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**Imagination Warfare:
Targeting Youths on the Everyday Battlefields of the 21st Century**

by

Henry A. Giroux and Brad Evans.

“There’s a nagging sense of emptiness. So people look for anything; they believe in any extreme—any extremist nonsense is better than nothing” (J.G. Ballard)

“We do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present” (Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari)

Youths in the Firing Line

There is a revealing similarity between the attacks on September 11, 2001--when airplanes were flown into the twin towers, killing thousands of people-- and the attack in Paris in 2015, in which over 130 people were killed and hundreds wounded. Yet, what they have in common has been largely overlooked in the mainstream and alternative media’s coverage of the more recent attacks. While both assaults have been rightly viewed as desperate acts of alarming brutality, what has been missed is that both acts of violence were committed by young men. This is not a minor issue because unravelling this similarity provides the possibility for addressing the conditions that made such attacks possible.

While French President Francois Hollande did say soon after the Paris assault that “youth in all its diversity” was targeted, he did not address the implications of the attack’s heinous and wanton violence. Instead, he embraced the not so “exceptional” discourse of militarism, vengeance, and ideological certainty, a discourse that turned 9/11 into an unending war, a tragic mistake that cost millions of lives and insured that the war on terrorism would benefit and play

into the very hands of those at which it was aimed. The call for war, retribution, and revenge extended the violent landscape of everyday oppressions by shutting down any possibility for understanding the conditions that galvanized the violence committed by young people against innocent youthful civilians.

In an altogether familiar and expected way, Hollande channeled the Bush/Cheney response to an act of terrorism, and in doing so, further paved the way for the emergence of the mass surveillance state, the collapsing of the state/army distinction, and the collapse of militarization and policing, all the while legitimating a culture of fear and demonization that unleashed a new wave of racism and Islamophobia in continental Europe and beyond. What Hollande and others, who are calling for increased military action, have also missed is that “the kind of brutal policies pursued by the Bush administration and Rumsfeld and Cheney utterly failed. They strategically failed on the ground in that they achieved nothing in terms of stabilizing Iraq or dealing with the threat of Islamic extremism.”¹ And they failed intellectually in that they offered no prospect for attesting the cycle of violence and revenge. Such is the definition of political nihilism.

There is a hidden politics at work here that prevents a deeper understanding, not only of the failure of the government’s responses to attacks like the ones witnessed in Paris, but also how such warlike strategies legitimate, reproduce, and quicken further the acts of violence, moving governments closer to the practices of a security state. As Ian Buruma points out, hysteria produces more than fear, it also puts into play the conditions mass violence in “which a Western government allows its policemen to humiliate and bully Muslims in the name of security, [which means] the more ISIS is likely to win European recruits.”² Under such circumstances, violence becomes the key organizing principle for societies, and fear becomes the foundation for

producing both regressive and vindictive policies and for producing subjects willing to accept violence as the best solution to address the conditions that cause such fear. Judith Butler is right in arguing that the fear and rage at the heart of such responses “may well turn into a fierce embrace of a police state.”³ Violence in fact is exonerated as an intolerable act sets the conditions for “purer” forms of violence to come.

But what does it mean when youths are now strategically in the firing line? How does this force a change in our understanding and perception of the political stakes to the violence? And how might be read this diagnostically as revealing both of the contemporary political climate, and what it might mean in terms of our shared political futures? Working on from the understanding that youths have become a notable, if under-theorized object for power and violence in the everyday battlefields of the 21st century, this paper will attend to these questions and what it means for rethinking the politics of violence in the 21st Century. Moving beyond conventional understandings of the violence, which neatly maps it out in terms of civilization versus barbarity, it is our contention that both sides have effectively created a Gordian knot through which the recourse to violence reins supreme. Indeed, once we recognize that the conflicts today are fought over the site of imagination itself, so there is a need to offer a fundamental rethink if we are to break the cycle of violence, and ensure that our collective futures are not violently fated.

A War Waged on Youth and by Youth

While politicians, pundits, and the mainstream media acknowledged that the Paris attackers largely targeted places where young people gathered—the concert hall, the café, and the sports stadium—what they missed was that this act of violence was part of a strategic war on youth. In

this instance, youth were targeted by other youth. Indeed a different angle of vision shows how this incident was part of a larger war waged on youth and by youth. For ISIS, the war on youth translates into what might be called hard and soft targets. As hard targets, young people are subject to intolerable forms of violence of the sort seen in the Paris attacks. Moreover, there is a kind of doubling here because once they are lured into the discourse of extremism and sacrificial violence, they are no longer targeted or defined by their deficits. On the contrary, they now refigure their sense of agency, resentment, and powerlessness in the nihilistic image of the suicide bomber who now targets other young people. The movement here is from an intolerable sense of powerlessness to an intolerable notion of violence defined through the image of a potential killing machine. In this script, the hard war cannot be separated from the soft war on youth, and it is precisely this combination of tactics that is missed by those Western governments waging the war on terrorism.

