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Silent Repression in America *From Barbed Wire to Invisible Fences*

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Following a long telephone conversation last night (6 Nov.) with CP contributor Mark Epstein about the nature of fascism and societal repression—his point that fascism / totalitarianism does not require the concentration camp, and that we as a people have internalized the structural-ideological poisons of advanced capitalism, e.g., militarism, consumerism—both of which I wholeheartedly agree (I was about to say, internalization, just as he said it) and also which put me in mind of a CP article I wrote several months ago, “Toward a Definition of Fascism,” I’d like now, briefly, to continue the train of thought.

America escaped the historical experience of outright Naziism, although taking American history as a whole, certainly chattel slavery, thence political-institutional racial segregation, Red-Scare round-ups, Japanese internment in World War II, the current vast black prison population, and much else besides, indicate a continuing vein of repression, punctuated by ethnocentrism and xenophobia, as well as an ingrained ideological contemptuousness for the poor (and, admittedly, working people in general), that, not in severity, but underlying propensity, hardly justifies a clean bill of health when referring to social-political-economic authoritarianism. Our

concentration camps are the exception, not the rule; Hitler, in all candor, did not leave his footprint on America. Yet repression is indelibly present here, structurally evident in the seemingly mandatory need of capitalism to enlist the unquestioned loyalty of its subjects, as though a system so fragile it envisions two specters: revolution under every bed, worse still, that consumers will stop buying, that advertising will lose its hold, that the narcotic of invidious distinction will wear off. We are enthralled to the machinery of waste, the drum beat of war and its preparation serving to dull the senses and drive out the utter insanity of wealth accumulation for its own sake and boasting rights against all others.

Sounds harmless enough, when compared with the crematoria. Perhaps so, yet dehumanization, while preferable to hideous death, not only—as I see it—is evil per se, but also leads, through callousness and cynicism, to the eventual building of the selfsame crematoria for those who stand in the way, primarily through achieving an alternative mode of life and social organization, and also, from there, a refutation of self-indulgence and the social insanity defining Americans' identity and way of life. A harsh judgment, offensive to patriotic instincts? Undoubtedly. Yet that does not change the reality in which an advanced industrial nation must resort to armed-drone assassinations to further its national interests and keep up its morale—assassination but a microcosm of the operational might of US militarism penetrating every corner of the globe. We are told, to be an advanced industrial nation carries certain responsibilities: be kind to the “natives” by giving them jobs (outsourcing), responsible governments (who follow our whims, dictates, political-military-ideological objectives) via humanitarian interventionism, and because so enthused, obligated, driven to fulfill our Exceptionalist glory and destiny, we may at the same time be pardoned from neglecting to look after the social welfare of the home front, too busy, in fact, to want to sully the work of bringing democracy to the world, that a rigidified corporatism, wealth concentration, the increase of entrenched poverty, crumbling infrastructure, deteriorating education, spoliation of the environment, all represent a small price to pay for America's selfless works of charity and philanthropy on a global basis.

If you buy that, as most Americans do, I have the Brooklyn Bridge to sell you cheap. A protofascistic social order, threatening to blossom forth in full form, is not, however, a laughing matter. My title, “From Barbed Wire to Invisible Fences,” is intended to suggest what lies beyond, and is a substitute for, the concentration camp. Repression comes in many varieties, selectively evolved from the nation's history, institutions, culture, in the case of the US, a systemic habituation to violence, accustomed deference to upper groups, raw individualism as license for everything from antisocial behavior to unlimited acquisition, all wrapped in the mantle of democracy and the Constitution, not as restraining forces, but to legitimate the traits

and practices themselves. Amoral cynicism becomes transmuted into a higher morality, defensive walls ensuring against self-doubt. It is the certainty of rectitude, no matter the depths of depravity reached by an action (saturation bombing at the outset in Iraq), the demeaning and depersonalization of an enemy (as in vaporizing humans through drone warfare), or the diplomatic- military posture of global hegemony (the Pacific-first strategy to contain, weaken, confront China) and counterrevolution using counterterrorism as a cover (CIA-JSOC paramilitary operations aimed at regime change), that warrants and validates describing the mindset as protofascistic on the verge of becoming still more lethal.

Certainty of rectitude, as separate elements, or especially combined, as components of Exceptionalism, bodes ill for the resistance to *repression*, particularly since together, including the ideological context, they underwrite its necessary mindset in America, not through physical clobbering, but the individual's own introjection of the capitalistic universe of thought and discourse, as a form of self-neutralization when it comes to radicalism or advocacy for social change. Barbed wire is unnecessary, except for the few who transcend false consciousness, and even then, quieter, more regularized, normalized means of intimidation, usually having the sanction of law, will do, so as not to upset or reveal subtler patterns of social control to the same end of inducing conformity and silencing dissent. On many suburban lawns in America one sees not barbed wire but invisible fences for keeping dogs from straying off the property line of the owner. And certainly, we can treat our people as well as our dogs. Instead of a long leash, an internalized acceptance of order, defined by Authority, inculcated, permeating consciousness, is both more effective and pleasing to the tenets of democracy, as commonly understood and practiced.

