

Ana Teixeira Pinto
**Male Fantasies:
The Sequel(s)**

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“How could the masses be made to desire their own repression?” was the question Wilhelm Reich famously asked in the wake of the *Reichstagsbrandverordnung* (Reichstag Fire Decree, February 28, 1933), which suspended the civil rights protections afforded by the Weimar Republic’s democratic constitution.¹ Hitler had been appointed chancellor on January 30, 1933 and Reich was trying to grapple with the fact that the German people had apparently chosen the authoritarian politics promoted by National Socialism against their own political interests. Ever since, the question of fascism, or rather the question of why might people vote for their own oppression, has never ceased to haunt political philosophy.² With Trump openly campaigning for less democracy in America – and with the continued electoral success of far-right antiliberal movements across Europe – this question has again become a pressing one.

Marxist theory, according to Reich, consistently depicts fascism as a mistaken choice resulting from false consciousness: the masses are ignorant and gullible, and thus easily led into contradictions. Refusing to absolve those who cheered for Hitler, Reich proposes an alternative theory. Marxism, he contends, was “unable to understand the power of an ideological movement like Nazism” because it lacked an adequate conception of ideology’s “material force as an emotional or affective structure.”³ The masses did not mistakenly choose fascism. Rather, there is a more fundamental nonidentity between class consciousness and mass movements. Fascism was not a *Falschkauf* (mistaken purchase) followed by buyer’s remorse. The people fought for it, fiercely and stubbornly – though this desire for fascism is also a desire for suppression, a “fight for servitude,” if you will, or an “escape from freedom,” as Erich Fromm put it in the title of his 1941 book.

The answer to this apparent paradox – how can desire desire its own suppression? – was, in Reich’s view, tied to *thwarted sexual development*. The rhetoric of social revolution ran afoul of the centuries-old association of transgression with social shame and punishment. Taught to suppress the natural expression of their sexual instincts, the masses conflated social and sexual convulsions in images of tides, floods, undercurrents, disorder, and chaos: everything which represents a fear of dissolution or threatens to swallow the subject. Fascism, from Reich’s perspective, constitutes the paradigmatic form of ideological displacement: the social antagonism diagnosed by communism (class struggle) is displaced “to the site of phantasmatic antagonism,” as the archetypal conflict between the Germanic Aryans



An early twentieth-century French postcard titled "The Winner" uses trompe l'œil for a sexist innuendo.

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and the Semitic Jews.⁴ The literature of anti-Semitism – fascist or otherwise – is marked by the putative illegitimacy or unnaturalness of interest-bearing capital, whose ability to generate money from money is represented as a kind of parasitical, or deviant sexuality, generating like from like. Patriarchal, land-based accumulation is threatened by both the “cheating” wife and by the “cheating” moneylender. Hence the all-pervasive anxiety about the potency or authenticity of the male *issue*, whether this issue is a child or a currency.⁵

Writing in 1936, Walter Benjamin also saw fascism as a mock revolution: the mobilization of revolutionary demands towards an epic feat of showmanship, which stages the power of the masses without granting them rights. Fascism, he noted, gives expression to the masses’ “will to power” while preserving capitalist class structures and keeping property relations intact. The outcome of this revolutionary carnival is the spectacularization of politics: the mass rallies, the histrionics, the paranoid discourse, the need to turn the lack of material resources into a drama of presence and absence charged with sexual intensity.

For all its merits, Reich’s account has a blind spot. While rejecting the dichotomy

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between “false consciousness” and “real conditions,” he ends up introducing another binary distinction: between the “rational” political agent and the “irrational” desirous subject – the foolish passions of the latter undercutting the material interests of the former. Whereas Marxism would solve the problem of fascism by tackling misinformation, Reich would solve the problem of fascism by tackling psychic hindrances and inhibitions; yet both see fascism as a deformation (either intellectual or sexual) whose hold on the subject can be dispelled by introducing less skewed educational programs or a different mode of socialization.

