Glenn Beck and Affective Media Production

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Introduction

After the election of Barack Obama as US president in 2008, Glenn Beck emerged as a powerful populist demagogue and leader of the Tea Party from the pulpit of *Fox* . A cross between *Network's* Howard Beale, Father Caughlin and Oprah, Beck was not simply another right-wing populist pundit whose outrage reset with each news cycle. Rather he engaged in seeming revolutionary exposition in consecrating a populist community across media space, unified by a transgressive dehumanization of its enemy. It's hard to overstate the radical break from convention presented by Beck as the programme ranged from deep apocalypticism to the warmth of a prayer meeting. Beck's shtick was the befuddled everyman who, reacting to a crisis-stricken America, is emotionally wracked by the burden of being the messenger of this reality. Delivering 20-minute monologues about the global caliphate or communists in the academy, Beck manoeuvres between fear, anger, sarcasm, intellectualism and tranquillity, while gesticulating or crying. Tears are Beck's affective currency, not simply because they are good television but in the affective solicitation to the populist fetish of the Tea Party.

This article looks at the *Glenn Beck Program* as an example of affective media production. In a media environment where cats, self-expressive modes of discourse and "inspirational response to bully" videos drive media consumption and internet traffic, affect functions as a central political and economic logic. The principle economic logic is the audience commodity performing affective labour. Beck's viewers produce the spectacle of Tea Party protest for *Fox* and consume Beck's program, reading list and end-times commodities as part of revolutionary preparedness (Author 2013). This is simultaneously a question of political ontology as affective media draws us into social and libidinal circuits of desire. Accounts of affective labour and media produsage bear the traces of Hardt and Negri's teleology of the multitude: the social nature of affective media production eludes capitalist control and opens new spaces for radical democracy. Beck and the Tea Party problematize humanist assumptions of such affective labour theory. Instead of the emancipatory multitude, populism is insular and fetishistic

Beck's ability to unite Tea Party members as an audience community rests upon his affective invitation to the populist lifeworld. The unhinged emotional range and appeal to the Tea Party signifier functions as an affective solicitation connected to the viewers' own inner libidinal investments. Beck's audience defines the populist political logic of 'affective investment in a partial object' (Laclau 2005, 116): the signifier "Tea Party" becomes a placeholder for republican virtue, free-market capitalism and Christianity (Author 2012). This partial object, or *objet petit a*, is the basis for a Tea Party hegemonic chain of equivalence dividing the social space between a people and its enemy. This affective investment takes a properly fetishistic turn (Žižek 2008) by constructing the people's enemy. The enemy is overdetermined by contradictory evils projected upon it, necessary for experiencing an obscene jouissance in participating in the movement.

This article identifies the political, economic and libidinal logic of affective media before turning to an analysis of Beck's affective performance at the level of text. Beck personally embodies the turmoil of the populist dichotomy; whether in viciously dehumanizing the enemy or consecrating his community in warmth and reciprocity. The "9-12" project launched on his program shifts seamlessly from innumerable threats to the audience's self-realization as universal agents of American history. Beck and his audience share tears, jokes and affirmations as if in group therapy. From this sanctum of affective fraternity, the enemy becomes an obsessive object of study, forever threatening the people's jouissance through their own rapacious enjoyment. The enemy is constructed in anti-Semitic terms, omnipotent yet overcome by carnal desires, from George Soros' addiction to financial manipulation, Barack Obama's college transgressions and the unrestrained avarice of the urban poor.

Where Beck's affective media production threatens a real critical media politics is in his explicit claim to the universal. The obscene jouissance of obsessively ridiculing the enemy is framed in the highest values of journalistic rationalism and "truth-telling". Beck's audience have exclusive access to critical "truth," making them 'people of a special mould…[as the] direct embodiment of the will of history' (Žižek 1991, 252). It's the emancipatory promise of populist exceptionalism that informs Beck's pseudo-intellectual apparatus of chalkboard expositions, book-hawking and the *Beck University* lecture series. The apogee of this affective media logic is Beck's role as 'Parrhesiaste' (Foucault 2001), that is, speaking truth to power despite danger. The emotional work of affective investment becomes wedded to universal truth. Beck's populist authenticity, inner turmoil and belief that Soros is trying to kill him all function as validity claims. Affective media production's ability to engender collaboration is premised upon investment in the fetish and seeming critical media practices which entail the incessant 'epistemological drive' (Lacan 2007, 105) to understand the Other's depravity. Affective media's social logic thus doesn't produce emancipatory politics, instead a populism that claims radical discourses of horizontalism and truth-telling against the fetishized enemy.

