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ESSAY

Why Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist and Why We Should Study Language to Understand It

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In this commentary, I want to take up the topic of heroes and hard truths. Gender, sexuality, and the sociolinguistics of the far right are the starting point from which to make two interconnected discursive moves: first, I want to revisit Félix Guattari's statement that "everybody wants to be a fascist"; and, second, I put particular emphasis on why we should study language in order to investigate and understand such a *desire* for fascism. While the articles in this special issue do not overtly draw on the work of Guattari or the joint publications with his intellectual partner, Gilles Deleuze, I believe that their theorization of what they call "microfascism" can be useful to bring to the fore some of the main arguments advanced in this special issue. For this purpose, I have been inspired by Michalinos Zembylas's (2021) rereading of Deleuze and Guattari's theories, and their relevance for the "(un)making of microfascism in school and classrooms." Unlike Zembylas, my goal here is not motivated by equitable pedagogic practices. And this is not because I do not believe in socially just education. Rather, because of my expertise in the mainstreaming of right-wing ideologies in the media (see, e.g., Milani 2020) and the empirical focus of this special issue on a variety of media outputs (memes, magazines, YouTube videos, websites, etc.), I am more interested in teasing out how Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual apparatus can help us appreciate the role of different semiotic resources (language, visuals, music, etc.) in the mediatization of visceral attachments to fascism.

Mediatization should be understood here in its political economic meaning as the process through which analog and digital media, and the social actors involved in them, are *invested*—quite literally—in using meaning-making resources for the production of social *value*: they valorize certain identities and desires, and thus encourage particular attachments to them, while devaluing others (see in particular Del Percio, Flubacher, and Duchêne 2017; Del Percio and Dlaske 2022). Needless to say, it is not within the remit of this commentary to provide an in-depth exegesis of Deleuze and Guattari's monumental oeuvre (see, however, Pietikäinen 2015 for an excellent précis that is accessible to discourse-oriented scholars, and Pietikäinen 2024 for a full-fledged operationalization of this theoretical framework). Rather, I employ some of their key concepts—desire, rhizome, assemblage of enunciation—to shed a different light on

some of the main points made by the contributors to this special issue, stressing how the articles here contribute to better understanding the political workings of fascism at a microscopic level, which, as Deleuze and Guattari note, is the most perfidious aspect of fascism. In their words, "What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power" (1987, 215) because it is fueled by "a thousand little monomanias, self-evident truths, and clarities that gush from every black hole and no longer form a system, but are only rumble and buzz, blinding lights giving any and everybody the mission of self-appointed judge, dispenser of justice, policeman, neighborhood SS man" (228). And, in their view, (micro)fascism is less the result of ignorance or ideology than of desire. As they vehemently state in *Anti-Oedipus*, "[N]o, the masses were not innocent dupes, at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they wanted fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 29). It is to such desire that I will now turn.

Desire and (Micro)Fascism

To begin with, it is important to clarify that Deleuze and Guattari's intellectual project grew out of a dissatisfaction with psychoanalytic interpretations of desire as developing from a preexisting lack. For such an obsession with lack, they would say in a mocking tone, inevitably leads to "a reduction to the One . . . it all leads back to daddy" (cited in Cameron and Kulick 2003). Against this backdrop, it will come as no surprise that Deleuze and Guattari were also deeply skeptical of the language of Freudian psychoanalysis, with its heavy reliance on hydraulic metaphors to describe how sexual drives operate through arousals, flows, and discharges. Instead, they view desire as a much broader and all-encompassing phenomenon than sexual libido alone. For example, in his previous work with Claire Parnet, Deleuze had observed, "Walking is desire. Listening to music, or making music, or writing, are desires. A spring, a winter, are desires. Old age is also desire. Even death" (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 95). Of course, one could ask: If everything is desire, does not this concept lose all its heuristic purchase? Not necessarily if we take into account that, couched under an often sarcastic and provocative style, Deleuze and Guattari's main aim was to resignify desire from lack and repression to "an active and positive reality, an affirmative vital force" (Gao 2013, 406). Linguistically, they did so by replacing the Freudian language of fluid mechanics with a plethora of suggestive terminology taken from botany (e.g., rhizomes) and geography (e.g., maps). As Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (2003, 111) observe, such a semantic shift has important analytical implications: rather than trying to dig out and reawaken a repressed past buried somewhere in the unconscious, analysts are instead tasked with "mapping the ways desire is made possible and charting the ways it moves, acts and forms connections. . . . Thus, attention can focus on whether and how different kinds of relations emit desire, fabricate it and/or block it, exhaust it." And I would add that it is precisely by focusing on language and other forms of signification

that we can document more accurately how such emissions, fabrications, or blockages take place at a molecular level.

