

Donald Trump and the Ghosts of Totalitarianism

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In the current historical moment in the United States, the emptying out of language is nourished by the assault on the civic imagination. One example of this can be found in the rise of Donald Trump on the political scene. Donald Trump's popular appeal speaks to not just the boldness of what he says and the shock it provokes, but the inability to respond to shock with informed judgement rather than titillation. Marie Luise Knott is right in noting that "We live our lives with the help of the concepts we form of the world. They enable an author to make the transition from shock to observation to finally creating space for action—for writing and speaking. Just as laws guarantee a public space for political action, conceptual thought ensures the existence of the four walls within which judgment operates." [1] The concepts that now guide our understanding of American society are dominated by a corporate induced linguistic and authoritarian model that brings ruin to language, politics and democracy itself.

Missing from the commentaries by most of the mainstream media regarding the current rise of Trumpism is any historical context that would offer a critical account of the ideological and political disorder plaguing American society—personified by Trump's popularity. A resurrection of historical memory in this moment could provide important lessons regarding the present crisis, particularly the long tradition of racism, white supremacy, exceptionalism, war mongering, and the extended wars on youth, women, and immigrants. Calling Trump a fascist is not enough. What is necessary are analyses in which the seeds of totalitarianism are made visible in Trump's discourse and policy measures. One example can be found in Steve Weissman's commentary on Trump in which he draws a relationship between Trump's casual racism and the rapidly growing neo-fascist movements across Europe that "are growing strong by hating others for their skin color, religious origin, or immigrant status." [2] Few journalists have acknowledged the presence of white militia and white supremacists groups at his rallies and almost none have acknowledged the chanting of "white power" at some of his political gatherings, which would surely signal not only Trump's connections to a racist past but also to the formative Nazi culture that gave rise to the endgame of genocide. [3] Another example can be found in Glenn Greenwald's analysis of the mainstream media's treatment of Trump's attack on Jorge Ramos, an influential anchor of Univision. [4] When Ramos stood up to question Trump's views on immigration, Trump refused not only to call on him, but insulted him by telling him to go back to Univision. Instead of focusing on this particular lack of civility, Greenwald takes up the way many journalists scolded Ramos because he had a point of view and was committed to a political narrative. Greenwald saw this not just as a disingenuous act on the part of establishment journalists but as a weakness that furthers the march of an authoritarian regime that does not have to be accountable to the press. Trump may be bold in his willingness to flaunt his racism and make clear that money drives politics, but this is not new and should surprise no one who is historically and civically literate.

What is clear in this case is that a widespread avoidance of the past has become not only a sign of the appalling lack of historical consciousness in contemporary American culture, but a deliberate political weapon used by the powerful to keep people passive and blind to the truth, if not reduced to a discourse drawn from the empty realm of celebrity culture. This is a discourse in which totalitarian images of the hero, fearless leader, and bold politicians get lost in the affective and ideological registers of what Hannah Arendt once called “the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment.”[5]Of course, there are many factors currently contributing to this production of ignorance and the lobotomizing of individual and collective agency. The forces promoting a deep seated culture of authoritarianism run deep in American society.

Such factors extend from the idiocy of celebrity and popular culture and the dumbing down of American schools to the transformation of the mainstream media into a deadly mix of propaganda and entertainment. The latter is particularly crucial as the collapse of journalistic standards that could inform the onslaught of information finds its counterpart in a government wedded to state secrecy and the aggressive prosecution of whistleblowers,[6] the expanding use of state secrecy, the corruption of political language,[7] the disregard for truth, all of which have contributed to growing culture of political and civic illiteracy.[8] The knowledge and value deficits that produce such detrimental forms of ignorance not only crush the critical and ethical imagination, critical modes of social interaction, and political dissent, but also destroy those public spheres and spaces that promote thoughtfulness, thinking, critical dialogue, and serve as “guardians of truths as facts,” as Arendt once put it.[9]

Under the reign of neoliberalism, space, time, and even language have been subject to the forces of privatization and commodification. Public space has been replaced by malls and a host of commercial institutions. Commodified and privatized, public space is now regulated through exchange values rather than public values just as communal values are replaced by atomizing and survival-of-the fittest market values. Time is no longer connected to long term

✖ investments, the development of social capital, and goals that benefit young people and the public good. On the contrary, time is now connected to short-term investments and quick financial gains. More broadly, time is now defined by “the non-stop operation of global exchange and circulation”[10] and the frenetic reproduction and perpetuation of an impoverished celebrity and consumer culture that both depoliticizes people and narrows their potential for critical thought, agency, and social relations to an investment in shopping, and other market-related activities. Under neoliberalism, time presents itself as a form tyranny, an unquestioned necessity, and in speeding up the flows of work, leisure, knowledge, and everyday life it spawns a new kind of violence in which the flow of capital replaces the flow of thoughtfulness, atomization replaces a notion of shared solidarity, the spectacle undermines historical memory, privatization seeks to erase all notions of the public good, and manufactured precarity replaces any sense of security and long-term planning.