Affective Media Production

"Affective media production" borrows from Hardt and Negri who identify affective and immaterial forms of labour as increasingly hegemonic in all spheres of production. My variant of the affective labour thesis limits itself to identifying the centrality of mediatized forms of affect to the fields of journalism and media as a political economic logic. Where Hardt and Negri speak of the general condition of capital to harness 'networks based on communication, collaboration and affective relationships' (66) my concern focusses on media production. While arguments can be made about the extent to which the exploitation of affective labour in service industries represents a new reality of capital, media production and consumption has demonstrably changed. Journalism and news media have always relied upon the 'affective encounter of bodies across space' (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xvi), but journalistic ideals of self-reflexivity and rationalism have been superseded by affective validation. The emergence of mobile devices as the new terrain for market expansion has transformed "traditional" content and practices to reflect the affective character of social media, in the pursuit of 'free labour' (Terranova 2004) from audiences and users. Affective solicitation is not simply a strategy of keeping pace

with new media practices, or enticing users with "clickbait", it represents the perfection of the media's model of audience commodification. In what Fuchs designates the calls 'prosumer audience commodity' (2012), users voluntarily surrender their personal preferences and intimate details opening the potential for 'infinite exploitation' (714) in social and productive spheres.

Beck's program performed exactly this function for *Fox,* cementing the network's brand strategy of 'craft[ing] intensive relationships with their viewers' (Jones 2012, 180). Beck connected the network to the far-flung libertarian, Bircher and militia strains of the Republican grassroots. In aiding, promoting and even staging Tea Party events, *Fox* reinforces its brand community, engendering a loyal and active audience whose free labour creates the very spectacle of protest *Fox* covers. These viewers do not merely follow *Fox* as a trusted media source but as an authentic voice in the populist struggle. It's this authenticity that allows Beck to sell gold, home security systems, and other "end-times" commodities as an extension of the movement. This is affective prosumption in the sense that it relies upon a broader 'sense of connection and participation in something that is larger than one's self…provid[ing] the impetus for exploring new techniques and practices of communication and affective productions' (Cote and Pybus 2007, 96). The indeterminate moralistic Tea Party cry of "Take Back Our Country!" elicits an affective drive of *Fox* viewers to fill the signifier "Tea Party". This affective labour should not be thought of as *a priori* controlled by media corporations as some of these energies may exceed *Fox's* remit[1]. Indeed, Beck himself was released by *Fox* over his monopolization of this free labour putting him in conflict with management and traditional advertisers, while also leading to an increasingly deluded political voice, even by his standards.

The affective labour thesis, as conceived by autonomist Marxists (Hardt and Negri 2004, Terranova 2004) and libertarian cyber-utopians (Coleman 2014, Benkler 2006), has primarily sought to identify new emancipatory modes of politics emerging through affective media labour. There has been a great deal of excitement in the emergence of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, but little consideration of how a phenomenon like Beck embodies affective labour and its discourse of social transformation. The key metaphor here is 'the rhizome' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7) where politics is dispersed with no central locus as a flow between bodies with 'no beginning or end' (ibid, 27). In affective media theory, networked communications are deemed rhizomatic 'upend[ing] the ideological divide between individualism and collectivism' (Coleman, 2014, p. 49-50). While Hardt and Negri have a theory of labour exploitation they channel the teleologies of Classical Marxism in claiming that affective labour transcends its capture by capital. For affective networks to function there must be creative autonomy from the 'mechanisms of control [that] contradict the productivity of biopolitical labour' (2009, 144). Conceived in this way, there is an inability to see radical illiberalism as a genuine product of affective media or be contained within circuits of capital.

While the affective passions of Beck's audience were too unruly for *Fox,* they did not supersede capital as Beck transformed this audience into an empire[2]. Where Deleuzian affective labour theory posits connectivity as innately critical, Dean's Lacanian Marxist reading of new media subjectivities is of neoliberal individuation and 'community without community' (2010a, 22). Whatever critical potential exists, affective media produces a notion of social transformation analogous to its own

logic. Once, Beck unwittingly channelled Deleuze and deterritorialization, entreating his audience 'to spit yourself out of the system, you've got to be nomadic, un-flagged' (Fox 2010). The task thus is to theorize affect as a political logic rather than rely upon a humanism with no theory of rupture outside of 'people's natural and healthy propensity to revolt' (Laclau, 243).

