

THE POLITICS OF ETHICIDE IN AN AGE OF COUNTER-REVOLUTION

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“We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together... you can’t really get rid of one without getting rid of the others... the whole structure of American life must be changed” (Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967).

The brutalising horrors of a fascist past are with us once again. This is most evident in the growing support for bigotry and white nationalism among Republicans in the United States (US) and their base, buttressed by the increased presence of armed militia and an increasingly well-armed populace (Ben-Ghiat, 2022). Within the current abysmal historical moment, a mix of aggrieved agency, a tsunami of conspiracy theories, and an expanding culture of lies fuel a massive political effort to legitimate and normalise white minority rule. Underlying this authoritarian political project is a massive ideological scaffolding reproducing the lethal workings of repressive power and a formative culture solidifying the identities and agents willing to embrace a political landscape of fascist agitation and violence. This is a pedagogical effort to refute elements of the past as a site of injustice, all the while enabling a machinery of exclusion and disposability wedded to the logic of white supremacy and what Kimberly Williams Crenshaw (2020) calls ‘The Unmattering of Black lives’.

Talk of a civil war has emerged at a time when violence becomes a powerful force for shaping language, addressing social problems, and emerging as a central organising principle of politics. Central to this brutalising of civic culture and the social imagination is the need to acknowledge that long before violence becomes normalised in society, politics descends into what John Berger once called ethicide - a formative culture composed of ‘agents [who] kill ethics and therefore any notion of history and justice’ (Berger, 2007: 89). At work here is a collective disavowal of social

responsibility and the removal of political, discursive, and economic actions from any sense of the social costs involved. Central to the turn towards ethicide is a Republican Party waging a counter-revolution against the foundations of democratic rule. This is a right-wing political party wedded to a politics of dehumanisation, social abandonment and terminal exclusion, which accelerate the death of the unwanted. This amounts to a politics of ethicide in which ethical boundaries disappear, language is emptied of ethical referents, zones of social abandonment become normalised, racial purity is embraced, historical amnesia is celebrated, and a culture of cruelty becomes commonplace.

Toni Morrison has remarked that the prevailing formative culture of neoliberalism and its underlying fascist politics ‘is recognizable by its need to purge, [and] its terror of democratic agendas’ (Morrison, 1995: 384-385). ‘It produces the perfect capitalist’ defined largely as consumers, indifferent to ethics, and more than willing to criminalise and pathologise the enemy, reward mindlessness, and maintain, at all costs, silence (Ibid). Morrison’s insights are all the more relevant in an age when the lines between democracy and authoritarianism are collapsing. Her warning necessitates a heightened critical vigilance at a moment when the culture is shifting, new political formations are emerging, and new identities are being produced. This is particularly true given the regressive formative culture that has been at work in producing the agents involved in the current attacks on democratic institutions, policies and laws. This is a formative culture rooted in hate, bigotry, cruelty, infused with a spirit of vigilante violence. Far removed from democratic values, it has provided the language and political signposts to support the attack on the Capitol, women’s reproductive rights, voting rights, and racial justice as part of a broader effort to successfully display its affirmation and merging of politics, white nationalism, imperialism, and violence. In addition to these policies, this emerging formative culture has forecasted the ‘bald political calculus’ of a rising unique American authoritarianism (Crenshaw, 2020).

The coup attempt on 6 January 2021 is a death-dealing expression of mass violence that has a deep resonance with the past that has once again

manifested itself as an organising force of the present. This contemporary expression of violence has a long history grounded in what Achille Mbembe has called necropolitics, or the politics of death - an upgraded species of fascist politics that defines whose lives are worthy of human value, citizenship, and occupying the public sphere, and, more specifically, who is considered disposable and excess (Mbembe, 2019; Evans and Giroux, 2015).

American legal scholar Lawrence Tribe rightly observes that Trump's Republican Party not only 'embraced the violence of 6 January', they also supported a governing form 'that almost always comes wrapped in violence' and is endemic to fascism (Tribe, 2022). How else to explain the threats and 'murderous violence' by Trump's followers aimed at school board members who support pupils wearing masks, medical personnel who support lockdowns, election officials who refuse the lie of fraudulent elections, and politicians who dare to disagree with Trump's policies (Freedland, 2021). The political scientist, Robert A. Pape, argues that a new politically violent mass movement has developed to restore the Trump presidency. This includes '21 million adamant supporters of insurrection [who] have the dangerous potential for violent mobilization' and are willing to shed bloodshed for their cause (Pape, 2021). What are we to make, for that matter, of Republican Governor Ron DeSantis signing legislation 'that gives legal protections to people who drive their cars into protesters in the street', and defines individuals as criminal felons if, in the midst of the protests, they break a window or engages in other alleged illegal activity (Hartmann, 2021). These are just a few of the many signposts indicating that the revival of fascist conditions that led to the attack on the Capitol on 6 January 2021 are not only still with us but are becoming normalised and reinvented every day.

