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Disposability in the age of neoliberal disasters: From dreamers and Puerto Rico to violence in Las Vegas

DESECHABILIDAD EN LA EDAD DE LOS DESASTRES NEOLIBERALES: DE LOS SOÑADORES Y PUERTO RICO A LA VIOLENCIA EN LAS VEGAS

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 21st century, we have seen the emergence of a new kind of politics of death. This is a politics that now merges with aggressive and violent efforts to silence dissent, analysis, and the very conditions of critical thought. People who are black, brown, poor, and weak are now excluded from the rights and guarantees, and their efforts to mobilize have been met with murderous police crackdowns and deportations. In this neoliberal context, the essays approaches how a politics of disposability provides a theoretical and political narrative that connects the crisis produced in Puerto Rico (after the devastating effects of Hurricane Maria), to the crisis surrounding Trump's revoking of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. Then, it analyzes how Trump's support of state-sanctioned violence normalizes a culture and spectacle of violence, one that creates a climate of lawlessness not unrelated to the mass shooting that took place in Las Vegas with its death toll of 50 individuals and the wounding of over 850 individuals. In brief, this essay analyzes how young children are groomed for violence by educational programs sponsored by the gun industries, how military recruiting and training have moved into public schools, how video games and other aspects of a militarized culture are used to teach youth to be insensitive to the horrors of real-life violence, and how the military-industrial complex makes a living from killing through defense contracts, weapons manufacturing and endless wars. In short, I explore all those facts as a systemic example of both state violence and a politics of disposability and social abandonment.

Key-words: critical thought, educational programs, gun industries, neoliberalism, Trump´s culture of violence.

Resumen

A comienzos del siglo XXI, hemos visto surgir un nuevo tipo de política de la muerte. Esta es una política que ahora se combina con esfuerzos agresivos y violentos para silenciar la disidencia, el análisis y las condiciones del pensamiento crítico. Las personas que son negras, mulatas, pobres y débiles están ahora excluidas de los derechos y garantías, y sus esfuerzos para movilizarse

se han enfrentado con represiones policiales y deportaciones asesinas. En este contexto neoliberal, el ensayo aborda cómo la política de desechabilidad proporciona una narrativa teórica y política que relaciona la crisis producida en Puerto Rico (después de los efectos devastadores del huracán María), con la crisis que rodea la revocación por parte de Trump del programa Acción Diferida para los Llegados en la Infancia. Después se analiza cómo el apoyo de Trump a la violencia sancionada por el estado normaliza una cultura y espectáculo de violencia, creando un clima de anarquía relacionado con el tiroteo masivo que tuvo lugar en Las Vegas con el saldo de 58 individuos muertos y más de 850 personas heridas. En suma, el ensayo analiza cómo los niños se preparan para la violencia mediante programas educacionales patrocinados por las industrias de armas, cómo el reclutamiento militar y la capacitación han trasladado a las escuelas públicas, cómo se usan los videojuegos y otros aspectos de una cultura militarizada para enseñar a los jóvenes a ser insensibles a los horrores de la violencia en la vida real, y cómo el complejo militar industrial se gana la vida matando a través de contratos de defensa, fabricación de armas y guerras interminables. En resumen, se exploran todos estos hechos como un ejemplo sistémico de violencia estatal y una política de desechabilidad y abandono social.

Palabras clave: pensamiento crítico, programas educativos, industria de armas, neoliberalismo, cultura de violencia de Trump.

Introduction to the Age of Neoliberal Disasters

Under the reign of Donald Trump, politics has become an extension of war and death has become a permanent attribute of everyday life.[2] Witness America's plunge into a dystopian world that bears the menacing markings of what presents itself as an endless series of isolated catastrophes. All of these are inevitably treated as unrelated incidents; victims subject to the toxic blows of fate. Mass misery and mass violence that result from the refusal of a government to address such pervasive and permanent crisis are now reinforced by

2 This is a play on Henry A. Kissinger's comment in describing Lenin's approach to politics, which was politics as a continuation of war by other means, thus turning Clausewitz's argument "on its head." See: Christopher Bassford, Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815–1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.198.

the popular neoliberal assumption that people are completely on their own, solely responsible for the ill-fortune they experience. This feral ideological assumption is reinforced by undermining any critical attention to the conditions produced by stepped-up systemic lawlessness, state violence, or the harsh consequences of a capricious and cruel head of state.

