



BRIAN MASSUMI

THE
PERSONALITY
OF POWER

A THEORY
OF
FASCISM
FOR
ANTI-FASCIST
LIFE

THE PERSONALITY OF POWER

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THOUGHT IN THE ACT

A series edited by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi

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The Personality
of Power:
A Theory of
Fascism for
Anti-fascist Life

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Trumping the Personality of Power

The “F”-Word

Throughout Trump’s time in power, mention of the word “fascist” was routinely met with rolled eyes and admonitions to avoid gratuitous mud-slinging, even if said with an interrogative accent or cautiously preceded by “proto-” or “semi-.” It doesn’t help to bandy about false equivalencies, went the refrain. When the Trump presidency reached its crescendo on January 6, 2021, with the storming of the US Capitol by the advance guard of his most ardent supporters, it became dramatically clear that the warnings had not been exaggerated. Hundreds of self-described “patriots” had attacked the linchpin of representative democracy—the peaceful transition of power—and had done so not in adherence to a coherent ideology but in fealty to Trump’s person. Four years of Trump’s relentless social media bush-beating had flushed out a congeries of white supremacists, antigovernment conspiracy theorists, and increasingly right-wing conservatives united by such attitudes as white grievance (in reaction to the growing ethnic diversity of American society and the amplification of African American voices by the Black Lives Matter movement), “Western chauvinism” (a self-descriptor of the Proud Boys who were among those who spearheaded the charge), a hatred for the “elites” of urban America (anyone with managerial or scientific expertise and a presumed cosmopolitanism), and anti-feminist, anti-queer, and anti-trans backlash. For many, Donald Trump was a savior figure. For the evangelical crowd, quite literally. “He will protect us” signs graced many a rally. “We’re doing this for him,” crowds chanted.

“For him”: power had repersonalized around Trump—or more precisely his media figure—to an extent unheard-of in recent American history, exceeding in intensity even the personality politics of Ronald Reagan. It was around Reagan that the tendencies now reaching a peak

expression had first begun to coalesce again in the late 1970s, after being briefly backgrounded, post-McCarthy, by the rise of the civil rights movement and other social movements of the 1960s.

Most shocking to Americans whose savior is not Donald Trump was perhaps the attribution of the status of “enemy” to the political adversary. In the Capitol crowd, the peppering of Confederate flags visually made the point: This is war. This is civil war. It was spelled it out in no uncertain terms on a popular T-shirt: “MAGA Civil War January 6, 2021.” Your very existence, these artifacts were saying, is an existential threat to us. We are armed against it. “You will not replace us!” When a significant minority of the Republican Party itself recoiled in horror and belatedly (and as it turned out, momentarily) distanced itself from the figure on whose coattails the party had ridden for four long years, they too became the enemy. Republicans supporting the peaceful transfer of power, even arch-enablers of Trump such as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Vice President Mike Pence, were threatened with death. In the immediate aftermath of the Capitol storming, far-right social media confirmed that a personality-centered movement willing to kill and to die “for him” was nearing a break with its collaborators in the political establishment, threatening to spin off from existing party politics into its own frenetic orbit.

The spin-off of right-wing passions from the established institutions of politics is the turning point. The catalytic point. The conversion point where a brewing proto-fascism heats up to the point that a full-boil fascism can be heard bubbling beneath the lid of politics as usual.

Fascism sparked on Pennsylvania Avenue. It remains to be seen whether it will light a prairie fire, but it is those who would not abide the use of the word during the years of Trumpian agitation on the campaign trail and in the White House—now in retrospect so clearly in continuity with what occurred on January 6—who should be admonished for their political timorousness.¹ The question of how the spark will continue to

¹ William E. Connolly is one prominent academic theorist who has consistently emphasized the need to think of how the antecedents of fascism are active in the contemporary social and political field. See Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).



1.1 January 6 Insurrection. Photo by Lev Radin / Shutterstock.

smolder should Trump return to the White House for a second term, or after he recedes from the scene, is as pressing moving forward as it was—and should have been recognized as being—in the lead-up to his 2016 election.

It has sparked. That has to be taken stock of, even if there was more than a hint of the farcical in the event. Marx said that historical events appear first as tragedy, then repeat as farce. It seems to be a characteristic of the “post-truth” age to skip directly to the latter—a situation which is, if anything, all the more tragic.

