

POPULISM AND THE POLITICS OF DEPOLITICIZATION

The scourge of neoliberalism and failure of liberal democracy itself became evident in the 2008 global economic crisis. The financial crisis has wreaked havoc in multiple ways. Yet there was another crisis that received little attention, a crisis of agency. This crisis centered around matters of identity, self-determination, and collective resistance, which were undermined in profound ways giving rise to and legitimating the emergence of authoritarian populist movements in many parts of the western world. In the aftermath of this crisis, there was a profound shift in public consciousness in both the United States and in a number of other countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Brazil.

At the heart of this shift was the declining belief in the legitimacy of both liberal democracy and its pledges about trickle down wealth, economic security, and broadening equal opportunities preached by the apostles of neoliberalism. In many ways, public faith in the welfare state, quality employment opportunities, institutional possibilities, and a secure future for each generation collapsed. In part, this was a consequence of the post-war economic boom giving way to massive degrees of inequality, the offshoring of wealth and power, the enactment of cruel austerity measures, an expanding regime of precarity, and a cut-throat economic and social environment in which individual interests and needs prevailed over any consideration of the common good. As liberalism aligned itself with corporate and political power, both the Democrat and Republican parties embraced financial reforms that increased the wealth of the bankers and corporate elite while doing nothing to prevent people from losing their homes, being strapped with chronic debt, seeing their pensions disappear, and facing a future of uncertainty and no long-term prospects or guarantees.

In an age of economic anxiety, existential insecurity, and a growing culture of fear, liberalism's overheated emphasis on individual liberties "made human beings subordinate to the market, replacing social bonds with market relations and sanctifying greed."¹ In this instance, neoliberalism became an incubator for a growing authoritarian populism fed largely by economic inequality. The latter was the outcome of a growing cultural and political polarization that made "it possible for haters to come out from the margins, form larger groups and make political trouble."² This toxic polarization and surge of right-wing populism produced by casino capitalism was accentuated with the growth

1 Francis Wilde interviews Pankaj Mishra, "The Liberal Order Is the Incubator for Authoritarianism": A Conversation with Pankaj Mishra," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, [Nov. 15, 2018]. Online: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-liberal-order-is-the-incubator-for-authoritarianism-a-conversation-with-pankaj-mishra/#>

2 George Lakey, "How to take on fascism without getting played," *Waging Non-Violence*, [December 20, 2018] Online: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-liberal-order-is-the-incubator-for-authoritarianism-a-conversation-with-pankaj-mishra/#>

of fascist groups that shared a skepticism of international organizations, supported a militant right-wing nationalism, and championed a surge of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-democratic values.

This apocalyptic populism was rooted in a profound discontent for the empty promises of a neoliberal ideology that made capitalism and democracy and their combination, a market economy, the model for all social relations. We can perhaps say that the anger and hostility towards liberalism and democracy (words which conceal the reality of neoliberal brutality) is being expressed in the very modes of brutality and exclusion that neoliberal social relations encourage. For examples of this brutality, we need look no further than liberal proponents of neoliberalism, such as Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, who participated in the dismantling of the social contract, widening economic inequality, and burgeoning landscapes of joblessness, misery, anger, and despair. At the same time, they enacted policies that dismantled civic culture and undermined a wide range of democratic institutions that extended from the media to public goods such as public and higher education. Under such circumstances, democratic narratives, values, and modes of solidarity, which traded in shared responsibilities and shared hopes, were replaced by a market-based focus on a regressive notion of hyper-individualism, ego-centered values, and a view of individual responsibility that eviscerated any broader notion of social or systemic accountability. Ways of imagining society through a collective ethos became fractured, and a comprehensive understanding of politics as inclusive and participatory morphed into an anti-politics marked by an investment in the language of individual rights, individual choice, and the power of rights-bearing individuals.

Under the reign of neoliberalism, language became thinner and more individualistic, detached from history, and more self-oriented, all the while undermining viable democratic social spheres as spaces where politics brings people together as collective agents and critically engaged citizens. Neoliberal language is written in the discourse of economics and market values not ethics. Under such circumstances, shallowness becomes an asset rather than a liability. This is a market-based language that manipulates public opinion and is absorbed “with the pornography of power and a bogus fantasy of machismo.”³ Increasingly the watered down language of liberal democracy with its over-emphasis on individual rights and its neoliberal coddling of the financial elite gave way to a regressive notion of the social marked by rising authoritarian tendencies, unchecked nativism, unapologetic expressions of bigotry, misdirected anger, and the language of resentment-filled revolt. Its endpoint came with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Liberal democracies across the globe appeared out of touch with not only the misery and suffering caused by neoliberal policies, but they also produced an insular and arrogant group of politicians who regarded

³ Pankaj Mishra, “The Incendiary Appeal of Demagoguery in Our Time.” *The New York Times*, (November 13, 2016) Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/opinion/the-incendiary-appeal-of-demagoguery-in-our-time.html>

themselves as an enlightened political formation that worked “on behalf of an ignorant public.”⁴ The ultimate consequence was to produce later what Wolfgang Merkel describes as “a rebellion of the disenfranchised.”⁵

As a regime of affective management, neoliberalism created a culture in which everyone was trapped in his or her own feelings, emotions, and orbits of privatization. The individual was celebrated at the expense of community and society, and all problems were relegated to the onerous notion of self-responsibility. For example, health became a matter of personal responsibility rather than viewed as a public good.⁶ One consequence was that legitimate political claims could only be pursued by individuals and families rather than social groups. In this instance, power was removed from the social sphere and placed almost entirely in the hands of corporate and political demagogues who used it to enrich themselves. In turn, these demagogues now use power to produce muscular authority in order “to secure order, boundaries, and to divert the growing anger of a declining middle and working-class. Both classes increasingly came to blame their economic and political conditions that produced their miser and ravaged ways of life on ‘others’: immigrants, minority races, ‘external’ predators and attackers ranging from terrorists to refugees.”⁷

Functioning largely as a ruthless form of social Darwinism, economic activity was removed from a concern with social costs and replaced by a culture of cruelty and resentment that disdained any notion of compassion or ethical concern for those deemed as “other” because of their class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion. This is a culture marked by gigantic hypocrisies, “the gloomy tabulation of unspeakable violent events,” widespread viciousness, “great concentrations of wealth,” “surveillance overkill,” and the “unceasing despoliation of biospheres for profit.”⁸

