WE STILL HERE

PANDEMIC, POLICING, PROTEST, & POSSIBILITY

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of wealth extraction rather than humanity. Centuries of this exploitation have created what scholar Eddie Glaude calls a "value gap," or the belief that White lives are simply worth more than others. It is this gap that allows the United States to completely shut down when faced with the prospect of mass death, only to quickly reopen once it became clear that poor Black people were the ones most at risk of dying.

So, yes, we should be mindful of our individual health. We should absolutely make responsible choices whenever possible. But it would be a gross mistake to attribute Covid-19 infections to individual choice and biological destiny. We must never ignore the fact that our choices are shaped, and constrained, by the social realities in which we find ourselves.

At the end of the day, Black life is not inherently valuable in this country. And Black death does not constitute a crisis. We are reminded daily that our worth is directly tied to the needs and interests of the powerful. This reality, by far, is the most important and influential preexisting condition.

CORONA CAPITALISM

The economic realities of Covid-19 are quite serious. How do you make sense of what is happening in the United States?

While surviving Covid-19 is the biggest priority, the economic challenges related to the illness cannot be overstated. Given the relationship between poverty and infection rates, the people most likely to be infected are also the most likely to have precarious employment. As a result, many people who got sick were fired from their jobs. By April, nearly half of all people in the country indicated that someone in their household had been laid off or let go because of Covid-19. Some who held onto their jobs were hourly employees with no sick leave or options to work from home. As a result, they were unable to earn money as they recovered. And given their lack of quality health care and other protective factors, their recovery times were extended. So as they recovered from Covid-19, many people found themselves in long-term financial peril.

And the economic dangers were not merely for those who were sick. Within six weeks of the US economy slowing down in mid-March, more than 30 million were newly out of work. By the end of May, that number reached 40 million. By the end of June, the unemployment rate had skyrocketed to more than 47.2 percent. In April, nearly a third of Americans reported that they could not afford to pay their rent. One study predicted that Covid-19 would push more than 21 million additional Americans into poverty.

And the economic devastation of Covid-19 is even more extreme when we look globally. The June 2020 Global Economic Prospects Report shows that the pandemic could push 71 million people into extreme poverty. The overwhelming majority of the new poor will be concentrated in already vulnerable areas, with almost half in South Asia and more than a third in sub-Saharan Africa.

But the story of Covid-19 is about so much more than the devastation of the world's vulnerable. While this devastation should be our most pressing concern, it can only be properly addressed and repaired with a proper understanding of the forces, systems, institutions, and ideologies that constitute the current moment. This requires an examination of Corona capitalism and how it shapes, reflects, and exacerbates the current moment.

What is Corona capitalism?

Corona capitalism refers to the economic conditions and institutional arrangements that made the vulnerable more likely

to experience premature death during the Covid-19 pandemic. Corona capitalism also speaks to the ways that human crises are exploited by the powerful, who coordinate with governments to create policies that enable them to profit during such moments.

Corona capitalism isn't a new mode of production or even a new iteration of capitalism. Rather, it describes how centuries of racial capitalism and decades of neoliberal economic policy not only created the conditions for the Covid-19 pandemic but also informed our legal, economic, medical, ecological, cultural, and social responses to it. While these responses bear a strong resemblance to those of previous junctures, they also bear the specific imprint of the current moment. As we stand in the rubble of Covid-19, we are unable to deny the dangers and limits of the current economic arrangement as it relates to the state, the environment, and the lives of the vulnerable.

Corona capitalism exposes the danger of living within a White supremacist capitalist empire. In the United States, being poor and Black makes you more likely to get sick. Being poor, Black, and sick makes you more likely to die. Your proximity to death makes you disposable. Your disposability makes you more exploitable. Within this condition, race is not incidental or a mere proxy for class. The racial logic of this country is one that not only denies the full citizenship of Black people but also rejects their fundamental humanity. As a result, the Covid-19 pandemic has done more than demonstrate the absence of safety, health, and prosperity for Black people. It has also spotlighted the impossibility of such

conditions within an empire built on unpaid African labor and justified through a process of racialization that stipulated that Black people were less moral, less intelligent, and, most significant, less human than White people.