In the age of casino capitalism, time itself has become a burden more than a condition for contemplation, self-reflection, and the cultivation of thoughtful and compassionate social relations. The extended arc of temporal relations in which one could imagine long-term investments in the common good has given way to a notion of time in which the horizon of time is contained within the fluctuating short-term investments of the financial elite and their militant drive for profits at any price. What is lost in this merging of time and the

dictates of neoliberal capital are the most basic elements of being human along with the formative culture and institutions necessary to develop a real, substantive democracy. As Christian Marazzi observes:

Taking time means giving each other the means of inventing one's future, freeing it from the anxiety of immediate profit. It means caring for oneself and the environment in which one lives, it means growing up in a socially responsible way. [Taking time means] questioning the meaning of consumption, production, and investment [so as to not] reproduce the preconditions of financial capitalism, the violence of its ups and downs, the philosophy according to which 'time is everything, man is nothing.' For man (sic) to be everything, we need to reclaim the time of his existence.[11]

Civic death and disposability are the new signposts of a society in which historical memory is diminished and ethical evaluations become derided as figments of liberal past. Dispossession and depoliticization are central to the discourse of neoliberalism in which language is central to moulding identities, desires, values, and social relationships. As Doreen Massey observes, under neoliberalism the public is urged to become consumers, customers, and highly competitive while taught that the only interest that matters are individual interests, almost always measured by monetary considerations.[12] Under such circumstances, social and communal bonds have been shredded, important modes of solidarity attacked, and a war has been waged against any institution that embraces the values, practices, and social relations endemic to a democracy.

This retreat into private silos has resulted in the inability of individuals to connect their personal suffering with larger public issues. Thus detached from any concept of the common good or viable vestige of the public realm, they are left to face alone a world of increasing precarity and uncertainty in which it becomes difficult to imagine anything other than how to survive. Under such circumstances, there is little room for thinking critically and acting collectively in ways that are imaginative and courageous.

Surely, the celebration and widespread prevalence of ignorance in American culture does more than merely testify "to human backwardness or stupidity"; it also "indicates human weakness and the fear that it is unbearably difficult to live beset by continuous doubts." [13] Yet, what is often missed in analysis of political and civic illiteracy as the new normal is the degree to which these new forms of illiteracy not only result in an unconscious flight from politics, but also produce a moral coma that supports modern systems of terror and authoritarianism. Civic illiteracy is about more than the glorification and manufacture of ignorance on an individual scale: it is producing a nation-wide crisis of agency, memory, and thinking itself.

How else to explain, for instance, the mainstream media's willingness to provide a platform for Donald Trump whose views express an unchecked hatred of immigrants, women, the welfare state, and any viable notion of the public good. As Richard Hofstadter, Noam Chomsky, and Susan Jacoby have made clear ignorance is not simply about the absence of knowledge, it is a kind of ideological sandstorm in which reason gives way to emotion, and a willful stupidity spreads through the culture as part of a political project that both infantilizes and depoliticizes the general public.[14] Trump is simply the most visible embodiment of a society that is not merely suspicious of critical thought but disdains it. Trump is the quintessential symbol of the merging of a war-like arrogance, a militant certainty, and as self-absorbed unworldliness in which he is removed from problems of the real world. The

clueless Trump is far from a kind of clownish fiction some writers have described him to be. And while liberals such as Michal Tomasky have pointed to his appeal to racial resentment, a gladiatorial style, and his ability to combine a war like discourse and elements of conservative fundamentalism with a flair for entertainment,[15] this type of analysis regrettably shies away from talking about Trump's presence on the political landscape as an indication and warning of the specter of totalitarianism confronting Americans in new forms.[16]

Trump is the embodiment of a political party and casino driven social order in which informed judgments, moral responsibility, and collective action disappear from the world of politics. Trump's often insulting, humiliating, misogynist, and racist remarks signify more than the rantings of an antediluvian, privileged white man who is both savvy in the world of public relations and delusional in the world of politics. Trump represents the new face of what Hannah Arendt once called the "banality of evil." [17] Unapologetic about the racist nature of his remarks, unreflective about an savage economic system that is destroying the planet and the lives of most of its inhabitants, and unaware of his own "criminal" participation in furthering a culture of fear and cruelty, he is typical of an expanding mass of pundits, anti-public intellectuals, and right-wing fundamentalists who live in a historical void and for whom emotion overtakes reason.