In the neoliberal world view, those who are poor, unemployed, poor consumers, or outside of the reach of a market in search of insatiable profits are considered losers, disposable, unknowable, and human waste. Viewed as human waste, an increasingly wider net of selected groups were viewed as anti-human, unknowable, faceless, and symbols of fear and pathology. This included undocumented immigrants in the United States and refugees in Europe as well as those who were considered of no value to a market society, and thus eligible to be deprived of

4 Wolfgang Merkel cited in John Keane, “The Pathologies of Populism,” *The Conversation*, [September 28, 2017]. Online: <http://theconversation.com/the-pathologies-of-populism-82593>

5 Wolfgang Merkel cited in John Keane, “The Pathologies of Populism,” *The Conversation*, [September 28, 2017]. Online: <http://theconversation.com/the-pathologies-of-populism-82593>

6 Ed Yong, “How the Pandemic Defeated America,” *The Atlantic*, [August 3, 2020] Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/coronavirus-american-failure/614191/>

7 Wendy Brown and Jo Littler, “Where the fires are An interview with Wendy Brown,” *Eurozine*, [APR 18, 2018]. Online: <https://www.eurozine.com/where-the-fires-are/>

8 Daniel Sandstrom, “My Life as a Writer,” *International New York Times*, [March 2, 2014]. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/books/review/my-life-as-a-writer.html>

the most basic rights and subject to the terror of state violence. Marking selected groups as disposable in both symbolic and material forms, the neoliberal politics of disposability became a machinery of political and social death—producing spaces where undesirable members are abused, put in cages, separated from their children, and subject to a massive violation of their human rights. Under a neoliberal politics of disposability, people live in spaces of ever-present danger and risk where nothing is certain, human beings considered excess are denied a social function, and relegated to what Étienne Balibar calls the “death zones of humanity.” “These are the 21st century workstations designed for processes of elimination, a death haunted mode of production rooted in the “absolute triumph of irrationality.”¹⁰ Within this new political formation, older forms of exploitation are now matched, if not exceeded, by a politics of racial and social cleansing as entire populations are removed from ethical assessments and “political discourses predicated on the grammar of suffering,” producing zones of social abandonment.¹¹

While it is generally acknowledged that neoliberalism was responsible for the worldwide economic crisis of 2008, what is less acknowledged is the crisis of agency and the new political formations it has produced. As the economic collapse became visceral, people’s lives were upended and sometimes destroyed. Moreover, as the social contract was shredded along with the need for socially constructed roles, norms, and public goods, the “social” no longer occupied a thick and important pedagogical space of solidarity, dialogue, political expression, dissent, and politics. As public spheres disappeared, communal bonds were weakened, and social provisions withered, tribalism with its communities of exclusion rooted in hatred, and consumerism, with its regressive notion of the citizens as a producer and consumer of goods, both gained in momentum offering the myth of unity at the expense of democracy.¹² Under neoliberalism, the social sphere regresses into a privatized society of consumers in which individuals are atomized, alienated, and increasingly removed from the variety of social connections and communal bonds that give meaning to the degree to which societies are good and just.¹³ This represents yet another instance in which neoliberal values have created subjects who are prone to embrace populism’s skepticism towards democratic public spheres that presuppose social cohesion and togetherness. People became isolated, atomized, segregated, and unable “to negotiate democratic dilemmas in a democratic way” as the actual exercise of power became more abstract and removed from

9 Étienne Balibar, “Outline of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence,” in *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.128

10 *Ibid.*, Balibar, p. 128.

11 Frank B. Wilderson III, “Introduction: Unspeakable Ethics,” *Red, White, & Black*, (London, UK: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 20.

12 Benjamin R. Barber, ‘Blood Brothers, Consumers, or Citizens: Three Models of Identity—Ethnic, Commercial, and Civic,’ in Carol C. Gould and Pasquale Pasquino, *Cultural Identity and the Nation-State*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), pp. 57-65

13 Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis. *Liquid Evil*, (Polity Press, 2016: Cambridge, UK), p. 4.

public participation and accountability.¹⁴ As the neoliberal net of privilege was cast wider, without apology for the rich and exclusion for others, it became more obvious to growing elements of the public that appeals to liberal democracy had failed to keep its promise of a better life for all.

As the narrative of class and class struggle disappeared along with the absence of a vibrant socialist movement, the call for democracy no longer provided a unifying narrative to bring different oppressed groups together. Instead, economic and authoritarian nationalism has become a rallying cry to create the conditions for merging a regressive neoliberalism and populism into a war machine. Under such circumstances, politics is imagined as a form of war repelling immigrants and refugees who are described by President Trump as “invaders,” “vermin” and “rapists.”

The emergence of neoliberalism as a war machine is evident in the current status of the Republican Party and the Trump administration who wage assaults on anything that does not mimic the values of the market. Such assaults take the form of labeling and fixing whole categories of people as disposable, enemies, and forcing them into conditions of extreme precarity and in increasingly more instances, conditions of danger and containment. Here, the right merely unearths and makes explicit the logics of disposability that underwrite neoliberal individualism. In fact, neoliberal capitalism radiates violence in a society that measures power by the speed to which it removes itself from any sense of ethical and social responsibility. In turn, this violent evacuation of the social legitimates masculinist notions of individual strength. As Beatrix Campbell puts it in her discussion of America’s production of violent forms of masculinity:

The richest society on the planet is armed. And it invests in one of the largest prison systems in the world. Violence circulates between state and citizen. Drilled to kill, doomed to die: mastery and martyrdom is the heart-breaking dialectic of the manufacture of militarized, violent masculinity.... The making and maintaining of militarized masculinities is vital to these new modes of armed conflict that are proliferating across the flexible frontiers of globalized capitalism, between and within states.¹⁵

Neoliberal violence has transmuted itself on a global level into the violent, political social, racial, and economic energies of a resurgent fascist politics, dependent as these are on militaristic discourses of strength and conflict. As neoliberal economies increasingly resort to violence and repression, fear replaces any sense of shared responsibilities as violence is not only elevated to an organizing principle of society, but also expands a network of extreme

¹⁴Debra Utacia Krol, “Our Last Shot at Democracy,” *Think Progress*, [July 19, 2019] Online <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/our-last-shot-at-democracy/>

¹⁵Beatrix Campbell, “After neoliberalism: the need for a gender revolution”, *Soundings: After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto*, Ed. Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin, [Lawrence & Wishart, 2015]. Online: https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/04_genderrevolution.pdf

cruelty. Imagining politics as a war machine, more and more groups are treated as excess and inscribed in an order of power as disposable, enemies, and forced into conditions of extreme precarity. This is a particularly savage form of state violence and undermines and constrains agency and subjects individuals and children to zones of abandonment evident in the growth of immigrant detention centers and an expanding carceral complex in the United States and other countries such as Hungary.