Affect and the Political

The political subject of affective media is not the rational humanist ideal supposed by Hardt and Negri and others, but the psychoanalytic subject of drives and libidinal investments. Political rupture is not born simply of connectivity and sociality but the libidinal rewards of political identity. Our incessant interactions in and through affective media function as a Lacanian drive that is 'a closed circular movement…[which] generates its own satisfaction' (Žižek 2014 412). Affective encounters accordingly bind users in circuits of capital and drive to 'extend affective networks without encouraging – and indeed, by displacing – their consolidation into organized political networks' (Dean 2010a, 42). Where these conditions of affective media production extend beyond insular drive is in the Lacanian logic of desire. This is precisely how the signifier "Tea Party" functions as a nodal point of 'affective investment' (Laclau 116) which represents an America reconciled in free-market capitalism, republican virtue, frontier fecundity, the second amendment and Christianity (Author 2012). Enjoyment and the pleasures of affective media must be understood in terms of unfulfilled desire, whether the ceaseless joys of interactivity and increasing one's reach, to the anxiety over miscommunication or the unliked post. In the Tea Party, there is a convergence of affective energies from the mediatized sense of participating in "something" with that something the incessant drive for the lost object: a primordial American frontier capitalism.

At this stage it's import to distinguish between Deleuzian affect theory and Lacanian Marxism, ie,; anti-Oedipus versus symbolic castration. The distinction is between a phenomenological understanding of affective connectivity—seen as politically productive in its own right—or antagonism as an ontologically-necessary precondition for political identity. For Deleuzians 'desire is open, drifting, expanding, productive' (Žižek 2014, 412) with affects generated in this circulation. This is captured in Ahmed's notion of affective economies where 'the accumulation of affective values shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds' (Ahmed 2004, 121). Affect here is a social contagion uniting bodies and dormant communities from the 'outside-in' (Ahmed 2010, 36). Deleuzian affect explicitly rejects the intra-psychic aspects of desire as affects are between bodies and 'if there is backward movement it's not to Oedipus and its threat to castration' (Clough 2008, 4). This contrasts sharply with the inter-subjective dynamics of Lacanian enjoyment where one is wracked by the presence of an other. The key distinction between here is between an affective economy which is productive and Lacanian Marxism's surplus enjoyment where there is always excess. Affective labour and its exploitation depends upon unfulfilled desire, the other threatening our desire and the fundamental lack of symbolic castration making desire possible.

The political encounter of others in affective media is not determined by affects themselves but the internal element of antagonism which is constitutive of political identity. At work is the oedipal logic of populism. The populist community are constituted by libidinal bonds with the signifier "The People" representing an

imagined organic whole analogous to the primordial mother/child relationship. This signifier functions as Lacan's *objet petit a*, promising the 'absent fullness of society' (Laclau, 226). As the fully-reconciled society of the Tea Party cannot be fulfilled, an "other" (Obama) always displaces this fulfilment. Thus the investment in the object denotes an antagonistic division of the social space as the basis for political identity (Mouffe, 15). Laclau and Mouffe hold that this affective identity is nominal, doesn't privilege any particular social actor and bears indeterminate political content. Thus, this affective investment is fleeting with eruptions of the political perpetually dislodging and dissolving identities.

On the question of affective media production and the political, Laclau's populism offers contingency and antagonism as a requiem to humanist teleologies. What is problematic in the formulation of populism is what Žižek calls the fetishistic--'proto-fascist'--logic (2006, 553) and the necessary ideological obfuscation of capitalism inherent in populism. The Tea Party fetish allows the community to disavow the crisis of capitalism with 'I know but nevertheless…' (Žižek 1991, 245). They can sustain their fetishistic belief in free-market capitalism by displacing the crisis onto parasitic agents, such as Obama, Soros and central bankers, who must be destroyed in to 'restore balance and justice' (Žižek 2008, 278). For Žižek the fetishistic defence of identity has an unavoidable trajectory towards fascism, the enemy occupying the same spectral presence as the Jew in Nazism (2006, 556). Laclau and Mouffe can theorize affect and the political far more satisfactorily than Hardt and Negri, yet they fail to account for the stubbornness of the fetish.

Affective media's political potential is dialectical in both channelling drive and affect in complex circuits of capital and in creating antagonistic divisions which are preconditions for the political. Just as not every division is political, with populism, a form of pseudo-politics[3], not every affect is fetishistic. Where the pleasures of communication approach the fetish is in the logic of jouissance. Jouissance is the obscene enjoyment or transgression licensed by the fetish that is caught in the fear and loathing of the other in populism. Jouissance relies upon the ridicule of the other, affirming the populist community, while the other's own enjoyment represents jouissance stolen from the community (Žižek 1997, 43). As both the source of enjoyment and a constant threat, the other becomes an object of obsession and a contradictory amalgam of evils. It's easy to see how the pursuit of jouissance as an end in itself, with no higher emancipatory potential, corresponds to the sociality of affective media. Trolling is exemplary in its obsession with the online presence of the other, whether a political or personal enemy, and the public mocking and ridicule of this other. Some theorists have turned to the hacker group Anonymous as example of sublimation of the affective drive for "LULZ" into 'the pursuit of a rational political goal' (Stoehrel and Lindgren 2014, 257). Whatever acts of resistance are produced through affective pleasures, the relation of this drive to the object is essential. As Lacan states 'sublimate as much as you like; you will have to pay for it with something and that something is called *jouissance*' (1992, 332). In the case of populism engendered by affective media, subjects "do it for the LULZ" in sustaining an overdetermined enemy as a target of derision and source of jouissance.