This Book

To be clear, this book is not an essay in history. Nor is it an empirical account in a cultural studies or sociological vein. It is a philosophical essay, aspiring, as Deleuze says philosophy should, to the creation of new concepts. Trump is taken as an exemplary case in which existing tendencies take on new variations, and emergent tendencies become perceptible. Concepts are distilled from Trumpian speech and gesture,

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which bear more on their mode of operation than on interpretations of their meaning (of which there is precious little). The concepts undergo extensive philosophical development before being rethreaded back through Trump World to generate more ideas meant to wrap themselves around the singularity of the Trump phenomenon and how it relates to fascism. The ideas also loop around each other in multiplying orbits. The hope is that this results in virtuous circles producing a growing toolbox of distinctions.

The emphasis on mode of operation is in keeping with the process philosophy orientation of this endeavor, which can be summed up briefly as taking constituting activity and events as primary, rather than already-constituted things and subjects. The interest is ultimately through Trump rather than in him: his exemplary case is for diagnostic purposes. The question of what constitutes fascism is refracted through the prism of Trump. The questions begin before the facts, in the stirrings of “fascisizing tendencies”: tendencies that prepare the ground for fascism and funnel toward it. The book focuses its lens on the Trump presidency of 2017–2021 and the period following the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol and up to the 2024 presidential election and his second bid for president. A conceptual X-ray examination of a key period such as this is sufficient to diagnose fascisizing tendencies in early stages of metastasis, revealing the direction in which they are moving. Only occasional asides will be made to later episodes, where they add useful detail or accent.

Since Trump’s power so evidently revolves around his person, what constitutes personhood will be the main philosophical stake. This is a tricky task, since we all already know what a person is, if only because we are one every day. However, in large part because of that intimacy, which is always already us and ours, our knowledge of personhood is steeped in presuppositions and rife with rationalizations. A certain estrangement is necessary to enable a fresh take. Bringing a constructive estrangement to the presupposed is the most important service philosophy can provide. In the case of personhood, this requires a great deal of effort and some fairly gymnastic mental maneuvering. It is with this in view that the book indulges in long developments of philosophical concepts, woven in and among the discussions of Trump, fascism, and fascisizing

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tendencies. The two most intensely philosophical sections are parts 2 and 3. Recaps are provided at the end of these parts that should enable readers less invested in the philosophical ins and outs to take a shortcut in order to concentrate on the material more directly pertinent to Trump and fascism in parts 1, 4, and 5. A comprehensive glossary of key terms will be published separately to serve as a reference and a guide.

Ultimately, the book's chimerical format combining in-depth political analysis and fundamental philosophical inquiry in equally intense doses comes from the conviction that not only is the content of conventional thinking about personhood and the political inadequate but so is the very logic we use to understand them. A postscript encapsulates an alternative logic gleaned from the process-oriented thinking deployed throughout the book, following conceptual paths blazed by C. S. Peirce, Gabriel Tarde, Henri Bergson, William James, A. N. Whitehead, Gilbert Simondon, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Susanne Langer, and Édouard Glissant, among others.² This the logic of "mutual inclusion." It addresses how things dynamically come together in becoming, without abrogating their difference.

The Decline and Rise of the Personality of Power

Fascism itself is a concept that is steeped in presuppositions and rife with rationalizations, in its case because it is so often assumed to be foreign to the world we know. Yes, it is necessary to avoid false equivalencies with past events, as critics of the word grumpily remind us. But it is just as necessary to recognize its uncanny closeness, in every era, as

- 2 The most direct inspiration behind the approach to fascism developed here is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which exhibits a prescient understanding of fascism that still strikes me as the best place to begin in the analysis of its contemporary forms. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). On Deleuze/Guattari and fascism, see Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Deleuze and Fascism: Security, War, Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2014); Rick Dolphijn and Rosi Braidotti, eds., *Deleuze and Guattari and Fascism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

a potential outbreak and passing of a threshold. Our ready-made conceptual tools are not well suited to understanding its current stirrings. An effort must be made to grasp the unique characteristics of fascism's drawing-close-upon-us in the present juncture.

I have argued elsewhere that over the last three decades, beginning in the Reagan years, the traditional model of ideological assent produced through a psychological identification with the charismatic leader became obsolete.³ Reagan's hold was, and still is, widely interpreted in terms of charismatic personality politics, or what is popularly termed the cult of personality. I argued, however, that something very different from what is conventionally meant by "personality politics" was going on.