Corona capitalism is built on neoliberal economic ideology, which views the free market as the answer to all our social problems. Austerity, efficiency, and privatization have become our "commonsense" responses to all our collective challenges. Private interests have become the stewards of the public good. This ideology allowed us to frame Covid-19 as an individual rather than collective problem. Washing our hands, taking our temperatures, and establishing social distance are framed as the only solutions to the pandemic, rather than also investing in communities, expanding the social safety net, and building sustainable institutions.

The United States is one of the richest countries in the world. But soon after the outbreak of the pandemic, the whole country was in crisis. Hospitals were overflowing; the frontline staff, nurses were using garbage bags as protection. How does "Corona capitalism" explain this happening in such a rich country?

Every aspect of our lives has been surrendered to the free market. This means that health care, both public and private, operates with the same profit-making logic as any other corporation.

Take New York, one of the hardest hit cities in the world, as an example. New York's hospital system has both public and private facilities. The public facilities, which serve the bulk of poor and working-class patients, are woefully underfunded. According to the Citizen's Budget Commission, the city's public and community hospitals operate with budget deficits as deep as $2.9 billion a year. The five large private networks, which serve a higher proportion of upper-middle-class and wealthy patients, operate at a profit. These gaps in hospital funding have a direct impact on the quality of care that institutions can provide.

Given the shortcomings of our health insurance system, hospitals in underresourced areas are already stretched beyond their intended role. On any given night, public hospitals in urban cities double as primary care facilities for the uninsured, homeless shelters, drug detox centers, and more. These same hospitals were then forced to treat a disproportionate number of Covid-19 patients. This meant that people using the hospital for those unintended purposes were either pushed out, without alternative supports, or forced to linger in hospitals with high rates of infection and few resources to protect them. Since many of these people were already immunocompromised due to their preexisting health conditions, this became a matter of life and death.

The poorest hospitals were suddenly forced to manage all these issues with limited staff, space, and money. In many cities, hospital workers resorted to mixing their own hand sanitizer, reusing disposable masks for days at a time, and making their own PPE. While this is partly due to the federal government's failure to properly prepare—for example,

the national stockpile of protective face masks was only 30 million, well short of the 500 million to 1 billion recommended by some experts—this also reflects a larger structural problem. From schools to housing to food, our failure to invest in public institutions has placed the vulnerable and those who work with them at tremendous disadvantage. With regard to hospitals, our neglect of the public good has devastating consequences.

Of course, the financial impact of Covid-19 was not limited to the poorest hospitals. Wealthier hospitals also took huge economic hits as a result of the pandemic. Due to overcrowding and the threat of infection, they were unable to provide many medical services that were not related to Covid-19. Surgeries, cancer treatments, and other critical medical procedures couldn't be performed. This presented not only a medical challenge for those patients in need but a financial challenge for those hospitals that rely on such procedures for revenue.

Still, many private hospitals had enough resources to successfully withstand the lean financial months. Some facilities, like NYU Langone, were even able to take advantage of low interest rates and obtain hundreds of millions of dollars in credit. Such moves allowed these privileged institutions to remain financially secure in the short term and prepare for long-term growth and expansion. At the same time, poorer hospitals located in the most highly affected areas of the city were fighting for beds, ventilators, and PPE. So, once again, the economic elite were able to profit from disaster as

the poor desperately fought for their lives. This reflects the perverse logic of Corona capitalism, in which healing is an industry and survival is a luxury.

But it wasn't just hospitals. The entire health care industry is implicated in this crisis.

Absolutely. We live in a country that does not value health care as a human right. Rather, we see it as yet another commodity. In the same way that we've tacitly accepted that poor people deserve poor education and poor housing, we have conceded that living on the economic margins means that you will not receive high-quality health care. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed how thoroughly dysfunctional and inhumane this system is.

