

# Table of Contents

Bombs and Bytes . . . . . 1



# Bombs and Bytes

By Anustup Basu

Can the intense economy of information short-circuit knowledge? Anustup Basu follows Gilles Deleuze in analysing fascism as a hijacking of linguistic potential. Fascism, he argues, realises itself through a technology of habituation parasitic on our willingness to be informed – a biopolitical sovereignty that percolates individuals and communities at the micro-level. No longer is world-order decreed by the word of the sovereign, but by an inhuman sovereign will constituted on the plane of information

## INTRODUCTION

During the publicity drive towards building up domestic and international support for the 2003 war on Iraq, no functionary of the United States government actually made a public statement to the effect that Saddam Hussein had an active part to play in the devastation of September 11, 2001.

Nevertheless, it was subsequently noted in the opinion polls that an alarming number of American people believed that the Iraqi despot was involved in the conspiracy and its execution. Hence the two propositions – Saddam the evil one, and 9/11, the horrible crime – seem to be associated in a demographic intelligence without having any narrative obligation to each other; that is, without being part of the same ‘story’. The outcome, it seems, was achieved by a mathematical chain of chance, by which two disparate postulates, in being publicised with adequate proximity, frequency, and density, gravitate towards each other in an inhuman plane of massified thought. They, in other words, are bits and bytes of newspeak which have come to share what I will call an ‘informatic’ affinity with each other, without being organically conjoined by constitutive knowledge. The formation of the latter entity is of course something we are prone to consider a primary task of the philosophical human subject, who is also the modern citizen with rights and responsibilities. Attaining knowledge by reading the world is how we are supposed to self-consciously exercise reason, form views, and partake in an enlightened project of democratic consensus and legislation. Hence, insofar as these much hallowed protocols of liberal democracy are concerned, this 9/11 opinion poll poses some disconcerting questions:

1. How does one account for the fact that what is, at face value, the most sophisticated technological assemblage for worldly communication and dissemination of ‘truth’, should sublimate what, in Kantian terms, must be called an unscientific belief or dogma?
2. To be mediatised literally means to lose one’s rights. Hence, what happens to the idea of government by the people and for the people if the ‘false’ is produced as a third relation which is not the synthetic union of two ideas in the conscious mind of the citizen or the general intellect of the organic community, but is a statistical coming together of variables?

[IMAGE]

3. If the ‘false’ is merely a moment in an overall control and management of an information environment and its electronic herd, that is, if it is simply a matter of manipulated distribution and saturation of facts in order to get a desired feedback in terms of public perception, what consequences does that have in terms of human politics? How is the cynical intelligence of power that calls this into being to be configured?

4. Lastly, this distillation of the false as ‘informatic’ perception requires money. In other words, it requires a tremendous amount of wealth in order to not only bring the variables Saddam Hussein and 9/11 into a state of associative frequency, but also to minimise and regulate the appearance of other

variables from appearing in the scenario. For instance, in this case, to reduce, for the time being, the frequency of the proper name Osama. Hence, the obvious question – what is the role of money in the purportedly post-modern, increasingly technologised, sphere of communicative action?

These are not new questions. They are a continuation of what a long line of western thinkers, from Antonio Gramsci to Giorgio Agamben, have been asking from various philosophical standpoints: how was it that modern technologies of reproduction of the art work and electrification of the public sphere should produce European fascism as one of its first, grotesque spectacles? In a way, this anxious query seems to resonate, in a particular context, the old Pascalian question posed at the very gestative period of a godless modern world: how does one protect the interests of abstract justice from the real, material interests of power in the world?

[IMAGE]

#### WHAT IS INFORMATION

The paradox, qua modern publicity and communication, as it is expressed in Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay, can be outlined as follows: from the perspective of the enlightenment humanist one could say that mechanised mass culture in the 20th century was supposed to 'de-auratise' the work of art and make it more democratically available; but what Benjamin notices in his time is a disturbing incursion of aesthetics into politics, rather than the politicisation of art that could have been possible. This, for him, constitutes a 'violation' of the technologies of mass culture, by which the 'Führer cult' produces its ritual values of aestheticising war and destruction. Benjamin formulates the problem as belonging to a society not yet 'mature' enough to 'incorporate technology as its organ'. In Benjamin's essay, 'The Storyteller', we can see this problem being articulated as a situation in which forms of storytelling (which are at once educative and exemplary to the citizen for his cosmopolitan education, and also amenable to his freedom of critical interpretation and judgement) are replaced by a new form of communication which he calls information. The first characteristic of information is its erasure of distance – its near-at-hand-ness grants information the 'readiest hearing' and makes it appear 'understandable in itself'. The dissemination and reception of information is thus predicated on the production of the event as 'local', as 'already being shot through with explanation.' For the conscious subject, this also entails the disappearance of a temporal interval required for movement within the faculties, from cognition to understanding and then finally to knowledge. Information is that which is accompanied by the entropic violence brought about by a supersession of the commonplace, and a reduction of language into clichés. It is in the ruins of a constitutive or legislative language that the instantaneous circuit of the commonsensical comes into being. In this case therefore, the establishment of Saddam's crimes does not remain a matter of old jurisprudence, following normative rules of argumentation, proof, and deduction; it becomes an absolute movement of the commonsensical as the 'already explained'.

