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(New) Fascism

Contagion, Community, Myth

Nidesh Lawtoo

Michigan State University Press

East Lansing

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Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and to point our finger at any of its new instances—every day, in every part of the world.

UMBERTO ECO, "UR-FASCISM"

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Coda

Fascism Now and Then: William Connolly and Nidesh Lawtoo in Conversation

William Connolly and I started discussing emerging (new) fascist movements back in the spring of 2016, at Johns Hopkins University. Donald Trump's campaign was beginning to gain traction in the primaries and, as I mentioned in the introduction, we shared a concern with the affective and contagious power of his rhetoric. As we had the occasion to meet again, a year later, this time in Weimar, Germany, in the summer of 2017, we naturally resumed the conversation. We had kept in regular touch, and while I had written a few articles on new fascism, Connolly was at work on a short book titled *Aspirational Fascism*—we were already into material, so to speak.

Since Connolly's book has appeared in the meantime, I thought it would be useful to conclude this study by

including our conversation on what fascism was in the past and what it is becoming now—a way of joining forces, establishing some genealogical connections, and closing the circle.

Nidesh Lawtoo (NL): You are a political theorist, but the kind of theory you are interested in is entangled with a number of different disciplines, from continental philosophy to anthropology, sociology to literary theory, stretching to include in-depth dialogues with hard sciences such as biology, geology, and the neurosciences. Across these disciplines you are known for your work on pluralism, for your critique of secularism, and for a conception of agonistic democracy that is inscribed in a Nietzschean philosophical tradition.

In your recent work, you have opened up this materialist tradition to the question of the Anthropocene. I am thinking of *The Fragility of Things* (2013) and, more recently, *Facing the Planetary* (2017). At the same time, in the wake of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, or actually already prior to it, you have been folding these future-oriented concerns with the planetary back into the all-too-human fascist politics that was constitutive of the 1930s and 1940s

in Europe, but that is currently returning to cast a shadow on the contemporary scene in Europe and, closer to home, in the United States.

Genealogy of Fascism

NL: As a response to this emerging political threat, last semester (spring 2017) you taught a graduate seminar at Johns Hopkins titled “What Was/Is Fascism?,” which I would like to take as a springboard to frame our discussion. This title suggests at least two related observations: first, that fascism is a political reality that is not only related to the past of other nations but remains a threat for the present of our own nations as well; and second, that in order to understand what fascism is today, it is necessary to adopt genealogical lenses and inscribe new fascist movements in a tradition of thought aware of what fascism was in the 1920s and 1930s.

So, my first questions are: What are some of the main lessons that emerged from this genealogy of fascism? And what

is “new” about this reemergence of authoritarian, neo-fascist, or as you call them, “aspirational fascist” leaders that are now haunting the contemporary political scene?

Bill Connolly (BC): That’s a good summary of what I am trying to do and of how this problematic on “What Was/Is Fascism” has emerged. Maybe the best way for me to start is to say that if you try to do a genealogy of Fascism your focus is on the present; the first thing that you pay close attention to is not just how things were, say, in German Nazism or in Italian Fascism, but also how comparisons to those very different situations may help us to focus on new strains and dangers today.¹

Another aspect of a genealogy of Fascism is to sharpen our thinking about what positive possibilities to pursue in the present. Current temptations to a new kind of Fascism might encourage us to rethink some classic ideals anti-Fascists pursued in the past, asking how they succumbed then and what their weaknesses might have been. Some opponents of Fascism were inspired by liberalism, others by neo-liberalism, and others yet by smooth ideals of collectivism

or communalism. So, a genealogy of Fascism can help us to rethink ideals articulated in the past, testing their relative powers as antidotes to Fascism. And it can point to pressures that encourage advocates of other ideals to go over to Fascism. That's part of what I hoped we could begin to do in this seminar.

Moving to the second part of the question: what are the dangers in the present that make some of us hear eerie echoes from the past? Well, a huge omission has been created in the Euro-American world, especially in the United States, where my focus is concentrated. The neoliberal Right has succeeded in pushing concentrations of wealth and income to an ever-smaller group of tycoons at the top, while the pluralizing Left—which I have actively supported over the last forty years—has had precarious (and highly variable) success in its efforts to advance the standing of African Americans, Hispanics, women, diverse sexualities, and several religious faiths. There is much more to be done on these fronts, to be sure, particularly with respect to African Americans.

But one minority placed in a bind between these two opposing drives—and the rhetorics that have sustained

each—has been the white working and lower-middle class. Portions of it have taken revenge for this neglect, first, in joining the evangelical/capitalist resonance machine that really got rolling in the early 1980s, and now in being tempted by the aspirational Fascism of Donald Trump. That has created happy hunting grounds for a new kind of neo-Fascist movement, one that would extend white triumphalism; intimidate the media; attack Muslims, Mexicans, and independent women; perfect the use of Big Lies; suppress minority voting; allow refugee pressures to grow as the effects of the Anthropocene accelerate; sacrifice diplomacy to dangerous military excursions; and displace science and the professoriate as independent centers of knowledge and public authority.

So, that is where I want to place my focus: working upon earlier ideals of democratic pluralism to respond to this emerging condition. When I say emerging condition, I don't mean that success is inevitable—the multiple forces of resistance are holding so far. I mean a set of powerful pressures on the horizon that must be engaged before it could become too late to forestall them.

Fascist Rhetoric

NL: On this question of emerging conditions, you and I share a concern with the rhetoric neo-fascist leaders like Donald Trump have mobilized to win the election, an affective and infective rhetoric that many of us in academia might have been tempted to downplay or dismiss for its apparent simplicity and crudeness—at least during the electoral campaign. But it has worked in the past and continues to be working in the present too.

In light of this genealogical reminder, we both argue that critics and theorists on the left need to be much more attentive to the ways in which this fascist rhetoric—based on repetition, use of images rather than ideas, spectacular lies, but also gestures, facial expressions, incitation to violence, racist and sexist language, nationalism, and so on—operates on what I call the “mimetic unconscious” and you call the “visceral register of cultural life.”

The fascist “art of persuasion” is not based on rational arguments, political programs, or even basic facts. Rather, its aim is to trigger affective reactions that, as some precursors

of fascist psychology (I'm thinking of Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, but also Nietzsche, Bataille, Girard, among others I started discussing in *The Phantom of the Ego*) also noticed, have the power to spread contagiously, especially in a crowd, but now also in publics watching such spectacles from a virtual distance. Could you say more about the affective power of this rhetoric, especially in light of a type of politics that increasingly operates in the mode of fictional entertainment?

BC: That's a really big question and it's at the center of what I would like to try to do, however imperfectly. In preparation for this seminar, I read, for the first time in my life, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. We explored huge sections of it in class, and I noted that at first no students wanted to present on this book. I also noted that almost no one I talked to, in the U.S. and Germany (we're having this interview in Weimar, Germany), had read that book either. The book was in large part dictated by Hitler to Rudolf Hess, while they were in prison together in the early 1920s. It reads as a text that could have been spoken: the rhythms, the punchiness, the

tendency to lapse into diatribes in a way people sometimes do when they are talking. . . .

