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Antifascism and anti-5G conspiracies

Günter Gassner

In my current research project, I explore antifascism as a spatial practice. I am interested in the different types of spaces that antifascism is entangled in and produces: physical spaces, virtual spaces, discursive spaces, 'free' spaces, memory spaces, utopian and dystopian spaces.¹ In so doing, I examine antifascism not merely as a fight against something (e.g. capitalism as the root of fascism) and someone (nationalists, racists, sexists, etc.), but also as a positive, self-determined urban practice that opens anti-oppressive and non-hierarchical spaces through its undertakings. My aim is to contribute to a better understanding of antifascism as a complex network that, on the basis of a collective identity and through non-institutionalized tactics, drives political, economic, social and cultural change.

What is the relationship between antifascism and anti-5G conspiracies? This brief essay is linked to my larger research project although technical infrastructures are not usually the focus of my work. Here, I am particularly interested in the ways in which 5G is framed and linked to discursive formations. This interest might be particularly relevant in at least two ways. First, it can help us understand the aesthetic regime of 5G, emphasizing links between discourses and practices in digital and physical urban spaces. Second, it can help us reconsider the relevance of different types of work that antifascists are involved in: from educational work, to the documentation of racist attacks and right-wing extremists networks, to militant street activism. These, I believe, are critical aspects given the prevalence and consolidation of authoritarian regimes and the ways in which the far-right has become increasingly mainstream in recent years.² Nationalism and racism, exclusion and expulsion, and a paranoid 'us' versus 'them' view of the world define the order of the day.³ In the UK too, we observe a "lurch to the right" and hostile environment policies that are put in place with the aim of identifying and reducing the number of immigrants, enforcing no right to remain.⁴

Before exploring discursive formations and 5G, I want to introduce a few notes on my approach to antifascism. An opposition between the 'free West' and 'authoritarianism elsewhere' has never been a convincing starting point of knowledge. Exclusion, injustice, and exploitation are built into

¹ See Günter Gassner, "Drawing as an ethico-political practice," *GeoHumanities*, 7, no. 2 (2021).
Günter Gassner, "Spiral Movement: Writing with Fascism and Urban Violence," *The Sociological Review*, 70, no. 4 (2022).

² See, for example, Aurelien Mondon & Aaron Winter, *Reactionary democracy* (London: Verso, 2020).

³ Jason Stanley, *How fascism works: the politics of us and them* (New York: Random House, 2020).

⁴ Stefan Bielik, "With its lurch to the right, Britain is no longer special in Europe," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/24/lurch-right-britain-special-europe-authoritarian>.

liberal democracies. Liberalism's formal commitment to equality and claims that its principles should be applied equally to all must not distract from the fact that it never managed to actualize these claims. Ishay Landa suggests that classical fascism was not an "outsider to the liberal, 'open society,' but in fact an *intimate insider*."⁵ It was an attempt to solve the nineteenth-century crisis of liberalism that resulted from a split between economic and political liberalism when the bourgeoisie, after it wrested the economy from the aristocracy (based on liberal principles) had to defend itself from the masses, which led to class-based allocations of freedoms and unfreedoms. Achille Mbembe, in turn, shows that democracies have never been peaceful societies but always required the definition of enemies: enemies within – creating a separation between "a *community of fellow creatures* governed, at least in principle, by the law of equality, and a *category of nonfellows*" – and enemies outside, an exteriorization of violence "to third places, to nonplaces" such as colonies and war zones in a fight for democratic values.⁶ It is problematic, therefore, to speak of nowadays in terms of an "age of resurgent fascism" as if fascism was ever entirely absent.⁷ The boundary between liberal democracies in practice and historical fascism has always been a porous one. Antifascism is a movement that encapsulates a variety of different tendencies, initiatives, NGOs, parties and trade unions to fight fascism. As I refer to it in this essay, it positions itself as an illiberal force at the boundary between liberalism and fascism. In so doing, I follow Natasha Lennard, who suggests that antifa "is not a group, nor a movement, nor even an identity," but rather "an illiberal intervention that in resisting fascism does not rely on the state, the justice system or any liberal institutions."⁸

I introduce these brief notes to sketch a diagram that positions the far-right, the liberal state, and antifascism in a triangle of actions, reactions, and interactions. This is important to consider because 5G technology is driven by the telecoms supply industry in the UK. The state is not the key owner of networks and services anymore and its prime role has become the promotion of economic activity and development, enhancing the "competitiveness of the sector in international markets," and to "attract new investment through diligent market opening and pro-competitive regulation."⁹ While the industry claims that 5G allows "much faster data download and upload speeds, wider coverage, more stable connections, making better use of the radio spectrum, and enabling far more devices to access the mobile Internet at the same time," the state develops appropriate policies as well as a discursive framing for these claims.¹⁰

In 2017, the Department for Culture Media & Sport and HM Treasury announced that there is a "clear ambition for the UK to be a global leader in the next generation of mobile technology."¹¹

⁵ Ishay Landa, *The apprentice's sorcerer: Liberal tradition and fascism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 9 (emphasis in original).