Violence in its spectacularised forms tends to produce a shock value that hides the often 'slow violence' of everyday life (Nixon, 2011). This is evident in the border violence waged against undocumented immigrants, the homeless deprived of the most basic social provisions, poor people of colour whose culture is equated with criminality, and fill America's prisons. It is also evident in poor housing conditions, people struggling to put food on the table,

support payments for the poor that tie them to a politics of mere survival and ‘bare life’ (Desmond, 2017; Hinton, 2021; Eubanks, 2019). One element of fascism that has returned with a vengeance is the relationship between fascism and big business (Guerin, 1973). Not only is this evident in the numerous examples of how the financial elite sponsor voter suppression laws, provide millions to push their economic and political interests through lobbying efforts, control the media, and attack government policies that enhance the welfare state and extend government policies that benefit the common good, but also in their hoarding of wealth and power.

Necropolitics finds its most powerful expression not in isolated attacks on the government or in plans to kidnap and kill politicians, however horrible such acts are, but in producing and normalising forms of massive economic and political inequality that kill. For instance, in a new report by Oxfam, it is estimated that ‘inequality is contributing to the death of at least 21,000 people a day, or one person every four seconds’ (Oxfam International, 2022). At the same time, ‘The world’s ten richest men more than doubled their fortunes from \$700 billion to \$1.5 trillion - at a rate of \$15,000 per second or \$1.3 billion a day - during the first two years of a pandemic that has seen the incomes of 99 per cent of humanity fall and over 160 million more people forced into poverty’ (Ibid). Oxfam makes clear that extreme inequality kills, inflicts violence on the vast majority of people on the globe, and ‘has unleashed this economic violence particularly acutely across racialized, marginalized and gendered lines’ (Ibid). Moreover, this greedy financial elite is killing the planet as ‘the richest 1 percent emit more than twice as much CO₂ as the bottom 50 percent of the world, driving climate change (which contributes) to wildfires, floods, tornadoes, crop failures and hunger’ (Ibid). Predatory capitalists such as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg amass huge profits while trafficking in death and misery, all the while paying little in taxes (Eisinger, Ernsthausen and Kiel, 2021). Oxfam recommends clawing back the tax gains that have been given to the rich and reversing the attack on workers’ rights, unions, and the welfare state. These are not insignificant demands, but they say nothing about the relationship between capitalism and fascism, nor do they associate a murderous inequality with a call to end neoliberal capitalism.

It is impossible to separate the breakdown of civic culture, the collapse of language, and a rise in insurrectionist violence in the United States from the plague of gangster capitalism. Under a regime of privatised utopias, hyper-individualism, and ego-centred values, human beings are reduced to self-sufficient atoms of self-interest, removed from relations of mutual dependency. A neoliberal market-driven society has given rise to a culture of fear, uncertainty, and danger that numbs many people just as it wipes out the creative faculties of imagination, memory, and critical thought. Rather than live in a historical period that awakens the critical faculties, Americans now occupy a social order that freezes and numbs the capacity for informed judgment. Turning away from the collapse of reason, justice and democracy appears to have become habitual for most Trump supporters.

As democracy is increasingly viewed with contempt by large segments of the public, the moral mechanisms of language, meaning, and morality collapse. What emerges is a cruel indifference that takes over diverse modes of communication and exchange - a singular register of the rise of a fascist politics with its scorn for democratic values, identities, and social relations. Surely, this is obvious today as all vestiges of the social contract, social responsibility, and modes of solidarity that get people working together give way to a form of social Darwinism with its emphasis on violence, privatisation, ruthlessness, cruelty, war, modes of hyper-masculinity and a disdain for those considered weak, dependent, alien, or economically unproductive.

While it has become increasingly clear that democracy is under siege, little has been said about something inherent in the unfolding of a savage and ruthless capitalism and its embrace of an updated form of fascist politics. Lost here were the workings of neoliberal machinery with its massive inequalities in wealth and private power, its comfortable alliance with structural racism, and a political system driven by money and the concentrated control of the ultra-rich and corrupt financial institutions. This is an economic system with profound malignancies, one that has given rise to pernicious relations of power that have transformed the Republican Party into a force that, as Noam

Chomsky states, ‘is driving organized human society to suicide’ (Chomsky, 2022). He goes further and argues that however weak democracy is in the United States, it ‘is intolerable to the GOP wreckers’. He writes:

“But even the tattered system that still survives is intolerable to GOP wreckers. Nothing is overlooked in their systematic assault on the fragile structure. Methods extend from ‘taking hold of the once-overlooked machinery of elections’ at the ground level, to passing laws to bar the ‘wrong people’ from voting, to devising a legal framework to establish the principle that Republican legislatures can ‘legally’ determine choice of electors, whatever the irrelevant public many choose” (Ibid).