What Hitler says in the book is that he spent much of his early life in politics rehearsing how to be an effective mass speaker: practicing larger-than-life gesticulations, pugnacious facial expressions, theatrical arm and body movements on stage to punctuate key phrases. The phrase/body combos in his speeches—we watched a few speeches—are thrown like punches: a left jab, a right jab, a couple more punches, and then boom—a knockout punch thrown to the audience! They are punches. Speech as a mode of attack; speech as communication set on the register of attack. Now acts of violence do not become big jumps for leaders or followers. In fact, as Hitler says, he welcomed violence at his rallies. His guards, who later became storm troopers, would rush in and mercilessly beat up protestors, doing so to incite the crowd to a higher pitch of passion.

If we think about Hitler's speaking style in relation to Trump's, it may turn out that Hitler was right about one thing: the professoriate pay attention mostly to writing; not nearly enough to the powers of diverse modes of speech.

Of course, there are exceptions: Judith Butler is one and there are others. But writing and texts are what academics love to attend to, and styles of speech require a different kind of attention. If you *read* one of Trump's speeches it may look incoherent, but it has its own coherence when delivered to a crowd. He also may rehearse those theatrical gestures and grimaces, walking back and forth on stage, circling around while pointing to the crowd to draw its acclaim, and so forth.

When you attend to his speaking style, you see that he has introduced a mode of communication that speaks to simmering grievances circulating in those crowds. Of course, he speaks to other constituencies too, some of them the super-rich. But the speeches are pitched to one prime constituency. His rhetoric and gestures tap, accelerate, and amplify those grievances as he seeks to channel them in a specific direction. Immigrants are responsible for deindustrialization, he says, never noting automation and free corporate tickets to desert the towns and cities that had housed and subsidized them so generously.

When Trump engages in the Big Lie scenario, which

forms a huge part of his speeches and tweets, followers do not always believe the lies. Rather, they accept them as *pegs* upon which to hang their grievances. So, when journalists ask, “Do you believe that he is going to build the wall and Mexico will pay for it?” many say, “No, I don’t believe that.” But when he says it, they yell and scream anyway because the promise is connected to their grievances.

Trump is the most recent practitioner of the Big Lie perfected by Hitler earlier. Of course, the latter’s Biggest Lie was the assertion that Jews were themselves master demagogues of the Big Lie. That is exactly how Donald Trump transfigures the production of Fake News on right-wing blogs; he charges CNN and the media in general with being purveyors of Fake News. The strategy of reversal is designed to make people doubt the veracity of all claims brought to them, preparing them to accept those that vent their grievances the most.

We have to understand how the Big Lie scenario works, what kinds of grievances it amplifies, how apparent incoherences in Trump’s speeches provide collection points to intensify grievances and identify vulnerable scapegoats—until

people leave his speeches electrified and ready to go. They are excited when guards usher a protester roughly off the premises. As the crowd screams, Trump says: “Don’t you love my rallies?” Those on the pluralist and egalitarian Left have to learn how this dynamic works, rather than merely saying, “Those people are stupid if they believe those Big Lies.” That plays into Trump’s hands.

As to how the intertext between entertainment and politics grows, well, Trump was in entertainment as well as being a mogul in real estate, where appearances and staging make up a large part of the show. Moreover, his Atlantic City investments pulled him closer to criminal elements, and he deploys gangster-like tactics to cajole and threaten people. He moves back and forth between these venues. He is not the first one to have done so. Reagan did too. But Trump has perfected a new version of these exchanges, reinforced by blogs and tweets.

Satirical Counter-Rhetoric

NL: I would like to follow up on this last point. It's important to understand how this mimetic rhetoric works, but not in order to try to erase it completely. It's rather a question of channeling it in new directions. This is a difficult maneuver, for it implies sailing past the Scylla of a rationalist conception of subjectivity and the Charybdis of an authoritarian conception of politics: on the one hand, we both don't believe that we can transcend this affective, visceral, or as I call it, mimetic register, for we are embodied creatures that are highly susceptible to mimesis and to the unconscious reactions imitation often triggers, especially in a crowd but not only; on the other hand, we also don't believe that such affects can *only* operate from a top-down vertical principle whereby the authoritarian leader has total hypnotic control over the masses—though its power is amplified by new media that exploit old suggestible tendencies characteristic of *Homo mimeticus*. It's rather a question of unmasking the vertical powers of mimesis while promoting horizontal

rhetorical alternatives that open up space for resistance, dissent, and political action.

Within this configuration, and to reframe my previous question on the relation between fascist politics and entertainment, what do you think of the role a genre such as political satire or comedy plays as a counter-rhetorical strategy? As a non-U.S. citizen who has lived in the United States during several presidential elections, I noticed how this genre is center stage in American politics, to an extent people from other countries might even have trouble imagining: From *The Daily Show* to *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show* to *The Saturday Night Live Show*, to the *Last Week Tonight Show*, and many other shows that inform a big segment of the U.S. population—in ways that, I must say, are often more accurate and perceptive than so-called real news, like *Fox News*.

In a way, comedians seem ideally placed not only to understand but also to unmask and oppose Trump's rhetoric on his own terrain. By training and profession, actors rely on rhetorical skills that derive from the world of performance and operate on an affective, bodily, and mimetic register. And they do so in order to counter, horizontally, the vertical

rhetoric of fascism—though I noticed their reluctance to use the word “fascism” in their shows—for that, genealogists are perhaps still needed . . . Anyway, I find it telling that specialists of dramatic impersonation (or actors) are now those who, paradoxically, unmask the fictions of political celebrities (or actors).

I value the work done on that front and I pay attention to it, but as I watch some of these shows I also have a lingering ambivalence and concern I'd like to share with you. On the one hand, the rhetoric of satire effectively channels political grievances to unmask, via comedic strategies, the absurdity of the Big Lie scenario you describe, as well as other authoritarian symptoms (nepotism, dismantling of public services, racist and sexist actions, dismissal of science, etc.); on the other hand, comedy also seems to contribute to blurring the line between politics and fiction, generating an affective confusion of genres that could well be part of the problem, not the solution.

Of course, political satire has been around for a long time, but the promotion of politics as a form of mass-mediatised entertainment that saturates—via new media—all corners of

private life is a recent phenomenon, and this fictionalization of politics, in turn, should perhaps redefine the critical role satire plays as well. In this spiraling loop, the laughter comedians generate wittily exposes political lies, counters docile subordinations to power, promotes freedom of speech, and perhaps, in small doses, even offers a temporary cathartic outlet that can be necessary for political activism.

And yet, at the same time, I also worry that comedy could generate an affective demand—I'm even tempted to say unhealthy addiction—precisely for those political scandals (the sexist language and actions, the lurid tapes, the spectacular firings, the secret investigations, and so on) it sets out to critique, leading an already media-dependent population to paradoxically focus political attention on the leader qua fictional celebrity to the detriment of real political action itself. What is your take on this double bind? And how do you evaluate these comedic efforts to rechannel a visceral/mimetic rhetoric contra (new) fascist leaders?

