

ZOMBIE  
POLITICS  
*and* CULTURE  
*in the Age of Casino Capitalism*



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# Introduction

## Zombie Politics, Democracy, and the Threat of Authoritarianism

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.

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## THE RISE OF ZOMBIE POLITICS

**I**n the world of popular culture, zombies seem to be everywhere, as evidenced by the relentless slew of books, movies, video games, and comics. From the haunting *Night of the Living Dead* to the comic movie *Zombieland*, the figure of the zombie has captured and touched something unique in the contemporary imagination. But the dark and terrifying image of the zombie with missing body parts, oozing body fluids, and an appetite for fresh, living, human brains does more than feed the mass-marketing machines that prey on the spectacle of the violent, grotesque, and ethically comatose. There is more at work in this wave of fascination with the grotesquely walking hyper-dead than a Hollywood appropriation of the dark recesses and unrestrained urges of the human mind. The zombie phenomenon is

now on display nightly on television alongside endless examples of destruction unfolding in real-time. Such a cultural fascination with proliferating images of the living hyper-dead and unrelenting human catastrophes that extend from a global economic meltdown to the earthquake in Haiti to the ecological disaster caused by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico signals a shift away from the hope that accompanies the living to a politics of cynicism and despair. The macabre double movement between “the dead that walk”<sup>2</sup> and those who are alive but are dying and suffering cannot be understood outside of the casino capitalism that now shapes every aspect of society in its own image. A casino capitalist zombie politics views competition as a form of social combat, celebrates war as an extension of politics, and legitimates a ruthless Social Darwinism in which particular individuals and groups are considered simply redundant, disposable—nothing more than human waste left to stew in their own misfortune—easy prey for the zombies who have a ravenous appetite for chaos and revel in apocalyptic visions filled with destruction, decay, abandoned houses, burned-out cars, gutted landscapes, and trashed gas stations.

The twenty-first-century zombies no longer emerge from the grave; they now inhabit the rich environs of Wall Street and roam the halls of the gilded monuments of greed such as Goldman Sachs. As an editorial in *The New York Times* points out, the new zombies of free-market fundamentalism turned “the financial system into a casino. Like gambling, the transactions mostly just shifted paper money around the globe. Unlike gambling, they packed an enormous capacity for collective and economic destruction—hobbling banks that made bad bets, freezing credit and economic activity. Society—not the bankers—bore the cost.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, the zombie—the immoral, sub-Nietzschean, id-driven “other” who is “hyper-dead” but still alive as an avatar of death and cruelty—provides an apt metaphor for a new kind of authoritarianism that has a grip on contemporary politics in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This is an authoritarianism in which mindless self-gratification becomes the sanctioned norm and public issues collapse into the realm of privatized anger and rage. The rule of the market offers the hyper-dead an opportunity to exercise unprecedented power in American society, reconstructing civic and political culture almost entirely in the service of a politics that fuels the friend/enemy divide, even as democracy becomes the scandal of casino capitalism—its ultimate humiliation.

But the new zombies are not only wandering around in the banks, investment houses, and death chambers of high finance, they have an ever-increasing presence in the highest reaches of government and in the forefront of mainstream media. The growing numbers of zombies in the mainstream media have huge financial backing from the corporate elite and represent the new face of the culture of cruelty and hatred in the second Gilded Age. Any mention of the social state, putting limits on casino capitalism, and regulating corporate zombies puts Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck,

Rush Limbaugh, and other talking heads into a state of high rage. They disparage any discourse that embraces social justice, social responsibility, and human rights. Appealing to “real” American values such as family, God, and Guns, they are in the forefront of a zombie politics that opposes any legislation or policy designed to lessen human suffering and promote economic and social progress. As Arun Gupta points out, they are insistent in their opposition to “civil rights, school desegregation, women’s rights, labor organizing, the minimum wage, Social Security, LGBT rights, welfare, immigrant rights, public education, reproductive rights, Medicare, [and] Medicaid.”<sup>5</sup> The walking hyper-dead even oppose providing the extension of unemployment benefits to millions of Americans who are out of work, food, and hope. They spectacularize hatred and trade in lies and misinformation. They make populist appeals to the people while legitimating the power of the rich. They appeal to common sense as a way of devaluing a culture of questioning and critical exchange. Unrelenting in their role as archetypes of the hyper-dead, they are misanthropes trading in fear, hatred, and hyper-nationalism.

The human suffering produced by the walking hyper-dead can also be seen in the nativist apoplexy resulting in the racist anti-immigration laws passed in Arizona, the attempts to ban ethnic studies in public schools, the rise of the punishing state, the social dumping of millions of people of color into prisons, and the attempts of Tea Party fanatics and politicians who want to “take back America” from President Barack Obama—described in the new lexicon of right-wing political illiteracy as both an alleged socialist and the new Hitler. Newt Gingrich joins Glenn Beck and other members of the elite squad of the hyper-dead in arguing that Obama is just another version of Joseph Stalin. For Gingrich and the rest of the zombie ideologues, any discourse that advocates for social protections, easing human suffering, or imagining a better future is dismissed by being compared to the horrors of the Nazi holocaust. Dystopian discourse and End Times morbidity rule the collective consciousness of this group.

The “death panels” envisaged by Sarah Palin are not going to emerge from Obama’s health care reform plan but from the toolkits the zombie politicians and talking heads open up every time they are given the opportunity to speak. The death threats, vandalism, and crowds shouting homophobic slurs at openly gay U.S. House Representative Barney Frank already speak to a fixation with images of death, violence, and war that now grips the country. Sarah Palin’s infamous call to a gathering of her followers to “reload” in opposition to President Obama’s policies—soon followed in a nationally televised press conference with a request for the American people to embrace Arizona’s new xenophobic laws—makes her one of the most prominent of the political zombies. Not only has she made less-than-vague endorsements of violence in many of her public speeches, she has cheerfully embraced the new face of white supremacy in her recent unapologetic endorsement of racial pro-

filing, stating in a widely reported speech that “It’s time for Americans across this great country to stand up and say, ‘We’re all Arizonians now.’”<sup>6</sup> The current descent into racism, ignorance, corruption, and mob idiocy makes clear the degree to which politics has become a sport for zombies rather than engaged and thoughtful citizens.<sup>7</sup>

The hyper-dead celebrate talk radio haters such as Rush Limbaugh, whose fanaticism appears to pass without criticism in the mainstream media. Limbaugh echoes the fanatics who whipped up racial hatred in Weimar Germany, the ideological zombies who dissolved the line between reason and distortion-laden propaganda. How else to explain his claim “that environmentalist terrorists might have caused the ecological disaster in the gulf”?<sup>8</sup> The ethically frozen zombies that dominate screen culture believe that only an appeal to self-interest motivates people—a convenient counterpart to a culture of cruelty that rebukes, if not disdains, any appeal to the virtues of a moral and just society. They smile at their audiences while collapsing the distinction between opinions and reasoned arguments. They report on Tea Party rallies while feeding the misplaced ideological frenzy that motivates such gatherings but then refuse to comment on rallies all over the country that do not trade in violence or spectacle. They report uncritically on Islam bashers, such as the radical right-wing radio host Michael Savage, as if his ultra-extremist racist views are a legitimate part of the American mainstream. In the age of zombie politics, there is too little public outrage or informed public anger over the pushing of millions of people out of their homes and jobs, the defunding of schools, and the rising tide of homeless families and destitute communities. Instead of organized, massive protests against casino capitalism, the American public is treated to an endless and arrogant display of wealth, greed, and power. Armies of zombies tune in to gossip-laden entertainment, game, and reality TV shows, transfixed by the empty lure of celebrity culture.

