Jussi Parikka's interview on digital populism and recent European political phenomena, held on **17th May 2013** with the author of Obsolete Capitalism

Crowd, Power and Post-democracy in the 21st Century

'Rural *fascism and city or neighborhood fascism, youth fascism and war veteran's fascism… fascism of the couple, family, school, and office. Only the micro-fascism can answer the global question: "why does desire long for its repression? how can it desires its very own repression?"'*
— Gilles Deleuze, Fèlix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

On the micro-fascism

Obsolete Capitalism Let us start from the analysis Wu Ming set out in their brief essay Grillismo: Yet another right-wing cult coming from Italy and which interprets Grillo's Five Star Movement as a new authoritarian right-wing faction. Why did the desire for change of much of the electorate long once again for its very repression? We seem to witness the re-affirmation of Wilhelm Reich's thought: at a given moment in history the masses wanted fascism. The masses have not been deceived: they have understood very well the danger of authoritarianism; but they have voted it anyway. Even more worrying is that the authoritarian Berlusconi's Freedom People (PDL) and Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) conquer more than half of the Italian electorate together. A very similar situation arose in the UK in May 2013, with the UKIP's exploit in the latest local elections. Why and in what measure are the toxins of authoritarianism and micro-fascism present in contemporary European society?

Jussi Parikka I think you already describe the situation partly in your question: gradually over the past couple of years we have seen a range of odd fluctuations across Europe. The recent surge in popularity of the right wing UKIP in the UK was preceded by the short feeling of power by the liberal party pulled to the government by the Conservatives. UK politics has long time suffered from a severe feeling of stagnancy of the bi-polar system, so a lot of these fluctuations can be explained by people trying out, experimenting, sometimes in very unfortunate ways. But on a more structural, Europe-wide level the authoritarian parties of fear have taken a too strong grip already. They range from the miserable situation in Hungary which has been neglected probably because of the South European crisis, but whose fascist policies are among the most scary in Europe to the "Finns" party in Finland whose protest party position might even stabilize. And it's not only the parties which express this weird mood of micro-fascism: for instance in various countries, and again not least in Finland, there are pockets of groups aggressively campaigning against feminism, for "men's rights" and in general, a return to such gender and sexual politics that I see as scary as the racist powers emerging.

Hence, there is a need for an analysis of affect in the midst of the economic crisis. We should take seriously the ideas of Gabriel Tarde concerning the affective constitution of economics, and consider in what ways are these different destructive affects mobilized, which relate to our sense of the social (the pathology of we-ness through its exclusive qualities, the Schmittian condition that persists) and its variations across our capacities for cognitive and affective evaluation of the crisis.

For the social democrat left in Europe it is a matter of coming up with a convincing narrative and task in the post-industrial mode of production. They have failed , despite such attempts as the creative industries New Labour. Instead, they have been branded more or less as advocates of a flimsy "globalization" which either bears the risk of meaning nothing or supporting the exploitation of workers and ecological resources on a

global scale. They have been rather without solutions to the debt crisis, and incapable of resisting to the emergence of new nationalisms. Hollande's vision for France is having major hiccups, which reflects as part of the general mood across Europe. What the conservative right is afraid of is losing votes to the extreme forces, and hence they are equipping themselves towards that pool of voters.

1919, 1933, 2013. On the crisis

OC In 2008 Slavoj Zizek said that when the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted, the field is open for a 'discursive' ideological competition. In Germany in the early 1930s Hitler won the competition to determine which narrative would explain the reasons for the crisis of the Weimar Republic — the Jewish conspiracy and the corruption of political parties. Zizek ends his reflection by stating that the expectations of the radical left to get scope for action and gain consent may be deceptive as populist or racist formations will prevail: the Greek Golden Dawn, the Hungarian Fidesz, the French Front National, the UK Independence Party are examples. Italy has had farcical groups such as the Lega Nord or the recent Five Star Movement, a bizarre rassemblement that seems to combine Reverend Jones People's Temple with Syriza, or 'revolutionary boyscoutism' with the disciplinarism of the societies of control. How can one escape the crisis? What discursive, possibly-winning narratives should be developed? Are the typically Anglo-Saxon neo-Keynesian politics an answer or, on the countrary, is it the new authoritarian populism that will prevail?