BC: I take an ambivalent approach to them, too. This is a very good question because my own perspective, which

draws sustenance from your work on mimetic contagion in *The Phantom of the Ego*, is that certain kinds of stances that liberals often adopt, that deliberative theorists and others do too, in which you say that the visceral register of cultural life must be transcended. Modes of politics that demean analysis, policy, rational argument, and so forth are wrong-headed and have to be replaced. I too prize argument and truth.

But I also believe that there is never a vacuum on the visceral register of cultural life, that this register—which can be affectively rich and conceptually coarse—is ineliminable. Infants, you remind us, respond to the gestures, facial expressions, laughter, movements, and prompts of parents and siblings on the way to learning language, and this dimension of relational being never simply dies out. It constitutes the affective tone of life. But the visceral register can be engaged very differently than Trump does, as we move back and forth across the visceral and refined registers to pour an ethos of presumptive generosity into both.

If we do not become skilled at this, we open the door to authoritarians to fill the vacuum. Those of us on the left need

to find alternative ways to allow the two registers to work back and forth on each other, to be part of each other, so that our most refined beliefs are filled with positive affective tonality and we are equipped to resist the Trumpian assaults. One thing neo-Fascist rhetoric teaches us is the ineliminability of the visceral level of cultural life.

Some comedians—when they show you in amusing ways, as *Saturday Night Live* comics and others do, how Trumpian rhetoric, rhythms, gestures, facial expressions, and demeanor work—imply that all this could be replaced with something entirely different. Well, it must be replaced, but not with something that denies the power of gesture and rhetoric, as those mirror neurons and olfactory sensors on our bodies absorb inflows below reflective attention. It is also necessary to examine how different sorts of bodily discipline encourage some modes of mimesis and discourage others. And so, I have an ambivalent relationship to comedians who do the exposés, depending on how they do it and what alternative they pursue.

The question is whether there are some who can carry us, as they show how the contagion works, to other

rhetorical styles that don't deny the complexity of life and that help to infuse refined intellectual judgments with an ethos of presumptive generosity and courage across differences in identity, faith, and social position. These counter-possibilities, then, need to be part of the comedy acts. Sometimes I think that people like Sarah Silverman and Steve Colbert get this, while someone like the guy on *Saturday Night Live* may not. I'm glad that we've had these comedic interventions, so that people can look again at what is conveyed and how it is conveyed. But when responses take simply the form of name-calling, they incite more agitated segments of the white working and lower-middle classes and teach us nothing about how to woo them in a different direction.

It's a real quandary. Part of the reason, again, is that there is never a vacuum on the visceral register of being, neither for the constituencies that Trump courts nor for the intellectuals and pundits who seek to pull these forces in different directions. Trump's advantage is that it may be easier under conditions of social stress to drag people down than it is to lift them to a higher nobility. Cornel West, however, is a

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rhetorician who combines nobility, presumptive generosity, and courage against aspirational Fascism. Trump is one of crassness and cruelty.

The Ambivalences of Mimesis

BC: But now it's my turn to ask some questions. You have written the notes of ambivalence in mimesis, particularly perhaps Fascist mimesis. Could you say a bit more about how that ambivalence works and what effects it sometimes has—how modes of contagion that work for a while sometimes lose their power? This seems to be a crucial issue to engage today.

NL: Yes, absolutely crucial. And difficult to pinpoint, perhaps because of the ambivalences, or double movements, that mimesis tends to generate. Mimesis is usually translated as imitation, but since humans imitate in radically different ways, it's a notoriously difficult concept to define, which adds different layers to these ambivalences.

Schematically, mimesis can be linked to both representation and vision as well as to mimicry and affects. A realist painter is said to imitate or represent nature not unlike a realist novelist represents the world; but then a child also imitates his parents, a student his or her teachers (or, more probably, favorite movie stars), and people generally imitate figures they admire and who serve as models, good or bad. While the dominant tendency so far has been to translate mimesis in terms of representation, I'm interested in the behavioral, affective, and as you also say, contagious dimension of mimesis—what some call mimetism. Figures like Plato, Nietzsche, Tarde, Girard, Lacoue-Labarthe, Borch-Jacobsen, and others promote analogous views.

On the shoulders of this tradition, I like to remind my students that mimesis comes from *mimos* (mime or actor) and that is originally linked to theatrical skills like impersonation, mimicry, and bodily performance. My sense is that there is an enormous affective power at play in mimetic skills that can be put to political use, and abuse, especially in a culture that has turned politics into a form of spectacle. It's perhaps for this reason that actors turned

politicians can cast such a spell on a significant segment of the population.

Mimesis is thus not always manifested as an image that we consciously see, but is constitutive of an environment that we feel with all our senses. We might not be fully conscious of it, especially if we're used to our environment, but it affects us nonetheless, and deeply so. A bit like the fish that is asked by the other fish, "how is the water today?" And it answers, surprised: "what's water?" Mimesis is the biocultural water we swim in: it's transparent, often imperceptible, and pervasive. Whether we like it or not, we're soaked in it, and the types of currents that surround us—from the family we're born into to the schools we attend, the friends we make and the profession we choose, the shows we watch to the people we follow online—have a strong mimetic influence on how we feel, think, act, and, eventually, vote. For better and worse.

So, to get to your question, there is indeed a political ambivalence at play in mimetic spells. Mimesis, and the affective contagion it generates, is most visible in the case of fascist leaders who use the skills of the actor to trigger aggressive nationalism, violent emotions, scapegoating mechanisms,

military aggressions, etc., but it is always at play on political stages and can be used to generate positive emotions as well, such as sympathy, compassion, and solidarity.

There is, in fact, a fundamental political indeterminacy at play in mimesis in the sense that it can be put to both fascist and anti-fascist uses. It's a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. In both cases, I share your sense that it is the performative or mimetic register politicians rely on to generate identification (via gestures, tonality of voice, mimicry, etc.), which in turn is disseminated via all kinds of mass media, that has the power to generate the mass enthusiasm central to winning an election. I think this is one of the reasons we both started to worry about Trump early on in the campaign—as a showman of sorts, he mastered the mimetic register.

But your question about the ambivalence of fascist mimesis goes beyond well-established political oppositions between Left and Right. It's unpopular to say it, but I think it's important to acknowledge that, to different degrees, *we're all susceptible to the affective forces at play in fascist mimesis*. This is difficult territory because it implies recognizing that we're all vulnerable to mimetic emotions such as violence,

fear, resentment, vengeance, especially in times of crisis. We might not be as autonomous, rational, and self-contained as we might like to think. Of course, it's always easier to see mimesis at work in others than in ourselves, and the challenge is more than doubled if what is at stake is the recognition of *fascist* mimesis.

In this sense, the term fascism we both chose to adopt to talk about present leaders that could simply be defined as populists, creates complications. As a culture, we have become so accustomed to thinking that fascism happened long ago, in totalitarian countries far away, and could not happen in our own democratic country. It's a mythic distinction but a powerful one.

