Three rights to play: Liberalist, Fascist, and Compositionist

Max Haiven
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Road
Thunder Bay, Ontario
mhaiven@lakeheadu.ca

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Extended abstract

Might there be a *right* to play? No state or supranational body recognizes one. But, surprisingly, a lot may hinge on the question. Exploring it can reveal some of the key ideological tensions of our moment. This presentation will contrast and unpack three approaches to a right to play: liberalist, fascistic, and compositionist. In a moment when the so-called “rules-based” international liberal order, which dominated the political imaginary since the Second World War, appears to unravel, a more capacious consideration of rights is increasingly important. Meditating on a “right to play” can help us recognize not only that play is politicized as never before, but that play (which I am using here in an intentionally broad fashion) offers a crucial category for rethinking politics and ideology (see Haiven 2026). To unpack the question, I employ a speculative and theoretical approach, drawing on both discursive analysis and theoretical exposition.

To comprehend a liberalist approach, this paper begins by taking up the promotional rhetoric of the highly successful Toronto-based international non-profit organization Right to Play that, for 25 years, has been supporting play-based learning in the "developing" world, in underserved communities, and in conflict zones. As laudatory as their efforts may be, the organization's framework emerges from, is integrated into, and in many ways emblematizes the dominant liberalist paradigm of human rights. This paradigm has been critiqued from the left for advancing individualistic, Eurocentric, and capitalist values (Losurdo 2014). Separately, this framework has recently come under direct attack from authoritarian and right-wing forces for undermining supposedly "traditional" values and discouraging competition, producing exploitable dependencies.

I unpack the liberalist articulation of the right to play with reference to John Rawls’ (1954) proposal of procedural justice as fairness (see Garthoff 2014). Despite the American philosopher’s intentions, this approach has become a key justification for the neoliberal revolution in government policy around the world, animated by a drive to "level the playing field" for capitalist competition (Jagoda 2020). While inherently

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unequal, a market society is proposed to be nonetheless fair in its basic operations (Tomasi 2012). The right to play here is ultimately the right to compete.

However, contrary to the idealism of neoliberalism's proponents, the global system it has produced over the past half-century feels to most people to be profoundly *unfair* (see Haiven 2026). This has been capitalized upon by fascistic protagonists who often claim that the unfairness is the result of nefarious actors who are cheating the system: notably migrants, minorities, and elites. But as numerous commentators observe, these accusations are often prejudicial and politicized, often by political actors or commentators who are themselves, conspicuously, cheats (see for example Haberman and Feuer 2020). Here I use the term fascistic to comprehend something broader than the ideology of avowed fascists, but rather a set of ideas and feelings organized around apocalyptic political paranoia, racism and authoritarianism.

To understand a fascistic approach I turn to Jean-Paul Sartre's (1948) enigmatic argument that fascistic actors manifest their own "right to play" with discourse, using bad faith arguments "not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert." I broaden this definition to explore how play has become pivotal to the fascistic quest for what Jack Bratich (2022) calls "autogenetic sovereignty," the mythical power of unaccountable self-creation. This fascistic right to play, which can also be observed in far-right online culture and material acts of terrorism, refracts Carl Schmidt's theories about the basis of sovereignty in the power to declare a "state of exception" in the name of survival (Agamben 2005). Whereas a liberalist right to play might be said to be granted by a just community of mutually respectful “players,” the fascistic right to play manifests itself through real and discursive violence and transgression, which is an end unto itself.

Is there a path beyond this antinomy? I turn, in the final section of this paper, to the work of the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber for clues. A compositionist approach takes inspiration from the anarchist traditions of political thought that inspire Graeber, but also from the work of Italian post-Operaismo, which explores capitalism as a system whereby the both power and resistance are in a constant relation of recomposition (Wright 2002). I take up Graeber's (2014) well-known essay "What's The Point if we Can't Have Fun?" as well as his anthropological studies of fetishism as a form of social creativity (Graeber 2005) in order to argue that the production of social life is *playful* in an expansive and profound sense. Systems of value (including capitalism) and domination may appear to be necessary outcomes of scarcity and authority, but are, in fact, the misrecognized and congealed form of a society's creative and playful power: the potential to collaboratively and imaginatively compose a world. The "right to play" in this sense is neither a liberalist entitlement to compete nor a fascistic will-to-power. It is, rather, a cooperative recognition that we players are composed as part of an infinite game, whose purpose is to enable the recomposition of the game of which we are part. Here, like Graeber, I turn to Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) to revisit questions of imagination, democracy and autonomy in light of this compositionist "right to play."

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