Clearly, the attack on reason, evidence, science, and critical thought has reached perilous proportions in the United States. A number of political, economic, social, and technological forces now work to distort reality and keep people passive, unthinking, and unable to act in a critically engaged manner. Politicians, right-wing pundits, and large swaths of the American public embrace positions that support Creationism, capital punishment, torture, and the denial of human-engineered climate change, any one of which not only defies human reason but stands in stark opposition to evidence-based scientific arguments. Reason now collapses into opinion, as thinking itself appears to be both dangerous and antithetical to understanding ourselves, our relations to others, and the larger state of world affairs. Under such circumstances, literacy disappears not just as the practice of learning skills, but also as the foundation for taking informed action. Divorced from any sense of critical understanding and agency, the meaning of literacy is narrowed to completing basic reading, writing, and numeracy tasks assigned in schools. Literacy education is similarly reduced to strictly methodological considerations and standardized assessment, rooted in test taking and deadening forms of memorization, and becomes far removed from forms of literacy that would impart an ability to raise questions about historical and social contexts.

For Arendt the inability to think, to be thoughtful, and assume responsibility for one's actions spoke not just to a regrettable type of civic and political illiteracy, but was crucial for creating the formative cultures that produced totalitarian regimes. Absent any residue of moral responsibility, political indignation, and collective resistance, crimes committed in a systemic way now emerge, in part, from a society in which thinking had become dangerous and non-thinking normalized. Of course, thinking critically is largely produced in public spheres that instill convictions rather than destroy them, encourage critical capacities rather than shut them down, invest in public spheres rather than eliminate them by turning them over to private interests. What Donald Trump represents is rarely talked about in the media. He is the most current egregious highly visible symbol of a terrifying stage in American society haunted by the protean elements of a new totalitarianism. Totalitarian forms are still with us but they no longer find expression in the rounding up and killing of Jews, gays, and intellectuals or in the spectacles of militarism with the heightened show of armies of thugs

dressed in military uniforms and black boots. The new totalitarianism is echoed in the resurgence of religious bigotry that runs through the current society like an electric current and personified in the media celebration of bigots such as Kentucky clerk Kim Davis who believes that her religion gives her the right to both deny marriage license to gays and the disavow the separation of church and state. Unfortunately, Davis is more than an embarrassment politically and ethically, she reflects a sizable number of religious fundamentalists who have the backing of Republican Party and presidential candidates such as Ted Cruz and Mike Huckabee.

Totalitarianism throws together authoritarian and anti-democratic forms that represent a new historical moment in American history. Economic fundamentalism now governs all of society rather than just the market and in doing so drives politics and sets policies that promote massive inequalities in wealth and power, produce huge amounts of suffering, and appear to delight in a culture of cruelty. Military fundamentalism points to a society that now militarizes everything from knowledge to schools. In this scenario, an increasing number of behaviors are criminalized, militarism feeds the punishing and incarceration state, and a kind of hyper masculinity now parades as the new model for legitimating aggression and violence in multiple spheres and against an increasing range of populations extending from women and black youth to Mexican immigrants. One of the most deadly fundamentalisms is education. We now live in a world in which illiteracy has replaced literacy and civic values have gone the way of the typewriter. As the orbits of privatization increase furthering what has been called by Mark Fisher the “empire of the self,” knowledge is transformed into the flow of non-stop information just as education collapses into training. Students are now defined as test-takers and celebrity culture has overtaken any viable notion of a critical, questioning, and informed culture. Trump’s rise in the polls is tantamount to the collapse of civic literacy and the public spheres that support it.

