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The Politics of Disimagination and the Pathologies of Power

"You write in order to change the world knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that [writing] is indispensable to the world. The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter even by a millimeter the way people look at reality, then you can change it." - James Baldwin

The Violence of Neoliberalism

We live in a time of deep foreboding, one that haunts any discourse about justice, democracy and the future. Not only have the points of reference that provided a sense of certainty and collective hope in the past largely evaporated, but the only referents available are increasingly supplied by a hyper-market-driven society, megacorporations and a corrupt financial service industry. The commanding economic and cultural institutions of American society have taken on what David Theo Goldberg calls a "militarizing social logic." [1] Market discipline now regulates all aspects of social life, and the regressive economic rationality that drives it sacrifices the public good, public values and social responsibility to a tawdry consumerist dream while simultaneously creating a throwaway society of goods, resources and individuals now considered disposable. [2] This militarizing logic is also creeping into public schools and colleges with the former increasingly resembling the culture of prison and the latter opening their classrooms to the national intelligence agencies. [3] In one glaring instance of universities endorsing the basic institutions of the punishing state, Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, concluded a deal to rename its football stadium after the GEO Group, a private prison corporation "whose record is marred by human rights abuses, by lawsuits, by unnecessary deaths of people in their custody and a whole series of incidents." [3A] Armed guards are now joined by armed knowledge. Corruption, commodification and repressive state apparatuses have become the central features of a predatory society in which it is presumed irrationally "that market should dominate and determine all choices and outcomes to the occlusion of any other considerations." [4]

The political, economic, and social consequences have done more than destroy any viable vision of a good society. They undermine the modern public's capacity to think critically, celebrate a narcissistic hyperindividualism that borders on the pathological, destroy social protections and promote a massive shift towards a punitive state that criminalizes the behavior of those bearing the hardships imposed by a survival-of-the-fittest society that takes delight in the suffering of others. How else to account for a criminal justice stacked overwhelmingly against poor minorities, a prison system in which "prisoners can be held in solitary confinement for years in small, windowless cells in which they are kept for twenty-three hours of every day," [5] or a police state that puts handcuffs on a 5-year old and puts him in jail because he violated a dress code by wearing sneakers that were the wrong color. [6] Why does the American public put up with a society in which "the top 1 percent of households owned 35.6 percent of net wealth (net worth) and a whopping 42.4 percent of net financial assets" in 2009, while many young people today represent the "new face of a national homeless population?" [7] American society is awash in a culture of civic illiteracy, cruelty and corruption. For example, major banks such as Barclays and HSBC swindle billions from clients and increase their profit margins by laundering money for terrorist organizations, and no one goes to

jail. At the same time, we have the return of debtor prisons for the poor who cannot pay something as trivial as a parking fine. President Obama arbitrarily decides that he can ignore due process and kill American citizens through drone strikes and the American public barely blinks. Civic life collapses into a war zone and yet the dominant media is upset only because it was not invited to witness the golf match between Obama and Tiger Woods.

The celebration of violence in both virtual culture and real life now feed each other. The spectacle of carnage celebrated in movies such as *A Good Day to Die Hard* is now matched by the deadly violence now playing out in cities such as Chicago and New Orleans. Young people are particularly vulnerable to such violence, with 561 children age 12 and under killed by firearms between 2006 and 2010.[8] Corporate power, along with its shameless lobbyists and intellectual pundits, unabashedly argue for more guns in order to feed the bottom line, even as the senseless carnage continues tragically in places like Newtown, Connecticut, Tustin, California, and other American cities. In the meantime, the mainstream media treats the insane rambling of National Rifle Association's (NRA) Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre as a legitimate point of view among many voices. This is the same guy who, after the killing of 20 young children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School, claimed the only way to stop more tragedies was to flood the market with more guns and provide schools with more armed guards. The American public was largely silent on the issue in spite of the fact that an increase of police in schools does nothing to prevent such massacres but does increase the number of children, particularly poor black youth, who are pulled out of class, booked and arrested for trivial behavioral infractions.