Given neoliberalism's lack of vision for the future, the search for narratives on which to pin the hatred of governing elites took an anti-democratic turn. What might have been a progressive revolt against those who "capped health and welfare spending, [imposed] punitive benefit withdraws [that] forced ... many families to rely on food banks [and] withdraw sickness and disability benefits from one million former workers below retirement age"¹⁶ was channeled into a tsunami of violent racial, economic, and political energies that mobilized a fascist politics. This populist violence found a distinct expression in the January 6th attack on the capital by the many fascists, white supremacists, and bigoted mobs at the forefront of the insurrection. Across the globe, a series of uprisings have appeared that signal new anti-democratic political formations that rejected the notion that there was no alternative to neoliberal hegemony. This was evident not only with the election of Donald Trump, and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, but also with the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil, and support for popular movements such as the National Front in France. Establishment politics has lost its legitimacy evident in the rise of right-wing populist voters who are "saying 'No!' to the lethal combination of austerity, free trade, predatory debt and precarious, ill-paid work that characterizes present-day financialized capitalism."¹⁷

Unfortunately, what started out as a revolt against privileged elites turned into a movement seething with forms of resentment that were militantly anti-utopian and all too willing to support a wave of reactionary populist leaders in the United States and across Europe. As Chantal Mouffe observes, in a number of European countries, populist aspirations for autonomy, freedom, and self-determination have "been captured by right-wing populist parties that have managed to construct the people through a xenophobic discourse that excludes immigrants, considered as a threat to national prosperity."¹⁸ At the same time, with the erosion of democratic ideals such as economic and social equality, freedom, and justice, popular resistance has taken a dark turn by reinforcing rather than challenging the widespread forces of exploitation, discrimination, exclusion, and repression.

¹⁶ Paul Mason, "Overcoming the fear of freedom," *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger. (Polity Press, 2017: Cambridge, UK), p. 93-94

¹⁷ Nancy Fraser, "Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism: a Hobson's choice," *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger. (Polity Press, 2017: Cambridge, UK), p. 40.

¹⁸ Chantal Mouffe, "The Populist Moment," *Open Democracy*, (November 21, 2016). Online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/chantal-mouffe/populist-moment>

Right-wing populist leaders across the globe recognized that national economies were in the hands of foreign investors, a mobile financial elite and transnational capital. In a masterful act of political diversion, populist leaders attacked all vestiges of liberal capitalism while refusing to name neoliberal inequities in wealth and power as a basic threat to their societies. Instead of calling for an acceleration of the democratic ideals of popular sovereignty and economic equality, right-wing populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Jair Bolsonaro defined democracy as the enemy of those who wish for accountable power. They also diverted genuine popular anger into the abyss of cultural chauvinism, anti-immigrant hatred, a contempt of Muslims, and a targeted attack on the environment, healthcare, education, public institutions, social provisions, and other basic life resources. As Arjun Padurai observes, such authoritarian leaders hate democracy, capture the political emotions of those treated as disposable, and do everything they can to hide the deep contradictions of neoliberal capitalism.¹⁹

In this scenario, we have the resurgence of a fascist politics that capitalizes on the immiseration, fears and anxieties produced by neoliberalism without identifying the underlying conditions that create and legitimate its policies and social costs, namely the conflation of two fundamentally incompatible systems: capitalism and democracy. While such populists comment on certain elements of neoliberalism such as globalization, they largely embrace those ideological and economic elements that concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a political, corporate, and financial elite, thus reinforcing in the end an extreme form of capitalism. At the same time, such leaders mobilize passions that deny critical understanding while simultaneously creating desires and affects that produce toxic and hyper-masculine forms of identification.

As we will see, the problematic use of “the people” in populist discourse further legitimates an imposed and illusory universality on societies defined by difference and heterogeneity. “The people” is an abstract category that functions as an imagined community, one that erases the deep differences among individuals and diverse political groups. As Joan Pedro-Caranana observes:

The populist discourse homogenizes what is materially heterogeneous. This means that populism strangles the multiple voices of resistance and change. The populist synecdoche buries the specific demands and interests of social movements through generalisation....In reality, when populists refer to “the people” they mean only those who support (or will support) them. Those who do not support them are excluded from the people and this easily ignites animosity on the side of the excluded. They are treated as non-people. Thus, populist discourse is based on a fiction that it calls people that can never be realized as there will always be a

¹⁹Arjun Appadurai, “Democracy Fatigue,” *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger. (London: Polity Press, 2017: Cambridge, UK), P. pp. 8-9.

part of society that is not represented by populists and which will be represented by others.²⁰

What warrants repeating is that the mass anger fueling neoliberal fascism is a diversion of genuine resistance into what amounts to a pathology, which empties politics of any substance. This is evident also in its support of a right wing populism and its focus on the immigrants and refugees as dangerous outsiders, which serves to eliminate class politics and camouflage its own authoritarian ruling class interests and relentless attacks on social welfare, labor unions, public goods, women's reproductive rights, and quality health care for all.²¹ Mike Lofgren is right in arguing that "If authoritarian populism is the wave of the future, its midwife is neoliberal economics turned punitive and illiberal."²²

A number of theorists such as Noam Chomsky, John Bellamy Foster, Neil Faulkner, and Federico Finchelstein see similarities between an earlier fascism and the current state of global politics. What they have not fully acknowledged is how neoliberalism has put in motion a distinctive and powerful politics of depoliticization that has undermined viable forms of individual and collective agency capable of resisting neoliberal capitalism and its emerging fascist politics. In this sense, neoliberal fascism is not only about the crisis of economics, historical memory, civic literacy, and politics, it is also about the crisis of agency or what I call the crisis of depoliticization.

I. The Politics of Depoliticization

Increasingly Americans live in an era in which every aspect of society extending from the workplace and education to the justice system and the larger culture display symptoms of political, economic, and ethical impoverishment. This is evident not only in a society increasingly dominated by the language of extreme nationalism, racism, nativism, xenophobia, and grotesque levels of inequality, but also in a social order in which depoliticizing conditions exist that strip individuals of any sense of critical thought, self-determination and reflective agency. As a depoliticizing process, agency becomes susceptible to modes that embrace shared fears, the loss of autonomy, and rancid hatreds rather than collective values and obligations. As a mode of failed sociality, market fundamentalism has turned the principles of democracy, against itself, deforming the language of autonomy, solidarity, freedom and justice that make economic and social equality a viable idea and political goal. Neoliberalism produces a notion of individualism and anti-intellectualism that harbor a

²⁰Joan Pedro-Caranana, "The 'People' Doesn't Exist: A Critique of Left Populism," *The Sociological Review* (March 28, 2019). Online: <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/the-people-doesnt-exist-a-critique-of-left-populism/>

²¹Thomas Klikauer and Kathleen Webb Tunney, "Review of The Fascist Nature of Neoliberalism," *Knowledge Cultures* 7(2) 2019, pp. 47-52.