Totalitarianism’s curse finds public and political support for a mode of non-thinking in which rails against any attempt to ask what it might mean to use knowledge and theory as a resource to address social problems and events in ways that are meaningful and expand democratic relations. This is a form of illiteracy marked by the inability to see outside of the realm of the privatized self, an illiteracy in which the act of translation withers, reduced to a relic of another age. The United States has become a country in which a chronic and deadly form of civic illiteracy finds its most visible expression in a disimagination machine that celebrates the Donald Trumps of the world. The world of politics is far from clownish and in fact points to a poisonous future at a time in which the educational force of the culture is being used to promote a poisonous form of civic illiteracy. Donald Trump is not the singular clown who has injected the color and idiocy into American politics, he is the canary in the mineshaft warning us that totalitarianism relies on mass support and feeds on hate, moral panics, and “the frenzied lawlessness or ideological certitude.”[18]

As American society moves from a culture of questioning to a culture of shouting, it has restaged politics and power in ways that are truly unproductive, frightening, and anti-democratic. Jerome Kohn writing about Arendt’s notion of totalitarianism provides a commentary that contains a message for the present age, one that points the possibility of hope triumphing over despair—a lesson that needs to be embraced at the present moment. He writes that for Arendt “what matters is not to give oneself over to the despair of the past or the utopian hope of the future, but ‘to remain wholly in the present.’ Totalitarianism is the crisis of our times insofar as its demise becomes a turning point for the present world, presenting us with an entirely new opportunity to realize a common world, a world that

Arendt called a 'human artifice,' a place fit for habitation by all human beings." [19] And if Trump represents a symbol of a threatening totalitarianism, the legacy of individual and collective struggle now on the horizon in the struggles emerging among the Black Lives Matter Movement, fast food workers, environmentalists, and a range of other groups point to a different future in which the ideological stupidity and the unbridled braggadocio of the loud mouth authoritarians will be challenged and overcome by the urgency of hope in the face of despair. Rather than view Trump as an eccentric clown maybe it is time to portray him symbolic of the legacy of a totalitarian past whose story needs to be told again. And in making such connections, there is not only the power of resistance but a call to civic action to prevent such horrible narrative from appearing once again.

I want to conclude by arguing that inherent in Arendt's notion of the banality is view of education as central to politics. That is, for her the educative nature of politics is dialectical in that it is central to both creating the formative cultures of thoughtlessness and Nazi pedagogy and in creating those modes of politics in which matters of critique, desire, and agency are central to constructing critical and socially responsible citizens alive to the demands of economic, racial, and political justice. For those of us who believe that education is more than an extension of the business world, it is crucial to address a number of issues that stress the educative nature of politics as part of a broader effort to create a critical culture, democratic public spheres, and a collective movement that supports the connection between critique and action and redefines agency in the service of the practice of freedom and justice. Let me mention just a few.

First, educators, artists and others can address and make clear the relationship between the attack on the social state and the transformation of a range of democratic public spheres into adjuncts of corporate power. The neoliberal attacks on the welfare state, social provisions, public servants, and the public good must be understood and addressed as not simply an agenda to solidify class power but as an attack on democracy itself. . Nor can it be understood outside of the production of the atomized neoliberal subject who is taught to believe in a form of possessive individualism that disdains matters of compassion, solidarity, and the type of sociality crucial to a democratic society. In a society in which the "social self" has been transformed into the "disembedded individual," any viable notion of the public good is now repudiated by the privatizing and atomistic values at the heart of a hyper-market driven society. [20]

As I have mentioned earlier in this essay, militarism has a deadly grip on American society as both an ideology with its celebration of the ideals of war, violence, and military heroism and as a policy that fuels the arms race, invests billions in military weapons, and spends more on the tools of surveillance, war, and state violence than on schools, health care, and the welfare state. Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies has done extensive research on military spending and the costs of war and states that as a result of the Iraqi War alone "American taxpayers will ultimately spend roughly \$2.2 trillion on the war, but because the U.S. government borrowed to finance the conflict, interest payments through the year 2053 means that the total bill could reach nearly \$4 trillion." [21] At the very least, any viable form of resistance against the onslaught of totalitarianism will have to develop as Rabbi Michael Lerner of *Tikkun* has pointed out a Marshall Plan in which funding is sufficient to make all levels of education free, while also providing enough social support to eliminate poverty, hunger, inadequate health care, and the destruction of the environment. [22] There is nothing utopian about the demand to redirect money away from the military, powerful corporations, and the upper 1 percent.

Second, progressives need to develop a new radical democratic imaginary that challenges the notion that a market economy is synonymous with democracy. Capitalism and democracy are antithetical and the ways in which democracy is undermined by casino capitalism needs to be endlessly addressed as part of the pedagogical and political task of rupturing what might be called neoliberal commonsense, especially regarding the assumption that the market should govern all of social life. The greatest threat posed by authoritarian politics is that it makes power invisible and hence defines itself in universal and commonsense terms, as if it is beyond critique and dissent. Moreover, disposability has become the new measure of a savage form of casino capitalism in which the only value that matters is exchange value. Coupled with making the machinery of neoliberal power visible is the need to overcome the fragmentation of the left while not denying the various modes of oppression at work in the United States. Put differently, there is a need young people, workers, educators, artists, and others to become part of a broader social movement aimed at dismantling the repressive institutions that are moving the United States into a new authoritarian age. This is especially true with regards to addressing the mass incarceration state, which drains billions of dollars in funds to put people in jail when such resources could be used to fund health care, free higher education, much needed infrastructure, a social wage, free day care, and so it goes. .

