” *New Left Review*, no. 133–34 (January/April 2022): 89–126. While feudalism involves a sense of duty and admitting having forms of inter-dependency, west-coast meritocracy does not have any of it, while monopolizing parts of daily life to make the big platforms rentiers. See also Carlo Vercellone, “The Crisis of the Law of Value and the Becoming-Rent of Profit: Notes on the Systemic Crisis of Cognitive Capitalism,” in *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles and New Political Scenarios*, ed. Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 85–118; and Mark Andrejevic, *Automated Media* (London: Routledge, 2019). For a description of the political realities of this form of post-industrial order, see David Golumbia, *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London:

ways in which meaning is organized—from the point of production to the point of realization, from strikes to riots, from working class to surplus populations, from solidarity to conspiracy, and from organization to petty sovereignty.

Metabolic Synchronization

Hybridity is the phenomena of the digital and the financial converging in time and space, committing things and bodies to constant territorialization that is both monetized and synchronized. From meta-data to Google Street View, surveillance and navigation are but two of many instances of metabolic synchronization that bring together body, location, and device. With the convergence of financialization and the digital, metabolic synchronization emerges in the form of Instagram foodies and Airbnb, marathons and gyms, dating apps and food delivery apps, joggers and food trucks, deep-fake and Sora videos, touchscreens and wellness, flash-mobs and pop-up exhibitions in non-art-spaces, and many other hallmarks of gentrification. Marx writes in the third volume of *Capital* of the “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism,”⁹ by which human economic activity generates an intervention in metabolic patterns, i.e. environmental collapse by the hands of capitalist industrialization. Metabolic synchronization emerges in the monitoring of heartbeats by apps, the administration and classification of bodies into registered and undocumented, customized ready-to-deliver services and goods, the design of the built space as a simulation for online extraction, etc. Combining the biopolitical and necropolitical, metabolic synchronization emerges as the form by which the digital totalizes all forms of human activity, constantly making them subject to financialization.

Compact Mass

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Brought together by an algorithm, through psychographic segmentation, the chopped-up personalities that are bundled together for predictive targeting make up the constituency of our fascisms. The “selfie coup” in the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, provided an example of the fascist sense of digi-

Verso, 2019); and Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2023).

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Three*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), 949.

tal aggregation. When the intruders arrived at the US Senate, they screamed “Where the f**k are they?” But they were eventually left alone to take selfies of themselves in different parts of the building. Walter Benjamin’s observation that “parliaments, like theatres, are empty” was echoed in this streamed event. In his essay on mechanical reproduction (second version), Benjamin uses the term “compact mass” to describe a grouping of people that has the potential to either organize for communism or be managed by fascism.¹⁰ Watching it unfold, the “selfie coup” felt brief and repetitive—streamed rather than broadcast. The duration was stretched but not even. The pulses of violence and irritation that were the characteristics of the attack on the US Capitol are those of buffering and parceling—on the algorithmic platforms of Parler and Zello as much as on the Senate floor. With the ceremonial torching of TV equipment (Antenna) in the Capitol, the wave was replaced by the data package—literally a compact mass. The pulses of information travelling over fiber optic cables and satellite triangulations are a compact mass—parcels of data that are shot at intervals (their lags or condensation appear as what we call buffering).¹¹ The events of January 6 were broadcast live on TV, without much documentation from inside the building, and then emerged as short videos from inside. The financial reality that this media structure emulates is that of flow and capture at the point of realization.

When it was all over, the ratification of the presidential elections resumed and re-appeared on TV as a reassuring form of “order restored,” with the Senate majority leader at the time, Mitch McConnell, declaring that the United States Sen-

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 19–55. Theodor Adorno compliments Benjamin in a letter from March 18, 1936, from New York, on the formulation of “compact mass”: “I cannot conclude, however, without telling you that your few sentences about the disintegration of the proletariat as ‘masses’ through revolution are among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory I have encountered since I read *State and Revolution*.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Letters to Walter Benjamin,” trans. Harry Zohn, in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 126. I wish to thank Zachary Formwalt for this reference.

¹¹ Neta Alexander, “Rage against the Machine: Buffering, Noise, and Perpetual Anxiety in the Age of Connected Viewing,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0000>.

ate “will not be intimidated.”¹² But by then that sequence of images and gestures had already been hollowed.