For example, in their analysis in this issue of the far-right magazine *Man's World*, Cat Tebaldi and Scott Burnett paint a compelling picture of how a particular form of "ontological desire" (Whitehead 2002; Kiesling 2011)—in this case, the desire to be a specific type of man (muscled, symmetrical, right-wing, hard)—is skillfully crafted via certain linguistic and visual choices. Here, images of white men with square jaws interpellate (Althusser 1971) potential viewers/readers, and they do so *affectively*.[1] While in his original formulation of interpellation Althusser dismissed affect as not entirely relevant to theorizing subjectivation, Tebaldi and Burnett demonstrate how powerful feelings such as desire are pivotal in processes of subject formation: the men in the magazine *Man's World* interpellate male audiences to desire to be *like* them at the same time as the magazine's text and images actively need to counter the dreaded specter of homosexuality, keeping at bay the risk that the very same audiences might feel sexually attracted to these muscular figures. From a perspective germane to that of Deleuze and Guattari, it does not matter how much we seek to resist such homosocial aesthetics; *Man's World* exudes desire, and in doing so, it interpellates us affectively.

By the same token, Gustav Westberg and Henning Årman's investigation of a Swedish fascist party's propaganda shows how certain linguistic and visual choices generate forms of attachment to, or desires for, a particular type of nuclear family, one that is Aryan and reproductive. Unlike the bulging muscles and perfect six-packs of the corn-fed white men in the images in *Man's World*, interpellation here is activated by pictures of pregnant white bellies, and silhouettes of fathers and children on a shore. As Westberg and Årman correctly point out, such images of white familial bliss are uncannily ordinary; they bear no resemblance to the fascist aesthetics of *Man's World*, but their political implications nonetheless arouse the desire for racist reproductive futurity among those more mainstream voters who might not immediately identify with overtly fascist politics (see also Dominika Baran's insightful analysis in this issue of the discursive construction of family values by a homophobic Polish NGO). These more subdued visual choices notwithstanding, other images are more direct in (re) generating a Nazi wish for an Aryan world. The picture of a smiling blonde girl behind the slogan "Nordic children should be like teeth—white, straight and strong" emits an unashamedly racist, homophobic, and ableist desire for a future Scandinavia.

In sum, these two articles demonstrate how linguistically oriented frameworks—linguistic anthropology and (multimodal) critical discourse analysis—can work like optical instruments that magnify how incitements to desire (to be a fascist) momentarily *crystallize* semiotically with the help of particular meaning-making resources in different media outlets (a magazine and a website). What remains to be demonstrated is how desire "is continually being dis/re/assembled" (Cameron and Kulick 2003, 111) through

1 For Althusser, ideologies "hail" or "call out" (from the French *interpeller*) to individuals, offering specific identities and constructing them as subjects.

movement across different discursive sites. It is at this juncture that the notion of the rhizome can describe such complex formations of desire in relation to microfascism.

The Rhizomatic Shapes of Microfascism

Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as a "subterranean stem . . . [that] assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). This botanical imagery allows them to highlight several principles that have analytical relevance when applying the concept of the rhizome to a set of data. The first is the infinite possibility of *connection* between any two points of a rhizome, leading to heterogeneous "connections between semiotic chains, . . . [which] are not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). The second is *multiplicity*, which indicates how a rhizome consists of a network structure of lines with different degrees of intensity (e.g., a thinner ramification versus a thicker tuber). As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 10) explain multiplicity: "There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines." The third is the possibility of *rupture*, following which "a rhizome may be broken, shatter at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 10). The fourth is its representability as a *map*, which, as they say, "is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 10).