²²Mike Lofgren, "Maybe This Is How Democracy Ends." *AlterNet*, [January 11, 2017]. <http://www.alternet.org/election-2016/how-democracy-ends>

pathological disdain for community and in doing so reinforces the notion that all social bonds and their respective ethos of social responsibility are untrustworthy. Unchecked notions of self-interest and a regressive withdrawal from a substantive oppositional politics now replace notions of the common good and engaged citizenship, just as “existing political institutions have long since ceased to represent anyone but the wealthy.”²³ Under the reign of a market fundamentalism, social atomization becomes comparable to the death of an inclusive and just democracy.

Closely related to the depoliticizing neoliberalism, the politics of social atomization and a failed sociality is the existence of a survival-of-the-fittest ethos that drives oppressive narratives used to define both agency and our relationship to others. Mimicking the logic of a war culture, neoliberal pedagogy creates a predatory culture in which the demands of hyper-competitiveness pits individuals against each other through a market-based logic in which compassion and caring for the other is replaced by a culture of winners and losers, with the former assuming the status of a national sport if not religion. As Herbert Rosa observes, under neoliberalism,

...people perceive the world around them, the world they encounter, as a combat zone to be viewed at best with indifference but more often with hostility – a world in which their own position was always precarious anyway – they see the vital, the foreign, the strange that confront them as a danger and a threat. Indeed, their own very real experience has led them to associate change above all with decadence and decline.²⁴

The language of aggression replaces matters of concern for those deemed “other” by virtue of their class, ethnicity, religion, or race and their inability or refusal to participate in a consumer society. Underlying this neoliberal worldview is a warrior mentality that replicates “Reality TV’s” mantra of a “war of all against all,” which brings home the lesson that punishment is the norm and reward the exception. Yet, this rhetoric of command does more than pit individuals against each other in an endless loop of competitiveness, it also weakens public values and reinforces a hardening of the culture, one in which a self-righteous coldness takes delight in the suffering of others.

How else to explain Trump’s racist comments and cruel policies aimed at undocumented immigrants trying to escape from poverty, violence, gangs, and rogue societies? How else to explain Trump’s suggestion that migrants at the southern border be shot in the legs in order to slow them down and electrifying

²³Jerome Roos, “The Days of Innocence Are Over: Self-Organization in a Time of Monsters,” *The Atlantic* (January 3, 2014). Online: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/The-Days-of-Innocence-Are-Over-Self-Organization-in-a-Time-of-Monsters-20140906-0025.html>

²⁴Hermut Rosa, “Adaptation, not fossilization,” *New Statesman*, [July 14, 2017] Online: <http://www.eurozine.com/adaptation-not-fossilization/>

the wall with spikes, and a moat filled with alligators and snakes?²⁵ How else to explain separating children from their parents at the border and then placing them in detention centers that some politicians have compared to concentration camps? The predatory culture of hyper-competitiveness produces a weakening of democratic values, pressures, and ideals and in doing so creates a culture in which expressions of violence and cruelty replace the ability to act politically, responsibility, and with civic courage. This predatory culture furthers the process of depoliticization by making it difficult for individuals to identify with any viable notion of the common good. Under such circumstances, politics is no longer about the language of public interest, but about how to survive in a world without social provisions, support, community, and a faith in collective struggle.

Democratic public spheres such as the oppositional media, schools and other public institutions are disappearing under the toxic policies of austerity and privatization, thus reinforcing a hyper-individualized, masculine, and militarized culture that destroys notions of engaged and critical citizenship along with any viable sense of individual and social agency. Operating under the false assumption that there are only individual solutions to socially produced problems, neoliberal pedagogy reinforces depoliticizing states of individual alienation and isolation, which increasingly are normalized rendering human beings numb and fearful, immune to the demands of economic and social justice and increasingly divorced from matters of politics, ethics, and social responsibility. This amounts to a form of depoliticization in which individuals develop a propensity to descend into a moral stupor, a deadening cynicism, and type of coma, all the while becoming increasingly susceptible to political shocks, and the seductive pleasure of the manufactured spectacle.

In this instance, the political becomes relentlessly personal rendering difficult any notion of social agency and collective resistance. There is more at work here than a freezing of the capacity for the development of modes of critical agency, there is also the emergence and signs of widespread apathy as more and more people refuse even the most elementary appeals to participate in elections or educate themselves about politics.²⁶ Another consequence is the slow deterioration of public spheres that once offered at least the glimmer of progressive ideas, enlightened social policies, non-commodified vales, and critical exchange. As public institutions and values are undermined, matters of class and power begin to disappear along with the social movements and public spaces that support them. Unions are weakened, working people lose their jobs with no tools to prevent such losses from happening, and increasingly all

²⁵Michael D. Shear and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Shoot Migrants' Legs, Build Alligator Moat: Behind Trump's Ideas for Border," *New York Times* (October 2, 2019). Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/us/politics/trump-border-wars.html>

²⁶See, for instance, Yascha Mounk, *The People VS. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and how to Save It* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown: 2018). For a more radical version of this issue, see Henry A. Giroux, *The Terror of the Unforeseen* (Los Angeles, LARB Books, 2019).

that is left is a culture of unfocused anger, despair, and entertainment which infantilizes everything it touches.

As the connections between democracy and education wither, hope becomes the enemy of agency, and agency is reduced to learning how to survive rather than working to improve the conditions that bear down on one's life and society in general. Dealing with life's problems becomes a solitary affair reducing matters of social responsibility to a regressive and depoliticized notion of individual responsibility. As the social sphere is emptied of democratic institutions and ideals, apocalyptic visions of fear and fatalism reinforce the increasingly normalized assumption that there are no alternatives to existing political logics and the tyranny of a neoliberal global economy. Under neoliberalism, shared notions of solidarity are erased along with institutions that nurture an engaged and critical sensibility. This type of depoliticizing erasure raises the question as to how a democratic conception of politics can emerge; how does it happen, and what agents are available to take up the task of mass and collective resistance?

