

Right-Wing Extremists Want Misinformation and Manufactured Ignorance, Not Democracy

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Manufactured ignorance now thrives in a world of interlacing disasters. This age of consuming catastrophes is part and parcel of an age of survival-of-the fittest economics fueled by the rise of right wing authoritarianism and political extremists. The rule of markets and its legitimating notion of economic Darwinism represents a return to the massive inequalities and culture of cruelty that marked the Gilded Age. This was an era when entrepreneurial pieties were used to legitimize unfettered markets and the concentration of power in the hands of a financial elite. In its updated versions, the **new** Gilded Age of neoliberal capitalism continues with a vengeance to reward the ultra-rich and powerful while beating workers, immigrants, and poor Black and brown people into the ground.

In a time of pandemics and economic and political plagues, there has been an acceleration of fear, dread, and anxiety adding to the surge of right-wing extremism and the return of an updated fascist politics. The current era is all the crueler since, in a time of staggering inequality, those populations, viewed as “the living dead” and increasingly stripped of their civil rights, are struggling less for the promise of social mobility and a better life than for mere survival. The script of neoliberalism is now written in the language of gangster capitalism. The language of democracy, then as today, is reduced to commercial values, competing consumers, deregulations, the privatization of everything, the relentless pursuit of profits, unchecked self-interest, a pandemic of lying, narrow notions of individual responsibility and the endless quest for profits. The rule of markets and the lawlessness of financial power now replace any viable notion of government responsibility. Under the new Gilded Age, the appeal to democracy functions once again as a cover, if not ruthless fiction, to promote thievery and political opportunism, offering an easy alibi for the crimes of capitalism. **The brutalities of fascism have returned and shadow of death seems to be everywhere.**

Up until the election of Ronald Reagan, democracy was tolerated as an ideal, however falsely enacted. But after the social rebellions of the 1960s, the tone of toleration changed to distrust. This was clear when the influential political scientist Samuel Huntington observed in his notorious *Crisis of Democracy* that [democracy had desirable limits that must be put into place](#). This distrust of democracy was articulated further in the 1975 Trilateral Commission report, which stated that the

problems that the United States faced in the 1960s and '70s were, in part, the result of “an excess of democracy.”

Times have changed. Capitalism has degenerated into a full-stage criminal enterprise and democracy is no longer distrusted; on the contrary, it is disdained, feared and subject to the scorn of crooks parading as politicians. Instead of having too much democracy, the current historical moment is being framed by the call to eliminate it altogether. Under the growing influence of right-wing extremists such as the current Republican Party in the United States, the ideological winds of the moment call for replacing the ideal and promise of democracy with the dictates of authoritarian nationalism, white supremacy and a politics of exclusion -- all of which echoes a dangerous past in its promotion of an updated version of fascism.

The rising tide of fascist politics has been matched by new anti-democratic practices and modes of oppression and expression. Democratic struggles and uprisings are now more image-based given the increased role of the media in normalizing extremist ideologies and promoting modes of identity and agency that resonate with fascist ideas and values. For instance, from his prime-time perch as a television host on *Fox News*, Tucker Carlson has become the most influential propagandist and most visible voice for white grievance ideology and replacement theory. He has also risen to the top of the mainstream media ecosystem with his politics of white nationalism, his relentless blasting liberals and leftists, and his support for Donald Trump's unfounded claim that the election was “rigged” and stolen. Moreover, Carlson is also one of the most powerful anti-immigration voices in the nation. He refers to immigration as a form of liberal atonement and has stated that, “We have a moral obligation to admit the world's poor, they tell us, even if it makes our own country poorer and dirtier and more divided.” As Michael Kranish [points out](#), quoting conservative Christopher Rufo, “Tucker Carlson Tonight’ is the highest-rated show in cable news, and to a large extent, Tucker frames the narrative for conservative politics. Tucker doesn’t react to the news; he creates the news.”

