

Microfascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Finding a Way Forward through Deleuze’s Immanent Theory  
of Desire

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Abstract

This paper takes a critical examination at selected works by 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I argue that, far from arcane, distant, inaccessible concepts, the selected Marxist ideas presented in their immanent critiques provide priceless insight into how fascism, in all forms, permeates every stretch of society. Understanding how these events occur, called micro- and macro-fascism, and how they are mediated through our beliefs and desires, can allow for us to resist transcendent theories of desire and modes and politics, and towards a mode of immanence, one that is always critiquing itself, and always resisting fascism.

Across the so-called Western world, fascism has become a hot-button topic—far-right political icons ranging from the United States’ Donald Trump to Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland* party have been decried as the genesis of a new wave of fascism, a warning sign of an authoritarian “hellworld” to come.<sup>12</sup> While this is certainly an unpleasant potential future, the vast majority of political answers from all nodes of the political spectrum are failing to account for their own fascistic natures, keeping us in an endless cycle of history bound to repeat itself. This paper will be divided into four parts: first, I will go over Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari’s transcendent and immanent theories of desire; second, I will look at macro and micro-fascism, and how it pervades the politics of both the right and the left; third, I will expand upon Deleuze and Guattari’s “anarchist” critique of capitalism and the State for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, interrogating it as fascistic; and finally, I will offer a way forward, utilizing our newfound, anti-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vox.com/world/2019/2/14/18221913/fascism-warning-madeleine-albright-book-trump>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ips-dc.org/germany-and-the-rise-of-a-fascist-international/>

fascist, immanent theory of desire to turn modern leftism into productive desire. I will make no claims that this is guaranteed to be a better world; rather, I aim to simply give us the necessary tools to think outside of our current political structures, and “refuse to allow any fascist formula to slip by, on whatever scale it may manifest itself.”<sup>3</sup>

The first and most important step is to understand the theory of desire outlined in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Desire is fundamentally related to both morality and ethics—we do things or strive for things because they are good or produce something which we judge to be good. Deleuze distinguishes between morality and ethics as follows: morality is a defined set of rules or codes that are true via an appeal to some transcendent or universal value(s); whereas ethics concerns what we do, think or feel, properly termed our “immanent mode of existence” or our “style of life.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, a transcendent theory of desire is connected to a transcendent morality, and an immanent theory of desire is connected to an immanent ethics. What do these two types of desire look like? The first, a transcendent theory of desire, is the theory we are more familiar with. Here, desire is thought of as a lack: suppose I desire a larger house. My desire is placed in the *acquisition* of the house, and so my desire corresponds to my lacking of said house. More abstractly, I lack an object, and my desire for it is founded upon my lack of it.<sup>5</sup> The second is an immanent theory of desire, which turns our standard conception on its head and defines it as *productive*. Here, Deleuze borrows his understanding of desire in part from Immanuel Kant’s definition: “a faculty which by means of its representations is the cause of the actuality of the objects of those representations.” Thus, an immanent theory of desire is my actions (or drives), and by desiring something I am actively and

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<sup>3</sup> Guattari, “Everybody Wants to be a Fascist,” Pg. 166

<sup>4</sup> Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics”, pg. 67

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, “Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia”, pg. 25

positively producing something.<sup>6</sup> We can see now the interrelationship between morality and transcendence, and ethics and immanence more clearly.

Why does this matter? Just as Hegel and Marx attempted a dialectical analysis of history through eidetic and material struggle respectively, Deleuze is trying to look at one simple yet major question in the history of state and social formations: why do we desire our own repression? To illustrate, Deleuze quotes William Reich:

“The astonishing thing is not that some people steal or that others occasionally go out on strike, but rather that all those who are starving do not steal as a regular practice, and all those who are exploited are not continually out on strike.”<sup>7</sup>

The answer lies in this very desire of transcendence. We agree to a social order, submit to a higher authority, and obey a higher set of laws which dictate our behaviors and actions. We are always separated from our truest and most free actions—our immanent mode of being. Our transcendent desire is a pure process that never ends, is never fulfilled, and is always something out there unattainable by us.