Within this neoliberal populist political formation, language functions to repress any sense of moral decency, connection to others and as a result individual communication rooted in democratic values and dialogue loses all meaning. Individuals are pressured increasingly to act as "ruthless seekers after their own survival, psychological pawns and puppets of a system that knows no other purpose than to keep itself in power."²⁷ Critical agency is now viewed as dangerous and undermined by the ongoing pedagogical machineries of power and a culture of manufactured ignorance that works as to produce a form of political repression, on the one hand, and political regression and infantilism on the other.²⁸

Depoliticization turns ignorance into a virtue making it even more difficult for individuals to balance reason and affect, distinguish between fact and fiction, and critical and informed judgments. Increasingly, education both in schools and in the wider cultural apparatuses, such as the mainstream and conservative media, becomes a tool of repression and neoliberal fascist propaganda. As such, the never-ending task of critique gives way to the failure of conscience, while succumbing to simplistic views of the world defined through an irrationality that is at the heart of a fascist politics. Reason and informed judgment, once a precondition for creating informed citizens, gives way to a culture of shouting,

²⁷ Leo Lowenthal, "Atomization of Man," *False Prophets: Studies in Authoritarianism*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987), pp., 184-185.

²⁸ On the issue of political repression and attacks on dissent, such forces are alive and well not only in the government but also in major corporate entities. See, for instance, Monsanto's attempts to destroy critics. Sam Levin, "Revealed: how Monsanto's 'intelligence center' targeted journalists and activists," *The Guardian* (August 8, 2019). Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/aug/07/monsanto-fusion-center-journalists-roundup-neil-young>

emotional overdrive, and shortened attention spans. New digital technologies and platforms controlled by monopolies trade in consumerism, speed, and brevity and conspire to make thoughtfulness, if not thinking itself, difficult. Knowledge is no longer troubling; instead, it is pre-packaged in the 24/7 news cycle reduced to babbling one-liners and commercial smart bombs.²⁹

As neoliberal ideology works its way through the vast reach of the mainstream and conservative media, it operates as a disimagination machine that attempts to both control history and erase moments of resistance and oppression. History as an act of dangerous memory is whitewashed, purged of utopian ideals, and replaced by apocalyptic fantasies. These include narratives of decline, fear, insecurity, anxiety, and visions of imminent danger, often expressed in the language of invasion, dangerous hordes, criminals and disease-infected others. As public vocabularies and transcripts disappear, it is difficult for individuals to understand the multiple wars waged on democratic ideals in a historical context. Everything appears to lack any antecedents, making the poisonous vitriol and policies of neoliberal fascism more energizing, fresh, and free of a toxic history. Rather than revealing humanity's legacy of repression and violence, or its heroic moments of resistance, memory is trapped in the present, a kind of add on that contributes to what Cornelius Castoriadis once called "the shameful degradation of the critical function."

The politics of depoliticization—with its refiguring of the social sphere, individual responsibility, historical memory, critical thinking, and collective identity—now begins to take the form of an acute indifference, withdrawal from public life, and a disdain for politics that amounts to a political catastrophe. The move from crisis, which implies the possibility of change, to catastrophe in which there are present agents necessary for a radical restructuring of society, is disappearing, producing what Richard Rodriguez calls "an astonishing vacancy."³⁰ In a society increasingly marked by a flight from responsibility, the ethical duty to care for the other vanishes or is viewed with disdain. In short, matters of self-fulfillment and an egoistic self-referentiality work hand in hand with instances of "painless morality" or an empty morality stripped of ethical obligations and an attentiveness to social costs.³¹

We live in a neoliberal age that destroys the most important democratic institutions, values, and relations that connect us. What is lost is a viable sense of those essential social spheres, public goods, historical consciousness, and collective forms of support necessary for an active and engaged citizenry. What

²⁹ Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2013); Christian Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism is the Age of Trump and Twitter* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

³⁰ Richard Rodriguez, "Sign of the Times," *New York Times Style Magazine* (October 19, 2014), p. 58.

³¹ Zygmunt Bauman, "Miseries of Happiness," *The Art of Life*, (Polity Press, 2008), p. 41

emerges in the absence of these institutions, public narratives, and democratic spaces is a neoliberal fascist politics and culture. This new political formation and punitive monstrosity is defined by the glitter, cruelty, spectacles, commodification, technological fanaticism, regressive notions of privatization, and disembodied notions of individualism that dethrone what Hannah Arendt has called “the prime importance of the political.”³²

II. Populism Is Not the Answer

The reigning politics of depoliticization has ushered in an age of political conformity and intellectual domestication. This is an age in which informed and engaged citizens who once struggled over the promises and ideals of democracy now provide growing support for a right-wing populism that views liberal democracy as both an anachronism and a curse. The signposts are clear. Across the globe politicians spew out simplisms and inordinate incitements of hatred and bigotry, while legitimating, if not overtly supporting, racist thuggery. Liberals cling to notions of freedom and liberty that ignore the power of capital to turn such terms into their opposite. The mainstream media measures the task of pursuing the truth against how their bottom line is affected, and violence in its multiple forms has moved from the realm of political critique to that of the pleasure-producing spectacle.

What has emerged out of this abyss of rising authoritarian power and its politics of depoliticization is not only the depredations of an updated version of fascist politics, but also the normalization of a rising tide of barbarism and a habituated ignorance. Habit normalized in a politics that destroys notions of informed agency and self-determination now merges ignorance and hatred. One result is the growing attraction of right-wing populism, which views individuals and populations displaced by global forces and deprived of the most basic means of existence including food, shelter, and pure water, with disdain and hatred. The late Russian writer and journalist Vasily Grossman issued a warning from another time that seems equally appropriate today. He writes:

How mighty, how terrible, and how kind is the power of habit! People can get used to anything—the sea, the southern stars, love, a bunk in a prison, the barbed wire of the camps.What creates this abyss is the power of habit. Dull as it seems, it is as powerful as dynamite; it can destroy anything. Passion, hatred, grief, pain—habit can destroy them all.³³

Right-wing populism offers a pseudo-democratic notion of politics in which matters of informed judgment, critical agency, and collective action disappear

³²Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, (Brooklyn, NY.: Melville House Publishing, 2013), pp. 33-34

³³Cited in Aaron Lake Smith, “The Trials of Vasily Grossman,” *Harpers*, [July 2019 issue] Online: <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/07/the-trials-of-vasily-grossman/>

into the symbol of the leader or political bosses “who pretend to be the earthly avatars of ‘the people.’”³⁴ In this discourse, politics becomes personalized in the image of the larger-than-life demagogue, removed from the alleged ignorance of the masses or “herd.” The past and present emergence of right-wing populist leaders is exemplified in the rise of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Geert Wilders, Alberto Fujimori, and Jaroslaw Kaczynski among others. Right-wing populism destroys everything that makes a genuine democratic politics possible.

