

## AMERICAN FASCISM: FOURTEEN DEADLY PRINCIPLES OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

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*As I speak to you now, the icy water of the ponds and rains Fills the hollows of the mass graves with a frigid and muddy water, as murky as our memory. War nods off to sleep but keeps one eye always open. Who amongst us keeps watch from this strange watchtower to warn of the arrival of our new executioners? ...We pretend it all happened only once, at a given time and place. We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity's never-ending cry.*

—Jean Cayrol (Resnais 1955)

On May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the ostentatious SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket took off from the Kennedy Space Centre to the International Space Station. The brainchild of the tech billionaire Elon Musk, the very first privately funded manned vessel to be sent into orbit was guided by the two white space travellers Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley. Meanwhile, as the rocket broke into the stratosphere, the United States they were leaving was also ablaze, having swiftly moved from lockdown to curfew in response to the violent insurrections that followed the killing of the unarmed black citizen George Floyd. President Donald Trump was present at the launch and used the occasion to talk of the death as a “grave tragedy” warning about how “The memory of George Floyd is being dishonoured by rioters, looters and anarchists. The violence and vandalism is being led by Antifa and other radical left wing groups who are terrorizing the innocent, destroying jobs, hurting businesses and burning down buildings.” Whist critics immediately pointed out the stark contrast when compared to his attitude regarding the intimidating actions of armed white militia in Michigan only a few weeks earlier, who were demanding their own version of liberty through a historically marked form of symbolic aggression, he went on to argue that America itself was now a victim. It was the “law abiding citizen” who was under siege. The setting for this speech however wasn’t incidental. There once was a time when space exploration

captured the American imagination. Yet as America's shifted from one crisis to another, the dream of discovery was now revealed to be a dream of vastly different visions of escape, one from the planet by a gilded elite and the other from conditions of everyday misery and oppression that had simply become unbearable.

Only a day before the launch of Space-X Falcon 9, the streets in many cities across the United States were raging with the fires of protest and the bullets of domestic police forces. Commenting on the brutal response, Cornel West went so far as to openly called Trump a "neofascist" live on a CNN broadcast. That Trump has been called a fascist wasn't that remarkable. Many scholars had been noting for some time how he was playing by the authoritarian handbook. A position forcefully stated by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who warned about the impending threat of fascism in America when confronting the divisive rhetoric of the President and when explicitly faced with the sight of immigrant children being locked up in abhorrent detention facilities. Camps have become the hallmark of historical fascism and remain its most portentous expression (Agamben 1998). But this focus on the camp can also be a hindrance. After all what does it mean to say a detention facility is similar to conditions witnessed in places like Auschwitz? Indeed, whilst these comparisons can all too easily be denounced as being insensitive, they also often fall prey to a crude flattening of history that is devoid of contextualisation. We are not in any way accusing Ocasio-Cortez of such crudities in her observations. She is clearly a very learned, adept and historically considerate member who puts her peers to shame. Nor is it not to say that camps are unimportant in terms of critiquing the character of any political regime. The locking up of innocent children remains indefensible on any humanitarian register. Camps however are only part of a much wider and complex fabric of fascistic power.

For some time, we have argued why the term "fascism" shouldn't be consigned to the historical record.<sup>1</sup> But now is the time to be more explicit and bring clarity and purpose to the raw realities of "American Fascism." We appreciate this is a highly charged political minefield, which is open to abuse and sharp countenance. For these reasons alone we don't use the phrase lightly. Certainly, the term has suffered from a lack of conceptual clarity, being open to multiple interpretations that seem to make its conceptually insignificant. Yet it is important to remember that we know of no concept which remains purely static in some hermetically sealed container. To even entertain such a proposition would be to reduce whatever concept to the most pernicious abstraction.

Fascism is a mutable beast. Like society itself, it is prone to transformation. We cannot underestimate the importance of this. Since so much of our understanding of fascism is informed by history, too often we fixate on the final acts of its destruction. The destruction of life, the destruction of

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<sup>1</sup>See especially Evans and Reid (2013), Evans and Giroux (2015), and Giroux (2018).

cities, the destruction of politics. Whilst this concern with *end state fascism* does allow us to emphasise how truly nihilistic and deadly its violence can become; it nevertheless works in an apologetic way inasmuch as fascism cannot be named if democracy hasn't fully been suspended or a gas chamber built and people led to certain death. The ends of fascism are suicide and ruination, including the ruination of fascism itself. Until then, we must recognize that fascism is a *process*, which parasitic to everyday fears, anxieties and insecurities, shows how it is adept at seducing the masses, so they desire their oppression as though it were their liberation.

At the same time, we do not accept the notion that talk of a fascist politics emerging in the United States and in the rise of right-wing populist movements across the globe can and should be dismissed as a naive exaggeration or a misguided historical analogy. In the age of leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro, and Erdogan, such objections feel like reckless efforts to deny the growing relevance of the term and the danger posed by a number of societies staring into the abyss of a menacing authoritarianism. In fact, the case can be made that rather than harbor an element of truth, such criticism further normalizes the very fascism it critiques, allowing the extraordinary and implausible, if not unthinkable, to become ordinary. Under such circumstances, history is not simply being ignored or distorted, it is being erased. Not only in such cases does one run the risk of repeating the worse elements of the past, but also becoming complicitous with them.

In the current historical moment, a growing fascist politics connects the ravages of neo-liberal capitalism, new media perversions of truth, and authoritarian practices with fascist ideals (Gilroy 2000, 139). This unprecedented convergence includes: a disdain for human rights, a rampant anti-intellectualism, a populist celebration of white nationalism, the cult of leadership, the protection of corporate power, the elevation of pejorative emotion over critical insight, rampant cronyism, a disdain for dissent and intellectuals, and the "more or less explicit endorsement of violence against political enemies" (139). What this new political formation suggests is that fascism and its brutalizing logics are never entirely interred in the past and that the conditions that produce its central assumptions are with us once again, ushering in a period of modern barbarity that appears to be reaching towards homicidal extremes (Bottici 2017). While there is no perfect fit between Trump and the fascist societies of Mussolini, Hitler, and Pinochet, the basic tenets of hyper-nationalism, racism, misogyny, rootlessness, and manipulation of the rule of law, "the essential message is the same" (Faulkner 2017). Fascism is never entirely interred in the past and as Hannah Arendt (1976) has reminded us in her discussions of totalitarianism, it can crystallize in different forms. It may go into remission, but it never entirely disappears. Its endpoint is a condition in which the past and present is defined in the image of war while providing a snapshot of what the end of humanity will look like.