Progress and dystopia have become synonymous just as state-endorsed social provisions and government responsibility are exiled by the neoliberal authorization of freedom as the unbridled promotion of self-interest, a narrow celebration of choice that ignores constrains, and a feral emphasis on individual responsibility and the internalization if failure that are blind to broader systemic structures and socially produced problems. Existential security no longer rests on collective foundations but on privatized solutions and facile appeals to moral character. Social and economic determinates now disappear in a political backdrop in which social provisions are eliminated, reinforced by the oppressively stupid babble of celebrity culture and self-help talk shows, such as Dr. Phil and Oprah Winfrey, all of which appeal to neoliberal sentiments of total self-reliance. Mainstream cultural pathways now combine a depoliticizing illiteracy with a spectacle of violence that creates the invisible architecture of social relations, desires, and values through which anti-democratic sentiments gain legitimacy. Under such circumstances, a politics of disposability has merged with an ascendant authoritarianism in the United States in which the government's response to such disparate issues as the DACA crisis, the devastation of Puerto Rico by Hurricane Maria, and the mass shooting in Las Vegas are met uniformly with state sanctioned and state promoted violence.

In an age when market values render democratic values moot, a war culture drives what I have called a politics of disposability. The politics of disposability has a long legacy in the United States and extends from the genocide of Native Americans and slavery to the increasing criminalization of everyday behaviors and the creation of a mass incarceration state.

In the 1970s, the politics of disposability guided by the growing financialization of a neoliberal economy, manifested itself primarily in the form of legislation that undermined the welfare state, social provisions, and public goods, while expanding the carceral state. This was part of the soft war

waged against democracy—mostly hidden and wrapped in the discourse of austerity, law and order, and market-based freedoms. At the beginning of the 21st century, we have seen the emergence of a new kind of politics of death the effects of which extend from the racist response to Hurricane Katrina to the lead poisoning of thousands of children in Flint, Michigan and dozens of other cities. This is a politics in which entire populations are considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves. This is a politics that now merges with aggressive and violent efforts to silence dissent, analysis, and the very conditions of critical thought. People who are black, brown, poor, and weak are now excluded from the rights and guarantees accorded to fully fledged citizens of the republic, removed from the syntax of suffering, and left to fend for themselves in the face of natural or man-made disasters. And their efforts to mobilize have been met with murderous police crackdowns and deportations.

With the election of Trump, the politics of disposability and the war against democracy have taken on a much harder and crueler edge. In fact, there has been a radical shift in both the investment in government sponsored violence and the creation of a social order designed to cancel out any promise of a democratic future, especially for young people. Violence now is sowed everywhere with an unapologetic and punishing arrogance. The police are being armed with weapons from the battlefields of Afghanistan, young people are being pushed through the school-to-prison pipeline, legislation is used to disenfranchise poor Blacks, connective forms of justice are dismantled, the police are urged by the president to take the gloves off when dealing with criminal suspects, and the Attorney General has called for a law and order campaign that is steeped in racism.

Under 21st century neoliberal capitalism, and especially under the Trump regime, there has been an acceleration of the mechanisms by which vulnerable populations are rendered unknowable, undesirable, unthinkable, considered an excess cost, and stripped of their humanity. Relegated to zones of social abandonment and political exclusion, targeted populations become incomprehensible, civil rights disappear, hardship and suffering are normalized, and human lives are targeted and negated by diverse machineries of violence as dangerous, pathological, and redundant. For those populations rendered

disposable, ethical questions go unasked as the mechanisms of dispossession, forced homelessness, and forms of social death feed corrupt political systems and forms of corporate power removed from any sense of civic and social responsibility. In many ways, the Trump administration is the new face of a politics of disposability that thrives on the energies of the vulnerable and powerless while accelerating what Joao Biehl calls "the death of the unwanted" (Biehl, 2005, p. 20). Under such conditions, power is defined by the degree to which it is abstracted from any sense of responsibility or critical analysis.

Evidence of this type of disposability is especially visible under the Trump presidency. Not only is it obvious in his discourse of humiliation, bigotry, and objectification, but also in policies designed to punish those populations who are the most vulnerable. These include the victims in Puerto Rico of Hurricane Maria, illegal immigrant children no longer protected by DACA, and a state-sanctioned culture of violence that has become the driving force for expanding the armed forces and para-militarizing local police forces throughout the country as part of a race-based law and order policy. Trump is the endpoint of a new dystopian model of disposability and has become a window on the growing embrace of violence and white supremacy at the highest levels of power as both a practice and ideological legitimation for increasing a culture of fear, one that threatens to make more and more individuals and groups, inconsequential and expendable, if not unthinkable. He has produced a war culture for which state-sanctioned violence has become the base-line for creating a society soaked in fear, manufactured ignorance, and pervasive loathing of those considered weak, branded with the demonizing inscriptions of mayhem, disease, pathology, and moral corruption (Butler, 2004).

