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America's Nazi Problem and the End of Policing



Storefront, Astoria, Oregon. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

The conditions that produce authoritarian societies are with us once again. The ghost of fascism haunts the present, appearing in a relentless number of assaults on the principles and institutions central to a democracy. America's Nazi problem is evident not only in the 73 million people who voted for a white supremacist presidential candidate in 2020 but

also in the attack on the Capitol by Trump's followers whose "minds [were] waterlogged with conspiracy theories [took] lies as truth, spread hate and bigotry, [and wrapped] themselves in several flags – American, Confederate, Blue Lives Matter – and [who] use the Bible as a weapon of violence and repression."^[1]

This is not to suggest that the United States, especially under the Trump regime, replicated precisely Hitler's Nazi Germany. Trump is not Hitler nor is Trumpism a precise replica of Nazi ideology. Robert Jay Lifton is right in arguing that the United States may not be "headed inevitably for an authoritarian society or Nazi-like society. What I am saying is that there are parallels. And they're dangerous. You know, the Nazis didn't do away with the major institutions of Germany."^[2] Trump, his incorrigible followers, and the Republican Party have unleashed elements of an authoritarian irrationality—a dark and menacing underside of a racist, anti-democratic politics and psychology. This is evident not only in a history of slavery, lynchings, and the mass incarceration of Blacks, but also in conditions that led to the storming of the Capitol by Trump's followers.

Put in a broader historical context, the attack on the Capital was an act of political terrorism made in the name of white supremacy. It echoes a sordid history that included the violence against Blacks that took place in Tulsa a hundred years ago. Tulsa was destroyed as a result of white supremacist violence and over 300 Black people were killed. That was an act of economic terrorism. Today economic and political terrorism are unified and drive a Republican Party that is relentless in its destruction of the rights of Black people and its willingness to destroy democracy as well. In the current moment, politics has become an extension of racial violence; this is a politics that no longer hides in the shadows or margins of society and has become a governing principle of the Republican Party.

The Black Lives Matter movement has made clear that America is reproducing alarming echoes of the past. It has exposed the mobilizing passions and ideological discourses of fascism evident in Trumpland. At a different time in history, Cedric Robinson identified this American form of fascist politics as racial capitalism.^[3] According to Robinson, America had its own home-grown version of fascism, which did not simply emulate the fascist European movements of the 1920s but reached back to the era of Jim Crow and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States.^[4] Fascism was no longer viewed as simply an import from Europe. The historical manufacture of fascism was acknowledged as dating back long before its rise in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its roots in the United States began with the era of settler-colonial racism and evolved into

“the violent nexus between the carceral state and racial capitalism,” which became the new site of fascism.^[5]

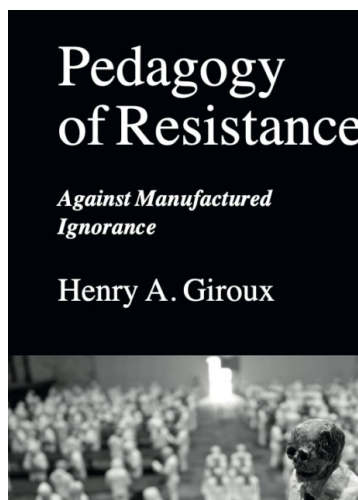
The collective institutions and public spheres capable of resisting the logic of neoliberal capitalism and the emerging fascist politics—from schools and unions to the courts and independent media—are either under attack or being dismantled. In this neoliberal dreamscape, utopia has become privatized, and the state is hollowed out, no longer viewed as a force for good. The inventory of public concerns ignores any notion of the civic imagination and the ideas, values, and institutions that connect it to an ongoing struggle over social, political, and economic rights. There is more at work here than a diminished capacity for democratic resistance, racial change, and the failure of the civic imagination. Yet, this is not meant to underestimate the struggle of emergent movements of resistance to liberate the public imagination from the grip of neoliberal ideology, white nationalism, militarized policing, systemic racism, and right-wing populism. Such movements are alive and offer more than a glimmer of hope for the future. At the same time, it would be reckless politically and morally to underestimate the challenge posed by the ongoing transformation of America into an up-dated fascist-like state, reproduced, in part, through a plague of manufactured ignorance, repression, and racist inspired violence.^[6]

