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The Mad Violence of Casino Capitalism

By Henry Giroux
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American society is morally bankrupt and politically broken, and its vision of the future appears utterly dystopian. As the United States descends into the dark abyss of an updated form of totalitarianism, the unimaginable has become imaginable in that it has become possible not only to foresee the death of the essential principles of constitutional democracy, but also the birth of what Hannah Arendt once called the horror of dark times. The politics of terror, a culture of fear, and the spectacle of violence dominate America's cultural apparatuses and legitimate the ongoing militarization of public life and American society.

Unchecked corporate power and a massive commodification, infantilization, and depoliticization of the polity have become the totalitarian benchmarks defining American society. In part, this is due to the emergence of a brutal modern-day capitalism, or what some might call neoliberalism. This form of neoliberal capitalism is a particularly savage, cruel, and exploitative regime of oppression in which not only are the social contract, civil liberties and the commons under siege, but also the very notion of the political, if not the planet itself. The dystopian moment facing the United States, if not most of the globe, can be summed up in Fred Jameson's contention "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." He goes on to say that "We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world."¹

One way of understanding Jameson's comment is through the ideological and affective spaces in which the neoliberal subject is produced and market-driven ideologies are normalized. Capitalism has made a virtue out of self-interest and the pursuit of material wealth and in doing so has created a culture of shattered dreams and a landscape filled with "Broken highways, bankrupt cities, collapsing bridges, failed schools, the unemployed, the underpaid and the uninsured: all suggest a collective failure of will. These shortcomings are so endemic that we no longer know how to talk about what is wrong, much less set about repairing it." [i]

Yet, there is a growing recognition that casino capitalism is driven by a kind of mad violence and form of self-sabotage and that if it does not come to an end what we will experience in all probability is the destruction of human life and the planet itself. Certainly, more recent scientific reports on the threat of ecological disaster from researchers at the University of Washington, NASA, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reinforce this dystopian possibility.² The undermining of public trust and public values has now given way to a market-driven discourse that produces a society that has lost any sense of democratic vision and social purpose and in doing so resorts to state terrorism, the criminalization of social problems, and culture of cruelty. Institutions that were once defined to protect and enhance human life now function largely to punish and maim.

As Michael Yates points out throughout this book, capitalism is devoid of any sense of social responsibility and is driven by an unchecked desire to accumulate capital at all costs. As power becomes global and politics remains local, ruling elites no longer make political concessions to workers or any other group that they either exploit or consider disposable.

Security and crisis have become the new passwords for imposing a culture of fear and for imposing what Giorgio Agamben has called a permanent state of exception and a technology of government repression.[ii] A constant appeal to a state of crisis becomes the new normal for arming the police, curtailing civil liberties, expanding the punishing state, criminalizing everyday behavior, and suppressing dissent. Fear now drives the major narratives that define the United States and give rise to dominant forms of power free from any sense of moral and political conviction, if not accountability.

In the midst of this dystopian nightmare, there is the deepening abyss of inequality, one that not only separates the rich from the poor, but also increasingly relegates the middle and working classes to the ranks of the precariat. Concentrations of wealth and income generate power for the financial elite and unchecked misery for most people, a fear/insecurity industry, and a growing number of social pathologies.

Michael Yates in *The Great Inequality* provides a road map for both understanding the registers that produce inequality as well as the magnitude of the problems it poses across a range of commanding spheres extending from health care and the political realm to the environment and education. At the same time, he exposes the myths that buttress the ideology of inequality. These include an unchecked belief in boundless economic growth, the notion that inequality is chosen freely by individuals in the market place, and the assumption that consumption is the road to happiness. Unlike a range of recent books on inequality, Yates goes beyond exposing the mechanisms that drive inequality and the panoply of commanding institutions that support it. He

also provides a number of strategies that challenge the deep concentrations of wealth and power while delivering a number of formative proposals that are crucial for nurturing a radical imagination and the social movements necessary to struggle for a society that no longer equates capitalism with democracy.