Fear no longer prompts the American government to address real dangers, now posed as inescapable. On the contrary, fear now "evokes an insomnia full of nightmares", (Bauman, 2007, p. 11) and is framed mostly within a discourse of threats to personal safety, serving to increase the criminalization of a wide range of everyday behaviors while buttressing the current administration's call for "law and order." Fear has become a petri-dish for racism state sanctioned dogmatism and has reinforced the increased development of gated

communities, a mass incarceration state, schools modeled after prisons, and the call for walls and sealed borders. Such fears further reinforce a punishing state wedded to the growth of a militarized culture, state violence, and an expanding authoritarianism. America has reached a political and ethical endpoint, and has become a society saturated in acute violence, ethical indifference, and lawlessness.

Under such circumstances, America's dystopian impulses not only produce harsh and dire political changes but also a failure to address a continuous series of economic, ecological, and social crisis. At the same time, the machinery of disposability and death rolls on in both punishing and making entire populations disappear, conferring upon them the status of the living dead, and catapulting them out of a moral universe that references what it means to live with dignity, but also what it means to be human. The death-dealing logic of disposability has been updated and now parades in the name of freedom, choice, efficiency, security, progress, and, ironically, democracy. Disposability has become so normalized that it is difficult to recognize it as a distinctive if not overriding organizing principle of the new American authoritarianism. Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult as Judith Butler has argued to recognize that some lives are not grievable, and that:

> certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture…..And since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object (Butler, 2004, pp. 33-34).

While the politics of disposability has a long legacy in the United States, Trump has given it a new and powerful impetus and it differs from the past both in terms of in unapologetic embrace of the ideology of white supremacy and it willingness to expand state sanctioned violence and death as part of a wider project of America's decent into authoritarianism.

Running through these events is a governmental response that has abandoned a social contract designed, however tepidly, to prevent hardship,

suffering and death. In fact, at work here is the haunting specter of a politics of disposability in which people are catapulted out of the moral universe of human beings for whom the government has limited if any responsibility. Such populations, inclusive of such disparate groups as the residents of Puerto Rico and the Dreamers, are left to fend for themselves in the face of natural or manmade disasters--considered collateral damage in the construction of a neoliberal order in which those marginalized by race and class become the objects of a violent form of social engineering relegating its victims to what Richard Sennett has termed a "specter of uselessness," whose outcomes are both tragic and devastating.

In what follows, I want to take up how a politics of disposability provides a theoretical and political narrative that connects the crisis produced in Puerto Rico after the devastating effects of Hurricane Maria to the crisis surrounding Trump's revoking of the DACA program [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals]. I then want to analyze how Trump's support of state-sanctioned violence normalizes a culture and spectacle of violence, one that creates a climate of lawlessness not unrelated to the mass shooting that took place in Las Vegas with its death toll of 50 individuals and the wounding of over 500 individuals. First, I will turn in this essay to the crisis in Puerto Rico in order to explore it as a systemic example of both state violence and a politics of disposability and social abandonment.

Puerto Rico as a zone of social and political abandonment

On September 20th 2017, Hurricane Maria, a category 5 storm, with 155 miles an hour winds slammed into and devastated the island of Puerto Rico. In the aftermath of a slow government response to the massive destruction caused by Maria, conditions in Puerto Rico have reached unprecedented and unacceptable levels of misery, hardship, and suffering. As of October 19, over one million people were without drinking water, 80 percent of the island lacked electricity, and ongoing reports by medical staff, nurses, and other respondents indicate that more and more people were dying (Conley, 2017). Thousands of people are living in shelters, lack phone service, and have to bear the burden of a health care system in shambles.

Such social immiseration is complicated by the fact that the island is home to 21 hazardous superfund sites, which pose deadly risks to human health and the environment Families who have lost everything now must contend with the possibility that their groundwater is tainted with poison" (Conley, 2017). Lois Marie Gibbs ominously reports that waterborne illnesses are spreading just as hospitals are running low on medicines. Caitlin Dickerson observed that the water shortages have been so severe that people are engaging "in a perpetual game of cat and mouse, scouring the city for any hints of places with water to sell. People are so desperate that … the Environmental Protection Agency cited reports of residents trying to obtain drinking water from wells at hazardous Superfund sites" (Dickerson, 2017). These are wells that were once sealed to avoid exposure to deadly toxins" (Dickerson, 2017). The governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rossello, warned that a number of people have died from Leptospirosis, a bacterial disease spread by animal urine (Melia, 2017).