At the same time, America's obsession with violence is reinforced by a market society that is Darwinian in its pursuit of profit and personal gain at almost any cost. Within this scenario, a social and economic order has emerged that combines the attributes and values of films such as the classics *Mad Max* and *American Psycho*. Material deprivation, galloping inequality, the weakening of public supports, the elimination of viable jobs, the mindless embrace of rabid competition and consumption, and the willful destruction of the environment speak to a society in which militarized violence finds its counterpart, if not legitimating credo, in a set of atomizing and selfish values that disdain shared social bonds and any notion of the public good. In this case, American society now mimics a market-driven culture that celebrates a narcissistic hyperindividualism that radiates with a new sociopathic lack of interest in others and a strong tendency towards violence and criminal behavior. As John le Carré once stated, "America has entered into one of its periods of historical madness." [9] While le Carré wrote this acerbic attack on American politics in 2003, I think it is fair to say that things have gotten worse, and that the United States is further plunging into madness because of a deadening form of historical and social amnesia that has taken over the country, further reproducing a mass flight from memory and social responsibility. The politics of disimagination includes, in this instance, what Mumia Abu-Jamal labeled "mentacide," a form of historical amnesia "inflicted on Black youth by the system's systematic campaign to eradicate and deny them their people's revolutionary history." [10]

America's Plunge Into Militarized Madness

How does one account for the lack of public outcry over millions of Americans losing their homes because of corrupt banking practices and millions more becoming unemployed because of the lack of an adequate jobs program in the United States, while at the same time stories abound of colossal greed and corruption on Wall Street? [11] For example, in 2009 alone, hedge fund manager David Tepper made approximately 4 billion dollars.[12] As Michael Yates points out: "This income, spent at a rate of \$10,000 a day and exclusive of any interest, would last him and his heirs 1,096 years! If we were to suppose that Mr. Tepper worked 2,000 hours in 2009 (fifty weeks at forty hours per week), he took in \$2,000,000 per hour and \$30,000 a minute." [13] This juxtaposition of robber-baron power

and greed is rarely mentioned in the mainstream media in conjunction with the deep suffering and misery now experienced by millions of families, workers, children, jobless public servants and young people. This is especially true of a generation of youth who have become the new precariat[14] - a zero generation relegated to zones of social and economic abandonment and marked by zero jobs, zero future, zero hope and what Zygmunt Bauman has defined as a societal condition which is more "liquid," less defined, punitive, and, in the end, more death dealing.[15]

Narcissism and unchecked greed have morphed into more than a psychological category that points to a character flaw among a marginal few. Such registers are now symptomatic of a market-driven society in which extremes of violence, militarization, cruelty and inequality are hardly noticed and have become normalized. Avarice and narcissism are not new. What is new is the unprecedented social sanction of the ethos of greed that has emerged since the 1980s.[16] What is also new is that military force and values have become a source of pride rather than alarm in American society. Not only has the war on terror violated a host of civil liberties, it has further sanctioned a military that has assumed a central role in American society, influencing everything from markets and education to popular culture and fashion. President Dwight D. Eisenhower left office warning about the rise of the military-industrial complex, with its pernicious alignment of the defense industry, the military and political power.[17] What he underestimated was the transition from a militarized economy to a militarized society in which the culture itself was shaped by military power, values and interests. What has become clear in contemporary America is that the organization of civil society for the production of violence is about more than producing militarized technologies and weapons; it is also about producing militarized subjects and a permanent war economy. As Aaron B. O'Connell points out:

Our culture has militarized considerably since Eisenhower's era, and civilians, not the armed services, have been the principal cause. From lawmakers' constant use of "support our troops" to justify defense spending, to TV programs and video games like "NCIS," "Homeland" and "Call of Duty," to NBC's shameful and unreal reality show "Stars Earn Stripes," Americans are subjected to a daily diet of stories that valorize the military while the storytellers pursue their own opportunistic political and commercial agendas.[18]

The imaginary of war and violence informs every aspect of American society and extends from the celebration of a warrior culture in mainstream media to the use of universities to educate students in the logic of the national security state. Military deployments now protect "free trade" arrangements, provide job programs and drain revenue from public coffers. For instance, Lockheed Martin stands to gain billions of dollars in profits as Washington prepares to buy 2,443 F-35 fighter planes at a cost of \$90 million each from the company. The overall cost of the project for a plane that has been called a "one trillion dollar boondoggle" is expected to cost more "than Australia's entire GDP (\$924 billion)."[19] Yet, the American government has no qualms about cutting food programs for the poor, early childhood programs for low-income students and food stamps for those who exist below the poverty line. Such misplaced priorities represent more than a military-industrial complex that is out of control. They also suggest the plunge of American society into the dark abyss of a state that is increasingly punitive, organized around the production of violence and unethical in its policies, priorities and values.

John Hinkson argues that such institutionalized violence is far from a short-lived and aberrant historical moment. In fact, he rightfully asserts that: "we have a new world economy, one crucially that lacks all substantial points of reference and is by implication nihilistic. The point is that this is not a temporary situation because of the imperatives, say, of war: it is a structural break with the past." [20] Evidence of such a shift is obvious in the massive transfer upward in wealth and income that have not only resulted in the concentration of power in relatively few hands, but have promoted

both unprecedented degrees of human suffering and hardship along with what can be called a politics of disimagination.