The soft war represents another type of violence, one that trades in both fear and a sense of certainty and ideological purity borne of hyper-moral sensibilities, which writes of the victim as a mere necessity to the wider sacred claim. As symbols of the future, youth harbor the possibility of an alternative and more liberating world-view, and in doing so they constitute a threat to the fundamentalist ideology of ISIS. Hence, they are viewed as potential targets subject to intolerable violence –whether they join terrorists groups or protest against such organizations. It is precisely through the mobilization of such fear that whatever hopes they might have for a better world is undermined or erased. This constitutes an attack on the imagination, designed to stamp out any sense of critical agency, thoughtfulness, and critical engagement with the present and the future.

The use of violence by ISIS is deftly designed to both terrorize young people and to

create a situation in which France and other governments, already built upon centuries of deeply embedded structural racism and xenophobia, will likely escalate their repressive tactics toward Muslims, thereby radicalizing more young people, and persuading them to travel to Syria to fight in the war effort. Put differently, when Hollande calls for pitiless vengeance he is creating the warlike conditions that will enable an entire generation of Muslim youth to become sacrificial agents and the pretext for further violence. When violence becomes the only condition for possibility, it either suppresses political agency or allows it to become either a target or the vehicle for targeting others. War is a fertile ground for resentment, anger and violence because it turns pure survivability into a doctrine, and produces subjects willing to accept violence as the best solution to addressing the conditions that cause an endless cycle of humiliation, fear, and powerlessness.

But the soft war does more than trade in a culture of fear. It also relies on a pedagogy of seduction, persuasion, and identification. That is why the spectacle of violence is so central. ISIS also capitalizes on the desperation, humiliation, and loss of hope that many young Muslims experience in the West along with an endless barrage of images depicting the violence waged by Western nations against Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and other Arab nations. The spectacle of violence is its defining organizational principle as a means for announcing itself and perpetuating the conditions, which constitute its very realities. Many youth in the West are vulnerable to ISIS propaganda because they are constantly subject to widespread discrimination, and because of their religion, continue to be harassed, dismissed, and humiliated. Such realities become overtly politicised and turned back upon themselves for the furtherance of violence and destruction. Much of this is further exacerbated by the expanding Islamophobia produced by right-wing populists in Europe and the United States. One particularly egregious example has been evident

in Republican Party presidential candidate, Donald Trump's call for banning Muslims from entering the United States.⁴ Humiliating Muslims in the name of security simply provides a powerful recruiting tool to win recruits from Europe and North America. This is more than strategic gamesmanship. The rampant spread of Islamophobia in the United States and Europe coupled with the relentless bombing of ISIS strongholds in Iraq and Syria "won't break the spell of [the] Islamist revolution for frustrated, bored, and marginalized young people" in the slums of Paris, New York, or other Western cities.⁵ And yet, tragically, both sides benefit from exacerbating the very conditions, which ultimately endanger the innocent and most vulnerable in this situation.

While the suffering and impoverishment of Muslim communities is ignored, resentment is routinely dismissed as a variant of ideological and political extremism devoid of both historical forces and personal experiences. Questions pertaining to the legacies of war and everyday oppressions (often amplified as a result of the ongoing state of siege warfare produces) are seldom asked by those tasked with formulating a response. Heiner Flassbeck rightly argues that ISIS is particularly adept at highlighting the conditions that produce this sense of resentment, anger, and powerlessness and how it strategically addresses the vulnerability of Muslim youth to join ISIS by luring them with the promise of community, support, and visions of an Islamic utopia. He writes:

For as much as we know, they grew up in human and social conditions that few of us can even imagine. They grew up fearing attracting attention to themselves and being branded as potential terrorists if they were a bit too religious (in the eyes of the West) or frequented Arab circles a bit too often. They also saw that the West shows little reservation in bombing what they considered their "home countries" and killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people in order to guarantee the 'safety' of its citizens.... The sad truth is that thousands of young men grow up in a world in which premeditated killings take place on an almost daily basis when

army personnel from thousands of miles away push a button. Is it really surprising that some of them lose their wits, strike back and create even more violence and the death of many innocent people?⁶

When the conditions that oppress youth are ignored in the face of the ongoing practices of state oppression - the attacks waged on Muslim youth in France and other countries, the blatant racism that degrades a religion as if all terrorists are Muslims or forgets that all religions produce their own share of terrorists - there is little hope to address the conditions that both impoverish and oppress young people, let alone developing the insight and vision to address such conditions before they erupt into a nihilistic form of rage. Abdelkader Benali gives credence to this argument when he notes:

But I know from my own experience that the lure of extremism can be very powerful when you grow up in a world where the media and everyone around you seems to mock and insult your culture. And European governments are not helping fight extremism by giving in to Islamophobia cooked up by right-wing populists. What I see is a lack of courage to embrace the Muslims of Europe as genuinely European — as citizens like everyone else.⁷

Very few voices are talking about the attacks in Paris as part of what can be called the war on youth. The perpetrators in this case targeted places where young people gather, sending a message that suggests that young people will have no future unless they can accept the ideological fundamentalism that drives terrorist threats and demands. This was an attack not simply on the bodies of youth but also on the imagination, an attempt to kill any sense of a better and more democratic future. When this script is ignored or derided as an unrealistic fantasy, then war, militarism, violence, and revenge become the only option for governments and young people to consider: a complex knot is tied that binding the past, present and future, erases the

conditions that produce ISIS or the conditions that make possible the recruitment of young people to such a violent death cult.