As I have pointed out in previous work, right wing populism builds upon and accentuates a long tradition of anti-democratic, neoliberal, and racist tendencies that have been smoldering in the United States for decades.³⁵ It eliminates critical thinking, undermines acts of civic courage, dismantles genuine collective action rooted in mass movements, suppresses democratic forms of opposition, and crushes opponents. Its stark Hobbesian division between friends and enemies, blind loyalty and democratic participation contains a propensity for violence rooted in its unforgiving politics of exclusion. The latter is especially troubling at a time in which violence has increasingly emerged and is accepted as a defining feature and organizing principle of politics, if not society itself. In this instance, the friend/enemy binary becomes all the more dangerous in a context where history is being erased and ignorance colludes with power to give rise to widening networks of oppression.

Trump makes this divisive feature central to his mode of governance. The discourse of disparities, code for Trump for an overt assertion of white supremacy, is evident in his regressive notion of unity whose other side points to a politics of disposability. According to Trump, “The only thing that matters is the unification of the people—because the other people don’t mean anything.”³⁶ In Trump’s discourse, the call for unity has as its foundation the implication that all opposition is not only illegitimate but constitutes the terrain of the enemy. His notion of “the people” is reduced to a category that mimics the will of the leader whose image of America is as racist as it is deeply anti-democratic in this deeply authoritarian discourse. The right-wing populist claim to exclusive power, representation, and governance in the hands of the leader is not without its critical moments. For instance, right wing populist leaders go out of their way to criticize globalization and the elite, but in doing so they “claim that only they can represent the people” while putting policies into play that expand the power of the financial elite and their neoliberal imperatives such

³⁴John Keane, “The Pathologies of Populism,” *The Conversation*, [September 28, 2017] Online: <http://theconversation.com/the-pathologies-of-populism-82593>

³⁵For instance, see Henry A. Giroux, *American Nightmare: Facing the Challenge of Fascism* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2018) and *The Terror of the Unforeseen* (Los Angeles: LARB Books, 2019).

³⁶Cited in Jan-Werner Müller, “Donald Trump’s use of the term ‘the people’ is a warning sign,” *The Guardian* (January 24, 2017). Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/24/donald-trumps-warning-sign-populism-authoritarianism-inauguration>

as regressive tax cuts and the hollowing out of the welfare state.³⁷ Populist discourse make a false claim to a homogenous notion of “the people” conveniently aimed at erasing the varied identities, interests, and modes of resistance that characterize multiple social groups. Consequently, matters of resistance and social change are packaged into simpleminded calls for unity.

The demagogic character of populism can be seen in its use of a language of simplicity, one that avoids complexity, honest dialogue, multifaceted struggles, and the hard work of power-sharing modes of governance. This spirit of populism is at odds with a language that is troubling, calls power into question, disturbs machineries of class, gender, sexual, and racial oppression, and uses language to sharpen the moral imagination and bear witness to state and corporate violence. Right wing populism both demonizes and promotes the fear of an internal enemy, distorts information, and suppresses dissent and resistance. In doing so, it attempts to strip democracy of all of its ideals. Populism’s language of simplicity and its embrace of an agency-stripping notion of anti-intellectualism is further strengthened by neoliberalism’s culture of fear, insecurity, and uncertainty that accentuates a sense of frustration, anger, and political impotence that traps individuals in their own feelings, unable to translate private troubles into broader social and political considerations.

Right-wing populism speaks in the language of the perpetrator as victim, refigures the language of war as heroic, and merges the rhetoric of command and racial purity with the discourse of commerce and capitalism. Under right wing populism, the language of violence parades as the language of war, redemption, walls, barriers, and security. This is a populism without a social conscience, one that supports authoritarian societies marked by deregulation, the dismantling of the welfare state, the denial of climate change, a soaring inequality, and a struggle to define a nation’s past.

Populist leaders such as Trump and Bolsonaro rule not for the public interest but for themselves and their ultra-rich allies, furthering the slide toward lawlessness and barbarism. How else to explain Trump’s pressuring Israel to ban three Congresswomen of color from visiting Israel after he has stated that they should go back to their own countries because they had criticized his policies? How else to explain his relentlessly cruel policies such as cutting federal support for food stamps for over three million people, asserting that immigrants who use government benefits such as housing vouchers or Medicaid may be denied green cards and visas, and his ongoing immigration raids which separate families and traumatize communities. Trump’s grotesque sense of entitlement and limitless self-regard translates into a fixation on dominating and humiliating others. Borrowing from Stephen Greenblatt’s comments made in another context,

³⁷ Jan-Werner Muller, “Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy,” *The Guardian* (September 1, 2016). Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/02/trump-erdogan-farage-the-attractions>

[Trump] is a bully. Easily enraged, he strikes out at anyone who stands in his way. He enjoys seeing others cringe, tremble, or wince with pain. He is gifted at detecting weakness and deft at mockery and insult. These skills attract followers who are drawn to the same cruel delight, even if they cannot have it to his unmatched degree. Though they know that he is dangerous, the followers help him advance to his goal, which is the possession of supreme power.

Right wing populism thrives on the allure of the spectacle of violence and redirects pent up anger and aggression into a form of collaborative pleasure and emotional release that becomes complicit with the ugliness of authoritarian modes of governance and morally compromised lives.³⁸ It shares many elements of a fascist politics including an ideology of certainty unhampered by doubt and complexity in its explanation of history and in its justification for its policies. Its friend/enemy distinction fuels both a politics of disposability that makes some human beings superfluous, and also promotes a culture of fear and terror in which the unthinkable becomes normalized. It disdains the truth, scientific evidence, and empties words of any meaning while elevating lying to the status of a national ideal that legitimates a kind of dystopian legitimacy. Historical amnesia covers over its support for a thinly veiled anti-Semitism, behind its pseudo hostility towards elites, and obscures its embrace of nativism and racial hatred. Moreover, it hides its authoritarian impulses under a form of historical amnesia that allows right-wing white nationalists and populists such as Trump to celebrate “authoritarian regimes as models” similar to those that ruled Europe in the 1930s. Another reason, as historian Timothy Snyder observes, to shake off the plague of historical amnesia so that we can remember the resemblance between a 21st century fascist politics and how it echoes the horrors of the past.

