

DISPOSABLE FUTURES

THE SEDUCTION OF VIOLENCE IN THE AGE OF SPECTACLE

BRAD EVANS AND HENRY A. GIROUX



“Beginning with Primo Levi and ending with Deleuze, Evans and Giroux map the radical transformation that has affected the representation of cruelty between the 20th and the 21st century. From ‘exceptional’ status, associated with the ultimate figures of state sovereignty, it has passed to a ‘routinized’ object of communication, consumption and manipulation. This is not to say that everything is visible, only that the protocols of visibility have been appropriated by a different form of economy, where humans are completely disposable. To counter this violence in the second degree, and to preserve our capacity to face the intolerable, a new aesthetics and politics of imagination is required. This powerful, committed, exciting book does more than just evoke its urgency. It already practices it.” —Étienne Balibar, author of *Violence and Civility*

“*Disposable Futures* confronts a key conundrum of our times: How is it that, given the capacity and abundance of resources to address the critical needs of all, so many are having their futures radically discounted while the privileged few dramatically increase their wealth and power? Brad Evans and Henry Giroux have written a trenchant analysis of the logic of late capitalism that has rendered it normal to dispose of any who do not service the powerful. A searing indictment of the socio-technique of destruction and the decisions of their deployability. Anyone concerned with trying to comprehend these driving dynamics of our time would be well served by taking up this compelling book.” —David Theo Goldberg, author of *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*

“Brad Evans and Henry Giroux offer a trenchant analysis of neoliberalism’s ills: its violence, its dystopian vision, its intrusiveness, and its attempt to eradicate all critical consciousness and with it all hope. They diagnose our exposure to disposability in an era marked by the collapse of a vision of a viable future. In doing so, they have laid out the challenge before us. The only question left is, do we have the will, as the authors suggest, to fabricate a nonviolent response to it?” —Todd May, Class of 1941 Memorial Professor of the Humanities, Clemson University

“*Disposable Futures* poses, and answers, the pressing question of our times: How is it that in this post-Fascist, post-Cold War era of peace and prosperity we are saddled with more war, violence, inequality, and poverty than ever? The neoliberal era, Evans and Giroux brilliantly reveal, is defined by violence, by drone strikes, ‘smart’ bombs, militarized police, Black lives taken, prison expansion, corporatized education, surveillance, the raw violence of racism, patriarchy, starvation, and want. The authors show how the neoliberal regime normalizes violence, renders its victims disposable, commodifies the spectacle of relentless violence and sells it to us as entertainment, and tries to contain cultures of resistance. If you’re not afraid of the truth in these dark times, then read this book. It is a beacon of light.” —Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

“*Disposable Futures* is an utterly spellbinding analysis of violence in the later 20th and early 21st centuries. It strikes me as a new breed of street-smart intellectualism moving through broad-ranging theoretical influences of Adorno, Arendt, Bauman, Deleuze, Foucault, Žižek, Marcuse, and Reich. I especially appreciated the discussion of representation and how it functions within a broader logic of power; the descriptions and analyses of violence mediating the social field and fracturing it through

paralyzing fear and anxiety; the colonization of bodies and pleasures; and the nuanced discussion of how state violence, surveillance, and disposability connect. Big ideas explained using a fresh, straightforward voice.” —Adrian Parr, author of *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics*

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For Tony Penna, my mentor and lost friend.

HENRY GIROUX

For Amelie, my beautiful little girl

BRAD EVANS

PREFACE

THE DROWNING

Writing one of the most important personal testimonies on the extreme horrors of the twentieth century, Primo Levi observes: “Logic and morality made it impossible to accept an illogical and immoral reality; they engendered a rejection of reality which as a rule led the cultivated man rapidly to despair.” Indeed, the tragedy of ideological fascism for Levi is both the forced complicity of victims into systems of brutal slaughter, and the seductions of violence made desirable by those interned to render them accomplices in their own destruction. As he further states, “the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness, with all its infinite nuances and motivations, to collaborate: terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation of the victor, myopic desire for any power whatsoever.” Central to Levi’s analysis here is the way in which the spectacle of violence becomes a substitute for human empowerment—a last refuge if you will—for those who are already condemned by the system.

Levi exposes us to the depths of human depravity and the dehumanization of our worldly fellows. He also warns us about the dangers of reducing the human condition to questions of pure survival, such that a truly dystopian condition accentuates the logic of violence by seducing the oppressed to desire their own oppression or to imagine a world in which the only condition of agency is survival. Eventually, as Levi points out, the spectacle of violence becomes so ingrained that everybody is infected, to the extent that clear lines concerning morality, ethics, and political affinities blur in what he termed “the gray zone.” If the system strips some lives of all sense of humanity and dignity—the killing of the subject while the person is still alive—so they come to embody what he named “the drowned,” those who remain are forever burdened by the guilt of surviving, the shame of being “saved” from a wretchedness that destroys the very notion of humanity.

Levi’s notion of disposability was rooted in a brutalism in which genocide became a policy and the slaughter of millions the means to an end. What Levi couldn’t have foreseen given the extreme dystopian historical circumstances of his time, however, was that disposability or the notion of intolerable violence and suffering in the twenty-first century would be recast by the very regimes that claimed to defeat ideological fascism. We are not in any way suggesting a uniform history here. The spectacle of violence is neither a universal nor a transcendental force haunting social relations. It emerges in different forms under distinct social formations, and signals in different ways how culture and politics works necessarily as a pedagogical force. The spectacle of violence takes on a kind of doubling, both in the production of subjects willing to serve the political and economic power represented by the spectacle and increasingly in the production of political and economic power willing to serve the spectacle itself. In this instance, the spectacle of violence exceeds its own pedagogical aims by bypassing even the minimalist democratic gesture of gaining consent from the subjects whose interests are supposed to be served by state power.

It was against twentieth-century forms of human disposability that we began to appreciate the political potency of the arts as a mode of resistance, as dystopian literatures, cinema, music, and poetry, along with the visual and performing arts, challenged conventional ways of interpreting

catastrophe. We only need to be reminded here of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Bertolt Brecht's *The In-terrogation of the Good*, Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain*, and Gorecki's *Symphony No. 3* to reveal the political value of more poetic interventions and creative responses to conditions we elect to term "the intolerable." Indeed, if the reduction of life to some scientific variable, capable of being manipulated and prodded into action as if it were some expendable lab rat, became the hallmark of violence in the name of progress, it was precisely the strategic confluence between the arts and politics that enabled us to challenge the dominant paradigm of twentieth-century thought. Hence, in theory at least, the idea that we needed to connect with the world in a more cultured and meaningful way appeared to be on the side of the practice of freedom and breathed new life into politics.