Glenn Beck's Affective Community

So far I have considered Beck at this macro level of instrumentality for *Fox*. In order to understand what is properly affective and political in his performance it's necessary to enter the micro level of text. The texts selected are key episodes from Beck's oeuvre during his stint on *Fox* from 2009-11. While the program itself was a tireless campaign against Obama, these episodes represent key inflection points that articulate the audience as movement and programming as revolutionary education. These include his creation of the 9/12 movement, the passage of healthcare reform, his three-part series on George Soros and key chalkboard expositions which are regularly featured in the Beck universe.

This analysis is not concerned with authorship or reception as Beck may well be a self-conscious charlatan and audiences range from true believers to masochistic liberals. The selected episodes of the Beck program are treated as texts that bear the political and libidinal logic of affective media. I stress what precisely these texts do. The circulation of affects in media space doesn't, in itself, produce new political subjectivities, rather elicits inner-psychic elements of desire and antagonism. The point of the analysis is not to track outlandish conspiracies but to understand how the performance and content correspond to the populist logics of the friend/enemy grouping, the overdetermined outsider, fetishism, jouissance and the populist claim to the universal. Beck's program is prescriptive, in terms of his didacticism and in the way it imagines social transformation, in and through, affective media.

Early in his tenure at *Fox*, Beck announced his unique populist routine to the world with his Tea Party-inspired 9/12 Project. The project attempted to solicit free labour, monetized by Beck and *Fox*, through an affective invitation to the populist lifeworld and jouissance. Invoking the overdetermined spectre of 9/11 as a metaphor for the populist's existential struggle, Beck's community is overwrought by fear, love and a narcissistic sense of its place in history. Beck's discourse of transformation through affective media practices culminated in a march on Washington on September 12th 2009 and countless other pseudo-political events. Rather than reconcile individualism and collectivism Beck mobilizes a collective of insular libidinal energies in the service of libertarianism.

The 9/12 launch was crafted as a spectacle embodying the light and dark, love and loathing, and friend/enemy groupings that define the populist lifeworld. The show begins with Beck backstage announcing, 'I'm going to show you that you aren't alone' (2009a). What follows is a lurid video fusing the threats of Mexican drug cartels, terrorism, Unions, Wall St, high corporate tax rates, foreign corporations and Washington DC, juxtaposed to Tea Party people who 'just know what is right' and have made America 'the world's beacon of freedom' (ibid). The last image shows two men in the aftermath of 9/11 hugging, rocking and crying as affective affirmation of populist brotherhood. The video concludes cutting to Beck, backstage, fighting back tears and urging his audience to 'remember who you were that day after 9/11'. This affective assault on the senses sets up the promise of the fetish as a "hug-it-out" fraternity and an emotional break-down analogous to evangelical rebirth, that simultaneously licenses wild fantasies of the enemy.

From this backstage space of darkness, Beck emerges in a choreographed emotional rise, with cued audience applause and a brightly-lit talk-show set, to declare 'we aren't alone'. Beck proceeds to detail the reach of his audience community from the

studio, to Chuck Norris' ranch, military bases, bars and churches in 'virtually every small town and big city in this great nation'. Beck's claim to stand as the historical agent of "Real America", what Laclau describes in populism as the *plebs* claim as *populous* (2005, 86), is secured by pandering to his audience in a manner symptomatic of affective media production. Standing in front of a mural of social media images of his viewers to read "We The People" [figure 1], Beck offers a mawkish version of affective media transformation:

> The mosaic proves that a single photo is just a face…but thousands of them grouped together in the right way can create something much more powerful

While this appropriation of the rhizome has no traces of Deleuzian poetry it speaks to the malleability of affective media discourses. Affective media production makes promises to both the populist fetishist and the multitude while reinforcing neo-liberal individuation and a political reward structure of narcissism and jouissance.