For the purposes of our critique, we believe that there are a number of further clarifications that need to be made clear from the outset: 1) Following

on from the work of Wilhelm Reich, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault, amongst others, it is important to recognize both the micro and the macro dimensions to fascist power.<sup>2</sup> Just as every person has the ability to reveal fascist tendencies, it is the desire for power that needs to be understood. Hence any viable critique of fascism means that we must be open to critique fascism in all its forms. 2) Fascism as a brutal relation seeks to bring about the annihilation of differences. Such prejudices work in many different ways and can on occasions even rework the logics of racial or cultural purity. While, for example, it is possible to write about Islamophobia as a clear manifestation of racism, that doesn't mean to say that organizations like ISIS were not fascist in terms of their violence and nihilism. Any political project is capable of becoming fascistic, especially those who draw upon ideological purities. 3) Fascism cannot be separated from the economic sphere. It thrives on an entire economy of political affect. This much is even agreed upon by thinkers on the right, notably Friedrich Von Hayek (1944). However, those who would reduce fascism to socialism completely miss the point. While historical socialism has indeed been fascistic, the operations of fascism have proved to be compatible with all modern forms of economic organization, which reduce life to some economic variable, and normalise vast inequalities that sanctions violence for its development.

Fascism is not simply the triumph of a certain economic model. It is the triumph of technical thinking over the political as an expression of difference. 4) Fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is not and cannot be the same as its 20<sup>th</sup> Century variants. It doesn't simply carbon-copy itself from the greyed-out pages of history into a comported and mirrored imaged present. Like any system of power relations amongst people, who themselves are born into different times and places, fascism reveals a monstrous face which is multiple and prone to adaptation and change. Fascism cannot be entirely interred in history, simply a function of past history, as some would argue. Hitler could never have imagined the power of the new media technologies of today and how they have changed entirely the morphology of life. Indeed, if we simply look to memories of the concentration camps of Third Reich, revived today through images of skin-headed men wearing jackboots or even students shouting "Sieg Heil" on American campuses, we will fail to account for the fascism of the everyday, which is not exceptional, but capable of rationalizing hierarchy and segregating in normalized ways life into disposable categories. The sense of terror, social atomization, rootlessness, precarity, hatred for those considered other, the myth of national greatness, and the death of the social enshrines a militarism and colonization of agency that are at the heart of a fascist politics.

Mindful of these points, our task is to be clear about naming fascism in all of its complexity, offering a coherent diagnosis, while showing how fascist tendencies can appear and eventually colonize an entire social system – from

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<sup>2</sup>See especially Reich (1998) and Foucault (2003, xi-xiv).

an elected President or leader who embodies the nihilistic will to power and arms himself with violent and humiliating language to a police officer who slowly pushes his knee down the back of an innocent man's neck, elevates this knee as a symbol of violence rooted in the long legacy of slavery and white supremacy. Faced with such violence, it is also our contention there is no neutral position when it comes to fascism. The power over life recognizes no distinction. The liberal appeal to balance, objectivity, and dialogue in this stance is a retreat not only from any viable sense of social responsibility, but an embrace of empty formalism and the abstract over the concrete violence at work in a fascist politics. We categorically reject this position. History shows there is nothing more appealing to the fascist than a passive position when it comes to its own emergence. Indeed, those who continue to advocate for a study of the political, which demands some cold and objective distancing (as if we somehow are removed from the realities of power and immune to its subjective investments), not only prove complicit with the very logics of power their language appeases, they deny the historical forces that compel us to write with ethical care and purposeful critical insight. Just as fascism remains the main strategic adversary of our times, we can insist there is no more compelling reason to express in whatever medium than to feel the world's beauty and pain. To write means to face the intolerable and confront directly the forces of nihilism, which seek to deny what ultimately makes us human. With this in mind, we want to propose the following fourteen deadly principles for critiquing the novelty of American fascism today.

### *The Grammar of Fascism*

Fascism operates at the level of desire (Deleuze and Guattari 2002). The desire for power, the desire to control, the desire to humiliate, the desire to violate, the desire to kill. It also operates at the level of desire that functions as a form of self-sabotage, which is the desire to give up one's agency in the image of the strong collective. Fascist desire both seduces and colonizes, embodies a ruthless appropriation of power and the loss of power over one's sense of self-determination. Fascist desire is also evident in fantasies of absolute control, racial purity, unchecked militarism, and class warfare, all of which are at the heart of an imagination that has turned lethal. Such desires need to be expressed. And such expression brings us directly to what we have elected to call "the grammar of fascism." Fascism begins here with language and needs a formative culture to give it momentum. Driven by a hatred for others, infused with a burning anger and resentment (so integral as Nietzsche understood to the "spirit of revenge," which is the main driver behind the forces of nihilism) towards the social order, and captivated by narratives of decline and victimization, a fascist politics trades in an incendiary rhetoric of fear, demonization, and violence. It conjures up and creates divisions by targeting groups it defines as criminal, less than human, and then expands

its grammars of violence to other groups as part of an attempt to deepen and enlarge a culture of fear, insecurity, and violence. Fascism thus begins with the spark of demonization and attempts to expand its power through attacks on the press, critics, and those considered disposable. Fascism is a manic assault upon the body politic (Massumi 1999, 116). Resentment based on real economic and existential insecurities thus become fodder for cult like figures to misdirect anger, feed collective hate, and foster a climate wracked by shared fears and social divisions.

Fascist politics uses violence as its weapon of choice and the language of war is its primary tool of communication. One example concerns Trump's reference to the caravan of refugees from Central America as an invading criminal force against whom he mobilizing as many as 15,000 troops, more than currently serve in Afghanistan. According to Trump, the caravan of immigrants had "violently overrun" Mexico and were on the verge of invading the United States. Another example centers around Trump's launching a military response against peaceful protesters demonstrating against police violence, calling them thugs and domestic terrorists, while proclaiming himself the "law and order" president. This language does more than promote a decline in civility as some in the mainstream press put it. We have heard this language before in the midst of fascist regimes mobilizing their nihilistic machineries for political destruction. It is a form of language that consciously feeds a fascist politics and "marks a terrifying new horizon for human political experience," one that suggests that the fascist use of language as a tool of state repression is still with us (Dixon 2014). Trump may not be Hitler, but there are disturbing parallels in his language and policies that send up alarming warnings and could easily lead to another genocide.