Capitalist man (gender bias not intended) is expected to exist in a condition of obedience as the ideal source of structural stabilization and economic submission, both necessary to the disposal of surplus production and high profit margins; critical awareness is construed as a mortal threat to the systemic features of class power, ideological predominance, the disposition to militarism, war, and intervention, all of which can come undone—to the ultimate collapse of capitalism—if not sufficiently and constantly reinforced. The invisible fences are the concentration camps of the mind; no guards or locks visible, the individual, culturally prepped to accept and help in bringing about the fragmentation of the personality structure so as to be the dutiful consumers of political reaction, economic shoddiness, ideological self-assumed superiority. We have a word for this human condition of self-pacification, *alienation*.

In Marx, it is derived from the commodity-structure of capitalism, which is a persuasive explanation at the epistemological and depth-psychology levels; yet for everyday purposes one can suggest instead the overriding implementation by ruling groups of the sum-total availability of pressures to deconstruct the human mind, the breakdown of the autonomous self, by virtue of the cultural-institutional elimination of whatever encourages the separateness of identity from capitalist-nationalist values and principles, and from that position of detachment the next and imperative phase, its reintegration into solidaristic bonds of class feeling, motivation, and interest. The conception of class must be destroyed in order for the individual to remain imprisoned in the walls of acquisitiveness, its near-neighbor, consumerism, and taking on greater importance for its diversionary aspect as well as instrumental role in the expansion of capitalism, militarism.

Successfully breaking through the invisible fences will no doubt bring about the barbed wire; still, ruling groups remain confident that perpetual war, enough opposition to democratization (as in placing limits on the social safety net, including health insurance in this category), so that the citizenry can neither gain a glimpse of authentic welfare by rights nor experience a standard of living freed from sacrifice or want, and the occasional use of force to display the powers of the State, would be sufficient for inducing compliance with the dictates of, and promoting a sense of inferiority within, the class structure, along with cues, notably the resounding calls to, and praise of, intervention, to ensure the result of ineffectual actors for social change. The velvet glove does not deny, only hides from sight, the mailed fist which lies beneath.

It does not surprise that massive surveillance has been taken in stride by the nation, rather than seen as a species of force, albeit of the velvet-glove variety. Here again the concentration-camp analogy sets up a false standard: succumbing to power can be achieved through legitimate channels of cultural-political indoctrination via the party system, the ideological fusion of capitalism and democracy, entertainment, even sport (from valuing combativeness to converting partisanship into the psychodynamics of loyalty), in sum, an ongoing bread-and-circuses, as the trivialization of both individual and national experience to displace inner moral bearings, now supplanted by nihilistic self-interest. When in the Spring of 1960 I sat on the couch of our apartment with Isaac Deutscher, there to celebrate passing my “generals” in the American Civilization program at Harvard, he said how the atmosphere had changed since his last visit to Cambridge, when researching at Houghton Library. Before, McCarthyism was so tangible that people avoided him and he could not discuss his work (I believe, then, the Trotsky biography) in a normal way, but now (1960), all sweetness and light, no longer any need to be wary. YET, he went on, things have become far worse. Why—although I already knew the answer from my

limited experience? Because in the US, he said, people had fully *internalized* McCarthyism to the point that external repression was no longer necessary. We observed the boundaries of societal decorum, perhaps even without thinking. The proof of the pudding: the gradual shrinkage of the approved political-ideological spectrum over the course of decades. Today, Obama passes as a liberal; in 1960, he would have been seen as a Right-wing opportunist, and liberalism itself, straying far from the path when the term had substantive bite during the New Deal.

We have internalized commodity fetishism (to recur to Marx), but also more besides, a reified militarism for its own sake, happily existing with or without consumerism, and a lurking psychopathology of power accounted for by the changing structure of world politics, whereby the US is no longer free, with the rise of multiple centers of power, to act unilaterally in guiding the global system exclusively in our own self-interest. Whether barbed wire or invisible fences, break-out time is upon us, to learn to live in comity with others, disposed to equality at home, else the growing pariah-status of the US in its singular quest for hegemonic certainty catches hold in world opinion, coupled with its actual deteriorating position in all things save for overwhelming military force, brings a precipitous decline that interventions, drones, carrier battle groups, eavesdropping, IMF / World Bank machinations to implement the “Washington Consensus” of market fundamentalism, cannot halt. Just today, we read in the *New York Times* that the CIA is in the business of domestic surveillance (here, in partnership with AT&T), again, no surprise, just another straw in the wind, repression in America wearing a smiley face, the roadmap pointing to a stage of totalitarianism specifically boiling down to fascism.