And yet, despite the horrors of the Century of Violence, our ways of thinking about politics not only have remained tied to the types of scientific reductions that history warns to be integral to the dehumanization of the subject, but such thinking has also made it difficult to define the very conditions that make a new politics possible. At the same time accelerating evolution of digital communications radicalizes the very contours of the human condition such that we are now truly "image conscious," so too is life increasingly defined and altered by the visual gaze and a screen culture whose omniscient presence offers new spaces for thinking dangerously. This hasn't led, however, to the harnessing of the power of imagination when dealing with the most pressing political issues. With neoliberal power having entered into the global space of flows while our politics remain wedded to out dated ways of thinking and acting, even the leaders of the strongest nations now preach the inevitability of catastrophe, forcing us to partake in a world they declare to be "insecure by design."

Isaac Cordal's *Follow the Leaders*, which appears on the cover of this book, captures the horrifying predicament of our contemporary neoliberal state of decline. While Cordal's work is commonly interpreted as providing commentary on the failures of our political leaders to prevent climate change, we prefer to connect it more broadly to the normalization of dystopian narratives in a way that forces us to address the fundamental questions of memory, political agency, responsibility, and bearing witness to the coming catastrophes that seemingly offer no possibility for escape. Indeed while the logics of contemporary violence are undoubtedly different from those witnessed by Levi at the extermination camps of Nazi Germany, Cordal's work nevertheless points to emergence of a new kind of terror haunting possibilities of a radical democracy, threatening to drown us all beneath the contaminated waters of a system that pays little regard to the human condition. To quote the contemporary artist Gottfried Helnwein:

Mussolini once said: "Fascism should rightly be called Corporatism, as it is the merger of corporate and government power." Well, look around—does it look like there is a growing influence of bankers and big corporations on our governments and our lives? The new Fascists will not come as grim-looking brutes in daemonic black uniforms and boots, they will wear slick suits and ties, and they will be smiling.¹

With this in mind, our decision to write this book was driven by a fundamental need to rethink the concept of the political itself. Just as neoliberalism has made a bonfire of the sovereign principle of the social contract, so too has it exhausted its claims to progress and reduced politics to a blind science in ways that eviscerate those irreducible qualities that distinguish humans from other predatory animals—namely love, cooperation, community, solidarity, creative wonderment, and the

drive to imagine and explore more just and egalitarian worlds than the one we have created for ourselves. Neoliberalism is violence against the cultural conditions and civic agency that make democracy possible. Its relentless mechanisms of privatization, commodification, deregulation, and militarization cannot acknowledge or tolerate a formative culture and social order in which non-market values as solidarity, civic education, community building, equality, and justice are prioritized.

This is a problem we unfortunately find evident in dominating strands of leftist thought which continue to try to resurrect the language, dogmatism, and scientific idealism of yesteryear. Rather than being mined for its insights and lessons for the present, history has become frozen for too many on the left for whom crippling orthodoxies and time-capsuled ideologies serve to disable rather than enable both the radical imagination and an emancipatory politics. There can be no twentieth-century solutions to twenty-first-century problems, what is needed is a new radical imagination that is able to mobilize alternative forms of social agency. It is therefore hoped that the book will both serve as a warning against the already present production of our disposable futures, and provide a moderate contribution to the much needed conversation for more radically poetic and politically liberating alternatives.

ONE

CULTURES OF CRUELTY

Critique of Violence

Imagine a world where spectacles of violence have become so ubiquitous that it is no longer possible to identify any clear civic, social, or ethical qualities in the enforced social order. Imagine a world where those who live on the margins of such a social order are condemned for their plight, while those who control the political processes prosper from those very policies that bring about social abandonment and human destruction. Imagine a world where the technological promise of human connectivity is supplanted by forms of surveillance that encourage citizens to actively participate in their own inescapable oppression. Imagine a world that proclaims an end to the brutality of colonialism, all the while continuing to consciously vilify, target, incarcerate, and kill those of different color. Imagine a world where the forces of militarism have become so ingrained that they are inseparable from the daily functioning of civic life. Imagine a world where the institutions tasked with producing the most brilliant and publicly engaged minds are put to the service of an uncompromising war machine. And imagine a world that has lost all faith in its ability to envisage—let alone create—better futures, condemning its citizens instead to a desolate terrain of inevitable catastrophe. The great tragedy of the current historical moment is that we can imagine this world all too easily, for it is the picture of the world that dominates the realities of our present condition. It is a world most people experience on a daily basis—a world that has become normalized and for which there is no immediate alternative—a world we understand as neoliberalism.

Neoliberal power is unmediated in its effects on people as it operates throughout the global space of unregulated flows. Whereas in an earlier industrial period capital was largely rooted and people migrated, for the most part today capital flows while peoples are contained. What becomes of sovereignty in this economically driven environment is a military and policing protectorate put to the service of global capital in ways that work by condemning the already condemned. At the same time, neoliberal ideology, policies, and modes of governing are normalized as if there is no outside alternative to capitalism. As corporate power replaces political sovereignty, politics becomes an extension of war and all public spaces are transformed into battle zones. Not only are all vestiges of the social contract, the safety net, and institutions of democracy under siege, but so too are all public spheres that support non-market values such as trust, critical dialogue, and solidarity. How else explain Heartland Institute President Joseph Best denouncing public schools as “socialist regimes”? Paul Buchheit is right in arguing that “privatizers believe that any form of working together as a community is anti-American. To them, individual achievement is all that matters. They’re not applying their winner-take-all profit motive to our children.” They are also punishing those individuals, groups, and institutions that refuse the individualized and cut throat values of a market-driven casino capitalism.