Right-wing populism destroys any notion of the social marked by the principles of individual freedom, justice, equity, and equality; it also thrives on anti-intellectualism, and as Hannah Arendt once said, brings “to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment;”³⁹ Finally, right-wing populism, like fascism, supports authoritarian governments in which power is concentrated in the hands of the alleged leader.

Populism comes in many forms and some writers such as Chantal Mouffe have argued that the antidote to right wing populism is left-wing populism.⁴⁰ She insists that left-wing populism works to expose and denounce rising social and economic inequality, criticize the deep cruelties of capitalism, and rightly reveals corrupt middle-of-the road politicians. She also argues that left-wing populism opposes centrist politics with its investments in neoliberal ideology, finance capital, austerity, deregulation, and corporate power. Federico

³⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, “Excerpt adapted from *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*,” *Longreads*, [July 17, 2018]. Online: <https://longreads.com/2018/07/18/the-tyrant-and-his-enablers/>

³⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2013), p. 33.

⁴⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

Finchelstein has pointed out that left wing populism is often marked by its “attention to unequal social and economic conditions...questioning even the dogmas of neoliberal austerity measures and the supposed neutrality of technocratic business-oriented solutions.”⁴¹ Yet, he qualifies the latter by pointing out that left-wing populism undermines its political project “by its claim to exclusively represent the entire people against the elites.”⁴² Mouffe ignores this criticism and suggests that the combination of popular sovereignty and equality advocated by left-wing populists offers the greatest challenge to the pervading hold of right-wing populism across the globe, which she argues is the background condition for the erosion of the democratic ideals and institutions. Mouffe appropriates Cass Mudde’s notion that populism is essentially a clash between the people and the elite and that conflict is a defining feature of contemporary political life.⁴³ For Mouffe, populism raises the significant question of how democracy is going to be represented and by whom. Rather than viewed as a threat to liberal democracy, Mouffe argues populism raises valid questions about inequality, the rule of elites, and the question of what kind of democracy do people desire.⁴⁴

What is particularly strong about Mouffe’s argument is the call for a populist movement rooted in a more comprehensive struggle to recover and expand democracy as a political force. For Mouffe, the challenge of left-wing populism is to make clear that the struggle for popular sovereignty has to be part of a broader struggle for democracy. She recognizes that people no longer feel in control of their destinies and her answer to massive forms of alienation is to create a left-wing populism that highlights the contradictions between liberal democratic ideals and the anti-democratic politics of the emerging right-wing populism. Democracy in this view becomes a means to fight an ideological war against right-wing adversaries and diverse modes of authoritarianism.

As crucial as some of these arguments are as part of a challenge to confront right-wing populism, they are not unproblematic. Mouffe and many other advocates of left-wing populism fail to understand the pathologies inherent in all forms of populism. As theorists such as Keane, Finchelstein, and Muller point out, these extend from underestimating how populism is susceptible to being a politically empty

⁴¹ Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), p. xv.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Finchelstein, p. xv.

⁴³ Cass Mudde *The Populist Zeitgeist. Government and Opposition*, 39:4 (2004), 541-563. Online: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/populist-zeitgeist/2CD34F8B25C4FFF4F322316833DB94B7/core-reader>

⁴⁴ These issues are taken up in detail in Peter C. Baker. ‘We the people’: the battle to define populism,” *The Guardian* (January 10, 2019). Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jan/10/we-the-people-the-battle-to-define-populism>

category that can be appropriated by almost any political group.⁴⁵ Jason Stanley is right in stating that populism as a term ignores more than it reveals, especially regarding the specifics of authoritarian threats. He is worth quoting at length:

The blanket accusation of populism polices the boundaries of “politics as usual” and the parameters of legitimate and reasonable political speech. Advocates of the populist thesis emphasize its authoritarian dangers while quietly pushing off stage the more enduring and structural sources of democratic decline such as the dramatic and growing inequalities of wealth and power that have defined the era of global neoliberalism, the marketization of once public goods and steady erosion of procedures of democratic accountability, and the unfettered role of money in political life that further guarantees the ongoing intensification of these processes. These more enduring sources of democratic decline—and the resulting dynamic devolution Antonio Gramsci elegantly termed, “catastrophic equilibrium”—have arguably led to the emergence of these authoritarian movements in the first place. The term populism conveniently facilitates this evasion.⁴⁶

Moreover, populism in all of its forms is too indebted to the personalization of leadership whether such leaders are on the left such as Bernie Sanders or on the right such as Donald Trump. Moreover, as Finchelstein rightly observes, “In all cases, populism speaks in the name of a single people, and does so in the name of democracy. But democracy is defined in narrow terms as the expression of the desires of the populist leaders.”⁴⁷ Moreover, the notion of an all-encompassing “people” is an abstraction and crude generalization that ignored the multiple political, ideological, and social differences at work in any society. In addition, it runs the risk of being organized around notions of unity that replicate the friend/enemy divide, and employing politics as a weapon based on hard and fast notions of exclusion and inclusion. This tends to underestimate the role of education as a central element in addressing and changing the consciousness of people who occupy either side of the populist divide as well as people who hold contradictory attitudes towards power, equality, identity, citizenship, asylum, and other central political issues. Crippling binarisms and what Walter Benjamin once called “distractions,” do not produce a collective political consciousness, instead they feed into either the dead end of a rigid orthodoxy or the banality of celebrity culture.⁴⁸ Instead of a

⁴⁵John Keane, “The Pathologies of Populism,” *The Conversation*, [September 28, 2017] Online: <http://theconversation.com/the-pathologies-of-populism-82593>; Jan-Werner Muller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017). Clearly, an important contribution to the complex literature on populism is by Ernesto Laclau. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

⁴⁶Jason Stanley, “Populism Isn’t the Problem,” *Boston Review* (August 15, 2019). Online: <http://bostonreview.net/politics/jason-frank-populism-not-the-problem>

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, Finchelstein, p. xv.

⁴⁸Peter E. Gordon, “The Utopian Promise of Adorno’s ‘Open Thinking,’ Fifty Years On,” *The New York Review of Books* (august 5, 2019). Online: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/08/05/the-utopian-promise-of-adornos-open-thinking-fifty-years-on/>

revolution in consciousness, we get a mix of intellectual infantilism and a commodified culture that denounces all thoughts of a critical public consciousness.

Populism on both sides can open the door to conspiracy theories, create what the historian Richard Hofstadter called the “paranoid style”⁴⁹ of politics, and “morph into a tool of journalistic [if not simplistic] discourse.” In short, populism can represent a range of perspectives and possibilities while still maintaining its illiberal attributes including “understanding its own position as the only true form of political legitimacy” while refusing to recognize the validity of its opponents views, subjecting them to the process of demonization and accusing them of “being tyrannical, conspiratorial, and anti-democratic.”⁵⁰ In other words, such a perspective becomes sclerotic in its own ideology and political certainty.