### *The Normalization of the Emergency*

Fascism thrives in times of crisis and political emergency. But such emergencies are never self-evident. Nor is there narrative determined. Whilst fascists can create a crisis to bring about the state of emergency, often they are parasitic to unexpected events that present themselves as a fascist condition of possibility. While the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has written extensively on these processes through his concerns with the state of exception (Agamben 1998; 2002), what should concern us more today is the normalisation of states of emergency as the world swiftly moves from one crisis to the next. Trump has proved to be an arch-manipulator in the politics of crisis and the creation of tensions. Not a day goes past when he doesn't invoke the need for some kind of exceptional measures, which demanding an emergency response, somehow proves his exceptional qualities. Trump in fact has proved to be the master of what Naomi Klein (2007) aptly called "disaster capitalism." A learned process he helped pioneer in the dystopic landscape of 1970's New York, where he understood how it was possible to profit from

misery and enrich through the destruction of others. For Trump, every crisis conjures up a sense of deep urgency used to privilege a war culture with its defence of walls, the proliferation of surveillance capitalism, the defence of borders, and the suspension of civil liberties. Normalizing a state of emergency allows authoritarians such as Trump to invoke a culture of fear as a pedagogical tool in which critical thought is derailed, dissent suppressed, the military deployed to attack demonstrators, and ignorance is elevated to the status of a virtue. Crises such as the pandemic today thus become a way of shaping fascist modes of governance. For instance, Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister passed a bill that gave him "sweeping emergency powers.... The measures were invoked as part of the government's response to the global pandemic" (Tharoor 2020). In this case, contemporary authoritarian leaders draw upon what activist Ejeris Dixon (2020) calls elements of a "fascist emergency playbook," which includes the creation of "scapegoats for the emergency, such as immigrants, people of colour, disabled people, ethnic and religious minorities, to distract public attention away from the failures of the state and the loss of civil liberties."

In the United States, Trump has introduced a series of policies under the rubric of a state of exception that diverts bailout money to the ruling elite, militarizes public space, increases the power of the police, wages attacks on undocumented immigrants as a public health threat, and legitimately promotes voter suppression. In addition, Trump has further strengthened the surveillance apparatus of the state, fired without oversight public servants for participating in the impeachment process, and initially claimed that the virus was a hoax perpetuated by the media and Democrats who were trying to undermine Trump's re-election. The use of such measures, as Dixon (2020) further reminds, work to "consolidate power, reduce institutional checks and balances, and reduce access to elections and other forms of participatory governance." In doing so, they further "promote a sense of fear and individual helplessness, particularly in relationship to the state, to reduce outcry and to create a culture where people consent to the power of the fascist state."

### *The Liberation of Prejudice*

Fascism depends upon the active liberation and the effective mobilizations of prejudicial desires. In the current climate, we see this most clearly through the waging of the precarious workforces against the globally vulnerable—notably the migrant or refugee, which has been central to all calls for rebuilding walls in the name of Sovereignty. Fascist groups and leaders have always been remarkably adept at scapegoating. This again plays into the fascist victim complex; they often in fact monopolise claims to be a victim of unjust history, which is also default position we often see employed by sexual abusers or those caught for heinous crimes. In order for such scapegoating to become a central aspect of political discussion and

awareness, politics must be reduced to questions of survival. What appears is therefore like a terrible adaptation of the Emperor's New Clothes, though it's the people who are actually naked. Under such conditions, as Primo Levi (1991) understood all too well, everything becomes possible, including a genocide, all in the name of reclaiming some spurious and fabricated notion of precious space that enslaves in the name of liberation. This is the space of disposability presenting itself as a universal law.

But the entrepreneurs of prejudice are no longer confined to the dustbin of history, particularly the 1930s and 1940s. The engineers of fascist politics are with us once again producing dystopian fantasies out of the decaying communities and landscapes produced by forty years of a savage capitalism. Angry loners looking for a cause, a place to put their agency into play, are fodder for cult leaders. They have found one in Trump for whom the relationship between the language of fascism and the divisive and brutalising worldview it creates has moved to the center of power in the United States. In the aftermath of a week, for example, that included the killing of two African-Americans in a grocery store near Louisville, a campaign of mail bombs being sent to a number of high-profile Democrats and celebrities, and the mass murder of 11 people in a Pittsburgh Synagogue, Trump refused to acknowledge how his toxic rhetoric, name-calling rallies, and interviews have fanned the flames of racism and anti-Semitism. Instead, he blamed the media for the violence and labeled them as "the true enemy of freedom;" he also labeled Democrats as the "party of crime," whom he argued were determined "to unleash violent predators and ruthless killers" onto American streets (Sink and Olorunnipa 2018). In addition, Trump has repeatedly labeled immigrants as rapists, drug dealers, and more recently as middle-Eastern terrorists. He publicly claims he is a nationalist emboldening right-wing extremist groups such as the Proud Boys, whose intimidating tactics echo the micro-fascisms of the Nazi brown shirts. Incapable of both empathy and self-reflection, language only services lies, vilification, and violence. Trump is the endpoint of a culture of hyper-punitiveness amplified through forms of militarization, privatization, the criminalization of entire groups of people and the financialization of everything. But Trump's fascist politics could not succeed without the liberation of prejudicial language and its discourse of hate. Nor could it succeed without producing a form of historical amnesia that enables him and his followers to keep reliving a past in which racism was normalized. Trump's language of hate and bigotry is deeply rooted in a politics of forgetting and is a crucial tool in the battle to undermine historical consciousness, ethical witnessing, and memories of resistance.



## *The Naked Appeal to Mythical Violence*

Fascism continues to make a naked appeal to what Walter Benjamin (1986) called mythical violence. Like all theologies, fascism has depended upon its symbols for power, its gospels and its mythmakers. Such myths have been integral to the creation of imagined communities, sanctioning in the process the slaughter of millions. What appears especially seductive for contemporary forms of fascism is a certain nostalgia for a mythical and glorious Paradise Lost. We have seen this clearly articulated in Trump's claims concerning "Great Again!" This is a deception. We are reminded here by Margret Bourke White's famous "American Way" photograph from the Ohio flood of 1937. America has never really been great for many of its citizens. Indeed, these appeals to greatness are yet another example of the violence of organized forgetting, now galvanized by the politics of shame, which allows new forms of violence to continue. What kind of world do we live in after-all when the crossing of a border is deemed to be a violent act and the gassing of women and children fleeing the ravages of conflict in anyway justifiable? A world we might say where the mythical supersedes the human. And yet Trump has learned all this can be sanctioned by calling again upon manifest destiny. To consider any such thing as certain invariably requires a definitive notion of one's place in space and time. This has often been the centring of the European and its Anglophiliations to worldly political affairs and the very authentication of human presence. But unlike the 20<sup>th</sup> century, manifest destiny is no longer simply teleological or operating in a world of infinite possibility, including the conquest of lands yet to be claimed. Operating instead within a world of endangered radical interconnectivity, the very idea of manifest destiny is now re-narrated as a system of preservation. It's all about holding on, for we, especially the white European, is now a victim of history. Manifest destiny thus appears here through the preservation of the Anglosphere as somehow under siege. Such that some even claim certain Anglophobia, like a sort of Orientalism in reverse, which is very much there in the parasitic ideas of scholars from Niall Ferguson to Jordan Peterson.