The roaming hordes of celebrity zombie intellectuals work hard to fuel a sense of misguided fear and indignation toward democratic politics, the social state, and immigrants—all of which is spewed out in bitter words and comes terribly close to inciting violence. Zombies love death-dealing institutions, which accounts for why they rarely criticize the bloated military budget and the rise of the punishing state and its expanding prison system. They smile with patriotic glee, anxious to further the demands of empire as automated drones kill innocent civilians—conveniently dismissed as collateral damage—and the torture state rolls inexorably along in Afghanistan, Iraq, and in other hidden and unknown sites. The slaughter that inevitably follows catastrophe is not new, but the current politics of death has reached new heights and threatens to transform a weak democracy into a full-fledged authoritarian state.

## A TURN TO THE DARK SIDE OF POLITICS

The American media, large segments of the public, and many educators widely believe that authoritarianism is alien to the political landscape of American society. Authoritarianism is generally associated with tyranny and governments that exercise power in violation of the rule of law. A commonly held perception of the American public is that authoritarianism is always elsewhere. It can be found in other allegedly “less developed/civilized countries,” such as contemporary China or Iran, or it belongs to a fixed moment in modern history, often associated with the rise of twentieth-century totalitarianism in its different forms in Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union under Stalin. Even as the United States became more disposed to modes of tyrannical power under the second Bush administration—demonstrated, for example, by the existence of secret CIA prisons, warrantless spying on Americans, and state-sanctioned kidnapping—mainstream liberals, intellectuals, journalists, and media pundits argued that any suggestion that the United States was becoming an authoritarian society was simply preposterous. For instance, the journalist James Traub repeated the dominant view that whatever problems the United States faced under the Bush administration had nothing to do with a growing authoritarianism or its more extreme form, totalitarianism.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, according to this position, America was simply beholden to a temporary seizure of power by some extremists, who represented a form of political exceptionalism and an annoying growth on the body politic. In other words, as repugnant as many of Bush’s domestic and foreign policies might have been, they neither threatened nor compromised in any substantial way America’s claim to being a democratic society.

Against the notion that the Bush administration had pushed the United States close to the brink of authoritarianism, some pundits have argued that this dark moment in America’s history, while uncharacteristic of a substantive democracy, had to be understood as temporary perversion of American law and democratic ideals that would end when George W. Bush concluded his second term in the White House. In this view, the regime of George W. Bush and its demonstrated contempt for democracy was explained away as the outgrowth of a random act of politics—a corrupt election and the bad-faith act of a conservative court in 2000 or a poorly run election campaign in 2004 by an uncinematic and boring Democratic candidate. According to this narrative, the Bush-Cheney regime exhibited such extreme modes of governance in its embrace of an imperial presidency, its violation of domestic and international laws, and its disdain for human rights and democratic values that it was hard to view such anti-democratic policies as part of a pervasive shift toward a hidden order of authoritarian politics, which historically has existed at the margins of American society. It would be difficult to label such a gov-

ernment other than as shockingly and uniquely extremist, given a political legacy that included the rise of the security and torture state; the creation of legal illegalities in which civil liberties were trampled; the launching of an unjust war in Iraq legitimated through official lies; the passing of legislative policies that drained the federal surplus by giving away more than a trillion dollars in tax cuts to the rich; the enactment of a shameful policy of preemptive war; the endorsement of an inflated military budget at the expense of much-needed social programs; the selling off of as many government functions as possible to corporate interests; the resurrection of an imperial presidency; an incessant attack against unions; support for a muzzled and increasingly corporate-controlled media; the government production of fake news reports to gain consent for regressive policies; the use of an Orwellian vocabulary for disguising monstrous acts such as torture (“enhanced interrogation techniques”); the furtherance of a racist campaign of legal harassment and incarceration of Arabs, Muslims, and immigrants; the advancement of a prison binge through a repressive policy of criminalization; the establishment of an unregulated and ultimately devastating form of casino capitalism; the arrogant celebration and support for the interests and values of big business at the expense of citizens and the common good; and the dismantling of social services and social safety nets as part of a larger campaign of ushering in the corporate state and the reign of finance capital?

## AUTHORITARIANISM WITH A FRIENDLY FACE

In the minds of the American public, the dominant media, and the accommodating pundits and intellectuals, there is no sense of how authoritarianism in its soft and hard forms can manifest itself as anything other than horrible images of concentration camps, goose-stepping storm troopers, rigid modes of censorship, and chilling spectacles of extremist government repression and violence. That is, there is little understanding of how new modes of authoritarian ideology, policy, values, and social relations might manifest themselves in degrees and gradations so as to create the conditions for a distinctly undemocratic and increasingly cruel and oppressive social order. As the late Susan Sontag suggested in another context, there is a willful ignorance of how emerging registers of power and governance “dissolve politics into pathology.”<sup>10</sup> It is generally believed that in a constitutional democracy, power is in the hands of the people, and that the long legacy of democratic ideals in America, however imperfect, is enough to prevent democracy from being subverted or lost. And yet the lessons of history provide clear examples of how the emergence of reactionary politics, the increasing power of the military, and the power of big business subverted democracy in Argentina, Chile, Germany, and Italy. In

spite of these histories, there is no room in the public imagination to entertain what has become the unthinkable—that such an order in its contemporary form might be more nuanced, less theatrical, more cunning, less concerned with repressive modes of control than with manipulative modes of consent—what one might call a mode of authoritarianism with a distinctly American character.<sup>11</sup>

Historical conjunctures produce different forms of authoritarianism, though they all share a hatred for democracy, dissent, and civil liberties. It is too easy to believe in a simplistic binary logic that strictly categorizes a country as either authoritarian *or* democratic, which leaves no room for entertaining the possibility of a mixture of both systems. American politics today suggests a more updated if not a different form of authoritarianism. In this context, it is worth remembering what Huey Long said in response to the question of whether America could ever become fascist: “Yes, but we will call it anti-fascist.”<sup>12</sup> Long’s reply suggests that fascism is not an ideological apparatus frozen in a particular historical period but a complex and often shifting theoretical and political register for understanding how democracy can be subverted, if not destroyed, from within. This notion of soft or friendly fascism was articulated in 1985 in Bertram Gross’s book *Friendly Fascism*, in which he argued that if fascism came to the United States it would not embody the same characteristics associated with fascist forms in the historical past. There would be no Nuremberg rallies, doctrines of racial superiority, government-sanctioned book burnings, death camps, genocidal purges, or the abrogation of the U.S. Constitution. In short, fascism would not take the form of an ideological grid from the past simply downloaded onto another country under different historical conditions. Gross believed that fascism was an ongoing danger and had the ability to become relevant under new conditions, taking on familiar forms of thought that resonate with nativist traditions, experiences, and political relations.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in his *Anatomy of Fascism*, Robert O. Paxton argued that the texture of American fascism would not mimic traditional European forms but would be rooted in the language, symbols, and culture of everyday life. He writes: “No swastikas in an American fascism, but Stars and Stripes (or Stars and Bars) and Christian crosses. No fascist salute, but mass recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance. These symbols contain no whiff of fascism in themselves, of course, but an American fascism would transform them into obligatory litmus tests for detecting the internal enemy.”<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Umberto Eco, in his discussion of “eternal fascism,” also argued that any updated version of fascism would not openly assume the mantle of historical fascism; rather, new forms of authoritarianism would appropriate some of its elements, making it virtually unrecognizable from its traditional forms. Like Gross and Paxton, Eco contended that fascism, if it comes to America, will have a different guise, although it will be no less destructive of democracy. He wrote:



Ur-Fascism [Eternal Fascism] is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes. It would be much easier for us if there appeared on the world scene somebody saying, "I want to reopen Auschwitz, I want the Blackshirts to parade again in the Italian squares." Life is not that simple. Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and to point our finger at any of its new instances—every day, in every part of the world.<sup>15</sup>

The renowned political theorist Sheldon Wolin, in *Democracy Incorporated*, updates these views and argues persuasively that the United States has produced its own unique form of authoritarianism, which he calls "inverted totalitarianism."<sup>16</sup> Wolin claims that under traditional forms of totalitarianism, there are usually founding texts such as *Mein Kampf*, rule by a personal demagogue such as Adolf Hitler, political change enacted by a revolutionary movement such as the Bolsheviks, the constitution rewritten or discarded, the political state's firm control over corporate interests, and an idealized and all-encompassing ideology used to create a unified and totalizing understanding of society. At the same time, the government uses all the power of its cultural and repressive state apparatuses to fashion followers in its own ideological image and collective identity.

In the United States, Wolin argues that an emerging authoritarianism appears to take on a very different form.<sup>17</sup> Instead of a charismatic leader, the government is now governed through the anonymous and largely remote hand of corporate power and finance capital. Political sovereignty is largely replaced by economic sovereignty as corporate power takes over the reins of governance. The dire consequence, as David Harvey points out, is that "raw money power wielded by the few undermines all semblances of democratic governance. The pharmaceutical companies, health insurance and hospital lobbies, for example, spent more than \$133 million in the first three months of 2009 to make sure they got their way on health care reform in the United States."<sup>18</sup> The more money influences politics the more corrupt the political culture becomes. Under such circumstances, holding office is largely dependent on having huge amounts of capital at one's disposal, while laws and policies at all levels of government are mostly fashioned by lobbyists representing big business corporations and commanding financial institutions. Moreover, as the politics of health care reform indicate, such lobbying, as corrupt and unethical as it may be, is not carried out in the open and displayed by insurance and drug companies as a badge of honor—a kind of open testimonial to the disrespect for democratic governance and a celebration of their power. The subversion of democratic governance in the United States by corporate interests is captured succinctly by Chris Hedges in his observation that

Corporations have 35,000 lobbyists in Washington and thousands more in state capitals that dole out corporate money to shape and write legislation. They use their political action com-

mittees to solicit employees and shareholders for donations to fund pliable candidates. The financial sector, for example, spent more than \$5 billion on political campaigns, influenc[e] peddling and lobbying during the past decade, which resulted in sweeping deregulation, the gouging of consumers, our global financial meltdown and the subsequent looting of the U.S. Treasury. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America spent \$26 million last year and drug companies such as Pfizer, Amgen and Eli Lilly kicked in tens of millions more to buy off the two parties. These corporations have made sure our so-called health reform bill will force us to buy their predatory and defective products. The oil and gas industry, the coal industry, defense contractors and telecommunications companies have thwarted the drive for sustainable energy and orchestrated the steady erosion of civil liberties. Politicians do corporate bidding and stage hollow acts of political theater to keep the fiction of the democratic state alive.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than being forced to adhere to a particular state ideology, the general public in the United States is largely depoliticized through the influence of corporations over schools, higher education, and other cultural apparatuses. The deadening of public values, civic consciousness, and critical citizenship is also the result of the work of anti-public intellectuals representing right-wing ideological and financial interests,<sup>20</sup> dominant media that are largely center-right, and a market-driven public pedagogy that reduces the obligations of citizenship to the endless consumption and discarding of commodities. In addition, a pedagogy of social and political amnesia works through celebrity culture and its counterpart in corporate-driven news, television, radio, and entertainment to produce a culture of stupidity, censorship, and diversionary spectacles.

## DEPOLITICIZING FREEDOM AND AGENCY

Agency is now defined by a neoliberal concept of freedom, a notion that is largely organized according to the narrow notions of individual self-interest and limited to the freedom from constraints. Central to this concept is the freedom to pursue one's self-interests independently of larger social concerns. For individuals in a consumer society, this often means the freedom to shop, own guns, and define rights without regard to the consequences for others or the larger social order. When applied to economic institutions, this notion of freedom often translates into a call for removing government regulation over the market and economic institutions. This notion of a deregulated and privatized freedom is decoupled from the common good and any understanding of individual and social responsibility. It is an unlimited notion of freedom that both refuses to recognize the importance of social costs and social consequences and has no language for an ethic that calls us beyond ourselves, that engages our responsibility to others. Within this discourse of hyper-individualized freedom, individuals are not only "liberated from the constraints imposed by

the dense network of social bonds,” but are also “stripped of the protection which had been matter-of-factly offered in the past by that dense network of social bonds.”<sup>21</sup>

Freedom exclusively tied to personal and political rights without also enabling access to economic resources becomes morally empty and politically dysfunctional. The much-heralded notion of choice associated with personal and political freedom is hardly assured when individuals lack the economic resources, knowledge, and social supports to make such choices and freedoms operative and meaningful. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, “The right to vote (and so, obliquely and at least in theory, the right to influence the composition of the ruler and the shape of the rules that bind the ruled) could be meaningfully exercised only by those ‘who possess sufficient economic and cultural resources’ to be ‘safe from the voluntary or involuntary servitude that cuts off any possible autonomy of choice (and/or its delegation) at the root....[Choice] stripped of economic resources and political power hardly assure[s] personal freedoms to the *dispossessed*, who have no claim on the resources without which personal freedom can neither be won nor in practice enjoyed.”<sup>22</sup> Paul Bigioni has argued that this flawed notion of freedom played a central role in the emerging fascist dictatorships of the early twentieth century. He writes:

It was the liberals of that era who clamored for unfettered personal and economic freedom, no matter what the cost to society. Such untrammelled freedom is not suitable to civilized humans. It is the freedom of the jungle. In other words, the strong have more of it than the weak. It is a notion of freedom that is inherently violent, because it is enjoyed at the expense of others. Such a notion of freedom legitimizes each and every increase in the wealth and power of those who are already powerful, regardless of the misery that will be suffered by others as a result. The use of the state to limit such “freedom” was denounced by the laissez-faire liberals of the early 20th century. The use of the state to protect such “freedom” was fascism. Just as monopoly is the ruin of the free market, fascism is the ultimate degradation of liberal capitalism.<sup>23</sup>