Conspiracy

What brought these people together on January 6, 2021, is conspiracy, not as a plot against the formal democratic procedures of the USA, but conspiracy as a mode of being in the world with other—a metabolic synchronization. The proliferation of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories expresses the hyperactivity of political passivity; conspiracy theories should be read as models of spectatorship as citizenship—being politically passive through the mechanism of representatives, we are hyperactive when decoding representations of politics.¹³

With conspiracy theories, being paranoid is less of a critical position vis-à-vis power today than it might have been in the age of cinema, let’s say (think of *The Three Days of the Condor* or *The Manchurian Candidate*). By now, conspiracy is a form of identification with power—after all, after the “War on Terror,”¹⁴ the state itself is designed as a paranoid entity with civil liberties being constantly repressed for the sake of national security (some world leaders today personify

¹² The C-Span TV broadcast, with multiple static cameras on the US Senate floor, returned at 8 p.m., and provided the aesthetic stability that encapsulates order under capitalist republics: white men in suits reading from paper. See “Senate Leaders on Security Breach at U.S. Capitol,” C-Span, January 6, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?507698-6/senate-leaders-security-breach-us-capitol>.

¹³ See Siri Peyer and Joshua Simon, *ReCoCo: Life under Representational Regimes*, ed. Orit Gat (Bat Yam: Museums of Bat Yam, 2013), 13. The exhibition catalog was published on the occasion of the exhibition *ReCoCo: Life Under Representational Regimes*, curated by Siri Peyer and Joshua Simon, White Space, Zurich, Switzerland, February 2011; Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Austria, May 2011; Museums of Bat Yam, Israel, May 2013.

¹⁴ Between September 12, 2001, and October 6, 2023, a certain doctrine of governance prevailed—managing inequality and maintaining disproportionate power relations by containing them with technological means that are delineated around an inside and an outside. The formula that technology can produce control proliferated from the EU’s policies in the Mediterranean with Fortress Europe, to the favelas in Brazil, from the separation wall erected in Palestine, the disengagement plan in Gaza, and the Iron Dome in Israel, to the San Diego-Tijuana border, and “build that wall.” For an analysis of this doctrine in the Israeli military and its collapse on October 7, 2023, see Ran Heilbrunn, “תשורה חייב” [A Factory of Blindspots], Telem, March 30, 2024, <https://telem.berl.org.il/9646/>.

the logic of conspiracy—from Putin to Trump to Netanyahu).¹⁵ This mechanism allows for the contemporary conspiracy believer to enjoy a certain sense of power—where it is one’s subjective compulsion that makes for objective reality: “In both paranoia and metanoia, one is delivered beyond their own mind—the paranoid supposedly loses their mind, and the metanoid goes through a conversion that changes their mind.”¹⁶ By now, the state is hollowed of any of its welfare functions—the digital replaced these with metabolic synchronization. In a sense, as it not longer supports social reproduction, it begs the question—when it comes to the nation state, without belief in a deep-state, or some cabal that predetermines the outcomes, what else do we have?¹⁷

A-signifying Semiotics

The belief in the digital as an unmediated mode of operation generates sensory and political frontiers that embody this logic—be it ASMR or extreme right-wing politics. These compensate and stand in for any agency in the world—think of Donald Trump tweeting as US President in the middle of the night some incoherent gibberish such as “covfefe”—the ultimate form of policy or the tingling effect one gets from gestures and sounds on the screen that rely on tactile sensory deprivation. This supposed unmediated experience stands in for any agency we might have had, as it compensates for our lack of collective access to the point of production. The failure of circulation to provide stability and prosperity and the defeat of labor at the point of production bring these frictions to the point of realization—NIMBY and consumer boycotts. At this stage, organizing at the point of production through collective bargaining is a memory half a century old. We now congeal around the point of realization—as tenants (with rent strikes and anti-gentrification campaigns, but also anti-migrant riots), as consumers (with boycotts, shaming campaigns, and petitions), as parents, as members of a gen-

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¹⁵ In a sad and brilliant text, Noam Yuran has summarized the impotent nature at the core of contemporary extreme right-wing populist governance. See Noam Yuran, “War Diary,” *Philosophy World Democracy*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.philosophy-world-democracy.org/articles-1/war-diary>.

¹⁶ Groys explains that “the term metanoia can be used to describe the transition from an individual subjective perspective to a general perspective, to a metaposition.” Groys, *Communist Postscript*, 26.

¹⁷ See Joshua Simon, “Putin was Right: The Paranoia and Metanoia of Maxim Komar-Myshkin,” *e-flux Film*, January 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/video/441729/the-buried-alive-videos-nbsp-2004-2010/>.

der group, and as enraged professionals (how many open letters did you sign this past decade—to keep someone in office, to get someone out of office, etc.?)—in ad-hoc eruptions (algorithmically enhanced) that are orchestrated by connectivity demands that compensate for our inability to collectively meet at the point of production. In this sense, buffering can stand as a metaphor for our predicament—both the inability to sustain an unmediated imagination of technology and the resentment and frustration generated at the point of realization—at this point, all these tensions are articulated by the extreme right, which has been part of the matrix of power in the industrial world for the past two decades.