Figure 1: The Launch of Beck's 9/12 Project (2009a)

The apogee of this affective movement discourse is articulated in a moment which provided fodder for late-night comics. Tearfully overcome by the support of his audience, he claims the 9/12 project proves that 'the real power to change America lies with you, you are the secret, you are the answer'. It's hard to think of a more contrived moment of affective sincerity than Beck's tearful entreaties to his audience's narcissism. Beck's tears are an invitation to the community and they cement a fetishistic solidarity through the performative ritual of religious testimony[4]. It's instructive of how affect works within fetishistic libidinal circuits. These tears aren't external productive energy but entirely insular, appealing to the fetishist's unfulfilled desire. In this sense, Beck's tears work at the level of symbolic efficiency. Jodi Dean (2010b) advances the notion that drive in affective media thrives on the decline of symbolic efficiency or the collapse of meaning. Disparate individualized channels of communication have a debilitating effect on political organization and lead to endless discussions, misrecognition and taxonomical identity politics. Conversely Beck's insular fetishistic community precisely embodies the symbolic efficiency and the logic of the political that is possible in affective media production.

The return of symbolic efficiency allows Beck to marry a discourse of rhizomatic individualism with a fetishistic uniformity of opinion, from the over-enthusiastic

nodding of the studio audience to panelists exalting Beck as a prophet. Beck and the 9/12 committee can even profess an intense concern for co-optation, process and individualism (2010a) that belies a community wholly reconciled in the fetish. Beck aligns his movements with post-hierarchical politics and the chair of 9/12 describes their organization as:

> truly grassroots, just like capitalism. If you don't have people at the top giving orders it gives people the freedom to make decisions and use their creativity (2010a).

This statement perfectly captures Beck's logic of affective media production. It creates the illusion of a non-hirearchical capitalism made possible by the Tea Party fetish of capitalism as a primordial wholeness. The affective investment in this fetish and the "creative freedoms" of followers allows Beck to exploit this labour and conflate his avarice and profit with virtue.

The Ominpotent Enemy

In affectively cementing a community in fetishism it's necessary to demarcate the antagonistic enemy as both a threat and source of enjoyment. This enemy of the people becomes an object of obsessive "revolutionary" study, producing its own circular conspiratorial enjoyment. For the populist the enemy is over-determined by a raft of contradictory evils all deriving from their own excessive enjoyment which threatens the people. Fittingly the Obama-as-Joker meme became widely circulated at Tea Party events and social media. The joker is a figure of obscene jouissance whose enjoyment is based on collapsing the people's order and morality, and yet he possesses 'no ideological agenda except to overturn order and incite chaos' (Acherman, 9). The spectral figure of the enemy 'condenses around itself a plurality of meanings' (Laclau 2005, 22), Obama and Soros simultaneously represent the lumpenproletariat and the financial elite, are incompetent yet omnipotent, masters of Machivellian dark arts and amoral rascals. The enemy's omnipotence is rendered in terms of jouissance and sexual pathology in an episode devoted entirely to the theory that the Obama administration represents the high point of Bernaysian libidinal mastery (2011). In one of Beck's recurrent chalkboard expositions, the "Timeline of Communism", he includes key dates such as 1848 (Communist Manifesto), 1871 (Paris Commune) and 2000 when super-model Gisele wore a bikini featuring the post-modern image of Che Guevara (2010c) [figure 2]. There is no irony intended in Beck's statement. This "event" is seen as a material demonstration of the enemy's libidinal power as a confluence of depravity and ruthless political efficiency.

Figure 2: Beck's "Timeline of Communism" (2010c)

The height of this over-determined and anti-semitic[5] discourse of the enemy occurred in Beck's three-part series on Soros entitled *The Puppet Master*. The opening credits feature puppeteers pulling strings with the names of Soros' various philanthropic institutions but also the street sign 'Wall St' [figures 3 and 4]. In a precise rendering of the fascist rhetoric of financial parasitism, Beck imagines Soros, the hedge-fund manager and liberal philanthropist, running a shadow-world government with functionaries like Obama. The pathological figure Beck casts is necessary to sustain the fetishistic belief in American capitalism, treating hedge funds as abnormal. Beck asks rhetorically: 'Is it a coincidence that everything under the sun when it comes to capitalism is targeted for regulation by congress except for hedge funds?' (2010g). As with anti-Semitic denunciations of finance, the critique of capitalism is replaced with an obscene enemy perverting the system. Soros did play a devastating role in the East-Asian financial crisis of the 1990s, but Beck doesn't attribute this to financial class power but Soros' insatiable jouissance. Beck explains: 'he loves turning countries inside out and upside down. He got hooked on it, he has to feed the addiction' (ibid). Having already denounced Soros as a self-hating Nazi collaborator (2010f) Beck invokes the classic figure of anti-semitism--the vampire--to describe Soros as an 'economic war criminal who sucks the blood of people' (2010g). In this scenario the Tea Party are the Christian virgin threatened with defilement as 'he [Soros] says America is his next target' (2010f).