The Trump administration's response has been unforgivably slow, with conditions worsening. Given the accelerating crisis, the Mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulin Cruz made a direct appeal to President Trump for aid stating with an acute sense of urgency "We are dying" (Blake, 2017). Trump responded by lashing out at her personally by telling her to stop complaining. While meeting with Jon Lee Anderson, a reporter from *The New Yorker*, Cruz became emotional when referring to elderly and ill victims of Maria that she could not reach and who were "still at great risk in places where relief supplies and medical help had yet to arrive" (Anderson, 2017). Cruz said the situation for many of these people was "like a slow death" (Anderson, 2017). Stories began to emerge in the press that validated Cruz's concerns. Many seriously ill dialysis patients either had their much needed treatments reduced or could not get access to health care facilities (Robles, 2017). Because of the lack of electricity, Harry Figueroa, a teacher "went a week without the oxygen that helped him breathe" and eventually died… at 58. "His body went unrefrigerated for so long that the funeral director could not embalm his badly decomposed corpse" (Robles, 2017).

Scholar Lauren Berlant has used the term, slow death, in her own work to refer "to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of

people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (Berlant, 2007). Slow death captures the colonial backdrop of global regimes of ideological and structural oppression deeply etched in Puerto Rico's history. The scale of suffering and devastation was so great that Robert P. Kadlec, the assistant secretary of Health and Human Services for preparedness and response stated that "The devastation I saw, I thought was equivalent to a nuclear detonation" (*apud* Robles, 2017).

Puerto Rico's tragic and ruinous problems brought on by Hurricane Maria are amplified both by its crippling $74 billion debt burden, an ongoing economic crisis, and the legacy of its colonial status and ongoing lack of political power in fighting for its sovereign and economic rights in Washington. With no federal representation and lacking the power to vote in presidential elections, it is difficult for Puerto Ricans to get their voices heard, secure the same rights as U. S. citizens, and put pressure on the Trump administration to address many of its longstanding problems (Hand, 2017). The latter include a poverty rate of 46 percent, a depressing household median income of $19,350 [compared to the U.S. median of $55,775], and a crippling debt. In fact, the debt burden is so overwhelming that "pre-Maria Puerto Rico was spending more on debt service than on education, health, or security. Results included the shuttering of 150 schools, the gutting of health care, increased taxes, splitting of families between the island and the mainland, and increased food insecurity" (Cox & Cox, 2017). Amy Davidson Sorkin was right in arguing that "Indeed, the crisis in Puerto Rico is a case study of what happens when people with little political capital need the help of their government" (Sorkin, 2017).

Not only did Trump allow three weeks to lapse before asking Congress to provide financial aid to the island, but his request reeked with a heartless indifference to Puerto Rico's economic hardships. Instead of asking for grants, he asked for loans, which as Paul Krugman points out "is mind-boggling when you bear in mind that the territory is effectively bankrupt" (Krugman, 2017). Throughout the crisis, Trump released a series of tweets in which he suggested that the plight of the Puerto Rican people was their own fault, threatened to cut off aid from government services proclaiming that the federal government "cannot keep FEMA, the Military & the First Responders . . . in

P.R. forever" (Anderson, 2017). Adding insult to injury, he also said that they were "throwing the government's budget out of whack because we've spent a lot of money on Puerto Rico" (Fernández, 2017). He lambasted local officials for not doing enough, "scolded them for their alleged profligacy and indolence," and shamelessly stated that they should do more to help themselves rather than rely on the aid of the federal government (Clair, 2017).

Trump also suggested that the crisis in Puerto Rico was not a real crisis when compared to Katrina, because it had a much higher body count. Trump's view of Puerto Ricans as second class citizens was exposed repeatedly in an ongoing range of tweets and comments that extended from the insulting notion that "they want everything to be done for them" to the visual image of Trump throwing paper towel rolls into a crowd as if he were on a public relations tour. Throughout the crisis, Trump has repeatedly congratulated himself on the government response to Puerto Rico falsely stating that everybody thinks we are doing "an amazing job" (Kolhatkar, 2017). A month after the crisis, Trump insisted, without irony or a shred of self-reflection, that he would give himself a "perfect ten."

These responses suggest more than a callous expression of narcissistic self- delusion and sociopathic indifference in the suffering of others. Trump's callous misrecognition of the magnitude of the crisis in Puerto Rico and extent of the islander's misery and suffering, coupled with his insults and demeaning tweets, demonstrate the convergence of race and class divisions in his governance. There is more at work here than a disconnection from the poor, there is also a white supremacist ideology that registers race as a central part of both his politics and a wider politics of disposability.