In the United States, half of the country receives health care benefits through their employer. This meant that, during the height of the pandemic, millions lost not only their job but their access to health care. Many who held on to their coverage could not afford medicine, co-pays, and other associated costs. A poll by the Commonwealth Fund showed that 68 percent of Americans said that money would be a factor in their decision to seek care if they had coronavirus symptoms. The fact that people can die from a preventable or treatable illness simply because they do not have enough money proves how evil this system is.

And we cannot ignore the role of the pharmaceutical industry. Market logic pushes drug companies to prioritize

profit making over life saving. Instead of fully investing profits into research and development, many companies prefer to wait until small companies make innovations, only to use their vast resources to take control of the product. While this is "good business," it does not maximize the possibility of developing a life-saving drug.

During a pandemic, you might think these companies would be more humane, right? Of course not. In April 2020, Democrats in the US House of Representatives proposed legislation designed to ensure that any effective Covid-19 drugs would be affordable and accessible to the entire country. Soon after, lobbying groups pushed back against the proposal, arguing that price controls and other pro-consumer measures were "dangerous, disruptive, and unacceptable." These groups contended that they had the right to patent and exclusively produce potentially life-saving drugs, even during a pandemic—that these drugs were "American assets." Sadly, this shameless appeal to the free market at a moment in which more than 75,000 Americans had already died is hardly surprising. In fact, it is business as usual.

What about the US government. What do you make of its response to the economic crisis?

The government's response was wholly inadequate. Not only did it fail to meet the needs of those most affected by Covid-19, it only served to advance the interests of the very institutions that created our current economic crisis.

In March 2020, Congress passed the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act. This was a $2 trillion economic stimulus package, the largest in US history. As its name suggests, the legislation was sold to the public as a relief package for everyday people in the face of economic uncertainty. In reality, the bill did far more than that. Of that $2 trillion, $500 billion went to corporations in "distressed industries." Although Democrats fought for federal oversight of how the funds would be dispersed, Donald Trump made it clear that he would resist such regulation. The events after the economic recession of 2008, when corporate executives used bailout funds to pay themselves astronomical bonuses, revealed the waste, fraud, and abuse of these funds that we should expect. But even without this extra malfeasance, everyday people were forced to pay a 25 percent ransom to corporate America in order to receive economic relief.

The most trumpeted part of the CARES Act was the dispersal of money directly to taxpayers. Many individuals received a one-time $1,200 payment, which was actually a tax credit, in order to provide them with financial support. Unfortunately, disorganization and logistical challenges made it difficult for people to access the funds. For example, many people without access to a formal lending institution or electronic banking had to wait months to receive their checks. These were often the same people who needed those funds the most. Most important, $1,200 was woefully inadequate for providing meaningful help to people who were unable to earn money for months, maybe longer.

What about small businesses?

Small businesses were also supposed to be targeted through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). The PPP program was authorized through the CARES Act to provide $349 billion in low-interest loans of up to $10 million to companies with fewer than 500 employees. These loans were intended to provide an emergency cash injection to small businesses so that they could continue to pay employees, as well as other regular monthly expenses. Given the vulnerability of small businesses during the pandemic, this was an important and necessary provision. In practice, however, many small businesses were also subordinated to the interests of corporate America.

Many of the companies accessing PPP loans hardly met the standard of a "small business." In April 2020, the Associated Press revealed that $365 million of the funds had been given to ninety-four publicly traded companies. Twenty-five percent of these companies had indicated to investors that they were facing financial insolvency months before the Covid-19 crisis. The AP also reported that $273 million of early funds went to one hundred companies that were owned or operated by people who had donated at least $11.1 million since May 2015 to Donald Trump's campaign, the Republican National Committee, or America First Action, a Trump-endorsed super political action committee.

Successful companies like Chembio Diagnostics, a multinational company that produces infectious disease tests, received $10 million, despite the fact that its stock doubled after it was approved to produce a rapid Covid-19 test. Rather than saving a struggling business, these funds were used to help a successful company become more successful. This was not an unusual example. Legal loopholes allowed companies with thousands of employees to apply for loans based on the number of employees at individual locations. This is how Shake Shack, a fast-food chain worth $2.8 billion that employs more than 6,000 people, was able to secure $10 million dollars in small business funds (though, after this was revealed, the company was pressured to return the loan). These examples spotlight how Corona capitalism normalizes an environment where the poor are stigmatized for having legitimate need while corporations are the undeserving beneficiary of a generous welfare system.