The current historical era is plagued by the abandonment of human rights, democratic institutions, and formations; the latter is aided and abetted by the concentrated power of a corporate-controlled social media dominated by incivility, bigotry, racism, and lies. Under such circumstances, it is crucial to understand how the different threads of oppression and anti-democratic tendencies mutually inform and sustain a totalizing network of state violence. Furthermore, it is essential to comprehend how the diverse elements of oppression are rooted in the language, symbols, and culture of society’s everyday patterns and social relations. America’s descent into fascist politics demands a rethinking of how education and the shaping of agency, values, and modes of identification have become central to politics while legitimizing and normalizing systemic violence and the punishing state as defining features of governance, culture, and everyday life.

In an age in which all social problems are treated as simply a matter of individual responsibility and unconstrained choices, it has become more difficult to translate private troubles into broader, systemic considerations. The self is now organized around notions of freedom and choice that view matters of the public good, community, and social responsibility as a regressive if not a reactionary set of obligations. Translation as a political form, if not necessity, has been rendered incoherent under the onslaught of

manufactured ignorance and the cult of conformity. The failure to connect the dots among a diverse number of issues and social problems is frequently the result of the depoliticizing logic of neoliberal individualization and privatization. There is also the problem that comes with a left politics that defines itself through a range of siloed differences. The result is a politics that is fractured and unable theoretically and politically to develop a unified movement capable of mass struggle and collective resistance.

In 2014, Eric Garner was arrested and murdered for the crime of selling cigarettes on the streets of Staten Island. Prior to his death, Officer Daniel Pantaleo put Garner in a chokehold while another officer put pressure on his chest. Even though he repeated 11 times that he could not breathe, Garner, who was



unarmed, died as a result of this inhumane and vicious treatment.^[7] Within a short time, “I cannot breathe” became a rallying cry and compelling shorthand for a protest movement against racist-inspired police brutality and mass incarceration. George Floyd uttered the same phrase prior to dying as a result of Officer Derick Chauvin putting his knee on Floyd’s neck for over 9 minutes in full view of many people witnessing this act of murderous violence. While these two cases are the most celebrated for launching protests against police brutality across the globe, it has been estimated that over 70 people have used the exact phrase while in police custody.^[8]

Building on the work of the Black Lives Movement and other activist groups protesting what Noam Chomsky calls “400 years of hideous crimes and atrocities,” George Floyd’s assassination prompted one of the largest protest movements in American history.^[9] What was different about this movement was that it exposed globally acts of police racism, violence, and brutality in terms of both its history and its existing policies regarding domestic terrorism. What this movement illuminated was the notion that police violence

could only be understood within the lengthy reach of a racist history whose roots were in the long legacy of slavery, the genocide waged against Native Americans, the Jim Crow era, and the rise of the carceral or punishing state that emerged in full force since the 1980s.^[10] George Floyd's murder, once again, unleashed the brutal cascading violence that comes with decades of institutional racism and the ruthlessness of a carceral state. It exposed and reminded Americans of the racist lies pushed Trump and his Confederate loving allies in the corporate and media worlds. The ghosts of history had come out of the shadows, revealing the detritus of dashed hopes, enduring hardships, and racist violence. The United States had not simply lost its way morally and politically; it had slipped into the ugly abyss of fascist politics.

From the 1970s on, neoliberal capitalism nourished, amplified, and intensified fascist passions, and by the time of Trump's election in 2016 to the presidency of the United States, America had entered the storm clouds of an updated version of fascist politics. The protest movements that emerged in response to the symbolic and real violence unleashed by the cry "I can't breathe" represent a much-needed form of historical remembrance and the unfreezing of a history of systemic repression and racism. Such movements have also made visible not only the re-emergence of a new wave of white supremacy, police violence, voter suppression, the rise of the punishing state, and the ongoing criminalization of social problems, but also, to a lesser degree, the ascendancy of a savage form of financial capitalism that has destroyed the civic imagination, hollowed out the social state, and created a new political formation that has tipped the alleged American dream into the American nightmare.

