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An Interview with Samir Gandesha

FA: How does psychoanalysis affect your scholarly ventures?

SG: My work has been deeply influenced by psychoanalysis. After having undergone something of a crisis through the 1980's and 1990's with both the growing influence of Michel Foucault's criticism of the "repressive hypothesis" in the volume one of the *History of Sexuality*, as well as the so-called "Freud Wars" instigated by figures such as Jeffrey Masson, Fredrick Crews and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, and also being threatened in the clinical context by pharmacology and "quick fixes" such as cognitive behaviour therapy, psychoanalysis has lately experienced a comeback within social and political thought and analysis. This has largely been, though not exclusively, due to the renewal of interest in the work of Jacques Lacan that was itself sparked by the prodigious output of Slavoj Žižek and the so-called Slovenian School as well as brilliant practicing analysts such as Hilda Fernandez, who, like myself, is based in Vancouver.

FA: Funny, you don't look Lacanian to us.

SG: Haha, no. I'm also thinking of other non-Lacanian perspectives such as those of Russell Berman, Jay Frankel, Jonathan Sklar, Lene Auestad, and David Morgan among many others. I consider myself to be in dialogue with this latter group. Psychoanalysis, of course, distinguishes itself by positing the existence of unconscious processes that limits or undermines the notion of the subject as a rational and utility-maximizing agent. In other words, the figure of *homo economicus*. In opposition to this figure, psychoanalysis places greater emphasis on, as it were, a certain libidinal economy within the subject itself; it insists on the importance of individual and collective trauma and phenomena such as ego-weakness, repetition compulsion, sado-masochistic dynamics, the importance of aggression, the death-drive and so on. These, I believe, are indispensable in understanding the drift of politics in the post-Cold War era, particularly now in the midst of a global pandemic.

FA: Do you think we have had a narrow escape from fascist tendencies in the US with Biden's victory over Trump?

SG: Yes and no. *Yes*, because we saw on January 6th, what Trump, and those around him, was capable of, and now we have a very different kind of president and administration. Now, I want to be clear that consider neither Biden nor his Vice-President, Kamala Harris, "progressive" by any stretch of the imagination, particularly on foreign policy as recent reportage by the Intercept's Jeremy Scahill has revealed, however, they have taken some important and effective steps in bringing the pandemic under control in the US, proposing massive spending (\$3 trillion) as now also waiving IP protections for pharmaceuticals. The reason they've done so, I think, is because of the progressive wing of the party led by Sanders supporters and the "squad" (Alexandra

Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib), have placed increasing pressure on the administration for more progressive policies. So, in sum, this is a very different legislative agenda from that pursued by the previous administration. The crucial question is whether it will be sufficient to ameliorate the conditions that led to the rise of first the Tea Party within the Republican Party and then Trumpism itself. These conditions have to do with the intersecting effects of the attacks of 9/11 and its ensuing wars and global crisis of displaced persons, on the one hand, and the effects of the financial crisis of 2007-08, which are currently being exacerbated by the public health emergency we are living through.

FA: And the "no" is because . . . ?

SG: Well, *no*, because let us remember that some 47% of the US electorate voted for Trump despite the disaster of the previous four years, despite his administration's complete mishandling of Covid, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives. So it is possible to invoke the slogan: "Trumpism is dead. Long live Trumpism!" meaning that his spirit has captured the Republican Party, which is now awash in reality-denial, alt-facts and conspiracy theories. Think of the difference between this situation and the attitude of the GOP's grandees to the prospect of Trump winning the nomination. Those opposing Trump around five years ago was a *Who's Who* of Republican Party establishment types like the Bush family, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, William Bennett, and even Lindsey Graham, himself. This is a party now facing significant demographic challenges, insofar as its popularity is severely waning among the youth and communities of colour (though not all of them). It is therefore resorting to time-honoured, repressive, anti-democratic measures such as criminalizing dissent and voter suppression. On the basis of the lie that the election was fraudulent, Republican states such as Texas and Florida are passing legislation geared to making voting even more difficult than it already was with a view to discouraging marginalized citizens from voting. So the threat of fascism continues to haunt us in the present.