It is difficult to miss the racist logic of malign neglect and reckless disregard for the safety and lives of Puerto Rican citizens, bordering on criminal negligence, which simmers just beneath the surface of Trump's rhetoric and actions. Hurricane Maria revealed more than an island unprepared for a natural disaster, it exposed a long history of racism that confirms the stultifying lack of sympathy for those who are poor, sick, elderly—and black/brown. With the proliferation of ongoing images flashed endlessly on television screens and newspapers all over the globe of people suffering, crying out for aid, and scrambling for the most basic necessities. The inadequate

government response to Hurricane Maria makes visible the hidden face of a politics of disposability and death-dealing racism.

Trump embodies the commitments of a neoliberal authoritarian government that not only fails to protect its citizens, but reveals without apology the full spectrum of mechanisms to expand poverty, racism, and hierarchies of class, making some lives disposable, redundant, and excessive while others appear privileged and secure. Trump's utterly failed response to the disaster in Puerto Rico reinforces Ta-Nehisi Coates' claim that the spectacle of bigotry that shapes Trump's presidency has "moved racism from the euphemistic and plausibly deniable to the overt and freely claimed" (Coates, 2017). What has happened in Puerto Rico not only exposes the great class and racial animus that drives Trump's policies, it also reveals the frightening marker of a politics of disposability in which any appeal to democracy loses its claim and becomes hard to imagine, let alone enact without the threat of violent retaliation.

Revoking DACA and the killing of the dream

Trump's penchant for cruelty in the face of great hardship and human suffering is evident not only in his slow response to the devastation Puerto Rico suffered after Hurricane Maria. It is also strikingly visible in the racial bigotry that has shaped his cancellation of the DACA program [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals], instituted in 2012 by former President Obama. Under the program, over 800,000 undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children or teens before 2007 were allowed to live, study, and work in the United States without fear of deportation. The program permitted these young people, known as Dreamers, to have access to Social Security cards, drivers' licenses, and to advance their education, start small business, and to be fully integrated into the fabric of American society. Seventy-six percent of Americans believe that Dreamers should be granted resident status or citizenship. In revoking the program, Trump has made clear his willingness to deport individuals who came to the U.S. as children through no actions of their own and who only know the United States as their home. Trump's actions are both cruel and racist, given that

78% of DACA residents are from Mexico--these are the same immigrants Trump once labeled as rapists, drug addicts, and criminals.

Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, one of the more visible symbols of a Trump's white supremacist commitment, was called upon to be the front man in announcing the cancelation of DACA. In barely concealed racist tones, Sessions argued that DACA had to end because "The effect of this unilateral executive amnesty, among other things, contributed to a surge of unaccompanied minors on the southern border that yielded terrible humanitarian consequences….denied jobs to hundreds of thousands of Americans by allowing those same jobs to go to illegal aliens" and had to be rescinded because "failure to enforce the laws in the past has put our nation at risk of crime, violence and even terrorism" (Teague, 2017). None of these charges are true.

According to Juan Cole, "Dreamers are 14 percent less like to be incarcerated than the general population…are from unusually educated families and are themselves disproportionately well education…and 91percent of Dreamers are employed" (Cole, 2017). Moreover, as William Finnegan has observed "Connecting Dreamers, moreover, to crime, violence, and terrorism is both absurd—anyone convicted of a serious crime is ineligible—and a tactic drawn straight from the nativist-demagogue playbook" (Finnegan, 2017). Rather than taking jobs from American workers, Dreamers add an enormous economic benefit to the economy and "it is estimated that the loss of the Dreamers' output will reduce the G.D.P. by several hundred billion dollars over a decade" (Finnegan, 2017). Sessions' claim that DACA contributed to a surge of unaccompanied minors at the border is simply an outright lie given that the surge began in 2008, four years before DACA was announced, and it was largely due, as Mark Joseph Stern points out, "to escalating gang violence in Central America, as well as drug cartels' willingness to target and recruit children in Mexico... [A] study published in International Migration…found that DACA was not one of these factors" (Stern, 2017).