⁶ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 17 (emphasis in original), 27.

⁷ Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the return of the far right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

⁸ Natasha Lennard, *Being numerous: Essays on non-fascist life* (London: Verso, 2019), 9.

⁹ Peter Humphreys & Seamus Simpson, "Globalization. The competition state and the rise of the regulatory state in European telecommunications," 2008, [http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/12517/1/Humphreys-SimpsonJCMS\(finsent21_12_06\).pdf](http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/12517/1/Humphreys-SimpsonJCMS(finsent21_12_06).pdf).

¹⁰ Peter Jones & Daphne Comfort, A commentary on the rollout of 5g mobile in the UK, *Public Affairs*, 20, no. 1 (2020): 1.

¹¹ Department for Culture Media & Sport and HM Treasury, "Next generation mobile technologies: A 5G strategy for the UK," 2017,

The UK “should be a global leader in 5G so that we can take early advantage of its potential and help to create a world-leading digital economy that works for everyone” because being “at the forefront [...] maximises the potential benefits to our economy and citizens.”¹² In 2022, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport stated that it “has invested almost £200 million in UK telecoms innovation through the 5G Testbeds and Trials programme (5GTT), helping to establish our global leadership in this area, and supporting industry, academic institutions, and local authorities to realise the benefits of 5G” and that it also invests £250 million in research and development “to deliver a diverse supply chain, to ensure the security and resilience of our networks and deliver the Government’s 5G Diversification Strategy.”¹³

5G is being constructed as a tool for economic growth, apparently benefitting ‘everyone.’ Social and environmental consequences of economic growth as we know it today are not being problematized. Antifascists cannot ignore such a discursive construction. They have experience in making themselves heard; for example, in protests that accompany World Trade Organization conferences (e.g. Seattle, 1999) and G20 summits (e.g. Hamburg, 2017). And they show solidarity with and support environmental movements. A group of young antifascists organised by Extinction Rebellion – Extinction Rebellion Antifa @AntifaRebellion on Twitter – emphasise that the climate crisis can be fought successfully only by adopting an antifascist approach. These tactics are also relevant for interventions in the promotion of a technology that drives global capitalism forward. At the same time, they challenge a growing body of research that puts its main focus on the rather narrow aim to tackle the ‘problem’ of the uneven geography of 5G rollout. 5G is currently available only in a few countries and in cities: the “increased cost of 5G mobile phones to consumers and the logistical problems and financial costs of establishing 5G networks in sparsely populated rural areas both make it unlikely that the advent of 5G will address the current digital divide.”¹⁴ Inequalities in access to opportunities, knowledge, services and goods are likely to increase.¹⁵

One of antifascism’s core concerns is less a problem of undersupply or a gap in supply but official state and industry narratives in the first place. If only capitalism can give rise to fascism, then the combination of hyper-connectivity and economic growth is one of its targets. Fighting for global justice, antifascism has a stake in anti-globalization movements. However, the radical left is not always immune to ‘positive racism’ and paternalistic, colonising and ethnocentric ways of approaching the world. How, therefore, can antifascism as an antiracist, anticapitalist, feminist as well as internationalist movement fight against economic globalization in a way that is fundamentally different to a ultra-nationalist and racist opposition to economic globalization?

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597421/07.03.17_5G_strategy_-_for_publication.pdf.

¹² Department for Culture Media & Sport and HM Treasury, “Next generation mobile technologies,” 8.

¹³ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, “UK Digital Strategy,” 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1089103/UK_Digital_Strategy_web_accessible.pdf.

¹⁴ Jones & Comfort, “A commentary on the rollout of 5G,” 4.

¹⁵ Peter Bloom, “5G won’t reduce the digital divide and might make it worse,” 2019, <https://www.rhizomatica.org/5g-wont-reduce-the-digital-divide-and-might-even-make-it-worse/>.



Photocollage derived from Department for Culture, Media and Sport & HM Treasury, *Next Generation Mobile Technologies: A 5G Strategy for the UK*, March 2017 (top) available online https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597421/07.03.17_5G_strategy_-_for_publication.pdf and MARK STEELE CHANNEL on Telegram, forwarded from Neet-to-know on 5th February, 2022 at 07:36 (bottom) available online <https://t.me/marksteele5g/5100>.