This stripped-down notion of market-based freedom that now dominates American society cancels out any viable notion of individual and social agency. This market-driven notion of freedom emphasizes choice as an economic function defined largely as the right to buy things while at the same time cancelling out any active understanding of freedom and choice as the right to make rational choices concerning the very structure of power and governance in a society. In embracing a passive attitude toward freedom in which power is viewed as a necessary evil, a conservative notion of freedom reduces politics to the empty ritual of voting and is incapable of understanding freedom as a form of collective, productive power that enables “a notion of political agency and freedom that affirms the equal opportunity of all to exercise political power in order to participate in shaping the most important decisions affecting their lives.”<sup>24</sup> This merging of the market-based understanding of

freedom as the freedom to consume and the conservative-based view of freedom as a restriction from all constraints refuses to recognize that the conditions for substantive freedom do not lie in personal and political rights alone; on the contrary, real choices and freedom include the individual and collective ability to actively intervene in and shape both the nature of politics and the myriad forces bearing down on everyday life—a notion of freedom that can only be viable when social rights and economic resources are available to individuals. Of course, this notion of freedom and choice is often dismissed either as a vestige of socialism or simply drowned out in a culture that collapses all social considerations and notions of solidarity into the often cruel and swindle-based discourse of instant gratification and individual gain. Under such conditions, democracy is managed through the empty ritual of elections; citizens are largely rendered passive observers as a result of giving undue influence to corporate power in shaping all of the essential elements of political governance and decision making; and manufactured appeals to fear and personal safety legitimate both the suspension of civil liberties and the expanding powers of an imperial presidency and the policing functions of a militaristic state.

I believe that the formative culture necessary to create modes of education, thought, dialogue, critique, and critical agency—the necessary conditions of any aspiring democracy—is largely destroyed through the pacification of intellectuals and the elimination of public spheres capable of creating such a culture. Elements of a depoliticizing and commodifying culture become clear in the shameless propaganda produced by the so-called “embedded” journalists, while a corporate-dominated popular culture largely operates through multiple technologies, screen cultures, and video games that trade endlessly in images of violence, spectacles of consumption, and stultifying modes of (il)literacy. Funded by right-wing ideological, corporate, and militaristic interests, an army of anti-public intellectuals groomed in right-wing think tanks and foundations, such as the American Enterprise Institute and Manhattan Institute, dominate the traditional media, police the universities for any vestige of critical thought and dissent, and endlessly spread their message of privatization, deregulation, and commercialization, exercising a powerful influence in the dismantling of all public spheres not dominated by private and commodifying interests. These “experts in legitimation,” to use Antonio Gramsci’s prescient phrase, peddle civic ignorance just as they renounce any vestige of public accountability for big business, giant media conglomerates, and financial megacorporations. How else to explain that nearly twenty percent of the American people believe incorrectly that Obama is a Muslim!

Under the new authoritarianism, the corporate state and the punishing state merge as economics drives politics, and repression is increasingly used to contain all those individuals and groups caught in an expanding web of destabilizing inequality and powerlessness that touches everything from the need for basic health

care, food, and shelter to the promise of a decent education. As the social state is hollowed out under pressure from free-market advocates, right-wing politicians, and conservative ideologues, the United States has increasingly turned its back on any semblance of social justice, civic responsibility, and democracy itself. This might explain the influential journalist Thomas Friedman's shameless endorsement of military adventurism in the *New York Times* article in which he argues that "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the U.S. Air Force F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps."<sup>25</sup> Freedom in this discourse is inextricably wedded to state and military violence and is a far cry from any semblance of a claim to democracy.

## ZOMBIE POLITICS AND THE CULTURE OF CRUELTY

Another characteristic of an emerging authoritarianism in the United States is the correlation between the growing atomization of the individual and the rise of a culture of cruelty, a type of zombie politics in which the living dead engage in forms of rapacious behavior that destroy almost every facet of a substantive democratic polity. There is a mode of terror rooted in a neoliberal market-driven society that numbs many people just as it wipes out the creative faculties of imagination, memory, and critical thought. Under a regime of privatized utopias, hyper-individualism, and ego-centered values, human beings slip into a kind of ethical somnolence, indifferent to the plight and suffering of others. Though writing in a different context, the late Frankfurt School theorist Leo Lowenthal captured this mode of terror in his comments on the deeply sedimented elements of authoritarianism rooted in modern civilization. He wrote:

In a system that reduces life to a chain of disconnected reactions to shock, personal communication tends to lose all meaning....The individual under terrorist conditions is never alone and always alone. He becomes numb and rigid not only in relation to his neighbor but also in relation to himself; fear robs him of the power of spontaneous emotional or mental reaction. Thinking becomes a stupid crime; it endangers his life. The inevitable consequence is that stupidity spreads as a contagious disease among the terrorized population. Human beings live in a state of stupor, in a moral coma.<sup>26</sup>

Implicit in Lowenthal's commentary is the assumption that as democracy becomes a fiction, the moral mechanisms of language, meaning, and ethics collapse, and a cruel indifference takes over diverse modes of communication and exchange, often as a register of the current paucity of democratic values, identities, and social relations. Surely, this is obvious today as all vestiges of the social compact, social

responsibility, and modes of solidarity give way to a form of Social Darwinism with its emphasis on ruthlessness, cruelty, war, violence, hyper modes of masculinity, and a disdain for those considered weak, dependent, alien, or economically unproductive. A poverty of civic ideals is matched not only by a poverty of critical agency but also by the disappearance among the public of the importance of moral and social responsibilities. As public life is commercialized and commodified, the pathology of individual entitlement and narcissism erodes those public spaces in which the conditions for conscience, decency, self-respect, and dignity take root. The delusion of endless growth coupled with an “obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization [and] uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, and disdain for the public sector” has produced a culture that seems “consumed by locusts” in “an age of pygmies.”<sup>27</sup>

This culture of cruelty is especially evident in the hardships and deprivations now visited upon many young people in the United States. We have 13.3 million homeless children; one child in five lives in poverty; too many are now under the supervision of the criminal justice system, and many more young adults are unemployed and lack any hope for the future.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, we are subjecting more and more children to psychiatric drugs as a way of controlling their alleged unruly behavior while providing huge profits for drug companies. As Evelyn Pringle points out, “in 2006 more money was spent on treating mental disorders in children aged 0 to 17 than for any other medical condition, with a total of \$8.9 billion.”<sup>29</sup> Needless to say, the drugging of American children is less about treating genuine mental disorders than it is about punishing so-called unruly children, largely children of the poor, while creating “lifelong patients and repeat customers for Pharma!”<sup>30</sup> Stories abound about poor young people being raped, beaten, and dying in juvenile detention centers, needlessly trafficked into the criminal justice system as part of a profit-making scheme cooked up by corrupt judges and private correction facilities administrators, and being given powerful antipsychotic medicines in schools and other state facilities.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, this regression to sheer Economic Darwinism is not only evident in increasing violence against young people, cutthroat reality TV shows, hate radio, and the Internet, it is also on full display in the discourse of government officials and politicians and serves as a register of the prominence of both a kind of political infantilism and a culture of cruelty. For instance, the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, recently stated in an interview in February 2010 that “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina.”<sup>32</sup> Duncan’s point, beyond the incredible inhumanity reflected in such a comment, was that it took a disaster that uprooted thousands of individuals and families and caused enormous amounts of suffering to enable the Obama administration to implement a massive educational system pushing charter schools based on market-driven principles that disdain public val-

