

of treating atrocity simply as the work of monsters. Modern systems of terror require administrators, lawyers, technicians, police officers, propagandists, intellectuals, journalists, and functionaries. Evil becomes most politically dangerous when it acquires an office, a budget, a bureaucracy, a vocabulary of necessity, and a public willing to accept its premises. Primo Levi understood this danger in another register. He rejected the consoling temptation to divide the world neatly between innocent humanity and incomprehensible monsters. As he once put it, “It is a stupid mistake to see all the demons on one side and all the saints on the other.... To divide into black and white means not to know human nature.” His concept of the gray zone gave this insight its most disturbing political force. The gray zone did not abolish distinctions between victim and perpetrator; it exposed the ways systems of domination corrupt moral life itself. The political lesson is disturbing precisely because it denies us the comfort of believing that atrocity belongs to another species of human being. Modern barbarism does not emerge outside civilization. It is organized through civilization’s institutions, technologies, forms of expertise, and structures of obedience. Umberto Eco made a related point about fascism. Fascism does not possess a single immutable costume. It changes its language, symbols, technologies, and institutional forms. Eco warned that “Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises.” To search only for Mussolini’s blackshirts or Hitler’s brownshirts is therefore to risk missing fascism when it returns wearing a business suit, carrying a Bible, appearing on podcasts, commanding an algorithm, or invoking the language of freedom, national rebirth, border security, and popular sovereignty. Fascism survives precisely because it learns how to inhabit the historical conditions of its own time. If fascism changes with the historical conditions it inhabits, then those conditions become central to understanding how its monsters are produced and sustained. The problem of the monster must therefore be situated within political economy, culture, pedagogy, and history. The conditions that make monstrosity possible are neither accidental nor timeless. They emerge from societies in which extreme inequality is treated as natural, cruelty becomes entertainment, racial hierarchy is defended as common sense, militarism becomes a national virtue, and entire populations are designated as disposable. The monstrosity of the present did not suddenly appear with Trump. Its genealogy runs through the long history of American empire and, with particular force, through the War on Terror. In the name of fighting terrorism, the United States unleashed wars whose direct death toll exceeded 600,000 people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen, while estimates of deaths produced indirectly through destroyed infrastructure, disease, displacement, and malnutrition run into the millions. Such devastation cannot be reduced to the language of catastrophic policy failure. It constituted a vast machinery of racialized disposability in which entire populations could be bombed, tortured, displaced, imprisoned, and abandoned while their suffering barely registered within the moral vocabulary of American political life. Aimé Césaire understood long ago

that imperial violence never remains safely confined to the people against whom it is first directed. Colonial brutality, he warned, produces a “terrific boomerang effect”: the habits of dehumanization, racial hierarchy, lawlessness, and organized violence cultivated abroad eventually return home. The War on Terror offers a terrifying contemporary illustration of that warning. The torture chambers of Abu Ghraib, indefinite detention at Guantánamo, extraordinary rendition, drone assassination, mass surveillance, and the normalization of permanent war did more than devastate other societies. They helped educate the American public into accepting torture, surveillance, militarized policing, lawless executive power, and the designation of whole populations as threats. Trumpism did not invent this political culture. It inherited it, intensified it, and turned its imperial habits inward. In this sense, the monster came home because the machinery that produced it had been operating for decades. Under gangster capitalism, the imperial machinery of disposability turns inward, assuming an especially lethal domestic form. Wealth concentrates, public goods are stripped for private profit, democratic institutions are subordinated to billionaire power, and the punishing state expands as the social state contracts. Abandonment and repression become two sides of the same political order. Pedagogy becomes central because fascism is never merely imposed from above. It must be learned. People must be taught whom to fear, whom to hate, whose suffering matters, whose suffering can be ignored, and whose disappearance can be celebrated. They must learn to experience cruelty as strength, domination as freedom, racial hierarchy as natural, and violence as national purification. Pedagogical terrorism names this process. It operates through schools and churches, television and social media, podcasts, political rallies, digital platforms, advertising, and the spectacular theater of state violence. These cultural apparatuses do more than communicate ideas. They organize attention, shape consciousness, mobilize desire, and teach habits of feeling. They create the emotional and ideological conditions under which disposability becomes common sense. Private anxieties are given public enemies. Loneliness is transformed into the counterfeit solidarity of the tribe, powerlessness redirected into aggression, and resentment elevated into a moral virtue. Fear is converted into hatred and humiliation into the desire to humiliate others. Fascism thrives on this emotional economy because it gives private suffering a public target. The wounds inflicted by an increasingly brutal social order are redirected away from the structures that produce them and toward immigrants, Black people, Palestinians, feminists, intellectuals, dissidents, and anyone else designated as an enemy. A culture of barbarism takes hold when cruelty is no longer confined to the state or its most fanatical leaders but enters everyday life, shaping public consciousness, political desire, and the boundaries of who is considered human. Barbarism becomes cultural when large numbers of people support forced removal, collective punishment, starvation, exterminatory violence, and the destruction of civilian life without experiencing such policies as a moral catastrophe.