One way in which antifascism is being confronted with 5G is via conspiracies that emerged around 2015 and which took off in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. These conspiracies do not make up a single and coherent theory. Some anti-5G campaigners believe that 5G “damages the immune system and thus facilitates the spread of the virus. Others believe the virus itself is actually caused by the tech. Others argue that the virus was ‘invented’ to cover up health problems caused by 5G. Still others believe that lockdown is an excuse to cover up the installation of new masts” or that 5G radiofrequency absorbs oxygen in the air from living organisms, deliberately killing segments of the population.¹⁶ Far-right activists have not been on the forefront of inventing related claims. However, they have adopted them, because these claims are compatible with far-right ideologies and beliefs in a Jewish-controlled New World Order. Anti-5G statements can be discursive infrastructures for creating the vision of a form of ethnostate because they open a window toward more explicitly racist and anti-Semitic narratives.¹⁷ In other words, 5G-related statements can build a productive link between conspiracy beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism with conspiracies serving as a “radicalizing multiplier” that hold groups together and “push them in a more extreme and sometimes violent direction.”¹⁸

Mark Steele is one of UK’s most active anti-5G campaigners. As a review of his Telegram channel between January and June 2022 shows, he believes that “5G is here to kill” (09/05). He claims that “safe radiation levels have been increased by regulatory agencies” (06/04); that “5G is a WEAPON and Causes RADIATION CELL POISONING Which is HIGHLY Contageous [sic]” (30/03); and that “CHILDREN [are] GETTING 5G RADIATION INDUCED HEPATITIS” (26/04). “THE 5G WEAPON SYSTEM WILL TAKE DOWN CIVILIAN AND MILITARY AIRCRAFT” (19/01) and vehicles that try to save lives. 5G is an “ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME” (13/03), killing bees (01/06), butterflies (24/03), and roots of trees (29/03). It is a “PLANNED GENOCIDE” (03/02). The Covid-19 vaccination is a “BIO WEAPON DEVELOPED IN CHINA” (15/01) and if Covid-19 does indeed exist, then it has further weakened our immune systems because “THE NANO PARTICLE CONTAMINATION IN THE COVID 19 VACCINE” is linked with 5G (26/04).

Steele’s world is controlled by evil conspirators. He states that the “connection between 5G electromagnetic radiation and the symptoms of so-called COVID 19 [are] all planned by the World Economic Forum (New World Order) to depopulate the World and implement their dystopian Great Reset to enslave the Human Race” (09/04). His fight against 5G is a fight against those “SATANIC NAZI’S PAEDO’S [who] ARE PLANNING OUR DESTRUCTION” (22/05), which include Boris Johnson (who is shown with a Hitler mustache, with a Nazi Anstecker, swastikas, vaccination needles and 5G infrastructure in the background, making a Hitler salute), the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, the political establishment in Norway, Portugal, Italy, Romania, France, Germany, Greece, Spain, Netherlands, Chile, Serbia, Croatia, Korea, etc., “and, of course, [the] Director-General of the World Health Organization” (22/05). Steele’s fight against 5G is a fight against ‘Jewish domination’ of the world. It is apparently a fight against Nazis and, at the same time, a fight against “FAKE ECO WARRIORS AND COMMUNISTS” who are supporting governments, the World Health Organization and the World Economic Forum (04/06).

¹⁶ Maria Pope, “How Britain Fell for the 5G Conspiracy Theory,” *Vice*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pke7yv/5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-origin>.

¹⁷ Jamie Bartlett & Carl Miller, *The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism* (London: Demos, 2010).

¹⁸ Bartlett & Miller, *Power of unreason*, 4-5.

Steele's sweeping swipe at 'them' (i.e. everyone and anyone who is not 'us') also includes a fight against antifascists. At various occasions he includes messages by the Antifa Public watch, which is an anti-antifa group that, according to its own description on Telegram, is against those that call themselves 'antifa' and shut down free speech. Like Lee Garret, another anti-5G activist, Steele might state that he does not necessarily support the far-right; that he is "not political" yet "fully anti-establishment" (06/06). And he calls for political action. For example, he asks followers to sign petitions to prohibit 5G technology in the UK (15/03), encourages them to notify neighbors and "alert the local business owners [...] ask them to put a poster in the front window distribute the posters to the general public" (30/03), and he provides a template for a letter to be sent to Members of Parliament, which he regards as vitally important because "SCUM IN PARLIAMENT SAY THAT 24 HOUR RADIATION POLLUTION RF/MW WILL NOT DESTROY YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM TO FIGHT OFF DISEASE AND 5G HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH COVID19/CORONA VIRUS" (09/04). He encourages people to join the 5G Action Group (13/04) and joins in when other Telegram users state that, "JUNE IS 5G LED URBAN RADAR BLACK OUT MONTH. Use a black bag or canvas bag find somebody who is fit and able to shimmy up a LED light pole, completely cover the light...be safe, have people at the bottom or some sort of harness system for safety. Or use a cherry picker. USE stickers from the 5G action group plus the posters & educate the locals about the legal 5G LED urban radar lights being fitted on their street" (04/06).

