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Global Capitalism and the Culture of Mad Violence

By Henry Giroux
September 2, 2015

Mohsen Abdelmoumen: The concept of “disposability” frequently returns in your writing, whether speaking of youth, politics, the future, etc. Why do you insist on this theme?

Henry Giroux: Global capitalism has taken on a range of characteristics that demand a new language for understanding such shifts along with the effects these economic, political, and pedagogical registers are having in different degrees upon those that bear the weight of its oppressive forces. Not only have we seen a separation of power, which is global, from politics, which is local, but we have seen a full-fledged attack on the social state, the rise of the punishing state, and the emergence of what might be called an authoritarian culture of cruelty. Under such circumstances, I have tried to capture the current savagery of various regimes of neoliberal capitalism by developing a paradigm that focused on the intensification of what I have called the politics of disposability.

Under neoliberalism, politics becomes an extension of war and those populations that do not contribute or buy into the notion that the only value that matters is exchange value are viewed as either useless or a threat to the ruling elites. One consequence is that within this new historical conjuncture, the practice of disposability expands to include more and more individuals and groups who have been considered redundant, consigned to zones of abandonment, surveillance, and mass incarceration.

Disposability is no longer the exception but the norm. As the reach of disposability has broadened to include a range of groups extending from college youth and poor minorities to the unemployed and members of the middle class who have lost their homes in the financial crisis of 2007, a shift in the radicalness and reach of the machinery of disposability constitutes not only a new mode of authoritarian politics, but also demands a new political vocabulary for understanding how the social contract has virtually disappeared while the mechanisms of expulsion, disposability, and state violence have become more integrated and menacing.

As Brad Evans and I have pointed out in *Disposable Futures*, the politics of disposability demands new conceptual vocabulary and more important still, it demands a fundamental rethinking of the problem of violence so as to interrogate the multiple ways in which entire populations are rendered disposable on a daily basis. This seemed crucial if we were to take seriously both the recourse to justice, along with the meaning of global rights and citizenship in the 21st century.

What I have attempted to do through the politics of disposability is to make visible the expanding populations now relegated to both the status of the precariat and also subjected to new forms of violence. Moreover, the politics of disposability highlights a form of global capitalism in which the financial elite live in an immune culture of self-regulation and personal enrichment, whether they are the corrupt hedge fund managers and bankers who caused the recent economic crisis, CIA operatives who tortured people and were not prosecuted, or the police in the US who have made a sport out of assaulting and killing Black men, and for the most part are acquitted of their crimes.

Under a savage neoliberalism, citizens are reduced to data, potential terrorists, consumers, and commodities and as such inhabit identities in which they become increasingly, drawing on João Biehl words, “unknowables, with no human rights and with no one accountable for their condition.” Within this machinery of social death, not only does moral blindness prevail on the part of the financial elite, but the inner worlds of the oppressed are constantly being remade under the force of economic pressures and a culture of fear, while their lives resemble the walking dead—discarded individuals who remain invisible and unaccounted for in the dominant discourse of politics, rights, and civic morality. The discourse of disposability points to and makes visible expanding zones of exclusion and invisibility incorporating more and more individuals and groups that were once seen as crucial to sustaining public life.

As we have seen with the brutalizing racist killing of black youth in the United States, disposability targets specific individuals and social spaces as sites of danger, violence, humiliation, and terror. This is most evident in the rise of a brutal punishing-incarceration state that imposes its racial and class-based power on the dispossessed, the emergence of a surveillance state that spies on and suppresses dissenters, the emergence of vast cultural apparatuses that colonize subjectivity in the interests of the market, and a political class that is uninterested in political concessions and appears immune from control by nation states.

The politics of disposability is central to my work because it makes clear the mechanisms of a more brutal form of authoritarianism driven by what psychologist Robert Jay Lifton rightly calls a “death-saturated age” in which matters of violence, survival, and trauma infuse everyday life.

Discarded by the corporate state, dispossessed of social provisions, and deprived of the economic, political, and social conditions that enable viable and critical modes of agency, expanding populations of Americans now find themselves inhabiting zones of abandonment.

These zones of hardship and terminal exclusion constitute a hallmark signature and intensification of a neoliberal politics of disposability that is relentless in the material and symbolic violence it wages against the 99 percent for the benefit of the new financial elite.

What has become clear is that capitalist expropriation, dispossession, and disinvestment have reached a point where life has become completely unbearable for over half of the American public living in or near poverty.

As I have said in much of my recent writing, evidence of such zones of abandonment and terror can be seen in the war against immigrants, poor minorities, the homeless, young people living in debt, the long term unemployed, workers, the declining middle class, all of whom have been pushed into invisible communities of control, harassment, security, and the governing through punishment complex.

As an intellectual who worked extensively on pedagogy, how do you explain that violence, whether at the level of the individual, society and the show business, has reached such a high level of attractiveness?

Violence in the United States is not just a functioning of state and domestic terrorism, or for that matter an outgrowth of vast inequalities in wealth, income, and power, it has been elevated to a national ideal and now serves as the most important register mediating just about all problems. As a mode of governance, the intensification of violence can be seen in the increasing spread of institutionalized lawlessness most evident in the militarization of schools, the police, the streets, and many other public spheres. Schools are now modeled after prisons and contain more police and security officers than teachers.