As Deleuze and Guattari point out, this distinction between the social and the psychic is difficult to sustain, since “there is no particular form of existence that can be labeled psychic reality.”⁶ In contrast to Reich’s emphasis on fascism as a psychosexual disorder, they stress that desire is social in nature: “It is not possible to attribute a special form of existence to desire, a mental or psychic reality that is presumably different from the material reality of social production. Desiring-machines are not fantasy-machines or dream-machines, which supposedly can be distinguished from technical and social machines.” Desire invests the entirety of the



In this Waffen SS recruitment poster, the Nazi army is portrayed slaying the Bolshevik dragon. The poster reads "Germany's victory means freedom for Europe."

social field, thus the libido has no “need for mediation or sublimation,” nor for any other psychic operation, in order to permeate all forms of social reproduction – even the most repressive and deadly.⁷

In 1977, five years after the publication of *Anti-Oedipus*, German sociologist Klaus Theweleit published *Male Fantasies*, his seminal work on the psychology of the “white terror.” Though Theweleit hadn’t read *Anti-Oedipus* before he began writing *Male Fantasies*, the latter could in many ways be described as the sociological counterpart of the former. Echoing Deleuze and Guattari’s argument for the coextension of rational and irrational forms, *Male Fantasies* sets out to describe the dialectical entanglement of social, political, and fantasy machines.

Examining the diaries written by members of the Freikorps – the German paramilitary units which refused to disarm after the WWI armistice – Theweleit couldn’t help but notice that the word “communism” was never used to refer to a form of political economy entailing the collectivization of resources; rather, “communism” was synonymous with castration, with the fear of being emasculated and rendered powerless – politically as well as sexually. As he

repeatedly points out, one cannot talk here about unconscious or repressed anxieties: the Freikorps men openly equate communism and the liberalization of gender roles with lawlessness and anarchy.

Recruited from the ranks of the defeated Imperial Army, the Freikorps men felt betrayed by Kaiser Wilhelm II, who abdicated in the aftermath of the November Revolution, and by the Weimar Republicans, who negotiated the armistice. But most importantly, they had returned to a country whose changes felt shocking: civil conflicts had given rise to multiple attempts to establish communist councils (Arbeiter und Soldatenräte) throughout Germany – in Kiel, Bremen, Braunschweig, and Würzburg.⁸ Bavaria and Alsace had proclaimed themselves Soviet Republics (on April 6, 1919 and November 8, 1918, respectively). The feminist demand for suffrage, which began in the Wilhelmine period, had in 1919 won women the right to vote, while the Weimar constitution consecrated equal pay, equal opportunity, and equal access to education. The Freikorps lore thus combined an element of truth – for the military class, war, however life-destroying, was a means of social reproduction, and the preservation of their own rank and privilege implied the preservation of

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A woman is beaten by Wehrmacht soldiers and Ukrainian nationalists during the Lviv pogroms, in 1941, Ukraine. Historians estimate that 4,000 Jewish people were murdered during the first pogrom, between June 30 and July 2, 1941.

certain social and gender hierarchies – with an element of delusion: As Theweleit puts it, they “experience communism as a direct assault on their genitals.”⁹

Though seemingly counterintuitive, the conflation of women and mass unrest was a common staple of conservative discourse at the turn of the century. In his book *The Crowd (Psychologie des Foules, 1895)* Gustave le Bon had already addressed the crowd as a gendered subject: impulsive, irrational, susceptible, irresponsible, unpredictable. The crowd is assimilated to the primitive, the infantile, and the feminine, the preserve of “beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution.”¹⁰ A crowd cannot have political demands because, like women, slaves, or the insane, it exists in the same state as the animal, outside of politics and history. Riots, strikes, and mass movements are thus not an expression of legitimate grievances but a lawless howl that threatens the very fabric of orderly life.

The experience of industrialization was an experience of shock, to both the social and individual body. Here, the fear of mutilation, of having the inner body’s (soft) entrails spilled by an industrial injury, is translated into the polarity between the chaotic formless masses and the armored (hard) drill formations of a military phalanx – a cipher for the fascist superbodily.

But the assimilation of mass movements with floods, swamps, or pits of muck is not just a literary exercise, it’s a political operation. What communism promised the underpaid and underfed working poor was an overhaul of social hierarchies; the revolt of the laboring class was – literally – a threat to the old barriers and entrenched privileges: communism pledged to engulf the old Prussian order, swallowing the lower ranks of the aristocracy that Freikorps recruits typically belonged to. Conflating lifestyle (the maintenance of rentier income) with survival, the Freikorps forged an imaginary identity between the dread of revolution and the dread of drowning and physical dissolution. But everything murky and watery is also a cipher for woman, which is why Theweleit asks to what extent this patriarchal organization of life adopts fascism in order to ensure its own survival.¹¹

Relations between the sexes, Theweleit argues, are never just sexual, they are socially structured and controlled, “the object of law.” *Male Fantasies* thus points to a certain type of male-female relation as a producer of fascist “life-destroying reality”¹²:

A man doesn't have “this” sexuality and a woman “that” one. If it seems possible today to make empirical distinctions between male and female sexuality, that

only proves that male-female relations of production in our culture have experienced so little real change for such a long time that structures have arisen whose all-pervasiveness tempts us into regarding them as specific to sex. But if male-female relations of production under patriarchy are relations of oppression, it is appropriate to understand the sexuality created by, and active within, those relations as a sexuality of the oppressor and the oppressed. If the social nature of such “gender-distinctions” isn't expressly emphasized, it seems grievously wrong to distinguish these sexualities according to the categories “male” and “female.” The sexuality of the patriarch is less “male” than it is deadly, just as that of the subjected women is not so much “female” as suppressed, devivified.¹³

The Freikorps men hated women, particularly working-class ones. They feared being swallowed by their shrieks, engulfed by their hordes. These imaginary assaults justified all forms of real aggression. In their diaries, members of the Freikorps fictionalized the killing of women, describing in lurid detail how bullets and bayonets penetrated their bodies, how hand grenades turned living, breathing beings into a “bloody mass.”¹⁴ For order to be restored, women had to die gruesome deaths; only after all traces of their existence were gone could the world be made “safe and male again.”¹⁵

Unlike the New Left, for whom sexual repression was not merely a characteristic of fascism but its very cause,¹⁶ Theweleit didn't see genocide as the thwarted expression of inhibited sexual energies. His point was rather that the production of gender and sexuality are intimately tied to the content of anti-Semitism and overt racism – both before, during, and after the fall of the Weimar Republic. Fascist sexuality is not so much repressed as it is ideological: it idealizes virility and fertility as *political* imperatives.¹⁷ Its tropes are worth revisiting not only because there is a continuity between every day sexism – for example, the culturally tolerated misogyny of expressions such as “I would fuck her brains out”¹⁸ – and the Freikorps murderous frenzy; or because conflicts over sexual mores and gender roles have again become an decisive site for political struggle; but mostly because the question of gender is always instrumental in defining the “enemy,” as the “act that brings the collective into being.”¹⁹

The content of fascism is a national-social form of Darwinism. This is what lends it ideological coherence – it ties its racial policy to its patchy economic program. As Hitler allegedly

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The 1975 Nazi exploitation movie, *Ilsa the She Wolf of the SS*, initiated a franchise of three sequels.

said: “The basic feature of our economic theory is that we have no theory at all.”²⁰ The only economic policy he did sustain was a lofty belief in inequality, since ruthless competition promoted the rise of “superior individuals.” This was the domestic equivalent of his foreign policy, which was based on ruthless competition among nations. Social Darwinism is also the link in the otherwise bumpy ideological continuum between fascism and capitalism.

As Susan Buck-Morss points out, the imaginary of nation-states is “purely political.”²¹ The economy plays no role in it. But precisely because economic actors are not recognized as political agents, capitalism is “incapable of providing a code that will apply to the whole of the social field.”²² Instead, it sets in motion a deterritorializing machine plagued by contradictions: theoretically at least, the free movement of capital should lead to a corresponding free movement of workers, in which case capitalism, unable to sustain its mode of production, would dissolve into a different socio-historical figure. From this perspective, capitalism requires fascism to violently and artificially reterritorialize social and sexual mores. Immigrants, for instance, are the ideal capitalist subjects: most migrants on temporary work arrangements are not entitled to vote or to receive formal benefits, but even when working illegally they are still taxable through VAT. On the other hand, the abolition of immigration restrictions would eventually even out wages across the globe, and the labor supply would dry up in the places that exploit it the most.²³ This possibility explains the surge in nationalist rhetoric and the need to fix unmoored labor by reinstating national boundaries. As long as capitalism remains able to recruit fascist rhetoric to wage war on the same underclass it feeds on, the two figures can happily coexist. But the balance is precarious, which is why liberal democracies tend to cultivate fascist fantasies whilst marginalizing fascist parties.

The reactionary modernism of the fascist state was at once technologically progressive and socially conservative. In fascist fantasies, the lack of a totalizing social narrative is masked by the triangulation of potency, technology, and masculinity, expressed in the ideal figure of the male as totality. Capitalism shares the attributes of phallic manhood: it is bold, ambitious, and competitive. Consistent with this hidden gender dimension, only so-called productive labor is remunerated; unproductive labor – i.e., labor that does not yield a product, like domestic or informal labor – is simply appropriated.²⁴ To paraphrase Matteo Pasquinelli: capital can be regarded as an abstract machine, which, like any other machine, can be analyzed according to its

inputs and outputs, and the divisions of labor it engenders.²⁵

The notion of gender becomes an organizing category in all aspects of social life at roughly the time when nineteenth-century scientific anthropology ties distinct gender roles to differences in biology. Since the very notion of progress is grafted onto masculinity, the heightened anxiety about female emancipation is not just epiphenomenal: for the Freikorps the “red nurse,” the woman who dared trespass onto the domain of the male (both politically, by fighting for socialism, and professionally, by performing medical functions) was a cipher for the total disintegration of the social. But this fantasy of the castrating female did not die with National Socialism – quite the contrary: it merged with it.