I believe that these properties of a rhizome are especially helpful because they give us a language through which to grasp 1) the *capillarity* of fascism—ramifications, intensifications, occasional ruptures, and regrowth; and 2) its *semiotic complexity* as a discursive, bodily/material, and affective phenomenon. In this respect, Dominika Baran's investigation of an anti-gender Polish NGO, the article on global NoFap discourses by Scott Burnett, Rodrigo Borba, and Mie Hiramoto, and Maureen Kosse's analysis of unexpected alliances between feminist transphobic and misogynist far-right groups lend themselves well to illustrating the rhizomatic shape of fascism. Not everyone would agree that the three phenomena under investigation in these articles can be easily labeled as "fascism" tout court. Indeed, Itamar Manoff (2024, 495) points out that "there is much disagreement in the scholarship on fascism with respect to the definition, nature or even the main distinguishing features of fascism." These differences notwithstanding, Manoff goes on to suggest that "there seems to be broad consensus that nationalism plays a central role in the ideology and political mobilization of historical fascism" (495). There is little doubt that nationalism fuels highly problematic discursive constructions such as those of the "true Poles" (Baran) and of trans people imagined as causing the extinction of white women (Kosse). A gendered facet of nationalism is also on display in the mediatized performances of "real manhood" enacted by the Swedish beefcake Marcus Follin. But nationalism is hardly perceptible in the no less supremacist

shapes of masculinity performed by the Brazilian Matheus Copini, and the Japanese *onakin* practitioners (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto). However, Guattari warns us that "what fascism set in motion yesterday continues to proliferate in *other forms*, within the complex of contemporary social space" (Guattari 2009, 163, my emphasis). Thus, nationalism might have become somewhat of a red herring in our assessment of what counts as fascist today and what does not. Instead, it might be more helpful to draw on David Renton's (2000, 77) broader view that fascism was based "on a radical elitism, that is on the notion that certain human beings were intrinsically, genetically better than others, who consequently could be treated as if they did not have the right to exist." With this broader perspective in mind, it is fairly obvious that even the data that does not overtly thematize nationalism in the articles by Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto, and by Kosse, can also be classified as fascist.

Definitional issues aside, the point I want to make here is that "true Poles," "real men," and the alliances between misogynists and "feminist" transphobes can be reread with the help of Deleuze and Guattari as stems in an intricate microfascist rhizome. For example, Baran's incisive critical discourse analysis of an email newsletter of a Polish NGO illustrates how anti-LGBTQ+ pronouncements are like rhizomatic knots in which discourses of disparate provenances get entangled with each other in the creation of what is presented as a God-given and hence natural and truthful opposition between heterosexual Catholic "true Poles" on the one hand, and LGBTQ+ people as devils incarnate that threaten religious and national unity on the other. Disentangling this problematic knot requires an appreciation of its different threads, which include but are not limited to 1) the important role of the Polish Catholic Church in the political struggle against communism, and subsequently of Catholicism as a central ingredient of Polish nationalism; and 2) an opposition between Poland and the "West," which is perceived as too sexually liberal. These rhizomatic entanglements take discursive shape through linguistic choices that, as Baran puts it, "borrow from, co-opt, redefine, and repurpose progressive terms, concepts, and ideas in service of right-wing agendas, while simultaneously delegitimizing their use by progressives." Most crucially, she observes that these linguistic choices are woven together into a purportedly logical fabric that portrays religio-nationalist beliefs about gender as commonsense truths "while at the same time constructing progressive stances on gender and sexuality as illogical and absurd."

Shifting the analytical gaze from argumentation to mediatized performances of masculine voices, Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto unveil another aspect of the rhizomatic shape of microfascism: this time it is the thickening and thinning of fascist fantasies about being a "real man" today, which take different embodied shapes across geopolitical contexts, from the hypermuscular physique of Follin to the less brawny Copini to the allegedly more spiritual Japanese *onakin* enthusiasts. Difference in embodiment notwithstanding, these examples are like dots in a global network. They might not be connected through conscious and direct intertextualities—Follin does not quote Copini, the *onakin*s do not refer to Follin—but they are nonetheless related to

each other; they are different growths in the same fascist rhizome, one that draws its nourishment from the misogynist belief that women are inferior and their function is simply to serve men's needs—sexual and otherwise. Once again, desire is at play here, semiotically materialized in the "performance of *voices*—multimodal styles, registers, and biographical idiosyncrasies" (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto). Through such semiotic choices young men are not only interpellated to aspire to "a muscular physique or sexual success," but they are also perniciously roped into "a masculinist and/or racist subjectivity" (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto).