Tucker Carlson and *Fox News* are symptomatic of the powerful role that social media and an image-based culture now play in shaping politics, particularly far right politics. It is part of a new politics of disinformation spurred on by corporate-funded disimagination machines and cultural apparatuses that trade in lies, ignorance and resistance to the truth. Manufactured ignorance is the new face of submission and the ongoing flight from political and social responsibility. Misinformation has become a new form of necropolitics, spreading fear, lies, anxiety and scapegoating — most obvious in the spiraling deaths brought on in

part by the bungling Trump leadership in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media has turned poisonous and dangerous in tracking our needs, interests, desires and politics while spreading false information that aligns individual and collective consciousness with the forces of an upgraded authoritarianism. For instance, right-wing social media endlessly stokes vaccine resistance among a wide array of conservatives, religious fundamentalists, and rural Americans, indifferent to the tragic amount suffering and deaths such messages both legitimate and produce. Manufactured ignorance merges with a hideous batch of bigoted and hateful emotions that surge through millions of Americans like an electric current. As David Frum argues, “Pro-Trump America has decided that vaccine refusal is a statement of identity and a test of loyalty.” [<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/vaccinated-america-breaking-point-anti-vaxxers/619539/>] Politics is no longer simply a struggle over economic institutions and power relations; it is also a struggle over consciousness, ideas, identity and agency.

The current historical era has witnessed an accelerating merger of culture, power and social media, which has contributed to the development of new social formations that produce tsunamis of misleading information, amounting to what the World Health Organization has labeled “infodemics.” In this instance, the media ecospheres and disimagination machines have created among large segments of the public a flight from critical thought and social responsibility. This is further accentuated by what Zygmunt Bauman has called “[ethical tranquilization](#),”—a type of appalling silence and refusal to speak up in the face of injustice____. Infodemics are depoliticization machines that work their way through the social order and daily life, obscuring the connection between social relations and the configurations of power that shape them, substituting what Wendy Brown [calls](#) “emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating solutions to political problems.” Consequently, it becomes difficult for the public, often lacking access to critical information, to translate private troubles into public concerns. As private interests trump the public good, public spaces are corroded and short-term personal advantage replaces any larger notion of civic engagement and social responsibility. Infodemics make it difficult for the public to imagine alternative futures, and horizons of possibility begin to disappear.

Under such circumstances, to cite [C. W. Mills](#), we are witnessing the breakdown of democracy, the infantilization of thought, the disappearance of critical intellectuals, and “the collapse of those public spheres which offer a sense of critical agency and social imagination.” Mills’ prescient comments amplify what has become a tragic reality. Missing from neoliberal market societies are those

public spheres — from public and higher education to the mainstream media and digital screen culture — where people can develop what might be called the civic imagination.

Infodemics have greatly contributed to what Timothy Snyder calls the death of truth and democracy. [He writes](#): “As we lose people who produce facts, we are in danger of losing the very idea of truth.... The death of truth also brings about the death of democracy, since people can rule only when they have the facts then need to defend themselves from power.” The culture wars have been a huge success for the far right and need to be taken seriously as central to any viable notion of politics. A new mode of cultural and educational politics must be developed in order to promote critical thinking, encourage dissent, and use the cultural realm to gain power in the service of widespread resistance. One caveat politically is the understanding that the fight against gangster capitalism cannot be reduced to the struggle over ideas, consciousness and agency.

