

COUNTERSTRAT

What time is it?

In her book “Emergent Strategy”, the movement facilitator adrienne maree brown recounts a formative exchange she had with her friend and mentor Grace Lee Boggs. Lee Boggs, at that time nearly 100 years old, was a US-American labour organizer, communist philosopher, translator of Marx, and fervent ecological thinker. In the regular gatherings of friends and activists in her house, one of the core questions Lee Boggs posed to her audience was “What time is it on the clock of the World?”. adrienne maree brown reflects on her own teaching and writing in the context of the Movement for Black Lives in the light of this question, summing it up in this answer: “Time to close the gap between vision and practice. Time for those of us who seek justice and liberation to be just and liberated, to be of this place fully.”¹

Her answer is the answer from within acting, the only possible answer perhaps that lives up to the real transformative impulse. It seems to reply “Now!” to the question about world-time, but a closer look suggests that it proposes a sophisticated temporality to give that “now” – the only time we ever really have – a revolutionary structure: the imperative to be fully of “this place” folds a future of justice and liberation into the present moment, a present moment figured as a gap between vision and practice. Lee Boggs, with her grandiose assumption of a unified clock of the World, embeds this answer in a dialectical aspiration, the task to read the moment before grasping it.

Authoritarianism as defence of phantom possession

Our moment, no doubt, is one of a rising authoritarian tide. It is a moment in which a gnawing reactionary malcontent with the successes of decolonial struggles of the mid-20th century and the cultural revolution of ’68 merges with a backlash freshly whipped-up by contemporary progressive politics – in the US especially the mass mobilization around Black Lives Matter.

This backlash displays a peculiar temporality itself. It is nearly the opposite to what brown envisions: not future liberation, but past dominion folded into the gaps of the present. Even when it is so clearly on the advance, authoritarianism mobilizes from a defensive position. Something is always attacked or stolen, but it is never (at least for the right-wing) something material. Instead, it is the nation, the women, the embryos, the election, past glory, and present freedom. When authoritarianism seeks to restore domains of lifelessness, it does not call this “authority”. It calls it “freedom”. And freedom, in this context, is a proud, individual possession. “[E]stablishing the spacetime of possession

STRATEGIES FOR LIFE

Eva von Redecker

and self-possession in ownership,” according to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, is the fundamental operation of white subjectivity. This stance is predicated on violence and bound to tip into defensive frenzy: “every step they take is a standing of ground, a stomping of the world out of earthly existence and into racial capitalist human being. It grows more pronounced the more it is threatened, consumed by its own feedback loop, and it produces sharper and sharper subject reactions in the face of this threat.”²

Authoritarianism in the present day, to a large extent, articulates “sharper and sharper subject reactions”. The reactions themselves follow a peculiar logic, one that I propose to analyze as defence of *phantom possession*. The *phantom* in phantom possession should be read in analogy with phantom pain. Right-wing entitlement operates in an empty place, it is a residual claim following amputation: ownership without object. That, indeed, makes for a very unstable status.

This is, however, not a status appearing late in the history of liberalism, whereby once all formerly oppressed groups are accorded self-ownership and a few privileged losers cannot quite get used to that. Authoritarian accumulation, the acquisition of entitlement over *othered* lives, is deeply embedded in liberal capitalism. It is, in fact, the flipside of liberalism’s central achievement: the free, self-owning individual. Marxist critics have long since pointed out that owning nothing but yourself is not a very tenable situation to be in. However, if we pay more attention to what exactly “owning” means, it becomes clear that it functions as a powerful bribe for some to invest in the ideology of ownership – even in the absence of actual riches. Self-ownership, the trophy of emancipation from feudal serfdom, enslavement, and patriarchal rule alike, is embedded in a specific genealogy of property, that of modern dominion. Ownership here denotes not just some sort of belonging. As a legal and economic practice, ownership in the West is defined as an absolute entitlement. This form of property ownership, enforced through colonization and enclosures, grants full sovereignty, the right to dispose at will over a bounded object. Dominion is limited through the property of others, but not by the object in question. Thus, being owned renders an object abusable, destructible, and killable.

