

When **monsters** walk among us



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OPINION

We have many monsters to destroy.

– George Seferis

But how can anyone tell the truth about Fascism, unless he is willing to speak out against capitalism, which brings it forth?

– Bertolt Brecht

More than four decades ago, the Greek composer and public intellectual Manos Hadjidakis issued a warning that now reads less like a reflection on fascism than a prophecy of our own time. The greatest danger, he suggested, comes when we grow accustomed to the monster, when its presence no longer shocks the conscience and its violence begins to merge with the routines of everyday life. Tolerance does not diminish the monster; it multiplies the conditions that allow it to flourish, strengthening its presence in public life until monstrosity itself acquires the authority to govern. In this instance, the collapse of conscience is inseparable from the uncoupling of “belief from judgment, conviction from action.” We have reached such a moment. The monsters are no longer hiding in the shadows. They occupy presidential offices and ministries, command armies and police forces, control digital platforms, dominate television screens, administer borders, build detention centers, and transform the suffering of others into political theater. Their language of racial purification, mass deportation, extermination, vengeance, and disposability no longer produces the outrage it once might have summoned. Cruelty is displayed as strength. Humiliation becomes entertainment. The spectacle of suffering becomes a source of political pleasure. What should be unbearable becomes familiar; what should provoke resistance is absorbed into the rhythms of everyday life.

The monster triumphs not simply when it commits atrocities, but when its language becomes ordinary, its violence becomes acceptable, its weaponization of racial and class divisions goes unnoticed, and its presence no longer disturbs the moral imagination. Toni Morrison gave us another language for understanding how monsters become ordinary. She called it “dead language,” a language emptied of ethical responsibility and enlisted in the service of domination. Morrison’s dead language is itself monstrous. As she writes, oppressive language “does more than represent violence; it is violence.” It is a language that “drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind.”

Morrison’s insight reaches beyond rhetoric. Monsters require a language that prepares the ground for their violence, strips their victims of humanity, and teaches people to accommodate the unthinkable. Dead language is one of the conditions that allows monstrosity to pass into everyday life disguised as common sense. Primo Levi once observed that “Monsters exist, but they are too



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few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.” Levi remains right about the role of unthinking functionaries, but today, the monsters themselves have acquired institutional power and public legitimacy. Emboldened by staggering economic inequality, empowered by the machinery of high-tech authoritarianism, and legitimated by an expanding culture of state violence, they have moved from the political margins to the commanding heights of American society. Here, Hannah Arendt’s warning about the failure of thinking takes on a renewed urgency. Monstrosity thrives when judgment is surrendered, when the obligation to think becomes a burden, and when ignorance is transformed from an absence of knowledge into a cultivated refusal to know. We might call this the banality of ignorance: the willful suspension of judgment that allows people to see suffering without confronting it and to hear lies without rejecting them. The monster does not merely demand obedience. It needs subjects who have learned not to think about what their obedience makes possible. Yet Hadjidakis’s warning poses a question more disturbing than



Children rest on the floor beneath foil blankets at a US Customs and Border Protection detention facility in McAllen, Texas, the US, in June 2018.

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whether monsters now govern us. What does it mean for a society to begin to resemble its monsters? And what pedagogical forces are at work in creating and normalizing that resemblance? Resemblance does not mean that everyone becomes a killer or a fascist. It means that the habits of thought, structures of feeling, and forms of indifference on which monstrosity depends begin to penetrate everyday life. The banality of ignorance becomes a social condition, a cultivated form of moral blindness in which not knowing offers a refuge from responsibility and refusing to think becomes a condition of belonging. But such ignorance does not exist outside the realm of desire. It has an emotional register; a psychology of authoritarianism and a pedagogy of terror through which people learn not simply to live with cruelty but to bathe in its emotional charge, finding pleasure and belonging in “patterns of domination and submission [that harden] into a syndrome of attitudes regarding hierarchy, power, sexuality and tradition.”

The monster has a long history, born in the darkest regions of the social imagination where fear, difference, and power converge. As Manvir Singh has observed, monsters have long haunted the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, the familiar and the terrifying, the civilized and what it casts outside its gates. But monsters are never simply creatures of fantasy. They are warnings, projections, embod-



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iments of collective fears, and often weapons for deciding who belongs within the circle of humanity and who can be expelled from it. What matters politically is what happens when the monster steps out of myth and fantasy, takes possession of the institutions of power, and acquires the authority to decide who may live, who must suffer, and who can be made disposable.