In the 1960s and '70s – ironically, the golden decades for social democracy – yearnings for lurid titillation found a ready-made outlet in Nazi fetishism. Tapping into the reservoir of sexual energy that fascism epitomized, “Nazisploitation” movies became a pop-culture staple. As Susan Sontag argued, fascism provides an obvious décor for the staging of violence and submission, and a recognizable storyline for the exercise of absolute power – which also feeds on sadistic fantasies that typically prey on the female body. The novelty, however, is that women are here both victim and victimizer: the supreme evil that National Socialism came to symbolize cannot be personified as male. Nazisploitation movies are filled with she-wolves, monstrous *torturers* with an insatiable sexual appetite. Though these depictions were extreme (read: pornographic), their diluted correlates trickled down to the mainstream as the trope of the sadistic female SS officer and its allegorical offspring, from “bunny boilers” to all other variations of the femme fatale hell-bent on destruction.²⁶ The tenacity of such imagery is also captured in the oxymoron “feminazi,” popularized by Rush Limbaugh to undermine pro-choice activists. The term originates from a TV series called *Hitler's Daughter*, whose plot revolves around an attempt by a Nazi conspiracy to seize power in the US via a Manchurian candidate who is, in fact, Hitler's child. Because the Nazi-hunting heroes do not know who she is, all office-holding women come under suspicion. Here too, the message couldn't be clearer: “all ambitious women should be suspected of secretly being feminazis.”²⁷ Defeating them at the polls is not enough, which is why Trump has made not-so-veiled calls for Hillary Clinton to be killed. Then as now, when sexuality adheres to a dominance-and-submission model, any challenge to the social hierarchy will be experienced as a “direct assault

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on your genitals.”

Though fantasizing about forcing women to yield does not necessarily mean one votes conservative, there is a continuity between the sexualization of supremacy and the narratives that tie uneven distribution of wealth to economic growth: both see parity as an impediment to potency – the political correlate of dominance and submission is a society predicated on inequality.

Capital, as Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan argue, is not a simple economic entity, but a symbolic quantification of power, whose logic is inherently differential. There is no such thing as “economic power”; nor is there “political power” that “somehow ‘distorts’ the economy.” Instead, all social institutions and agents – from ideology and culture to organized violence, religion, and law; from ethnicity and gender to international conflicts, labor relations, manufacturing techniques, and financial organisms – hinge on the “differential level and volatility of earnings.” As the authors point out, from this perspective we cannot discern “economic exploitation from political oppression.” Instead, there is a dialectical entanglement of capital accumulation and social formation, through which “*power is accumulated as capital.*”²⁸

One could perhaps invert Lyotard’s formula and say that every libidinal economy is political: gender is the value form of capitalism; sexuality is its mode of representation (men appear as money and power, women as beauty, youth, and sex appeal). The exaggerated masculinity of fascist fantasies is the magnified form of “normal” sexual norms, whose maleness already entails denying that anything coded as “feminine” could be a legitimate dimension of social and political experience. From this viewpoint, only male sexuality is “sexual,” and all kinds of issues can be reframed as narratives of masculinity: the Left is seen as emasculated and lacking in libidinal energy; liberals are viewed as whiners; demands for inclusion are a symptom of (hysterical) oversensitivity; political correctness is castrating; the preoccupation with “local” politics is said to signal surrender and impotency. Teeming with male fantasies, the entertainment industry speculates that neither the Holocaust nor slavery would have happened if their victims had “manned up” and fought back (i.e., Tarantino’s *Inglorious Bastards* and *Django Unchained*).²⁹ These armored images of manhood also linger in fields as diverse as evolutionary biology (ideology by another name), with its naturalization of rape as evolutionary strategy,³⁰ and lifestyle trends, which echo hunter-gatherer fantasies (the Paleo diet, the biopolitics of attachment parenting). Feeding off the

conflation between the digital revolution and Reagan’s conservative revolution, a certain type of subjectivity seems to have returned with a vengeance, grafting the markers of social Darwinism (competition for resources, survival of the fittest) onto software and information processing. This symbolic system, dripping with ill-disguised desire, finds its apex in the martialization of artificial intelligence, personified as a distilled form of white-maleness-without-white-men, even though the intelligence of “deep-learning” algorithms does not necessitate consciousness,³¹ and the putative potential of the “cyborg” as a man-machine hybrid has become reality in the form of the fully responsive environment of the “smart city;” not in the over-explicit phallicism of a “Terminator-like figure.”³²