At the same time, under the interlocking regimes of neoliberal power, violence appears so arbitrary and thoughtless that it lacks the need for any justification, let alone claims to justice and

accountability. It is truly as limitless as it appears banal. All that matters instead is to re-create the very conditions to further and deepen the crises of neoliberal rule. Violence, with its ever-present economy of uncertainty, fear, and terror, is no longer merely a side effect of police brutality, war, or criminal behavior; it has become fundamental to neoliberalism as a particularly savage facet of capitalism. And in doing so it has turned out to be central to legitimating those social relations in which the political and pedagogical are redefined in order to undercut possibilities for authentic democracy. Under such circumstances, the social becomes retrograde, emptied of any democratic values, and organized around a culture of shared anxieties rather than shared responsibilities. The contemporary world, then—the world of neoliberalism—creates the most monstrous of illusions, one that functions by hiding things in plain sight. We see this most troublingly played out as its simulated spectacles of destruction are scripted in such a way as to support the narrative that violence itself is enjoying a veritable decline as a result of liberal influence and pacification. Howard Zinn understood this perversion better than most:

I start from the supposition that the world is topsy-turvy, that things are all wrong, that the wrong people are in jail and the wrong people are out of jail, that the wrong people are in power and the wrong people are out of power, that the wealth is distributed in this country and the world in such a way as not simply to require small reform but to require a drastic reallocation of wealth. I start from the supposition that we don't have to say too much about this because all we have to do is think about the state of the world today and realize that things are all upside down.¹

There is no greater task today than to develop a critique of violence adequate to our deeply unjust, inequitable, and violent times. Only then might we grasp the magnitude and depths of suffering endured on a daily basis by many of the world's citizens. Only then might we move beyond the conceit of a neoliberal project, which has normalized violence such that its worst manifestations become part of our cultural "pastimes." And only then might we reignite a radical imagination that is capable of diagnosing the violence of the present in such a manner that we have the confidence to rethink the meaning of global citizenship in the twenty-first century.

Following on from the enduring legacy and inspiration of Zinn and other cautionary voices of political concern such as Paulo Freire, our critique begins from the supposition that mass violence today must be understood by comprehending the ways in which systemic cruelty is transformed into questions of individual pathology. What is more, with the burden of guilt placed on the shoulders of the already condemned, those whose lives are rendered disposable, we must question more rigorously the imaginaries of violence, which instigate a forced partaking in a system that encourages the subjugated to embrace their oppression as though it were their liberation. Nowhere is this more apparent today than in the doctrine of "resilience" which, as critiqued elsewhere, forces us to accept our vulnerabilities without providing us with the tools for genuine transformation of those systematic processes that render us insecure in the first place.² Neoliberalism's culture of violence is reinforced by what Zsuzsa Ferge calls the "individualization of the social,"³ in which all traces of the broader structural forces producing a range of social problems such as widening inequality and mass poverty disappear. Under the regime of neoliberalism, individual responsibility becomes the only politics that matters and serves to blame those who are susceptible to larger systemic forces. Even though such problems are not of their own making, neoliberalism's discourse insists that the fate of the vulnerable is a product of personal issues ranging from weak character to bad choices or simply mor

deficiencies. This makes it easier for its advocates to argue that “poverty is a deserved condition.”⁴

Systematic violence has never been “exceptional” in the history of capitalistic development. How might we explain David Harvey’s apt description of capitalist expansion as “accumulation by dispossession,”⁵ if the rise of capitalism did not signal the advent of a truly predatory social formation? Indeed, even the contemporary advocates of neoliberal markets recognize that their notion of a “just world” depends on coercion and violence as a way to enforce capitalism’s uneven distribution of wealth and impoverishment. As the Oxford economic historian Avner Offer explained to Chris Hedges, “those who suffer deserve to suffer.”⁶ The neoliberal model is, after all, “a war machine for inflicting pain.”⁷ The regime of neoliberalism is precisely organized for the production of violence. Such violence is more than symbolic. Instead of waging a war on poverty it wages a war on the poor—and does so removed from any concern for social costs or ethical violations. Such a brutal diagnosis argues in favor of a neoliberal model despite its perverse outcomes: “It is perhaps symptomatic that the USA, a society that elevates freedom to the highest position among its values, is also the one that has one of the very largest penal systems in the world relative to its population. It also inflicts violence all over the world. It tolerates a great deal of gun violence, and a health service that excludes large numbers of people.”⁸ Its effects in the United States are evident in the incarceration of more than 2.3 million people, mostly people of color. Not only are 77 percent of all inmates people of color, but, as Michelle Alexander has pointed out, as of 2012 “more African American men were disenfranchised (due to felon disenfranchisement laws) than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race.”⁹ The necropolitics of neoliberal policies is evident in the unnecessary deaths of up to 17,000 more Americans each year because partisan ideologues opted out of the expansion of the Medicaid program offered by the Obama administration.¹⁰ Across the globe, violence creeps into almost all of the commanding institutions of public life, extending from public schools to health care apparatuses. Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano knew the impacts of neoliberalism’s theater of cruelty better than most: “Our defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others—the empires and their native overseers. In the colonial and neo-colonial alchemy, gold changes into scrap metal and food into poison.”¹¹

Zygmunt Bauman has taken this further by showing us how the most appalling acts of mass slaughter have been perfectly in keeping with the modern compulsion to destroy lives for more progressive times to come.¹² Acts of non-violence, in fact, are the exceptional moments of our more recent history. They also confirm Hannah Arendt’s insistence that power and violence are *qualitatively* different.¹³ There is no doubt something truly powerful, truly exceptional, to the examples set by Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, and indigenous movements such as the Zapatistas of Mexico, whose choice of non-violence as an insurgent strategy reveals more fully the violence of oppressive contemporary regimes. Violence easily deals with violence on its own terms. Carlos Marighella was wrong to suggest otherwise.¹⁴ What violence, however, cannot deal with except by issuing more violence, remains the power of a dignified response and movements of collective resistance by those who refuse to get caught up in a cycle of cruelty that corrupts even good intention. Frantz Fanon was most clear in this respect.¹⁵ Who are the “wretched,” after all, if not those who fail to see that their recourse to violence only produces a mirror image of that which was once deemed intolerable?

Our history—the history of our present—is a history of violence. Beneath the surface of every semblance of peace, it is possible to identify all too easily the scars of sacrifice and the bloodshed of victims whose only error was often to be born in a cruel age. There are many ways in which we could

try to make sense of this burden of sacrificial history. Why do so many continue to die for the sake of the living? Why do we continue to protect inhuman conditions through the endless wars fought in the name of humanity? Why is killing so often presented as necessary? How is it that the police in the United States can kill blacks at a rate twenty-one times higher than whites and not only act with impunity but respond to protests by the larger public almost exclusively with massive militarized responses, as if the use of violence is the only legitimate form of mediation to any problem that emerges in the larger society? While all these questions are important, it is precisely the spectacle that most perturbs us here. For it is through the spectacle of violence that we begin to uncover the ability to strip life of any political, ethical, and human claim. Violence seeks to curate who and what is human even though the physical body might still be in existence. When violence becomes normalized and decentered, the disposability of entire populations becomes integral to the functioning, the profiteering, and the entrenchment of the prevailing rationalities of the dominant culture. Such violence, in other words, offers the most potent diagnosis of any political project by revealing what is deemed culturally acceptable and socially normalized.

