

The National Insecurity State

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I think it is fair to say, following Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem, that each country ravaged by neoliberalism and its attack on the social state will develop its own form of authoritarianism rooted in the historical, pedagogical, and cultural traditions that enable it to reproduce itself. In the United States, a "soft war" is being waged on the cultural front aided by the new electronic technologies of consumerism and surveillance.

There is a full-fledged effort to conscript the pedagogical influence of various cultural apparatuses, extending from schools and older forms of media, on the one hand, to new media and digital modes of communication, on the other. These educational tools are being used to produce elements of the authoritarian personality, while crushing as much as possible any form of collective dissent and struggle. With the continuation of such conditions, state sovereignty will be permanently replaced by corporate sovereignty, giving substance to the specter of totalitarianism that Michael Halberstam described in *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics* as a specter that "haunts the modern ideal of political emancipation." What is more, there is ample evidence that any failure of this soft war to enthrall the citizenry is liable to provoke a "hard war" that deploys unremitting state violence against the American people. There has been an increase in military-style repression in order to deal with the inevitable economic, ecological, and political crises that will only intensify under the new authoritarianism. In this instance, justifications will continue to be issued regarding the need for state security and control, reinforced by a virulent culture of fear and an intensified appeal to overtly racist forms of nationalism. This has become particularly evident in the overt racism displayed by Donald Trump and his fellow Republican Party candidates in the 2016 presidential primaries. The racist anti-immigrant discourse spewed forth in this campaign is as ruthless and cruel as it is politically reactionary. Mexican immigrants are now labeled as rapists, criminals, and moochers while their children born in the United States are derisively called anchor babies."

Chris Hedges crystalizes this premise in arguing that Americans now live in a society in which "violence is the habitual response by the state to every dilemma." War is increasingly legitimized as a permanent feature of society and violence embraced as the organizing principle of politics. Under such circumstances, malevolent modes of rationality now impose the values of a militarized neoliberal regime on everyone, shattering what remains of any democratic modes of agency, solidarity, and hope. Amid the bleakness and despair, the discourses of militarism, danger, and aggression now fuel a war on terrorism that, as Tzvetan Todorov writes in *Torture and the War on Terror*, "represents the negation of politics - since all interaction is reduced to a test of military strength, war brings death and destruction, not only to the adversary but also to one's side, and without distinguishing between guilty and innocent." Human barbarity is no longer invisible, or hidden under the bureaucratic language of Orwellian doublespeak. Its conspicuousness, if not celebration, emerged with the new editions of American exceptionalism ushered in by the post-9/11 war on terror.

Fourteen years after September 11, 2001, the historical rupture produced by the events of that day has transformed a terrorist attack into a war on terror that mimics the very crimes it pledged to eliminate. The script is now familiar: security trumped civil liberties as shared fears replaced any

sense of shared responsibilities. Under Bush and Cheney, the government lied to the American public about the war in Iraq and manipulated the justice system in order to impose anti-terrorist laws that violate civil liberties. The Bush administration used a state of emergency to turn the United States into a torture state, rolling out a range of terrorist practices around the globe, including extraordinary rendition and state torture. But it is Obama who has become the master of permanent war, seeking to increase the bloated military budget - close to a trillion dollars - while "turning to lawless violence...translated into unrestrained violent interventions from Libya to Syria and back to Iraq," including an attempt "to expand the war on ISIS in Syria and possibly send more heavy weapons to its client government in Ukraine." Obama has not only expanded the reach of the militarized state, but has colluded with Democratic and Republican Party extremists in preaching a notion of security rooted in personal fears rather than rallying collective strengths against the deprivations and suffering produced by war, poverty, racism, and injustice. United in their efforts to wage war abroad, both political parties have made it easier at home to undermine those basic civil liberties that protect individuals against invasive and potentially repressive government actions.

Under the burgeoning of what James Risen, in his book *Pay at Any Price*, has called the "homeland security-industrial complex," state secrecy and organized corporate corruption have filled the coffers of the defense industry along with the corporate-owned security industries - especially those providing drones - who benefit the most from the war on terror.⁴⁸ This is not to suggest that security is not an important consideration for the United States. Clearly, the legitimate need to defend itself should not serve, as it has, as a pretext for American exceptionalism and the imperialist, expansionist goals of political elites. No more should security serve as an excuse for abandoning civil liberties, democratic values, and any semblance of justice, morality, and political responsibility.