Seen this way, Trump's inflammatory rhetoric does more than legitimate and accelerate acts of violence; it weaponizes mythical language as a tool of political opportunism. He thrives in feeding the fantasy of greatness while creating social divisions and merges ignorance and power as powerful tools to fuel conspiracy theories, thus eliminating the line between fact and fiction. Unsurprisingly, in his appeal to the mythical promise, Trump is unconcerned about the power of words to inflame, humiliate, and embolden some of his followers to violence. His politics is one that promotes social abandonment, ingratiates a sadistic desire to relegate his critics and those he views as not white enough or ethnically abhorrent to zones of terminal exclusion. Where is the collective outrage among the Republican Party over his endless rhetorical tropes of hate and demonization that both wound and undermine the foundations for a civil society? What can be said about an administration and

its followers that refuses to respond to the accusation that Trump's highly charged rhetoric both legitimates and fuels acts of violence? What kind of signals does this type of rhetoric send to numerous fascist groups that support him? Trump thrives on promoting social divisions and often references violence as a means of addressing them. His praise of a Montana congressman Greg Gianforte for body slamming a *Guardian* reporter in 2017 registers being a case point. Oblivious to the horrors of the past, Trump once called the Nazi protesters in Charlottesville "very fine people." Unsurprisingly, Trump was praised for the remark by David Duke, the former head of the Ku Klux Klan who revels in some mythical and theological vision for an America once that was purer. Furthermore, Trump cheered and vocally supported the armed white militia types who protested at the Michigan State capital in defense of violating shelter-in-place orders designed to limit the spread of the virus. Invoking the mythical politics of supremacy that goes all the way back to the early pioneers, Trump more recently has invoked periods in history marked by the most vicious forms of racist violence. As Adam Shatz observes (2020): "Trump has shown a flair for evoking some of the most hideous periods in American history." "When the looting starts, the shooting starts," he wrote in one tweet, a phrase coined in 1967 by the Miami police chief Walter Headley, who also said: "We don't mind being accused of police brutality." Trump claimed not to know the source of the quote, but his advisers did. And no one with even a rudimentary knowledge of American history could have failed to spot the implication of his threat to set "vicious dogs" on the protesters outside the White House. Slave owners used Cuban bloodhounds to hunt down escaped slaves; Eugene "Bull" Connor, the commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama, attacked civil rights protesters with snarling dogs. Trump also said that in his effort to restore "law and order," he would protect not only property but "your Second Amendment rights" — a message to reassure his white supporters that they need not hesitate to use armed "self-defence," a practice legalized in recent years by "stand your ground" laws (walking or driving in some white neighbourhoods has become an increasingly dangerous activity for black people) (Shatz 2020).

### *The Plague of Historical Amnesia*

In most countries governed by a fascist politics, historical amnesia is used as a weapon of (mis)education, politics, and power and is waged primarily through the militarization and weaponization of the media. The reason fascism can thrive is that it is either consigned to the historical record, which in itself can be a form of forgetting, or we remain deaf to the harrowing words of Cayrol who already foresaw the new fascisms on the horizon. The erasure of the historical in the present constitutes a form of amnesiac pedagogy — again attacking the body politic like a pedagogical virus that erodes modes of agency, values, and ethical engagement. That

certain myths of the past should be celebrated, while its abuses are more a burden that must be forgotten is a centre piece of authoritarian regimes, one that allows public memory to wither and the threads of fascism to become normalized. History under fascism is both forgotten and rewritten. In its mythic versions, it harnesses the emotions of nostalgia, a yearning for a past that was pure, marked by a robust nationalism, and literally cleansed of its dark moments (Stanley 2018). As we have mentioned, while some critics eschew the comparison of Trump with the Nazi era, it is crucial to recognize the alarming signs in this administration that echo a fascist politics of the past, while reworking fascism in the present. As Jonathan Freedland (2018) points out, “the signs are there, if only we can bear to look.” Rejecting the Trump-Nazi comparison makes it easier to believe we have nothing to learn from history and to take comfort in the assumption it cannot happen again. This is a conceit to a certain attachment to progress we continue to sell ourselves. No viable notion of democracy can survive if it ignores the lessons of the past, reduces education to mass conformity, celebrates civic illiteracy, and makes rabid consumerism the only obligation of citizenship. We owe it to Zygmunt Bauman (1991) here for reminding us that memory alone is insufficient. It’s not just that we remember, but what we remember and critique that’s the main concern.

For Bauman, the missed lessons of the past were all too clear, for instead of putting the instrumental ravages of modernity itself and its penchant for reducing life to an economic variable on trial (the triumph of the technical over the critical); instead we comfort ourselves with discussions about 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies—which have been so radically transformed through the power of technology, communication, along with economic and geo-strategic alignments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they could not possibly bear a perfect resemblance when it comes to comparing the operations of power. Saying that we can’t discuss fascism today because it doesn’t look like the worst expressions of the quintessential fascisms of old is like saying we cannot talk about Chinese communism today because it doesn’t look like the Khmer Rouge. Countering the plague of amnesia is thus all about breaking open the parameters in which critical thought is constrained in the historical conjuncture and tasked to merely critique something in the present by simply comorting the past into the age as if everything else merely withstood the passage of time. Max Horkheimer added a more specific register to the relationship between fascism and capitalism in his comment “If you don’t want to talk about capitalism then you had better keep quiet about fascism” (ctd. in Thompson 2013).

### *The Normalization of Human Disposability*

Fascism shows a willful disregard for human life. It has thrown millions into the abyss of human misery and despair. But this capacity for human

disposal is not consigned to the camps of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The politics of disposability is the defining feature of neoliberalism (Evans and Giroux 2015). The neoliberal project runs counter to those who argue that democracy and capitalism march hand in hand and both historically and in the current moment thrives. Neoliberalism splinters people into competitive tribes, views them largely as consumers, and subject human relations to a “dog-eat-dog world of social Darwinism where only the physically fittest, with minds molded to act instinctually to buy and sell” (Broudy and Arakaki 2020). This is a world systematically geared for exploitation, exclusion, hyper-masculinity, and a body politic in which the space of the social resembles a form of cage fighting that has been so culturally appealing to Trump, performatively pattered on a “war of all against all.” But we know this hasn’t been reserved to the realm of entertainment alone. All politics in the age of Trump has been reduced to a war machine and all social relations are viewed as a form of combat, allowing him to unproblematically style himself as a war commander. Trump is not some eccentric lunatic who happened to be elected by a stupefied body of sleep walking voters. He is symptomatic of a savage form of neoliberalism that over the past 40 years has promoted a war on the welfare state, the most vulnerable, and those deemed excess while punishing everyone else with austerity policies that just happened to make the financial elite more rich and major corporations more powerful. Extreme wealth and inequality have found its savior and unabashed apostle in Donald Trump – a populist for the rich. Trump is distinctive in that he merges the worst of casino capitalism, what democratic forces once sought to at least tame and regulate – with an unapologetic reverence for its ravages as “dictated” by the market. In this regard, the line separating liberalism and fascism was never so distant as apologetics have often claimed.

