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The Plague of American Authoritarianism

By Henry Giroux

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Authoritarianism in the American collective psyche and in what might be called traditional narratives of historical memory is always viewed as existing elsewhere. Viewed as an alien and demagogic political system, it is primarily understood as a mode of governance associated with the dictatorships in Latin America in the 1970s and, of course, in its most vile extremes, with Hitler's poisonous Nazi rule and Mussolini's fascist state in the 1930s and 1940s. These were and are societies that idealized war, soldiers, nationalism, militarism, political certainty, fallen warriors, racial cleansing, and a dogmatic allegiance to the homeland.[i] Education and the media were the propaganda tools of authoritarianism, merging fascist and religious symbols with the language of God, family, and country, and were integral to promoting servility and conformity among the populace. This script is well known to the American public and it has been played out in films, popular culture, museums, the mainstream media, and other cultural apparatuses. Historical memory that posits the threat of the return of an updated authoritarianism turns the potential threat of the return of authoritarianism into dead memory. Hence, any totalitarian mode of governance is now treated as a relic of a sealed past that bears no

relationship to the present. The need to retell the story of totalitarianism becomes a frozen lesson in history rather than a narrative necessary to understanding the present

Hannah Arendt, the great theorist of totalitarianism, believed that the protean elements of totalitarianism are still with us and that they would crystalize in different forms.[ii] Far from being a thing of the past, she believed that totalitarianism “heralds as a possible model for the future.”[iii] Arendt was keenly aware that the culture of traditionalism, an ever present culture of fear, the corporatization of civil society, the capture of state power by corporations, the destruction of public goods, the corporate control of the media, the rise of a survival-of-the-fittest ethos, the dismantling of civil and political rights, the ongoing militarization of society, the “religionization of politics,”[iv] a rampant sexism, an attack on labor, an obsession with national security, human rights abuses, the emergence of a police state, a deeply rooted racism, and the attempts by demagogues to undermine critical education as a foundation for producing critical citizenry were all at work in American society. For Arendt, these anti-democratic elements in American society constituted what she called the “sand storm,” a metaphor for totalitarianism.[v]

Historical conjunctures produce different forms of authoritarianism, though they all share a hatred for democracy, dissent, and human rights. It is too easy to believe in a simplistic binary logic that strictly categorizes a country as either authoritarian *or* democratic and leaves no room for entertaining the possibility of a mixture of both systems. American politics today suggests a more updated if not different form of authoritarianism or what some have called the curse of totalitarianism. In this context, it is worth remembering what Huey Long said in response to the question of whether America could ever become fascist: “Yes, but we will call it anti-fascist.” [vi] Long’s reply indicates that fascism is not an ideological apparatus frozen in a particular historical period, but as Arendt suggested a complex and often shifting theoretical and political register for understanding how democracy can be subverted, if not destroyed, from within.

The notion of soft fascism was articulated in 1985 in Bertram Gross’s book, *Friendly Fascism*, in which he argued that if fascism came to the United States it would not embody the same characteristics associated with fascist forms in the historical past. There would be no Nuremberg rallies, doctrines of racial superiority, government-sanctioned book burnings, death camps, genocidal purges, or the abrogation of the constitution. In short, fascism would not take the form of an ideological grid from the past simply downloaded onto another country under different historical conditions. Gross believed that fascism was an ongoing danger and had the ability to become relevant under new conditions, taking on familiar forms of thought that resonate with nativist traditions, experiences, and political relations. Similarly, in his *Anatomy of Fascism*,

Robert O. Paxton argued that the texture of American fascism would not mimic traditional European forms but would be rooted in the language, symbols, and culture of everyday life. According to Paxton:

No swastikas in an American fascism, but Stars and Stripes (or Stars and Bars) and Christian crosses. No fascist salute, but mass recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance. These symbols contain no whiff of fascism in themselves, of course, but an American fascism would transform them into obligatory litmus tests for detecting the internal enemy).[vii]

It is worth noting that Umberto Eco in his discussion of “eternal fascism,” also argued that any updated version of fascism would not openly assume the mantle of historical fascism; rather, new forms of authoritarianism would appropriate some of its elements, making it virtually unrecognizable from its traditional forms.[viii] Eco contended that fascism, if it comes to America, will have a different guise, although it will be no less destructive of democracy.