Living the Everyday War

The conditions which give rise to extremism do not lie simply in ideological fundamentalism; they also connect to the wider conditions of oppression, war, racism, poverty, the abandonment of entire generations of Palestinian youth, the dictatorships that stifle young people in the Middle East, and the racist assaults on Black youth in urban centers in America. For too many people, youth are now the subject and object of a continuous state of siege warfare, transformed either into suicide bombers or the collateral damage that comes from the ubiquitous war machines. There are few safe spaces for them any more, unless they are hidden in the gated enclaves and protectorates of the globally enriched. In an age of extreme violence, civil wars, and increasing indiscriminate attacks, it is crucial for those wedded to a democratic future to examine the state of youth globally, especially those marginalized by class, race, religion, ethnicity and gender in order to address those forces that produce the conditions of violence, extreme fundamentalism, militarism, and massive political and economic inequalities. This is a crucial project that would also necessitate analyzing and distinguishing the ever-expanding global war machines that thrive on violence and exclusion from those governmental processes, which might offer a transformation for the better.

Surely there is more to the future than allowing young people to be killed by drones or while sitting innocently in a cafe, or for that matter for their spirit to be crushed or misdirected by impoverishment of body and mind. Maybe it is time to ask important questions about the choices different youth are making: Why are some youth joining and supporting violent

organizations? And what has led others to resist state violence and persecution in all of its forms, framing this violence as an indecent assault on individuals, groups, and the planet itself?

Maybe it is time to ask what it means when a society ignores young people and then goes to war because they engage in terrorist acts or are its victims. One thing is clear: there will be no sense of global safety unless the conditions are addressed and eliminated that produce young people as both the subject and objects of violence. Safety is not guaranteed by war, militarism, and vengeance. In fact, this response to violence becomes the generative principle for more violence to come, thereby guaranteeing that no one will be safe until it becomes clear that that these young people who have been initiated into a culture of violence are the product of a world we have created. As Flassbeck rightly argues:

Safety cannot be guaranteed. Airplanes, public building and politicians can be protected, but there is no way to guarantee the safety of citizens. Those who oppose the 'system' that, in their eyes constitutes a destructive and life-threatening force may strike anywhere. To them, it makes little difference who dies, as long as their actions create death, destruction, fear and, of course, more violence as a reaction. Safety can only be achieved if we start to realize and admit to ourselves that these angry young men are a product of our world. They are not just strangers that are driven by some perverted ideology. They are the result of a long series of misjudgments from our part and from our callousness when it comes to identify potential suspects and hit them with bombs and drones in order to restore 'order' and 'safety.'⁸

Western powers cannot allow the fog of violence to cover over the bankruptcy of a militaristic response to an act of indiscriminate violence. Such militaristic responses function largely to govern the effects of acts of terror by ISIS while ignoring its wider systemic dimensions. Dealing with the violence of ISIS requires political contextualization and serious engagement. However abhorrent we might find their actions, it is patently absurd for any leader involved with the ongoing acts of violence constantly recorded and made available on the

internet not to recognize that one strategic assault posed by ISIS is to deploy production values and aesthetics of entertainment used in Hollywood films and video games to project images of subjugation and power like those produced by U.S. military media operations in Guatánamo Bay at the outset of the terror wars.

John Pilger ventures to take this a step further by noting the historical parallels with the Khmer Rouge, which terrorized Cambodia. As Pilger writes, this movement was the direct outcome of a US bombing campaign: “The Americans dropped the equivalent of five Hiroshimas on rural Cambodia during 1969-73. They levelled village after village, returning to bomb the rubble and corpses. The craters left monstrous necklaces of carnage, still visible from the air. The terror was unimaginable.”⁹ The outcome was the emergence of group largely made up of radical young men, driven by a dystopian ideology, all dressed in black, sweeping the country in the most violent and terrifying of ways. The historical comparison is all too apparent: “ISIS has a similar past and present. By most scholarly measure, Bush and Blair's invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the deaths of some 700,000 people - in a country that had no history of jihadism.”¹⁰

If a nation continually bombs a people, invades and occupies their land, appropriates their resources, harms their children, imprisons and humiliates their families, and tears apart the fabric of the social order, there is direct responsibility for the inevitable backlash to follow. It actually produces the very conditions in which violence continues to thrive. The rush to violence kills more innocent people, is strategically useful only as a recruiting tool for extremists, and further emboldens those who thrive on a culture of fear, and benefit from creating a surveillance state, a lock-down society, and a violently determined order based on the principles of limitless control, managed forms of social and political exclusion, and privilege—including the privilege to destroy.