The unapologetic is now the hallmark of this disposability. Trump delights in smearing those individuals and groups he considers disposable. He has brazenly attacked journalists even in the face of a growing number of assaults on them – over a 1000 killed in the last decade across the globe. He has endlessly defended Saudi Arabia’s role in torturing and killing Jamal Khashoggi – unabashedly suggesting that the profits from trading in weapons of death are more important than defending civil and human rights. He delights in producing and suggesting cruel policies that would have seemed unimaginable a decade ago. For instance, he even threatens to use an executive order to end birthright citizenship. His ethical disregard appears unbounded given his endless attacks on immigrants. He wages war on the planet through his support for the fossil fuel industry and his deregulation of corporate practices that pollute the environment. Trump’s policies aimed at social cleansing, his love affair with some of the world’s most heinous dictators, and his hatred of radical democracy (note again the calling of anti-fascists as terrorist) echoes a period in history when the unimaginable became possible, when genocide was the endpoint of dehumanizing others, and the mix of nativist and nationalist rhetoric ended in the horrors of the

camp. The world is at civil war once again, and it is a war against radical democracy and Trump is leading the battle. What is new at the current moment however is that people have broken through the fog of lies, cover ups, and misinformation that has hidden state violence in the past. In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement has once again drawn attention to the police violence against Black people, but this time the violence was captured on a cell phone video that lasted for almost nine minutes exposing a life being taken with a kind of chilling indifference that bordered on a sadistic pleasure. The video spoke not to the actions of a bad cop but to a systemic racism that could no longer hide in the shadows. Sherrilyn Ifill, while appearing on the television program *60 Minutes*, called the video a snapshot of the soul of the country. She is worth repeating:

There are moments in this country when there are photographs that are snapshots of the soul of this country. They almost hold up a mirror to this country. And when we see this picture of the nonchalance with which America will put its knee on the neck of black people and make itself deaf to our suffering, deaf to our cries, deaf to our desperation, that's the snapshot. That's America. That's America that can see African Americans suffering from disproportionately from COVID infection and COVID death, can see us subject to housing discrimination, can see us as the lowest wage workers, can see us being victims of voter suppression, can see our desperation and still won't change. Still won't let the knee up one bit. (Whitaker 2020)

### *The Militarization of the Everyday*

The order of fascism is not only about conquest and colonization of external peoples; it wages war upon its own population such that the state becomes a necropolis.<sup>3</sup> A defining feature of fascism is to wage war upon its own people, to enact a civil war where the lines of battle take place at every door, down every street, through every conversation, and in every possible setting. Fascism thus reproduces a politics of walls, gated communities, prisons, jails, and zones of terminal exclusion. Militarizing the fabric of the everyday, it is built on an architecture of punishment, surveillance, and fear. It resembles what Peter Maas (2020) calls “an array of what be described as the accessories and devices of dictatorship.” Fascism militarizes every space in an effort to control and depoliticize all possibilities for critical thought, dissent, and resistance. It functions as a form of slow violence, consolidating

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<sup>3</sup>We are borrowing the terms here developed and used on various social media platforms by Nicholas Mirzoeff.

power and accumulating control while further testing the limits for “cultivating a taste for savagery, undermining ‘moral boundaries,’ inuring people to the acceptance of extreme cruelty, [and] learning to think the unthinkable” (O’Toole 2018).

According to Maass (2020), the accessories of militarization have expanded with infectious ruthlessness in American cities in recent times. These include, “The police swinging batons wildly, the paramilitary forces refusing to identify themselves, the hysterical president trying to incite war, the vigilantes in league with the police, military helicopters clattering overhead, the general marching in the streets in combat fatigues.” Fascism does not simply use its war machine to shape its imperialistic foreign policies, it also accelerates and embeds without limitation the already existent militarization of culture at home (Turse 2008). Trump’s America is at war with itself, and it’s now deploying its unrivalled military supremacy upon domestic populations, which to any outsider should look terrifying. Just compare the images of desperately under equipped nurses saving lives in New York with plastic bags working as protective garments, alongside the overly equipped militarized police who were so quickly deployed to recapture the streets from those simply asking not to be killed. The United States is the most powerful military force on the planet and is the top military spender in the world. It has a military expenditure of \$732 billion, and accounts for 38 percent of global spending. In 2019, it “spent almost as much on its military...as the next 190 highest spenders combined” (Tian et al. 2020). It has used its military might to circle the globe with over 800 military bases is the largest producer of arms in the world. Its wars and military interventions have been used to overthrow democratically elected governments that range from its intervention in Cuba in 1952 and the removal in 1953 of the democratically Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, to its participation in the overthrow in 1973 of the democratically elected Marxist leader Salvador Allende in Chile. And it has engaged in endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where counter-insurgency strategies for domestic pacification have been learned and brought back home in a form of a post-colonial boomerang.

Military power under a fascist state is celebrated as its highest ideal blurring the line between war and peace, security and freedom, war values and democratic values. If militarization is the legitimation of military power and the production of the codes of war designed to shape a society’s institutions, policies, behaviour, and values, militarism is a central feature of fascism. Focusing on the United States, historian Richard H. Kohn argues militarism is the “domination of war values and frameworks in American thinking, public policy, institutions and society to the point of dominating rather than influencing or simply shaping American foreign relations and domestic life” (ctd. in González and Gusterson 2018, 6). America as such has always been primed. In a fascist society however, all social spaces become subject to militarism making “Americans feel better about fighting wars that create hometown heroes [while also being] powerful and sophisticated

enough to infiltrate and mediate intimate social relations—between parent and child, family and community, civilian and soldier—colonizing the imagination of those who can help further its own ends” (ctd. in González and Gusterson 2018, 5). Culture is now militarized producing what anthropologist Catherine Lutz calls the “military normal” —a condition in which science, entertainment, business and even high fashion deeply reflect militaristic values” (ctd. in González and Gusterson 2018, 5). The militarization of everyday life produces not only an endless stream of merchandise, films, toys, fashion, and video games, it also creates what Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls “a continuum of violence in which the tactics of war and war crimes gradually seep into domestic civilian life” (2018, 111-112). Under the Trump administration, fascist military ideals have become the central organizing principles of governance. Militarism now plays out in the domestic sphere or what Maass (2020) calls the “streets of a dying empire.” The fascist political culture at work in the highest reaches of power was most evident when Senator Tom Cotton in a controversial op-ed in the *New York Times* referred to those protesting police violence and the murder of George Floyd as “rioters,” “looters,” and “nihilist criminals” and called for the mobilization of the U.S. military to provide “an overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter lawbreakers.” The call to use military troops to police protesters has little to do with a democracy and a great deal to do in providing a snapshot of a society that has systematically tumbled into the abyss of fascism.