At the same time, we are beginning to learn that fascism does not stop at national borders and often emerges from "democratic" processes within one's national walls. Using the terms like "(new) fascism" or "aspirational fascism"—with all the indeterminacies and potentialities they entail—might be strategically useful to help us remember the historical lesson attached to the second term. Namely, that we're all potentially vulnerable to fascism because we are all vulnerable to

mimetic contagion. At some unconscious level, we might even be viscerally attracted by the very figures we denounce politically. Hence my ambivalence about comedians who cathect their satirical comments a bit too much on the leader. Turning him into a protagonist that is always center stage unwittingly contributes to generating a fascination for the abject subject matters we denounce politically.

BC: Do you think this ambivalence is due to a subliminal war between reception at the visceral register of culture and desires for reflectivity and autonomy that sometimes compete with such modes of contagion?

NL: Yes, I lingered on *fascism's* mimetic power of attraction because acknowledging it, no matter how difficult, seems to me a first step for the development of a conscious and active resistance to new or aspirational fascist movements. But you're absolutely right to stress that there is nothing inevitable about these movements' mesmerizing attraction, and that an agonistic competition between unconscious mimesis and more conscious forms of reflection can ensue.

If we're attentive to the mimetic currents we swim in, we can perhaps find strategies to swim in an opposed direction using *both* our reflective *and* mimetic faculties. Bataille spoke of the "attraction and repulsion" fascist leaders trigger in the crowd; Nietzsche used the notion of "pathos of distance" to designate a similar double movement. There might thus be a way of channeling the currents of visceral repulsion (new) fascist leaders generate to initiate modes of affective and reflective resistance and opposition to fascist mimesis.

While I fear that politics becoming entertainment intensifies this fascination for fascist pathos to an unprecedented degree, it's always possible to set up a distance from the dominant spectacle in which we bathe, and swim somewhere else. Regaining autonomy helps in theory—that's what Nietzsche sought in the Alps, away from crowds, and I have deep sympathy for that. But in practice, since many of us are mimetic creatures living in urban centers, it might be more effective to join others who are already engaged in anti-fascist movements, protests, and in the formation of alternative communities or assemblages. A different form of mimesis linked to sympathy, mutual respect, and solidarity

can then not only be nurtured in such environments; the social environment retroacts mimetically on the ego and amplifies anti-fascist dispositions. And this, I think, brings me to your preference for swarms over crowds.

From the Crowd to the Swarm

NL: In your new book, *Facing the Planetary*, you have a chapter titled “The Politics of Swarming and the General Strike,” which might make some readers wonder: what is the difference between a crowd and a swarm?

More specifically, in an individualistic culture centered on personal needs and desires, what are the strategies, or tactics, we could collectively mobilize to aspire to a political model of swarming that requires a degree of human collaboration that is sometimes instinctively present among certain animal species—the paradigmatic example of the swarm in your chapter comes not from fish and the currents they swim in, but from honeybees and the flowers they pollinate.

Let's change environment then and confront the following objection: some might say that *Homo sapiens* in the age of neoliberal capitalism seems often—not only, but often—restricted to playing the role of an individual, self-concerned, egotistic, and competitive consumer subject concerned with his/her individual needs, desires, and success. You, on the other hand, stress the need to actively and consciously promote collaborative swarm behavior to collectively counter the multiple human and nonhuman threats we're up against as new fascist movements pull us deeper in the age of the Anthropocene. How should we negotiate this contradictory push-pull?

BC: In that book, which came out in February 2017, there are preliminary reflections about Fascist danger, but the focus is elsewhere. The focus is on how large planetary processes like species evolution, the ocean conveyor system, glacier flows, and climate change intersect with each other and generate self-amplifying powers of their own. Earth scientists have recently—between the 1980s and the 1990s—broken previous assumptions about planetary gradualism that

earlier earth scientists such as the geologist Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin made with such authority. There have been several punctuations of rapid, deep change in the past well before the Anthropocene; now there is another rapid change created by capitalism, replete with a series of planetary amplifiers. Planetary gradualism has bitten the dust, but a lot of humanists and human scientists, even those who worry about the Anthropocene, have not yet heard the news. *Haven't you heard? Gradualism is dead.* That affects everything.

When you see how the uneven effects of emissions from capitalist states team up with other planetary amplifiers with degrees of autonomy of their own, the question becomes how to generate a cross-regional pluralist assemblage of constituencies who come to terms with the Anthropocene and press regions, states, churches, universities, corporations, consumers, investment firms, and retirement funds to make radical changes over a short period of time. You must move on multiple fronts to both tame and redirect capitalist growth, as you look forward to a time when the perverse growth machine is brought under more severe control. So,

what I mean by the “politics of swarming” does speak to the kinds of things we were just discussing.

The politics of swarming moves on multiple scales, going back and forth to amplify each in relation to the others. One register involves experimenting with role assignments that we pursue in daily life. It’s related to what Foucault meant by the “specific intellectual,” but is now extended to what might be called “specific citizens.” If, say, you are relatively well-off in a high-emitting regime, you change the kind of car you drive, the occasions you ride a bike, the ways you press a neighborhood association to take action with respect to ecological issues, the way in which—if you are a teacher, as we both are—you change your courses to highlight these issues, and so forth. You alter a series of role definitions, connecting to people and institutions in new ways. Some collective effects are generated here. But, the key point is how creative role experiments work on the visceral registers of cultural pre-understandings, perception, judgment, and relationality. They move them. They thus prepare us to take new actions in other domains. We, in effect, work tactically upon our relational selves

to open them to new contacts and to insulate them from Trumpian rhetoric.

Now other scales of politics can be engaged in a new key: protests, boycotts, electoral politics, creating eco-sanctuaries, copying tactics that have worked in other regions. As the activities escalate and as we encounter new events—a rapidly escalating glacier melt, a new upsurge of climate refugees, vigilante actions against climate activists, etc.—it may now be possible to forge a cross-regional assemblage, applying new pressure from the inside and outside upon states, corporations, churches, universities, temples, neighborhoods, and elected officials to take radical action. A politics of swarming acts at many sites at once.

These cross-regional assemblages may not be *that* likely to emerge, of course. But in the contemporary condition it becomes a piece of crackpot realism to say, “OK, let’s forget it then.” For the urgency of time makes it essential to probe actions that may be possible in relation to *needs* of the day. The politics of swarming *could* perhaps crystallize into cross-regional general strikes, as constituencies inspire each other into peaceful and urgent modes of action. A

cross-regional strike is what I call an “improbable necessity” because the situation is more stark than those imagine who have ignored the history of planetary volatility before the advent of the Anthropocene. They overlook how planetary gradualism was never true and is not true now; hence they miss the autonomous role volatile planetary forces play *now* as CO₂ emissions trigger amplifiers that generate results greatly exceeding the force of the triggers.