The renowned political theorist Sheldon Wolin, in *Democracy Incorporated*, expanded and updated these views by arguing persuasively that the United States has produced its own unique form of authoritarianism, which he calls “inverted totalitarianism.”[ix] Wolin claimed that in the United States an emerging totalitarianism has appeared in form different from what we have seen in the past. Instead of a charismatic leader, the government is now governed through the anonymous and largely remote hands of corporate power and finance capital. Political sovereignty is largely replaced by economic sovereignty as corporate power takes over the reins of governance. The more money influences politics, the more corrupt the political culture becomes. Under such circumstances, holding office is largely dependent on having huge amounts of capital at one’s disposal, while laws and policies at all levels of government are mostly fashioned by lobbyists representing big business corporations and financial institutions. Moreover, as the politics of Obama’s health-care reform indicate—a gift to the health insurance giants—such lobbying, as corrupt and unethical as it may be, is now carried out in the open and displayed by insurance and drug companies as a badge of honor—a kind of open testimonial to their disrespect for democratic governance and a celebration of their power.

Rather than forcing a populace to adhere to a particular state ideology, the general public in the United States is largely depoliticized through the influence of corporations over schools, higher education, and other cultural apparatuses. The deadening of public values, civic consciousness, and critical citizenship are also the result of the work of anti-public intellectuals representing right-wing ideological and financial interests, a powerful corporate controlled media that are

largely center-right, and a market-driven public pedagogy that reduces the obligations of citizenship to the endless consumption and discarding of commodities. In addition, a pedagogy of historical, social, and racial amnesia is constructed and circulated through a highly popular celebrity culture and its counterpart in corporate-driven news, television, radio, and entertainment to produce a culture of stupidity, censorship, and diversionary spectacles.

The protean forces for creating an authoritarian state are in full play in the United States and extend far beyond the shadow of a debased and corrupt politics. A set of complex forces working in tandem is slowly, insidiously eroding the very foundations of a civic and democratic culture. Some of the most glaring issues are massive unemployment; a rotting infrastructure; the defunding of vital public services; the dismantling of the social safety net; expanding levels of poverty, especially for children; and an imprisonment binge largely targeting poor minorities of color. At the same time, a reign of lawlessness is overtaking the United States as police violence and state terrorism result in the killing of an increasing number of black men, women, and young people. But such a list barely scratches the surface. Institutions that were once designed to serve the public good now wage war against all things public. For instance, we have witnessed in the last thirty years the restructuring of public education as either a source of profit for corporations or an updated version of control modeled after prison culture coupled with an increasing culture of lying, cruelty, and corruption.

A culture of thoughtlessness now drives the predatory formative culture that allows a range of anti-democratic tendencies to flourish—tendencies that embody a new and extreme form of lawlessness and a theater of cruelty. Civic literacy in the United States is not simply in decline, it is the object of scorn and derision. The corporate controlled media have abandoned even the pretense of holding power accountable and now primarily serve as second rate entertainment venues spouting the virtues of balance, consumerism, greed, and American exceptionalism.

The seeds of extremism are everywhere. Instead of being educated, school children are handcuffed and punished for trivial infractions or simply taught how to take tests and give up on any vestige of critical thinking. Celebrity culture now works in tandem with neoliberal values to vaunt as models individuals who represent extreme forms of solipsism and a cultivated idiocy. The war on democracy by the financial elite and other religious and political fundamentalists is intent on defunding and eliminating every public sphere that serves the public good rather than moneyed interests. A war culture now shapes every aspect of society as war-like values, a hyper-masculinity, and an aggressive militarism seeps into every major institution in the United States including the schools, the media, and local police forces. The criminal justice system has become

the default structure for dealing with social problems. More and more people are considered disposable and excess because they are viewed as a drain on the wealth or offend the sensibilities of the financial elite who are rapidly consolidating class power.

The spirit of aggression and the spectacle of violence permeates the culture and deeply imprints domestic and foreign policy. As Robert Koehler points out, “America is armed and dangerous—and always at war, both collectively and individually.”^[x] The outcome of this unfolding nightmare will be not only a political and economic instability but this disappearance of public institutions to serve public needs, if not politics itself. At the same time, the destruction of a public culture that embraces and sustains democratic values and practices will be intensified. Surely all this points to what Hannah Arendt believed was the harbinger of totalitarianism—the disappearance of the thinking and speaking citizens who make politics possible.

What is particularly troublesome is the manifestations of totalitarianism in the discourse and proposed policy measures of the extremists that now govern the Republican Party and how this is taken up in the mainstream media. One finds in the rhetoric of Donald Trump, Scott Walker, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie and others a mix of war like values, expressions of racism, a hatred of women’s rights, unabashed support for the financial elite, a religious fundamentalism, a celebration of war, and a deep seated hostility for all things public. Chris Christie sells himself to the American public as a bully and believes that threatening violence is a crucial element of leadership. This was on full display when he recently stated that teacher’s unions “are the single most destructive force in public education in America [and deserve] a punch in the face.”^[xi]

Threatening violence appears to be a powerful ideological register shared by many of the Republican Party candidates. Donald Trump comes close to supporting a form of racial cleansing by threatening to deport 11 million undocumented Mexican immigrants all the while demonizing them as rapists and criminals. This script has been played out before just prior to the genocide promoted in Nazi Germany. Mike Huckabee, Marco Rubio, and Scott Walker want to abolish a woman’s right to abortion, and go so far as to argue that they would not permit women to get an abortion even if their lives depended on it. Huckabee takes this threat even further. When *Rolling Stone*’s Matt Taibbi asked Huckabee if he would send “the FBI or the National Guard to close abortion clinics,” he answered ““We’ll see when I’m president.”^[xii] Huckabee is a real piece of work stating at one point that he would deny an abortion to a 10-year-old rape victim.^[xiii] This hatred of women and the need to control and domesticate them to the crudest forms of male hegemony and control is central to all fascist regimes.