In this sense, what I’ll loosely call, “fascistic” structures pervade every facet of our social and political life. Structures of authority, control, uniformity, homogeneity, etc., hierarchize our pursuits, beliefs, and actions. It is no longer useful to consider fascism simply as a historical political period surrounding World War II:

“The historical transversality of the machines of desire on which totalitarian systems depend is, in fact, inseparable from their social transversality. Therefore, the analysis of fascism is not simply a historian's specialty. I repeat: what fascism set in motion yesterday continues to proliferate in other forms, within the complex of contemporary social space. A whole totalitarian chemistry manipulates the structures of state, political and union structures, institutional and family structures, and even individual structures,

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, pg. 74

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pg. 38

inasmuch as one can speak of a sort of fascism of the superego in situations of guilt and neurosis.”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout this work, Guattari utilizes the prefixes macro- and micro- to help elucidate the different but equally important forms of desire, politics, and fascism. For example, politics conceived through collectives is labeled as “macropolitics,” whereas politics conceived through the individual and their relation to the collective, is labeled as “micropolitics.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, macrofascism refers to an authoritative collective, be it Nazism or Stalinism—“different forms of fascism placed under the same rubric.”<sup>10</sup> The focus of this paper, then, is first to examine the microfascism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in American macro and micropolitics: “Fascism seems to come from the outside, but it finds its energy right at the heart of everyone's desire.”<sup>11</sup> It is a fascism that operates inside “the family, in school, or in a trade union”... “fascism of the Left and fascism of the Right.”<sup>1213</sup>

Microfascism on the right can be seen in a multitude of ways. Republicans hold some key transcendent desires—obedience to the law, the constitution, and God are prime beliefs. A common critique of American politics by Republicans is that we “must return to the Constitution.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, their desire is always a desire of lack—the American macropolitical structure is failing to live up to the transcendent idea of the sacrosanct constitution, and we must restore its power in order for there to be legitimacy in our state’s institution. Perhaps a more humorous but tremendously poignant example is the desire for, as our constitution’s preamble put it, a “more perfect union,” an idea which should obviously seem absurd *prima facie*; yet it is

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<sup>8</sup> Guattari, pg. 163

<sup>9</sup> Jeffery A. Bell, “Between Individualism and Socialism: Deleuze’s Micropolitics of Desire,” pg. 12-13

<sup>10</sup> Guattari, pg. 163

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, pg. 171

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, pg. 162

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, “A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia”, pg. 214)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/02/opinion/02thu4.html>

cherished as an ultimate ideal, that even if America is perfect, we can continue reaching for some not-yet-acquired perfection in our state. Thus, our union has never *truly* fulfilled its duty, and a continual submission to the state repeats the pure process of desiring a more perfect perfection it lacks.

This microfascism importantly extends to the individual level. Social scientist Jonathan Metzl looks at a fascinating case study of a Republican man from Tennessee named Trevor. Trevor is dying of liver disease and lacks the health insurance to ameliorate or cure his ailments. Tennessee had the opportunity to allow Medicaid to expand under the ACA in such a way that it would cover people like Trevor, but Republican Tennessee lawmakers blocked these efforts. Trevor in fact desired his own repression, a microfascism that dictates his micropolitical beliefs:

“But Trevor is not mad at the state’s elected officials. ‘Ain’t no way I would ever support Obamacare or sign up for it,’ he tells Metzl. ‘I would rather die.’ When Metzl prods him about why he’d choose death over affordable health care, Trevor’s answer is telling. ‘We don’t need any more government in our lives. And in any case, no way I want my tax dollars paying for Mexicans or welfare queens.’<sup>15</sup>

More concerned with preventing “Mexicans or welfare queens” from receiving aid, Trevor is quite literally willing to hurt himself, and eventually die. A Guattarian “analysis of the molecular components of fascism” is useful here. This is a prime example of how microfascism relates to macrofascism—Trevor’s individual willingness to repress himself in order to repress others is a microcosm of a fascist state whose loyal soldiers die to protect their Mother/Fatherland. Without investigating this genealogy between the micro- and macropolitical, we fail to realize the “permanence of certain fascist machineries...which kept developing and perfecting itself up to our own time.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <https://portside.org/2019-03-13/dying-whiteness>