Narrowing the debate about the attack on democracy to the attack on the Capitol and spectacularised forms of violence creates the conditions for cynicism, despair, and a politics that sabotages itself by virtue of its narrow focus (Snyder, 2021a; Snyder, 2021b; Henderson, 2021). Moreover, by isolating these events, history disappears and with it the ability to learn from the past in ways that allow us to further understand the long-standing forces and patterns that work to dissolve the line between democracy and authoritarianism. Under such circumstances, remembrance no longer functions as an activity of interrogation, criticism, and renewal dedicated to the promise of freedom (Eppard and Giroux, 2022); on the contrary, it now functions as an ‘organized structure of misrecognition’ (Terdiman, 1985: 16). What is under attack by conservative forces is what Tony Morrison described in *Beloved* as ‘rememory’ - a way of thinking memory afresh. As Gabrielle Bellot observes, this takes place in spite of the fact that:

“the terrors of the past still live in the present. [As can be seen] in an age when Republicans in Texas and Idaho, among other states have approved legislation prescribing how current events are taught in the classroom severely curtailing discussions of Black American history, and when it is all too common for conservatives to dismiss the existence of systemic racism or the relevance of historical acts of anti-

Black violence. In an era when it is still all too common to see Black bodies under the heel of white cops” (Bellot, 2021).

Memory has become a site of repression. Its underlying project is the creation of a history without an individual and collective democratic subject. Systemic violence, racial injustice, and political corruption have now disappeared from history. In part, this whitewashing of history takes place through both increasing acts of censorship in the schools and through the efforts of Republicans in Congress and their allies in right-wing media to rewrite history by invoking the horrors of 1930 fascist regimes to criticise health workers and policymakers trying to save lives in the midst of the pandemic crisis. This type of moral nihilism is displayed by Tucker Carlson, a white supremacist and *Fox News* host who has compared Biden’s vaccine mandates to Nazi medical practices, and *Fox News* contributor, Laura Logan, who has compared Dr. Anthony Fauci, Joe Biden’s chief medical adviser, to Josef Mengele, the Nazi doctor, who was known as the ‘Angel of Death’ for experimenting on Jews in the concentration camps (Pengelly, 2021).

These propagandistic efforts to induce a climate of fear along with a moral and political coma are meant to turn reality on its head, all of which is part of the Republican Party’s dangerous efforts to produce a public consciousness trapped in the fog of historical amnesia and unchecked ignorance. The current assortment of Republican zombies are not merely reactionaries for a new age. On the contrary, to paraphrase Raoul Vaneigem, they are people who have a corpse in their mouths (Vaneigem, 2012: 11)

The violent attack waged by the armed loyalists to Donald Trump on the Capitol on 6 January 2021 constituted a major political and constitutional crisis in the making. But recognition of the seriousness of the attack did not lead to a deeper understanding of its underlying historical, political, and economic causes. Largely ignored in the mainstream media was the growing threat of authoritarianism accelerated through the merging of white supremacy ideology and the savage mechanisms of a neoliberal economy, both of which were powerful forces in creating the conditions for the insurrection (Giroux,

2017; Street, 2021; DiMaggio, 2022). The underlying necropolitics driving the surge of right-wing populism and the attack on the Capitol was largely decoupled from neoliberal capitalism and its related institutions of violence: white supremacy, inequality, the prison-industrial complex, unequal humanity, disposability, militarisation, colonialism, and its propagandistic cultural apparatuses, what C. Wright Mills called ‘the observation posts, the interpretation centres, the presentation depots’ (Wright Mills, 2008: 204). Underlying this attack was a counter-revolutionary politics whose aim was the elevation of white nationalist rule and a politics of disposability. In this instance, politics turned deadly with the rise of an authoritarian narrative, which as Mbembe states in a different context, those who do not matter are relegated to ‘death worlds...forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*’ (Mbembe, 2003).

None of this appears out of the ordinary in the current historical moment, suggesting as Coco Das points out, America has a Nazi problem (Das, 2020). At the same time, it is crucial to stress that I am not suggesting that the former Trump administration was a precise replica of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. Yet, as a number of historians, writers, and critics have argued, there are important parallels that cannot be ignored (DiMaggio, 2022; Street, 2022; Ben-Ghiat, 2020; Mullen and Vials, 2020; Snyder, 2017; Stanley, 2018; Giroux, 2018; Boggs, 2018). Fascism has deep roots in American history, and its basic elements can crystallise in different forms under unique historical circumstances. Rather than being a precise replica of the past, fascism should be viewed as a series of patterns that emerge out of different conditions that produce what Hannah Arendt called totalitarian forms.