The Rise of the "Disimagination Machine"

Borrowing from Georges Didi-Huberman's use of the term, "disimagination machine," I argue that the politics of disimagination refers to images, and I would argue institutions, discourses, and other modes of representation, that undermine the capacity of individuals to bear witness to a different and critical sense of remembering, agency, ethics and collective resistance.[21] The "disimagination machine" is both a set of cultural apparatuses extending from schools and mainstream media to the new sites of screen culture, and a public pedagogy that functions primarily to undermine the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue: put simply, to become critically informed citizens of the world.

Examples of the "disimagination machine" abound. A few will suffice. For instance, the Texas State Board of Education and other conservative boards of education throughout the United States are rewriting American textbooks to promote and impose on America's public school students what Katherine Stewart calls "a Christian nationalist version of US history" in which Jesus is implored to "invade" public schools.[22] In this version of history, the term "slavery" is removed from textbooks and replaced with "Atlantic triangular trade," the earth is 6,000 years old, and the Enlightenment is the enemy of education. Historical figures such as Jefferson, Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin, considered to have suspect religious views, "are ruthlessly demoted or purged altogether from the study program." [23] Currently, 46 percent of the American population believes in the creationist view of evolution and increasingly rejects scientific evidence, research and rationality as either 'academic' or irreligious.[24]

The rise of the Tea Party and the renewal of the culture wars have resulted in a Republican Party which is now considered the party of anti-science. Similarly, right-wing politicians, media, talk show hosts and other conservative pundits loudly and widely spread the message that a culture of questioning is antithetical to the American way of life. Moreover, this message is also promoted by conservative groups such as The American Legislative Exchange Council, (ALEC) which has "hit the ground running in 2013, pushing 'model bills' mandating the teaching of climate change denial in public school systems." [25] The climate-change-denial machine is also promoted by powerful conservative groups such as the Heartland Institute. Ignorance is never too far from repression, as was recently demonstrated in Arizona, where State Rep. Bob Thorpe, a Republican freshman Tea Party member, introduced a new bill requiring students to take a loyalty oath in order to receive a graduation diploma.[26]

The "disimagination machine" is more powerful than ever as conservative think tanks provide ample funds for training and promoting anti-public pseudo-intellectuals and religious fundamentalists while simultaneously offering policy statements and talking points to conservative media such as FOX News, Christian news networks, right-wing talk radio, and partisan social media and blogs. This ever growing information/illiteracy bubble has become a powerful force of public pedagogy in the larger culture and is responsible for not only the war on science, reason and critical thought, but also the war on women's reproductive rights, poor minority youth, immigrants, public schooling, and any other marginalized group or institution that challenges the anti-intellectual, anti-democratic worldviews of the new extremists and the narrative supporting Christian nationalism. Liberal Democrats, of course, contribute to this "disimagination machine" through educational policies that substitute critical thinking and critical pedagogy for paralyzing pedagogies of memorization and rote learning tied to high-stakes testing in the service of creating a neoliberal, dumbed-down workforce.

As John Atcheson has pointed out, we are "witnessing an epochal shift in our socio-political world. We are de-evolving, hurtling headlong into a past that was defined by serfs and lords; by necromancy and superstition; by policies based on fiat, not facts." [27] We are also plunging into a dark world of anti-intellectualism, civic illiteracy and a formative culture supportive of an authoritarian state. The embrace of ignorance is at the center of political life today, and a reactionary form of public pedagogy has become the most powerful element of the politics of authoritarianism. Civic illiteracy is the *modus operandi* for creating depoliticized subjects who believe that consumerism is the only obligation of citizenship, who privilege opinions over reasoned arguments, and who are led to believe that ignorance is a virtue rather than a political and civic liability. In any educated democracy, much of the debate that occupies political life today, extending from creationism and climate change denial to "birther" arguments, would be speedily dismissed as magical thinking, superstition and an obvious form of ignorance. Mark Slouka is right in arguing that, "Ignorance gives us a sense of community; it confers citizenship; our representatives either share it or bow down to it or risk our wrath.... Communicate intelligently in America and you're immediately suspect." [28] The politics and machinery of disimagination and its production of ever-deepening ignorance dominates American society because it produces, to a large degree, uninformed customers, hapless clients, depoliticized subjects and illiterate citizens incapable of holding corporate and political power accountable. At stake here is more than the dangerous concentration of economic, political and cultural power in the hands of the ultrarich, megacorporations and elite financial services industries. Also at issue is the widespread perversion of the social, critical education, the public good, and democracy itself.