There is an important point to stress here regarding the logics of brutality. Violence is easily condemned when it appears exceptional. This also unfortunately precludes more searching and uncomfortable questions. Normalized violence, by contrast, represents a more formidable challenge requiring a more sophisticated and learned response. Exposing more fully how these normalized cultures of cruelty shape the historic moment is the main purpose of this work, as it is integral to the critical imagination and those forms of political agency necessary for successfully living in a nonviolent and civilian future.

Our motivation for writing this book is driven by a commitment to the value of critical pedagogy in countering mechanisms of dehumanization and domination at play in neoliberal societies and beyond. We have no time whatsoever for those who reason that violence may be studied in a “objective” or “rational” way. There are no neutral pedagogies indifferent to matters of political power, and ideology. Pedagogy is, in part, always about both struggle and vision—struggles over identities, modes of agency, values, desires, and visions of the possible. Not only does the apologetic of neutrality lead to the most remiss intellectualism when the personal experience of violence is reduced to emotionless inquiry, but it also announces complicity in the rationalizations of violence that depend upon the degradation of those qualities that constitute what is essential to the human condition. Thus, education is by definition a form of political intervention. It is always disentangling itself from particular regimes of power that attempt to authenticate and disqualify certain ways of perceiving and thinking about the world. The larger issue is that not only is education central to politics, but the educative nature of politics begins with the assumption that how people think, critically engage the world, and are self-reflective about the shaping of their own experiences and relations to others marks the beginning of a viable and oppositional politics.

We dare to perceive and think differently from both neo-liberal rule and the increasingly stagnant and redundant left, which does little to counter it. The world that we inhabit is systematically oppressive and tolerates the most banal and ritualistic forms of violence. It educates us of the need for warfare; it prizes, above all, the values of militarism and its conceptual apparatus of “civilized soldierology.” It sanctions and openly celebrates killings as if they are necessary to prove our civilization’s credentials. It takes pride, if not pleasure, in punishing peoples of distinct racial and class profiles, all in the name of better securing society. It promotes those within that order with characteristics that in other situations would be both criminalized and deemed pathological.¹⁶ And it invests significantly in all manner of cultural productions so that we develop a taste for violence, and

even learn to appreciate aesthetics of violence, as the normal and necessary price of being entertained

This book inevitably draws upon a number of critical visionaries whose fight for dignity cannot be divorced from their intellectual concerns. The spirit of the late Paulo Freire in particular is impressed upon each of these pages.¹⁷ His critical pedagogy was unashamedly tasked with liberating both the oppressed and their oppressors from the self-perpetuating dynamics of subjugation. Freire's project echoed the humanizing call for a more just, literate, and tolerant world. He remains a strong influence in the field of education and in other areas of practice that require thinking about the possibility of an ethics of difference that resists violence in all its forms.

The power and forcefulness of Freire's works are to be found in the tensions, conflicts, poetry, and politics that make it a project for thinking about (non)violence meaningfully. Siding with the disempowered of history—those at the raw ends of tyranny—Freire's work calls for a more poetic image of thought that is a way of reclaiming power by reimagining the space and practice of culture and political resistance. His work thus represents a textual borderland where poetry slips into liberation politics, and solidarity becomes a song for the present begun in the past while waiting to be heard in the future. Freire, no less trenchant in his critique of illegitimate rule, refuses to dwell in hopelessness. His resistance is empowering because it is infused with a fearless belief in people's abilities and finds reasons to rejoice in the transformative possibilities of living:

The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.¹⁸

Freire is not only our source of inspiration. Nearly a century ago Walter Benjamin responded to the tyranny of his times by writing his famous "Critique of Violence."¹⁹ Ours is a different age. And yet the need for a critique adequate to our times is as pressing as ever. We are not lacking in knowledge of our own oppression. Let's be sure of that. Oppressive power reveals enough of its violent traces for even a casual cartographer to expose its deceptions or else retreat into conspiracy. What we do lack is a rigorous critique of the historical moment and its varied modes of imaginative resistance. Such modes of artistic imagination are as important as contemporary sources of oppression are in mediating suffering in the service of established contemporary power. This requires a critique of violence that once again encourages us to think beyond its necessity, so as to make clear that in a world in which violence is normalized, it once again becomes possible to imagine the unimaginable, particularly the notion that collective resistance not only is possible but can transform the world with confidence.

Hence, while authors like Steven Pinker cloud our perception by claiming the current era is the least violent era in human history, relying upon crude per capita human death rates etc.,²⁰ it takes only a slightly different angle of vision to see the current social order's full range of preventable violence: impoverishment, financial predation, malnutrition, mass incarceration, and rapidly accelerating deforestation, ecological degradation, and irreversible biocide. Pinker would do well to acknowledge that political violence is poorly understood if it simply refers to a failure of liberal modernity. Political violence cannot be reduced to such a crude and reductionist metric. Indeed, conventional demarcations between times of war and times of peace, zones of security and zones of crises, friend

and enemies, have long since evaporated. We live in complex and radically interconnected societies whose social morphology has radically altered our sense of the world such that we are taught to accept insecurity as the natural order of things.²¹ This is fully in keeping with the proliferation of media output, factual and fictional, that bombards us continuously with images of violence and catastrophe for subtle political gain. Indeed, what is new about the current historical conjuncture is not only commodified popular culture that trades in extreme violence, greed, and narcissism as a source of entertainment, but the emergence of a predatory society in which the suffering and death of others becomes a reason to rejoice rather than mourn. Extreme violence has become not only a commodified spectacle, but one of the few popular resources available through which people can bump up their pleasure quotient.

Our critique begins from the realization that violence has become ubiquitous, “settling like some all-enveloping excremental mist . . . that has permeated every nook of any institution or being that has real influence on the way we live now.”²² We cannot escape its spectre. Its presence is everywhere. It is hardwired into the fabric of our digital DNA. Capitalism in fact has always thrived on its consumption. There is, after all, no profit in peace. We are not calling here for the censoring of all representations of violence as if we could retreat into some sheltered protectorate. That would be foolish and intellectually dangerous. Our claim is both that the violence we are exposed to is heavily mediated, and that as such we are witness to various spectacles that serve a distinct political function, especially as they either work to demonize political resistance or simply extract from its occurrence (fictional and actual) any sense of political context and critical insight. Moving beyond the spectacle by making visible the reality of violence in all of its modes is both necessary and politically important. What we need then is an ethical approach to the problem of violence such that its occurrence is intolerable to witness.