Trump's rescinding of DACA is politically indefensible and heartless. Only 12 percent of Americans want the Dreamers deported and this support is drawn mostly from Trump's base of ideological extremists, religious conservatives, and ultra-nationalists. This would include former White House

chief strategist, Steve Bannon, who left the White House and now heads, once again, Breitbart, the right wing news outlet. Bannon is a leading figure of the right-wing extremists influencing Trump and is largely responsible for bringing white supremacist and ultranationalist ideology from the fringes of society to the center of power (Grossberg, 2018). On a recent segment of the TV series, *60 Minutes,* Bannon told Charlie Rose, that the DACA program shouldn't be codified, adding "As the work permits run out, they self deport…There's no path to citizenship, no path to a green card and no amnesty. Amnesty is non-negotiable." Bannon's comments are cruel but predictable given his support for the uniformly bigoted policies Trump has pushed before and after his election. The call to end DACA is part of a broader anti-immigration and racist policy aimed at making America white again, a throwback to a period in history in which racial profiling turned deadly and racial brutality was the order of the day. The current backlash against people of color, immigrant youth, and those others marked by the registers of race and class are not only heartless and cruel, they also invoke a dark throwback to the days of state-sponsored lynching, the imposed terror of the Klu Klux Klan and other domestic terrorists, and offers up an eerie resonance to the violent and repressive racist policies of the totalitarian governments that emerged in Germany in the 1930s and Latin America in the 1970s.

Las Vegas and the politics of violence

On Sunday, October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock, a lone gunman, ensconced on the 32 floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada opened fire on a crowd of country and western concert goers below killing 58 and wounding over 500. While the venues for such shootings differ, the results are always predictable. People die or are wounded and the media and politicians weigh in on the cause of the violence. If the assailant is a person of color or a Muslim, they are labeled a terrorist, but if they are white they are often labeled as mentally disturbed or even a racist as was the case with Dylann Roof, an admitted white supremacist, who was sentenced to death after killing 9 black church members. Paddock was immediately branded by

President Trump as a "sick" and "deranged man" who had committed an act of "radical evil."

Trump's characterizing of the shooting as an act of radical evil is more mystifying than assuring and it did little to explain how such an egregious act of brutality fits into a broader pattern of civic decline, cultural decay, political corruption, and systemic violence. Or as Jeffrey St. Clair observes how "state-sponsored violence propagates violence within the state" (Clair, 2017). Connecting the dots appears to be one of great absences of corporate media that trades in isolated spectacles. Rarely is there a connection made in the mainstream media, for instance, between the fact that the U.S. is the largest arms manufacturer with the biggest military budget in the world and the almost unimaginable fact that there are more than 300 million people who own guns in the United States, which amounts to "112 guns per 100 people" (Clair, 2017). While the Trump administration is not directly responsible for the bloodbath in Las Vegas, it does feed a culture of violence in the United States and in doing so has contributed to priming "the mind which did and made accessible the machinery of death" (Clair, 2017).

Many Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, reinforced the lack of civic and ethical courage that emerged in the aftermath of the Las Vegas massacre by arguing that it was "particularly inappropriate" to talk about gun reform or politics in general after a mass shooting. By eliminating the issue of politics from the discussion, the power of gun manufactures to flood the country with guns disappears as does the power of lobbyists to insure that gun-safety measures do not become part of a wider national conversation. Excluding politics from the Las Vegas mass shooting makes it easier to erase the conditions that made it possible for Paddock to amass 49 guns with various killing capacities, including a bump-stock which allowed him to turn rifles into automatic weapons and massively increase the amount of carnage. This depoliticizing logic also enabled any discussion about Paddock to be center on his actions as an aberration, the work of a person who, as Trump argued, "wires are screwed up."

The corporate press, with few exceptions, was unwilling to address how and why mass shootings have become routine in the United States and how everyday violence benefits a broader industry of death that gets

rich through profits made by the defense industry, the arms manufactures, corrupt gun lobbyists, and the popular culture peddlers of the spectacle of violence (Whitehead, 2017). There was no reference to how young children are groomed for violence by educational programs sponsored by the gun industries, how military recruiting and training have moved into public schools, how video games and other aspects of a militarized culture are used to teach youth to be insensitive to the horrors of real-life violence, how the military-industrial complex "makes a living from killing through defense contracts, weapons manufacturing and endless wars" (Whitehead, 2017). Or, how war propaganda provided by the Pentagon influences not only pro-sports events and Hollywood blockbuster movies but also Reality TV shows such as *American Idol* and *The X-Factor.* John W. Whitehead puts the militarizing of American culture in perspective. He writes that:

> U.S. military intelligence agencies (including the NSA) have influenced over 1,800 movies and TV shows. And then there are the growing number of video games, a number of which are engineered by or created for the military, which have accustomed players to interactive war play through military simulations and first-person shooter scenarios. This is how you acclimate a population to war. This is how you cultivate loyalty to a war machine (Whitehead, 2017).

