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The War on Youth in the Age of Fascist Politics

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Youth Under Siege

One of the most important registers in measuring the democratic health of a society can be found in how it treats its youth. By any current standard, which

includes the quality of public schools to laws that protect the health and well-being of young people, the United States is failing miserably. Youth, especially youth of color, are not only viewed as a liability, much of their behavior is also being increasingly criminalized. When young people are relentlessly and ruthlessly subject to forces that commodify them, criminalize, punish them, and deem them unworthy of receiving a critical and meaningful education, it bodes ill for the nation as a whole. Of course, this attack on youth is not new.

In the 1970s youth were viewed as both predatory and dangerous and in succeeding generations they were increasingly marginalized, terrorized, and written out of the social contract.^[1] The United States is one of the few countries in the world that puts children in supermax prisons, tries them as adults, incarcerates them for exceptionally long periods of time, defines them as “super predators,” pepper sprays them for engaging in peaceful protests, and describes them as “teenage time bombs.”^[2] More recently, it has been reported that hundreds of Native American children in the United States and even more Indigenous children in Canada in government and reservation schools were not only separated from their families but also abused physically, emotionally, and sexually. Many others died in these genocidal factories and were buried in unmarked graves. The legacy of violence against children of color runs deep in the United States.^[3] Viewed as a long-term investment, they are defined under neoliberalism as both an economic liability and a drain on the resources needed to concentrate wealth in the hands of the ruling classes and financial elite. What has changed is that the range of laws and sites in which a war is now waged on young people has moved from the streets to all of the major institutions in which they inhabit. No space is safe for underserved young people. Schools for poor kids of color are largely modeled after prisons; books are banned; teachers are under siege for not subscribing to the whitewashing of history; public institutions are defunded; tax credits for poor kids are rescinded; student debt forecloses the future of many young people; white supremacists now enact laws against those youth, especially transgender youth, whose sexual orientation and identity do not fit into a white, Christian orthodox notion of both heteronormativity and a regressive notion of who qualifies as a citizen. Under such circumstance, it is not surprising that in a report published in the medical journal *The Lancet* “The United States ranks lower than 38 other countries on measurements of children’s survival, health, education and nutrition — and every

country in the world has levels of excess carbon emissions that will prevent younger generations from a healthy and sustainable future.”^[4]

Inequality, precarity, and moral depravity are now written into the DNA of American politics and those who suffer the most from this form of necropolitics are youth of color and poor working-class youth. Written out of the script of democracy, youth are seeing their future cancelled. Unsurprisingly, a 2021 poll released by the Harvard University Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics stated that “52% of young people in the U.S. believe that the country’s democracy is either ‘in trouble’ or ‘a failed democracy.’ Just 7% said that democracy in the United States is ‘healthy.’”^[5] Capitalism in its neoliberal fascist register has not only defined young people as the enemy, it is also preparing them for a life of uncertainty, stupidity, ignorance and conformity. And while the future is open and domination is not the only register of power, there has never been a more important historical moment for young people to rise up and fight for a notion of agency, justice, and equality that offers them both hope, freedom, and a sense of equality and justice.

The Disappearing Social

The Gilded Age and its current mix of fascist politics is back with big profits for the ultra-rich and large financial institutions and increasing impoverishment and misery for the middle and working classes. In addition, manufactured ignorance, political illiteracy, and religious fundamentalism have cornered the market on populist rage, providing support for a country in which, as Robert Reich points out, “the very richest people get all the economic gains [and] routinely bribe politicians” to cut their taxes and establish policies that eliminate public goods.^[6] It gets worse. Everywhere we look, the current Republican Party with its dedication to white supremacy and fascist politics are using their authority and power to undermine the social contract and the quality of justice, if not life itself, for a range of youth increasingly marginalized from the scripts of power.