A rhizomatic formation can also be traced in the rather bewildering alliances between feminist transphobic and misogynist far-right groups. Here rather opposite stems—feminism and misogynism—are unexpectedly conjoined by a shared ideological opposition to trans people. Such a belief is built on the view that the meaning of a word does not emerge from its use, as Wittgenstein and current sociolinguistic research would posit, but is a stable and objective reflection of a preexisting social reality. Also known as referentialism, this ideology of language is weaponized, Kosse argues, by anti-trans feminists and misogynist far-right groups, who resort to dictionary definitions of lexical and grammatical items, such as the word "woman" or personal pronouns (he/she), as the "natural" proofs of a biological gender order, in which there is only space for he=penis=male and she=vagina=female, while everybody who does not fit into this binary division should be eliminated at all costs. As Michael Billig reminds us, one of the fundamental traits of fascism is the advancement of a set of ideological commitments that "pose a direct threat to democracy and to personal freedom" (1978, 7). Such a characteristic has often been interpreted in the rather narrow party-political sense that "fascists do not simply oppose Marxism, or left-wing politics more generally, they actively try to stamp them out—denying rights of political association, banning parties, and (ultimately) killing opponents" (Richardson 2016, 449). While this is still the case in many undemocratic contexts, Kosse's analysis of the alliances between feminist transphobic and misogynist far-right groups points to a much broader but no less violent and capillary fascist curbing of freedom, this time not targeting political rivals but trans individuals' right to exist.

Read together, the articles by Baran, Kosse, and Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto present us with illuminating cases that point to the ways semiotic resources and beliefs about language are essential in the formation of a poisonous microfascist rhizome consisting of different stems that grow parallel to each other, get entwined, break off somewhere, and (re)grow somewhere else.

Toward an Assemblage of Enunciation: Unearthing "the Fascist inside You"

If everything is connected through rhizomatic formations, and desire (to be fascist) flows through innumerable stems to the point that it is impossible to pinpoint a beginning or an end, but only trace connections, what is the agency of individual speaking subjects in this stream of affective forces? And can we account for individual responsibility and

culpability for specific utterances, writings, and images? Deleuze and Guattari's work is heavily influenced by Baruch Spinoza's idea that entities (human and nonhuman) in the world are deeply enmeshed with each other; they affect and are affected by each other. With such a focus on immanence, it is inevitable then that, when a subject speaks, they do so from a position of being entangled in a preexisting "assemblage of enunciation." Deleuze and Guattari describe such a position of the subject entering the domain of the discursive as follows:

> I always depend on a molecular assemblage of enunciation that is not given in my conscious mind, any more than it depends solely on my apparent social determinations, which combine many heterogeneous regimes of signs. Speaking in tongues. To write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices, to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call my Self. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 84)

In a manner analogous to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986, 89) idea that "our speech . . . is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness,'" Deleuze and Guattari remind us that the speaking subject is inevitably situated within discourses that precede them. While such a view of language could be interpreted as inherently absolving individual speakers/writers of any responsibility for the content and effect of whatever they say—"I was just repeating what someone else said before me"—I would argue that Deleuze and Guattari's view is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's (1963) reflections on individual culpability in her writings about Adolf Eichmann's well-known trial in Jerusalem.

Needless to say, Arendt was not a trained linguist, and neither were Deleuze and Guattari. However, they share a similar conviction that speaking subjects find themselves at the crossroads of 1) processes of entextualizations into recognizable discursive forms such as political speeches, narratives, and fables; and 2) the decontextualization and recontextualization of specific elements from such forms. It is through such rather banal discursive processes, Arendt would say, that individuals do not necessarily actively decide to be good or bad but simply act "normally" as interpellated across a variety of discursive genres to the point that they might not apprehend the moral implications of their individual conduct. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 215) would go a step further by pointing their fingers at the ambivalences within the speaking subject, warning that "[i]t's too easy to be antifascist on the molar [that is, macro-societal] level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective."

A fascinating example of the "fascist inside you" is provided by Johanna Maj Schmidt's investigation of how a small group of leftist social scientists working at a democracy research institute interpreted two far-right memes. While the psychoanalytic framework employed by Schmidt is inherently at loggerheads with Deleuze and

Guattari's anti-psychoanalytic theorization of microfascism, the article shows how *even* well-educated scholars who identify with the political left can express mixed feelings for right-wing messages. In this instance, they feel ambivalent about the content of a meme representing three Pepe the Frog characters who seem to be running away after having stolen a flag with the slogan "He Will Not Divide Us." Here, the motto refers to the title of an anti-Trump online installation created by Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Rönkkö, and Luke Turner, which faced several disruptions by trolls since its inception. In the meme, LaBeouf is portrayed as an enraged "Crying Wojak" figure with a raised fist. What is particularly relevant for the point I want to make here is how the leftist academics in Schmidt's study express affective stances that fluctuate from feeling sorry for LaBeouf/Wojak to empathizing with the schadenfreude of the three far-right Pepes. These ambivalences aside, everyone in the study seemed to agree that LaBeouf's angry response was a failure.

