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Contesting far-right identification: Oedipal myth, embodied affects and agonistic choreopolitics

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Over the past two decades, far-right political parties have gained power, particularly in Europe, by capitalising on developments like multiculturalism, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and social media influence. Parties such as the Brothers of Italy, the French National Rally and Hungarian Fidesz, among others, promote nationalist agendas centred on identity politics, traditional family values and scapegoating. Events like the EU enlargement (2004, 2007), the debt crisis (2009–18), migration surges (2015–) and health and energy crises (2019–) have fuelled their rise, with far-right groups often blaming immigrants for societal challenges, fostering discrimination, xenophobia and racism through the promotion of a monocultural, nativist identity. This article explores how to challenge such discourses and promote a pluralistic, intercultural view of identification. It examines identification through the Oedipal complex, interpreting the traditional psychoanalytic triad (Mother, Father, Child) in political terms, and extending it to a quadratic structure to incorporate the (ant) agonistic other. This approach, drawing on psychoanalysis, helps understand how exclusionary nationalist discourses are formed beyond merely ideological fantasies and how they can be contested, highlighting the affective and bodily traces of identification that shape agonistic subjectivities.

Identification, as a psychoanalytic concept, has been most explicitly theorised in relation to the Oedipal complex, initially formulated by Sigmund Freud. Freud (Freud, 1921; [1923] 1960) described the Oedipal complex as a crucial stage in a boy's psychosexual development, typically occurring between the ages of three and six. In its classical formulation, Freud sees it as a triangular structure involving the child, the mother and the father. Initially, the male child experiences two distinct psychological ties: an identification with his father (the desire to be like him) and the choice of his mother as an object of desire (the desire to have her). At first, these ties coexist without conflict. However, as the boy's mental life becomes more unified, these attachments converge, giving rise to the Oedipus complex. In this

process, the father is perceived as a rival who limits the boy's access to the mother, asserting that she is not an object of unrestricted possession. This results in rivalry and hostility towards the father, as his paternal function is perceived as standing in the way of the boy's desire. The conflict intensifies as the boy internalises the father's prohibitive role, recognising the authority that imposes a restriction on his desire for the mother. Central to this conflict is the threat of castration anxiety, the fear of losing the genital organ, which Freud saw as fundamental to the resolution of the Oedipal conflict. The boy experiences this anxiety as a fear of literal castration by the father, who is perceived as possessing the power to enforce the prohibition. In response, the boy relinquishes his incestuous desire for the mother and identifies with the father, adopting his authority and values as a means of securing his place within the symbolic and social order. According to Freud, the identification with parents marks a shift in the child's psychic development, allowing them to internalise the authority of the same-sex parent rather than continuing to oppose it. It is through identification that the child enters the symbolic order, aligning with societal and cultural norms. The resolution of the Oedipal complex is thus essential for the formation of the child's subjectivity and their proper integration into the social world.

While Freud's focus on identification in the Oedipus complex revolves around the boy's emotional ties to his parents, with a particular emphasis on prohibition and castration anxiety, Jacques Lacan shifts the focus to the boy's entry into the symbolic order – the realm of language, law and social structures that shape his subjectivity (Lacan, [1966] 2003; [1973] 1981). For Lacan, the Oedipus complex is not merely a developmental stage or a psychological conflict centred on rivalrous relationships within the family at a specific age. Rather, it represents a structural moment in the formation of the subject, marking the transition from the pre-symbolic world of early affective bonds to the symbolic order, where meaning, desire and social identity are organised. Lacan redefines the paternal function through the concept of the Name-of-the-Father (*Nom-du-Père*), which is not merely the literal father but a broader system of authority, prohibition and linguistic structuration that regulates desire. The paternal function, in this sense, operates as the symbolic law that intervenes in the dyadic relationship between the boy and his mother, introducing separation and establishing limits. This intervention is crucial because it redirects the boy's desire away from an exclusive attachment to the mother and towards the wider field of symbolic identifications, ultimately enabling him to develop a coherent sense of self. As a result, identification in Lacanian terms is not simply the resolution of familial conflicts, but a structural effect of symbolisation, that is, entry into language, shaping the way the subject relates to themselves and others.

Slavoj Žižek reinterprets the Oedipal complex by integrating Freud and Lacan into his broader critique of ideology and subject formation (Žižek, [1989] 2008; [1997] 2000). While Freud conceives the Oedipus complex as a psychological drama rooted in familial relationships and Lacan reframes it as a structural process of entry into the symbolic order, Žižek radicalises Lacan's position by foregrounding the role of ideological fantasy in sustaining identification. For Žižek, the paternal function, as the Name-of-the-Father, does not merely introduce law and prohibition; it also generates the fantasy that there is an ultimate enjoyment (*jouissance*) to which the subject is denied access. This fantasy structures how subjects relate to power, authority and desire, but not as neutral symbolic processes. Instead, it operates through ideological misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), where the subject fails to recognise the contradictions

and inconsistencies within the law. Hence, the Oedipal complex, in Žižek's reading, is not only about submission to the law, but about the subject's unconscious investment in the law's own inconsistencies. The law, embodied in the figure of the father as an authority, is never entirely stable. The father's power is both asserted and undermined by its internal contradictions. Crucially, the paternal function does not simply prohibit enjoyment. It sustains the illusion that someone, somewhere, enjoys without limits. This fantasy of an unattainable surplus enjoyment fuels the subject's desire, making prohibition itself desirable. Identification, therefore, is always mediated by an unconscious ideological framework, in which subjects misrecognise both the authority of the symbolic order and the true nature of their own desire.