Epilogue

The defining move for the twentieth-century global order, Susan Buck-Morss argued, was the geopoliticization of communism: by forging an identity between communism and the Soviet Union, the Western Block could equate internal dissent (and constituencies as diverse as African-Americans, feminists, socialists, workers, ecologists, and pacifists) with treason, casting unionized labor as unpatriotic. In the US, to be a leftist was to be un-American. The geopoliticization of the protests that became known as the “Arab Spring” mirrors this strategy: it confines dissent to a specific geolocation, obscuring the continuity between these uprisings and other protest movements such as the Indignados and Occupy. But the demise of the USSR also dissolved the nexus between communism and the nation-state: resistance to capitalism can no longer be portrayed as a sign of Soviet intrusion. Once again social struggles are displaced onto the phantasmatic antagonism between the “Free World” and “Islamic Fundamentalism.” “Wars on Terror” notwithstanding, this time around the masses do not want fascism; they want equality.

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- 1
 Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 1933.
- 2
 This question first appears in Spinoza: “Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?” The latest iteration possibly being: “Why do those who would benefit from universal health care fight for its suppression?”
- 3
 Quoted in Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 179.
- 4
 Sami Khatib, “May Day School 2015: How do We Think about Fascism Today?,” Ljubljana, April 30, 2015.
- 5
 To this day, the security force responsible for protecting American kings – the presidential Secret Service – is also tasked with eliminating counterfeiters.
- 6
 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London: Continuum, 2004), 27.
- 7
 Ibid., 30.
- 8
 These councils were brutality repressed by the Freikorps, who executed circa 1,800 of their members and supporters.
- 9
 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 74.
- 10
 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 2nd ed. (London: Dunwoody, 1968), 15–44.
- 11
 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 89.
- 12
 Ibid., 227.
- 13
 Ibid., 221.
- 14
 Ibid.
- 15
 Barbara Ehrenreich, Foreword to Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, xiv.
- 16
 Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, (Princeton University Press, 2005)
- 17
 Daniel Woodley, *Fascism and Political Theory: Critical Perspectives on Fascist Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 212.
- 18
 Ehrenreich, xv.
- 19
 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dream World and Catastrophe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 9.
- 20
 Hans-Joachim Braun, *The German Economy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1990), 78.
- 21
 Buck-Morss, *Dream World and Catastrophe*, 18. A case in point is the current European debate about the distinction between “refugees” and “migrants”: because the violence and coercion resulting from economic conditions is not perceived as violence, people fleeing hunger or exploitation are denied the status of refugees.
- 22
 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 33.
- 23
 At present, the survival of global capital depends on the Chinese Communist Party providing cheap, non-unionized labor for outsourced industries, whose low-cost products, in turn, meet the purchasing power of an increasingly impoverished Western working class.
- 24
 This gendered division of labor is the household equivalent of the international division of labor, which hierarchizes the stages of manufacturing geographically.
- 25
 Matteo Pasquinelli, “Capital Thinks Too: The Idea of the Common in the Age of Machine Intelligence,” *Open! Communist Aesthetics*, December 11, 2015 <http://matteopasquinelli.com/capital-thinks-too/>.
- 26
 It is worth noting that though women were implicated in Nazi war crimes, they were never allowed to join the all-male SS.
- 27
 Brian E. Crim, “The Monstrous Women of Nazisploitation Cinema,” in *Selling Sex on Screen: From Weimar Cinema to Zombie Porn*, eds. Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Catriona McAvoy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 105.
- 28
 Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan, *Capital as Power* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 36–37.
- 29
 Similarly, the French, we are told, could have stopped the Paris attacks if they’d been armed.
- 30
 See Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

31

Even in its more realistic versions, as Orit Halpern notes, the current conception of deep learning is predatory: the world becomes a standing reserve of data to be greedily absorbed by pattern-recognizing algorithms. See Halpern, "The Smart Mandate," in *Nervous Systems: Quantified Life and the Social Question* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015), 223.

32

Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Post Human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 149.

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