Here, the claim is that 5G needs to be blacked out because it is both exalted and extensively distributed in the city. Pointing to an image that shows 5G infrastructure installed at a church building, Steele writes: "This picture says so much. 5G is the 'God' of the trans-humanist, technocratic agenda. It paves the way for the 'Internet of Things' and a techno-fascist dystopia" (23/03). If techno-fascism is the authoritarian rule that is executed by technocrats, then it is with the expertise on 5G that the world is coming to an end. To achieve this end, 5G is being applied systematically in the city. 5G is a cellular network, i.e. services are divided into small geographical areas, so-called 'cells', with local antennas. Steele, like other anti-5G campaigners, reads this technical characteristic in terms of the spatiality of a particular grid: the "KILL GRID" is "THEIR MASS MURDER PLAN" (09/05); "KILL GRID 5G CITY FOR THE EXTERMINATION OF MANKIND" (21/05).

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5G is being discursively constructed as an important tool of economic globalization without problematizing its contribution to the exacerbation of global injustices. Anti-5G activists directly attack antifascists and describe the visibility of technical infrastructure as proof of 'total oppression.' These are just some of the ways delineating how antifascism is in a relation with 5G and they pose several questions.

What is the value and what is the danger of even paying attention to anti-5G conspiracy beliefs? For good reasons, the radical left has been critical for a long time of the value of free speech and scientific rationalism as methods of apprehending truth. Lennard's arguments underscore crucial points: a "racist for whom the tenets of white supremacy are foundational will not be swayed by [...] correctness" and "[I]beral appeals to Truth will not break through a fascist epistemology of power and domination."¹⁹ If fascists must not be given a platform, if even direct confrontation with them can lead to their empowerment as some antifascists keep suggesting in controversies

¹⁹ Lennard, *Being numerous*, 13.

with autonomous antifa groups, then it is also important to consider that anti-5G conspiracies, while being in their sphere of influence, are not at the center of far-right ideologies. If these beliefs can be coopted by right-wing extremists, how can they be used to create anti-oppressive and non-hierarchical spaces? Conspiracy 'theories' can incorporate any kind of counter-argument into their narratives and use it as an argument to opposite ends. Yet, they may also "allow individuals to question or challenge dominance hierarchies and query the actions of powerful groups."²⁰ What happens when anti-5G statements are juxtaposed with statements about the capitalist need of endless economic growth? Can a space be opened that becomes uncontrollable for fascists?

How can antifascism usefully intervene in physical urban spaces? Since 2020, several 5G masts have been vandalized. How can antifascist interventions differ spatially and visually from those of right-wing extremists? Rather than entering into a competition with the 5G Action Group and, in so doing, becoming useful for anti-antifa, how can a radical understanding of ongoing socio-economic and democratic problems be nurtured? Some research indicates that "ridiculing conspiracy claims could be effective in reducing conspiracy belief."²¹ While I have argued against counter-arguing above, antifascism has an impressive track record of both rigorous documentation and satirical re-presentation of the activities of right-wing extremists that helps us understand paranoid, exclusionary and destructive agendas. Being aware of the delicate nature of this work, how and to what extent can some of it be made visible in the public realm? Can satires of technological conspiracies become powerful interventions in anti-5G interventions?

How can antifascism keep producing alternative urban imaginaries by emphasizing relationships between direct, structural, and symbolic types of violence? If antifascism and the far-right are both insurrectionary in that they challenge the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, how can 5G neither be exalted ('5G is God') nor equalized with genocide and ecocide? The aim is to replace an aesthetic of total oppression with an anti-oppressive and non-hierarchical aesthetic. How can cities be imagined beyond conservative categories of urban beauty that reproduce Western norms and white standards, experimenting with aesthetic categories such as the excessive, the comical, and the superficial?²² Exploring this question enables an urban aesthetic that is not built around an account of 5G as techno-fascist dystopia but based on a critical examination of 5G as a global capitalist tool that can expedite fascist tendencies.

²⁰ Karen Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turkay Nefes, Chee Siang Ang, Farzin Deravi, "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Advances in Political Psychology*, 40, no. 1 (2019), 17.

²¹ Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," 23.

²² For a discussion of conservative approaches to capitalist urban aesthetics, see Günter Gassner, *Ruined Skylines: Aesthetics, politics, and London's towering cityscape* (London: Routledge, 2020).