<sup>16</sup> Guattari, pg. 162

Microfascism is by no means limited to the Right. Just as macrofascism finds itself in both far-right Nazism and far-left Stalinism, microfascism finds itself in the Left too. The Left is notorious for sectarian in-fighting. Be it the infamous Bolshevik-Menshevik split in Russia; or the CNT's conflict with the Communist Party of Spain in revolutionary Catalonia, a party which itself split from the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party, a party deemed not Left enough; or any of the various modern internet Leftists who accuse everyone else not lockstep with their theory of being a "liberal." There is always a purer form of leftism, a more ideal reading of Marx or some other theory, or a more virtuous and correct way of achieving communism/socialism. Thus, the macropolitical desire is stuck in a transcendent Left, a pure utopian rejection of capitalism that will never be fulfilled. In a very similar fashion, the modern Left regularly chastises those in the center and the right (especially in the digital world), turning people off from the message and effectively making the left's actions counterproductive in their goal of socialism. Perhaps the clinical, Deleuzian analysis here is that leftists desire the repression of their own goals (actually obtaining socialism) so that the Left can continue to feel psychosocially superior to others and continue to put them down as immoral or wrong. In this sense, the Left too desires its own repression—gatekeeping to feel superior.<sup>17</sup> One final, more concrete example, is the growing popularity amongst the Left and Democrats to censor certain speech, especially on college campuses. This is empirically proven: "The political views of the student body have shifted well to the left and the group self-identified as "strong liberal" is the least supportive of speech rights. That was not true...fifteen years ago."<sup>18</sup> This microfascism of controlling speech, and deciding

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<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/existentialcoms/status/929408212125728768>

<sup>18</sup> Julie Voorhes and Marc Lendler, "Student Opinion on Campus Speech Rights: A Longitudinal Study"

what forms are acceptable and which aren't, thrusts speech under a transcendent lens of good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable forms of discourse.

So, there are fascistic tendencies in most if not all ends of the political spectrum. What about macrofascism in the American state? Ample fascistic and transcendent characteristics can be found in the state, capitalism, and the desiring-machine that connects the two. Deleuze introduces the idea of flow and code to better explain this. Flow is meant to be taken nominally, ranging from the flow of water and electricity, to a flow of immigrants crossing a border. Coding, then, is the making sense of all of this, and controlling it—dams, power grids, borders, etc.<sup>19</sup> Capitalism, at its core, is the flow of labor and capital. It decodes these two flows, abstracting them into labor capacity and pure monetary value (your wealth is not just what you physically hold, but the digital number in your bank account). However, as capitalism decodes, it loses control, and requires a recoding of everything. Thus, the state emerges as an artificial mediator between the laborer and the capitalist. It draws borders, fights to protect its capital and capitalists, and restricts the flow of immigrants in order to secure its own legitimacy. Correspondingly, nationalism is borne out of this, a transcendence that defines your identity. The state enforces its laws as the highest good, transcending us in favor of never-perfect nationalist desire. A final term is offered by Deleuze, stock, which relates to an individual's claim, or share, of the flow—“my bank account...is my portion of the flow...it's *mine*.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, this three-pronged system of Capitalism encourages a system of transcendent desire. There is always new flow of capital ready to be coded and extracted out of labor, landing in someone's stock. There is always something more than you can earn—you can always be richer, and always desire stock

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel W. Smith, “Flow, Code and Stock: A Note on Deleuze's Political Philosophy,” pg. 37-38

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, pg. 44

which you lack. As this process continues *ad infinitum*, the state always remains as a necessary feature of control.

Deleuze's critique of capitalism and the state is possibly truer now than ever. Flow of capital continues to propagate, but wealth inequality in the wealthiest nation in the world continues to widen. As stocks are placed in fewer and fewer hands, the state ups its ante of coding, ushering us into an era Mikkel Rasmussen calls the postfascist period of late capitalism:

“...contemporary fascism is postmodern. Unemployment, precarity and the slow dismantling of the welfare state are translated into Islamophobia and xenophobia. ‘We’re going to build a wall,’ Trump promises and threatens” ... “Postfascism is successful due to its ability to translate social justice into reactionary identity politics in which structural economic dynamics are reduced to a politics of fear and easily identifiable enemies”<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, this isn't just random happenstance, Trump and these fascistic tendencies *arise* out of our micropolitics and transcendent desire. Americans voted in Donald Trump, desiring this repression, order, control, and collective identity. Trump is merely the product of the population's microfascist tendencies.<sup>22</sup>