Granted, leftist scholars' negative reactions to anger might not be completely remarkable because, as I have pointed out elsewhere, anger is generally perceived as "a 'dirty' feeling—a pathology even—if we are to believe the innumerable available courses in 'anger management'" (Milani 2021, 441). Linguistically, a certain discomfort with this emotion can also be detected in the preference accorded by scholarship on affect (see Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018) to that cognate of anger, "righteous indignation," which, in my view, "sanitizes anger's murky waters, while covering them with an unpolluted moral surface" (Milani and Richardson 2023, 468). Whether due to a response to the particular instance of LaBeouf's rage in the meme or to a more general discomfort with anger altogether, the leftist scholars in Schmidt's study concur that the main problems with LaBeouf's irate reactions were his attempt to control the message he had created and his belonging to an "elitist art bubble" disconnected from society at large, which had prevented him from taking into account diverging class interests within the body politic.

The most important conclusion drawn in Schmidt's article is how the affective alignments expressed by leftist scholars to the far-right message of the meme point "to an aspect of far-right meme culture that seems to have broader appeal, and which should not be underestimated: sometimes right-wing memes lay bare the inner contradictions and sore points of the liberal status quo." And language once again plays an important role in the production of such emotional attachments: "The unfulfilled promise of equality, and the spiritless, corny language this is cloaked in, invite ridicule from people across the political spectrum" (Schmidt). What is particularly terrifying, though, is how even those leftist academics who felt compelled to shield LaBeouf from the severe criticism of their peers fell into the antisemitic trope of "emphasizing his Jewish family background as a possible explanation for his *thin-skinned* reaction to Nazi slurs" (Schmidt, my emphasis).

Overall, I believe that the data in Schmidt's article give us empirical proof of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "fascist inside you" and of Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil." They show how leftist academics who might be antifascist at the molar level

might, as Deleuze and Guattari would say, harbor fascist sympathies at the molecular level. They might not even be aware of it, though they are no less culpable for it, when they situate themselves in discourse by reacting to specific interpellations in the present

Instead of a Conclusion

Read from cover to cover, this special issue provides much needed empirical evidence of a theoretical point made by Michel Foucault in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. Foucault wrote that

> the major enemy . . . is fascism. . . . And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also 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. (Foucault 1983, xiii, my emphasis)

More specifically, the articles illustrate different facets of microfascism and its different crystallizations via semiotic resources. Very often throughout my career I have met peers in the humanities and social sciences who have felt frustrated or even put off by the level of linguistic/semiotic precision exemplified by the articles in this special issue, which, in their view, is simply too detailed and is therefore inadequate to advance "big" arguments about larger social arrangements. I would counterargue that critical discourse analysts, linguistic anthropologists, and sociolinguists are like microbiologists, putting forms of semiosis under a microscope. Such attention to the minuscular level of language, however, is not an esoteric exercise of navel-gazing but is geared to better understand the production, circulation, and unfolding of broader social processes and phenomena. And, as the COVID pandemic taught us, large public health studies would not have been possible without microscopic analyses of how the COVID virus behaves. In a similar way, I believe that critical discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, and sociolinguistics can be particularly valuable analytical frameworks for investigating why everyone wants to be a fascist, as they offer us a toolkit with which to scrutinize how attachments to fascism (i.e., identities and desires) accrue social values at the molecular level, without losing sight of their connections to the molar level. As someone who strongly identifies with such a tradition of textual analysis, I hope that this special issue will open an avenue for scholars interested in critical investigations of the far right to engage more substantially with linguistically/semiotically oriented scholarship. It is through attention to the nitty-gritty of mediatized semiotic outputs (memes, webpages, newsletters, magazines, etc.) that we can unveil more precisely how "new forms of molecular fascism are developing: a slow burning fascism in familialism, in school, in racism, in every kind of ghetto, which advantageously makes up for the crematory ovens" (Guattari 2009, 171).

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