Exposing violence is not the same as being exposed to it, though the former too often comes as a result of the latter. The corrupting and punishing forms taken by violence today must be addressed by all people as both the most important element of power and the most vital of forces shaping social relationships under the predatory formation of neoliberalism. Violence is both symbolic and material in its effects and its assaults on all social relations, whereas the mediation of violence coupled with its aesthetic regimes of suffering is a form of violence that takes as its object both memory and thought. It purges the historical record, denying access to the history of a more dignified present, purposefully destroying the ability to connect forms of struggle across the ages. Memory as such is fundamental to any ethics of responsibility. Our critique of violence begins, then, as an ethical imperative. It demands a rigorous questioning of the normalized culture of violence in which we are now immersed. It looks to the past so that we may understand the violence of our present. It looks to the ways that ideas about the future shape the present such that we learn to accept a world that is deemed to be violent by design. This requires a proper critical reading of the way violence is mediated in our contemporary moment; how skewed power relations and propagators of violence are absolved of any wider blame; a pedagogical and political game that permits only winners and losers; how any act of injustice is made permissible in a world that enshrines systemic cruelty.

The Dystopian Imagination

The twentieth century is often termed the “Century of Violence.” And rightly so, given the widespread devastation of an entire continent during the two World Wars; the continued plunder and suppression of former colonial enclaves; the rebirth of extermination camps in the progressive heart of a modern

Europe; the appalling experiments in human barbarism that incinerated Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the torture and symbolic acts of disappearance so widespread in Latin America; the passivity in the face of ongoing acts of genocide; the wars and violence carried out in the name of some deceitful humanitarian principle. This legacy of violence makes it difficult to assess this history without developing profound suspicions about the nature of the human condition and its capacity for evil. One of the particular novelties of this period was the emergence of dystopia literatures and compelling works of art that proved integral to the lasting critique of totalitarian regimes. Indeed, some of the most appealing prose of the times was put forward not by recognized political theorists or radical philosophers, but by the likes of Yevgeny Zamyatin, H. G. Wells, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley amongst others, who managed to reveal with incisive flair and public appeal the violence so often hidden beneath the utopian promise of technologically driven progress.²³ Dystopia in these discourses embodied a warning and a hope that humankind would address and reverse the dark authoritarian practices that descended on the twentieth century like a thick, choking fog.

Hannah Arendt understood how the authoritarian violence of the twentieth century needed a broader frame of reference.²⁴ The harrowing experimental camps of the colonies would all too quickly blow back into the metropolitan homelands as gulags, death camps, and torture chambers become exportable elements in the production of theaters of cruelty. The utopian promise of the Enlightenment thus contained within it the violence and brutalities embedded in the logic of instrumental rationality and the unchecked appeal to progress and ideological purity, all of which were later rehearsed within the most terrifying fictions and rewritten with the same devastating effect for those expendable millions that made up a veritable continent of suffering we could rightly map as the globally dispossessed.

We live, however, in a different political moment. The state is no longer the center of politics. Neoliberalism has made a bonfire of the sovereign principles embodied in the social contract. Nor can we simply diagnose twenty-first-century forms of oppression and exploitation by relying on well-rehearsed orthodoxies of our recent past. With power and its modalities of violence having entered into the global space of flows—detached from the controlling political interests of the nation-state and utilizing technologies far beyond those imagined in the most exaggerating of twentieth-century fictions—the dystopian theorists of yesteryear prove to be of limited use.²⁵ The virtues of political affirmation and confidence appear increasingly to have fallen prey to formations of global capitalism and its engulfing webs of precarity that have reduced human life to the task of merely being able to survive. Individual and collective agencies are not only under siege to a degree unparalleled at any other time in history, but have become depoliticized, overcome by a culture of anxiety, insecurity, commodification, and privatization.

More specifically, under neoliberal rule the vast majority are forced to live a barely sustainable precariousness and to accept that our contemporary society is naturally precarious. That the future is a terrain of endemic and unavoidable catastrophe is taken as given in most policy circles. Dystopia, in other words, is no longer the realm of scientific fiction—as suggested, for instance, by increasingly urgent recent climate reports warning that the integrity of the planet's diversity-sustaining biosphere is collapsing. It is the dominant imaginary for neoliberal governance and its narcissistic reasoning.

If Theodor Adorno was right to argue that the apocalypse already occurred with the realization of the Holocaust and the experience of World War II, what has taken its place is a discourse signaling the normalization of a catastrophic imagination that offers few means for possible escape.²⁶ Despite the relation to “end of times narratives,” as Jacob Taubes once noted,²⁷ there is perhaps something different at work here between the pre-modern apocalyptic movements and the shift toward

catastrophic reasoning that has come to define the contemporary moment. For all their nihilism and monotheistic servitude, at least the apocalyptic movements actively imagine a better world than the one they are in. Theirs was and is open to the idea of a different time-to-come. Under neoliberalism, imagining a better future is limited entirely to imagining the privatization of the entire world or, even worse, imagining simply how to survive.

It is within this historical conjuncture and the current savagery of various regimes of neoliberal capitalism that we conceived of the need to develop a critical paradigm that interrogates and resists the intensification of the *politics of disposability*—the ways in which people, families, and communities are not only increasingly considered excess to be discarded, but also alienated from the millions of similarly oppressed others so as to prevent them from developing the solidarity necessary to successfully challenge the wider political dynamics and circumstances at play against them.²⁸ Such a politics, we argue, normalizes disposability in such a way as to place the burden of social ills on the shoulders of the victims.

Dystopian politics has become mainstream politics as the practice of disposability has intensified and more and more communities are now considered excess, consigned to “zones of social abandonment,”²⁹ surveillance, and incarceration. The expansive politics of disposability can be seen in the rising numbers of homeless, the growing army of debt-ridden students whose prospects remain bleak, those lacking basic necessities amid widening income disparities, the surveillance of immigrants, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the widespread destruction of the middle class by new forms of debt servitude.³⁰ Citizens, as Gilles Deleuze foresaw,³¹ are now reduced to data, consumer and commodities and as such inhabit identities in which they increasingly become unknowables, with no human or civic rights and with no one accountable for their condition.