As Yates makes clear throughout this book, money now engulfs everything in this new age of disposability. Moreover, when coupled with a weakening of movements to counter the generated power of capitalists, the result has been a startling increase in the influence of predatory capitalism, along with inequities in wealth, income, power, and opportunity. Such power breeds more than anti-democratic tendencies, it also imposes constraints, rules, and prohibitions on the 99 percent whose choices are increasingly limited to merely trying to survive. Capitalists are no longer willing to compromise and have expanded their use of power to dominate economic, political, and social life. For Yates, it is all the more crucial to understand how power works under the reign of global capitalism in order to grasp the magnitude of inequality, the myriad of factors that produce it, and what might be done to change it.

Accompanying the rise of a savage form of capitalism and the ever-expanding security state is the emergence of new technologies and spaces of control. One consequence is that labor power is increasing produced by machines and robotic technologies which serve to create “a large pool of more or less unemployed people.” Moreover, as new technologies produce massive pools of unused labor, it also is being used as a repressive tool for collecting “unlimited biometric and genetic information of all of its citizens.”[iii]

The ongoing attack on the working class is matched by new measures of repression and surveillance. This new weaponized face of capitalism is particularly ominous given the rise of the punishing state and the transformation of the United States from a democracy in progress to a fully developed authoritarian society. Every act of protest is now tainted, labeled by the government and mainstream media as either treasonous or viewed as a potential act of terrorism. For example, animal rights activists are put on the terrorist list. Whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden are painted as traitors. Members of the Black Lives Matter movement are put under surveillance,[iv] all electronic communication is now subject to government spying, and academics who criticize government policy are denied tenure or worse.

Under neoliberalism, public space is increasingly converted into private space undermining those sphere necessary for developing a viable sense of social responsibility, while also serving to transform citizenship into mostly an act of consumption. Under such circumstances, the notion of crisis is used both to legitimate a system of economic terrorism as well as to accentuate an increasing process of depoliticization. Within this fog of market induced paralysis, language is subject to the laws of capitalism, reduced to a commodity, and subject to the “tyranny of the moment....emaciated, impoverished, vulgarized and squeezed out of the meanings it was resumed to carry.”[v]

As the latest stage of predatory capitalism, neoliberalism is part of a broader economic and political project of restoring class power and consolidating the rapid concentration of capital, particularly financial capital.[vi] As a political project it includes “the deregulation of finance, privatization of public services, elimination and curtailment of social welfare programs, open

attacks on unions, and routine violations of labor laws.”[vii] As an ideology, it casts all dimensions of life in terms of market rationality, construes profit making as the arbiter and essence of democracy, consuming as the only operable form of citizenship, and upholds the irrational belief that the market can both solve all problems and serve as a model for structuring all social relations. As a mode of governance, it produces identities, subjects, and ways of life driven by a survival-of-the fittest-ethic, grounded in the idea of the free, possessive individual, and committed to the right of ruling groups and institutions to exercise power removed from matters of ethics and social costs. As a policy and political project, it is wedded to the privatization of public services, the dismantling of the connection of private issues and public problems, the selling off of state functions, liberalization of trade in goods and capital investment, the eradication of government regulation of financial institutions and corporations, the destruction of the welfare state and unions, and the endless marketization and commodification of society.

Nothing engenders the wrath of conservatives more than the existence of the government providing a universal safety net, especially one that works, such as either Medicare or Social Security. As Yates points out, government is viewed by capitalists as an institution that gets in the way of capital. One result is a weakening of social programs and provisions. As Paul Krugman observes regarding the ongoing conservative attacks on Medicare, “The real reason conservatives want to do away with Medicare has always been political: It’s the very idea of the government providing a universal safety net that they hate, and they hate it even more when such programs are successful.”[viii] In opposition to Krugman and other liberal economists, Michael Yates argues rightly in this book that the issue is not simply preserving Medicare but eliminating the predatory system that disavows equality of wealth, power, opportunity, and health care for everyone.