ues, if not public schooling itself. This is the language of cruelty and zombie politicians, a language indifferent to the ways in which people who suffer great tragedies are expelled from their histories, narratives, and right to be human. Horrible tragedies caused in part by government indifference are now covered up in the discourse and ideals inspired by the logic of the market. This mean and merciless streak was also on display recently when Lieutenant Governor Andre Bauer, who is running for the Republican nomination for governor in South Carolina, stated that giving people government assistance was comparable to “feeding stray animals.” The utterly derogatory and implicitly racist nature of his remark became obvious in the statement that followed: “You know why? Because they breed. You’re facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce, especially ones that don’t think too much further than that. And so what you’ve got to do is you’ve got to curtail that type of behavior. They don’t know any better.”<sup>33</sup>

Lowenthal’s argument that in an authoritarian society “stupidity spreads as a contagious disease” is evident in a statement made by Michele Bachmann, a Republican congresswoman, who recently argued that “Americans should purchase [health] insurance with their own tax-free money.”<sup>34</sup> That 43 million Americans are without health insurance because they cannot afford it seems lost on Bachmann, whose comments suggest that these uninsured individuals, families, unemployed workers, and children are not simply a disposable surplus but actually invisible and therefore unworthy of any acknowledgment.

The regressive politics and moral stupidity are also evident in the emergence of right-wing extremists now taking over the Republican Party. This new and aggressive political formation calls for decoupling market-driven financial institutions from any vestige of political and governmental constraint, celebrates emotion over reason, treats critical intelligence as a toxin possessed largely by elites, wraps its sophomoric misrepresentations in an air of beyond-interrogation “we’re just folks” insularity, and calls for the restoration of a traditional, white, Christian, male-dominated America.<sup>35</sup> Such calls embody elements of a racial panic that are evident in all authoritarian movements and have increasingly become a defining feature of a Republican Party that has sided with far-right-wing thugs and goon squads intent on disrupting any vestige of the democratic process. This emerging authoritarian element in American political culture is embodied in the wildly popular media presence of Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck—right-wing extremists who share a contempt for reason and believe in organizing politics on the model of war, unconditional surrender, personal insults, hyper-masculine spectacles, and the complete destruction of one’s opponent.

The culture of cruelty, violence, and slander was on full display as the Obama administration successfully passed a weak version of health care reform in 2010. Stoked by a Republican Party that has either looked away or in some cases support-

ed the coded language of racism and violence, it was no surprise that there was barely a peep out of Republican Party leaders when racial and homophobic slurs were hurled by Tea Party demonstrators at civil rights legend Jon Lewis and openly gay Barney Frank, both firm supporters of the Obama health policies. Even worse is the nod to trigger-happy right-wing advocates of violence that conservatives such as Sarah Palin have suggested in their response to the passage of the health care bill. For instance, Frank Rich argues that

this bill that inspired G.O.P. congressmen on the House floor to egg on disruptive protesters even as they were being evicted from the gallery by the Capitol Police last Sunday. It's this bill that prompted a congressman to shout "baby killer" at Bart Stupak, a staunch anti-abortion Democrat. It's this bill that drove a demonstrator to spit on Emanuel Cleaver, a black representative from Missouri. And it's this "middle-of-the-road" bill, as Obama accurately calls it, that has incited an unglued firestorm of homicidal rhetoric, from "Kill the bill!" to Sarah Palin's cry for her followers to "reload." At least four of the House members hit with death threats or vandalism are among the 20 political targets Palin marks with rifle crosshairs on a map on her Facebook page.<sup>36</sup>

There is more at work here than the usual right-wing promotion of bigotry and ignorance; there is the use of violent rhetoric and imagery that mimics the discourse of terrorism reminiscent of Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh, dangerous right-wing militia groups, and other American-style fascists. As Chris Hedges insists, "The language of violence always presages violence"<sup>37</sup> and fuels an authoritarianism that feeds on such excesses and the moral coma that accompanies the inability of a society to both question itself and imagine an alternative democratic order. How else can one read the "homicidal rhetoric" that is growing in America as anything other than an obituary for dialogue, democratic values, and civic courage? What does it mean for a democracy when the general public either supports or is silent in the face of widely publicized events such as black and gay members of Congress being subjected to racist and homophobic taunts, a black congressman being spit on, and the throwing of bricks through the office windows of some legislators who supported the health care bill? What does it mean for a democracy when there is little collective outrage when Sarah Palin, a leading voice in the Republican Party, mimics the tactics of vigilantes by posting a map with crosshairs on the districts of Democrats and urges her supporters on with the shameful slogan "Don't Retreat. Instead—RELOAD!" Under such circumstances, the brandishing of assault weapons at right-wing political rallies, the posters and signs comparing Obama to Hitler, and the ever-increasing chants to "Take Our Country Back" echoes what Frank Rich calls a "small-scale mimicry of Kristallnacht."<sup>38</sup> Violence and aggression are now openly tolerated and in some cases promoted. The chants, insults, violence, and mob hysteria all portend a dark period in American history—



an historical conjuncture in the death knell for democracy is being written as the media turn such events into spectacles rather than treat them as morally and politically repugnant acts more akin to the legacy of fascism than the ideals of an aspiring democracy. All the while the public yawns or, more troubling, engages fantasies of reloading.

Unfortunately, the problems now facing the United States are legion and further the erosion of a civic and democratic culture. Some of the most glaring issues are massive unemployment; a rotting infrastructure; the erosion of vital public services; the dismantling of the social safety net; expanding levels of poverty, especially for children; and an imprisonment binge largely affecting poor minorities of color. But such a list barely scratches the surface. In addition, we have witnessed in the last thirty years the restructuring of public education as either a source of profit for corporations or an updated version of control modeled after prison culture coupled with an increasing culture of lying, cruelty, and corruption, all of which belie a democratic vision of America that now seems imaginable only as a nostalgic rendering of the founding ideals of democracy.