JP We need to be able to even evaluate and consider what is the crisis. First question would be: is there a traumatic interruption, or actually is this the trauma that has consistently persisted? In other words, does our political evaluation of the situation start from an assumption of establishment of new sovereign powers of interruption in which the crisis expresses itself, and reaches out to new political powers of destructive kind emerging – or whether there is a low level background hum that characterises this crisis?

In what sense do we need to be able to evaluate the various but coalescing temporal levels of this crisis? Partly this might have to do with the cynical international politics sparked off by post 9/11 which we can perceive across various social scales: securitization of the street level to international operations of war and new technologies such as drones. But as much we need to be aware of the low level hum: not only opposing things like the drones or our government participation and deployment of such killing machines at a distance – but the more systematic violence through lack of water, food and for instance the ecological problems.

It relates to the slow sedimentation of new procedures of technologised security entangled with particular economic, financial measures: the double face of violence that has attacked us the past 10-15 years, from the violence of the military and the police to the violence of economic austerity, which indirectly links to massive amount of physical and mental casualties. I am not sure if we should just focus on the emergence of right wing parties and their popularity, but the push and pull of the established powers who have been instrumental in establishment of the certain grim military-economic situation we are in, as well as the willingness of those established powers to give way to the extreme movements. It seems that the Tories in the UK have no problems in now taking UKIP seriously as one political party among others, it seems that the 'True Finns" populist voices are becoming embedded as the normal state of things in Finland, and similarly, the other examples are becoming normalised. It is the normal we should be worried about!

But it is not about escaping the crisis, but engaging with it. As mentioned above, we need to understand the various links between mobilisation of affects with the current financial schemes and the crisis, as well as the wider public sector crisis. The universities are less and less available as the places where we come up with the analysis and cognitive as well as affective coordination of powers of resistance. The management of the corporate

universities are willing to spend less and less on such disciplines where this work happens. Instead, universities are becoming increasingly places of management and business studies and watered down creative hubs. Academics turn into entrepreneurs and managers of their own careers. This does not mean that we are raising our hands, but just that we need to be able to think what are the forums where to develop our own, positive crisis.

Indeed, I agree with a range of voices that for instance Rosi Braidotti summons in her new book *The Posthuman* (Polity, 2013). She reminds of the postcolonial and feminist theorists who continue to insist the possibility of thinking Europe in terms of difference: not the project of fortress Europe but one of transnational flows, migrancy, hybrid identities in language, sexuality and other modalities of subjectivity. We should not forget this legacy and remember what multiplicity there lies in a different sort of Europe already existing now too. Just take a normal bus in London, down from Archway towards Kings Cross, look at the people around you, and you know what I mean.

On the missing people

OC Mario Tronti states that 'there is populism because there is no people.' That of the people is an enduring theme which Tronti disclaims in a very Italian way: 'the great political forces use to stand firmly on the popular components of the social history: the Catholic populism, the socialist tradition, the diversity in communism. Since there was the people, there was no populism.' Paul Klee often complained that even in historical artistic avant-gardes 'it was people who were lacking.' However the radical critique to populism has led to important results: the birth of a mature democracy in America; the rise of the theory and the practice of revolution in the Tsarist Empire, a country plagued by the contradictions of a capitalist development in an underdeveloped territory (Lenin and bolshevism). Tronti carries on in his tranchant analysis of the Italian and European backgrounds: 'In today's populism, there is no people and there is no

prince. It is necessary to beat populism because it obscures the relations of power.' Through its economic-mediatic-judicial apparatuses, neopopulism constantly shapes "trust-worthy people" similar to the "customers portfolio" of the branded world of neoliberal economy: Berlusconi's "people" have been following the deeds of Arcore's Sultan for twenty years; Grillo's followers are adopting similar all-encompassing identifying processes, giving birth to the more confused impulses of the Italian social strata. With institutional fragility, fluctuating sovereignties and the oblivion of left-wing dogmas (class, status, conflict, solidarity, equality) how can we form people today? Is it possible to reinvent an anti-authoritarian people? Is it only the people or also politics itself that is lacking?

JP It is one thing to ask if what we mean by politics is somewhat inadequate than to claim that there is no politics. People's frustration with political parties whether in the US or for instance Europe is nothing new. But that does not mean that politics would have disappeared, or more accurately: we need to be aware of the range of practices that are not necessarily "politics" but rather significant for a range of measures, also for summoning a "people to come". So yes, beyond the focus of representational politics or even identity politics there are a lot of groupings, which bring people together and formulate such communities in formation. It comes often in bursts, and not all of it is perhaps "productive" from the perspective of established politics. For instance UK has had a fair range of events the past years, from student demonstrations to the riots in 2011. There might not be an overarching explanation of what they "meant" politically but we need to understand what happens on the ground, on affective levels, on levels what Tarde would call imitational, and what produces attachments and detachments.