How do we move forward? This is the next crucial undertaking—it is not enough to simply critique political ideologies as misguided; rather, we must adopt a political ideology of critiquing any and all things fascistic. Though my and Deleuze's analysis can be understandably characterized as anarchist, we mustn't think of the project here as a call for anarchy. Anarchy, at its core, is getting rid of all institutions and hierarchies, but there is simply no reality where you get rid of desire which shapes those hierarchies. To falsely believe in this not-yet-acquired anarchy would be to fall spell yet again to desire as lack. The same goes for utopian Marxist communism. So, anarchy is just an idea. But we can think about it, and use it as a tool, to remind

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<sup>21</sup> Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “Postfascism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” pg. 2

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, pg. 5

us that our micro- and macropolitical desires could be assembled otherwise. In other words, anarchy gives us a useful point of view for rejecting transcendent modes of desire in favor of immanent modes of desire.

This political ideology, more concretely, is a micropolitics of desire that opposes fascism in all forms. It is a rejection of transcendent objects, such as the state or capitalism. To be revolutionary is no longer just to engage in macropolitical resistances against these structures—these projects have tried and failed, the largest example being Stalinism. The left needs to reframe itself as productive desire, and an increased focus on its micropolitical desires, avoiding the fascistic tendencies that permeate parties, unions, friendships, and politicians. Importantly, this doesn't mean that we abandon anything collective, centralized, or organized inside of a political party; rather, this micropolitics of desire would “no longer seek support from a transcendent object [such as the state] in order to provide itself with security...rather, it would center on a multiplicity of objectives, within the immediate reach of the most diverse social groupings.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the call is at least nominally anti-statist, but not anti-hierarchy—these are inevitable. All humans possess drives, and they're always already assembled and organized in some fashion, such that our social structures shape and are shaped by them. Thus, good praxis goes far beyond a critique of the state, but also “the power of any kind of bureaucracy, the power of academia, familial power, phallogocratic power in male/female relationships, or even the repressive power of the superego over the individual.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, it's not enough to simply talk about these problems; our immanent mode of existence must reflect this newfound antifascist

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<sup>23</sup> Guattari, pg. 158

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, pg. 156

micropolitics. Perhaps the closest modern-day example of this is the Mexican Zapatistas, a leftist/libertarian-socialist organization. First and foremost, their immanent ethics is resistance to capitalism, resistance to a state, and resistance to a central or singular axis of authoritative control. This is not just done through militant action, but also by prioritizing inclusive and intersectional approaches which constantly recode and reform their sites of struggle and politicization. Thomas Nail writes, examining the Zapatistas:

“...these political tendencies or types are really distinct insofar as they occupy different dimensions of a struggle and yet they also coexist simultaneously insofar as they occupy a single political event that holds them all together under the same name. Thus, instead of succession (presupposing separate taxonomic categories) political tendencies change and merge as they cross the different thresholds immanent to the struggle under consideration”<sup>25</sup>

The political identity of the Zapatistas is never static—it is one of constant, immanent, micropolitical, antifascist ethics. Problems affecting their community, ranging from nearby drug wars, to misogyny, to environmental damage, are all part of their larger struggle against the state, patriarchal tradition, capitalism, and other transcendent desires. It is also a militaristic struggle, physically resisting the larger state they reside in, and frequently changing in territorial size (recoding). However, the Zapatistas are still far from free of microfascistic tendencies. Where, for example, they’ve resisted transcendent patriarchal values by allowing women into the military as equals, they’ve also opened the door for military control over the “autonomy and self-management of the Zapatistas.”<sup>26</sup> This recoding always has the potential to reinstate or instantiate new transcendent values, which is why an immanent mode of ethics is necessary to always critique, and always act in accordance with a productive desire.

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Nail, “Constructivism and the Future Anterior of Radical Politics”, pg. 82

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, pg. 84

This paper is a call for the active, conscious rejection of transcendent desire. Only through an immanent mode of desire can our micropolitics resist the “molecular components of fascism” that machinate themselves throughout our state and social structures.<sup>27</sup> Where the left and the right regularly continue to succumb to the cyclical desiring of their own repression, a new way forward can be found through Deleuze and Guattari’s productive desire. Creatively and continually reimagining what our hierarchies could look like can produce the ultimate resistance to fascism, so long as it is reflected in our immanent mode of existence.

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<sup>27</sup> Guattari, pg. 158