All of these candidates, with the exception of Rand Paul, support the surveillance state and warrantless spying on American citizens. All of the candidates want to send troops to the Middle East to fight Islamic extremists, expand the military, and Trump goes so far as to claim he wants to seize the oil wells in Syria in order to appropriate their wealth—no apologies for naked imperialism here. Rick Santorum brags that if he is the next president of the United States he will be a wartime president, and add that he will also defend the “sanctity of life in the womb.”^[xiv] John Dean in resurrecting arguments about the authoritarian personality argues that Donald Trump, though this applies to most of the Republican Party leadership, has four clear characteristics or traits that distinguish them as authoritarian: “They are dominating; they oppose equality; they desire personal power; and they are amoral.”^[xv] This echoes the classic work by Theodor Adorno on the authoritarian personality.

Similarly, the mainstream media treats this group of extremists who promote a culture of fear, racism, and hatred as eccentric, odd, crazies, colorful, or simply toxic. All the while, they refuse to acknowledge that the extremism on full display among these politicians reveals a dark and more threatening side of politics, one that exposes the unapologetic register of totalitarianism and goes far beyond either the psychologizing of authoritarianism or locating it within the aberrant personalities of a few politicians. Totalitarianism is a complex systemic register that is deeply woven into American ideology, governance, and policy. It is present in the attack on the welfare state, the attack on civil liberties, the indiscriminate killing of civilians by drones, illegal wars, the legitimization of state torture, and the ongoing spread of domestic violence against minorities of class and color.

A few journalists have raised the specter of totalitarianism but they largely confine the charge to the bellicose Donald Trump. For instance, Connor Lynch claims points to Trump’s authoritarian discourse which is “full of race baiting, xenophobia and belligerent nationalism.”^[xvi] Jeffrey Tucker goes further arguing that Trump’s popularity not only draws support from “the darkest elements of American life” but also mimics a form of neoliberalism in which economics is affirmed as a way of governing all of social life.^[xvii] For Tucker, Trump is representative of a mode of totalitarianism that “seeks total control of society and economy and demands no limits on state power.”^[xviii] Those on the Left, such as Norman Solomon, who raise this issue are largely marginalized.

What is useful about these critiques is that they acknowledge that democracy is dead in the United States and that the forces of tyranny and authoritarianism offer no apologies for their hatred of democracy and the culture of poverty, immiseration, and cruelty that they want to

impose on the American people, if not the rest of the world. What they fail to acknowledge is that the anti-democratic forces at work in the new totalitarianism are not limited to the discourse of the new extremists. Totalitarianism is not merely about errant personalities. It is also about the ideological, political, cultural, and governing structures of society. These systemic forces have been building for quite some time in the United States and have been recognized by our most astute writers such as Sheldon Wolin and Chris Hedges. What is new is that they are not only out of the shadows but are enthusiastically embraced by a segment of the population and articulated in all of their fury by a number of politicians. Totalitarianism is not simply a personality disorder and is not limited to the power of a few erratic politicians; it demands and cannot survive without mass support—it is systemic, a desiring machine, a politics, a culture, and a distortion of power. And it is not limited to Republican Party extremists.

Take for instance the comments on CNN by the alleged liberal Wesley Clark, a former 4-star general and one-time Democratic candidate for President of the United States. Clark called for World War II-style internment camps to be revived for “disloyal Americans.” Clark unapologetically argued for people to be identified who are most likely to embrace a radical ideology stating that “If these people are radicalized and they don’t support the United States and they are disloyal to the United States as a matter of principle, fine. It is their right and it’s our right and obligation to segregate them from the normal community for the duration of the conflict.”^[xix] Calling for domestic internment camps for radicals is more than chilling and suggests the degree to which a poisonous nationalism mimics the legacy of Nazi Germany.

As Bill Dixon has observed “We live in an era in which the conditions that produce totalitarian forms are once again with us.”^[xx] A new form of authoritarianism is now shaping American society. What is equally true is that there is nothing inevitable about this growing threat. This dystopian politics must be exposed, made visible, and challenged on both the local, national, and global planes.