The police are given left over military-grade weapons from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan and now resemble para-military forces whose only mission is to implement state violence. At the level of daily life, more and more behaviors are being criminalized from homelessness to being impoverished and poor.

At the same time, violence has become deeply embedded in the industrial-military-entertainment that sells violence in video games, Hollywood movies, and in a wide range of platforms that make up screen and digital culture. This ongoing spectacle of violence now seeps into every aspect of American life, some of which is highly visible as in recent police killings of black youth, and some of it is invisible as in the growing violence and abuse against women.

At the center of this intensification of violence is a form of authoritarian capitalism in which civic literacy is disdained, compassion viewed as a weakness, and the view that all forms of solidarity that embrace justice, equality, and care for the other should be regarded as a pathology.

Neoliberalism had created a hardening of the culture that undermines the ethical imagination, social responsibility, and any viable notion of the social. In its place, it enshrines possessive individualism, a war of all against all celebration of social Darwinism, and a notion of privatization that isolates, infantilizes, and depoliticizes individuals.

At the heart of these values, modes of governance, and policies is the primacy of the punishing state which now enforces the dictates of a neoliberal mode of corporate sovereignty.

You worked on the concept of violence; can we tell that with Daesh ISIS, human being has reached the maximum level of violence?

When the inhuman defines the essence of politics and creates a set of values in which human life is utterly disposable, and politics removes itself from any sense of ethical considerations, I would argue that a profoundly fascistic mode of fundamentalism is on display in which the conditions for extreme forms of violence become normalized. When the line between the inhuman and human, violence and life, justice and injustice are no longer recognizable politics dissolves into a pathology.

ISIS engages in what Hannah Arendt argues is radical evil because it makes human beings superfluous and in doing so mimics the logic of the Nazi death camps. It also destroys politics by enshrining thoughtlessness in the name of certainty. Fundamentalism eliminates the thinking human being by both killing the mind and if necessary eliminating the body. Politics requires judgment and the elimination of the critical, thinking human being is the essence of what might be called the condition of fascism, which is an embrace of the profoundly anti-political.

One consequence of the appeal to absolutes is a culture of mad violence and this is what we see in ISIS. There is no truth here only a mad and violent dogmatism in which human life becomes irrelevant. Hence, the false appeal to radicalism while women are being sold in the market, raped, and abused just as endless so called infidels are beheaded, tortured, and murdered. The first mark of a murderous totalitarianism is an ideology rooted in certainty, moral absolutes, and can only deal with the world through the binarism of good and evil. Arendt believed that one definition of totalitarianism was the imposition of total terror. That is what ISIS represents the worldview and politics of total terror.

You made a critical reading of the movie “American Sniper”. Would the themes taken back by Clint Eastwood in this movie be the reflection of the American society and its need for hero?

This is certainly true at some level in that there is a deep strain in American history in which the lone gunman and vigilante is celebrated as a hero of sorts. *American Sniper* hides the fact that behind the celebrated image of the heroic vigilante sniper lies killer elite squads and special operations teams that function as global killing machine, running covert wars, and allowing its special operations units to function as unaccountable death squads.

But I think that at a deeper level, *American Sniper* is less about the need for a hero than it is a glorification of a kind of perverted military metaphysics, a legitimation of American exceptionalism, and the attempt to transform state violence into a romanticized view of war and

hyper-masculinity. Of course, while it may be redemptive for Hollywood to link targeted assassinations with American heroism, what it erases is that the real global assassination campaign is not the stuff of military valor, of “man to man” combat, but is being waged daily in the Drone wars that have become the defining feature of the Obama administration.

Faced with the neoliberal offensive, do you think that reading again Karl Marx is a historical necessity?

I think Marx is essential reading if we want to understand how capitalism works to wage both class warfare and to consolidate class power. This is especially true around the issue of struggling over not just expanding rights for workers but taking over the labor process. At the same time, Marx has to be updated given the emergence of historical conjunctions that Marx could not have envisioned. There is a need to theorize the struggle against capitalism in terms that take seriously the educative nature of politics. We need to look to Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, C. W. Mills, Franz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and others who recognize that forms of domination cannot be understood exclusively in terms of economic structures.

The issue of how capitalism creates desires, identities, and social relations that mimic its value system is crucial to address. I have attempted to do this by addressing neoliberalism as a public pedagogy. No struggle will survive or work without taking seriously the need for a formative transformative pedagogy that can connect the problems that people face on a personal level with not only their needs but also with broader systemic causes.

There is also a need related to this issue of creating organic intellectuals who can work in a variety of pedagogical sites and with social movements to produce what might be called an alternative understanding of the power of the imagination, the future, and the power of collective struggle.

Finally, we need a broad social movement that incorporates matters of race, gender, ecological oppression, and other social issues and makes the connection among them in ways that overcome their splinting into an isolated and fragmented form of politics. Matters of race, disposability, and class are all interrelated and rooted in the same struggle to identify the centers of power, dismantle them, and create a new radically democratic world.