By “swarming” I mean action on multiple fronts across several constituencies and regions that speak to the urgency and scope of the issues we face. Since we have seen several times in the past how capitalism can be stretched and turned in new directions, as well as how imbricated it is with a series of forces that exceed it, the interim task is to stretch it now and then to see how to tame further the growth imperatives it secretes.

The Power of Myth

NL: *Facing the Planetary* starts with a myth, and although the book itself is not about fascism but about self-regulating planetary processes, the question of myth is also relevant to our discussion for it is genealogically related to fascism. Myth was, in fact, appropriated by fascists and Nazis alike to promote a racist, anti-Semitic ideology.

I'm thinking in particular of Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the 20th Century*, which was not as influential as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, but was nonetheless one of the bestsellers of the Third Reich. Addressing a distressed, disappointed, and suffering population in the aftermath of the Great War going through a severe economic crisis, Rosenberg articulated the ideology of Nazism by promoting the Aryan racial myth and the necessary to root the German *Volk* back in an essentialist and nationalist conception of "blood and soil."

Much of what we've just said about rhetoric equally applies to the power of myth to move the masses on a visceral/mimetic register, and precisely for this reason, political theorists, starting very early, actually all the way back to Plato,

have tended to be critical of myth and set out to oppose, or even exclude, the mythic, along with the affective registers it mediates.

Interestingly, however, even Plato—in his dramatization of the ideal republic—cannot avoid the mythic. In his critique of Homer or Hesiod, in the early books of *Republic* and in other dialogues as well, he relies on mythic elements, such as characters, dialogues, allegories, gods, heroes, and so forth. Somewhere in *Laws* he even says that this ideal polity has been constructed as a “dramatization of a noble and perfect lie,” or myth. There is thus a sense in which Plato opposes myth via myth, or relies on a philosophical register that includes the mythic to discredit mythic fictions as lies far removed from the truth. He is thus relevant for our discussion.

Of course, you work within a very different, actually opposed, political ontology, one based on becoming over Being, immanence rather than transcendence, horizontality much more than verticality. Still, one could detect a similar strategic move in your appropriation of myth from the *Book of Job* that prefaces *Facing the Planetary*, in the sense that you

rely on a tradition that has in Nietzsche (who was a critical but careful reader of Plato) a major modern representative and considers that in the mythic, past and present theorists can find a source of inspiration that can be used to counter some of the forces we have been grouping under the rubric of new or aspirational fascism.

To return to the opening pages of *Facing the Planetary*: you show how the Nameless One in the *Book of Job* attunes Job to nonhuman, planetary forces (oceans, clouds, tornadoes, etc.), and at one remove, your book relies on this myth to render us attentive to a volatile world of multiple forces as well, as we slide deeper into the Anthropocene. For the present discussion, I wonder if you could draw upon this view of myth open to a plurality of planetary forces to address or, perhaps, counter the myths at play in the politics of (new) fascism. Just as visceral affects can be put to fascist and anti-fascist uses, could myth become a source of inspiration for countering fascist myths?

BC: I agree. What I can say is, yes, Plato said that he opposed the mythic, but then in the *Symposium* he offers a

counter-myth of ascending to a transcendent level at which you gain an intuitive grasp of the Forms—it's an intuitive grasp. He knows that he can't simply prove such an ascension, then; rather, he produces a myth to support the possibility. But his myth is different from some he opposes because it arises out of a dialogue in which characters pose questions about it, continue to have doubts about it, and so on. Aristophanes is never convinced. So, it's not just one myth vs. another; this mythic mode is sprinkled with reflective dimensions—and that's true of Nietzsche as well.

You take Alfred Rosenberg, whom you know better than I do. I will take Hitler. Hitler also focuses on the centrality of a racial myth. He saw one day, according to his testimony in *Mein Kampf*, how Jews provided the “red thread” tying everything he hated together: he could tie them to social democracy, to communism, to miscegenation, to shopkeepers, and to other things he wanted to oppose. He presents the racial myth of the Aryan people as an authoritative myth that must be accepted; he terrorized everyone on the other side of it: Jews, homosexuals, Romani, social democrats, and others who resisted its

“truth.” Today he would call its opponents purveyors of Fake News.

When I present in the preface of *Facing the Planetary* a discussion of the *Book of Job* as a myth, I draw upon the testimonial in the Theophany in which the Nameless One speaks to Job out of a whirlwind or tornado. Job thus allows us to see and feel how our dominant spiritual traditions include some characterizations of planetary processes and nonhuman beings that are neither oriented to human mastery nor expressive of a world organically predisposed to us. Neither-nor. The world is worthy of embrace despite that, in part because it enables us to be. The new work in the earth sciences on planetary processes encourages us to think anew with and through such an orientation, to respect a planet with periodic volatilities, replete with multiple trajectories that intersect and exceed our capacities to master; a planet that will not even become that smooth and slow if we start now to tread lightly upon it.

There are strong premonitions of such an image in the *Book of Job*. You can hear them also elsewhere, as Bruno Latour has shown with his reading of Gaia, the volatile

image of the planet developed from Hesiod. And so, we can sometimes engage myths to jostle dangerous assumptions and demands settled into the background of our thinking, practices, theories, and activities, opening them up for new reflection. Because there is never a vacuum on the visceral register of cultural life; there are always background premonitions that in-form life. They need to be jostled on occasion. The Anthropocene is a new era, but the rapid shifts it portends are not unique. It is only recently that capitalism has become the key catalyzing agent of planetary change—in dynamic relation to other volatile forces.

Nietzsche was right to say that myth, as a condensation of cultural preunderstandings and insinuations, works on the visceral register of being in its modes of presentation, its rhythms of expression, and so forth. I agree with you that we are never in a world in which there is not some kind of mythic background sliding into preunderstandings, modes of perception, and prejudgments. The mythic is not to be eliminated; it is, rather, to be approached much differently than Hitler or Rosenberg approached it, along at least two dimensions: you resist and challenge the myth of the racial

Volk, challenging *both* its falsity and the visceral hatreds that fuel support for it; you then jostle the reassuring myth of planetary gradualism with counter-understandings of planetary processes.

I do not want to eliminate the mythic, and I'm guessing that Plato, whom you have studied more deeply, did not want to either. You could also take an early-modern thinker such as Hobbes who tells you to get rid of rhetorical figures and mythic arguments. Then you read Hobbes carefully and realize he is a rhetorical genius and knows himself to be one. The mythic never disappears: you can draw upon it to disturb and shake cultural predispositions about the planet that continue to hover in the background of the thinking, spirituality, and demands of so many people in old capitalist states. At least the *Book of Job* helps to loosen up undergrads in my classes as they encounter again a childhood story they thought they had already engaged. That's the way I'm trying to think about it.

NL: Your interest in the mythic and the way it operates on what you call the visceral register resonates very much with

what I was saying about the mimetic dimension of human beings, or *Homo mimeticus*. I should add that despite the emphasis on representation, in recent years there has been a revival of attention in the fundamental biological, psychological, anthropological, and, since the discovery of mirror neurons, neurological fact that we are, nolens volens, imitative animals that respond—emotionally, affectively, and often unconsciously—to the myths we are told, including, of course, political myths.