FA: The fascist drift has been far more evident and empowered elsewhere, such as Eastern Europe.

SG: Viktor Orban, Hungary's president, having previously curtailed the autonomy of the courts, has indefinitely suspended the legislative branch of government eliminating, in the process, the key liberal-democratic principle of institutional limits on executive authority; Orban now rules by decree. Orban has consistently over the years attacked George Soros whom he has taken as the metonym of the baleful "globalist," which is to say, Jewish, influence on Hungarian politics. We see it, as well, in Poland in that regime's successful downgrading of the power of the courts to act as a check on executive authority. We saw the considerable and negative impact that UKIP had on the public sphere in Britain and, ultimately, the triumph of the Brexit vote. Of course, we now know how influential social media platforms such as Facebook were in both this vote and the election of Donald J. Trump. As Shoshona Zuboff has suggested, Facebook was used to, for example, dissuade African-Americans from voting in the 2016 US Presidential Election.

FA: How has the coronavirus played into this fascist narrative?

SG: At first, I worried that state power could be mobilized in an exceedingly authoritarian direction on the pretext of the pandemic. In its most extreme form, this worry was expressed by Giorgio Agamben who, amongst other things, is known for his theorization of what he calls *homo sacer*, the subject who can be put to death, as well as the “state of exception.” Agamben argued that the public health protocols put into place last Spring amounted to an intensification of biopower and compared academics who agreed to teach remotely to German university professors who participated in the Nazi program of *Gleichshaltung* (total coordination of the state). While we ought to subject all states to the severest scrutiny, the biggest threat seems to stem from those states that have not taken the Covid crisis seriously enough rather than exaggerating the threat so as to engage in a power-grab.

FA: Agamben may have a point insofar as we do not yet know how far state authority will be enhanced for good or ill.

SG: In Canada, provincial governments that have been hardest hit because they refused to act in a decisive way early on are now extending state powers: ie. declaration of emergency in Ontario, increased police presence, particularly among already vulnerable communities, and so on. This combined with the strengthening of border controls is fraught and bears certain similarities with the 1930’s. However, unlike that period characterized by a total coordination of the state (at least in Germany), today we still have a relatively independent press, academic freedom, a relatively open public sphere, and public health authorities, no doubt while under pressure from pharmaceutical companies, making more or less evidence-based decisions, etc all of which can hold executive power to account. This is troubling but, again, not as troubling as the far-right groups that engage in Covid-19 denialism. This was and is a huge problem in Germany, for example. It’s quite interesting that those countries and regions that have the least amount of respect for science, and technical expertise more generally, that we see the worst effects of the pandemic. Call it a “populist pandemic.” I’m thinking here not only of the Trump example, but also India which is an absolute catastrophe, the Philippines, Indonesia and so on. The pandemic makes clear not so much a quasi-fascist state power but rather the fascist potential of capitalism itself.

FA: That may be difficult to explain to people subjected to relentless neoliberal indoctrination for the last 4 or 5 decades.

SG: I was just explaining the concepts of use and exchange value to my 20 year-old daughter as we were gardening and used the vaccine as an example. Capitalism is inherently irrational insofar as it is fundamentally geared to the production of exchange over use value, the former being profits and the latter human needs. So, capitalism is a humanly created order that functions like a machine inasmuch as at its heart it is “self-valorizing value”. It is geared to its own expanded reproduction no matter what costs to the natural ecosystem at the level of inputs (raw material) and at