Toward a Radical Imagination

Against the politics of disimagination, progressives, workers, educators, young people and others need to develop a new language of radical reform and create new public spheres that provide the pedagogical conditions for critical thought, dialogue and thoughtful deliberation. At stake here is a notion of pedagogy that both informs the mind and creates the conditions for modes of agency that are critical, informed, engaged and socially responsible. The radical imagination can be nurtured around the merging of critique and hope, the capacity to connect private troubles with broader social considerations, and the production of alternative formative cultures that provide the precondition for political engagement and for energizing democratic movements for social change - movements willing to think beyond isolated struggles and the limits of a savage global capitalism. Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis point to such a project in their manifesto on the radical imagination. They write:

This Manifesto looks forward to the creation of a new political Left formation that can overcome fragmentation, and provide a solid basis for many-side interventions in the current economic, political and social crises that afflict people in all walks of life. The Left must once again offer to young people, people of color, women, workers, activists, intellectuals and newly-arrived immigrants places to learn how the capitalist system works in all of its forms of exploitation whether personal, political, or economic. We need to reconstruct a platform to oppose Capital. It must ask in this moment of US global hegemony what are the alternatives to its cruel power over our lives, and those of large portions of the world's peoples. And the Left formation is needed to offer proposals on how to rebuild a militant, democratic labor movement, strengthen and transform the social movements; and, more generally, provide the opportunity to obtain a broad education that is denied to them by official institutions. We need a political formation dedicated to the proposition that radical theory and practice are inextricably linked, that knowledge without action is impotent, but action without knowledge is blind. [29]

Matters of justice, equality, and political participation are foundational to any functioning

democracy, but it is important to recognize that they have to be rooted in a vibrant formative culture in which democracy is understood not just as a political and economic structure but also as a civic force enabling justice, equality and freedom to flourish. While the institutions and practices of a civil society and an aspiring democracy are essential in this project, what must also be present are the principles and modes of civic education and critical engagement that support the very foundations of democratic culture. Central to such a project is the development of a new radical imagination both through the pedagogies and projects of public intellectuals in the academy and through work that can be done in other educational sites, such as the new media. Utilizing the Internet, social media, and other elements of the digital and screen culture, public intellectuals, cultural workers, young people and others can address larger audiences and present the task of challenging diverse forms of oppression, exploitation and exclusion as part of a broader effort to create a radical democracy.

There is a need to invent modes of pedagogy that release the imagination, connect learning to social change and create social relations in which people assume responsibility for each other. Such a pedagogy is not about methods or prepping students to learn how to take tests. Nor is such an education about imposing harsh disciplinary behaviors in the service of a pedagogy of oppression. On the contrary, it is about a moral and political practice capable of enabling students and others to become more knowledgeable while creating the conditions for generating a new vision of the future in which people can recognize themselves, a vision that connects with and speaks to the desires, dreams and hopes of those who are willing to fight for a radical democracy. Americans need to develop a new understanding of civic literacy, education and engagement, one capable of developing a new conversation and a new political project about democracy, inequality, and the redistribution of wealth and power, and how such a discourse can offer the conditions for democratically inspired visions, modes of governance and policymaking. Americans need to embrace and develop modes of civic literacy, critical education and democratic social movements that view the public good as a utopian imaginary, one that harbors a trace and vision of what it means to defend old and new public spheres that offer spaces where dissent can be produced, public values asserted, dialogue made meaningful and critical thought embraced as a noble ideal.

Elements of such a utopian imaginary can be found in James Baldwin's "Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis," in which he points out that "we live in an age in which silence is not only criminal but suicidal."^[30] The utopian imaginary is also on full display in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," where King states under the weight and harshness of incarceration that an "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere ... [and asks whether we will] be extremists for the preservation of injustice - or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?"^[31] According to King, "we must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy."^[32] We hear it in the words of former Harvard University President James B. Conant, who makes an impassioned call for "the need for the American radical - the missing political link between the past and future of this great democratic land." ^[33] We hear it in the voices of young people all across the United States - the new American radicals - who are fighting for a society in which justice matters, social protections are guaranteed, equality is insured, and education becomes a right and not an entitlement. The radical imagination waits to be unleashed through social movements in which injustice is put on the run and civic literacy, economic justice, and collective struggle once again become the precondition for agency, hope and the struggle over democracy.

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