Shamelessly and without apology, the political and corporate elites use their unchecked power to dismantle public services, denigrate public goods such as schools, infrastructure, health care services, and public transportation. Medical pandemics are now accelerated through political and moral pandemics that prioritize capital over human needs, meaningful health care, and matters of social justice.^[7]

Meanwhile, the neoliberal social order embraces the ruthless and punishing values of economic Darwinism and a survival-of-the-fittest ethic. In doing so, the

major political parties reward the mega banks, ultra-large financial industries, the defense establishment, and big business as their chief beneficiaries. Regardless of the consequences to the wider public good, including children, the obsessive quest for short-term profits by the apostles of neoliberalism is only matched by an aggressive effort on the part of the ruling financial and political elites to privatize public services, deregulate the financial industry, and depoliticize the public realm in order to replace a market economy with a market society.[\[8\]](#)

Reinvigorated by the passing of tax cuts for the super-rich and the growing assaults on civil liberties, the right-wing politicians who grovel in Trumpism, a reactionary Supreme Court, and a number of right-wing state governors have launched an ongoing war on women's rights, the welfare state, workers, students, the press, and anyone who has the temerity to speak out against such attacks. The corporate controlled media, especially Fox News, along with wealthy right-wing foundations such as ALEC, the Bradley Foundation, and the Koch Foundations are shaping policies that undermine public education, wage war against women's reproductive rights, and criminalize youth of color.[\[9\]](#) Hiding behind the mantle of balance and objectivism, the mainstream media are too hesitant to make discriminating judgments or take moral positions in the face of a growing authoritarianism. One consequence is that a politics of false equivalency spreads like wildfire among liberals. Everyone from George Packer to Margaret Atwood are claiming that the left is just as responsible as the right for the current attacks on democracy and the war on youth. This is a strange and false argument suggesting that the left bears as much responsibility and power as the Republican Party and its army of servile advocates and followers. Or that it is responsible for passing voter suppression laws, censoring books and history in classrooms, embracing conspiracy theories, advocating white supremacy, supporting white replacement theory, militarizing the planet, promoting ecological devastation, supporting crippling inequality, and prioritizing profits over the sanctity of human life and the planet. This line of argument not only violates any sense of ethical responsibility, it is also politically disingenuous and is code for defending the toxic policies of neoliberal fascism.

Youth in the Age of Necropolitics

Neoliberalism continues unchecked in imposing its values, social relations, and forms of social death upon all aspects of civic life that affect young people.[\[10\]](#) As a form of necropolitics, it produces a form of slow violence that delivers a death blow to the social contract, especially in regard to public health.

It is the DNA of gangster capitalism, spreading destruction and death throughout the United States, nowhere more evident than in the bungling of public health services in the early HIV/AIDs crisis and more recently in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. With regard to the latter, the CDC reported that “between April 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021 over 121,000 children under age 18 in the United States lost a parent, custodial grandparent, or grandparent caregiver who provided the child’s home and basic needs, including love, security, and daily care.”^[11] This needless orphaning of children illustrates what Achille Mbembe terms the “death-worlds” produced by necropolitics, which amount to “a type of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead.”^[12] In neoliberal capitalism’s “death-worlds,” savage market principles are prioritized over meaningful health care for all and access to basic social provisions.

Necropolitics is now driven by a white supremacist Republican Party that bleeds life from the social contract, the welfare state, and the lives of those considered disposable, especially children. How else to explain the attempts by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and Governor Greg Abbott to criminalize and terrorize those individuals or institutions who administer gender affirming medical treatment to transgender children, including their parents? This cruel law was introduced in spite of the fact that as Chase Strangio has noted: “In December 2021, the Trevor Project released a peer-reviewed study finding that ‘gender-affirming hormone therapy is significantly related to lower rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts among transgender and nonbinary youth’”^[13] What other referent might be used, other than necropolitics, to explain that democracy-hating Texas Governor Abbot is considering challenging a 1992 ruling requiring that states “offer quality free public education to all children.”^[14] What these regressive and reactionary attacks on youth signal is that the United States now resembles a failed state in which governments work to destroy their own defenses against anti-democratic forces.

Drunk on power and devoid of any responsibility for the public welfare of children, the White power leadership of the Republican Party has abandoned any pretense to moral witnessing, social justice and the defense democracy. Manufactured ignorance, social media induced atomization, the privatization of everything, and the collapse of civic culture and the public imagination have shredded all notions of society bound by shared values, shared trust, and strong

institutions. Politics is now militarized, culture has been spectacularized; moreover, cruelty and manufacture ignorance have become central elements of governance.[\[15\]](#)