In this instance, the culture of violence cannot be separated from the business of violence. Similarly, popular culture does more than sanitize violence, it also creates conditions for what Cornelius Castoriadis (2003, p. 4) once termed "the shameful degradation of the critical function" and a flight from responsibility and allows one to view themselves as exempt from the realm of moral responsibility and evaluation. In the advent of mass shootings, the hidden structures of violence disappear in the discourses of personal sorrow, the call for prayers, and the insipid argument that such events should not be subject to political analysis. Trump's dismissive comments on the Vegas shooting as an act of radical evil misses the fact that what is evil is the pervasive presence of violence throughout American history and the current emergence of extreme violence and mass shootings on college campuses, in elementary schools, concerts, and in diverse workplaces. Mass shootings may

have become routine in America, but the larger issue to be addressed is that violence is an epidemic that is central to how the American experience is lived daily.

Militant neoliberalism in armed America

American dreams have turned into nightmares, white supremacy has become normalized at the highest levels of power, and militarized responses have become the primary medium for addressing, if not the solution to solving, all social problems, rendering critical thought less and less probable, less and less relevant. Science and evidence are under siege, a resurgent nationalism has produced what Wendy Brown (2017) calls an "apocalyptic populism," and willful ignorance has gained its most powerful and toxic expression in President Trump, who as Arial Dorfman (2017) argues, exhibits "a toxic mix of ignorance and mendacity [as well as a] lack of intellectual curiosity and disregard for rigorous analysis." This lethal mix of anti-intellectualism, ideological fundamentalism, and retreat from the ethical imagination provides the perfect storm for what can be labeled a war culture, one that trades democratic values for a machinery of social abandonment, misery, and death.

American society is armed and radiates violence. War as an extension of politics fuels both a spectacle of violence that has overtaken popular culture while normalizing concrete acts of gun violence that kill 93 Americans every day (Street, 2017). Traumatic events such as the termination of DACA, impacting grown young people, or the refusal on the part of the government to quickly and effectively respond to the hardships experienced by the people of Puerto Rico no longer appear to represent an ethical dilemma to those in power. Instead, they represent disposable populations who inhabit frontier zones whose borders are shaped by racism and economic inequality.

America now inhabits a new space of disposability in which a liminal purgatory of social homelessness is experienced by those deemed excess, and marked for terminal exclusion. Fueled by a retreat from any sense of ethical responsibility and accelerated by a punitive culture of lawlessness and state-legitimated violence, the politics of disposability has intensified and seeped into everyday life with a vengeance. What is distinctive about the politics

of disposability, especially when coupled with the transformation of governance into a legitimation for violence and cruelty under Trump, is that it has both expanded a culture of extreme violence and has become a defining feature of American life. Chris Hedges (2014) has argued convincingly that "violence is the habitual response by the state to every dilemma." This insight has taken on a more ominous register as the state, corporations, and individuals choose violence as a primary mode of engagement. Immersed in a "death culture" such choices imprison people rather than educate them and legitimate the militarizing of every major public institutions from schools to airports. The carceral state now provides the template for interacting with others in a society addicted to persistent rituals of violence both as entertainment and in real life.

Under a global regime of neoliberalism, the political and ethical vigor that historically has driven social movements to embrace the promise of a radical democracy has given way to the vitalities of the living dead and what Adorno once called "authoritarian irrationality," the dark and menacing underside of a racist, anti-democratic and totalitarian politics and psychology. The flirtation with elements of totalitarianism haunts existing notions of ideology, power, and politics, spreading across much of Europe and the United States. All these modes of authoritarianism hate democracy and feed on fear and uncertainty. Uncertain possibilities now abound in the age of extreme privatization and commodification, accompanied by a new sense of meaninglessness that produces the widespread social atomization endemic to neoliberal capitalism. As Josep R. Llobera has observed, Darwin's expression "'survival of the fittest' [has been] transformed into an ideological component that incorporate[s] racial inequality and struggle for existence" (Llobera, 2003, p. 135). It also gives rise to monstrous forms of barbarism in which brutality becomes more "rationale" and fascist ideas more normalized. One consequence, in terms of state action, is that the boundaries between the acceptable and forbidden collapse.