In this new era of image-politics, there is also a need to combine struggles over language, visual culture, consciousness and agency with struggles that engage a materialist politics, informed by concrete institutions and structural relations of power. These include eliminating the institutions and structures of power produced under neoliberal economic and state-based structures of capitalism and extend from the system of mass incarceration to the institutions governed by the financial elite. This new historical moment calls for new modes of resistance that incorporate the language, visual culture, everyday life, and power to create a new politics of identification, develop an educational movement for shaping mass consciousness, and create the subjective and material conditions for developing new social movements. In *The Eyes of the People*, Jeffrey Edward Green furthers this argument that the power of voice -- how individuals talk to each other -- is no longer the only vehicle of popular empowerment. Instead, we now live in an age in which deliberative democracy with its multitude of voices is too narrow a concept for understanding how politics is now shaped. Green emphasizes the new social formation he labels as “ocular politics.” This refers to a notion of spectatorship in which the relationship between individuals and the corporate media is defined by a visual culture. [According to Green](#), ocular politics refers “to the fact that most people engage with politics primarily with their eyes, rather than their voice,” reducing politics to the forces of mass marketing and a spectacularized politics manipulated by dominant elites in which most citizens inhabit the role of spectator. Ocular politics and social media have merged to produce forms of visual messaging in the interest of political warfare and cultural domination. Right-wing social media platforms have transformed politics into a spectacle in which the

forces of public relations and consumption become part of a politics of raw emotion, infantilization and fear.

The U.S.'s slide into a fascist politics demands a revitalized understanding of the historical moment in which we find ourselves, along with a systemic critical analysis of the new political formations and forms of popular power that mark this period. [As Ruth Ben-Ghiat argues](#), this entails developing new modes of communication in which arresting images and narratives speak to both a resonant history of struggle and have enough emotional appeal “to channel the unique power of images to allow us to feel and dream and inspire us to take action as we build a pro-democracy movement for our country.” Part of this challenge is to create a counter ocular politics, a new language of identification, and a mass social movement that addresses and constructs empowering terrains of education, popular culture and power that challenge existing systems of racist violence, economic inequality and cultural domination. Such a movement would connect both a counter ocular politics with a range of material demands that would align the call for political rights with economic rights. For instance, in his fight to nationalize legislation to eliminate voter restrictions laws, Rev. William J. Barber II connects the fight against voter suppression and other aspects of Jim Crow policies with the call for raising the minimum wage. He makes clear that voter suppression is not simply about securing rights for Black people but a fight over economic justice for all people who are economically disenfranchised.

This intersectional strategy can be found in anti-racist movements, emerging labor movements, the Poor People's Campaign, youth movements fighting against gun violence, movements for the abolition of the carceral state, emerging public school teacher struggles, and the alignment of all of these groups with others fighting far right extremism while struggling to free themselves from a racist, class-based, exploitive authoritarian history and overthrow a hyper-capitalist social order. [According to Lacino Hamilton](#), these movements also teach us to reconstruct stories crafted in the everyday lives of the oppressed as part of a politics and popular cultural movement that recognizes that when the public is not only voiceless but ignorant of the power of an image-based culture, they are also powerless.

[As Nasrine Malik points out](#), what the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement made clear is that their protests have had “one lasting effect on public discourse. They shifted our conversations about racism away from a notion of personal and intentional moral failure, and toward a conception of racism as something structural and institutional.” And they did this partly through a visual politics and

visual messaging campaign. BLM used not only the power of critical rhetoric but also the weapons of an image-based cultural politics: The movement used the media available to it and employed in a powerful manner films, social media, and photographs to produce and distribute its goals and tactics. As [Bijan Stephen observes](#), “I believe that Black Lives Matter has changed the visceral experience of being black in America. I see this in the way it has become a community reflex to record interactions with police — a habit that is empowering, even as it highlights black vulnerability.”

The power of an image-based politics can also be seen in the growing struggles of Indigenous peoples to recast their struggles in more militant, less isolated and global terms, especially in light of [growing revelations](#) about hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children who attended residential schools in Canada. Images of crosses, shoes and resistance flooded Canadian media, providing visceral images that removed such violence from the deadening abstraction of newspeak. What was made visible in an emotionally powerful fashion was the government’s attempts to erase the culture of entire generations of Indigenous children and its endpoint of [genocidal acts of state violence](#).