In the aftermath of endless wars around the globe, the U.S. government has learned nothing from its profligate military spending and embrace of a war culture. Both political parties are enablers of expanding a military-industrial complex that rings the earth with over 700 military bases, has more nuclear weapons than any other country, and has a defense budget as of \$778 billion as of 2022. Bernie Sanders, who chairs the Senate budget committee, rightly argues that “At a time when we are already spending more on the military than the next 11 countries combined, no we do not need a massive increase in the defense budget.”[\[16\]](#) In the current moment, the bloated financial class and their lobbyists are buying off politicians who are only too willing to squander the public coffers on wars abroad, while attempting to establish across the globe death zones inhabited by drones, high tech weaponry, and increasingly private armies.[\[17\]](#) Curbing such funding is not merely about saving money, it is also about redirecting such funds in order to address a number of issues that directly affect young people. Republican can salivate over increasing the defense budget, but they blocked renewing the enhanced Child Tax Credit payments, which resulted in 3.2 million children falling back into poverty, especially Black and Latino children. [\[18\]](#) Only a gangster state wages a war on young people by refusing to enact social programs that would not only benefit them, especially the most deserving, but also benefit society as a whole. Social programs aimed at children are more than a public investment, they are a moral and political responsibility. As Greg Rosalsky points out:

In recent years, economists have found all sorts of benefits that derive from government spending on kids, including better educational outcomes, fewer health problems, lower crime and incarceration rates, and higher earnings (and tax payments) when the kids become adults. One recent study in a top economic journal, by Harvard economists Nathaniel Hendren and Ben Sprung-Keyser, analyzed the bang-per-buck of government spending programs. They found that social spending on kids stands out as having far greater returns for society over the long run than spending on adults. The returns are so large that it's possible that government spending on kids could end up paying for itself over those kids' lifetimes, through economic gains for the kids, and through reduced public spending on them through other social programs when they get older.[\[19\]](#)

The refusal to address child poverty and other social problems extends the war on drugs, terror, crime, and women to the war on children. Inequality is a scourge imposed on American youth. Yet it grows to staggering proportions under gangster capitalism, even though “research has shown that child poverty increases crime rates, swells health care costs, worsens educational outcomes and shrinks our overall economy.”^[20] At a time when mental health problems and potential suicide attempts, are increasing among young people, especially among youth in low-income families, there is almost no attempt on the part of the government to address the crucial problem of inequality in America.^[21] Politics has been militarized just as the discourse of social responsibility and the common good have disappeared from the language of governance.

Militarization normalizes violence at home and abroad. Mass shootings have become an everyday occurrences that are barely reported.^[22] Across America, a gun culture puts more and more guns in the hands of individuals, approximately 390 million are owned by Americans—in spite of the fact that gun deaths were the leading cause of death among U.S. children in 2020. As the CDC points out, “the rise in gun-related deaths among Americans between the ages of one and 19 was part of an overall 33.4% increase in firearm homicides nationwide.”^[23] Undocumented immigrant children are held in cages, and often subject to sexual violence and abuse.

The White power movement now defines a Republican Party that views Black and Latino youth in the U.S. as elements of a criminal culture, subject to endless acts of lawlessness and police violence.^[24] There is a growing silence, in spite of the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, over the fact that Black youth are endlessly demonized and criminalized. Too many people look away from the fact that Black youth are disproportionately arrested in relation to white youth, vastly over-represented in juvenile detention centers, “nine times more likely than white children to receive adult prisons sentences,” and disproportionately suspended and expelled from under-resourced schools as a result of zero-tolerance laws.^[25] Against this landscape violence against youth, the discourse of white supremacy, hate and bigotry has intensified among Republican politicians, pundits, and the wider Republican Party base.^[26] Subjected to the tidal wave of fascist politics, Black and Latino youth are under siege as the war against youth strengthens as part of a growing counter-revolutionary movement in the United States.^[27]

Youth now occupy a social order in which war is glamorized, even if it bears down destructively on their everyday existence. In the aftermath of the war on terror, the violent debacles of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the current war fever emerging around the war in Ukraine, militarization has emerged as a national narcotic inducing a comatose public, indifferent to a sense of collective, political, and social responsibility. Talk of diplomacy regarding the war in Ukraine has been sacrificed to the call for providing more weapons giving credence to the notion that war is the ultimate and most valuable approach to foreign policy. Fear, mass anxiety, and social atomization have opened the door to the seductions of empire, which now provide the salutes, spectacles, and high drama to overlook the predatory violence that shapes domestic politics aimed at youth. Authoritarianism has become the new default for neoliberalism. This is not to suggest that in this new era of creeping authoritarianism that consumerism and profit making have lost their power as the organizing principles of citizenship, if not freedom itself. The prison of unchecked self-interest and the power of ugly freedoms defined narrowly through the prism of individual interests still provide the ideological scaffolding of neoliberalism that allows markets to govern economic relations free from government regulation or moral considerations. What has changed is that neoliberal fascism has now become the endpoint of a gangster capitalism that can no longer defend itself and now diverts its own failures by preaching racial hatred, white supremacy, racial cleansing, and puts into play a range of policies that constitute an ongoing war on youth.