[IMAGE]

#### WHAT IS FASCISM?

Fascism is the common name we accord to totalitarian power. However, we often do it irresponsibly or ahistorically, categorically identifying the concept with limited, sociologicistic understandings of the German or Italian scenarios around the great wars, or confining it to grotesque figurations of human agency, like that of Mussolini or Hitler. If the concept is to have any critical valence whatsoever in our global, neoliberal occasion, it needs to be unpacked and re-articulated before we begin to transpose it here and there. Gilles Deleuze has re-articulated Benjamin's argument by transposing it from its organicist parabasis into a sub-human, molecular-pragmatic one. According to Deleuze, the discourses of fascism, as dominant myths in our time, establish themselves by an imperial-linguistic takeover of a

whole social body of expressive potentialities. There are different forms of life and expressive energies in any situation of the historical which are capable of generating multiple instances of thought, imaginative actions, and wills to art. Fascism destroys such pre-signifying and pre-linguistic energies of the world, extinguishes pluralities, and replaces them with a monologue of power that saturates space with, and only with, the immanent will of the dictator. This is the moment in which the language system sponsored by the sovereign is at its most violent; it seeks to efface historical memory by denying its constitutive or legislative relation with non-linguistic social energies; it casts itself and its unilateral doctrine as absolute and natural. For Deleuze, this is a psychomechanical production of social reality more than an organicity of community torn asunder by human alienation and the incursion of reactionary ideologies, false consciousnesses, and agents. Not that the latter do not exist, or are unimportant components in this matter, but that this technology of power cannot be simply seen as a neutral arrangement of tools misused by evil ones. The figure of the dictator is therefore not that of the aberrant individual madman, but a psychological automaton that becomes insidiously present in all, in the technology of massification itself. The images and objects that mass hallucination, somnambulism, and trance produce are attributes of this immanent will to power.[1] The hypnotic, fascinating drive of fascism is thus seen to paradoxically operate below the radar of a moral and voluntaristic consciousness of the human subject; fascism becomes a political reality when knowledge based exchanges between entities of intelligence give way to a technologism of informatics.

Thinking, knowledge, or communicability (which is different from this or that technologism of communication) becomes foreclosed in such an order of power because one cannot really say anything that the social habit does not designate as something already thought of and pre-judged by the dictator. The publicity of fascism is one where friend and foe alike are seen to be engaged in tauto-talk, repeating what the dictator has already said or warned about. Benjamin calls this an eclipse of the order of cosmological mystery and secular miracles that the European humanist sciences of self and nature, and an enlightened novelisation of the arts sought to delineate and solve. There can be neither secrets in fascism, nor anything unknown. Conspiracies in that sense can only be manifestations of what is already foretold and waiting to be confessed. The SS can of course procure and store 'classified information', but it can never say anything that the Führer does not know better. Information therefore becomes an incessant and emphatic localisation of the global will of the dictator; in its seriality and movement, it can only keep repeating, illustrating, and reporting the self-evident truth of the dictatorial monologue.[2] For Deleuze, it is in this immanence of dictatorial will that Hitler becomes information itself. Also, it is precisely because of this that one cannot wage a battle against Hitlerism by embarking on a battle of truth and falsehood without questioning, and taking for granted, the very parabasis of information and its social relations of production. 'No information, whatever it might be, is sufficient to defeat Hitler'.