Neoliberalism has put an enormous effort into creating a commanding cultural apparatus and public pedagogy in which individuals can only view themselves as consumers, embrace freedom as the right to participate in the market, and supplant issues of social responsibility for an unchecked embrace of individualism and the belief that all social relation be judged according to how they further one’s individual needs and self-interests. Matters of mutual caring, respect, and compassion for the other have given way to the limiting orbits of privatization and unrestrained self-interest, just as it is has become increasingly difficult to translate private troubles into larger social, economic, and political considerations. One consequence is that it has become more difficult for people to debate and question neoliberal hegemony and the widespread misery it produces for young people, the poor, middle class, workers, and other segments of society— now considered disposable under neoliberal regimes which are governed by a survival-of-the fittest ethos, largely imposed by the ruling economic and political elite. Unable to make their voices heard and lacking any viable representation in the process makes clear the degree to which the American public, in particular, are suffering under a democratic deficit producing a profound dissatisfaction that does not always translate into an understanding of how neoliberal capitalism has destroyed democracy or what it might mean to understand and challenge its diverse apparatuses of persuasion and power. Clearly, the surge of popularity behind the presidential candidacy of a buffoon such as Donald Trump testifies to both a deep seated desire for change and the forms it can take when emotion replaces reason and any viable analysis of capitalism and its effects seem to be absent from a popular sensibility.

What Michael Yates makes clear in this incisive book on inequality is that democratic values, commitments, integrity, and struggles are under assault from a wide range of sites in an age of intensified violence and disposability. Throughout the book he weaves a set of narratives and critiques in which he lays bare the anti-democratic tendencies that are on display in a growing age of lawlessness and disposability. He not only makes clear that inequality is not good for the economy, social bonds, the environment, politics, and democracy, Yates also argues that capitalism in the current historical moment is marked by an age that thrives on racism, xenophobia, the purported existence of an alleged culture of criminality, and a massive system of inequality that affects all aspects of society. Worth repeating is that at the center of this book, unlike so many others tackling inequality, is an attempt to map a number of modalities that give shape and purpose to widespread disparities in wealth and income, including the underlying forces behind inequality, how it works to secure class power, how it undermines almost every viable foundation needed for a sustainable democracy, and what it might mean to develop a plan of action to produce the radical imagination and corresponding modes of agency and practice that can think and act outside of the reformist politics of capitalism.

Unlike so many other economists such as Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz who address the issue of inequality, Yates refuses the argument that the system is simply out of whack and can be fixed. Nor does he believe that capitalism can be described only in terms of economic structures. Capitalism is both a symbolic pathological economy that produces particular dispositions, values, and identities as well as oppressive institutional apparatuses and economic structures. Yates goes even further arguing that capitalism is not only about authoritarian ideologies and structures, it is also about the crisis of ideas, agency, and the failure of people to react to the suffering of others and to the conditions of their own oppression. Neoliberal capitalism has no language for human suffering, moral evaluation, and social responsibility. Instead, it creates a survival-of-the fittest ethos buttressed by a discourse that is morally insensitive, sadistic, cannibalistic, and displays a hatred of those whose labor cannot be exploited, do not buy into the consumerist ethic, or are considered other by virtue of their race, class, and ethnicity. Neoliberalism is the discourse of shadow games, committed to highlighting corporate power and making invisible the suffering of others, all the while leaving those considered disposable in the dark to fend for themselves.

Yates makes visible not only the economic constraints that bear down on the poor and disposable in the neoliberal age of precarity, he also narrates the voices, conditions, hardships and suffering workers have to endure in a variety of occupations ranging from automobile workers and cruise ship workers to those who work in restaurants and as harvester on farms. He provides a number of invaluable statistics that chart the injuries of class and race under capitalism but rather than tell a story with only statistics and mind boggling data, he also provides stories that give flesh to the statistics that mark a new historical conjuncture and a wide range of hardships that render work for most people hell and produce what has been called the hidden injuries of class. Much of what he writes is informed by a decade long research trip across the United States in which he attempted to see first-hand what the effects of capitalism have been on peoples' lives, the environment, work, unions, and other crucial spheres that inform everyday life. His keen eye is particularly riveting as he describes his teaming up with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in the 1970s and his growing disappointment with a union that increasingly betrayed its own principles.

