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title

Geopolitical events and fascist machines: Trump, Brexit and the deterritorialisation of the West

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INTRODUCTION

The June 2016 vote for Britain to leave the European Union (EU) – Brexit – and the November 2016 election of Donald Trump as the next US President have raised serious problems for Atlanticism, a geopolitical formation that has been fundamental to the idea of the West since the Second World War. Here I assess the prospects of Atlanticism and by extension the West in light of concepts formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose influence continues to reconfigure thinking in political geography (Yusoff et al. 2012; Kaiser 2012; Dittmer 2014; Gerlach 2015). In so doing, I highlight the ways in which geopolitics can be understood in relation to events and machines. Here Deleuze and Guattari (2004) are particularly useful in view of how their ideas of the event and the machine relate to their discussions of fascism, war and the state. Whereas the election of Trump and Brexit appear to constitute geopolitical events *par excellence*, the concept of machines directs attention to specific forms of agency that shape and are shaped by such events. Having emerged out of the *milieux* formed by the end of the Second World War and early Cold War, it is by no means certain that geopolitics will continue to be territorialised around the Atlanticist machine. Caught between postcolonial and anticapitalist machines on the one hand and more-than-incipiently fascist new right machines on the other, the contours and prospects of Atlanticism – and thus the West – are very much in question.

EVENTS

Though its meaning has varied (Dunne 2004), the term Atlanticism has come to denote a sense of identity and community that territorialises the United States and other countries, primarily via the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), but also via security and intelligence cooperation (through the ‘Five Eyes’ alliance between the US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand) (Dittmer 2015), and through ideological commitments to

democratic governance and market capitalism. It is territorialising in the dual sense (De Landa 2006, p.12) of embodying a shared commitment both to territorial defence (through Article 5 of the NATO treaty) and more expansively to liberal nostrums concerning freedom and security.

The Atlanticist assemblage has also always been traversed by multiple tensions and lines of flight that threaten its deterritorialisation. Tensions can be identified between the EU and NATO, France and NATO, between market rule and democracy, between dependence on the US and independence from it, between Britain and Europe, and between militarism and democracy. But while already in question, however, the identity and coherence of Atlanticism as a machine that territorialises geopolitics are significantly further challenged by Brexit and by Trump's election, events that might turn out to be points in a cascading series.

Shortly before the election, Slavoj Žižek caused a furore by declaring that, were he able to vote, he would take the 'desperate' measure of voting for Trump in the face of what he saw as the 'true danger' of 'inertia' represented by Hillary Clinton (Channel 4 News 2016). A Trump victory would bring about 'a big awakening' (Channel 4 News 2016); in other words, it would constitute a veritable event, the basic structure of which is 'the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme' (Žižek 2014, p.5). Like Trump's victory, the July 2016 vote for Britain to leave the EU also constitutes a disruption to liberal life, a disruption which, again like Trump's victory, was encountered by many as profoundly shocking. As Deleuze and Guattari (2004, p.238) wrote in relation to *les événements* of 1968: 'those who evaluated things in macropolitical terms understood nothing of the event because something unaccountable was escaping'. The question, however, is not just how to grasp events more effectively, but how the conditions for them are brought about through the work of machines.

MACHINES

The events of Brexit and Trump did not happen out of nowhere; they were made possible by the actions of machines that had already been working away at deterritorialising geopolitics as hitherto constituted.

As Gerald Raunig notes,

[a]s early as the 19th century, a machinic thinking emerged which actualized the concatenation of technical apparatuses with social assemblages and with the intellect as a collective capacity, and recognizes the revolutionary potential in this. (Raunig 2010, p.26)

The machinic thinking of Deleuze and Guattari of the 1970s added to this by emphasising the openness but also the ambivalence of the machine, which can develop along revolutionary or fascist lines of flight and which can weave in and out of a state apparatus, disrupting it or lending it new energies (see also Barry 2001). Chief among these energies is desire, which is always assembled: '[d]esire is never an undifferentiated instinctual energy, but itself results from a highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p.237).

The possibilities for engineering new 'resonance machines' (Connolly 2005) have been enhanced by the expansion of digital social media, the erosion of traditional news and information channels and the proliferation of self-generated content. This provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories, 'truthy' memes and fake news, upon which political strategists seize, gleefully mobilising and hybridising them with misogynistic, homophobic and racist tropes, 'malcontent providers' (Mead 2010) generating a 'dissonance machine' (Page & Dittmer 2016). Using such techniques, new right machines assemble desire into narratives that echo classical fascist themes such as the corruption of the elites, the threat of the other and the enemy within, inciting a need to burn, drain and cleanse the body politic. While some narrative strands speak to anticapitalist tendencies that are widely felt among people whose existence has become precarious as a

result of thirty-plus years of neoliberalism, others capitalise upon decidedly authoritarian tendencies.

In deterritorialising politics away from anything that might be termed matters of public concern (Latour 2004) and reterritorialising them around betrayal, confrontation and the prospect of violence, this new politics bears the hallmarks of a fascist war machine. There must therefore be a concern with how, as Raunig (2010, p.71) suggests, ‘the inventiveness of the war machine evolves new forms of sociality, instituent practices and constituent power, the creation and actualization of other, different possible worlds’. In the words of Florian Philipott (2016, n.p.), an advisor to Marine Le Pen: *‘Leur monde s’effondre. Le nôtre se construit’*: ‘Their world is collapsing. Ours is being built’.

Here we must consider not just transformations in national politics but the transnational networks of the new right, a political tendency whose intellectual lineages go back to Europe in the period following the Second World War, when fascist thinking was preserved and elaborated in certain circles following the military defeat of fascist forces (Laqueur 1993). The new right advanced again with the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union and has gained further traction with the 2008 financial crash and the more recent migration crisis. Russian ‘Eurasianists’ find common cause with American ‘patriots’ and European ‘traditionalists’ in their rejection of ‘globalism’, ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘liberalism’ (Ingram 2001). But while it is no surprise to find elements of the European new right bankrolled and facilitated by Russian interests, the extent to which the incoming US President’s affairs have been enmeshed with them is extraordinary (Stott & Belton 2016). Though much remains to be worked out during the transition to the new presidency, the new right war machine has got close to the core of the American state apparatus.

DETERRITORIALISATION

Events happen, but in order for things to resonate, machines have to assemble, in turn shaping the conditions for new events. New right machines have been assembling away, enabling the events of Brexit and Trump's election and leaving the Atlanticist machine facing new lines of deterritorialisation. While angst over the prospects of Atlanticism is by no means new, there is an urgency to statements by Atlanticist leaders (The Telegraph 2016; Borger 2016) in light of Trump's campaign declaration that NATO was 'obsolete' and that he would consider withdrawing the US from it. Trump has, characteristically, rowed back from these statements, but their performative force cannot be entirely revoked.

Concerns over the fate of Atlanticism and the West are starting to resonate in new ways. Before the election, *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum (2016) stated that 'Trump is a threat to the West as we know it, even if he loses'; afterwards Carl Bildt (2016), a leading Atlanticist figure, declared that '[i]t is the end of the West as we know it'. Though Atlanticism and the West are by no means coincident, it is hard to imagine one without the other and together they have exerted a powerful structuring influence in global politics. For advocates of liberal or neoliberal empire, this has been to the good; twentieth century fascism and communism were defeated, after all. For critics, the Atlantic West (or Global North) has been the main problem to be solved in the passage to a more equitable global order. Other scenarios, long in the making, are now on the table.

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