Populism on both the right and left narrows the scope of power to the role of leaders, whether progressive or reactionary. This weakens a politics of resistance, and potentially undermines the hard work of building a mass anti-capitalist political movement while possibly sabotaging the rise of self-determining and engaged individual and social agents. However, it does more, in its application to any group that challenges power, it loses a sense of political specificity and historical context and tends to overgeneralize the opposition with a homogenizing view of people that conceives of political opponents as enemies. Populism in general runs the risk of pitting groups against each other and for the left this means often pitting class against race which engenders an inability to move or think beyond fractured groups as isolated, single-issue movements. In addition, power in all of its complexity is increasingly defined in simplistic terms as something to resist rather than as a tool of possibility rooted in the struggle over developing democratic institutions.

III. Conclusion: Beyond Populism

Populism has strong tendencies to criticize elites, but power runs much deeper and is present in both economic and political structures and ideologies that develop over time, all of which need to be challenged. At the same time, what is needed in this instance is a vision and a movement of informed workers, artists, intellectuals, young people, and others who are challenging not just corporate elites but capitalism itself. Populism runs the risk of becoming synonymous with momentary, if not misdirected, outbursts of anger, discontent, and moral outrage, only to be then appropriated by demagogues. Social movements are built not merely on feelings of isolation, anger, and emotional dissatisfaction but also on the hard work of organizing concerted ideological struggles to connect with the problems that everyday people confront, and to create a politics of identification in which people can recognize themselves

⁴⁹Michael Kazin, “How Can Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders Both be ‘Populist’?,” *New York Times* (March 22, 2016). Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/magazine/how-can-donald-trump-and-bernie-sanders-both-be-populist.html>

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, Finkelstein, p. 5.

and join with others not merely to condemn elites but to radically change the structures of domination.

What is needed is an anti-capitalist movement that can redirect the pain, anger, and rage of the dispossessed toward a radical restructuring of society whose aim is the construction of a democratic socialist society. The problems people face in the United States and other authoritarian capitalist societies are too deep, extend too far and command too much power. Their deep sources of oppression must be challenged by building alliances that bring together workers, intellectuals, young people, and diverse anti-capitalist social movements. Such a broad-based social and political formation must learn to speak to and with the dispossessed while addressing how capitalism deprives them of the material conditions of freedom, forcing them to compete over scarce resources, time, and dignity.

Capitalism is the antithesis of democracy and must be overthrown because it cannot provide what Jeff Noonan calls “universal life goods,” which translate into “a healthy environment, public healthcare distributed on the basis of need and not ability to pay, and an adequately funded public education system are all universal life-goods without which we cannot live and live fully.”⁵¹

Any challenge to the current rise of right-wing populism must address the need for a politics that contains both a language of critique and hope. This suggests a politics that rouses the passions of people to be energized and more informed, that makes clear that resistance must be a collective enterprise, and that such struggles must be unified in their aim to refuse the notion that capitalism and democracy are the same. Martin Luther King Jr. was right when he argued near the end of his life that we need a politics that comprehends the totality of the system we are fighting, that there is no struggle without risk, and that struggle is a collective project rooted in a revolution of values and the dream of a world in which justice and equality merge.

The depoliticizing forces at work under neoliberalism cannot be underestimated in terms of their contribution to the rise of right-wing populism. Widening inequality, rising immigration flows, widespread alienation, a hardening of culture, the collapse of public goods and civic culture, the dismantling of the social contract, the triumph of emotion over reason, the expanding criminalization of social problems, and a ballooning civic illiteracy, among other forces, all contribute to diverse forms of depoliticization. Under such circumstances, the declining popularity of liberal democracy produces a populace that lacks a sophisticated understanding of how neoliberal fascism infantilizes them politically and undermines their ability to exercise critical judgment, concerted acts of self-determination, and collective resistance. The left needs to make visible the

⁵¹ Jeff Noonan, “Far-Right Identity, Politics and the Task for the Left,” *Socialist Project*, [May 21, 2018]. Online: <https://socialistproject.ca/2019/05/far-right-identity-politics-and-the-task-for-the-left/>

right-wing assault on the basic values and programs that undermine democracy, social justice, and promote widespread misery and suffering. It needs to provide alternative educational programs, use the alternative media to educate people in a language they can understand, use demonstrations as pedagogical tools to raise consciousness, and make education central to promoting policies that both undermine capitalism and give meaning to what a socialist society looks like. There will be no change to the power and ideological dynamics of a savage capitalism if matters of popular sovereignty, class struggles, and economic equality are not central to the collective fights for economic, political, and social justice.

Neither a reactionary nor a progressive populism will provide a strategy capable of challenging the new capitalist formation I term neoliberal fascism. Populism tends towards extremes and a pseudo-democratic style of politics that embraces an imagined people, oversimplifications, and charismatic and demagogic leaders.⁵² Neoliberal fascism must be challenged with a new narrative and vision of what counts as politics at a time in which power has become global and the promises of established liberal elites have become bankrupt politically and ethically. Nancy Fraser rightly argues that we need a political movement in which “a broad spectrum of social actors can find themselves” and address the “challenge of financialization, deindustrialization” and “corporate globalization.”⁵³ She is also right in insisting that the left needs a new political narrative that clearly articulates conjoining “the struggle for emancipation and social equality” while simultaneously informed by a vision that provides a revitalized project for aligning “an egalitarian social movement with an abandoned working class.”⁵⁴

Populism neither explains the rise of fascist movements around the globe nor does it provide the answer to challenging them. What is needed is a powerful new vision of politics, one that takes education, agency, and power seriously in its ongoing efforts to develop an alliance among those forces who can imagine and struggle for a world in which neoliberal fascism no longer exists and the promise of a socialist democracy becomes more than a utopian dream. There will be no justice without a struggle, and there will be no future worth living without the collective will to struggle.

52] John Keane, “The Pathologies of Populism,” *The Conversation*, [September 28, 2017]. Online: <http://theconversation.com/the-pathologies-of-populism-82593>

53] Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond”, *American Affairs*, (Winter 2017 | Vol. I, No 4) Online at: <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/>

54] Nancy Fraser and Houssam Hamade, “A new leftist narrative is required,” *Open Democracy* (August 2017). Online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/nancy-fraser-houssam-hamade/new-leftist-narrative-is-required>