The war on terrorism has extended the discourse, space, location, and time of war in ways that have made it unbounded and ubiquitous, turning everyone into a potential terrorist and bringing the battle home to be fought in domestic sites as well as foreign ones. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben, cited in an essay for the *London Review of Books*, has rightly warned that under the war on terrorism, the political landscape has utterly changed in the United States: "We are no longer citizens but detainees, distinguishable from the inmates of Guantanamo not by an indifference in legal status, but only by the fact that we have not yet had the misfortune to be incarcerated - or unexpectedly executed by a missile from an unmanned aircraft." The war on terror has come home. Fear has taken on a totalizing presence, as enemies of the state now include not only those enemy combatants abroad who endure bombing, abduction, and torture, but also citizens of the United States who have seen a growing imposition of punitive measures at home through the use of the police and federal troops for interventions ranging from drug interdictions to the enforcement of zero tolerance standards in public schools to the arrest and criminalization of homeless people.

That the war on terror now manifests as state terrorism is made clear as poor neighborhoods are transformed into war zones with the police resembling an occupying army. Of course, terrorism is part of US history, and its homegrown dimensions include the lynchings of thousands of black men and women in the first half of the twentieth century, the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, and the more recent torture of black men by the Chicago police force in the 1960s - a practice that still continues. Not only has this legacy been forgotten, but its most poisonous effects have returned with a vengeance. Racism is now normalized, even as it is being loudly proclaimed across the country that we live in a post-racial society, a statement that suggests both a tragic state of self-delusion and mass psychosis. The most lethal expressions of racism have become commonplace. In 2014, Eric Garner was brutalized and choked to death by a white policeman who believed he was selling cigarettes illegally. In 2015, unarmed black men such as Walter Scott and Eric Harris were both shot in the back by poorly trained cops. Racist violence has also touched the lives of black youth

such as twelve-year-old Tamir Rice who was shot for holding a toy gun and Freddie Gray who died after his spine was broken while in police custody.⁵¹ The prevalence of African American youth and adults being victimized by police violence has rightly provoked moral outrage and social protest. Such occurrences are shocking because they expose civility and color-neutrality as merely thin veneers that overlay the racism and barbarism that infuses American culture both past and present. Oliver Laughland, Jon Swaine, and Jamiles Lartey report in *The Guardian* that:

Police in the United States are killing people at a rate that would result in 1,100 fatalities by the end of [2015], according to a *Guardian* investigation, which recorded an average of three people killed per day during the first half of 2015. . . . When adjusted to accurately reflect the US population, the totals indicate that black people are being killed by police at more than twice the rate of white and Hispanic or Latino people. Black people killed by police were also significantly more likely to have been unarmed.

What is also shocking is the apparent willingness of most of the general population to accept lethal violence in everyday life as a common event - indicative of the widespread desensitization that has occurred within the context of rising state terrorism and lawlessness. As Jeffrey St. Clair has pointed out, one indicator of how state-sanctioned violence has become normalized is the fact that the majority of Americans support torture, even though they know "it is totally ineffective as a means of intelligence gathering." This suggests more than simple indifference; it implies an endorsement of cruelty that is mirrored in the American public's growing appetite for violence, whether it parades as entertainment or manifests itself in the growing demonization and incarceration of poor minority youth, Muslims, immigrants, and others deemed as disposable.

When the history and range of the cultural and systemic forces that promote violence in the United States are considered, it should really come as no surprise that the only issue on which the top 2016 Republican Party presidential contenders agree on is that guns are the ultimate symbol of freedom in America, a "bellwether of individual liberty, a symbol of what big government wants and shouldn't have." Gun policies provide political theater for the new extremists, and are symptomatic less of some cockeyed defense of the Second Amendment than a willingness to capitalize on the pleasure of violence and a hyper-masculine aesthetic infused with patriotic fervor in order to buttress the case for using deadly force both at home and abroad. Far from deterring the growth of "big government," which is simply their code for the social state, they wish to arm and militarize society in order to justify the existence of a maximum security state and the authoritarian rule that is inevitably its corollary. When the campaign message of major political figures in the United States becomes "maximizing the pleasure of violence," as Rustom Bharacua and Susan Sontag have argued in different contexts, surely we are bearing witness to a moment in history that "dissolves politics into pathology."