What I am suggesting is that progressives need to develop a more comprehensive view of society and a keener recognition of the mutually informing registers of politics, oppression, and political struggle. There is a noble and informing example of this type of analysis in the work of theorists such as Michael Lerner, Stanley Aronowitz, Angela Davis, and the late Martin Luther King, Jr., who drew connections between militarism, racism and capitalism as part of a call not for reform but for a radical restructuring of American society.

Third, against the new thoughtlessness that drapes the American public in the abyss of ignorance, infantilism, consumerism, militarism, and environmental stupidity, there is a need to create those pedagogical spaces in which shared faith in justice replaces the shared fears of precarity, hatred of the other, and a fear of the demands of justice. Against the savage brutality of the new totalitarianism, there is a need to develop new discourses, vocabularies, values, desires, and a sense of spirituality that brings people together around a need for critique, passion for justice, and a desire for new modes of collective resistance and struggle. We may be in the midst of “dark times” but the light of hope is never far off and while it offers no guarantees, it posits the possibility of a future that will not mimic the horrors of the past and present.

Notes.

[1] Marie Luise Knott, *Unlearning With Hannah Arendt*, trans. by David Dollenmayer, (Other Press: New York, NY. 2011, 2013), p. 47.

[2] Steve Weissman, “Bashing Blacks, Latinos, Jews, and Muslims: Never Again!,” *Reader Supported News*, (September 2011). Online
at: <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/32150-focus-bashing-blacks-latinos-jews-and-muslims-never-again>

[3] See, for example, Randy Blazak, “Donald Trump is the New Face of White Supremacy,” *Counter Punch*, (August 28, 2015). Online
at: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/28/donald-trump-is-the-new-face-of-white-supremacy/>

[4] Glenn Greenwald, "Jorge Ramos Commits Journalism, Gets Immediately Attacked by Journalists," *The Intercept*, (August 27, 2015).

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at: <https://theintercept.com/2015/08/26/jorge-ramos-commits-journalism-gets-immediately-attacked-journalists/>

[5] Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2013)

[6] Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide* (New York: Metropolitan, 2014).

[7] Charles Lewis, *935 Lies: The Future of Truth and the Decline of America's Moral Integrity* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

[8] Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon, 2008); Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds. *Agnotology: the Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). The classic text here is Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

[9] Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2013), p. 31.

[10] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, (Verso, 2013) (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Press, 2013), p. 5.

[11] Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (New York: Semiotext(e) 2011), p. 96.

[12] Doreen Massey, "Vocabularies of the economy," *Soundings*, (2013)

<http://lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/pdfs/Vocabularies%20of%20the%20economy.pdf>

[13] Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), p. 7.

[14] Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002); Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon, 2008) and Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

[15] Michael Tomasky, "Trump," *New York Review of Books* (September 24, 2015).

Online: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/sep/24/trump/>

[16] See, for instance, Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Destinies of Totalitarianism," *Salmagundi*, No. 60, (Spring -Summer, 1983), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40547754>

[17] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

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

[19] Jerome Kohn, "Totalitarianism: The Inversion of Politics," *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the*

Library of Congress Essays and lectures—"On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding" (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.) Online at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/essayb1.html>

[20] These two terms are taken from Stefan Collini, "Response to Book Review Symposium: Stefan Collini, What are Universities For," *Sociology* 1-2 (February 5, 2014), Online: <http://soc.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/02/14/0038038513518852>

[21] Ben Armbruster, "Study: Iraq War Cost U.S. \$2.2 Trillion, Claimed Nearly 200,000 Lives," *ThinkProgress* (March 14, 2013). Online: <http://thinkprogress.org/security/2013/03/14/1721961/study-iraq-war-cost-2-trillion/> The publication by the Watson Institute of the March 14, 2013 'Costs of War' Project, "Iraq War: 190,000 lives, \$2.2 trillion," can be found online at <http://news.brown.edu/articles/2013/03/warcosts>

[22] For *Tikkun's* Marshall Plan, see http://spiritualprogressives.org/newsite/?page_id=114

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