This is why self-ownership is never enough. An embodied, partly self-conscious existence does not warrant the experience of total dominion. Though capable of suicide, we do not survive the test-case of self-destruction. If the aspiration is for the freedom of full ownership, modern subjects require an outer domain to exercise their will in: a certain “ground” in the words of Moten and Harney, as the basis for that “stomping of the world out of earthly existence and into racial capitalist human being.” In the most brutal institutions of modern domination, enslavement, marriage under coverture, forced labour, and conscription, the lives of some groups were partly – near-fully in chattel slavery – propertized and appropriated by other subjects. Those other, freer subjects

gained a domain supplementing self-ownership, a domain within which abuse was licensed: commodified bodies, objectified care and sexuality, extracted labour, defensive force. Freedom, white freedom, is premised on the mandate over a domain of death-dealing. With living, even self-conscious objects, of course, the instability of ownership is perpetuated. The full control over such propertized domains is forever imperfect, or fragile. But it is an outwardly aggressive fragility. As Sun Yung Shin writes in a piece on “white fragility”: “Glass is fragile. It’s actually a very slow liquid, but it breaks, and it breaks into sharp pieces, and it cuts flesh, and it can kill a person”.³

Propertized violence, at times amounting to destruction, serves to perform and reinscribe the differentiation between the free, owning subject and the objectified owned object. The political form that validates the aspiration to defend phantom possession is authoritarianism. It often materializes the defence institutionally, for instance as border fortification, the police force, the prison system, and punitive austerity policies. If, either individually or with the help of these arrangements, the “sharper and sharper subject reactions” are pursued all the way towards liquidating their objects, it seems warranted to speak of neo-fascism. From the point of view of fascism, the unwieldy domains of phantom possession do not require husbandry, but hunt. Often, of course, the same group is attacked in both modes – those who resist are seen as thieves of themselves and get punished accordingly. At other times, the modes are split, allowing to make the objectified subjects “innocent” property which is corrupted by another group, just as in the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which (in some of its variants) claims that immigrants are brought in by Jews to replace a white population which does not reproduce sufficiently because women, in turn, are manipulated by feminists and “gender ideologues”.

Neoliberalism and the destruction of future time

Authoritarianism is not just a backlash against emancipation. Its peculiar and frightening projection of past dominion onto the political body of today is in line with the long history of violence that underwrites the colonial-capitalist conquest of the globe. Yet when we ask about our specific moment in world history, we can better situate authoritarianism’s selective fixation on domains of unchecked dominion. It is the anthropocene, the time shaped by men self-reproducing through plantation-agriculture and fossil capitalism. Our era is marked by an unprecedented generalization of loss. One way to describe the neoliberal present is as a loss of the world – not in pieces, but as future time. Neoliberalism as financialized capitalism codifies future life as destructible property and hence potential commodity. Future labour time is propertized and dispossessed by debt, future political time by data-mediated predictability. Neoliberalism is also the continuation of fossil capitalism in full knowledge of its ecocidal effects. Extractivism has always destroyed futures alongside the enormous amount of past ecological time stored in what it propertized as resources. In its current continuation, it destroys the very basis of planetary life.

Unlike what some sections of the ecological movement like to think, climate warming and mass extinction are not a potential apocalyptic moment located in the future, something we might still avert through heightened virtue. The ecological catastrophe is a loss of

time which has already happened by extracting the past time safely stored in resources, most of all fossil fuels, but also phosphate fertilizer and rare metals, and by discarding them – in morphed, toxic form – back into the future.

The time that is broken by this colonial-capitalist mode of human reproduction is not the modern fiction of linear, progressive time. That fiction, rather, served to avert the gaze, of the profiteers at least, from all the devastation caused by extractivism to future returns. Ecological time is neither linear nor progressive: ecological time is regenerative. It has the form of tides, myriad interlocking time-spans of self-reproduction. And these tides are already broken in many ways and in many places through propertization and littering. The collapse of eco-systems consists of the desynchronization and devastation of tides. This is what I mean by losing the world as future time.