A new picture of myths relevant to fascist politics thus emerges: myths are not simply false imitations of reality we can see from a safe distance. Rather, myths have a destabilizing formative and transformative power—Nietzsche also calls it a *pathos*—that spills over the walls of representation to affect and infect, by affective contagion, our psychic and political lives as well. Myth as a lie can easily turn into myth as a way of life.

BC: I would be interested to hear a bit more concerning your own thinking about the role of myth. Is myth, to you, both indispensable and dangerous? Do we need myth to combat

the dangers of myth, and other tactics as well? If myth is ambiguous, what makes it so for beings such as it is?

NL: I agree with you that myth can't be eliminated. The ambivalence of mimesis and the one of myth are actually entangled in interesting ways. When I first read the *Republic*, I remember being struck by the way myth and mimesis, for Plato, are really two faces of the same coin. His strategy of attack is also similar: just as Plato critiques mimesis via the mimetic genre of the dialogue, so he attacks myth via a philosophical logos that continues to rely on myth. This is perhaps why Nietzsche mischievously says that Plato invented a new literary genre, namely, the novel. I like to think it's a Socratic irony he inherits from Plato.

So, yes, myth is both dangerous and indispensable. Myth is traditionally linked to lies, war, and violence, and in this first sense it is part of the danger we are facing today, not the solution. This is also Plato's position with respect to the mythmakers of his day: poets, rhapsodes, and sophists. The stories they spin represent realities that are not true, for they do not fit his ideal vision of rational Forms; they are not

based on dialectical arguments but on divine inspirations. He linked them to lies, shadows, and phantoms instead. If we take this definition of myth, we notice that the media have changed but the shadows continue to surround us. They are so pervasive in our media environment that they have been blurring the very distinction between truth and lies, material facts and so called alternative facts, inaugurating the age of post-truth. I guess Plato would have seen this state of affairs as the total victory of myth over philosophy! We remain, more than ever, chained in caves, magnetized by shadows of our own making.

If the Platonic lesson that we are mimetic creatures is true, and I think it is, the mythmaker always has a certain advantage over the philosopher, for myths speak to people's mimetic faculties. And yet, as you have also stressed, this does not mean that myth, just like mimesis, cannot be resisted, reframed, and retold, perhaps using the very tools of myth—not to escape from the cave into an ideal world, but to create alternative immanent worlds. This second move seems to me intimately connected to a less visible, but not less fundamental dimension of myth that concerns its power of affection, formation, and transformation.

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Stories have a formative power, and if we hear them in childhood, they will remain constitutive of who we are. Once again this is both good and bad news. Myth generates a feeling of belonging, unity, and transcendental reassurance that ties us to a destiny bigger than ours—often the destiny of a community, a nation, a chosen people protected by a tribal God. To a certain degree, this need for a narrative to give national unity to a people is understandable. It speaks to deeply-seated human needs to belong to an identity larger than oneself and remains necessary to provide a certain stability to one's worldview. However, such national myths often trigger the ethnocentric feeling that our nation is greater than the others, our God a better god, that our people are chosen people, and so on.

This territorial side of myth was of course powerfully exploited by fascist and Nazi regimes. I mentioned Rosenberg's *The Myth of the 20th Century*, which is not a popular book, so I was surprised that it had sold more than a million copies by 1945. It relies on the same anti-Semitic, racist ideology central to *Mein Kampf*. Rosenberg also adds an emphasis on Nordic mythology, which he considers necessary to set up a difference between racial types. The German *Volk*, he

says, was the product of a certain “blood and soil,” *Blut und Boden*, and so it’s rooted in *nature*.

But in a contradiction that doesn’t trouble the myth-maker, he also adds that so-called superior races need to be rooted in an Aryan mythology, and thus in a specific *culture*. It’s as if Rosenberg sensed that blood alone is not sufficient to create national unity. Since blood purity is a fiction, all fascist ideologues need myths too to give form to a people. The horrors generated in the name of this myth in Germany were unprecedented, but unfortunately there is nothing exceptional in these hypernationalist, ethnocentric, and racist feelings. To different degrees, we find them in all nations; they are particularly appealing in times of loss of national identity and economic crisis—for innocent victims can be blamed for the failure of mythic dreams. If these fascist tendencies are easy to denounce in theory (especially in other nations), their affective power is more difficult to acknowledge, let alone eradicate in practice (especially in our nation).

That said, there are good and bad fictions, and so myths can have the very opposite effect as well. They have the

affective power to open up new worlds, generate encounters with different cultures, trigger the desire to travel to other territories rather than protect one's own territory.

Since myth operates on a personal level, let me briefly switch to a confessional mode. I remember discovering early on in my life the power of myth via a PBS interview between Bill Moyers and the mythologist Joseph Campbell in the 1990s. It was titled *The Power of Myth* (as I say in the introduction, childhood impressions can be lasting). I was a teenager growing up in a remote village in the Italian-speaking side of the Alps and I was captivated by this American scholar of myth who was also a brilliant storyteller. His motif was the one of the hero's journey and the process of maturation that ensues from crossing a threshold and entering a different world where tests and trials need to be confronted for maturation to ensue. Viewers of *Star Wars*, or any other adventure, should be familiar with the journey.

Campbell's archetypal approach to myth might be a bit outdated today, but his lesson that myths should not be taken literally but interpreted for their symbolic potential, educative power, and spiritual insights that belong to

specific cultures yet also speak across one's tribal belonging or creed is a lesson I still find valid. It also calls parents' and teachers' attention to the fact that the stories we read in childhood do not simply represent fictional narratives; they make real, lasting impressions on who we are, or aspire to become.

As a parent of two small children now, I also find myself gravitating back toward myths, old and new. They seem to provide some signposts in a fast-changing world dominated by virtual spectacles that might not always be particularly edifying. By reading them through my children's eyes, I learned to better appreciate Aesop's *Fables*, for instance. Contrary to what I thought, they do not provide a moral lesson to be applied to life in general. Instead, they show how ethical values emerge from specific, true to life, and typical social situations that often pit a dominant and powerful figure against a subaltern, disempowered, yet wiser counterpart—those animals, with their flaws and virtues, caught in human, all too human predicaments are still very much our contemporaries and can teach us a few lessons about political virtues.

Closer to us, I also found strikingly contemporary values in founding short stories like Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," for instance, which promotes the importance of adventure, the rediscovery of our mythic past, and the centrality of storytelling in providing a sense of direction during periods of historical transition in a culture perhaps excessively concerned with material values; or in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, an adventure book that, not unlike myth, celebrates a world of playful transformation over one of stability; or, my children's favorite right now, Homer's *Odyssey*, a founding myth that illustrates not one but many figures, and is thus not ideal in Plato's sense. If it's at times problematic in its assumptions, especially with respect to gender, it also stresses the importance of resilience, hospitality, and the immanent vitality of diplomatic speeches over mere violence in order to survive a perilous journey back home—wherever home may be.