Hence, like any other individual, Adolf the Aryan anti-semitic does not exhaust the figure of Hitler. Informatics has not ceased after the death of Adolf and his propaganda machine, or the passing away of the particular discourse of the Adolphic oracle and its immediate historical context. As a figural diagram, as a special shorthand for a particular technology of power, Hitler subsequently must have only become stronger, that is, if indeed we are to still account for him as an immanent will to information that invests modern societies. But how can one conceptualise him without the formalist baggage, in other words, without the grotesque, arborescent institutions of repression, like the secret police or the concentration camps, which constitute a historicist definition of fascism? If one were to put the question differently, that is, occasion it in terms of a present global order of neo-liberalism, marked by American style individualism, consumer choices, democracy, and free markets that supposedly come to us after the agonistic struggles of liberation in the modern era are already settled, how can one enfigure the dead and buried tyrant in our midst in such an 'untimely' manner? How is Hitler possible in a liberal constitution? The question is a complicated one, because if we go back to the example we began our essay with, we will see that it actually satisfies the conditions of democratic

accountability in terms of the human lie (the President never said this). Besides, it is also not the result of the state, as collective capitalist, monopolising the public sphere for propaganda purposes.

Perhaps one has to begin by not trying to enfigure Hitler in the contours of the human, as the irrational apex of the suicidal state, or the pathological Goebbelsian liar who perverted the tools of human communication into mass propaganda machines. Hitler in that sense, would not simply be the mediocre and grotesque madman who uses or abuses technology. He would still be a proper name for technologism itself, but in his latest neoliberal incarnation, he would not be one who simply imprisons the human in enclosed spaces like the death camp or exercises a Faustian domination over him through arborescent structures like the Nazi war/propaganda machine. The 'postmodern' technology of information that we are talking about qua Hitler is neither external nor internal to the human; it is one that is a part of the latter's self-making as well as that of the bio-anthropological environment he lives in. Hitler enters us through a socialisation of life itself, through a technology of habituation that involves our willingness to be informed. It is a diffuse modality of power that perpetually communicates between the inside and the outside, erasing distance between the home and the world. It is in this context that Deleuze's statement, that there is a Hitler inside us, modern abjects of capital, becomes particularly significant. Hitler, as per this formulation, becomes an immanent form of sovereignty that is biopolitically present, percolating individuals and communities in an osmotic manner. Hitler as information, as socially immanent micro-fascisms, is not the addresser who speaks to us while we listen. It was only Adolf who did that in the old days, as the anachronistic caricature of the sovereign who had not yet had his head cut off, but had simply 'lost it'. Information on the other hand, is a metropolitan habit of instant signification; it is an administered social automaton that does not presume a contract between the speaker and the hearer. Since it has no point of origin other than the person informed, the instance of information is thus always one where the self listens to the commonsensical within the self itself, to the point where the two become indistinguishable. Hence, it is neither a lying President who says that Saddam Hussein had something to do with 9/11, nor was such a sublimation the result of unilateral state propaganda in the style of old Adolf or old Stalin. Information in this sense, is indeed a commodified effect – a compact of words and images that is called into being by a non-linear and inhuman intelligence that, amongst other things, produces the human caricature or the icon of the Dictator himself. Informatisation therefore, evades the legal question altogether, by creating a situation where the commonsensical relation between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaida is established not by the word of the sovereign (which can always be produced as evidence and contested in tribunals of justice) but by a manifest immanence of an inhuman sovereign will.

It is only when we understand the cult of information as a social mode of production that we can understand that the problem of mediatisation that we have been talking about does not concern the agency of the individual human at all. To put it blandly, this is not about a conspiracy of a cabal of capitalists and money mongers who manufacture truth in a determined manner. That is, Hitler in an anthropomorphic form who arbitrates what should be said and what should not. We are also not simply talking about representational intentions (what Karl Rove really wanted us to believe) or prejudices about representational capabilities (Americans, as a people, need to mature in order to be able to separate the wheat from the chaff). The effort, on the other hand, is to understand a situation where screen time is money time, where one has to have money, or be sponsored by corporate interests of money, in order to be able to exercise one's right to 'self representation'. The fact that we are mediatised, hence bereft of rights, thus applies only differentially – all of us are Hitlers who command attention, or nigger-infants (the Greek etymology of the word infant, as in in-fans, refers to the being without language) who listen without speaking, but only in differential degrees of hierarchised mediation. Without old Adolf's old dividing walls, everyone can speak, blessed with the freedom of speech. Nominally, everyone can play the game of representations, since everyone has money. It is a different matter altogether, one that has not much to do with the language games of neo-liberal

economics and ideology, that some have a lot more of it than others.