But the rush to violence does more than perpetuate a war on youth; it also eliminates what might be called a politics of memory, the legacy of an insurrectional democracy, and in doing so furthers the registers of the militaristic state. The call for lethal violence in the face of the murderous attacks in Paris eviscerates from collective consciousness the mistakes made by President Bush who declared “a war on terror” after 9/11, a statement that led us to the Patriot Act, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and Guantánamo.”¹¹ The consequences of that rush to judgment and war are difficult to fathom. As Bret Weinstein observes, Bush responded in a way that fed right into the perpetrators playbook:

The 9/11 attack was symbolic... It was designed to provoke a reaction. The reaction cost more than 6,000 American lives in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more than \$3 trillion in U.S. treasure. The reaction also caused the United States to cripple its own Constitution and radicalize the Muslim world with a reign of terror that has killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani civilians.¹²

How different might our futures look now had an alternative response been sought at that particular moment? Continuing the cycle of violence and revenge, the response ramped up the violence and derided anybody who called for “addressing some of the social, cultural, and economic problems that create a context for extremism.”¹³ The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the failure of the U.S. war in Vietnam, the failure of the Western invasion of Iraq, and the futility of the military attacks on Libya and Syria all testify to failure of wars waged against foreign populations, especially people in the Middle East. As Peter Van Buren dryly observes,

We gave up many of our freedoms in America to defeat the terrorists. It did not work. We gave the lives of over 4,000 American men and women in Iraq, and thousands more in Afghanistan, to defeat the terrorists, and refuse to ask what they died for. We killed tens of thousands or more in those countries. It did not work. We went to war again in Iraq, and now in Syria,

before in Libya, and only created more failed states and ungoverned spaces that provide havens for terrorists and spilled terror like dropped paint across borders. We harass and discriminate against our own Muslim populations and then stand slack-jawed as they become radicalized, and all we do then is blame ISIS for Tweeting.¹⁴

The Wars on Terror and the ethos of militarism that has driven it into the normalized fabric of everyday politics is seen by many of its victims as an act of terrorism because of the dreadful toll it takes on noncombatants, and who can blame them. When Obama uses drone strikes to blow up hospitals, kill members of a wedding party, and slaughter innocent children, regardless of the humanitarian signatures, the violence becomes a major recruiting factor for ISIS and other groups.¹⁵ When the practice of moral witnessing disappears, along with the narratives of suffering on the part of the oppressed, politics withers, and the turn to violence and extremism gains ground, especially among impoverished youth. When the West forgets that as “UN data shows that Muslim avoidable deaths from deprivation in countries subject to Western military intervention in 2001-2015 now total about 27 million” such actions further serve to both create more fear of the “Other” and generate more resentment and hatred by those who are relegated to the shameless and ethically reprehensible status of collateral damage.¹⁶

The call for war eliminates historical and public memory. The pedagogical dimensions embedded in its practice of forgetting ensure that any intervention in the present will be limited by erasing any understanding of the past which might cultivate a renewed sense of political identification, social responsibility, and those forms of ethical and political commitments that bear on the immediacy of a world caught in the fog of war and the thoughtlessness of its conditioning. As such, those who forget the past ignore precisely the similarities mentioned above, whether we are discussing the Western actions that created Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge

or the histories of violence that created the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.¹⁷ Chris Floyd is right to remind us that

Without the American crime of aggressive war against Iraq — which, by the measurements used by Western governments themselves, left more than a million innocent people dead — there would be no ISIS, no “Al Qaeda in Iraq.” Without the Saudi and Western funding and arming of an amalgam of extremist Sunni groups across the Middle East, used as proxies to strike at Iran and its allies, there would be no ISIS. Let’s go back further. Without the direct, extensive and deliberate creation by the United States and its Saudi ally of a world-wide movement of armed Sunni extremists during the Carter and Reagan administrations, there would have been no “War on Terror” — and no terrorist attacks in Paris.¹⁸

Joseph G. Ramsey is also correct in insisting that those who focus only on the immediate and the shocking images of the suffering and trauma of those young people killed and wounded in Paris, while failing to acknowledge the broader historical context out of which this intolerable emerged, “neither do justice to the situation, nor do they help us to achieve a framework for response, in thinking or in action, that can in fact reduce, rather than escalate and increase, the dangers that these terrible events represent, and that they portend.”¹⁹ One way in which such violence can be escalated is by giving free rein to the cheerleaders of racism, denouncement, and militarism. This is the “bomb first and think later” group that not only makes a claim to occupy the high moral and political ground, but adamantly refuses to attend to any alternative narrative that addresses the wider dimensions, especially those responsible for what we are calling the war on youth. Unfortunately, the gospel of fear and sensationalism is being encouraged by mainstream corporate media outlets, especially the cable news networks, who in their search for higher ratings spread moral panics, fuel anti-immigrant sentiment, and encourage war mongering

by providing coverage that lacks any historical context or a complex and informative coverage of terror.²⁰