My sense, then, is that all these different myths and many others that have withstood the test of time are part of a legacy we can draw from, as parents, teachers, and citizens. They have something to teach future generations confronted with

mythic distinctions between good and evil, us and them. If these oppositions play in favor of new fascist leaders, they no longer hold in a world of transformation characteristic of the Anthropocene. And since transformation, encounters, and processes of becoming that involve human and nonhuman others have been central components of myth from time immemorial, I also like to think that dominant territorial myths can be countered by alternative mythic traditions. Anyway, as long as my children enjoy the stories, I'll keep reading.

Tyranny, Strikes, Resistance

NL: We have been joining forces in the past years to confront challenging shadows on the horizon. To establish another genealogical bridge with other thinkers who are currently countering the rise of new fascist movements, I would like you to comment on a recent book that, in many ways, resonates with our discussion: Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017). In this

little but illuminating book, Snyder, who is an American historian specialized in the history of the Holocaust, shares the presupposition with which we started: namely, that it's necessary to learn from the strategies mobilized by fascist and Nazi leaders and ideologues in the 1930s and '40s in order to steer contemporary constituencies away from the political reenactment of those horrifying possibilities.

To that end, Snyder offers a series of practical, action-oriented suggestions that structure the book and help us counter the rise of fascism, suggestions like "Do Not Obey in Advance," "Defend Institutions," or "Believe in Truth." He offers twenty of them, but I would like to zoom in on Lesson 8, titled "Stand Out," for it seems in line with a principle necessary to develop what you call "politics of swarming" and counters forces that I call "mimetic crowds." In favor of standing out from the crowd, Snyder writes: "Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parks. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken and others will follow." There is a double movement at play in this passage

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that retraces, from the angle of mimesis, a double-take on rhetoric and myth we share, in the sense that anti-mimetic movements (not following along) can generate alternative models (or examples) on which the politics of swarming hinges that, in turn, have the potential to trigger mimetic counter-movements (others will follow). Can you comment on this lesson? And what additional lessons emerged from your genealogy of fascism that we could add to the list?

BC: I read Snyder's book last winter, maybe in January, as I was thinking about using it in the seminar on Fascism. We didn't end up using it—there is the problem that you have forty books on the list and you end up using only ten—but I was impressed with Snyder's book for several reasons, the most important being its timeliness and its courageousness. He says: We are in trouble; things are going in the wrong direction; don't think this is just a little blip on the horizon that will automatically disappear—and I agree with him on that.

I also liked the way the book is organized around twenty recipes of response. The one that you call attention to, "do

not obey in advance,” that is, resist tacitly going along to get along. I think of that as congruent with the themes of role experimentations mentioned earlier. Role experiments create room within the things that you regularly do, like work, raising kids, attending church, relating to neighbors, writing, retirement investments, teaching, etc. You then take a step here, a step there, outside settled expectations, because there is often room to do things that exceed merely going along to get along. They make a difference in a cumulative effect, yes. But the most important effect is the way they help to recode our tacit presumptions and orientations to collective action. Even small things.

In this spirit, I recently used Facebook to write an open letter to Donald Trump after he withdrew from the Paris Accord. Making such a minor public statement can coalesce with innumerable others doing similar things. People shared it; it received a broader hearing; even some trolls ridiculed it. It would not be easy to take back. The accumulation of such minor actions counters the scary drive to allow Trumpism to become normalized. Charles Blow, the *New York Times* columnist, also keeps us focused on that issue.

I like several things about Snyder's book, but I think—maybe I am wrong, for I might not have read it carefully enough—that it is kind of limited to what you and I, as individuals and small groups, can do. Today we need to join these small acts to the larger politics of swarming, out of which new cross-regional citizen assemblages grow. Such assemblages themselves, in the ways they coalesce and operate horizontally, expose fallacies in the Fascist leadership principle. Protests at town meetings, for instance, fit Snyder's theme, I am sure.

But let's suppose, as could well happen, that the Antarctic glacier starts melting at such a rapid rate we see how its consequences are going to be extremely severe over a short period of time. (The computer models are usually three to five years behind what actually happens on the ice, ground, and atmosphere.) Constituencies in several regions could now mobilize around this event to organize general strikes, putting pressure on states and corporations from inside and outside at the same time. So, the main way I would supplement Snyder is to explore the horizontal mobilization of larger assemblages, to speak to the urgency

of time during a period when dominant states so far resist doing enough.

Further, from my point of view, electoral politics poses severe problems; but there is also a dilemma of electoral politics that must be engaged honestly. Electoral victories can be stymied by many forces. But you must not use that fact as a reason to desist. For, as some of us have argued on the blog *The Contemporary Condition* for several years, if and when the right wing gains control of all branches of government, you run the severe risk of a Fascist takeover. So, participate in elections and act on other fronts as well. Indeed, in the United States the evangelical/capitalist resonance machine has acted in its way on multiple fronts simultaneously for decades. The Right believes in its version of the politics of swarming.

The way to respond to the dilemma of electoral politics is to expand beyond it but not to eliminate it as one site of activity. For, again, if the right wing controls the courts, the presidency, both houses of Congress, the intelligence agencies, and a lot of state legislators, they can generate cumulative effects that will be very difficult to reverse.

Aspirational Fascists, for instance, use such victories to suppress minority voting. So, multiple modes and registers of politics. I wouldn't be surprised if Snyder and I agree on that.

NL: I think you're right. In Snyder's longer genealogy of fascism and Nazism, *Black Earth*, of which the little book is in many ways a distillation, he ends with a chapter titled "Our World," which situates fascist politics in the broader context of climate change and collective catastrophes along the lines you also suggested in *Facing the Planetary*. The more voices promoting pluralist assemblages contra the nihilism of fascist crowds, the better!

Anti-Fascism

NL: Speaking of little books, then, I hear you are yourself working on a new short book dealing with some of the issues we have been discussing, which is provisionally titled *Aspirational Fascism*. To conclude, and amplify anti-fascist diagnostics could you briefly delineate its general content,

scope, and some of the main lessons you hope will be retained?

BC: This will be a short, quickly executed book, a pamphlet, that could come out within a year. It's divided into three chapters, and it will probably be around one hundred pages. The first chapter reviews similarities and differences between Hitler's rhetoric and crowd management and those of Donald Trump. It also attends to how the pluralizing Left has too often ignored the real grievances of the white working class, helping inadvertently to set it up for a Trump takeover. The second chapter explores how a set of severe bodily drills and disciplines in pre-Nazi Germany helped to create men particularly attuned to Hitler's rhetoric in the wake of the loss of World War I and the Great Depression. You and I are having this conversation today in Weimar, a sweet, lovely, artistic town. Hitler, I am told, gave over twenty speeches here, in the central *platz*, to assembled throngs.

So, in the second chapter I attend to how coarse rhetorical strategies, severe bodily practices, and extreme events work back and forth on each other. That chapter is indebted

to a book by Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (1987, 2 vols.); it helps me to attend to how specific bodily disciplines and drills attune people to particular rhetorical practices and insulate them from others. The themes Theweleit pursues are then carried into the United States of today as we explore how the neglect of real white working-class grievances, the military training and job disciplines many in that class face, and the interminable Trump campaign work back and forth upon one another. That is why I never understate the need to attend to our own bodily disciplines, habits, and role practices.