[IMAGE]

## CONCLUSION

A new form of political thinking has to begin by taking into account vast amounts of energies in the world that are antagonistic to capital. This has to be done in terms other than those pertaining to the figure of the human citizen and his charter of rights. It is part of the transcendental stupidity of the cult of information to impart such energies with a catalogue of profiles: the criminal, the delinquent, the madman, the negro, the woman, the child, the African AIDS victim, the poor, the unemployed, the illegal immigrant, or the terrorist. Informatics is about the reporting of the state's pharmacopic action on these bodies, as objects of charity, aid, medication, schooling, or military action. This is why the unspeakable antagonism of living labour in the world is never 'visible' on CNN, Fox or any other corporate geo-televisual schema of metropolitan representation. The latter can discern only the ontology of money and its coalitionary interests – that which perpetually makes screen time money time. Humans, who are merely refugees great and small, can only climb into one or many of the designated profiles of massification. The centralising, perspectivist drive of CNN – as commentary of the world, as a repetitive human psychodrama of development (birth pangs of modernity in the frontier, subjugated and freed consumer desires) – overlooks the energy from the margins of the frame in trying to fit entire crowds into the telegenic face. This is why populations can be categorically divided into simple binaries like 'with us' or 'against us'. Labour and its multiple wills to antagonism (of which various narratives of resistance are only partial but undeniably important molar expressions) are thus un-representable precisely because they lack a 'human' face, or rather the face of the future American consumer. Global antagonisms to capital are at once utopic (as in 'non-place' since the logic of globalisation cannot posit an 'outside') and pantopic; they are, in multiple forms, and in different degrees of sublimation, nowhere and everywhere. It is a complex, political understanding of such matters – like linking insurrectionary violence in different corners of the world to unfair and imbalanced trade practices like agricultural subsidiaries, dumping, and tariff walls by first world countries – that spectacular informatisation removes or minimises from the public sphere. Politics therefore is replaced by symbiotic exchanges between peace and terror, and fear and security; communication likewise, is overwritten by a great monologue of global managerial-elite interests, in which power speaks to itself.

A judgement of the panorama of expressions of this global antagonistic will on the lines of good and bad can take place only as an afterthought; political thinking in our occasion can begin only with the acknowledgement of these energies as eventful, and not subject to essential categories of a state language that has become global. In other words, thinking has to proceed acutely, from an awareness of that very point of danger, where the state fails to 'translate' such affective hostilities into repetitive instances of its own already explained story. It must be remembered that informatics, as a form of social production of consent, is able to attain a normative power precisely because it is accompanied by an epistemic presumption of the end of the historical process altogether.[3] Stories therefore cannot be seen to be teaching us anything new in terms of constitutive politics because in the new world order of a globally rampant neoliberalism, there can be nothing new to narrate at all, in terms of alternative destinies and potentials of the world. They can only be local instances of crisis and management, in a grand chronicle of financialisation of the globe that is already foretold. It is this dire poverty of political language that the neo-liberal state tries to cover up with violence dictated in a situation of 'emergency' that is legitimised by an emotionalist, folksy rhetoric of 'good' and 'evil'. Here I must strongly clarify that I am not registering support for either the undeniably tyrannical Saddam Hussein, or a statist ideology of violence like that of Al Qaida. These two totalitarian entities, like some of their western counterparts, merely capture and mobilise some of these antagonistic energies. As far as the

latter is concerned, it is not difficult to see how informatics peddles the worst clichés of neo-liberalism in trying to enframe antagonism through a host of good and evil profile doublets according to which a population is invented and managed, or policed and fed – the model minority contra the inner city delinquent, the healthy contra the mad, the peaceful Arab contra the Islamic bigot. In terms of spectacle and violence, it thus falls perfectly within the logic of war/information to have the yellow cluster bomb be interspersed with the yellow food packet during the recent war in Afghanistan. The global state of surveillance and security today violently tries to foreclose the political by informatising complex insurrectionary potentialities in terms of a simplistic, self-evident, and bipolar logic of peace and terror. The latter thus becomes a generic term to reductively describe a multiplicity of forces – from Latin American guerilla movements, to African tribal formations, to Islamic militancy in the Middle-East to Maoist rebellion in Nepal. The freedom of choice offered by the globally rampant North Atlantic machine of war and informatics is no longer between dwelling as a poet or as an assassin, but between a statistic or a terrorist.

[1] See Deleuze, Cinema 2, p. 263-69

[2] In this context see Hannah Arendt's useful elaborations in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

[3] I am of course alluding to Francis Fukuyama's Kojévian-Hegelian thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man*

#### Works Cited:

Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harvest, 1973 || Benjamin, Walter 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt ed., Trans. Harry Zohn, London: Fontana, 1973, pp. 83-107 || Benjamin, Walter 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, pp. 211-244 || Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989 || Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Avon Books, 1992

Anustup Basu <anbst42@pitt.edu> is Cultural Studies Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh's Department of English