How Fear Turns to Fascism

As Rabbi Michael Lerner has brilliantly argued, fear and the desires it generates is the moving force of fascism. Fear undermines historical memory due to its appeal to intense emotions and quick reactions steeped in violence. And, as Lerner writes, fear also guarantees that

Fascistic and racist right-wing forces will grow more popular as their anti-immigrant policies are portrayed as ‘common sense.’ In doing so, the politics of fear will inevitably lead to the empowering of domestic intelligence forces who are eager to invade our private lives and adamant in their call to receive greater support from the American public in the name of a disingenuous commitment to security. The call for tighter security and the allocation of increasing powers of surveillance to the government and its intelligence agencies will be supported by liberal leaders who seek to show that they too can be “tough.”²¹

Violence borne of such viscerally felt moments is always rooted in a pedagogical practice that mobilizes fear, embraces emotion over serious deliberation, and serves to legitimate a discourse that drowns out historical memory and ethical considerations. This is a discourse that is mobilized as a public pedagogy and is spread through a number of cultural apparatuses, which favor the sensationalist pundits, intellectuals, politicians, and others, who benefit from the continuation of violence and the normalization insecurities, thereby using it to promote their own political agendas. At work here is a particularly pernicious discourse embraced by many in the West who want to use any major catastrophe to restrict civil liberties and impose a surveillance state in the name of security. In France and Belgium, for example, top government officials have

now called for new sweeping security bills, expanding the antiterrorism budget, new powers for the police, and the expansion of wiretaps.

Capitalizing on the recent terrorist attacks in Paris in a way that is nothing more than an act of political expediency, John Brennan, the head of the CIA, has now criticized those who had exposed the illegal spying activities of the National Security Agency. The *New York Times* claimed he was using the tragedy in Paris to further his own agenda and had resorted to a “new and disgraceful low.”²² The *Times* also stated that Brennan was in fact a certified liar and that it was hard to believe anything he might say. James Comey, the head of the F.B.I. made a similar case suggesting that the encryption messages used by Apple and Google customers were benefiting terrorists and that these companies should “make it possible for law enforcement to decode encrypted messages.”²³ Authoritarian practices have little regard for freedom and will mobilize any number of fears, however exaggerated, to create a security state and subordinate civil liberties to the demands of safety. This is a dangerous trade off, and as William C. Anderson observes:

The many tragedies at hand - from Paris to Beirut to Baga - are horrid, and chaos abounds.... That being said, in these weeks following the attacks in Paris, we should be vigilant and refuse to allow the types of politics and policy that were used to manipulate the public after 9/11 to arise. Violent terror attacks are a threat to one's physical existence (the freedom to live), but the draconian advances that come afterward threaten societies' freedoms as a whole in the most intricate of ways. What is life without freedom?²⁴

There is no evidence that the Paris attackers used encryption. While the mainstream media's criticisms of this call for expanded surveillance powers were well placed, they nevertheless failed to report when airing the comments of both Brennan and Comey that the U.S. government was not simply spying on terrorists but on everyone. But there is more at stake here

than sacrificing civil liberties in the name of security. In the wake of the Paris attacks, security takes a turn that speaks directly to a widespread move toward practices associated with former totalitarian states. We hear it in the words of Sarkozy, the former French president, who wants to put Syrian immigrants in detention camps. Marie Le Pen, the leader of France's most popular right wing party, referred to the new migrants as "bacteria" and called "for the country to annihilate Islamist fundamentalism, shut down mosques and expel dangerous 'foreigners' and 'illegal migrants.'"²⁵

Intellectual Efforts to Legitimize Militarism and Racism

The return to such fascistic language is also evident in the various ways in which the discourse of bigotry and xenophobia has become a major and manipulative tool of politicians in the United States. They empty politics of any viable meaning, substituting in its place an anti-politics that feeds on fear and mobilizes a racist discourse and culture of cruelty. The Republican Party's leading presidential candidates have resorted to racist and politically reactionary comments in the aftermath of the Paris killings that would seem unthinkable in a country that calls itself a democracy. When asked about Syrian refugees, Ben Carson referred to them as "rabid dogs."²⁶ Donald Trump echoed the Nazi practice of registering Jews and forcing them to wear a yellow star when he stated that, if elected president, he would force all Muslims living in the United States "to register their personal information in a federal database."²⁷ He also called for shutting down mosques in the United States. Marc Rubio, another leading president candidate, went even further arguing that he would not only shut down mosques but would shut down "any place where radical Muslims congregate, whether it be a café, a diner, and internet site—any place where radicals are being inspired."²⁸