In some sense, the self-possessive individual has always already lost the world. That is its way of living in it. Its bounded domains of phantom-possession are cut out of a shared world and enclose freedom as sovereignty, the privileged form of solitary confinement. In its protracted hold over material objects, and objectified subjects, the possessive individual seals that loss as literal, and irrevocable, world-historical process. Past extractivism has already implied the dispossession of some groups of their ancestral lands and their future life time. Continued extraction is now happening in full knowledge of the destruction of the shared conditions of life for all. Maybe, like in neo-fascism, what is “new” in neoliberal capitalism, apart from innovative algorithmic and legal tools to contract and invert time, is just that we know that it is happening.

And yet we lack the power to stop it from happening. That circumstances lend a certain rationality to the authoritarian affirmation of death-dealing. If it were written on the clock that the violence could not stop, then it makes sense to grab whatever it is possible to get hold of, to viciously defend all entitlements and – vis-à-vis a future that might never happen – at least to secure one’s share in the joy of destruction. Neoliberal rationality is marked not by the performance principle, but by the possessive principle. Instead of the disciplinary incentive to sacrifice the subject’s present moment for future gains, there is the aggressive impulse to sacrifice the object’s future existence for a demonstration of sovereignty, right now.

Revolution for life

Authoritarianism is a hollow, and yet deadly, attempt to perpetuate past violence. This violence is not accidental, it is part and parcel of capitalist accumulation. The violence is “part” of capitalist accumulation, because only as disposable property can parts of the natural world – including labouring bodies – be rendered exploitable. And it is “parcel” of capitalist accumulation because phantom possession provides a potent ideological compensation for the losses suffered in market societies.

Anti-authoritarianism, as a radical political force, opposes not just authoritarianism. It opposes the hold of dominion over life. The mobilizing themes in anti-authoritarianism are multi-faceted. We see struggles around race, migration, gender, reproductive freedom. Struggles against debt and land-grabbing and gentrification. Organized as well as wild-cat strikes. Occupations protesting the extraction of natural resources, especially fossil fuels, and civil disobedience blocking destructive infrastructure projects. New forms of democratic self-organization, and attempts to resist the ongoing militarization of societies

that spend most of their budgets on arms capable of contracting the anthropocentric work of world-destruction to one single moment of button-pushing. In all those instances, precious domains of life are wrested from profitable exhaustion and from control by those who regard them as phantom possession, fit for littering or obliteration. We also see seemingly passive yet extremely potent gestures of exodus, gestures that counter the generalized exhaustion not with possessive rage, but with an insistence on pause and regeneration. Adherents of the *tangping* or lying flat movement in China refuse to make the effort of inclusion into the standard possessive practices of modern societies – career, house-ownership, and family. This echoes the “Great Resignation” noted in North America and Western Europe, where unprecedented numbers of workers quit their jobs two years into the Covid-19 pandemic.

A labour politics that can identify class-issues in all depletion and exhaustion of regenerative time might be able to claim these “passive strikes” for a socialist feminist agenda. In fighting the continued and renewed dominion, resistance can liberate lives not just from subjugation, but also from isolation – this is celebrated where the gap between vision and practice is indeed closed, as in the mass mobilization achieved by Black Lives Matter and the Latin American Feminist movement. Counter-authoritarian politics, according to one of its most effective practitioners consists in a very particular type of assembly. Verónica Gago describes the assemblies of Argentinian feminists as an exercise in reappropriating time. They are kitchens (her word) for creating political time, the time of new beginning. In the actual practice of the feminist strike, with its focus on reproductive labour, the possibility of a new planetary time articulates itself: the time where properitized reproductive labour is paused, and depropertized regenerative tides might set in. Labour as we know it abolished, yet reproductive activity universalized. Freedom, then, could be detached from the possessive individual. It might mean that we can share our time without losing or looting it, and learn to exchange softer and softer subject reactions. In every moment where authoritarianism’s prolongation of past dominion is blocked, the possibility of a different life articulates itself: one in which we might have all the time in the world. No more “stomping of the world out of earthly existence and into racial capitalist human being” – but rather being “of this place fully”.

Endnotes

- 1 adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy. Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017, p. 168.
- 2 Stafno Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete*, Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2021, p. 17.
- 3 Sun Yung Shin, "It's not White Fragility, it's White Flammability", 22 June 2020, medium.com/afrosapiophile/its-not-white-fragility-it-s-white-flammability-1b1b5f520e1c