What about individual wealth?

It is difficult to disentangle corporate wealth from individual wealth, as the country's wealthiest people are tied to some of the country's richest and most powerful companies. How do we separate Elon Musk from Tesla, Eric Yuan from Zoom, or Jeff Bezos from Amazon?

In early April 2020, the same month in which 20 million Americans had filed for unemployment, US billionaires' wealth grew by nearly 10 percent, passing $3.2 trillion. As of June, when 42.6 million had filed for unemployment over the previous eleven weeks, US billionaires were 20 percent richer, adding $565 billion to their collective wealth.

These numbers show the inherent immorality of a system that produces billionaires to begin with. It is literally impossible to amass such gross amounts of money without being directly connected to various forms of human suffering. No amount of philanthropy, activism, or principled reinvestment can change that.

You mentioned Jeff Bezos, the CEO and founder of Amazon. No individual or company has financially benefited more from the Covid-19 pandemic. How do you make sense of this?

With a personal net worth of more than $200 billion, Bezos is the richest human being in modern history. In the first quarter of 2020, against the backdrop of global pandemic, his personal net worth increased by nearly $24 billion. Beyond being a primary player in the current crisis, Bezos and Amazon are the poster children for Corona capitalism.

Prior to the pandemic, Amazon built a historically unprecedented economic empire by avoiding taxes, exploiting workers, and dominating markets in ways that starve and ultimately kill small businesses. Amazon began its empire by using what is referred to as a "beachhead strategy," or dominating a small market area and then using it as a stronghold from which to expand into other products and markets. Bezos started by taking over the online book market, selling books at prices with which no brick-and-mortar store could compete. The success of Amazon caused the shutdown not only of major bookseller chains but also

independent bookstores around the country. For Amazon, profits weren't the primary goal. Rather, it was knocking out all competition and controlling as much of the market as possible. Twenty-five years later, Amazon has succeeded. The company is the second largest private employer in the United States and, by 2021, will account for 50 percent of all online sales nationwide.

With this control comes extraordinary power. Amazon has the political power to shape local and federal policy, determine labor standards, and shield itself from democratic accountability. Despite having earned billions in profits, Amazon pays very little in taxes. In 2019, Amazon reported $280 billion in total revenue and $13.9 billion in pre-tax income. Still, according to the US Securities and Exchange Commission, the company only had to pay $162 million in taxes. Although the federal corporate tax rate is 21 percent, tax loopholes allowed Amazon to only pay 1.2 percent. Sadly, this was progress from 2018, when it paid zero dollars in taxes, and 2017, when it received a $137 million refund.

At the same time that Amazon is earning historically unprecedented amounts of cash, the company's workers have continued to suffer. Low wages and unhealthy working conditions have been central to Amazon's business model of "consumer friendliness." While Amazon earns tax breaks by accepting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) subsidies from customers, its employees are among the top food stamp recipients in numerous states around the country. Again, this was true *before* the Covid-19 pandemic.

Once the country began to shut down, Amazon quickly became the only game in town. With so many people stuck at home, Amazon became the only way for many to access necessary goods. And with a severely shrunken labor market, Amazon was the only available employment for many workers. Essentially, twenty-five years of predatory business practices put it in a position to exploit an unforeseeable human crisis. This is the essence of Corona capitalism.

Supporters of capitalism will say that Amazon's success is just a natural function of the free market. How do you respond to that?

There is nothing natural or free about capitalism. Companies like Amazon become economic behemoths because of government policies that allow them to be so. They are rescued from the "natural" effects of the market when institutions like the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and Federal Reserve decide that they are "too big to fail." While the right rails against the threat of socialism, they actively support government interventions that ensure that the wealthy benefit.