One lesson to be learned regarding the racial roots of fascism in the United States is that it is a "protracted social process" that can be understood as a historical arc that identifies the protracted extent of a parasitic fascist politics in the United States and its re-emergence in different forms today. Alberto Toscano rightly highlights this point in referencing the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which has argued that:

the threat is not of a "return of the 1930s" but the ongoing fact of racialized state terror. This is the ever-present danger that animates present-day anti-fascist energies in the United States—and it cannot be boiled down to the necessary but insufficient task of confronting only those who self-identify as fascists.^[11]

One of the challenges faced by the emergence of this new era of fascist politics is the need for a new vocabulary capable of analyzing how neoliberalism works through a wide range of oppressive practices in various sites to reproduce a totalizing system of violence.^[12] The

aligning of racial violence and fascism necessitates connecting, as Samir Amin once noted, “the return of fascism on the political scene to the ongoing crisis of contemporary capitalism.”^[13] According to Amin, fascism rejects the most basic elements of democracy, which includes “theories and practices of modern democracies [based on a] recognition of a diversity of opinions, recourse to electoral procedures to determine a majority, [and] guarantee of the rights of the minority.”^[14] Against democratic values and rights, fascism proposes “the values of submission to the requirements of collective discipline and the authority of the supreme leader and his main agents.”^[15]

Connecting racial violence and fascism also suggests a critical historical and contemporary analysis of the rise of the punishing state in a range of institutions, spaces, and social relations that shape daily life. In this logic, capitalism and violence become synonymous. Robin D. G. Kelley reiterates this point in his insistence that capitalism and racism are not distinct from one another and that racial hierarchies are a governing principle of capitalism.^[16] Under such circumstances, it is not possible to “eliminate capitalism, overthrow it, without the complete destruction of white supremacy, of the racial regime under which it’s built.”^[17]

David Harvey is right in asking how neoliberalism has managed to cancel out the future, render invisible the main centers of oppression, and extend market-driven values far beyond the economic realm to a range of institutions, spaces, and social actors.^[18] Similarly, it is crucial to analyze how neoliberalism has enabled the re-emergence of white supremacy, white nationalism, and systemic racism as the foundation for merging neoliberalism and an updated version of fascist politics.^[19] A central question here is how has the reach of violence changed under neoliberalism, and how has the ethical collapse of political horizons, language, and a shared sense of meaning and values furthered the destruction of public spaces, public imagination, and the rise of fascist politics?^[20]

In an era of rampant anti-intellectualism, rising Christian nationalism, the elevation of blind faith for critical reason, and the advancement of consumerism to a national ideal, manufactured ignorance reinforces the destruction of those crucial public spheres where the discourse of the common good, public life, and social justice can be taught and learned. Under such circumstances, everyday life is militarized as predominantly white males are considered citizen-soldiers waging war against those viewed as disposable in a society where the public sphere is deemed only available to white people.^[21] In this view of the social order, only whites have a legitimate claim to citizenship.

Domestic Space as a Battlefield

Domestic space has become a battlefield with tragic results. Heightened fear and paranoia, intensified by a racist culture, has resulted in Black people being killed for reasons as trivial as selling untaxed cigarettes, minor traffic offenses such as jaywalking, failing to signal a lane change, or alleged passing a fake \$20 bill at a grocery store.^[22] Duante Wright, a twenty-year-old unarmed Black man, was pulled over for a minor technicality, and in an absurd and tragic turn of events, was killed by a police officer who confused her Taser with a gun. Moreover, African Americans are far more likely to be killed by the police. From a broader historical perspective steeped in the brutality of slavery and the public lynching of Black men, deadly mistakes of this sort happen predominantly to those individuals who are rendered faceless, symbolizing pathology, evil, criminality, mayhem, and danger.^[23] According to Aaron Morrison, Blacks are “far more likely than whites to die at the hands of the police.” He writes:

Various studies of criminal justice data show that African Americans are far more likely than whites to be pulled over by police and are as much as three times more likely to be searched. Black people are roughly 13 percent of the population, whereas the white population is about 60 percent. Black men were about 2.5 times more likely than white men to be killed by police between 2013 and 2018, according to an August 2019 study published by the National Academy of Sciences. Black women were 1.4 more times likely than white women to be killed by police, according to the same study.^[24]

Policing in the United States blurs the lines between the war at home and abroad. America’s police forces have been militarized. They act with impunity in targeted neighborhoods, public schools, college campuses, hospitals, and almost every other public sphere. Not only do the police view protesters, Black people, and undocumented immigrants as antagonists to be controlled, they are also armed with military-grade weapons. This is a process that dates as far back as President Lyndon Johnson when he initiated the 1965 Law Enforcement Assistance Act, which supplied local police forces with weapons used in the Vietnam War. The public is now regarded as dangerous and suspect; moreover, as the police are given more military technologies and weapons of war, a culture of punishment, resentment, and racism intensifies as Black people, in particular, are viewed as a threat to law and order. Unfortunately, employing militarized responses to routine police practices has become normalized and barely the object of public criticism. One consequence is that the federal government has continued to arm the police through

the Defense Logistics Agency's 1033 Program, which allows the Defense Department to transfer military equipment free of charge to local enforcement agencies.

The scope of the 1033 Program is alarming given that "Since its inception, more than 11,500 domestic law enforcement agencies have taken part in the 1033 Program, receiving more than \$7.4 billion in military equipment."^[25] There is also the federally run 1122 Program which allows the police to purchase military equipment at the same discounted rate as the federal government. In addition, there is the Homeland Security Grant Program, which provides funds for local police departments to buy military-grade armaments and weapons. The military-grade weapons provided through these federal programs include armored vehicles, assault rifles, flashbang grenade launchers, bomb-detonating robots, and night vision items. Arming the police with more powerful weapons reinforced a culture that taught police officers to learn, think, and act as soldiers engaged in a war. Moreover, as Ryan Welch and Jack Mewhirter wrote in *The Washington Post*, the more militarized and armed the police are, the greater the increase in civilian deaths. As they point out:

Even controlling for other possible factors in police violence (such as household income, overall and black population, violent-crime levels and drug use), more-militarized law enforcement agencies were associated with more civilians killed each year by police. When a county goes from receiving no military equipment to \$2,539,767 worth (the largest figure that went to one agency in our data), more than twice as many civilians are likely to die in that county the following year.^[26]

This arming and militarizing of the police were intensified after the 9/11 attacks and privileged a police ethos defined by "the use of violent tactics and non-negotiable force over compromise, mediation, and peaceful conflict resolution."^[27] Police brutality is endemic to American history. As Mariame Kaba argues,

There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against black people. Policing in the South emerged from the slave patrols in the 1700 and 1800s that caught and returned runaway slaves. In the North, the first municipal police departments in the mid-1800s helped quash labor strikes and riots against the rich. Everywhere, they have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo.^[28]

Police brutality cannot be separated from the lethal nature of white supremacy, and in its recent incarnations became "the war on crime." Under President Nixon and every American president after him, the war on crime continued to expand and intensify into a war on Black communities. The call for "law and order" repeatedly served as a smokescreen for racist and militarized police practices that equated Black behavior with

criminality and authorized the use of force against them. This is the organizing principle of a war mentality adopted by the police throughout the United States in which the behavior of Black people is criminalized. As the reach of the culture of punishment expanded, its targets included protesters, immigrants, and those individuals and groups marginalized by class, religion, ethnicity, and color as the other—an enemy.^[29] It comes as no surprise that as one study reports, “Police kill, on average, 2.8 men per day.... Police homicide risk is higher than suggested by official data. Black and Latino men are at higher risk for death than are White men, and these disparities vary markedly across place.”^[30] A militarized culture breed violence. It wastes money on the security industries, policing, and impoverished socially necessary programs to prevent it. Violence is both shocking and part of everyday life, especially for those who are poor, Black, and disenfranchised. In the last few decades, “the US has had the highest homicide rate of any high-income country, and according to preliminary data released in March by the FBI, it rose by 25 percent in 2020, when an estimated 20,000 people were murdered—more than fifty-six a day.”^[31] Police brutality became code for a more violent expression of racism that emerged with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s.^[32] This was especially obvious under the Trump administration as the racist adoption of both white supremacy and a wave of police brutality against Blacks and undocumented immigrants was presented to the American public as a badge of honor and an act of civic pride.