There is, however, another problem with the metaphor of the monster itself. To imagine Donald Trump, Stephen Miller, Pete Hegseth, Itamar Ben-Gvir, Benjamin Netanyahu, or other architects of contemporary authoritarian violence simply as monsters risks placing them outside history, as if their cruelty originated in some private pathology detached from the society that produced them. The monster can then become an alibi for the society that created him. Moral outrage becomes individualized, while the institutions, economic interests, racial hierarchies, cultural apparatuses, and political forces that make organized cruelty possible disappear. This is the crucial insight in Jorge Gonzalez Arocha’s argument that turning perpetrators into monsters can itself become a way of looking away. Arocha argues that “reducing the perpetrator to nothing more than a monster protects us from recognising ourselves as potential perpetrators. It distances us from the event and its reality, while placing us in a position of moral superiority....[it] is a way of denying that the ability to destroy also belongs to us, that it forms part of the human condition.”

The problem is not that monsters do not exist. The problem begins when monstrosity becomes an explanation rather than a question. Monsters do not descend upon society from somewhere outside history. They are produced within history, cultivated through institutions, protected by bureaucracies, legitimized by law, financed by powerful economic interests, amplified by media, and normalized through culture. The political significance of monsters lies not simply in the horrors they commit, but in the social order that makes those horrors possible, useful, legitimate, and eventually ordinary. A singular focus on monsters can obscure the deeper structure of gangster capitalism, a system that “prioritises certain forms of power over the common good and enables the gradual dehumanization of our societies.”

The question must therefore change. We must move from monster to machinery, from the pathology of the individual to the political economy of organized cruelty, and from there to the cultural and educational forces that teach people how to live with the suffering such machinery produces. Monsters do not act alone. Their power becomes visible in the institutions that protect them, the wealth that sustains them, the laws that authorize them, and the violence that follows in their wake. We see their handiwork in streets stained with blood, in migrants brutalized and left to die in detention centers, in the torture documented in Israeli prisons, and in the bodies of children and families torn apart by Israeli and American bombs in Gaza. Behind these abstractions are torn limbs, dismembered bodies, chil-

dren pulled from rubble, families burned and buried beneath the ruins of their homes, and human beings reduced to flesh and bone by systems in which cruelty has been organized, authorized, and repeated until even the most horrific violence threatens to lose its capacity to shock.

The horror lies in a society’s growing accommodation to monsters, in the silence surrounding their crimes and the erosion of moral and political boundaries that once made their actions intolerable. Such silence is never innocent. It is the rigor mortis of ethical and political decay, the point at which a politics organized around death begins to pass as ordinary life. The nightmare no longer lurks in the shadows; it claws its way into daylight and is met with indifference, resignation, or applause. The question is how people learn to live amid mass suffering and eventually look away. What forms of power require such silence? What institutions cultivate it? What culture teaches people to turn away from the bodies left behind? And most important, what pedagogical machinery teaches millions not merely to tolerate cruelty but to identify with those who inflict it, desire the power they embody, and experience the suffering of others as the price of their own imagined liberation?

Political economy, culture, and pedagogy converge here. The monster becomes inseparable from gangster capitalism, pedagogical terrorism, and the culture of cruelty. Gangster capitalism does not accidentally produce monsters. It increasingly requires them, along with publics capable of loving them.

Arendt’s concept of radical evil takes this argument further, moving us from the failure of judgment to the political machinery that renders human beings superfluous. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, radical evil emerges from a political order capable of stripping human beings of rights, history, individuality, and finally their claim to membership in the human community. The concentration camp represented the most extreme realization of this logic, but its political significance extended beyond the camp. Totalitarianism required institutions capable of transforming human beings into disposable matter.

Arendt’s later account of Adolf Eichmann complicated the picture further. Eichmann did not appear before her as a demonic figure possessing some unfathomable depth of evil. He appeared frighteningly ordinary: bureaucratic, careerist, obedient, incapable of thinking seriously about the consequences of his actions. The banality of evil did not mean that his crimes were banal. It meant that extraordinary crimes could be administered through ordinary routines, bureaucratic language, professional ambition, obedience, and the suspension of judgment. Reinhard Heydrich, one of the principal architects of the Nazi machinery of terror and mass murder, represents another configuration of the political monster. Here, ideological fanaticism, administrative intelligence, and extraordinary institutional power converged. Eichmann and Heydrich should not be collapsed into the same psychological type, but both expose the inadequacy