Throughout his presidency, Reagan's policies, when polled individually, were consistently opposed by a majority of voters. Ideological adherence was tenuous. His discourse was famously fragmented, presenting very little in the way of a coherent ideational framework. His body image, while playing on media stereotypes of the rugged American male, was beset by an undertow of fragility and evoked dismemberment as often as wholeness and strength (*Where's the Rest of Me?*, wailed the title of his autobiography).⁴ I became convinced that the double default, of discourse and body image, was not a defect but, rather, a positive mechanism successfully playing between two registers.

The fitful self-suspension of discursive unity allowed the register of the body to flash through the cracks in crumbling discourse. The flicker between bodily wholeness and dismemberment effected an affective capture foregrounding proprioception—the nonvisual sense of the body's deformations in movement—over visual image integrity and constancy of form.

The model suggested was closer to mime than to identification. The mime stages the body, subtracted from speech, in a segmentation

3 Kenneth Dean and Brian Massumi, *First and Last Emperors: The Body of the Despot and the Absolute State* (New York: Autonomedia, 1992), 87–152; Massumi, "The Bleed," in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 49–72.

4 Ronald Reagan and Richard B. Hubler, *Where Is the Rest of Me?* (1965; repr., New York: Karz, 1981). For analysis of the autobiography and the trope of dismemberment, see Massumi, "The Bleed," in *Parables for the Virtual*, 49–72.

of its movements. “Mime,” José Gil explains, “dismembers the body: we know that the training of mimes takes them through this basic exercise—separation of the limbs in such a way as to completely remove the connections and make the parts they join independent from each other, thus abolishing the rigidities and stereotypes that cultural coding has imprinted on them.” This means that every articulation, every gap between segments, holds the potential for any next gesture. This fullness of potential, however, is also a threat. “The audience is held in a continual ‘suspense’ due to an unconscious anticipation of a ‘failing,’ in which the performer might suddenly lose the ability to continue his or her discourse. Because of this fear of broken communication, this art walks a tightrope.”⁵

It was *because* Reagan walked the tightrope of broken communication that he was the “Great Communicator.” The rise of potential in the gap made palpable a full proprioceptive body—a virtual body replete with any-next potential—while the fall of imminent failing simultaneously activated an abstract grasping desperately to hold on (this rise and fall of potential is constitutive of the “full body” as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari, a concept that will feature prominently in what follows). The tension between the rise and fall of bodily potential exerted an infra-linguistic “fascination.” The proprioceptive “bodies without an image” of the audience were riveted to it, adjoined to it, forming a trans-individual body politic.⁶ This is closer to Simondon’s transductive “communication of subconsciousnesses”—which operates at the affective level of bodily capacitation and its dephasing—than it is to a cognitive, subject-centered identification with the eternal wholeness of an ideal visual image.⁷ “Reagan” was the proper name of the collective assemblage that actuated and sustained this dynamic through rhythms of image circulation

5 José Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body*, trans. Stephen Muecke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 107–8.

6 Infra-linguistic fascination: Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body*, 107. Body without an image: Massumi, “The Art of the Relational Body,” in *Couplets* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 342–57.

7 Communication of subconsciousnesses: Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 275.

oscillating between the rise of the full body and its fall toward dismemberment, and between this polarization and the discourse it broke into, suspended, and relaunched in a fitful rhythm.

The “person” of Reagan, politically, was not the man. It was not the actual image of the man, nor was it his “persona” in the sense in which that word is used to designate an inauthentic contrast between the man and his image. Reagan was the being of the media figure produced by the collective assemblage orbiting around his movements—the gestures suspending discourse, triggering the rise/fall of the full body in the breaks, and self-absenting the man through that transindividualizing dynamic. Reagan was “machinic” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of a processual mode whose operations claim a subjective autonomy of operation—without a separate subject as agent of the action (Raymond Ruyer would say they are “autoconducting,” or self-driving).⁸

Following this line of reasoning, Reagan was a media figure whose machinic person(a) represented a personalizing of power in a new mode. The “personality” of this power was an optical (or more accurately, proprioceptive) effect of this machinery: the aura of the full body, at every move haunting the relational field with potential and taunting it with failure. The dynamically animating ghost in the machine. Ronald Reagan ghosted the person.