the level of outputs (pollution, waste, environmental degradation) via consumption. of course it can pay no heed to the costs to workers of health and safety as well as in the theft of time, which is the real source of value, nor to consumers. It can pay no heed to these things precisely because it lives on their death; capital is dead labour feeding on living labour, as Marx put it. In fact, the pandemic reminds us of the costs to would-be consumers of the vaccines made by behemoths such as Pfizer, these are potential consumers in the global south who have no access to the vaccines because their states are often too poor to be able to purchase them. Of course, if countries such as India, Nepal, Indonesia, Philippines, Brazil, etc. are unable to get the virus under control it threatens everybody. No one will be safe, even those who have been vaccinated, because of the newer and more deadly strains that are mutating and will continue to do so into the future. Here we have corporate capitalism putting millions of human lives at risk. Let's be clear, this is a calculation. Human lives under capitalism are and always have been more or less expendable. This applies especially to those among us who are deemed less than human and whose lives are valued even less. This has historically been those of African descent who were historically enslaved, which is to say, turned into things. The Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe has argued that what we see today is the "becoming Black of the world," where more and more people, irrespective of their race, are being transformed into what he calls "abandoned subjects."

FA: Some critics will respond that these examples do not amount to fascism, but rather are instances of good old-fashioned authoritarianism, to whatever degree it is distinguishable from fascism.

SG: One must always be careful when using the word "fascism," insofar as it is often used so indiscriminately—especially on the Left—to vilify one's political opponents that it has been in danger of losing all meaning. Today, for example, J.K. Rowling is referred to as a "fascist." In what sense can we say that what we are witnessing throughout the globe is the re-emergence of fascism? Writing in the pages of the *New Left Review* two years ago, Dylan Riley has argued trenchantly that if we compare 20th century fascism with contemporary authoritarians such as Trump across four axes: geo-political dynamics, the relation between class and nation, developments within civil society and political parties, there is no persuasive evidence that what we are confronted with today is anything approaching fascism. And, indeed, according to Slavoj Žižek's influential gloss on Walter Benjamin, the authoritarianism that we see around us today does not arise in response to what could reasonably be called a "failed revolution." Of course, there were the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements, but they didn't come remotely close to challenging the domination of capital.

FA: Sure, but aren't there some instances where making very fine distinctions between authoritarian tendencies and textbook fascism becomes kind of pointless? A panicky society may just be going in the wrong direction, toward stamping out or eluding democratic forms, with all the obvious evils that follow in its wake.

SG: As Samir Amin has perceptively argued, fascism doesn't have to entirely conform to the twentieth century mould and may be simply understood as being comprised of two essential elements. The first is that is the response to the crisis of capitalism. The second that it constitutes a categorical rejection of "democracy" by way of an appeal to collective identities—often condensed in the figure of a "strong" leader-- tied to a notion of the "people." Yet, two refinements ought be made to Amin's definition.

FA: And they are?

SG: The first refinement is that the very notion of crisis needs to be rethought. Under neoliberalism, crisis is not longer to be regarded as discrete and cyclical but rather as a continuous and enduring. It is not an event but a syndrome or a condition; to use a medical metaphor, crisis is no longer "acute" but "chronic." This means of course that fascism is always something of a haunting presence within a neoliberalism that is, one could say, co-extensive with a deep and abiding fissure within the social order. Once touted as precisely as the antidote to authoritarianism¹, neoliberalism deepens and exacerbates authoritarian tendencies that are coextensive with capitalism itself. That, at the end of the day, capitalism, now faced with crushing inequalities will preserve itself by any means necessary.² As [Theodor W.] Adorno once argued the real threat of fascism comes from within not from outside of capitalist or liberal democracy.

FA: It appears that the pandemic is just another crisis that neoliberalism, or plain old capitalism, does not want to go to waste.

SG: The pandemic undoubtedly overdetermines neoliberalism's endemic crisis and the word crisis, it is important to remember, derives from the Greek *krisis* (decision) and *krinein* (to decide). In late Middle English, the word comes to mean the turning point of a malady, that *decisive* point at which time the condition of the patient manifestly improves or *deteriorates*. In other words, if the crisis of our neoliberal social order—greatly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic--is chronic rather than acute, then it is a time at which the figure of the sovereign, that entity which *decides* on the exception comes to cast a particularly long and dark shadow over our times.³ This is exemplified by the way in which, as discussed above, in the US, Hungary and India, the pandemic, less of a definite *event* than an amorphous *syndrome* plays the role of the "Reichstag fire" in consolidating sovereign power. As has been widely observed, the pandemic brings into visibility, the deep-seated precarity constitutive of the neo-liberal order - one that only the very wealthy can seemingly escape.