There is, however, more at stake here than the contemporary plight of those millions forced to live in intolerable conditions. What we will argue throughout this book is that contemporary forms of disposability are so abhorrent precisely because they now shape *disposable futures*. The future now appears to us as a terrain of endemic catastrophe and disorder from which there is no clear escape except to continue to show allegiance to those predatory formations that put us there in the first place. Devoid of any alternative image of the world, we are requested merely to see the world as predestined and catastrophically fated. Frederic Jameson’s claim, then, that it is easier to “imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism”³² is more than a reflection on the poverty of contemporary imaginations. It is revealing of the nihilism of our times which forces us to accept that the only world conceivable is the one we are currently forced to endure. A world that is brutally reproduced and forces us all to consume its spectacles of violence, and demands we accept that all things are ultimately built to be vulnerable. In this suffocating climate, we are indoctrinated to imagine that the best we can hope for is to be connected to some fragile and precarious life-support system—the neoliberal grid of credit, precarious insurance, and privilege—that may be withdrawn from us at any moment.

Political affirmation is increasingly dissolved into pervasive nihilism as our politics are increasingly reduced to the quest for mere survival. For if there is a clear lesson, as New Yorkers now testify better than most, to living in these times, it is precisely that the lights can go out at any given moment, without any lasting concern for social responsibility. This is simply the natural order of things (so we are told), and we need to adapt our thinking accordingly.

Little wonder that we have seen a revival in these times of all sorts of monstrous fictions. As James and Lewis Gordon explain, “Monsters of disaster are special kinds of divine warning. They are harbingers of things we do not want to face, of catastrophes, and we fear they will bring such even-

upon us by coming to us.”³³ Only a decade or so ago, citizens feared the wrath of robots, terminators and cyborgs who wanted to destroy us—the legacy of a highly rationalized, technocratic culture that eludes human regulation, even comprehension. Now, those who are not part of a technocratic elite appear helpless and adrift, caught in the grip of a society that denies them any alternative sense of agency or hope. This raises some important questions on the advent of monstrosity, not least the fascination in popular culture today with the figure of the zombie, which has its own distinct politics.

The zombie genre can be traced to earlier critiques of capitalism, with the undead in particular appearing at a time when the shopping mall started to become a defining symbol of modernity. Zombies here would become the embodiment of a political form, one that had lost all sense of the past and had no future to speak of. The only performance it knew was the desire for violence, as it was suspended in a state of purgatory that offered no means of escape. To become a zombie was to be devoid of any political, ethical, and social claim or responsibility (including the capacity to show compassion and love) other than the eventual completion of the nihilistic project.³⁴

The marketing of this metaphorical figure in today’s popular culture is most revealing. It speaks to both the nihilistic conditions in which we live, along with the deadly violence of neoliberal regimes, and the power and the modes of political subjectivity it seeks to authenticate/destroy. It also speaks to a future in which survival fully colonizes the meaning of life, a future that both anticipates and consents to the possibility of extinction. As Keir Milburn and David Harvie have noted:

Neoliberalism no longer “makes sense,” but its logic keeps stumbling on, without conscious direction, like a zombie: ugly, persistent and dangerous. Such is the “unlife” of a zombie, a body stripped of its goals, unable to adjust itself to the future, unable to make plans. It can only act habitually as it pursues a monomaniacal hunger. Unless there is a dramatic recomposition of society, we face the prospect of decades of drift as the crises we face—economic, social, environmental—remain unresolved. But where will that recomposition come from when we are living in the world of zombie-liberalism?³⁵

One of the most remarkable recent examples of this genre that offers a truly potent exposition of contemporary nihilism is Marc Forster’s *World War Z*. While the source of the outbreak remains somewhat elusive in the movie, from the outset Forster situates the problem in connection with contemporary concerns of the biosphere and the all too real mutation of viruses capable of destroying a world with little care or responsibility for its social habitat. The movie further amplifies the relevance of this genre for exposing the futility of nation-states, as societies quickly learn that the media are the only message, while emphasizing the biopolitical (life-centric) dimensions to power wherein it is widely accepted today that anybody and anything can become the source of contamination. The movie portrays a world in which nobody is safe and no location might provide a sanctuary. Indeed, while the burning of Manhattan offers a provocative screening of potential devastation brought about by widespread human abandonment, it is the zombies’ breach of the walls of Jerusalem that will no doubt unsettle many (for obvious reasons).

However, instead of following the conventional deconstruction of the zombie here as revealing the death of subjectivities brought about by commodification, on this occasion there is more to be gained by analyzing the survivors. *World War Z* does not allow the viewer to be under any illusion given its message that the best that can be imagined is *pure survival*. Indeed, the only way to survive is by engaging in a form of self-harm by using a lethal microbe as a form of “camouflage” so that the health of the body no longer registers, hence the body is no longer a target for the undead. It is further

revealing that the eventual fate of the survivors is in no way certain, as the final scenes tell that this is merely the start of a perpetual state of violence that allows for some strategic gains, but remains ultimately a state infested with the decay of a political and social order that might never recover its humanness. The movie as such is perhaps less meditation on the already dead than contemplation of the fate of those who are hoping to survive the ubiquitous war. For they are also denied the possibility of another world, forced to partake instead in a world of personal risk and deadly infection that continually puts into question their destiny as political subjects who are able to transform the world for the better. This is political nihilism taken to the *n*th degree: the most violent of conditions that renders the will to nothingness the start and ending for all collective actions and viable notions of human togetherness.

Such a vision of the world, mass marketed as entertainment, is actually far more disturbing than the dystopian fables of the twentieth century. Our condition denies us the possibility of better times to come as the imagined and the real collapse in such a way that we are condemned to already be living amongst the ruins of the future. All we can seemingly imagine is a world filled with unavoidable catastrophes, the source of which, we are told, remains beyond our grasp, thereby denying us any possibility for genuine systemic transformation in the order of things. How do we explain the current fetish for the doctrine of resilience if not through the need to adapt to the inevitability of catastrophe and to simply partake in a world that is deemed to be “insecure by design”?³⁶ Such adaptation both forces us to accept narratives of vulnerability as the authentic basis of political subjectivity, regardless of the oppressive conditions that produce vulnerable subjects, and neutralizes all meaningful qualitative differences in class, race, and gender.