As a weakened social contract comes under sustained attack, the model of the prison, along with its practices and accelerating mechanisms of punishment, emerges as a core institution and mode of governance under the suicidal state—a hyper mode of punishment is consequently seeping into a variety of institutions.^[28] Agencies and public services that once offered relief and hope to disadvantaged youth are now being replaced with a police presence, along with other elements of the criminal justice system.^[29] The brutal face of the emerging police state is also evident in the attacks on young black people and youthful protesters. Florida and other states are introducing and passing legislation that criminalize dissent and mass protests. Right-wing vigilantes such as Kyle Rittenhouse are celebrated in the conservative media as more and more politicians are advocating violence in the name of political opportunism.

Democracy and Youth in the Age of White Supremacy

Democracy is on life support, and the list of casualties in the war to empty it of any substance is long. We are witnessing the ongoing privatization of public schools, health care, prisons, transportation, the military, public air waves, public lands, and other crucial elements of the commons along with the undermining of our most basic civil liberties. Privatization in this case not only turns public goods over to the savage interests of the corporate elite but puts such goods in the hands of market-based fundamentalists who exercise increasing control over the production of identities, values, modes of agency, and dissent in the United States. As public spheres dedicated to the public good shrink, the language of community, public values, and social responsibility disappears from the public imagination just as the ability to translate private troubles into larger social problems disappears as a basic tool of civic literacy. At the same time, a learned helplessness has been unleashed on the country as ignorance, conformity, and a disdain for informed judgments are celebrated over reason. A scourge of disimagination machines inundate Americans with lies and the discourse of pundits who inhabit the twilight zone of ignorance and racial hatred. This political and educational deficit is particularly damaging for young people who no longer symbolize a crucial and long-term social investment in the future.

Since the 1970s, there has been an intensification of the anti-democratic pressures of neoliberal modes of governance, ideology, and policies. What is particularly new is the way in which young people are increasingly denied any place in an already weakened social contract and the degree to which they are no longer seen as central to how the United States defines its future. Youth are no longer the place where society reveals its dreams but increasingly hides its nightmares. Within neoliberal narratives, youth are either defined as a consumer market or stand for trouble.^[30] They are under constant surveillance and live in the insular world of a social media that does less to inform them than to infantilize and isolate them from a larger public. The shift in representations of how American society talks about young people betrays a great deal about what is increasingly new about the economic, social, cultural, and political fabric of American society and its growing disinvestment in young people, the social state, and democracy itself.^[31] Protecting children from the ravages of poverty, sexual policing, state violence, and mind-numbing forms of schooling are now shockingly labeled by the right as the practice of pedophiles.

This language is taken right out of the fascist playbook, updated in the vocabulary and magical mindset of the QAnon zombies. As Michael Bronski observes, much of the bills being passed against transgender youth represent a current manifestation of a history of regressive and vindictive policies waged against youth and a range of progressive gains.^[32] Such law represent a blatant and relaunched form of homophobia. To make the point, he cites the case of Christina Pushaw, a spokesperson for right-wing Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida, who tweeted “The bill that liberals inaccurately call ‘Don’t Say Gay’ would be more accurately described as an Anti-Grooming Bill.”^[33] He writes that this is a “blatant appeal to homophobia [that refers] to the myth that homosexuals ‘groom’ or ‘recruit’ children to become homosexuals so they can have sex with them. She quickly followed her initial tweet with: ‘If you’re against the Anti-Grooming Bill, you are probably a groomer or at least you don’t denounce the grooming of 4–8-year-old children. Silence is complicity.’”^[34] There is more at work here than a sordid demonstration of homophobia, there is also the logic of disposability dressed up in the logic of an authoritarian notion of moral righteousness and the threat of violence and social cleansing. In the name of protecting youth, Republican lawmakers want to cut back social provisions, jail youth as young as ten, and incarcerate underage youth with no chance of parole for some crimes. Right-wing Republican policies that claim to protect children are just a cover in order to do just the opposite. Bronski is on target in claiming:

Don’t Say Gay bills burst onto the scene as part of a suite of campaigns that purport to ‘defend’ children. These include efforts to remove books about race and sexuality from public and school libraries, to block the teaching of the 1619 Project and critical race theory, and the grilling of Supreme Court nominee (now Justice) Ketanji Brown Jackson about whether babies are racist. They are of a piece with states’ bills, such as in Texas, that prohibit medical care for transgender youth, which such laws legally label “child abuse” and cite as grounds for parents to have their children removed from their custody. These have built on the preexisting sentiments, and laws, that ban transgender athletes from competing in sports and using bathrooms aligned to their gender. This is happening in the broader context of an all-out assault on reproductive rights: these include attempts to criminalize the sale and use of medication abortion pills, criminalizing helping women to obtain abortions, and the likely repeal of Roe v.

Wade. All under the rhetoric of protecting that ‘most innocent of all humans: the unborn child.’^[35]

It is crucial to understand that the right-wing culture wars are part of a broader counter-revolutionary movement that embraces a past in which a fake appeal to innocence merges with the power of White Christian extremists to refigure modernity through the imposition of biblical values and the registers of exclusion, control, and repression.^[36] As the evils of child labor laws and other injustices were overcome historically, modernity increasingly acknowledged that young people were a social investment crucial to developing a substantive democracy. But modernity’s seemingly unshakeable faith in young people has been short-lived with the rise of neoliberalism and its rebranded fascism. The promises of modernity regarding progress, freedom, and hope, at least their more democratic principles, have not been eliminated; they have been reconfigured, stripped of their emancipatory potential and relegated to the logic of a savage market instrumentality. No longer calibrated with the promises of democracy, modernity has given way to viewing youth in general but particularly youth outside of traditional biblical norms as a looming threat to be disciplined, stripped of their rights, and banished to spheres of terminal exclusion. What I wrote *Youth in a Suspect Society* in 2010 is more prescient today and is worth repeating.

If youth once constituted a social investment in the future and symbolized the promise of a better world, they are now entering another stage in the construction of a global social order in which children are increasingly demonized and criminalized—subject to random strip searches and increased surveillance, forced into prostitution, sold into child slavery, abducted as child soldiers, and made victims of numerous other forms of violence. As objects of a low-intensity war without end wage by governments and global corporations, youth are now defined with the languages of criminalization and commodification, their daily existence delineated with a permanent state of emergency mediated by heightened economic exploitation, class inequality, and racial injustices.^[37] Modernity has reneged on its promises, however disingenuous or limited, to young people regarding social mobility, stability, and collective security. Long term planning and the institutional structures that support them are now relegated to the imperatives of privatization, deregulation, flexibility, and short-term investments. Social bonds have given way under the collapse of social protections and the welfare state just as “the emphasis is now on individual

solutions to socially produced problems.”^[38] As Sharon Stevens pointed out in a different historical context, what we are now witnessing is not only the “wide-ranging restructurings of modernity” but also the effect “these changes have for the concept of childhood and the life conditions of children.”^[39] Stevens is not wrong, but her logic is incomplete. What we are now witnessing is a fascist war on youth and the death of the very idea of modernity now dressed up in the theocratic language of evil, enemies, repression, pedophiles, and fanaticism.

The severity of the consequences of this shift in modernity under neoliberalism among youth is evident in the fact that this is the first generation in which the “plight of the outcast may stretch to embrace a whole generation.”^[40] Zygmunt Bauman argued that today’s youth have been “cast in a condition of liminal drift, with no way of knowing whether it is transitory or permanent.”^[41] That is, the generation of youth in the early 21st century has no way of grasping if they will ever “be free from the gnawing sense of the transience, indefiniteness, and provisional nature of any settlement.”^[42] Neoliberal and fascist violence produced in part through a massive shift in wealth to the upper 1 percent, growing inequality, the reign of the financial services, the closing down of educational opportunities, the stripping of benefits and resources from those marginalized by race and class, and the return of Jim Crow politics has produced a generation without jobs, social autonomy, and even the most minimal social benefits.