Israelis dance during a demonstration calling for Jewish resettlement of the Gaza Strip on October 21, 2024. ● TSAFRIR ABAYOV/AP

Israel offers a chilling example. In May 2025, a survey conducted by Pennsylvania State University professor Tamir Sorek found that 82 percent of Israeli Jews surveyed supported the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza, with 54 percent saying they were “very” supportive. More disturbing still, 47 percent agreed that when the Israeli military conquers an enemy city it should act as the Israelites did in the biblical conquest of Jericho, by “killing all the residents”. These figures register something more terrifying than support for a particular military policy. They reveal how the language of expulsion and extermination can migrate from the margins of political life into the moral vocabulary of everyday society. This is what a culture of barbarism looks like when disposability becomes common sense and the destruction of another people can be imagined as legitimate, necessary, or even righteous. Omer Bartov has gone further, arguing that Israeli society has become complicit through both action and silence, and is increasingly marked by violence, vulgarity, and indifference. What is at stake here exceeds the crimes of Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir, or the Israeli military. It points to the pedagogical production of a social order in which the language of elimination becomes thinkable, mass suffering becomes tolerable, and exterminatory violence can be absorbed into the ordinary rhythms of national life. This is the endpoint of pedagogical terrorism: the manufacture of subjects for whom barbarism no longer appears barbaric. The culture of fascism does not merely tolerate monsters; it turns them into celebrities, strongmen, saviors, and objects of identification, reproducing a cult of leadership. Their violations of moral and political norms become signs of authenticity, their cruelty proof of strength. Their contempt for democratic restraints becomes a source of pleasure for followers who experience each transgression as their own imaginary liberation from the obligations of equality, compassion, and mutual responsibility. Trump offered a chilling display of these mobilizing passions of fascism when he called upon his followers to cheat in the November elections. At the Republican convention in Dallas, he instructed thousands of supporters to

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raise their right hands and repeat an oath of personal loyalty that included the declaration, “I don’t care if I’m registered or not. I’m going to try and cheat like hell like they do.” This was more than another assault on democratic norms. It was a fascist political ritual in which loyalty to the leader, contempt for law, and the thrill of collective transgression were fused into a mass spectacle. Yet the incident was absorbed into the churn of the news cycle as another bizarre Trump performance. This is how fascism becomes ordinary: the outrageous is reported, consumed, and forgotten before its meaning can become a matter of sustained public judgment. What should have registered as a political emergency dissolved into the culture of immediacy, stripped of its historical meaning and reduced to another spectacle without consequence. The political task cannot be reduced to removing individual monsters from power. The language of monstrosity becomes politically disabling when it individualizes what is systemic, directing attention toward pathological leaders while leaving intact the institutions, economic interests, media ecosystems, racial hierarchies, and educational forces that produce authoritarian consciousness. The defining political question of our time is not whether monsters have returned. It is what kind of society produces them, what forms of power need them, and what pedagogical machinery teaches people to follow them. The monster is not the end of the analysis but its beginning. Fascism cannot be defeated by removing its most visible leaders while leaving intact the economic, political, and cultural machinery that produced them. The struggle against fascism must also confront gangster capitalism, white supremacy, militarism, the carceral state, and the institutions that turn human beings into disposable populations. But resistance cannot live on outrage alone. It needs a language of possibility and a politics capable of making hope concrete. Hope is neither optimism nor faith that history bends automatically toward justice. It is a practice born when people refuse the manufactured loneliness of neoliberal life, discover one another in struggle, and recognize that what they experience as private misery is often a public wound produced by structures of power. It takes form in unions, classrooms, demonstrations, mutual-aid networks, abolitionist movements, struggles for Palestinian freedom, immigrant justice campaigns, and organi-

zations capable of turning anger into collective power. There are already signs that such a politics is struggling to be born in the United States. The resurgence of democratic socialism, the extraordinary growth of the Democratic Socialists of America, the electoral victories of socialist candidates, and renewed labor militancy suggest that increasing numbers of people are no longer willing to accept the tyranny of the market as the horizon of political possibility. DSA reported more than 120,000 members by the summer of 2026, alongside a widening field of socialist electoral victories and organizing campaigns. These developments should neither be romanticized nor mistaken for a mass socialist transformation. But they matter because they register something the ruling order desperately wants declared impossible: capitalism is once again being named as a political problem, socialism has returned to public life as a language of possibility, and collective struggle is breaking through the suffocating claim that there is no alternative. Hope is dangerous to fascism because authoritarian power feeds on isolation, historical amnesia, political exhaustion, and the conviction that nothing can be changed. Militant hope shatters that conviction. It turns private suffering into public anger, spectators into political agents, and the loneliness on which fascism feeds into collective power. Against the pedagogy of fear, it creates a pedagogy of resistance and civic courage. Against the culture of cruelty, it makes solidarity a weapon and justice a collective demand. Against a society organized around disposability, it insists that human beings are worth more than markets, borders, property, and profit, and that the institutions producing misery, abandonment, and organized violence must be transformed. The struggle is larger than defeating the monsters who occupy the commanding heights of power. We must destroy the conditions that make them possible by building a mass democratic politics capable of confronting concentrated wealth, dismantling racial and economic hierarchies, defending public goods, breaking the grip of militarism, and returning economic and political power to ordinary people. Democracy cannot survive as the political shell of capitalism, emptied of its substance while concentrated economic power governs from within. It must become a way of organizing social life itself, grounded in equality, collective power, and the struggle for a just future. More than four decades ago, Manos Hadjidakis warned: “When the face of the monster ceases to frighten us, then we must be afraid... because that means we have begun to resemble it.” His warning has never been more urgent. But resemblance is not destiny. The monster depends upon our resignation, our silence, our isolation, and finally our belief that resistance is futile. The most radical form of hope begins with the refusal of that lie. Monsters are made by history, and they can be unmade by collective struggle. That struggle must confront capitalism itself and build a democratic socialist politics capable of wresting power from the ruling elites, returning it to ordinary people, and transforming hope into a force for remaking the world.

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