Carson and Rubio have also called for policies that would eliminate abortions, even for women whose lives are at risk or who have been raped.²⁹ The roots of anti-democratic practices reach, in this case, deeply into American society. Of course, all of these policies will do nothing more than legitimate and spread insidious acts of racism and xenophobia as an acceptable political discourse while normalizing the forces of oppression and violence. How else to explain the rabid racism expressed by Elain Morgan, a state senator in Rhode Island in which she stated in an email that “The Muslim religion and philosophy is to murder, rape, and decapitate anyone who is a non-Muslim.”³⁰ There is more at stake here than Islamophobia, there is also the call for policies that make recruiting young people easier for ISIS and other extremist groups. As Peter Bouckaert, Human Rights Watch’s emergencies director, points out:

Every Syrian refugee who reaches the United States has gone through four levels of security review. These are the most carefully screened refugees anywhere in the world. And there have been no incidents with the hundreds of thousands of refugees that the U.S. has taken in over the years. The United States’ values are built about being welcoming to refugees. And it’s our most powerful tool in the war against Islamic extremism, are our values. It’s not our military planes and our bombs. The only way we can fight against this brutality, this barbarism, is with our values. And if we’re going to shut the door on these refugees, we’re giving a propaganda victory to ISIS....because they would love it if we shut the door on the people who are fleeing their so-called Islamic caliphate.³¹

Violence to Thought

Of course, it is not just Carson, Trump, Rubio, and virtually the entire Republican leadership who trade in war mongering and racism. Culturally coded racism and xenophobia is also to be found in public intellectuals such as Bernard -Henri Levy and Neil Ferguson who provide

intellectual legitimacy to the marriage of militarism and subjugation. Levy, a right-wing favorite of the mainstream media in France and the United States argues that it is necessary in the face of the Paris attacks to think the unthinkable, accept that everyone in the West is a target, allegedly because of our freedoms, and reluctance to go to war! For Levy, caught in his own fog of historical denial and blinded to the violence of recent memory, the greatest failing of the West is their aversion to war, and goes far as to claim that the aversion to outright war in these times is democracy's true weakness.³²

The real weakness is that Levy finds genuine democracy dangerous, while refusing to recognize the anti-democratic intellectual violence he practices and supports. Levy's militarism is matched by the historian Neil Ferguson's contemptuous claim in a *Boston Globe* op-ed. Channelling Edward Gibbon, he claims that the Syrian refugees are similar to the barbaric hordes that contributed to the fall of Rome. Unapologetically, he offers a disingenuous humanitarian qualification before invoking his “war of civilizations” theses. He states the following regarding the Syrian refugees:

To be sure, most have come hoping only for a better life. Things in their own countries have become just good enough economically for them to afford to leave and just bad enough politically for them to risk leaving. But they cannot stream northward and westward without some of that political malaise coming along with them. As Gibbon saw, convinced monotheists pose a grave threat to a secular empire.³³

Ferguson also calls the Western countries weak and decadent for opening their gates to outsiders. Effectively inverting the humanitarian mantra of saving strangers, these types of comments reinforce a vision of a deeply divided world, demanding continued militarism and the insatiable call for war. Devoid of political imagination, such an analysis refuses to address the violence, misery, suffering, and despair that, in fact, create the conditions that produces extremism in the

first place.

What makes such interventions so abhorrent is precisely the way they contribute to the production of *disposable futures*³⁴. The future now appears to us as a terrain of endemic catastrophe and disorder from which there is no viable escape except to draw upon the logics of those predatory formations that put us there in the first place. Devoid of any alternative image of the world, we are merely requested to see the world as predestined and catastrophically fated. This is revealing of the nihilism of our times that forces us to accept that the only world conceivable is the one we are currently forced to endure: a world that is brutally reproduced and forces us all to become witness to its spectacles of violence, which demand we accept that all things are ultimately insecure by design. In this suffocating climate, the best we can hope for is to be connected to some fragile and precarious life support system that may be withdrawn from us at any moment. Hope has dissolved into the pathology of social and civil death and the quest for mere survival. For if there is a clear lesson to living in these times, it is precisely that the lights can go out at any given moment, without any lasting concern for social responsibility. This is simply the natural order of things (so we are told) and we need to adapt our thinking accordingly.