Once a dynamic of this kind “takes” (attains a consistency), it abides as a self-operating tendency, like a habit of the body politic, poised to return with variations across periods of subsidence. It continued into the George H. W. Bush administration and returned with Bush II, subsiding in the intervening Bill Clinton years and afterward with Barack Obama, in favor of their more traditionally personality-based affective dynamics (in Obama’s case, hope as a focal point of subjectivation beaming from his person).

It is of the nature of ghosts to return and haunt. George W. Bush was a faded revenant Reagan. He was even more challenged in the production of conceptually and grammatically coherent speech, and refigured Reagan’s “dismemberment” as spasms of stumbling and strange

8 Raymond Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 85.

rhythms of whole-body disappearance and reappearance, flickering in a “barely there” of being.⁹

The contemporary complexion of the personality of power in the Reagan lineage takes a significant turn with Trump, as indicated by Trump himself in his ruthless ridiculing of Biden during the 2020 presidential campaign. On the grounds of his age and supposed mental and physical frailty and the intermittence of his campaign appearances, Trump bestowed on him the nickname of “Barely There Biden,” taunting that he “doesn’t even know he is alive.”¹⁰ What Trump was responding to was not in fact a Democratic version of George W. Bush’s persona, but a traditional, and arguably obsolete, political figure seen through the lens of the personality of power—the only one Trump understands. What Biden was cultivating was the image of the head of state as a regular guy, in the traditional model of personhood, who just happens to sit at the head of state: a steady manager working tirelessly in the corridors of power in the interests of the nation, immersed in the practical details of governing (what Carl Schmitt calls the “pure normativist,” as we will see in a moment).

Trump forged his own relation to the full body, while remaining in many ways in the Reagan frame of personalizing power: not barely there, more like brazenly everywhere. And the furthest thing possible from the steady manager of the conventional levers of power.

Resolving the apparent contradiction of an anomalously personal personality of power will be a major stake in what follows. The resolution

9 Massumi, “Barely There: The Power of the Image at the Limit of Life,” in *Couplets*, 232–84.

10 For “Barely There Biden,” see Richard Wolffe, “Don’t Call It a Comeback: Trump’s Tulsa Rally Was Just Another Sad Farce,” *Guardian*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/20/donald-trump-tulsa-rally-crowd-empty-seats>. For “Doesn’t even know he is alive,” see Philip Rucker and Felicia Sonmez, “Trump Defends Bungled Handling of Coronavirus with Falsehoods and Dubious Claims,” *Washington Post*, July 19, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-defends-bungled-handling-of-coronavirus-with-falsehoods-and-dubious-claims/2020/07/19/1b57cb3e-c9e6-11ea-91fr-28aca4d833ao_story.html. Trump also nicknamed Biden “Sleepy Joe” and “Hid’n Biden.” See Mark Leibovich, “When Joe Biden’s in Town, but It’s Hard to Know,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/us/politics/joe-biden-campaign.html>.

will be sought in a reformulation of what it means to be a person to include in its very definition the self-driving of the machinic, in its collective operation. The person-“effect” of dynamics such as Reagan’s ghosting of the machine will be given a positive genealogy in the fundamental operations of perception, their discursive and social media amplifications, an affective regime dominated by reaction, and a discursive regime expressive of it. It will be seen as an emergent effect with its own character, and a reality of its own, after its own manner. In the case of Trump, it will be seen to have a powerful political efficacy in its own right through its ability to performatively index the potentials of the full body and channel them, reactively, into the register of threat. It will be suggested that this power can only be understood by rethinking the operations of the social circulation of signs in ways that take seriously the notions of collective personhood and collective individuation, while remaining sensitive to singularity. The question of what constitutes a media figure will have to be broached, and for that a new take on what figuration is in the first place will be required.

Who Decides?

The political efficacy of the new figure of the personality of power harks back in strange ways to Carl Schmitt’s concept of sovereign decision, also widely mistaken for personalist in a sense compatible with traditional definitions of what a person is felt to be: a discrete subject with a well-regulated interiority separate from the social, exercising individual agency authored by an “I” in exclusive ownership of its thoughts, actions, and emotions.

Schmitt’s concept of decision is mistaken for personalist because he formulates the question of sovereignty as “Who decides?” The impression that Schmitt is delivering decision to a principle of the personality of power in the traditional sense of person is reinforced when he criticizes the normative governmental notion of sovereignty for its substitution of an impersonal self-regulating system of government for the preeminence of the one who decides.

But then he pivots. He announces in no uncertain terms that when he is speaking of the one who decides, he is not speaking in psycho-