Notions of democracy appear to be giving way to the discourse of revenge, domestic security, stupidity, and war. The political reality that has emerged since the shattering crisis of 9/11 increasingly points to a set of narrow choices that is being dictated by jingoistic right-wing extremists, the Defense Department, and neoconservative private foundations, all fueled by the dominant media. War and violence now function as an aphrodisiac for a public inundated with commodities and awash in celebrity culture idiocy. Capitalizing on the pent-up emotions of an angry, disillusioned, and grieving public, almost any reportage of a terrorist attack throughout the globe further amplifies the American media's hyped-up language of war, patriotism, surveillance, and retaliation - often infused by unchecked racism. Conservative talking heads write numerous op-eds and appear on endless talk shows fanning the fires of "patriotism" by calling upon the United States to expand the war against any one of a number of Arab countries that are considered terrorist states. For example, John Bolton, writing an op-ed for the *New York Times*, insisted that any attempt

by the Obama administration to negotiate an arms deal with Iran would clearly be a sign of weakness. For Bolton, the only way to deal with Iran is to launch an attack on their nuclear infrastructure. The title of his op-ed sums up the organizing idea of the article: "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran." Indeed, the current extremists dominating Congress require no encouragement to go to war with Iran, bomb Syria into the twilight zone, and further extend the reach of the American empire through its bloated war machine to any country that questions the use of American power.

Against an endless onslaught of images of jets bombing countries extending from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and Gaza, amply supplied by the Defense Department, the dominant media use the war abroad to stoke fears at home by presenting numerous stories about the endless ways in which potential terrorists might use nuclear weapons, poison the food supply, or unleash biochemical agents on the American population. Innumerable examples of fear-based, warmongering rhetoric can be found in the militarized frothing and Islamophobia perpetrated by the Fox News Channel, which frequently reaches fever pitch as a result of the bellicosity that informs the majority of its commentaries and reactions to the war on terror.

It is worth recalling that not only the most fanatical outlets but all American mainstream media supported Bush's fabrications to justify the invasion of Iraq, and never apologized for such despicable actions. Missing from the endless calls for security, vengeance, and the use of state violence has been any account of the massive lawlessness produced by the United States government through targeted drone attacks on enemy combatants, the violation of civil liberties, and the almost unimaginable human suffering and hardship perpetrated through the American war machine in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. Also missing has been the history of lawlessness, imperialism, and torture that supported a host of authoritarian regimes propped up by the United States. Mainstream media have similarly remained silent about the pardoning of those who tortured as a matter of state policy, and even more so about supporting the heroic actions of whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Thomas Drake, John Kiriakou, Jeffrey Sterling, and others.

At the same time, American mainstream media do little to resist publicly the emergence of a surveillance state and a domestic war on terror that produces a dangerous "culture of shadows and subterfuge" in which there is a holding back of dissent, openness, and resistance for fear that such actions could cost one a job, initiate government harassment, or worse. To the contrary, glaring examples of support for increased securitization can be found in the constant and underanalyzed images and stories circulating in the media of the terrorists "in our midst" threatening to blow up malls, schools, and any other conceivable space where the public gathers. The fear and insecurity created by such stories simultaneously serve to support a militaristic foreign policy and legitimize a host of anti-democratic practices at home - including "a concerted attack on civil liberties, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press," and a growing sentiment on the part of the American public that people who suggest that terrorism is, in part, caused by American foreign policy should not be allowed to teach in the public schools or work in the government.

This legacy of suppression has a long history in the United States, and it has returned with a vengeance in academia, especially for those academics such as Norman Finkelstein and Steven G. Salaita who have condemned America's policies in the Middle East and the government's support of the Israeli government's policies toward Palestinians. The public's surrender to intimidation and fear is made all the more easy by the civic illiteracy now sweeping the United States. Climate change deniers, anti-intellectuals, religious fundamentalists, the "Love America" crowd, and others exhibit pride in displaying a kind of thoughtlessness bereft of historical consciousness. The consequence is that the people feel beset by a form of political and theoretical helplessness that opens the door to public acceptance of foreign and domestic violence.

The war on terror is the new normal. Its intensification of violence, militarization, and state terrorism now reaches into every aspect of American life. Americans complain over the economic deficit, but say little about the democratic and moral deficits that move the country ever closer to authoritarianism. The growing police presence in our major cities provides a visible sign of how the authoritarian state now flourishes. For example, with 34,000 uniformed police officers in its midst, New York City resembles an armed camp with a force that, as Thom Hartman points out, is "bigger than the active militaries of Austria, Bulgaria, Chad, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Kenya." At the same time, the Pentagon has given billions of dollars' worth of military equipment to local police forces all over America. Is it any wonder that minorities of color fear the police more than the gangs and criminals that haunt their neighborhoods? Militarism is one of the breeding grounds of violence in the United States and is visible in the ubiquitous gun culture, the modeling of schools after prisons, the exploding incarceration state, the paramilitarization of local police forces, the burgeoning military budget, and the ongoing attacks on protesters, dissidents, black and brown youth, and women.