¹ See the writings of Hayek and Foucault.

² See Piketty's flawed but nonetheless useful *Capital and Ideology*.

³ I refer to the work of Carl Schmitt.

FA: And the second refinement?

SG: The second refinement is that fascism isn't a categorical rejection of democracy *per se* but rather a rejection of its *liberal* form. As Vladimir Putin recently mused, perhaps liberal democracy is obsolete. Yet, like leaders of fascist movements of the 20th century, Putin makes an appeal of a certain sort to the idea of democracy (Rousseau's "general will as opposed to what he calls the "will of all"). He does so by claiming to embody the will of the *demos* people or *Volk* and this is what makes such claims especially dangerous today. There is, in other words, considerable overlap between 20th century fascism, on the one hand, and contemporary forms of right-wing or authoritarian populism, (which are often correctly described as "neo-fascist" or post-fascist" as Enzo traverso has recently indicated), on the other.

FA: What are the most important differences between fascism in the 20th century and now?

SG: An important difference between twentieth and twenty-first century forms of fascism is that while the former in Germany, under the pretext of the post-Reichstag Fire emergency, abolished the right of assembly, freedom of the press etc. and ultimately elections by suspending the Weimar Constitution, right-populists today are committed, at least nominally and for the time being, to contesting elections although they are quite happy to dispense with many of its corollaries such as the rule of law, respect for minority rights, the division of powers, engage in gerrymandering, voter suppression and so on. In fact, they are mobilizing divisions so effectively that they are winning elections and maintaining popular support for the time being, particularly in Hungary and India.

FA: Trump at least was foiled but the ultra-rightist movement, if we can call it that, is not going away soon.

SG: A vitally important difference between the fascism of the 20th century and that of the present century is in how each of them conceive of time. While, to be sure, Hitler's dream of a "1000-year Reich" was spatially oriented insofar as it was based on the securing of *Lebensraum* to the east for the German *Volk*. What was more important, however, than *space* in Nazi thinking was *time* insofar as fascism was in its own perverse way "utopian" and "revolutionary" oriented as it was to a bright new future for the "Aryan race." In *Being and Time*, card-carrying member of the Nazi Party, Martin Heidegger, elevated the temporal modality of the future over both the past and the present. The future would be secured by retrieving the forgotten experiences at the origin of the Greek understanding of Being.

FA: As perverse as dystopianism gets.

SG: Present-day fascism, in contrast, takes refuge in the past as such, in a supposedly "great" America before the Civil Rights Act (if not before the Civil War); in an

authentic homeland of the Magyars in Hungary; and in a purified India for Hindus (Hindustan). In other words, contemporary fascism makes little or no claim on the future in an era of its *ecologically planned obsolescence*. In this it is, as Aimé Césaire had already pointed out in *Discourse on Colonialism*, a form of European colonialism applied to Europe itself – *endocolonialism*, as it were. As Raoul Peck, the creator of the terrific film on James Baldwin, *I am Not Your Negro* and, more recently, his account of European colonialism *Exterminate All the Brutes*, says: “When what had been done in the heart of darkness was repeated in the heart of Europe, no one wished to recognize what everyone knew,” he says. “Auschwitz is the modern industrial application of established extermination methods.” Today, as we have seen in the Greek case, its weapons are German banks rather than tanks. As I’ve written about elsewhere, we see this, as well, with the willingness of that exemplary of feel-good “liberal multiculturalism,” the Canadian state, to deploy the logic of the exception to permit on-going large energy infrastructure projects (hydro, LNG and bitumen) under conditions of a Covid-19 lock-down. Recalling the weaponization of disease in the earliest days of contact between Indigene and Colonizer, this puts already vulnerable indigenous communities at serious risk of a health catastrophe. The same logic can be discerned in the Modi Government’s resource extraction agenda driving the war on India’s tribal peoples (Adivasis) in Chhattisgarh, not to mention in Jair Bolsonaro’s iron-fisted developmental programme in the Amazon basin.