While Cotton’s op-ed was highly criticized and even repudiated by the *New York Times*, Trump had no trouble with Cotton’s belief that the U.S. military should be used on peaceful protesters and did just that by unleashing the National Guard and other heavily armed troops against demonstrators protesting outside of the White House so he could create the conditions for a photo op for his propaganda machine. Trump attempted to justify what came close to a declaration of war against the American people by calling himself “the president of law and order.” Surely, using the threat of military force to silence dissent is one more indication of the degree to which a fascist politics has come into play in the current historical moment. Adam Weinstein (2020) writing in *The New Republic*, observed that the Trump administration represents a gangster state that has “reached an important stage of fascist maturity in the streets of dozens of cities last weekend.” He writes, “It is time to embrace the parallels, to be unafraid to speak a clear truth: Whether by design or lack of it, Donald Trump and the Republican Party operate an American state that they have increasingly organized on fascist principles. It is also time to consider what else the fascists may yet do, during an unprecedented pandemic, amid unprecedented unemployment, faced with unprecedented resistance ahead of an unprecedented election.”

## *Violence to Truth*

Fascism doesn't simply talk in an untruthful or deceiving way all the times. The fascist, in fact, is an adept diagnostician and arc-manipulator, who is able to read the political moment and steer it in a particular, albeit nihilistic, direction. Trump is seemingly incapable of any form of self-reflection, preferring instead to affirm his own greatness. Ceaselessly, he states that he is going to "tone up" the rhetoric rather than tone it down. He lies endlessly, shreds standards for discerning the truth, and produces falsehoods daily in order to divert the media from addressing serious topics ranging from health care, attacks on social security, and the Mueller investigation. The endless lying is about more than diversion or a perpetual motion machine of absurdist theater, it is also about creating a mediascape where ethics collapses and a criminogenic culture of thuggery, corruption, white supremacy, and violence flourish—and democracy dies. History seems to be repeating itself in a script in which language falls into an ecosystem of falsehoods, militarism and racism. But history also offers us a reliable narrative of the horrific consequences of a society in which anti-Semitism is couched in the language of globalization, and the call for racial and social cleansing is echoed in the discourse of borders and walls. What historical memory reveals in this case is an emergence of state terrorism that alarmingly resembles the 1930s.

In an age when civic literacy and holding the powerful accountable for their action is dismissed as "fake news," ignorance becomes the breeding ground not just for hate but for a culture that represses historical memory, shreds any understanding of the importance of shared values, refuses to make respect and dignity key elements of civic dialogue, and allows the powerful to poison everyday discourse. State sanctioned ignorance is more than fodder for late night comedy shows, it also provides the psychological conditions for individuals and groups to associate "pollution" and disposability with what Professor Richard A. Etlin (2002, 2) calls "a biologically racist worldview, which divides the human race according to the dichotomy of the pure and impure, the life-enhancing and the life-polluting." This is a language mobilized by the energies of the ethically dead, and resonates strongly with the anti-Semitism that was at the center of the genocidal policies of the Third Reich. This poisonous anti-Semitic discourse has returned to an unusual and dangerous extent in Hungary, Poland, and a number of other countries now moving towards fascism. It is also surfacing among alt-right and other neo-Nazi groups in the United States. Trump's racist remarks set the tone for his presidential campaign and have been the driving force during his presidency. Under the Trump administration, people who should be labeled as a threat to democracy are now at the center of power and embraced by Trump. As Trump increasingly plays to his base, his discourse becomes more extreme, his condoning and fomenting of violence more intensified.



## *The Authoritarian Personality*

Fascism undoubtedly depends upon its media savvy performative leaders. While such leaders like to see themselves in the mirror as Caesar reincarnate, in public the fascist will in fact often play the clown and trivialise politics in a way that permits mockery. Adorno (1950) reminds us that when he first came to power, Hitler was never taken too seriously, and people would often laugh and mock his performances for their vulgarities and absurdities. We see this evidenced in the anti-fascist artworks of John Heartfield<sup>4</sup> along with Chaplin's wonderful and tragic adaptation in *The Great Dictator*. Part of the strategy here is disarming through a conscious banalization. It is to counter the possible representation of monstrosity with a harmless clown. But the clown is no comedian, and there is a real reason why children are often fearful of their presence. Children know they could at any moment, through mere arbitrary selection, become the unwilling victim of mockery and shaming all for the entertainment value of others. And so, unlike the comic who laughs in the face of tragedy because they know the human depths of despair and the suffering, the clown is the sovereign performer who commands attention and turns mockery against itself, redirecting it upon the masses, especially those who are the most vulnerable targets. Like all psychotics, the mockery of the clown conceals through the acts of shaming a more violent laughter all too reminiscent of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. Perhaps it is the most telling metaphor for our times that the Netflix streaming channel has this movie listed in its comedy section.

For Trump as well as his Vichy-Republican allies and many of his followers, facts or ethics appear never to get in the way of acknowledging the degree to which Trumpism has normalized violence as a tool to counter dissent, threaten journalists, and others critical of Trump's fascist politics. The rhetoric of violence, hate, and intolerance has morphed into the service of fashioning Trump as the undisputed strongman at the center of a stupefied cult, and as a fascist symbol for criminalizing all those individuals and groups considered disposable and outside of the ultra-nationalist notion of America as a white-public sphere. Under Trump, violence defines the political sphere, if not politics itself, and has become a mythic force in which all meaning, desire, relations, and actions are framed with a friend/enemy divide. This is the worldview of the demagogue and points alarmingly to a resurgence of a fascist ideology updated for the 21st century. Trump's rhetoric of hate resembles the Nazi obsession with a leader whose discourse of pollution, ritualistic acts aimed at purging critical thought and undermining informed judgment take place at the expense of learning from the horrors of history. This is the discourse of an authoritarian personality and a petri dish for nourishing the contagious virus of a fascist politics.

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<sup>4</sup>See Heartfield (2019).