The Seductions of Violence

Wilhelm Reich profoundly altered our understanding of oppression by drawing attention to its *mass psychology*.³⁷ Focusing on the nature of twentieth-century fascism, he explained how predatory political and economic formations promote the disposability of entire populations as they indoctrinate the disadvantaged to desire what is patently oppressive. Reich showed how micro-specific questions of agency were intimately bound to imaginaries of threat and survivability such that the masses end up willfully accepting a suffocating and depoliticizing embrace. Notions of endangerment thus operate here affectively by appealing to concerns of the everyday.³⁸ As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would explain, “Reich is at his profoundest as a thinker when he refuses to accept ignorance or illusion on part of the masses as an explanation of fascism, and demands an explanation that will take their desires into account, an explanation formulated in terms of desire: no, the masses were not innocent dupes; at a certain point, under certain conditions, they *wanted* fascism, and it is this perversion of desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for.”³⁹ Hence, as Reich understood, it is misguided to simply blame a handful of individuals for the “abuse of power” and their privilege. Rather than recoil in horror or exempt ourselves from deeper reflection, we must ask more searching questions about the normalization of violence and how it relates to the prevailing rationalities of the times. And we must do so while reflecting upon our own shameful compromises, acknowledging the ways we are all being openly recruited into everyday forms of passivity, inactivism, subjugation, intolerance, and a denial of our humanity. Violence under such conditions becomes central to understanding a politics of desire and the production of subjectivities in the interest of their own oppression, but also how that politics functions as part of a struggle over agency itself.

It is impossible to comprehend the mass psychology of violence in the contemporary period

without recognizing the centrality of commercial media that underpins its seductive potency.⁴⁰ No longer peripheral to public life, constantly evolving, increasing mobile media technologies such as smart phones, tablets, and wearable devices have enacted a structural transformation of everyday life by fusing sophisticated networking technologies with a ubiquitous screen culture, which simultaneously expanding the range of cultural producers and recipients of information and images. The accelerating evolution of personal media technologies enables modes of spectatorship that seem to resist bundling users into a monolithic mass. Such technologies deploy unheard-of powers in the shaping of time, space, knowledge, values, identities, and social relations. They not only transform the relationships between the specificity of an event and its public display by making events accessible to a global audience, they also usher in an era of increasing awareness—the age of the spectacle—which screen culture and visual politics *create* spectacular events just as much as they record them. Given that screen culture now dominates much of everyday life in privileged populations across the globe, the “audio-visual mode has become our primary way of coming in contact with the world and at the same time being detached (safe) from it.”⁴³

Individuals’ capacity to create and globally distribute imagery, first-person accounts, and live video streams, however, are continually transforming relationships between politics, spectacle, violence, and possibilities for community resistance to oppression, as has been the case in Ferguson, Missouri.

While individual and community access to state, national, and global audiences does open new vistas for organizing resistance, the same technology is also used by authorities to increase surveillance, and for employers to keep employees working all the time. As Brian Massumi has argued, such technology all too often can increase social control and act as “a workstation in the main production line of fear.”⁴⁴

While the association between mid-century fascism and aesthetics, and by implication its fetishistic spectacles, has been the subject of sustained critical analysis, the most promising work on the politics of the spectacle has been organized around its relationship with neoliberalism. Not, of course, to buy into the conceit here that fascism has been somehow defeated by neoliberal “conquerors,” or for that matter that neoliberalism is immune to fascistic ways of manipulating desires for political ends. Fascism remains as diverse as power. Indeed, as we shall explain, which philosophers and cultural critics have recognized in a prescient fashion the emergence of a new era of the spectacle under neoliberalism, and how such spectacles have wielded the potential to utterly transform the social order, what is particularly novel about the historical conjuncture in which we live is the ability to secure mass consent by shattering the familiar demarcations between inside/outside, friend/enemy, private/public, times of war/peace, that hallmark of ideological fascism in the twentieth century.

In our contemporary moment, we owe it to thinkers such as Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, Susan Sontag, Jean Baudrillard, François Debrix, and Douglas Kellner, among others, who have greatly extended our knowledge of how the spectacle has become a dominant mode of indoctrination that reinforces the foreclosure of civic agency once available to individuals and communities within capitalistic regimes of power. They have raised crucial questions about how the concepts and practices associated with the spectacle can lead to genuine civic advances and defiant acts of radical imagination, the very thought of which are increasingly considered with alarm by authorities who treat such non-market values as insurrectional, and see public displays of disobedience as gateways to crime and terrorism. That national anti-terrorism resources were marshalled to assist the surveillance and repression of the Occupy movement, leading to more than 7,000 arrests, is evidence of just how

threatened the neoliberal order feels, and how drastically it reacts when sectors of society begin behaving off-message from the privatized grid of finance that dominates all aspects of society, culture, politics, and law.

Guy Debord's pioneering work in *The Society of the Spectacle*⁴⁵ provides a number of important theoretical insights for critically understanding the transformation of the spectacle and its role today. According to Debord, the spectacle that has emerged represents a new form of social control that is quite different from, but contains the political traces of, earlier forms of spectacle that were instrumental to fascism. Debord views the spectacle as a product of the market and a new form of cultural politics. He argues that the spectacle represents a "new stage in the accumulation of capital [in which] more and more facets of human activity and elements of everyday life were being brought under the control of the market."⁴⁶ The spectacle, in other words, is no longer put to use for the creation of a mythical unity of superior beings. It now operates for its own purpose—complete commercialization, commodification, and marketization. Indeed, in its willful manipulation of desire through the sophisticated deployment of mechanisms that prompt people to tolerate conditions that ordinarily would appear politically oppressive, the spectacle is in fact, a predatory strategy and politically fascistic. Such mechanisms resonate with Reich's concerns about the ability to manipulate large sectors of society by inducing a form of mass psychosis of consent that manipulates reasoning and conscience and thus normalizes the most abhorrent form of subjugation and violence.

Under late capitalism, the spectacle has been reformed in the crucible of mass consumption and the mass media, producing new modes for power to advantage itself through the domination of everyday life. Although the spectacle is often viewed by the public as mere entertainment, disconnected from power and politics, Debord insists that "the spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence."⁴⁷ For Debord, new technological developments in communications now establish the mode of information as a category as important for reproducing social life as labor had been for Marx. Moreover, for Debord, the society of the spectacle is not a discrete element of social existence; it has become a constituting activity that refigures the very nature of common sense and social relations.