FA: They never miss an opportunity to create a backward-looking future in which we are all to be neocolonial subjects.

SG: Indeed. Spectres of fascism loom, then, as a response to the chronic financial and ecological crisis of capitalism. Twentieth-century fascism, in part, offered a solution to the economic slump via an acceleration of the extraction of absolute and relative surplus-value from living labour by smashing the revolutionary Left, independent trade unions and other working-class institutions. This was, indeed, the meaning Mussolini’s (and Gentile’s) original idea of fascism based on the image of what was called in Latin “fasces” or a bundle of rods and protruding axe blade symbolizing the penal powers of the Roman state wielded by the magistrate. Fascism entailed, then, the binding together of the rods of the state, capital and labour. It is perhaps telling that both the US and French Republics adopted and maintained this proto-fascistic Roman symbolism through the 18th and 19th centuries.

FA: What then is "post-human" fascism, as you term it? How does it differ from the store brand?

SG: In contrast to its anti-human twentieth century form, contemporary “post-human” fascism centres on a deepening of resource extraction on the very precipice of massive deskilling of labour, and widespread automation and employment of robotics, machine learning and artificial intelligence, to wit: the prospective obsolescence of humanity itself. To refer, once again, to Mbembe:

There are no more workers as such. There are only laboring nomads. If yesterday's drama of the subject was exploitation by capital, the tragedy of the multitude today is that they are unable to be exploited at all. They are abandoned subjects, relegated to the role of a "superfluous humanity."

FA: So this is automation at the exclusive service of the ruling classes, which Marx believed was not tenable in the long run, whatever the long run is.

SG: The pandemic put members of society deemed surplus as well as workers, particularly people of colour, at grave risk of contracting or even dying from the virus (A recent UCSF study conducted in San Francisco's Mission District showed that 95% of positive cases were Latinx). Of course, it could be argued that human labour has never appeared more and "essential" than in this historical moment. Yet states are also showing themselves quite willing place such essential workers at extreme risk and even die *en masse*, for want of PPE, for example. MTA conductor and writer, Sujatha Gidla reports her co-workers as saying "We are not essential, we are sacrificial."⁴ In his depiction of the aftermath of catastrophe, possibly nuclear war, in *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett presents the destruction of nature as taking a specific spatial configuration in which the dialectic time, itself, has seemingly come to a standstill. He shows in coldly unsentimental though often humorously ribald terms the obsolescence of human beings, reduced as they are to pure existence, and subordinated to the inscrutable machinations of geopolitical forces beyond their understanding and control. The necessary supplement to *Endgame*, according to Stanley Cavell is Kubrick's Cold War masterpiece *Dr. Strangelove*.

FA: Even, or especially, there it is comically obvious that the supposedly rational scheme is irrational, unless you as a member of the misguiding elite have a luxurious bomb shelter to retreat into for God knows how long.

SG: Beckett depicts the parents of his anti-hero Hamm, as literally reduced to a form of societal refuse, having been confined to garbage bins, perhaps signifying for us today, all-too painfully, the perilous state of nursing homes. Warehouse-coffins for human beings poised somewhere between life and death; waiting for an end to the excruciating game of waiting. They wax nostalgic ("Ah, the good old days" sighs Nell) about the days when they were provided with sand, rather than sawdust, in their metallic cloisters, a signifier of happier times spent on the beach rather than of a nature that is now "corpsed." The catastrophe of the present and its relation to the recent past forms a continuum of the same unfolding disaster Walter Benjamin writes about in his final text "On the Concept of History" before his suicide in Port Bou in desperate flight from the Nazis. Today, governments seem prepared to sacrifice the elderly, the infirm, the poor, indigent, black and brown, to the iron laws of the market. Republican Lieutenant Governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, recently suggested on the that grandparents might consider *sacrificing* their health and lives for their grandchildren, which is to say, for the health of the economy. But this logic

⁴ *New York Times*, 6 May.

is nothing new. It was discernible in each press release from myriad corporate head offices of massive downsizings producing an immediate, dramatic uptick in their share prices. As I already alluded to, the market lives on death.