Maurizio Lazzarato defines as “machinic enslavement” not only our submission to manipulation by another agent driven by a meaning (in this case, a conspiracy theory), but systemic activation that operates at an a-signifying semiotic level—through impulse, tempo, tone, and the like. This double submission to signifying and a-signifying semiotics defines the realm of meaning itself. Lazzarato, following Félix Guattari, explains machinic enslavement as “sign production machines, which have a direct, unmediated impact on the real and on the body without being routed through a signification or a representation.”¹⁸ He describes how a-signifying transmissions that go beyond language—voice, rhythm, frequency, pitch, tone, appearance, resemblance, accent, etc.—are all directly related to the techniques of politics, as they involve not only live performance with direct and immediate effect, but all kinds of mediated apparatus:

A-signifying semiotics (stock listings, currencies, corporate accounting, national budgets, computer languages, mathematics, scientific functions and equations, as well as the a-signifying semiotics of music, art, etc.) are not beholden to significations and the individuated subjects who convey them. They slip past rather than produce significations or representations.¹⁹

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The Tiny Hands of the Market

Our fascisms are created at a moment of antebellum, imperial-age-scale inequality, where the documented levels of inequality resemble those of the

¹⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 55–94.

¹⁹ Lazzarato, 80.

pre-Bolshevik revolution era. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes the prison-industrial complex and the carceral state as a form of time-capturing machine.²⁰ Creating a reserve army of surplus population that can only work odd jobs as day laborers generates masses of racialized populations ripe for apps as a marketplace as they are captured into micro-task online platforms (Uber Eats, TaskRabbit, and the like).²¹ The tiny hands of the market (named after Donald Trump's physique) stand for the enormous consolidation of wealth through engineered financial tides of low interest rates combined with unregulated extractive platform capitalism freed from responsibility for social reproduction. At the heart of it is the dumping of costs onto workers, further entangling their dispossession. In Marxist terms, this is exercised in the circuit of money capital. Marx writes in volume two of *Capital*: "If we call labour-power L , the means of production mp , and the sum of commodities to be purchased C , then we have $C = L + mp$. To abbreviate, $C < Lmp$."²² Thus, the whole circuit of money capital according to Marx operates along the lines of this equation: $M - C < Lmp \dots P \dots C' - M'$. Money buys the means of production (mp) and labor power (L)—these two markets converge in C . This stage stands for acquiring machinery, hiring, training, and a whole set of relations that we have learned to identify with direct employment. The intervention of the tiny hands of the market in the form of platform accumulation is exactly here, where the worker brings with her what we used to call the means of production. Directly, this happens with the Amazon delivery person or Uber driver bringing to work their own car, filled up with gasoline, with insurance and a driver's license all taken care of, or the teacher accruing the costs of broadband and a laptop at home in order to teach on Zoom during COVID. Thus,

²⁰ See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2007).

²¹ On the day of the US presidential elections in 2020, Californians were asked to vote on "Proposition 22," which was intended to confirm the status of delivery workers and other forms of employment on apps as independent contractors, rather than as employees. This became the most expensive proposal in the history of California when companies such as Lyft, Door-Dash, Instacart, Postmates, and Uber joined to finance campaigns in favor of their position with \$205,000,000. The person who managed the campaign in favor of Uber and its ilk was Tony West, a lawyer who is also married to the sister of Kamala Harris, who was elected Vice President of the United States on behalf of the Democratic Party that day. Harris's brother-in-law helped Uber and the like to buy a law that allows them to deny direct employment relations, despite being a monopoly or the market itself in this case.

²² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Two*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 109–18.

the ability of app companies to operate as marketplaces for the gig jobs of mechanical-Turks, gypsy cars, etc. (formerly known as the sharing economy) cannot be reduced to some lines of code, but should be recognized as the ability to shift all those various costs of *mp* onto workers.²³

Simply put, there can be no capitalism without the pollution and extinction of the biosphere, without racism, without misogyny, without exploitation, without extreme inequality, without fascism. I just put the Horkheimer quote that opens this essay into perplexity.ai and it gave a good explanation: “By stating that one should remain silent about fascism if unwilling to engage with capitalism, Horkheimer implies that fascism cannot be fully understood or confronted without critically analyzing the capitalist system from which it arises.”

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²³ See Joshua Simon, “The Tiny Hands of the Market: Social Distancing Without Society,” *Social Text*, June 16, 2020, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the-sign-language-of-the-tiny-hands-of-the-market.

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