We definitely need more anti-authoritarian attachments that bring a different set of alliances as part of our reality. What is interesting is that also the established parties, like the Tories, tried to reinvent the citizenship power with their rhetorics of empowerment

from below: the big society. Such cynical appropriations are reflecting some of the ideas we find politically progressive like local organization.

Otherwise, I don't think we should restrict ourselves with the language of "lack" like there would be an ideal sense of the political waiting for us to fulfill it. I think we need an ethical stance to the questions at hand, but also what recognizes the difficulties of everyday life. That stance steers clear of moralism and tries to cultivate new possibilities and ways of living. At the moment, we are going against a wall, too fast, on so many fronts from everyday life in Europe to the ecological implications of current modes of production and consumption. It will be around a range of questions on that axis that our new alliances are getting born.

I am not sure if I am happy to discard questions of class – or for instance the possibilities of solidarity – as left-wing dogma. There is much more to be said and understood relating to the political economy of contemporary capitalism, and a lot of which testifies to persistence of class positions even if not always in traditional ways.

On Control

OC In *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, published in 1990, Gilles Deleuze states that, thanks to the illuminating analyses of Michel Foucault, a new diagnosis of contemporary Western society has emerged. Deleuze's analysis is as follows: control societies have replaced disciplinary societies at the beginning of the twentieth century. He writes that 'marketing is now the instrument of social control and it forms the impudent breed of our masters.' Let us evaluate who stands beyond two very successful electoral adventures such as Forza Italia (Berlusconi's first party) and M5S: respectively Publitalia 80 owned by Marcello Dell'Utri, and Casaleggio Asssociati owned by Gianroberto Casaleggio. The incontrovertible fact that two marketing companies stand behind these political

projects reinforces Deleuze's analysis. Mechanisms of control, media events such as exit polls and infinite surveys, im/penetrable databases, data as commodities, continuous spin doctoring, influencers that lead consensus on the net, opaque bots, digital squads, dominant echo-chambering. Evil media. These are the determinations of post-ideological (post-democratic?) neoliberalism. The misery of the new control techniques competes only with that of the glass house of transparency (web-control, of course). Jacques Ranciere says we live in the epoch of post-politics: how can we get out of the neo-liberal cage and free ourselves from the ideological consensus of its electoral products? What will the reconfiguration of left-wing politics be after the exhaustion of Marxist hegemony?

JP I think there are several different questions there, and I will focus only on the question of control. For me, the relevancy of Deleuze's short text is in how it points a move from exclusively architectures of human bodies (Foucauldian analysis of discipline) to the modulation and control of nonhuman bodies too: for instance algorithms and circuits. Marketing is of course one form of governance of bodies, and circuiting them not only on architectural, external behavioral ways but on affective and cerebral too. Marketing creates milieus of behavior and feeling that are also affective. Such are however not completely new in terms of politics, but more of a phenomenon of 20th century: polls and advertising, moods and crowd management on affective levels are what characterizes the emergence of mediatic states of politics-becoming-marketing.

On the Googlization of politics; the financial side of digi-populism

OC The first decade of the 21st century has been characterized by the rise of neo-capitalism, referred to as cognitive; in this context a company like Google has established itself as the perfect synthesis of web-business as it does not compensate, if not in a small part, the content-carriers it lists. In Italy, following

the electoral success of the Five Star Movement we witnessed a mutation of the typical prosumer of social networks: the new figure of the "prosumer-voter" was in fact born on Grillo's blog - being essentially the one and only channel of information of the movement. The blog is a commercial activity and the high number of contacts and daily access has steadily increased in the last year. This digital militancy produces incomes both in the form of advertising and online sales of products such as DVDs, books and other material associated with the movement. All of this leads to the risk of googlization of politics whereby the modes of financing political activity radically change because of the "network surplus-value" - an expression coined by the researcher Matteo Pasquinelli to define that portion of incomes extracted from the practices of the web prosumers. Having said this, are we about to witness a shift of the financial paradigm applied to politics? Will the fundings from powerful lobbies or the general public be replaced by micro-donations via web (in the style of Obama's) and by the exploitation of the prosumer-voters? And if so, will the dominant 'googlization of politics' involve any particular risks?