According to Debord, the "whole of life [now] presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation."⁴⁸ The educational function of the culture, whether it be "news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment" has been transformed into a spectacle, which "epitomizes the prevailing model of social life."⁴⁹ Debord rightly recognizes that the dynamics of domination under late capitalism can no longer be explained exclusively within the primacy of the economic sphere and its exploitative modes and relations of production. Rejecting conventional Marxist notions of social reproduction, Debord follows the lead of Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and other neo-Marxist theorists arguing that domination is secured increasingly through "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images,"⁵⁰ and that capitalism has successfully employed an image industry to transform commodities into appearances and history into staged events. Under such circumstances, the "society of the spectacle" "proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance."⁵¹ The degree to which society permits visual mediation—screen culture—to become its primary mode of education, self-understanding, and socializing is the degree to which it opens the door for spectacle to dominate as a depoliticizing substitute for unmediated social formations, thinking, and creativity. Thus, according to Debord, "any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life—and as a negation of life *that has invented a visual form for itself.*"

In Debord's theory, media have become the quintessential tool of contemporary capitalism, and consumerism is its legitimating ideology. Or, to cite Debord's famous quip, "the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image."⁵² What is crucial about Debord's theory is that it connects the state's investment in social reproduction to its commitment to, "and control of, the field of images—the alternative world conjured up by the new battery of 'perpetual emotion machines' (of which TV was the dim pioneer and which now beckons the citizen every waking minute)."⁵³ Not only does the world of images a structural necessity for capitalism, it affirms the primacy of the pedagogical as a crucial element of the political. It enforces "the submission of more and more facets of human sociability—areas of everyday life, forms of recreation, patterns of speech, idioms of local solidarity . . . to the deadly sollicitation (the lifeless bright sameness) of the market."⁵⁴

By exposing how the spectacle colonizes everyday life, Debord shows how power operates through a merger of state and corporate forces that seek both to control the media through which society experiences itself and to completely depoliticize and redefine the agency of citizenry in terms of prefabricated choices of consumerism and the status of ownership. Under contemporary capitalism, state-sanctioned violence makes its mark through the prisons, courts, police surveillance, and other criminalizing forces; it also wages a form of symbolic warfare mediated by a regime of consumer-based images and staged events that narrow individual and social agency to the dictates of the marketplace, reducing the capacity for human aspirations and desires to needs embodied in the appearance of the commodity. In Debord's terms, "the spectacle is the bad dream of modern society . . . chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep."⁵⁵

Contemporary culture has long become a society organized around a vast array of commodities and various image-making technologies used to promote them, and numerous sites from which to circulate them that leaves no spaces for contemplating that other worlds are possible. For Debord, our "society of the spectacle" is a form of soft violence that perpetually cultures the conformity, inactivism, and passivity necessary to repress critical engagement and resistance by relentlessly privatizing, marginalizing, or openly criminalizing educational and liberatory forces.

Debord's notion of the spectacle makes a significant contribution in mapping a new form of social control associated with the accumulation of capital. He makes clear that the whole industry of leisure consumption, entertainment, advertising, fantasy, and other pedagogical apparatuses of media culture has become a crucial element of life, and thus a primary condition of politics. Debord does not argue that commodities were the source of domination. As Eugene L. Arva points out, Debord insists that "the system of mediation by representation (the world of the spectacle, if you wish) has come to be of more relevance than commodities themselves."⁵⁶ Participation in commodity culture and its symbolic networks, rather than simple ownership of commodities, has become an essential feature of social status and belonging. Debord thus furthers our understanding that domination has to be analyzed as part of a politics of consent in which all aspects of social life are increasingly shaped by the communication technologies under the control of corporate forces.

Although Debord has been accused of overestimating the all-encompassing power of the spectacle, media, and other control mechanisms of late capitalism ("a permanent opium war"),⁵⁷ he never harbors the often politically crippling pessimism of the Frankfurt School. His *Society of the Spectacle* "reads, rather, as a warning against the paralysis of the senses, the lethargy of the mind, and the political inertia with which a primarily visually determined, visually accessible, and most visually livable reality threatens" any viable notion of the autonomous subject.⁵⁸ He militates against the dystopian notion of the totally administered society and begins advancing forms of political rupture and cultural insurgency that connect individual and collective agency to historical critique and

creative social transformation. For Debord, the struggle for collective freedom was impossible without self-emancipation.

Yet the enormous analytic challenge facing Debord reveals itself in precisely that which, in globalizing post-9/11 world, his theory cannot sufficiently explain. As Lutz Koepnick points out, we now live in a culture “characterized by hybrid multimedia aggregates and diversified strategies of consumption.”⁵⁹ Within this new era, technology and media merge, resulting in a massive cultural reorganization involving the production, distribution, and consumption of information and images. Not only has the old model of a monolithic system of media control and cultural reproduction been undermined by Internet-driven media and technologies, but entirely new configurations of communication relations have emerged and continue to evolve. Although dependent on corporate infrastructure and software and wide open to state surveillance and tracking, the production and dissemination of content have become radically more accessible to massive non-market sectors of society—the public—with enormous consequences on business, law enforcement, politics, education, and culture.⁶⁰ At the same time, Internet-driven media are shaping new types of individual agency and social formations that are actively co-evolving with the unprecedented speed, immediacy, and global reach of increasingly accessible personal communication technology.

Past assumptions about time and space being homogeneous and fixed are no longer applicable. Digital networks have stretched and compressed the relationships among time, space, and place. Technology is constantly accelerating the speed with which we can publish information, disseminate images, and communicate with large networks of people around the planet. Just as new forms of social media and cultural representation make possible highly individualized modes of symbolic expression, the undiversified masses have given way to a diverse globalized public far removed from the homogeneous community of viewers and producers that was characteristic of the older broadcasting age of media.

Of course, we are not suggesting here that new media and technological developments have ushered in structural changes amounting to a more democratic society. This perspective is inaccurate as it is overly romantic, especially in light of the way in which the Internet and social media are exploited for government surveillance and corporate data collection and marketing. At the same time, any analysis of the reconfiguration of public culture by neoliberal forces must take into account the unprecedented effects of evolving media technologies—including the speed, distance, rhythms of information and communication, real-time images, and differential modes of control associated with consumption. Stuart Hall understood this better than most:

Neoliberalism’s victory has depended on the boldness and ambition of global capital, on its confidence that it can now govern not just the economy but the whole of social life. On the back of a revamped liberal political and economic theory, its champions have constructed a vision and a new common sense that have permeated society. Market forces have begun to model institutional life and press deeply into our private lives, as well as dominating political discourse. They have shaped a popular culture that extols celebrity and success and promotes values of private gain and possessive individualism. They have thoroughly undermined the redistributive egalitarian consensus that underpinned the welfare state, with painful consequences for socially vulnerable groups such as women, old people, the young and ethnic minorities.⁶¹

Mark Poster suggests that as communication technologies today surpass the first media era

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