Democracy is becoming all the more irrelevant in the United States under the Trump administration, especially in light of what Robert Weissmann, the president of the watchdog group, Public Citizens, calls "a total corporate takeover of the U.S. government on a scale we have never seen in American

history" (Weissman, 2017). Corporate governance and economic sovereignty has replaced state sovereignty just as illiberal democracy has become a populist flashpoint in reconfiguring much of Europe and normalizing the rise of populist bigotry and state-sanctioned violence aimed at immigrants and refugees fleeing from war and poverty. Democratic values and civic culture are under attack by a class of political extremists who embrace without reservation the cynical instrumental reason of the market, while producing on a global level widespread mayhem, suffering, and violence. How else to explain the fact that over 70 percent of the Trump's picks for top administration jobs have corporate ties or work for major corporations. Almost all of these people represent interests diametrically opposed to the agencies for whom they now lead and are against almost any notion of the public good. Hence, under the Trump regime, we have witnessed a slew of rollbacks deregulations and a shift on toxic chemicals that will result in an increase of pollution, thus putting at risk children, the elderly, and others who might be exposed to hazardous toxins. The *New York Times* has reported that one E.P.A. appointee, Nancy Beck, a former executive at the American Chemistry Council, has initiated changes to make it more difficult to track and regulate the chemical, perflourooctanic acid, which has been linked to "kidney cancer, birth defects, immune system disorders and other serious health problems" (Lipton, 2017).

The sense of collective belonging that underpins the civic vigor of a democracy is being replaced by a lethal survival-of-the-fittest ethos, and a desperate need to promote the narrow interests of capital and racist exclusion, regardless of the cost. At the heart of this collective ethos is a war culture stoked by fear and anxiety, one that feeds on dehumanization, condemns the so-called losers, and revels in violence as a source of pleasure and retribution. The link between violence and authoritarianism increasingly finds expression not only in endless government and populist assaults on immigrants, Blacks, and other vulnerable groups, but also in a popular culture that turns representations of extreme violence into entertainment. In addition, a powerful and unaccountable gun culture now feeds both what Hedges calls "vigilante violence" against those protesting white supremacy and the rise of neo-fascism and populist racist delusions aimed at ridding the country of Muslims

and Mexican immigrants, however lawless the actions might be (Hedges, 2015).

America has become a society organized both for the production of violence and the creation of a culture brimming with fear, paranoia, and a social atomization. Under such circumstances, the murderous aggression associated with authoritarian states becomes more common in the United States and increasingly mirrored in the everyday actions of citizens. Mass shootings in the United States have become as ubiquitous as they are now mundane with chances of gun control more remote than ever, even as an incomplete reform. If the government response to crisis that enveloped DACA and Puerto Rico points to a culture of state-sanctioned violence and cruelty, the mass shooting in Las Vegas represents the endpoint of a culture newly aligned with the rise of authoritarianism. The shooting in Las Vegas does more than point to a record setting death toll for vigilante violence, it also provides a signpost about a terrifying new political and cultural horizon in the relationship between violence and everyday life. The mass shooting in Vegas represents more than another act of senseless violence, it also points to an expression of absolute lawlessness that has become all too common in the United States. At the same time, such lawlessness and its accompanying culture of cruelty point to increasingly dark expressions of individual brutality on a daily level that push the boundaries of violence to levels that heretofore seemed unimaginable. What is difficult, yet crucial to comprehend, is the connection between the state-sanctioned violence at work in ending DACA and the inadequate government response to the disaster in Puerto Rico and the mass shooting in Las Vegas. All of these incidents must be understood as a surface manifestation of much larger set of issues endemic to the rise of authoritarianism in the United States.

These three indices of violence offer pointed and alarming examples of how inequality, systemic exclusion, and a culture of cruelty define American society, even, and especially, as they destroy it. Each offers an individual snapshot of how war culture and violence both merge and are experienced and distributed across different sites. As part of a broader category indicting the rise of authoritarianism in the United States, they make visible the pervasiveness of violence as an organizing principle of American life. While it is

easy to condemn the violence at work in each of these specific examples, it is crucial to address the larger economic, political, and structural forces that create these conditions.

In the face of this epidemic of violence, there is an urgent need for a broader awareness of the scope, range, and effects of violence in America as well as the relationship between politics and disposability, one that offers a warning against limiting such criticism to isolated issues of brutality and aggression. Only then will America be able to address the need for a radical restructuring of its politics, economics, institutions, and a re-fashioning of its citizens. Violence in America has to be understood as part of a wide scale epidemic that is an outgrowth of crisis of a politics and culture defined by meaninglessness, helplessness, neglect, and disposability. Historically, expressions of violence created moral outrage over the misery and suffering they gave rise to when America abandoned its citizens, but such outrage is less visible today and not effective on its own in any case. Instead, resistance to such violence should also produce widespread thoughtful, informed, and collective action over the fate of democracy itself. This suggests the need for a shared vision of economic justice, class, race, and gender--one that offers the promise of a new understanding of politics and the need for creating a powerful coalition among existing social movements, youth groups, workers, intellectuals, teachers, and other progressives. This is especially true under the Trump administration since politics and democracy are now defined by a threshold of dysfunction that points not only to their demise, but to the malignancy of an ascendant American-style authoritarianism.

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