Such a vision of the world is actually far more disturbing than the dystopian fables of the 20th century. Our condition denies us the possibility of better times to come as the imagined and the real collapse in such a way that we are already living amongst the ruins of the future. All we can seemingly imagine is a world filled with unavoidable catastrophes, the source of which, we are told, remains beyond our grasp, thereby denying us any possibility for genuine systemic transformation in the order of things. How else can we explain the current fetish with the doctrine of resilience if not through the need to accept the inevitability of catastrophe, and to

simply partake in a world that is deemed to be "insecure by design"?³⁵ This forces us to accept narratives of vulnerability as the authentic basis of political subjectivity regardless of the oppressive conditions that produce vulnerable subjects (thereby neutralizing all meaningful qualitative differences in class, racial and gendered experiences). So we are encouraged to lament this world, armed only with the individualistic hope that the privileged elite might survive better than others.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

Eliminating ISIS means eradicating the conditions that created it. This suggests producing a political settlement in Syria and stabilizing the Middle East and ending Western support for the various anti-democratic and dictatorial regimes it supports throughout the Middle East and around the world. One obvious step would be for the West to stop supporting and arming the ruthless dictators of Saudi Arabia and others who have been linked to providing financial support to extremists all over the globe. It also demands understanding how the war on terror is in reality a war on youth who are both its target and the vehicle for targeting other. Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor "Generation Zero" thus becomes more than an indication of the nihilism of the times.³⁶ It becomes the clearest discursive framing as "0" symbolises those who are targeted on account of their hopes and future aspirations.

The forms of violence we witness today are not only an attack on the present – such violence also points to an assault on an imagined and hopeful future. As such, youth connect directly to the age of catastrophe--its multiple forms of endangerment, the normalization of terror and the production of catastrophic futures. Vagaries in the state of war cannot only be understood by reference to juxtaposed temporalities--present horror as distinct from past horror or anticipated horrors to come. Rather they must be addressed in terms of their projects and projections, their

attempts to colonize, and failing that, eradicate any vestiges of the radical imagination. War is both an act of concrete violence and a disimagination machine; that is why the present landscape is already littered with corpses of the victims of the violence to come. The cycle of violence already condemns us to a ruinous future.

We must also not forget the plight of the refugees who are caught in the strategic crossfires. As usual, it's always those who are the most vulnerable in any situation, who become the scapegoats for calculated misdirection's. The refugee crisis must be resolved not by simply calling for open borders, however laudable, but by making the countries that the refugees are fleeing from free from war and violence. We must eliminate militarism, encourage genuine political transformation, end neoliberal austerity policies, redistribute wealth globally, and stop the widespread discrimination against Muslim youth. Only then can history be steered in a different direction. There will be no safe heavens anywhere in the world until the militaristic, impoverished, and violent conditions that humiliate and oppress young people are addressed. As Robert Fisk writes with an acute eye on new radically interconnected and violently contoured geographies of our times:

Our own shock – indeed, our indignation – that our own precious borders were not respected by these largely Muslim armies of the poor was in sharp contrast to our own blithe non-observance of Arab frontiers... Quite apart from our mournful Afghan adventure and our utterly illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, our aircraft have been bombing Libya, Iraq and Syria along with the aircraft of various local pseudo-democracies for so long that this state of affairs has become routine, almost normal, scarcely worthy of a front-page headline... The point, of course, is that we had grown so used to attacking Arab lands – France had become so inured to sending its soldiers and air crews to Africa and the Middle East to shoot and bomb those whom it regarded as its enemies – that only when Muslims began attacking our capital cities did we suddenly announce that we were “at war”³⁷.

The concept of violence is not taken lightly here. Violence remains poorly understood if it is accounted for simply in terms of how and what it kills, the scale of its destructiveness, or any other element of its annihilative power. Intellectual violence is no exception as its qualities point to a deadly and destructive conceptual terrain. Like all violence there are two sides to this relation. There is the annihilative power of nihilistic thought that seeks, through strategies of domination and practices of terminal exclusion, to close down the political as a site for differences. Such violence appeals to the authority of a peaceful settlement, though it does so in a way that imposes a distinct moral image of thought which already maps out what is reasonable to think, speak, and act. Since the means and ends are already set out in advance, the discursive frame is never brought into critical question. And there is an affirmative counter that directly challenges the violence. Such affirmation refuses to accept the parameters of the rehearsed orthodoxy. It brings into question that which is not ordinarily questioned. Foregrounding the life of the subject as key to understanding political deliberation, it eschews intellectual dogmatism with a commitment to the open possibilities in thought. However, rather than countering intellectual violence with a “purer violence” (discursive or otherwise) there is a need to maintain the language of critical pedagogy. By criticality we insist upon a form of thought which does not have war or violence as its object. If there is destruction, this is only apparent when the affirmative is denied. And by criticality we also insist upon a form of thought that does not offer its intellectual soul to the seductions of militarized power. Too often we find that while the critical gestures towards profane illumination; it is really the beginning of a violence that amounts to a death sentence for critical thought. Our task is to avoid this false promise and demand a politics that is dignified and open to the possibility of non-violent ways of living.