FA: So is this fascism or not?

If we take as our definition the classic account of fascism as that reactionary mass movement comprised of an alliance between industrial capital and the petite bourgeoisie against the working class and its political organizations in the context of imperialist rivalries and discrete capitalist crises of overproduction, then it is far from clear that what we face today can be described as “fascism.” After the defeat of organized labour, there is precious little resistance to dead labour’s machinic extraction of surplus value from living labour. Such a defeat drives clear the way for redoubled colonization and endocolonization, militarism, racism and, ultimately, war.

Contemporary fascism emerges from the phenomenon of accelerated global migration flows resulting from the economic, social and political violence (new forms of primitive accumulation) attendant upon the global reconstitution of the relations of production. It responds to the increasing ontological insecurity of citizens of these states – inestimably bolstered now by the pandemic - whose fear is increasingly and effectively mobilized against myriad *strangers* turned into *enemies*. Such mobilization is based on the acute awareness that, under the late form of neoliberalism, the line between citizen and migrant, parvenu and pariah, in other words, “genuine” and “superfluous” humanity is increasingly blurred. Capitalism has always embodied a sacrificial logic and this lies at the heart of its authoritarian potential today. This logic deepens when workers, particularly white workers, hand in hand with the lower middle class, come to identify with rather than contest the power of the aggressor.

FA: It seems unlikely, though, that a majority of citizens are inclined to "identify with the aggressor".

SG: Yes, as dire as the situation may be, there are hopeful signs of growing labour militancy as was recently demonstrated by May Day protests around the world. There is of course the several-month long Indian Farmers strike, which opposes three laws brought in by the Modi Government to further commodify the land and would make Indian farmers even more indebted and precarious and, sadly, suicidal than ever. Of course, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has accelerated since the murder of George Floyd and that has contributed massively in the US and beyond to drawing attention not simply to the question of the systemic racism in policing directed at Black (and also Indigenous) Americans, but also the structural inequality that the police are required to maintain. This is what Cedric J. Robinson has called “racial capitalism.” It draws attention, moreover, to the calls to “defund the police.” As Angela Davis eloquently put it, “It’s about shifting public funds to new services and new institutions — mental health counselors, who can respond to people who are in crisis without arms. It’s about shifting funding to education, to housing, to

recreation. All of these things help to create security and safety. It's about learning that safety, safeguarded by violence, is not really safety"⁵

FA: Well, yes. Capitalism needs the complicity of the state in order to commodify everything in sight. Resistance is vital.

SG: The global health emergency, moreover, has demonstrated that the integrity of societies cannot be indexed to the prosperity and well-being of its most affluent but most indigent members. It has decisively shown that health care cannot be tied to conditions of employment but must be understood, as Bernie Sanders repeated over and over again in his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, as a basic human right. It has highlighted the nihilistic illusions of the "possessive individualism" on which shifting sands the entire neoliberal order is based. It has seriously revived with great urgency discussion of the admittedly fraught and contested idea of Universal Basic Income. The Pandemic places a certain kind of thin universalism on the table: like the nature of planetary climate change, it shows us, no matter our identity, gender, sexual orientation and so on, we all ultimately share the same fate. The pandemic has doubtless, as I have argued, constituted an opening for a further authoritarian consolidation of power, but, at the same time, it has also opened space for imagining a very different kind of society. Which path we take will be a matter of organizing, which is to say, *politics*.

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⁵ *Democracy Now!* Sept 07, 2020.