## *The Spectacle of Fascism*

Fascism today operates in the realm of the visible. It openly declares its appearance, while denying it in all but name, without apology for its prejudices. And it is through this regime of visibility it is able to deny any association with the secrecy of former Totalitarian regimes. Such fascism appreciates that Orwell was wrong when he was concerned about the invasive forces of surveillance in people's lives. In the age of the spectacle, it's not what is invasive to the private sphere, but the threat of not being seen which the greater cause for concern. Hence as people wilfully give themselves over to power, fully investing themselves into systems of human classification and a deeply complex assay about every aspect of their political subjectivity; so, the fascist has realized there is nothing to hide, except the nothingness of its nihilistic embrace. The fascist is always seductively armed with the violence of an artificial love. Hence the fascist has become an adept media celebrity, basking in the limelight of a system of fading global liberal power, whose twilight has long since been called. Trump, in particular has a penchant for turning politics into a form of theater and entertainment into a form of cruelty. For instance, he resuscitates mob rallies similar to what took place under Mussolini and Hitler in the 1930s. Much like the Nazi rallies, Trump seeks to turn politics into a grandiose theater of nativism, while presenting the head of state as a kind of demigod. In addition, there is the preaching of hate, which functions as a kind of quasi-religious experience used to trade off and amplify mass anger largely directed at those considered the enemies of the state.

Seizing upon the potentially violent energy of his followers, Trump transforms their heightened anxieties and collective fears into a mass disdain for Muslims, immigrants, Black people and others. Such events are not unique to the United States. There are traces of this racist and nativist ideology in right wing movements in Canada and full-blown expressions can be found in Hungary, Poland, Brazil, India, and other European countries. This is about more than the privileging of fear and emotion over critical insight, it is whipped up hysteria parading as entertainment, one in which pleasure becomes a vehicle for demonizing others. This is part of a politics of the spectacle that reinforces the social emptiness at the heart of fascist societies and filling it with the spectacle of fear. For Trump, shock becomes his mode of address, designed to both titillate his adoring fans while using theatre as an incendiary politics of diversion. Trump's racism, his demonizing of others and his call to suppress dissent makes the appeal to violence a legitimating tool of governance. At the same time, Trump's rallies like the Nuremberg rallies in Nazi Germany not only appeal to the affective registers of division, but also pathologize politics by promoting a culture of fear that reverses the process of identification from compassion for the other to fear itself. Let's be clear. At the heart of Trump's rallies is a manufactured pageant that trades in violence, cruelty, humiliation and domination as part of his campaign

of terror that makes the elemental structures of a democracy and the social sphere dysfunctional. Trump's spectacle operates off fear rather than persuasion and, in doing so, reinforces the ominous anti-intellectual forces that drive his presidency. All of this echoes a history that we cannot allow ourselves to forget.

However, while the digital age has made the spectacles of violence more visible, they have done little to reform either the violent culture of policing or the terror imposed by the state. Americans watched a 12-year old child, Tamir Rice, killed by the police. They watched Eric Garner strangled to death by the police for allegedly selling cigarettes on a street corner. They watched Freddie Gray dragged into back of a Baltimore police van because he had a pocket knife, only to die soon afterwards; they watched Sandra Bland get stopped for a minor traffic violation, pulled from her car, only to later to be found hanging in a police station cell. They watched Philando Castille shot by the police in front of his girlfriend and her small child; and they watched George Floyd die under the knee of a cop who appeared chillingly indifferent as George's last breath left his body. That knee in place for nine minutes, as if it wanted to make clear that it was more than willing to stand proudly as a symbol of what Robert Shetterly (2020) called "the blunt instrument of [a racist] history." They watched as the police in almost all of these crimes, except thus far for Floyd's death, were exonerated. They watched as almost everyone with power looked away. They watched as the public tuned into their nightly game shows. They watched as the habits of public powerlessness, apparatuses of hopelessness, and collapse of civic courage once more dethroned a viable sense of social responsibility, politics, and democracy itself. Then they watched as the media focuses less on the historical context for such killings and more on the alleged outside radical leftists/anarchists/running through the streets committing the alleged real violence. The fires burning in the cities are unfortunate, but the real fires go unnoticed. These are the fires burning the spirits of those who suffer daily traumas, fears, police violence, and policy driven hardships are what need to be noticed, addressed, and rouse mass anger. No one talks about the roots of these problems and we do not simply mean their origins in slavery, a culture of lynching, and a deeply ingrained institutional racism, however crucial these events are. We are talking about the roots of a fascist politics in which money counts more than people, and some people count far more than others. We are talking about a brutalizing form of capitalism that is incompatible with the slightest vestige of democracy and has to be destroyed, not changed, modified, or made more compassionate. We are talking about the resurgence of fascism in an updated form in the United States – a fascism without apology.

## *The Faux Revolution*

Fascism often presents itself as a radical movement. It consciously positions itself in opposition to the prevailing order of things, promising to liberate the masses from the forces of elitism and destitution. To achieve this, the fascists of history have learned how to appropriate the language of freedom and rights for their own parasitic ends. And they do so by playing on genuinely held concerns with the way the bourgeoisie behaves and has positioned themselves as the standard for privilege within a social order. At the level of critique, some of what the fascists claim is agreeable. But what matters is not the critique. It is the solution. For it is in the solution where we see the real deceptions at work. Fascists merely want to bring about a changing of the guard to steer history in an even more brutal direction. Fascism in fact is not a revolution but acceleration. Fascism accelerates the divisions, accelerates the crises, accelerates the violence, accelerates the denials, accelerates the disposability's, accelerates the inequalities, accelerates the surveillance, accelerates the militarisation, accelerates the suppression, accelerates the terror, accelerates the resentment, accelerates the destruction, accelerates the pain. Its vision of revolution as such produces nothing more than a false consciousness or a simulacrum in which the only thing that changes is the deepening of oppression.

Echoing the earlier insights of Umberto Eco, Sheldon Wolin, Timothy Snyder, Federico Finchelstein, Jason Stanley, and other students of fascism, what is crucial to acknowledge is that Trump is the endpoint and symbol of a fascist political apparatus that has been in the making for some time in the United States. The war on terror, a resurgent racism, the move of white supremacy and white nationalism from the margins to the centre of power, the saturation of public space with war values, militarized police, mass incarceration, fortified borders, drone wars, the rise of the surveillance all predated the rise of Donald Trump.<sup>5</sup> Under such circumstances, the seeds for fascism were already planted, allowing for germination of ideas that could eventually undermine civil liberties while ridiculing and censoring critics. Corporate control of the cultural apparatuses already provided the public with endless spectacles of violence, illusions, the celebration of market-driven values, and an empty obsession and worship of celebrity culture. Trump has merely run with these, accelerating their politically devastating potentials.