Figures 3 and 4: Beck's three part series on George Soros entitled "The Puppet Master" (2010e)

In his broadcast after the passage of the Affordable Care Act (2010b), Beck elaborated upon this parasitic network of stolen jouissance. Beck's exposition conforms neatly with Žižek's classification of the 'inauthentic fundamentalist' (2001, 68) whose obsession with the other's *jouissance* is an acting-out of their own inner

turmoil. Beck characterizes the Obama/Soros apparatus as 'California hippy Marxist socialist communist progressive, sticking flowers in the barrel [sic], sitting around smoking dope during college…I bet you a lot of them are still doing it.' (2010b). This jouissance is linked specifically to political efficacy as the Democrats are both 'dirty spineless weasels' *and* 'ruthless, morally bankrupt and the ends-justify-the-means Saul Alinskyites…[who] will do anything including eat their own' (ibid). There is no paradox here as the overdetermined enemy is "ruthless" by virtue of being "spineless" slaves to their passions. At one point in his healthcare monologue, Beck demands: 'Tell me Barack Obama what were you doing? What were you doing when you were going to college, who were you hanging out with?' (2010b). Constructing Obama as a cipher, or jouissance personified, allows him to stand in for multiple excesses embodying the libertarian paranoiac view of the masses as simultaneously a force for communism and fascism. He is at once a libertine of the 1960s counter-culture, the terror of a mobilized African-American lumpenproletariat and a ruthless autocrat.

What is central to these wild claims of Obama and Soros' network of jouissance is an affective solicitation to the insular world of the fetish. Beck's claims are validated by an ineffable sense of stolen enjoyment and victimization. Where this converges with affective media practices is in the circuits of outrage, obsession and trolling as a source of jouissance made possible by the superfluousness of tweets, memes and youtube clips. In the same monologue, Beck further unpacks this obscene network of solipsistic radicals, transitioning to who he describes as 'the real bulk of [Obama's] army' (2010b). Beck then proceeds to play a recording made by a right-wing radio host who interviewed African-American residents from Detroit applying to a federal anti-homelessness program The clip is completely decontextualized but serves as "proof" of the enemies rapaciousness by reference to the fetishist imaginary:

> *Reporter*: Why are you here?
> *Women*: To get some money.
> *Reporter*: What kind of money?
> *Women*: Obama money.
> *Reporter*: Where's it coming from?
> *Women*: Obama.
> *Reporter*: Where did Obama get it?
> *Women*: I don't know his stash [laughing]. I don't know. I don't know where he got it from, but he givin' it to us to help us, and we love him.
> *Women*: That's why we voted for him.
> [children chanting: Obama! Obama!] (ibid)

The racist imaginary here is unrestrained; hordes of inner-city blacks on welfare and Regan's specter of unmarried "Welfare Queens" having children. Their jouissance is dependent upon the enemy's obscene alliance of elites and the poor who deprive the people of their enjoyment and virtuous toil through progressive taxation. In the world of the Tea Party fetish, there is no disconnect between this racism and the claim to stand for King and the civil rights movement as they resist the Obama network and its progressive 'chains of slavery' (Beck 2010b).

Parrhesia

The affective sociality of Beck's audience is clearly not the rhizomatic realization of a latent multitude. Rather than the reconciliation of individualism and the collective, these affective encounters possess an ontology of fetishist individuation and a communal structure of jouissance. In spite of these reactionary politics, Beck instrumentalizes affective media's notion of critical universality. Beck's audience imagine themselves engaging in transformative social practices[6] prefiguring a new universalist millenarian community. Populist ontology depends upon a discourse of universality, and a victimized people with exclusive access to a radical "truth". The populists are imbued with the universal, or as Thomas Jefferson declared of the frontier yeoman, they are 'the chosen people of god…whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue' (1975, 217). The Tea Party's fetishistic worship of the founders and the constitution is important here as it bridges bourgeois enlightenment with the affective validity claims of the community. In this way, Beck models himself as a modern day Thomas Paine 'daring to ask reasonable questions in unreasonable times' (2009b).

Beck's affective performance adopts the classical rhetoric of 'parrhessia' (Foucault 2001); a form of plain-speaking demonstrating 'the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger' (ibid, 16). While the modern Cartesian subject of enlightenment arrives at truth through a self-critical process of 'evidential experience', the parrhessiaste's truth is guaranteed by 'moral qualities' (ibid, 14-15) of courage and sincerity. Beck's claim to truth-telling is validated by the affective baring of his soul and his vulnerabilities. What is unique is Beck's attempt to wed a populist epistemology to the universalism of enlightenment rationalism. As Hofstader's classic study of anti-communist extremism describes, these movements are 'intensely rationalistic' (1965, 36), built by the pseudo-scholarship of anti-intellectual intellectuals. Thus, Beck's chalkboard expositions, the stable of right-wing public intellectuals he relies upon and the Beck University subscription service provide the semblance of academic rigor in a self-referential populist universe where the drive for "truth" is merely a function of enjoyment and jouissance.