For Yates, the capitalist system is corrupt, malicious, and needs to be replaced. Capitalism leaves no room for the language of justice, the social, or, for that matter, democracy itself. In fact, one of its major attributes is to hide its effects of power, racial injustice, militarized state violence, domestic terrorism, and new forms of disposability, especially regarding those marginalized by class and race. The grotesque inequalities produced by capitalism are too powerful, deeply rooted in the social and economic fabric, and unamenable to liberal reforms. Class disparities constitute a machinery of social death, a kind of zombie-like machine that drains life out of most of the population poisoning both existing and future generations.

The politics of disposability has gone mainstream as more and more individuals and groups are now considered surplus and vulnerable, consigned to zones of abandonment, surveillance, and incarceration. At one level, the expansive politics of disposability can be seen in the rising numbers of homeless, the growing army of debt-ridden students, the increasingly harsh treatment of immigrants, the racism that fuels the school-to-prison pipeline, and the growing attack on public servants. On another level, the politics of disposability has produced a culture of lawlessness and cruelty evident by the increasing rollback of voting rights, the war waged against women's reproductive rights, laws that discriminate against gays, the rise of the surveillance state, and the growing militarization of local police forces. Yates argues convincingly that there is a desperate need for a new language for politics, solidarity, shared responsibilities, and democracy itself. Yates sees in the now largely departed Occupy Movement an example of a movement that used a new discourse and set of slogans to highlight inequality, make class inequities visible, and to showcase the workings of power in the hands of the financial elite. For Yates, Occupy provided a strategy that can be and is being emulated by a number of groups, especially those emerging in the black community in opposition to police violence. Such a strategy begins by asking what a real democracy looks like and how does it compare to the current society in which we live. One precondition for individual and social agency is that the horizons for change must transcend the parameters of the existing society, and the future must be configured in such a way as to not mimic the present.

What is remarkable about *The Great Inequality* is that Yates does not simply provide a critique of capitalism in its old and new forms, he also provides a discourse of possibility developed around a number of suggested policies and practices designed to not reform capitalism but to abolish it. This is a book that follows in the manner of Dr. Martin Luther King's call to break the silence. In it Yates functions as a moral witness in reporting on the hardships and suffering produced by grotesque forms of inequality. As such, he reveals the dark threats that capitalism in its ruthlessly updated versions poses to the planet. Yet, his narrative is never far from either hope or a sense that there is a larger public for whom his testimony matters and that such a public is capable of collective resistance. *The Great Inequality* also serves to enliven the ethical imagination, and speak out for those populations now considered outcast and voiceless. Yates provides a furious reading of inequality and the larger structure of capitalism. In doing so he exhibits a keen and incisive intellect along with a welcomed sense of righteous fury.

Notes.

[i] Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, (New York, N.Y.: The Penguin Press, 2010), p. 12.

[ii] Giorgio Agamben, "The Security State and a theory of destituent power," *Philosophers for Change*, (February 25, 2014). Online:

<http://philosophersforchange.org/2014/02/25/the-security-state-and-a-theory-of-destituent-power/>

[iii] Ibid., Agamben, "The Security State and a theory of destituent power,"

[iv] George Joseph, "Exclusive: feds regularly monitored black lives matter since ferguson," *Intercept* (July 24, 2015). Online: <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/07/24/documents-show-department-homeland-security-monitoring-black-lives-matter-since-ferguson/>; Deirdre Fulton, "Exposed: Big Brother Targets Black Lives: Government spying can be an 'effective way to chill protest movements,' warns Center for Constitutional Rights," *CommonDreams* (July 24, 2015). Online: <http://www.commondreams.org/news/2015/07/24/exposed-big-brother-targets-black-lives>

[v] Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), p. 46.

[vi] I have taken up the issue of neoliberalism extensively in Henry A. Giroux, *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2008) . See also, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Henry A. Giroux, *Twilight of the Social* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2013); Henry A. Giroux, and in *Against the Violence of Organized Forgetting: Beyond America's Disimagination Machine* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2014);

Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: Zone Books 2015).

[vii] Michael D. Yates, "Occupy Wall Street and the Significance of Political Slogans," *Counterpunch*, (February 27, 2013). Online: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/02/27/occupy-wall-street-and-the-significance-of-political-slogans/>

[viii] Paul Krugman, "Zombies Against Medicare," *New York Times* (July 27, 2015). Online: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/opinion/zombies-against-medicare.html?_r=0