Beyond these visible elements of an expanding culture of violence, identity and language itself have become militarized, fed by an onslaught of extreme violence that now floods Hollywood films and dominates American television. Hollywood blockbusters such as *American Sniper* glorify war crimes and reproduce demonizing views of Islam. Television programs such as *Spartacus*, *The Following*, *Hannibal*, *True Detective*, *Justified*, and *Top of the Lake* intensify the pleasure quotient for viewing extreme and graphic violence to an almost unimaginable degree. Graphic violence appears to provide one of the few outlets for Americans to express what has come to resemble something like a form of spiritual release. Consuming extreme violence, including accounts of state torture, may be one of the few practices left that allows the American people to feel alive, to mark what it means to be close to the register of death in a way that reminds them of the ability to feel within a culture that deadens every possibility of life. Under such circumstances, the representation of violence is transformed into something more than entertainment; it becomes akin to a sacred experience that ritualizes and legitimates a carnival of cruelty. The privatization of violence through media spectacles does more than maximize the pleasure quotient and heighten macho ebullience; it also gives violence a fascist edge by depoliticizing a culture in which the reality of violence often takes the form of state terrorism.

The extreme visibility of both real and imagined violence in American culture represents a willful pedagogy of carnage and gore designed to normalize its presence and to legitimate its practice as a matter of common sense. Warmaking and the militarization of public discourse and public space also serve as an uncritical homage to a form of hypermasculinity that operates from the assumption that violence is not only the most effective practice for mediating most problems, but also central to identity formation itself. Agency is now militarized and almost completely removed from any notion of civic values. We get a glimpse of this form of violent hyper-masculinity not only in the highly publicized brutality against women dished out by professional football players, but also in the endless stories of sexual abuse and violence now taking place in frat houses across America, many in some of the most prestigious colleges and universities. Violence has become the nervous system of warmaking in the United States, escalating under Bush and Obama into a kind of war fever that embraces a death drive. As Robert J. Lifton points out in his article, "American Apocalypse," in *The Nation*:

Warmaking can quickly become associated with "war fever," the mobilization of public excitement to the point of a collective experience with transcendence. War then becomes heroic, even mythic, a task that must be carried out for the defense of one's nation, to sustain its special historical destiny and the immortality of its people. . . . War fever tends always to be sporadic and subject to disillusionment. Its underside is death anxiety, in this case related less to combat than to fears of

new terrorist attacks at home or against Americans abroad - and later to growing casualties in occupied Iraq.

Under the war on terrorism, moral panic and a culture of fear have not only redefined public space as the "sinister abode of danger, death and infection" and fueled the collective rush to "patriotism on the cheap," they have also buttressed a "fear economy" and refigured the meaning of politics itself. Defined as "the complex of military and security firms rushing to exploit the national nervous breakdown," the fear economy promises big financial gains for both the Defense Department and the anti-terrorist security sector now primed to terror-proof everything from trash cans and water systems to shopping malls and public restrooms. The war on terrorism has been transformed into a new market in which to pitch consumer goods for the fearful, while the hysterical warmongers and their acolytes in the media turn politics into an extension of war. Fear is no longer an attitude as much as it is a culture that functions as "the enemy of reason [while distorting] emotions and perceptions, and often leads to poor decisions." But the culture of fear does more than undermine critical judgment and suppress dissent. As Don Hazen observes, it also "breeds more violence, mental illness and trauma, social disintegration, job failure, loss of workers' rights, and much more. Pervasive fear ultimately paves the way for an accelerating authoritarian society with increased police power, legally codified oppression, invasion of privacy, social controls, social anxiety and PTSD. "Fear and repression reproduce, rather than address, the most fundamental antidemocratic elements of terrorism. Instead of promulgating a culture of fear, people need to recognize that the threat of terrorism cannot be understood apart from the crisis of democracy itself. In the current historical moment, the language of indiscriminate revenge and lawlessness seems to be winning the day. This is a discourse unconscious of its own dangerous refusal to acknowledge the important role that democratic values and social justice must play to achieve a truly unified response and to prevent the further killing of innocent people, regardless of their religion, culture, and place of occupancy in the world. Authoritarianism in this context, observes Franco Bifo Berardi in his book *Precarious Rhapsody*, encounters little resistance in its efforts to turn politics "into a criminal system and keeps working toward the expansion of the realm of pure violence, where its advancement can proceed unhindered. "The greatest struggle faced by the American public is not terrorism, but a struggle on behalf of justice, freedom, and democracy for all of the citizens of the globe. This is not going to take place, as President Obama's policies will tragically affirm, by shutting down democracy, eliminating its most cherished rights and freedoms, and deriding communities of dissent.