As the power of the police expanded—edged on by the Trump administration—along with their unions, social programs were defunded. These included job programs, food stamp programs, health centers, healthcare programs, and early childhood education. In many states, more money was spent on prisons than on colleges and universities.^[33] Targeted cities inhabited mostly by poor Black and brown people were now under siege as the war on poverty morphed into the war on crime. Instead of “fighting black youth poverty,” the new crop of white supremacist politicians fought what Elizabeth Hinton called “fighting black youth crime.”^[34]

As Jim Crow re-emerged in more punitive forms, immigration was criminalized, the war on youth of color intensified, and the culture of punishment began to shape a range of institutions. This was particularly evident as mass incarceration became a defining organizing institution of the narrow racially inspired policies of criminalization in America and, by default, the prison its most notorious welfare agency. America has been in the midst of an imprisonment binge since the 1960s.^[35] As Angela Davis has noted:

But even more important, imprisonment is the punitive solution to a while range of social problems that are not being addressed by those social institutions that might help people lead better, more satisfying lives. This is the logic of what has been called the imprisonment binge: Instead of building housing, throw the homeless in prison. Instead of developing the educational system, throw the illiterate in prison. Throw people in prison who lose jobs as the result of de-industrialization, globalization of capital, and the dismantling of the welfare state. Get rid of all of them. Remove these dispensable populations from society. According to this logic the prison becomes a way of disappearing people in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems they represent. ^[36]

The numbers speak for themselves. Historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad makes this clear in his new preface to *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. He writes:

By population, by per capita incarceration rates, and by expenditures, the United States exceeds all other nations in how many of its citizens, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants are under some form of criminal justice supervision.... The number of African American and Latinx people in American jails and prisons today exceeds the entire populations of some African, Eastern European, and Caribbean countries. ^[37]

Gangster Capitalism

Gangster capitalism trades on a culture that makes people disposable and derails the project of democracy in multiple ways. Michelle Brown has argued persuasively that the rise of police violence, especially against people of color, indicates that increases in the scale of punishment cannot be abstracted from a parallel rise in both power and apparatuses of punishment—extending from the law enforcement, military services, private security forces, immigration detention centers to intelligence networks, and surveillance apparatuses. ^[38] Moreover, the culture of punishment increasingly defines both subjects and social problems through the registers of punishment, pain, and violence. How else to explain the actions of the South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, who in 2021 signed “a bill requiring death row inmates to choose between the electric chair and a firing squad as their method of execution.” ^[39] Frank Knaack, the Executive Director of the South Carolina’s ACLU, stated that capital punishment and the new law “evolved from lynchings and racial terror, and it has failed to separate its modern capital punishment system from this racist history.” ^[40]

Policing cannot be understood outside of the history of criminogenic culture and racist punishing state marked by both staggering inequities in wealth, income, and power, as well as a collective mindset in which those considered non-white are considered less than human, undeserving of human rights, and viewed as disposable.^[41] The journalist Robert C. Koehler rightly argues that underlying both the larger culture and the culture of policing is a deeply ingrained white supremacy marked by a system of gross inequalities in which economic rights do not match political and individual rights. Koehler writes:

it is racism that is the trigger that disproportionately escalates police encounters with people of color. However, even more sadly, it is systemic racism that normalizes it, or legitimates it, making it largely acceptable to white American eyes and consciences. For it is not only the police who have this problem, but our entire society.^[42]