The third chapter is designed to show how what I call multifaceted pluralism is both good in itself and generates the best mode of resistance to Fascist movements. *Multifaceted* means that it supports generous, responsive modes of affective communications and bodily interrelations; it also means that the new pluralism treats the white working class as one of the minorities to nourish, even as we also oppose the ugly things a portion of it does. That support must first include folding egalitarian projects into those noble drives to pluralization that have been in play; it must also include

taking radical action to respond to the Anthropocene before it generates so much ocean acidification, expansive drought, ocean rising, and increasing temperatures that the resulting wars and refugee pressures will provide even more happy hunting grounds for aspirational Fascism.

The pluralizing Left must come to terms immediately with the need to ameliorate class inequality in job conditions, retirement security, and workplace authority. That deserves as much attention as the politics of pluralization itself. I pursue a model of egalitarian pluralism, then, that challenges both liberal individualism and the image of a smooth communist future, seeing both to be insufficient to counter the twin dangers of Fascism and the Anthropocene today. There are no smooth ideals to pursue on this rocky planet. But there may be ways to enhance our attachment to a planet that exceeds the contending adventures of mastery that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Those are the three parts of the book. I realize, for sure, that the project makes for heavy lifting, that it will be difficult to convince some pluralists to push an egalitarian agenda and some segments of the working class to take the

Anthropocene seriously. But the two projects are interrelated and imperative, and it is possible that advances on the first front could loosen more people up to accept action on the second.

Against the dangers of Fascism, I do not project either a communitarian ideal or a single-minded liberalism concentrated on the reflective register of public deliberation. A multifaceted democracy combines together a diversity of voices, a broad spectrum ethos that speaks on several registers of cultural life, economic egalitarianism, a periodic politics to bring new diversities into being, and a readiness by those who appreciate a multifaceted culture to create a militant pluralist assemblage from time to time to fight against aspirational Fascism when it raises its ugly head. I think that you have participated in a tradition in which the search for community is matched by the disavowal of its closure. Could you say more about your current thinking on this matter? It seems to be a timely question today.

NL: Yes, I share this pluralist view and I'm equally skeptical of communitarian ideals for the mimetic reasons we discussed

in relation to both myth and mimesis. The formation of a community runs the risk of relying on myths that promote a type of nationalist, organic, and tribal closure we have witnessed in the 1920s and 1930s and is currently reemerging in the present period, both in Europe and in the United States. In a sense, while I'm far from opposed to elective communities of few individuals in practice, it's precisely this skepticism concerning the theoretical origins of fin de siècle discourses of community that encouraged me to return to this concept from a genealogical perspective that is haunted by the phantom of fascist communities.

The link between mimesis and community was present in figures like Sigmund Freud, for instance, who posited the problematic of identification at the heart of a mythic founding murder. You equally find it at work in René Girard, who establishes a connection between sacrifice, violence, and communal formations predicated on scapegoating mechanisms. If identification plays a role in the election of a new fascist leader, scapegoating continues to be at play today, especially against racial, gendered, and religious minorities. Even earlier, you find the concept of community at work in

sociologists like Ferdinand Tönnies, who set up an opposition between a mechanical, atomistic modern society (or *Gesellschaft*) and a pre-industrial conception of an organic community (or *Gemeinschaft*).

But as your question suggests, this is not what most scholars have primarily in mind when they speak of community these days. Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, the focus has progressively shifted from organic communities that advocated mimetic closure to inoperative communities predicated on heterogeneous plurality. Figures like Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, for instance, have been pivotal in generating a renewal of interest in this old concept in order to rethink the ontological foundations of politics beyond the horizon of the two dominant paradigms of community in the twentieth century: namely, communism and fascism. A deconstruction of community launched this concept on the theoretical scene, and especially in literary theory and continental philosophy, it's still a hot topic.

My approach is inscribed in both these modern and postmodern traditions. But rather than stressing the inoperative quality of community, I'm more concerned with

the danger of communal movements that might become quite operative again. In an article [now chapter two of this volume] on community, I thus took a genealogical step back to a figure who is not often discussed by contemporary social theorists but who relied on a modern sociological tradition attentive to violent communal movements and, at the same time, provided both Nancy and Blanchot with a theoretical starting point to reframe this concept: namely, Georges Bataille.

I found it important to go back to Bataille's writings of the 1930s because as he first started thinking about community, he explicitly did so in the context of the rise of fascist movements. It also seemed crucial to stress that the Bataillean concept of community cannot be peeled off from what he called "the psychological structure of fascism" in order to call attention to the fact that community is a concept that is fundamentally ambivalent and can thus be put to both fascist and revolutionary use. Nancy is fully aware of this ambivalence. But more recent theorists have paid less attention to the genealogical affiliation between community and fascism.

The positive aura that surrounds postmodern accounts of linguistic communities led me to focus on its darker affective and historical side. My main goal was thus not to promote community as a concept that should necessarily be recuperated politically today. Bataille was nonetheless particularly useful for diagnosing the heterogeneous movements of “attraction and repulsion” that fascist leaders who are “totally other” can generate in the crowd of followers. He provided a historical and theoretical framework to think critically about the contemporary resurgence of new fascist leaders who are currently channeling affective forces we still need to come to terms with. Looking back to the rise of European fascism seemed a way to begin to recognize that if not fascism itself, the mimetic drive toward a new form of fascism I tried to outline might still be secretly at play in rising communal movements. I grouped them under the rubric of the “mimetic community” to call attention to the danger of fusional sameness.

That said, I also find that, at the micro-level, Bataille’s concept of “elective community” resonates with your definition of a pluralist assemblage or swarm that is open to

heterogeneous connections. There might be productive, inclusive, and nonviolent modes of resistance to fascism in joining these traditions, since positive, life-affirmative forms of mimesis are central to both. The ambivalence we spoke of in relation to myth and mimesis might be equally operative in relation to community. This is also true in practice. Once people assemble, it's always difficult to predict what the outcome will be. As Bataille, echoing Durkheim, used to say, there is a force in the group that is more than the sum of its parts. Violence and the erasure of differences is always a danger, as Girard and Bataille remind us. Still, there is also an opportunity for nonviolent resistance to fascism in pluralist assemblages, as you and Judith Butler invite us to consider. In any case, the Janus-faced properties of mimesis always lead me to try to look both ways, which, I like to think, is another heterogeneous connection between our anti-fascist perspectives.

To conclude on an affirmative note, let me stress the importance of the general strike that you call an "improbable necessity." In the wake of the cumulative scandalous political actions and mimetic reactions that do not simply

repeat European fascism but entangle new fascist power with nonhuman planetary forces in such catastrophic ways, I'm even tempted to think, or hope, that a vital improbability will, in the near future, turn into an emerging, perhaps even probable possibility.