Julia Kristeva's approach to the Oedipal complex presents a complex rethinking of Freud and Lacan, by emphasising the pre-Oedipal, maternal realm as the foundational site of subject formation (Kristeva, [1974] 1984; [1980] 1984). While Freud conceptualises the Oedipal complex as a psychological drama revolving around parental identification, prohibition and castration anxiety, and Lacan reinterprets it as the subject's entry into the symbolic order through the paternal function, Kristeva challenges this framework. She argues that the symbolic order defined by language, law and paternal authority is not the primary structuring force of subjectivity. Instead, she directs attention to what precedes and underpins it – the semiotic *chora*, a dimension of meaning-making rooted in the maternal experience. For Kristeva, the transition into the symbolic order is not hence merely marked by the child's submission to the paternal law, but by the loss of the maternal body, which is the first site of identification and desire. This loss, embodied and affective, is central to the Oedipal complex, and it remains unresolved in the unconscious as the abject, a force that resists full assimilation into language and ideology. Kristeva's view thus reframes the role of fantasy. While Žižek emphasises fantasy as the ideological supplement that sustains authority, Kristeva shifts the focus to a more intimate and archaic level, that is, to the fantasy of recovering the maternal body, rhythms and tones. She asserts that the symbolic order is never fully stable, but always haunted by the semiotic traces of the maternal. This makes her view of identification more embodied and affective than Žižek's. Hence, for Kristeva, identification is not solely about aligning with law and power, but about confronting the loss of the maternal body, an ambivalence that shapes subjectivity. In this view, the Oedipal process is never fully completed, because traces of the maternal, of the semiotic and the abject, continue to unsettle the symbolic order. These remnants create space for both crisis and creativity, ultimately complicating the classical Oedipal trajectory by revealing how the maternal always remains in tension with the paternal.

The far-right's rise in Europe has been fuelled by a combination of economic crises, immigration and the rise of identity politics. These movements often construct a monocultural, nativist identity that excludes 'the other' as a figure associated with foreignness, immigration and cultural difference. The concept of identification in the Oedipal complex, as framed by psychoanalysis, offers a way to think through this exclusionary discourse. In the traditional Oedipal triad, the Father symbolises authority, the Mother functions as both the source of nurturing and the object of desire, and the Child is the subject in development. In the political analogy, the Father corresponds to the political leader, the Mother to the nation or the state, and the Child to the people - conceived as a collective subject in articulation, shaped by both the paternal authority and the maternal embodiment. The addition of the Other

broadens the scope to include the figure of the 'foreign' who challenges the coherence of the family-identity manipulated by the leader. This Other becomes the focal point of discrimination, designated as an existential threat to the self-identification of the nation. Žižek's lens radicalises this framework by examining the ideological fantasies that sustain the symbolic order. He suggests that the subject's identification with authority is structured not by genuine submission, but by a fantasy of the law's contradictions, where its very inconsistency conceals an unattainable enjoyment believed to be possessed by the Other. (Žižek, [1989] 2008). For Žižek, the far-right's appeal lies in the ideological fantasy that promises a return to a pre-crisis, pure state of being that could restore stability. But, this is fundamentally an illusion. Kristeva, however, provides a more compelling framework for understanding identification in multicultural terms. She emphasises the maternal, pre-Oedipal, semiotic realm, which challenges the symbolic order structured by paternal authority and law. She suggests that the symbolic order is always haunted by traces of the maternal dimension, which is not fully absorbed into language or ideology. The maternal realm represents the *abject*, the pre-linguistic, bodily experience that is always present in unconscious processes, even if it is excluded from rational discourse (Kristeva, [1980] 1984). The *abject* represents a boundary that cannot be fully integrated, and it is through interaction with the *abject* that subjects negotiate their identification with the law and authority. In the context of multiculturalism, Kristeva's approach allows for the complexity of identity to remain unresolved (Kristeva, [1990] 1993). The paternal order, as represented by the leader, imposes a symbolic framework that seeks to reduce the otherness of the foreign, but the foreign remains *abject*; it cannot be fully integrated into the law without disrupting the symbolic order. This creates a space where antagonisms arise, not simply through ideological fantasies, but as an inherent tension within the formation of subjectivity itself.

While Žižek's theory echoes Laclau and Mouffe's idea of antagonism – that society is inherently shaped by irreconcilable conflicts (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) – Kristeva's perspective complements Mouffe's argument that the goal of democracy is to ensure that conflicts do not escalate into antagonism, where opposing sides perceive each other as enemies, but rather take the form of agonism, viewing opponents as adversaries (Mouffe, 2013). This framework of (ant)agonism allows for a more nuanced understanding of multicultural societies, where the *abject* other is not simply rejected or assimilated, but remains in *tension* with the symbolic order, opening up possibilities for negotiation, creativity and transformation. This perspective highlights the complexity of the processes of identification, challenging the totalising and discriminating tendencies of far-right nationalism. It acknowledges the ambivalence of identity formation, recognising that the other is not merely an external threat, but an integral part of the symbolic economy that shapes society. This framework is particularly insightful for understanding the affective and symbolic dynamics at play in 'agonistic choreographies' (Petrović Lotina, 2021), where the contingent character of identity in multicultural societies is perpetually negotiated through the encounter of bodies—a process of identification foregrounding the corporeal negotiation of foreignness, both within and beyond ourselves.

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