What is crucial is that the mechanisms, discourse, culture, and ideologies that inform authoritarianism must become part of any analysis that now addresses and is willing to challenge the anti-democratic forces at the heart of American politics. This means, in part, focusing on the ongoing repressive and systemic conditions, institutions, ideologies, and values that have been developing in American society for the last forty years, at the very least. It means finding a common ground on which various elements of the left can be mobilized under the banner of a radical democracy in order to challenge the diverse forms of oppression, incarceration, mass violence, exploitation, and exclusion that now define the authoritarian nature of American

politics. It means taking seriously the educative nature of politics and recognizing that public spheres must be created in order to educate citizens who are informed, socially responsible, and willing to fight collectively for a future in which a radical democracy appears sustainable. This suggests an anti-fascist struggle that is not simply about remaking economic structures, but also refashioning identities, values, social relations, modes of identification as part of a democratic project along with what it means to desire a better and more democratic future.

Hannah Arendt was right in stating that “the aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any,” suggesting that totalitarianism was as much about the production of thoughtlessness as it was about the imposition of brute force, gaping inequality, corporatism, and the spectacle of violence.^[xxi] Totalitarianism destroys everything that democracy makes possible and in doing so thrives on mass terror, manufactured stupidity, and the disappearance of politics, all the while making of human beings superfluous. Yet, power however tyrannical is never without resistance. Dark times are not ahead, they are here but that does not mean they are here to stay.

Notes.

[i] See, for instance, Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[ii] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York: 2001).

[iii] Marie Luise Knott, *Unlearning With Hannah Arendt*, trans. by David Dollemayer, (Other Press: New York, NY. 2011, 2013), p 17.

[iv] I have taken this term from Zygmunt Bauman, *Living on Borrowed Time: Conversations with Citlali Roviroso-Madrado*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), p. 132.

[v] See Bill Dixon insightful commentary on Arendt use of “sand storm” as a metaphor for analyzing the protean elements of totalitarianism. Bill Dixon, “Totalitarianism and the Sand Storm,” Hannah Arendt Center (February 3, 2014). Online: <http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=12466>

[vi] Paul Bigioni, “The Real Threat of Fascism”, *CommonDreams.org*, (September 30, 2005). online at: <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0930-25.htm>

[vii] Robert O' Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 2004), p. 202.

[viii] Umberto Eco, "Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt," *New York Review of Books* (February 2010), pp. 12-15.

[ix] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, (Princeton University Press, 2008).

[x] Robert Koehler, "Armed Insecurity," *Counter Punch*, (July 24, 2015). Online at: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/24/armed-insecurity/>

[xi] Chris Christie, "Chris Christie: Apologize for Threatening Teachers," *AFT A Union of Professionals*, (August 15, 2015). Online at: <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/chris-christie-apologize-for-threatening-teachers>

[xii] Matt Taibbi, "Inside the GOP Clown Car," *Rolling Stone* (August 12, 2015). Online: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/inside-the-gop-clown-car-20150812>

[xiii] Emily Atkin, "Huckabee Supports Denying Abortion to 10-year-Old Rape Victim," *Think Progress* (August 16, 2015). Online: <http://thinkprogress.org/election/2015/08/16/3692100/huckabee-paraguay-rape-abortion/>

[xiv] Lou Dubose, "Ted Cruz and the Politics of Faith and Fear," *The Washington Spectator*, (July 27, 2015). Online at: <http://washingtonspectator.org/ted-cruz-and-the-politics-of-faith-and-fear/>

[xv] John Dean, "Trump Is the Authoritarian Ruler Republicans—and Some Dems—Have Been Waiting For," *Alternet*, (August 13, 2015). Online at: <http://www.alternet.org/election-2016/trump-authoritarian-ruler-republicans-and-some-dems-have-been-waiting>

[xvi] Conor Lynch, "Donald Trump is an actual fascist: What his surging popularity says about the GOP base," *Salon*, (July 25, 2015). Online at: http://www.salon.com/2015/07/25/donald_trump_is_an_actual_fascist_what_his_surging_popularity_says_about_the_gop_base/

[xvii] Jeffrey A. Tucker, "Is Donald Trump A Fascist?," *Newsweek*, (July 17, 2015) Online at: <http://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-fascist-354690>

[xviii] Ibid. Jeffrey A. Tucker, “Is Donald Trump A Fascist?.”

[xix] Murtaza Hussain, “Wesley Clark Calls for Internment Camps for ‘Radicalized Americans.” *The Intercept* (July 20, 2015). Online: <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/07/20/chattanooga-wesley-clark-calls-internment-camps-disloyal-americans/>

[xx] Bill Dixon, “Totalitarianism and the Sand Storm,” Hannah Arendt Center (February 3, 2014). Online: <http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=12466>

[xxi] Hannah Arendt, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York: 2001). p. 468.