We need to learn to live with violence less through the modality of the sacred than through the critical lens of the profane. By this we mean that we need to appreciate our violent histories and how our subjectivities have been formed through a history of physical bloodshed. This requires more of a willingness to interrogate violence in a variety of registers (ranging from the historical and concrete to the abstract and symbolic) than it does a bending to discourses of fate and normalization. We need to acknowledge our own shameful compromises with the varied forces of violence. And we need to accept that intellectualism shares an intimate relationship with violence both in its complicity with violence and as an act of violence. There is an echo of the pornographic here not in the ethical detachment that now accompanies the spectacles of violence to which we are forced witness. We need then to reject what Leo Lowenthal has called the imperative to believe that “thinking becomes a stupid crime.”³⁸ This does not require a return to the language of the Benjamin idea of “divine violence” as a pure expression of force regardless of its contestable claims to non-violent violence.³⁹ We prefer instead to deploy the often abused term “critical pedagogy” as a meaningful political counter to vicissitudes of intellectual violence.

Intellectuals are continually forced to make choices (sometimes against our better judgments). The truth of course is that there are no clear lines drawn in the sand neatly separating what is left from what is right. And yet as Paolo Freire insisted, one is invariably drawn into an entire history of struggle the moment our critical ideas are expressed as force and put out into the public realm to the disruption of orthodox thinking. There is however a clear warning from history: our intellectual allegiances should be less concerned with ideological dogmatism. There is, after all, no one more micro-fascist or intellectually violent than the authenticating militant whose self-imposed vanguardism compels allegiance through unquestioning loyalty and political

purity. To the charges here that critical pedagogy merely masks a retreat into cultural relativism we may counter that there is no reciprocal relationship with that which doesn't respect difference while at the same time recognizing that pedagogy is an act of intervention. Pedagogy always represents a commitment to the future, and it remains the task of educators to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which the discourses of critique and possibility in conjunction with the values of freedom, and equality function to alter, as part of a broader democratic project, the grounds upon which life is lived. This is hardly a prescription for either relativism or political indoctrination, but it is a project that gives education its most valued purpose and meaning, which in part is "to encourage human agency, not mold it in the manner of Pygmalion."⁴⁰

Instead of accepting the role of the compromised intellectual as embodied in the likes of Levy and Ferguson, there is an urgent need for public intellectuals in the academy, art world, business sphere, media, and other cultural apparatuses to move from negation to hope. Now more than ever we need reasons to believe in this world. This places renewed emphasis on forms of critical pedagogy that enables citizens to reclaim their voices, speak out, exhibit ethical outrage and create the social movements, tactics, and public spheres that will reverse the growing tide of political fascism on all sides. Such intellectuals are essential to any viable notion of democracy, even as social well-being depends on a continuous effort to raise disquieting questions and challenges, use knowledge and analytical skills to address important social problems, alleviate human suffering where possible, and redirect resources back to individuals and communities who cannot survive and flourish without them. Engaged public intellectuals are especially needed at a time when it is necessary to resist the call to violence and its normalization through repetition.

Under the present circumstances, it is time to remind ourselves that critical ideas are a matter of critical importance. Those public spheres in which critical thought is nurtured provide the minimal conditions for people to become worldly, take hold of important social issues and alleviate human suffering as the means of making more equitable and just societies. Ideas are not empty gestures and they do more than express a free-floating idealism. Ideas provide a crucial foundation for assessing the limits and strengths of our senses of individual and collective agency and what it might mean to exercise civic courage in order to not merely live in the world, but to shape it in light of democratic ideals that would make it a better place for everyone. Critical ideas and the technologies, institutions and public spheres that enable them matter because they offer us the opportunity to think and act otherwise, challenge common sense, cross over into new lines of inquiry and take positions without standing still - in short, to become border crossers who refuse the silos that isolate and determine the future of thought. Some intellectuals refute the values of criticality. They don't engage in debates; they simply offer already rehearsed positions in which unsubstantiated opinion and sustained argument collapse into each other. It is time then for critical thinkers with a public interest to make pedagogy central to any viable notion of politics. It is time to initiate a cultural campaign in which the positive virtues of radical criticality can be reclaimed, courage to truth defended, and learning connected to social change. Our task in short is to demand a return of the political as a matter of critical urgency.

A global system that inflicts violence on young people all over the world cannot be supported. As Michael Lerner has argued, not only must the iniquitous and dangerous structural conditions for economic, political, and cultural violence be eliminated, but the subjective and psychological underpinnings of a hateful fundamentalism must be addressed and challenged

through a public pedagogy that emphasizes an ethos of trust, compassion, care, solidarity, and justice-the opposite of the self-serving survival of the fittest ethos that now dominates the political landscape.⁴¹ Young people cannot inherit a future marked by fear, militarism, suicide bombers and a world in which the very idea of democracy has been emptied of any substantive meaning. Or if they do, then the destructive forces of nihilism and resentment will have truly have won the political argument. Creating alternative futures requires serious and sustained investment in attesting the cycle of violence, imagining better futures and styles for living amongst the world of peoples. It is to destroy the image of a violently fated world we have created for ourselves by taking pedagogy and education seriously, harnessing the power of imagination and equipping global youths with the confidence that the world can be transformed for the better.

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