In the United States, anti-racist movements are using digital media to teach us “[that eradicating racial oppression ultimately requires a struggle against oppression in all of its forms...\[especially\] restructuring America’s economic system](#).” This is especially important as those marginalized by class, race, ethnicity and religion have become aware of how much they have lost control over the economic, political, pedagogical and social conditions that bear down on their lives in this new era of fascist politics. Under such circumstances, visual culture has become more toxic.

Visions have become dystopian, devolving into a sense of being left out, abandoned, and subject to increasing systems of terror and violence. These issues can no longer be viewed as individual or isolated problems but as manifestations of a broader failure of politics, if not the public imagination. Moreover, what is needed is not a series of stopgap reforms limited to particular institutions or groups but a radical restructuring of the entirety of U.S. society as a start toward more global acts of resistance. This is as much an educational project steeped in image-based politics as it is a political project that relies on discursive modes of exchange, persuasion and deliberation.

The call for a socialist democracy demands the creation of visions, ideals, institutions, social relations and pedagogies of resistance that enable the public to

imagine a life beyond a social order in which racial, class and-gender-based violence produce endless assaults on the environment, systemic police violence, a culture of ignorance and cruelty. Such a challenge must address an assault by neoliberalism on the public and civic imagination, mediated through the elevation of war, militarization, violent masculinity and the politics of disposability to the highest levels of power — increasingly rooted in a spectacularized politics. Neoliberal capitalism is a death-driven machinery that infantilizes, exploits, and devalues human life and the planet itself. Understood properly, neoliberal capitalism is a form of necropolitics, or more specifically, a type of gangster capitalism that is utterly criminogenic. Gangster capitalism thrives on the silence of the oppressed and the complicity of those seduced by its power. As an educational project, it trades in manufactured ignorance. One consequence is that as market mentalities and moralities tighten their grip on all aspects of society, democratic institutions and public spheres are being downsized, if not altogether disappearing, along with the educated citizens without which there is no democracy.

Any viable pedagogy of resistance needs to create the educational and pedagogical tools to produce a radical shift in consciousness, capable of both recognizing the scorched-earth policies of gangster capitalism, and the twisted ideologies that support it. This shift in consciousness cannot occur without [pedagogical interventions](#) that speak to people in ways in which they can recognize themselves, identify with the issues being addressed and place the privatization of their troubles in a broader systemic context. Niko Block gets it right in arguing for a “radical recasting of the leftist imagination,” in which the concrete needs of people are addressed and elevated to the forefront of public discussion in order to address and get ahead of the crises of our times. [He writes](#):

This process involves building bridges between the real and the imaginary, so that the path to achieving political goals is plain to see. Accordingly, the articulation of leftist goals must resonate with people in concrete ways, so that it becomes obvious how the achievement of those goals would improve their day-to-day lives. The left, in this sense, must appeal to people’s existing identities and not condescend the general public as victims of “false consciousness.” All this means building movements of continual improvement and refusing to ask already-vulnerable people for short-term losses on the abstract promise of long-term gains. This project also demands that we understand precisely why right-wing ideology retains a popular appeal in so many spaces.

Block gestures toward (but does not mention) the plague of manufactured ignorance emerging from a political arena largely defined by popular culture and powerful right-wing media. There is no ocular politics in this important message. Yet, it is precisely such a politics that offers a challenge to appealing to people's existing identities and creating narratives in which they can recognize themselves and become more critical of the conditions that bear down on their lives. In the age of the spectacle, the tools of pedagogy and popular culture must be elevated to the center of politics. Increasingly, an image-based culture is where people realize themselves as citizens, as agents and as members of a larger community. Agency is the basis of politics, and culture is the sphere where people become either politically literate or civically illiterate. Matters of subjectivity, persuasion and identification are the material bedrock of politics and are no less important than the economic structures through which they work to normalize the plague of depoliticization, infantilization, and their endpoint, fascist politics. To forget this is to give the far right and gangster capitalism an upper hand in the culture war that might be impossible to reverse. The stakes are much too high to all this to happen.