## *The Racial Grammars of Suffering*

We have already noted how fascism and racism are not the same and there is a need to recognize this. But when fascism is aligned with notions

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<sup>5</sup>See especially Giroux (2019; 2018) and Klein (2017).

of white supremacy, that is when racial violence truly becomes deadly. The sheer brutality of George Floyd's death at the hands of a viciously violent cop symbolized not only the unadulterated racism of a culture that looks away in the face of police violence against Black people but also a society in which a form of racialized domestic terrorism has become normalized. Floyd's murder has to be understood as part of wider systemic politics indebted to the long legacy of a culture of racist terror that extends from slavery and Jim Crow to the scourge of racial mass incarceration and a politics of disposability. The punishing apparatuses of the racial state have become more barbaric as power is concentrated more and more in the hands of the ultra-rich, white nationalists and white supremacists who now occupy the White House. Fascism has taken off the gloves and now resorts to outright terror to keep people of color in check. Every space in the U.S. that people of color occupy is militarized.

The ongoing murder and exercise of state terrorism against Black people is part of a White House program that supports the false argument that white people are the real victims, bolstered in part by white supremacist fantasies regarding the alleged nightmare of what they call the threat of white genocide. White supremacists such as Stephen Miller now set immigration policy. In this world of racist fears and conspiracy theories, it is convenient for whites to hate people of color and moreover to subscribe to the notion that the public sphere is a space only for whites. The racist grammars of suffering, state violence and disposability have become unspeakable and removed from any sense of ethical and social responsibility. America has become an armed camp and the war on black and brown people a source of pride rather than alarm. Racism has morphed into a badge of honor for the current administration. This administration trades in racist taunts, encourages violence on the part of the police, and believes that Blacks are more dangerous than right-wing terrorists, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists. People of color are viewed in the dominant discourse of white supremacy as being outside of the bounds of justice; their existence occupies a space between invisibility and terminal exclusion. Increasingly, under the Trump regime, people of color are "thugs" relegated to zones of social abandonment, lacking human rights, and unknowable as lives worthy of any positive value. As we mentioned in an previous reference, we also see it in its more obvious toxic forms as when he states in the aftermath of the mass protests, "When the looting starts, the shooting starts," all the while echoing a racist phrase by a former Miami Police Chief Walter Headley who liked to brag that he only hired white police officers and prided himself for using violence against Black people. There is nothing new about the police killing black people. Nor is there anything new about the United State engaging in state sponsored violence by way of a racially marked mass incarceration system. But to do so without apology when confronted with the undeniable truth is something that marks a new chapter.

## *The Triumph of Violence*

Fascism seeks to bring about the destruction of all viable claims to political difference. This is ultimately its clarion-call. But history continues to show that people will resist what they find patently intolerable. And it's when faced with these conditions, the only thing that fascism knows is more violence. Fascism, then, in the end, is the triumph of violence and the move towards the eradication of all resistance. As a regime predicated upon intimidation—of the mind, body and senses, fascism cannot sustain itself without a naked appeal to violence as imagined and real, and hence it draws upon it claims to its continued justification. This is why countering fascism with violence is self-defeating. Fascism thrives as a suffocating force when the conditions of violence prevails. It continually feeds off enmity and the liberation of prejudice. But that doesn't mean to say that fascism shouldn't be confronted. As Todd May (2015) argues, non-violence is confrontational, but in order to steer history in a different direction. Recognizing these features, it is deluded to believe that liberalism or socialism might save us. What is required is a new political imagination that imagines a world free from the enslaving forces of nihilism. I am reminded here by a wonderful quote from the artist Gottfried Helnwein, who observed:

Nothing scares authoritarian regimes more than art and free creation. Why would Hitler burn mountains of books and paintings and ban all arts? Why would Stalin—the master over life and death of almost 300 million people, a man who commanded the biggest army and secret service that ever existed—be afraid of the poems written by Anna Akhmatova? Why would Mao be so obsessed with destroying China's entire cultural heritage? Why would FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, while denying the existence of organized crime in the United States, put so much effort into harassing and investigating every artist of any significance from Hemingway to John Lennon? (Evans and Helnwein 2018, 170)

## *The Fragility of Fascism*

Fascism, however, in the end is a fragile organism. It is not defined by its strength or power of coercion. It's defined by its weaknesses. Fascism preys upon the vulnerable. It targets them. It recruits them. It is in fact relatively impotent when it comes to any affirmative conception of empowerment. Fascist power is purely reactionary. It invents nothing. Its imagination is nothing more than a dead-end road. This is why it demands so much violence. When power fails that is when violence prevails. As James Martel has acutely observed, "one of the most important things that Benjamin has

to tell us is that fascism, for all of its terrifying appearance, is always and inherently on the brink of collapse. That is to say, that fascism is trapped by its own violence, forced to turn to a greater and greater degree of violence as it continually seeks to ground and reground itself. Usually when we think of a very violent and powerful system, we think that it is utterly in control of the situation and that it only collapses, if ever, by virtue of some externality (kind of the way that the combined force of the Allies in World War II ended fascism, at least for a moment). Yet, fascism in some sense does not even need external enemies because it bears its own vulnerability within itself" (Evans and Martel 2020).

But we know that such vulnerability can also be deadly. Fantasies of absolute control, racial purity, unchecked militarism, and class warfare are at the heart of a political imagination that has turned lethal. This is a dystopian imagination pillaged of any substantive meaning, cleansed of compassion, and used to legitimate the notion that alternative worlds are impossible to entertain. Fascist politics has resurfaced with a vengeance, resurrecting a ghostly apparition many people thought would never re-emerge again after the horrors and death inflicted on millions by previous fascist dictators. It is here the power of critical pedagogy becomes all the more important as it draws from history and imagines a future that does not imitate the present. The ghosts of fascism should terrify us, but most importantly they should educate us and imbue us with a spirit of civic justice and collective action in the fight for a democratically inclusive society. What protesters fighting against fascism today have made clear is that history is open, and it is time to think otherwise in order to act otherwise, especially if they want to imagine and bring into being alternative democratic futures and horizons of possibility. In that sense, they are part of what Matthew Yglesias has called the "great awakening," one that embodies the spirit of revolt and struggle articulated by the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass (2019). Without such a struggle, the fantasies of armed white militia, white nationalists and neo-Nazis will become more difficult to challenge and the dark night of fascism will once again produce its recurring plagues of deprivation, racial cleansing, cruelty, inequality, and human suffering on a massive level. But to defeat fascism we have to understand it, both historically and in its current forms. There is no time to waste.

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