## DANGEROUS AUTHORITARIANISM OR SHRINKING DEMOCRACY?

Needless to say, many would disagree with Wolin's view that the United States is in the grip of a new and dangerous authoritarianism that makes a mockery of the country's moral claim to being a model of democracy at home and for the rest of the world. For instance, liberal critic Robert Reich, the former Secretary of Labor under President Bill Clinton, refers to America's changing political landscape as a "shrinking democracy."<sup>39</sup> For Reich, democracy necessitates three things: "(1) Important decisions are made in the open. (2) The public and its representatives have an opportunity to debate them, so the decisions can be revised in light of what the public discovers and wants. And (3) those who make the big decisions are accountable to voters."<sup>40</sup> If we apply Reich's notion of democracy, then it becomes evident that the use of the term democracy is neither theoretically apt nor politically feasible at the current historical moment as a description of the United States. All of the conditions he claims are crucial for a democracy are now undermined by financial and economic interests that control elections, buy off political representatives, and eliminate those public spheres where real dialogue and debate can take place. It is difficult to imagine that anyone looking at a society in which an ultra-rich financial elite and megacorporations have the power to control almost every aspect of politics—from who gets elected to how laws are enacted—could possibly mistake this social order and system of government for a democracy. A more appropriate understanding of democracy comes from Wolin in his claim that

democracy is about the conditions that make it possible for ordinary people to better their lives by becoming political beings and by making power responsive to their hopes and needs. What is at stake in democratic politics is whether ordinary men and women can recognize that their concerns are best protected and cultivated under a regime whose actions are governed by principles of commonality, equality, and fairness, a regime in which taking part in politics becomes a way of staking out and sharing in a common life and its forms of self-fulfillment. Democracy is not about bowling together but about managing together those powers that immediately and significantly affect the lives and circumstances of others and one's self. Exercising power can be humbling when the consequences are palpable rather than statistical—and rather different from wielding power at a distance, at, say, an “undisclosed bunker somewhere in northern Virginia.”<sup>41</sup>

Wolin ties democracy not merely to participation and accountability but to the importance of the formative culture necessary for critical citizens and the need for a redistribution of power and wealth, that is, a democracy in which power is exercised not just for the people by elites but by the people in their own collective interests. But more importantly, Wolin and others recognize that the rituals of voting and accountability have become empty in a country that has been reduced to a lockdown universe in which torture, abuse, and the suspension of civil liberties have become so normalized that more than half of all Americans now support the use of torture under some circumstances.<sup>42</sup> Torture, kidnapping, indefinite detention, murder, and disappeared “enemy combatants” are typical practices carried out in dictatorships, not in democracies, especially in a democracy that allegedly has a liberal president whose election campaign ran on the promise of change and hope. Maybe it's time to use a different language to name and resist the registers of power and ideology that now dominate American society.

While precise accounts of the meaning of authoritarianism, especially fascism, abound, I have no desire, given its shifting nature, to impose a rigid or universal definition. What is to be noted is that many scholars, such as Kevin Passmore and Robert O. Paxton, agree that authoritarianism is a mass movement that emerges out of a failed democracy, and its ideology is extremely anti-liberal, anti-democratic, and anti-socialistic.<sup>43</sup> As a social order, it is generally characterized by a system of terror directed against perceived enemies of the state; a monopolistic control of the mass media; an expanding prison system; a state monopoly of weapons; political rule by privileged groups and classes; control of the economy by a limited number of people; unbridled corporatism; “the appeal to emotion and myth rather than reason; the glorification of violence on behalf of a national cause; the mobilization and militarization of civil society; [and] an expansionist foreign policy intended to promote national greatness.”<sup>44</sup> All of these tendencies were highly visible during the former Bush administration. With the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, there was a widespread feeling among large sections of the American public and its intellectuals that the threat of authoritarianism had passed. And yet there are many

troubling signs that in spite of the election of Obama, authoritarian policies not only continue to unfold unabated within his administration but continue outside of his power to control them. In this case, antidemocratic forces seem to align with many of the conditions that make up what Wolin calls the politics of inverted totalitarianism.

I think it is fair to say that authoritarianism can permeate the lived relations of a political culture and social order and can be seen in the ways in which such relations exacerbate the material conditions of inequality, undercut a sense of individual and social agency, hijack democratic values, and promote a deep sense of hopelessness, cynicism, and eventually unbridled anger. This deep sense of cynicism and despair on the part of the polity in the face of unaccountable corporate and political power lends credence to Hannah Arendt's notion that at the heart of totalitarianism is the disappearance of the thinking, dialogue, and speaking citizens who make politics possible. Authoritarianism as both an ideology and a set of social practices emerges within the lives of those marked by such relations, as its proponents scorn the present while calling for a revolution that rescues a deeply anti-modernist past in order to revolutionize the future.

Determining for certain whether we are in the midst of a new authoritarianism under the leadership of Barack Obama is difficult, but one thing is clear: any new form of authoritarianism that emerges in the current time will be much more powerful and complex in its beliefs, mechanisms of power, and modes of control than the alleged idealism of one man or one administration. The popular belief, especially after McCain's defeat, was that the country had made a break with its morally transgressive and reactionary past and that Obama signified not just hope but political redemption. Such views ignored both the systemic and powerfully organized financial and economic forces at work in American society while vastly overestimating the power of any one individual or isolated group to challenge and transform them. Even as the current economic meltdown revealed the destructive and distinctive class character of the financial crisis, the idea that the crisis was rooted in systemic causes that far exceeded a few bailouts was lost even on liberal economists such as Paul Krugman, Jeffrey Sachs, and Joseph Stiglitz.

Within such economic analyses and narratives of political redemption, the primacy of hope and "critical exuberance" took precedence over the reality of established corporate power, ideological interests, and the influence of the military-industrial complex. As Judith Butler warned soon after Obama's victory, "Obama is, after all, hardly a leftist, regardless of the attributions of 'socialism' proffered by his conservative opponents. In what ways will his actions be constrained by party politics, economic interests, and state power; in what ways have they been compromised already? If we seek through this presidency to overcome a sense of dissonance, then we will have jettisoned critical politics in favor of an exuberance whose phan-

tasmatic dimensions will prove consequential.”<sup>45</sup> In retrospect, Butler’s comments have proven prescient, and the hope that accompanied Obama’s election has now been tempered by not simply despair but in many quarters outright and legitimate anger.

If Bush’s presidency represented an exceptional anti-democratic moment, it would seem logical that the Obama administration would have examined, condemned, and dismantled policies and practices at odds with the ideals of an aspiring democracy. Unfortunately, such has not been the case under Obama, at least up to this point in his administration. Within the past few years, Obama has moved decidedly to the right, and in doing so has extended some of the worst elements of the counter-terrorism policies of the Bush administration. He has endorsed the use of military commissions, argued for the use of indefinite detention with no charges or legal recourse for Afghan prisoners, extended the USA Patriot Act,<sup>46</sup> continued two wars while expanding the war in Afghanistan, and largely reproduced Bush’s market-driven approach to school reform.<sup>47</sup> As Noam Chomsky points out, Obama has done nothing to alter the power and triumph of financial liberalization in the past thirty years.<sup>48</sup> He bailed out banks and financial investment institutions at the expense of the 26.3 million Americans who are either unemployed or do not have full-time jobs along with the millions who have lost their homes. His chief economic and foreign policy advisors—Tim Geithner, Lawrence Summers, and Robert Gates—represent a continuation of a military and big business orientation that is central to the ideologies and power relations of a undemocratic and increasingly bankrupt economic and political system. While claiming to enact policies designed to reduce the federal deficit, Obama plans to cut many crucial domestic programs while increasing military spending, the intelligence budget, and foreign military aid. Obama has requested a defense budget for 2011 of \$708 billion, in addition to calling for \$33 billion to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This budget is almost as large as the rest of the entire world’s defense spending combined. Roger Hodge provides a useful summary of Obama’s failings, extending from the perversion of the rule of law to the authoritarian claim of “sovereign immunity.” He writes:

Obama promised to end the war in Iraq, end torture, close Guantánamo, restore the constitution, heal our wounds, and wash our feet. None of these things has come to pass. As president, with few exceptions, Obama either has embraced the unconstitutional war powers claimed by his predecessor or has left the door open for their quiet adoption at some later date. Leon Panetta, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has declared that the right to kidnap (known as “extraordinary rendition”) foreigners will continue, just as the Bush administration’s expansive doctrine of state secrets continues to be used in court against those wrongfully detained and tortured by our security forces and allies. Obama has adopted military commissions, once an unpardonable offense against our best traditions, to prosecute terrorism cases in which legitimate convictions cannot be obtained.... The principle of habeas corpus, sacred to candidate Obama as “the essence of who we are,” no longer seems so essen-

tial, and reports continue to surface of secret prisons hidden from due process and the Red Cross. Waterboarding has been banned, but other “soft” forms of torture, such as sleep deprivation and force-feeding, continue—as do the practices, which once seemed so terribly important to opponents of the Bush regime, of presidential signing statements and warrantless surveillance. In at least one respect, the Obama Justice Department has produced an innovation: a claim of “sovereign immunity” in response to a lawsuit seeking damages for illegal spying. Not even the minions of George W. Bush, with their fanciful notions of the unitary executive, made use of this constitutionally suspect doctrine, derived from the ancient common-law assumption that “the King can do no wrong,” to defend their clear violations of the federal surveillance statute.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, by giving corporations and unions unlimited freedom to contribute to elections, the recent Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* provided a final step in placing the control of politics more firmly in the hands of big money and large corporations. In this ruling, democracy—like everything else in American culture—was treated as a commodity and offered up to the highest bidder. As a result, whatever government regulations are imposed on big business and the financial sectors will be largely ineffective and will do little to disrupt casino capitalism’s freedom from political, economic, and ethical constraints. Chris Hedges is right in insisting that the Supreme Court’s decision “carried out a coup d’état in slow motion. The coup is over. We lost. The ruling is one more judicial effort to streamline mechanisms for corporate control. It exposes the myth of a functioning democracy and the triumph of corporate power....The corporate state is firmly cemented in place.”<sup>50</sup>

In light of his conservative, if not authoritarian, policies, Obama’s once-inspiring call for hope has been reduced to what appears to be simply an empty performance, one that “favours the grand symbolic gesture over deep structural change every time.”<sup>51</sup> What once appeared as inspired rhetoric has largely been reduced to fodder for late-night television comics, while for a growing army of angry voters it has become nothing more than a cheap marketing campaign and disingenuous diversion in support of moneyed interests and power. Obama’s rhetoric of hope is largely contradicted by policies that continue to reproduce a world of egotistic self-referentiality, an insensitivity to human suffering, massive investments in military power, and an embrace of those market-driven values that produce enormous inequalities in wealth, income, and security. There is more at stake here than a politics of misrepresentation and bad faith. There is an invisible register of politics that goes far beyond the contradiction between Obama’s discourse and his right-wing policies. What we must take seriously in Obama’s policies is the absence of anything that might suggest a fundamental power shift away from casino capitalism to policies that would develop the conditions “that make it possible for ordinary people to better their lives by becoming political beings and by making power responsive to their hopes and needs.”<sup>52</sup> In Obama’s world, cutthroat competition is still the

name of the game, and individual choice is still simply about a hunt for bargains. Lost here is any notion of political and social responsibility for the welfare, autonomy, and dignity of all human beings but especially those who are marginalized because they lack food, shelter, jobs, and other crucial basic needs. But then again, this is not Obama's world; it is a political order and mode of economic sovereignty that has been in the making for quite some time and now shapes practically every aspect of culture, politics, and civic life. In doing so it has largely destroyed any vestige of real democracy in the United States.

I am not suggesting that in light of Obama's continuation of some of the deeply structured authoritarian tendencies in American society that people should turn away from the language of hope, but I am saying that they should avoid a notion of hope that is as empty as it is disingenuous. What is needed is a language of critique and hope that mutually inform each other, and engagement in a discourse of hope that is concretely rooted in real struggles and capable of inspiring a new political language and collective vision among a highly conservative and fractured polity. Maybe it is time to shift the critique of Obama away from an exclusive focus on the policies and practices of his administration and develop a new language, one with a longer historical purview and deeper understanding of the ominous forces that now threaten any credible notion of the United States as an aspiring democracy. As Stuart Hall insists, we "need to change the scale of magnification" in order to make visible the anti-democratic relations often buried beneath the hidden order of politics that have taken hold in the United States in the last few decades.<sup>53</sup> It may be time to shift the discourse away from focusing on either Obama's failures or urging progressives and others to develop "the organizational power to make muscular demands"<sup>54</sup> on the Obama administration. Maybe the time has come to focus on the ongoing repressive and systemic conditions, institutions, ideologies, and values that have been developing in American society for the last thirty years, forces that are giving rise to a unique form of American authoritarianism. I agree with Sheldon Wolin that the "fixation upon" Obama now "obscures the problems" we are facing.<sup>55</sup> Maybe it is time to imagine what democracy would look like outside of what we have come to call capitalism, not simply neoliberalism at its most extreme manifestation. Maybe it is time to fight for the formative culture and modes of thought and agency that are the very foundations of democracy. And maybe it is time to mobilize a militant, far-reaching social movement to challenge the false claims that equate democracy and capitalism.

If it is true that a new form of authoritarianism is developing in the United States, undercutting any vestige of a democratic society, then it is equally true that there is nothing inevitable about this growing threat. The long and tightening grip of authoritarianism in American political culture can be resisted and transformed. This dystopic future will not happen if intellectuals, workers, young people, and

diverse social movements unite to create the public spaces and unsettling formative educational cultures necessary for reimagining the meaning of radical democracy. In part, this is a pedagogical project, one that recognizes consciousness, agency, and education as central to any viable notion of politics. It is also a project designed to address, critique, and make visible the commonsense ideologies that enable neoliberal capitalism and other elements of an emergent authoritarianism to function alongside a kind of moral coma and political amnesia at the level of everyday life. But such a project will not take place if the American public cannot recognize how the mechanisms of authoritarianism have had an impact on their lives, restructured negatively the notion of freedom, and corrupted power by placing it largely in the hands of ruling elites, corporations, and different segments of the military and national security state. Such a project must work to develop vigorous social spheres and communities that promote a culture of deliberation, public debate, and critical exchange across a wide variety of cultural and institutional sites in an effort to generate democratic movements for social change. Central to such a project is the attempt to foster a new radical imagination as part of a wider political project to create the conditions for a broad-based social movement that can move beyond the legacy of a fractured left/progressive culture and politics in order to address the totality of the society's problems. This suggests finding a common ground in which challenging diverse forms of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion can become part of a broader challenge to create a radical democracy. We need to develop an educated and informed public—one that embraces a culture of questioning and puts into question society's commanding institutions. Such a citizenry is crucial to the development of a critical formative culture organized around a project of autonomy and mode of politics in which, as Cornelius Castoriadis insists, broader concerns with power and justice are connected to the need "to create citizens who are critical thinkers capable of putting existing institutions into question so that democracy again becomes society's movement...that is to say, a new type of regime in the full sense of the term."<sup>56</sup> We live in a time that demands a discourse of both critique and possibility, one that recognizes that without an informed citizenry, collective struggle, and viable social movements, democracy will slip out of our reach and we will arrive at a new stage of history marked by the birth of an authoritarianism that not only disdains all vestiges of democracy but is more than willing to relegate it to a distant memory.