American society is broken, corrupted by the financial elite, and addicted to violence and a culture of permanent war. The commanding institutions of American life have lost their sense of public mission, just as leadership at all levels of government is being stripped of any viable democratic vision. The United States is now governed by an economic and social orthodoxy informed by the dictates of religious and political extremists. Reform efforts that include the established political parties have resulted in nothing but regression, or forms of accommodation that serve to normalize the new authoritarianism and its war on terrorism. Politics has to be thought anew and must be informed by a powerful vision matched by durable organizations that include young people, unions, workers, diverse social movements, artists, intellectuals, and others. In part, this means reawakening the radical imagination so as to address the intensifying crisis of history and agency, and engage the emotional and ethical registers of fear and human suffering. To fight the neoliberal counterrevolution, social movements need to create new public spaces along with a new language for enabling people to relate the self to public life, social responsibility, and the demands of global citizenship.

Instead of viewing the current crisis as a total break with the past that has nothing to learn from history, it is crucial for the American public to begin to understand how the past might be useful in

addressing what it means to live in a democracy at a time when democracy is viewed as nothing more than a hindrance to the wishes and interests of the new extremists who now control the American government. The anti-democratic forces that define American history cannot be forgotten in the fog of political and cultural amnesia. State violence and terrorism have a long history in the United States, both in its foreign and domestic policies, and ignoring this dark period of history means that nothing will be learned from the legacy of a politics that has indulged authoritarian ideologies and embraced violence as a central measure of power, national identity, and patriotism.

At stake here is the need to establish an alternative vision of a genuinely democratic society and a global order that prioritizes the safeguarding of basic civil liberties and human rights. Any struggle against terrorism must begin with the pledge on the part of the United States that it will work in conjunction with international organizations, especially the United Nations; that it will refuse to engage in any military operations that might target civilians; and that it will rethink those aspects of its foreign policy that have allied it with repressive nations in which democratic liberties and civilian lives are under siege. Once again, the United States has a long history of supporting terrorist groups, upholding authoritarian regimes, and imposing atrocities and barbarous acts of violence on others - the more recent and well-known being Abu Ghraib, the torture dungeons of CIA-controlled black sites, the Predator and Reaper drone strikes "on at least eight wedding parties," and the brutalizing murders committed by the twelve-member 'kill team' that hunted Afghans 'for sport.'"Crimes overlooked will be repeated and intensified, just as public memory is rendered a liability in the discourse of revenge, demonization, and extreme violence.

The political left in the United States is too fractured and needs to develop a more comprehensive understanding of politics, oppression, and struggles as well as a discourse that rises to the level of ethical assessment and accountability. Against the new authoritarianism and its ever-evolving forms of terror, progressives of all stripes need an inspiring and energizing politics that embraces coalition building, rejects the notion that capitalism equals democracy, and challenges the stolid vocabulary of embodied incapacity stripped of any sense of risk, hope, and possibility. If the struggle against the war on terrorism, militarization, and neoliberalization is to have any chance of success, it is crucial for a loyal and dedicated left to embrace a commitment to economic and social justice, understanding the educative nature of politics, and the need to build a sustainable political formation outside of the established parties.

The United States is in a new historical conjuncture, and as difficult as it is to admit, it is a conjuncture that shares more with the legacies of totalitarianism than with America's often misguided understanding of democracy. Under the merging of the surveillance state, warfare state, and the harsh regime of neoliberalism, we are witnessing the death of the old system of social welfare supports and the emergence of a new society marked by the heavy hand of the national security state. For the American public, this has meant not only the depoliticization of public discourse and a pervasive culture of fear, but extreme inequities in wealth, power, and income, and a new mode of governance now firmly controlled by the major corporations, banks, and financial elite. This is a politics in which there is no room for democracy, and no room for reformism. The time has come to name the current historical moment as representative of the "dark times" that Hannah Arendt warned us against. We must begin to transform politics at a systemic level through social movements in which the promise of a radical democracy can be re-imagined in the midst of determined, collective struggles. The war on terrorism has morphed into a new form of authoritarianism that imposes its own brand of terror and whose real enemy is not terrorism at all, but democracy itself.

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