Youth no longer occupy the hope of a protected place that was offered to previous generations. They now inhabit a neoliberal notion of temporality marked by a loss of faith in the future along with the emergence of apocalyptic narratives in which the future appears indeterminate, bleak, and insecure. Time is no longer a luxury, but a deprivation tied to the strangulating struggle for survival. Heightened expectations and progressive visions pale and are smashed next to the normalization of market-driven government policies that wipe out pensions, eliminate quality health care, raise college tuition, and produce a harsh world of debt and part-time work, while giving millions to banks and the military. Students, in particular, now find themselves in a world in which heightened expectations have been replaced by dashed hopes. The promises of higher education and previously enviable credentials have turned into the swindle of fulfillment as “For the first time in living memory, the whole class of graduates faces a high probability, almost the certainty, of ad hoc, temporary, insecure and

part-time jobs, unpaid ‘trainee’ pseudo-jobs deceitfully rebranded ‘practices’—all considerably below the skills they have acquired and eons below the level of their expectations.”[43] Nothing has prepared this generation for the inhospitable and savage new world of commodification, privatization, joblessness, frustrated hopes, the legitimation of racial cleansing, and stillborn projects.[44] Nor have they been prepared for the rise of a fascist politics that is as ruthless as it is unapologetic in its hatred of Black and brown youth. The present generation has been born into a throwaway society of consumers in which language, social relations, public goods and young people are increasingly militarized, privatized and removed from any notion of the common good. The ideological and institutional structures of neoliberalism do more than disinvest in young people, they also transform the protected space of childhood into a zone of disciplinary exclusion and cruelty. Many youth are now considered disposable, forced to inhabit “zones of social abandonment” extending from bad schools to bulging detention centers and prisons.[45] In the midst of the rise of the punishing state, the circuits of state repression, surveillance, and disposability increasingly “link the fate of “blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, poor whites, and Asian Americans” who are now caught in a governing through crime youth complex, which now serves as default solutions to major social problems.[46] Republican governors have expanded the vice of terror and violence aimed at young people. They support the mass production of guns, destroy the institutions in which young people can learn how to become critical agents, and impose on them economic constraints that condemn them to a life of unending immiseration.

Already disenfranchised by virtue of their age, young people are under assault today in ways that are entirely new because they now face a world that is far more dangerous than at any other time in recent history. Not only do they live in a space of social homelessness in which precarity and uncertainty lock them out of a secure future, but they also find themselves living in a society that seeks to silence them by making them invisible if not disposable.[47] How else to explain the current war on transgender youth and what it suggests for eroding a range of civil liberties affecting young people often considered excess and disposable. Victims of a war against economic justice, equality, and democratic values, young people are now told not to expect too much and to accept the status of “stateless, faceless, and functionless” nomads, a plight for which they alone will have to accept responsibility. [48] At best, they are told each must assume sole

responsibility for their fate. At worst, they are viewed as unproductive, excess, and utterly expendable.

Youth now constitute a present absence in any talk about democracy. Their disappearance is symptomatic of a society that has turned against itself, punishes its children, and does so at the risk of killing the entire body politic. Under the regime of a ruthless economic Darwinism that emphasizes an ego-centric, win at any cost, war against all ethic, the concepts and practices of community and solidarity have been replaced by a world of cutthroat politics, financial greed, media spectacles, and a rabid consumerism.

The everyday existence of poor white, immigrant, and minority youth has indeed become a matter of survival. No longer tracked into either high or low achievement classes, many of these youth are being pushed right out of school into the juvenile criminal justice system.[\[49\]](#) Under such circumstances, the disposability of certain social groups becomes central to the political and social order. Too many young people are not completing high school but are instead bearing the brunt of a system that leaves them uneducated and jobless, and that ultimately offers them a life of destitution or prison—the only available roles for those individuals who cannot be producers or consumers. When the material foundations of agency and security disappear, young people are reduced to the status of waste products to be tossed out or hidden away in the global human waste industry. How else to explain the fate of generations of young people, especially poor white, brown, and Black youth, who find themselves in a country which is the world's leader in incarceration, one in which such youth are considered the nexus of crime?

In the aftermath of the war on terror and the rise of a fascist Republican Party, young people have become the enemy of choice, elevated to the status as an all-pervasive threat to dominant authority. The increased militarization of local police forces and their growing use of violence against young protesters signal the threat that young people now pose to the rise of systemic racism, ecological devastation, and police violence. Instead of children being nurtured and educated, they are now tasered, sequestered in dangerous prisons, and demonized in order to divert our attention from real social problems and their potential solutions. At the same time, society engages in a public purification ritual through imposing harsh disciplinary practices on its most vulnerable members and the teachers, public servants, and institutions that educate and nurture youth.