Key to the role of the parrhesiaste is describing the personal journey which has brought Beck to his awakening. Mirroring the language of evangelical redemption and revolutionary conceptions of political awakening, the truth deracinates. In one of the episodes where Beck outlines the communist/progressive plot, he reveals his own disbelief as validating this unimpeachable truth. The episode features an interview with a revisionist historian about his book rehabilitating Joseph McCarthy:

> I picked up this book about 2-3 years ago…I put it down and the reason why I put it down is, I don't want to believe this. I don't want to believe it. I put it down and went, "I'm not ready to hear that", "I can't handle that". Please America, please read this book (2010c).

This "truth" is not arrived at through self-reflexivity but is affectively validated in the loop of pain and jouissance that is fetishized identity. Yet Beck appeals to seemingly rationalist practices and disavows the closed logic of his populist epistemology. In his truth-telling mode he continually urges: 'Don't just listen to me but do your own homework, research yourself, this is far too important' (2010e), directing viewers to his own website as a primary source (2010f). Beck assigns scholarly weight to his chalkboard expositions as if this requires careful unpacking rather than simply

affective identification. Introducing his series of broadcasts on Soros, Beck urged his audience: 'We are trying to get through a very difficult problem in a short period of time I ask that you VCR or DVR every episode this week' (2010e). Where this echoes a critical media sensibility is in the logic of radical enlightenment, as Beck claims his "truth" is arming the people 'with the most powerful weapon you have, information you need' (2010f).

Figure 5: Beck's "personal story" (2010e)

Central to Beck's shtick and the affective logic of the program is his role as the tortured parrhesiaste. Beneath the surface of every program lies an anguish and suffering that the truth inflicts upon him. Speaking to Alveida King before his rally to claim the mantle of Martin Luther King, Beck spoke of facing down the perceived threat of violence from the likes of the New Black Panther party by 'link[ing] arms and sing[ing] a hymn' (2010d). He regularly forcasts his martyrdom since leaving *Fox*, however this formula was crystallized in his series on Soros. At the end of Beck's first breathless program on Soros, he transitions from his chalkboard/professorial context to a part of his set which has been transformed to appear like his sitting room [figure 5]. Adorned with Americana, this sanctum of populist lifeworld is where Beck reveals the cost of truth stating: 'There is a personal story we need to share with you' (2010e). He proceeds to explain how a representative of Soros' reached out to Beck to request a meeting. The representative is described as wild and out of control demanding Beck cease his attacks on Soros. When Beck's producer stood firm on the validity of Beck's claims Soros' representative is described as offering a clear threat:

> He looked at my executive and said, "I don't think you hear me", "I don't think you understand. Glenn Beck is hurting Mr Soros and his business" (ibid).

This "threat" looms large over the next two episodes as Beck accepts the consequences for his truth-telling as he resolves that: 'as long as I have breath I will always speak what I think is the truth' (ibid).

While resolved to this fate, Beck slips from tranquility to anguish as if simply serving as the medium for a truth which is more powerful than his own frail humanity. In the final Soros episode, Beck shifts to unbridled apocalypticism entreating his audience to embrace this painful truth:

> Look I know that soon, soon, the gates of *hell* [headrocking for emphasis] are going to be opened up...It's time to take a stand! You have to take a stand because my children and your children's freedom is at stake (2010g).

Beck's affective performance of sincerity and sacrifice are used to show the indisputable nature of his claims. In signing off from the program Beck performs a self-aggrandizing gesture that suggests that this act might be his last stating that: 'I'd like to be remembered for three things. Question with boldness, hold to truth, speak without fear' (ibid). Whether Beck believes this or not is irrelevant, this performance of parrhesia allows his community to experience themselves as the universal class facing down the enemy in a virtuous struggle.

Conclusion

Beck is exemplary of affective media production; his show and media empire rely upon the exploitation of personal affective moments and expounding an ideal of social transformation. His audience are a loyal army consuming his media ventures, reading lists and end-times commodities; while simultaneously experiencing a form of social collaboration and rebellion. It would seem antithetical to boosters of affective media that Beck's audience could embody the values of the rhizome, however Beck marries this notion of social transformation with a communal structure of individuation and jouissance. The labour of Beck's audience is affective but it doesn't exceed capitalism as malleable social ideals of autonomy are appropriated into circuits of drive. In fact, Beck achieves something quite remarkable in imaging his movement of private property fetishists as the digital multitude. Against Hardt and Negri's teleology of affective labour, there is nothing innately critical about the sociality of Beck's audience. Their affective energies aren't productive beyond a fetishistic outburst of antagonism which simply reaffirms jouissance and populist desire. Put simply, affect doesn't short circuit the political work of ideology and organization through a humanist uniting of bodies in media space.