As the late Daniel Guerin, one of the more authoritative experts on fascism made clear, there is no one single version of fascism, ‘fascism comes in many forms’ (Guerin, 1973). Fascism is not interred strictly in a specific history, and its different histories are crucial to understand because it mutates, evolves, and often lies dormant, but it never goes away. The potential for fascism exists in every society, and what its histor(ies) teach us is that there is

much to lose if we fail to learn its lessons (see Eco, 1995). In the current era, there is no perfect fit between 1930s Germany and Trump and his followers, but there are alarming echoes of history.

The threat of fascism is especially acute under neoliberalism, which exacerbates the worst elements of gangster capitalism. This includes most emphatically the widening of the scourge of inequality, a contempt for social responsibility, promotion of racial hatred, the acceleration of a politics of disposability, a corrupt alignment with big business, and a belief in the necessity of a heroic leader (Eppart and Giroux, 2022). Peter Dolack is right in arguing that while ‘militarism, extreme nationalism, the creation of enemies and scapegoats’ are basic elements of a fascist politics, ‘the most critical component is a rabid propaganda that intentionally raises panic and hate while disguising its true nature and intentions under the cover of a phony populism’. He concludes by stating that ‘As long as capitalism exists, the threat of fascism exists’ (Dolack, 2022). This may be an understatement. If anything, the United States may be well beyond the threat (Edsall, 2021).

If a form of mass resistance is to take place to avoid a fascist coup in the future, it is essential to develop a new language for equating freedom and democracy. This necessitates challenging the basic tenets of neoliberal capitalism and connecting the push for civic literacy. The latter is fundamental to a creating mass movement dedicated to the principles of democratic socialism. Real substantive and lasting change will not come without the existence of mass movement in America. Angela Davis has long advocated that mass movements coupled with a radical shift in consciousness about what kind of world we want are the key to radical change. She is worth quoting at length:

“...what I am saying is that in order to make real, lasting change, we have to do the work of building movements. It is masses of people who are responsible for historical change. It was because of the movement, the Black freedom movement, the mid-century Black freedom movement, that Black people acquired the right to vote - not

because someone decided to pass a Voting Rights Act. And we know now that that victory cannot simply be consolidated as a bill passed, because there are continual efforts to suppress the power of Black voters. And we know that the only way to reverse that is by building movements, by involving masses of people in the process of historical change. And this holds true for the current administration” (Davis cited in Goodman, 2021).

Rather than wage war against neoliberal capitalism in the abstract, it is crucial to wage an educational campaign in which activists speak to people in a language they understand, one that makes visible the problems they face, and provides them with a moment of recognition capable of altering their common-sense assumptions about how they deal with the problems they experience. This means addressing fundamental concrete problems such as the threat to social security, funding public education, abolishing student debt, providing free child care, implementing universal health care, providing a social wage for everyone, eliminating homelessness, dismantling the prison-industrial complex, curbing gun violence, making neighbourhoods safe, massively curbing military budgets in order to expand programmes to eliminate poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, and decaying infrastructures, among other issues. These deeply rooted issues begin not with abstractions about predatory capitalism but with a language in which people can recognise themselves.

In addition, there is a crucial need to wage a political and educational campaign to defend schools and other institutions that provide the conditions for people to think critically, question authority, learn the tools for making informed judgments, and embrace what it means to be moral witnesses and engaged citizens. Making education central to politics demands a new language, a different regime of desires, new forms of identification, and a struggle to create new modes of thinking, subjectivity and agency. It is important to stress that direct action, cultural politics, and political education are crucial tools to mobilise public attention as part of a broader campaign both to inform a wider public and create the conditions for mass struggle.

The United States is in the midst of a cultural war infused by a counter-revolutionary movement that is waging a full-scale attack against ideas, truth, rationality, ethics, and justice. This is a site of contestation and struggle over minds, emotions, and modes of agency; it takes place in diverse cultural apparatuses that must be challenged, redefined, and appropriated as sites of resistance. Fascism removes the language of aggrieved identity, pain, and rage from the structures of capitalism while undermining the ideals and promises of a socialist democracy. In part, this is done through a cultural politics that produces civic illiteracy, manufactured ignorance, moral decay, and historical amnesia, all the while promoting apocalyptic fears that feed off an exaggerated discourse of catastrophe allegedly facing white civilisation. Against this regressive educational and cultural project, a new anti-capitalist politics must arise. Such a struggle needs a new vision, one that merges the power of critique in multiple sites with ‘a positive, forward-looking program for real change’ (Jacobin, 2017). Only then will a mass movement arise infused with a language of both critique and hope, willing to engage in the long struggle against fascism and the battle for a future in which matters of justice, freedom, and equality become foundational in the struggle for a democratic socialist society. Democracy is under siege in America as the result of a counter-revolutionary movement and criminal conspiracy being waged by right-wing extremists at the highest levels of power and government. There is no room for balance, compromise, and indifference, only mass resistance.

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