The deteriorating state of youth may be the most serious challenge facing educators, social workers, youth workers, and others in the twenty-first century. It is a struggle that demands a new understanding of politics, one that demands that we think beyond the given, imagine the unimaginable, and combine the lofty ideals of democracy with a willingness to fight for its realization. But this is not a fight that can be won through individual struggles or fragmented political movements. It demands new modes of solidarity, new political organizations, and a powerful social movement capable of uniting diverse political interests and groups. It is a struggle that is as educational as it is political. It is also a struggle that is as necessary as it is urgent. It is a struggle that *must not* be ignored.

Confronting the War on Youth

One way of addressing our collapsing intellectual and moral visions regarding young people is to imagine those policies, values, opportunities, and social relations that invoke adult responsibility and reinforce the ethical imperative to provide young people, especially those marginalized by race and class, with the economic, social, and educational conditions that make life livable and the future sustainable. At the heart of such a vision is making education a fundamental element of politics; moreover, such a vision must move beyond what Alain Badiou has called the “crisis of negation,”^[50] which is a failure of imagination, historical consciousness, and an aversion to new ideas. The call for a new vision can be found in the protests being waged by the Black Lives Matter movements and other youth resistance movements around the globe. There is also a long history of resistance in the United States that can be reread and learned from as a resource in fighting against the war on young people.^[51] In the current historical moment, what is evident in a growing worldwide movement of youth protests is a bold attempt to imagine the possibility of another world, a refusal of the current moment of historical one-dimensionality, and a refusal to settle for reforms that are purely incremental. As adults, there is also the question of what responsibility do we have as educators, teachers, journalists, artists, and social workers to teach children about violence making them aware of where it comes from, how it works, and how it can be challenged.^[52]

The United States has become a necropolitical society organized around the primacy of sadistic impulses, with widespread violence and modes of hyper-punishment functioning as part of a culture of cruelty that turns the economy of genuine pleasure into a mode of sadism that creates the foundation for sapping democracy of any political substance and moral vitality. Gangster

capitalism in its rebranded mode of fascist politics devalues any viable notion of rationality, ethics, and democracy. High-octane moral panics, a flight from civic responsibility, extreme callousness, and the relentless production of human suffering have become the by-products of a racist and market-driven society caught in the shadow of a creeping authoritarianism.

The prevalence of institutionalized injustice, illegal legalities, and expanding violence in American society suggests the only way forward to a viable future must begin with a new conversation and politics that address how a truly just and fair world must look. We see the initiation of such a conversation among a range of youth movements who are addressing how to build a future free of neoliberal capitalism. This is also part of a larger conversation infused by the need for a new political language that is being formulated with great care and self-reflection by intellectuals, artists, workers, unions, parents, educators, young people, and others whose individual protections and social rights are in grave danger from the threat of a fascist politics that is spreading its poison throughout the body politic. The fascist tendencies of the state, with its apparatuses of violence, are creeping into all aspects of social life, making clear that too many young people and others marginalized by class, gender, race, and ethnicity have been abandoned by America's claim to democracy. A substantial portion of the American public and the entire Republican Party has given up on the promise and ideals of a radical democracy, indicating a new urgency for the rise of a collective politics and social movements capable of both negating the established order of capitalism and imagining the emergence of a democratic socialist society. In these efforts, critique must merge with a sense of realistic possibilities; at the same time, individual struggles and isolated political factions must expand into a larger mass social movement.

At the very least, the American public owes to its children and future generations a considerable effort to dismantle the necropolitical neoliberal machinery of death. This is necessary in order to reclaim the spirit of a future that works for life rather than for the death-worlds of the current authoritarianism. It is time for young people, educators, artists, and other cultural workers to connect the dots, educate themselves, and develop social movements that will not only rewrite the language of democracy but put into place the institutions and formative cultures that make it possible.

Such a challenge will not take place without making education central to politics, changing mass consciousness, and creating the institutions and social movements

that make such changes achievable. In the face of the current upgraded fascism, there is no longer room for constraint or prolonged deliberation. What is needed is informed judgment and rigorous ideas that create a catalyst for mass action among workers, artists, teachers, students, young people and others who refuse to allow the dark clouds of fascism to smother their hopes and possibilities for imagining a different social order. We would do well to heed the words of James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*. He writes: “The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.” The lights are getting dimmer, but the spark of resistance is always ready to start a fire that can lead us out of the darkness.

Notes.

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