JP The reason why Obama was able to mobilize such a broad "grassroot level" system was of course linked to the existence of already political structures. It was not just invented from nothing, like a political miracle. Of course, there is much there that made the case interesting but as a reform of politics, it fails. I think Evgeni Morozov points out in his new book good arguments about the phenomenon of crowdsourced politics as well as funding, and its problems: that it does not automatically mean any better governmental policies but even at times the risk of focus on rather secondary matters in a world which needs issues like the Middle Eastern crisis, the ecological crisis and the debt crisis to be solved! Morozov's case studies range from the U.S. to the European Pirate Parties, especially the Germany case, and the failure to live up to any more sustained goals.

On another front we need to remember Jodi Dean's analysis of the communicative capitalism. The conflation of democratic ideals with the rhetorics of new technological platforms from Google to Facebook is a tempting prospect that for sure is on the advertising agenda of Silicon Valley companies. However, it also leads into a weird economic arrangement as well as dependency on those proprietary platforms. Freedom, communication and the intelligence of the crowds – direct democracy – are such lovely aims that no-one expect a horrible dictator would dare to object but at the same time the actual technologies and techniques that sustain those ideals are more complex.

Prosumer-voters hints of what is the issue: there is still a reference to the consumerist aspect of it, where politics is perhaps one form of online shopping. There is a lot of work in creating, sustaining and driving topics on the public agenda of politics and this is where the aspects of labour invested should be counted. In terms of finance, crowdfunding does not remove the fact that lobbying power remains with certain key stakeholders, as well as the biggest purses.

On digital populism, on affective capitalism

OC James Ballard once said that after the religions of the Book we should expect those of the Web. Some claim that, in fact, a first techno-religion already exists in the form of Affective Capitalism whose technological and communicative characteristics mirror those of network cultures. This notion of a secularized cult can be traced back to Walter Benjamin's thought but is enriched by a very contemporary mix of affective manipulation techniques, politics of neo-liberalism and political practices 2.0. The rise of the Five Stars Movement is the first successful example of italian digital populism; Obama's campaign in the U.S.A. has witnessed an evolution of micro-targeting techniques - customized political offers via the web. The new frontier of both medical and economic research is producing a disturbing convergence of evolving 'fields of knowledges': control theories, neuro-economics and neuro-marketing. In 1976, in the optic of the

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'war-repression' schema, Foucault entitled his course at the Collège de France 'Society must be defended'. Now, faced with the general friability of all of us, how can we defend ourselves from the impact of affective capitalism and its digital practices? Can we put forward a differential, local knowledge which, as Foucault said, 'owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it'?

JP I don't know if this is a case of rescue – there won't be a god or a cybernetic apparatus to rescue us. It is more about intelligent, historical and productive analyses of the situations in which our cognitive and affective capacities are constantly being harnessed as part of value creation, militaristic politics and policies of self-mutilation, like austerity. Affective capitalism is not so much an entity to be resisted, as it is an apparatus of capture, as Deleuze and Guattari defined it. Indeed, it is in this sense a logic of power, or an abstract machine, for cultivation and capture of affective worlds. This does not mean the need to retract from affects, but cultivate more of them: joyous affects, as the Deleuzian Spinozists often call them!

One of the central questions for network activism seems to be this one about engagement and affect: do we refrain from involvement in such spheres of communicative capitalism, or do we engage head on, immanently on the level of subject topics, platforms, and exactly the mechanisms where capture happens? Does one leave Facebook or build resistance and a voice inside it? Either way, we have to engage with questions of affect and communication, but also of the non-semiotic regimes of communication: algorithms. Such platforms are never merely about the level of our everyday engagement but create the second level of data on which it does not matter if your message is anti-capitalist or just celebration of friend's hipster photographs that were Instagrammed.

In other words, we need to continue the notion of "affect" beyond human bodies to that of other sorts of relations that sustain the modes of posthuman subjectivity. I am here again thinking with Braidotti: that the current modes of subjectivity need to be understood as crossroads between a variety of forces human and non-human, of planetary dimensions including ecology and geology, but also the algorithmic and other sorts of affordances for the digital me. Any analysis of cognitive capitalism has to get specific about the technologies and techniques where exploitation happens: not only the street, but the algorithmic too.

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