Beck's followers aren't merely polarized, a concern common of normative liberal communication studies, but embody the populist logic of the political. Here affective media production engenders the political as the signifier "Tea Party" emerges as an object of radical investment. This signifier is overdetermined, replacing a holistic ideal of the social reconciled in private property, a people of boundless virtue and a rapacious enemy responsible for the theft of the people's jouissance. Beck's emotional performance is an affective invitation to the movement with communal solidarity and warmth cemented by the vicious dehumanization of the enemy. Where social media politics has generally meant the 'decline of symbolic efficiency' (Dean 2010b, 5), the eruption of an antagonistic fetishistic populism is the kind of symbolic efficiency possible in affective media. Beck's audience aren't prone to the endless discussions aimed at clarifying their political lexicon, as is characteristic of left social media. The fetish and affective validation are shortcuts to meaning. When Beck sheds tears he is appealing to the insular libidinal energies of the populist who simply know Beck is right by virtue of their own affective investments.

Beck's Tea Party populism clearly doesn't approach emancipatory politics, rather it's caught an incessant drive for jouissance, pursued as its own end and never fully

attained. Beck and his audience are obsessed with their enemy, imagined as an omnipotent amalgamation of contradictory evils and personal pathologies of jouissance. Soros is "addicted" to destroying countries, Obama is a pot-smoking campus Marxist and inner-city African Americans are having children out of wedlock. While populism calls for the enemy's destruction, this enemy cannot be transcended as they are necessary to enjoy the fetish of the reconciled community. In a manner analogous to anti-semitism, it's the very presence of the Jew/enemy that sustains the myth of the social whole and licenses a transgressive jouissance. Beck and the Tea Party can consequently imagine themselves as inheritors of the civil rights legacy while engaging in vile attacks on the black working-class.

Beck's impact on American political discourse has been profound, not simply in the popularization and dissemination of his conspiracies but in the semblance of radical critique. In many ways, affective media politics may resemble the political at a formal level, yet this is void of critical potential as with Beck's "community" of individuation or parrhesia sans critique. It's not enough to say that affective media production co-opts social energies and diverts political potential, an epistemological drive is built-in as a pre-condition for the exploitation of affective labour. In his role as parrhesiaste, Beck panders to his audiences' sense of radical knowingness and persecution. They imagine the omnipotent enemy as an existential threat; shared experience of this perceived vulnerability function as proof-positive that the people have access to a critical "truth" and represent the universal will of history. This populist knowledge assumes a radical emancipatory quality similar to other forms of "truth will out" politics; from Alex Jones and 9/11 Truthers to the hacker politics of Anonymous. In the affective subsumption of the universal, this pseudo-critical knowledge regularly devolves into depoliticized-libertarian notions of power and politics in which the people are encircled by both fascists and communists. What should be clear from this case study is that a critical media politics will not simply arise by virtue of the social characteristics of affective media production as contemporary media relies upon the proliferation of pseudo-critical discourses in soliciting affective labour.

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[1] There is no better demonstration of this than the emergence of Donald Trump as force of pure jouissance untethered from the discipline of *Fox*, the party and its donors.

[2] Forbes (2014) magazine listed Beck's 2014 earnings at $90 million dollars, second only to Howard Stern, but more than Oprah, Ellen Degeneres and Rush Limbaugh.

[3] While the concept of the political as ontologically necessary is useful I would hold that the distinction between authentic political rupture and populism would be a project which delineates an enemy in ethico-political terms rather than the fetishist imaginary.

[4] The chair of the 9/12 project spoke of the power of Beck's word as evidenced by her uncontrollable weeping upon hearing Beck on his radio program (Beck 2010d).

[5] Beck's anti-semitism is deceptive as he simultaneously associates Soros with anti-semitic tropes while holding Israel and conservative Jews in the highest esteem. This is more than just the evangelical enthusiasm for Israel as part of an end-times scenario. This deep solidarity with the state of Israel allows Tea Partiers to indulge in notions of persecution analogous to the Jews and anti-Semitism.

[6] Whether radical education, survivalist agricultural production or the exchange of metallic currency all are based on an "off-the-grid" social alternative. Of course all of these "alternative" models of social relations are directly monetized by Beck.