As neoliberalism failed to deliver on its promises of upward social and economic mobility, it shifted attention for its broken social experiment to attacks on immigrants, Blacks, and other populations deemed unworthy, inferior, and a threat to white people. In doing so, gangster capitalism has become armed, spiraling into a form of authoritarianism that has merged the savagery of market despotism with the rancid ideology of white supremacy. Cornel West is right in arguing that neoliberal capitalism with its emphasis on materialism, racism, and cruelty “allows for endemic inequality and a culture of greed and consumerism that [has trampled] on the rights and dignity of poor people and minorities decade after decade.”^[43] The American nightmare that has descended upon the United States points to a crisis of power, agency, community, education, and hope. The effects of the neoliberalism’s death-dealing-machinery are everywhere, and police abuse is only one thread of this criminogenic social formation.

Rather than fade into the past or disappear beneath the propaganda techniques of right-wing disimagination machines, widespread poverty, racially segregated schools, rampant homelessness, ecological destruction, large-scale rootlessness, fearmongering, social atomization voter suppression, and the politics of disposability are alive and well.^[44] It is now unabashedly reproduced and defended by a Republican Party that has become the overt symbol of white supremacy, economic ruthlessness, and manufactured ignorance.

Widespread corruption is now matched by a climate of fear and a willingness on the part of Trump’s political allies to inflict violence on undesirable members of the public along with anyone voicing criticism or dissent. The scaffold of resistance now faces a malignant fascist politics growing across the globe. Fascist politics, especially in the United States, has been on steroids, especially true both during Trump’s reign in office and has continued

after his defeat, especially with the rule of the Republican Party in the Congress and among a majority of state legislatures. If the systemic violence and lawlessness that denies Black communities a claim to human rights, citizenship, and dignity are to be challenged, it is crucial to understand how neoliberal fascism becomes a machinery of dread, tearing the social fabric, while cancelling the future. As a regime of ideology, neoliberal fascism wages a political and pedagogical war against the conditions that make thinking, agency, the search for truth, and informed judgment possible.

The heart of American violence does not reside merely in the culture and practice of policing in America, or for that matter in its prison-industrial complex. Its center of gravity is more comprehensive and is part of a broader crisis that extends from the threat of nuclear war and ecological devastation to the rise of authoritarian states and the human suffering caused by the staggering concentrations of wealth in the hands of a global financial elite. The roots of these multilayered and intersecting crises lie elsewhere in a new political and social formation that constitutes a racialized criminal economy that has embraced greed, violence, disposability, denial, and racial cleansing as governing principles of the entire social order. This is the rule of neoliberal fascism on steroids. It is also an extermination machine rooted in a vapid nihilism that fuels the celebration of materialism and social atomization with a belief in unshakable loyalty, purification through violence, and a cult of heroism.

It is crucial to understand how the threads of racial violence in its broader historical context, comprehensive connections, and multidimensional layers shape capitalism in its totality to produce what David Theo Goldberg calls a machinery of proliferating dread.^[45] This suggests that any call for police reform must be part of a collective movement to bring an end to neoliberal capitalism rather than limit the call for racial justice to the defunding of the police. Such calls do not go to the heart of violence in America, particularly as it slides into an updated form of fascist politics. Policing as it currently exists must be eliminated. Mariame Kaba illuminates this issue in comments regarding police abolition. She writes:

People like me who want to abolish prisons and police, however, have a vision of a different society, built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation. What would the country look like if it had billions of extra dollars to spend on housing, food and education for all? This change in society wouldn't happen immediately, but the protests show that many people are ready to embrace a different vision of safety and justice.^[46]

Kaba's challenge does not advocate for liberal reforms. Her call is to advance a radical restructuring of society. Central to her call for social change is that such a task be understood as not merely political but also educational. This necessitates the development of political and pedagogical struggles that take seriously the need to rethink the attack on the public imagination and attack on critical agency, identity, and everyday life. Also at stake is the need to identify and reclaim those institutions that are necessary to produce and connect an educated public to the struggle for a substantive and radical democracy. The crisis of democracy extends far beyond the calls for police reforms and demands a more comprehensive view not only of oppression and the forces through which it is produced, legitimated, and normalized but also of political struggle itself.

Notes.

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