## CONCLUSION

This book was published just as the Obama administration finished its second year in office. Initially, hopes were high among large segments of the American public.

The long dark years of war, repression, secrecy, and corruption were rejected by popular vote, and a brighter day seemed on the horizon, or so it seemed. Obama spoke a political language that embodied hope, and his earnest embrace of the American dream appeared to represent the possibility of a more just future. Under Bush, the United States had come as close to authoritarianism as was possible without giving up all vestiges of democratic aspirations. The Bush/Cheney regime was the apotheosis of a new kind of politics in American life, one in which the arrogance of power and wealth transformed a limited social state into a mode of sovereignty that not only worked in the interests of rich and powerful corporations but also increasingly viewed more and more individuals and groups as disposable and expendable. As politics came to occupy the center of life itself, the welfare state was transformed into a corporate and punishing state. Problems were no longer viewed as in need of social and political remedies. Instead, they were criminalized, reduced to matters of law and order—when law and order weren't suspended altogether. The defense of the common good, public values, and social protections moved from the center of political culture to the margins—reduced to an inconvenience, if not a threat to those who occupied the privileged precincts of power. In the midst of a militarized culture of fear, insecurity, and market-driven values, economics drove politics to its death-dealing limit, as crucial considerations of justice, ethics, and compassion were largely expunged from our political vocabulary, except as objects of disdain or a weak-kneed liberal nostalgic yearning. It seemed as if the living dead now ruled every commanding aspect of the culture, extending from the media to popular expression itself.

Tragically, little has changed since Barack Obama took office. The politics of corruption, death, and despair appear to define the Obama administration as much as they did the relentless eight years of the Bush regime. This book is an attempt to develop a new form of political critique forged out of what may seem an extreme metaphor, the zombie or hyper-dead. Yet the metaphor is particularly apt for drawing attention to the ways in which political culture and power in American society now work in the interests of bare survival, if not disposability, for the vast majority of people—a kind of war machine and biopolitics committed to the creation of death-worlds, a new and unique form of social existence in which large segments of the population live under a state of siege, reduced to a form of social death. The zombie metaphor does more than suggest the symbolic face of power, it points dramatically to a kind of “mad agency that is power in a new form, death-in-life”<sup>57</sup> agency without conscience and bereft of social democratic imagination or hope. This is what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics in which “death is the mediator of the present—the only form of agency left.”<sup>58</sup> What is new about this type of politics is that it is not hidden, lurking in the shadows but appears daily and unremarkably in memos, reports, and policies justifying illegal legalities such as the use of state



secrets, indefinite detention without charge, the massive incarceration of people of color, hidden prisons, a world of night raids, the bailout of corrupt corporations that led to the direct destitution of millions, and the full-fledged attack on a weakened oppositional culture of thoughtfulness and critique, itself all but left for dead. The figure of the zombie utilizes the iconography of the living dead to signal a society that appears to have stopped questioning itself, that revels in its collusion with human suffering, and is awash in a culture of unbridled materialism and narcissism. Though not of his making, this is now Obama's challenge; and yet the politics of death and suffering continue unabated both in the United States and in America's imperial adventures abroad.

This book is an attempt to understand critically both the political and pedagogical conditions that have produced this culture of sadism and death, attempting to mark and chart its visible registers, including the emergence of right-wing teaching machines, a growing politics of disposability, the emergence of a culture of cruelty, the ongoing war being waged on young people, and especially on youth of color. The book begins and ends with an analysis of authoritarianism and the ways it reworks itself, mutates, and attacks parasitically the desiccated shell of democracy, sucking out its life-blood. The focus on authoritarianism serves as both a warning as well as a call to critical engagement in the interest of hope—not as a political rhetoric emptied of context and commitment but one that seeks to resuscitate a democratic imaginary and energized social movements that is the one antidote to the zombification of politics.

In the first section of the book, elements of the new authoritarianism are analyzed as a death-dealing politics that works its way through a culture of deceit, fear, humiliation, torture, and market-driven desire for their ever-more “extreme” expressions. Next it focuses on challenging the rise of a politics of illiteracy and the ongoing destruction of democratic public spheres, stressing how the values of casino capitalism are mobilized through the emergence of market-driven commercial spheres and public institutions such as schools. The third section of the book focuses on the figure of youth as a register of the crisis of public values, signaling the impending crisis of a democratic future. The merging of zombie politics and the increasing scale of suffering and hardship that young people have to endure in the United States points to the serious political and ethical consequences of a society mobilized and controlled by casino capitalism—a capitalism that in its arrogance and greed takes the side of death and destruction rather than siding with democracy and public life. The figure of the zombie signifies not just a crisis of consciousness but a new type of political power and “mad agency,” visible in the rituals of economic Darwinism that rule not just reality TV but everyday life. But such a politics is far from undefeatable, and surely it is not without the continued presence and possibility of individual and collective resistance. My hope is that this book will break

through a diseased common sense that often masks zombie politicians, anti-public intellectuals, politics, institutions, and social relations and bring into focus the need for a new language, pedagogy, and politics in which the living dead will be moved decisively to the margins rather than occupying the very center of politics and everyday life.

## NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1968; New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 196.
2. I have taken this term from Stephen Jones, ed., *The Dead That Walk* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2010).
3. Editorial, "Wall Street Casino," *The New York Times* (April 28, 2010), p. A24, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/28/opinion/28wed1.html>.
4. Some of the ideas come from Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad, eds., *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead* (Chicago: Open Court, 2010).
5. Arun Gupta, "Party of No: How Republicans and the Right Have Tried to Thwart All Social Progress," *Truthout.org* (May 21, 2010), [www.alternet.org/news/146965](http://www.alternet.org/news/146965).
6. Jonathan J. Cooper, "We're All Arizonians Now," *Huffington Post* (May 15, 2010), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/15/sarah-palin-were-all-ariz\\_n\\_577671.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/15/sarah-palin-were-all-ariz_n_577671.html).
7. See the excellent commentary on this issue by Frank Rich, "The Rage Is Not About Health Care," *The New York Times* (March 28, 2010), p. WK10. See also Justine Sharrock, "The Oath Keepers: The Militant and Armed Side of the Tea Party Movement," *AlterNet* (March 6, 2010), <http://www.alternet.org/story/145769>; and Mark Potok, "Rage on the Right: The Year in Hate and Extremism," *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report* 137 (Spring 2010), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/spring/rage-on-the-right>.
8. Paul Krugman, "Going to Extreme," *The New York Times* (May 16, 2010), p. A23.
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