Within the rules and logic of this system, Amazon did nothing wrong. The company simply responded to the demands of the system. The problem, however, is that the system is engineered to ensure that certain people are winners and losers. Imagine playing a competitive sport where one of the competitors also gets to create the rules, design the playing field, and be one of the referees. This is precisely what happens within Corona capitalism.

Think about the people who were caught selling hand sanitizer, masks, and other protective items at exorbitant prices. In some instances, people were selling hand sanitizer for four hundred dollars a case. The corporate media quickly exposed these individuals, while the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation threatened to bring the full force of the law to punish them. And Amazon, with no sense of irony, went to Congress and demanded legislation against price gouging. The hypocrisy is stunning.

Focusing on individual price gouging seems like such a small drop in the bucket.

It is. Obviously, I don't support price gouging. During a moment of crisis, we should be looking to support and protect, not prey on, each other. Still, economic desperation produces these kinds of decisions. Also, the culture of capitalism teaches us to think in market terms. We are taught to focus on our "brands" rather than our reputations. We are taught to view citizenship through the lens of consumership rather than democratic participation. We are taught to view each other as means rather than ends. Within this framework, it is no surprise that people would view the pandemic through the lens of market demand.

But it's pointless to focus on the few everyday people who exploited the crisis. They are symptoms of the larger crisis of Corona capitalism. The person selling hand sanitizer for four hundred dollars doesn't have the power to normalize

their exploitative practices. This is why a desperate citizen making thousands from Covid-19 masks creates a moral panic, while transnational corporations making billions from the same pandemic is accepted as the proper functioning of the "free" market.

The issue of power is key here. Due to its massive economic influence, Amazon has the ability to regulate consumer practices, shape public policy, and control global markets. The emergence of Corona capitalism has only expedited the consolidation of privatized power. Corporations, not governments, are the primary shapers of our lives. As a result, we are shedding even the pretense of political transparency, democratic practices, social safety nets, or a fundamental investment in the lives of the vulnerable.

And this type of exploitation is not particular to the Covid-19 pandemic, right?

Definitely not. As Naomi Klein describes in her brilliant book *The Shock Doctrine*, natural disasters and human crises are prime sites of opportunity for predatory forms of capitalism. Whenever the masses are in a state of shock and disorientation caused by a crisis, the powerful intervene with ostensible solutions that expand their wealth and widen the gap between the have-gots and the have-nots. The rise of private military contractors and "tax-free enterprise zones" for corporations in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the emergence of private security companies after the September 11 attacks, the infiltration of Western oil companies into Iraqi oil fields after the Iraq War, and the massive corporate bailouts during the 2008 financial crisis are examples of how unexpected crises become the pretext for developing policies and institutional arrangements that have longstanding impacts on the economy, environment, law, and everyday life.

In the current moment of Corona capitalism, we are witnessing an even more naked and aggressive articulation of Klein's thesis. Through the shock of an unprecedented global health crisis, government and corporate elites are quickly threatening to implement long-held goals. In a few short months, the Trump administration has used the discourse of "national emergency" as an excuse to impose a lethal southern border security policy, undermine unions, and privatize school lunch programs. The fossil fuel industry has used the pandemic to garner financial benefit and justify various forms of deregulation. These are just a few examples of how the powerful are radically reshaping the world as many of us remain in a state of shock, work to navigate the challenges of everyday life, and actively resist the current structures of power.

DEATH-ELIGIBLE

There has been very little conversation about the impact of Covid-19 within prisons. Why do you think that is?

The lack of conversation about the impact of Covid-19 on incarcerated populations is disturbing but hardly surprising. Although there is a growing conversation about the crisis of incarceration in this country, we still fail to view those living inside of prisons as full human beings, much less full citizens. In moments of crisis, even ones where we attempt to universalize our pain, prison populations are easily forgotten. With more than 2.2 million people currently caged inside of US prisons and jails, this is not only an irresponsible oversight but the foundation of a political, moral, and public health crisis.

In May 2020, the Federal Bureau of Prisons reported that 70 percent of the incarcerated people who were tested for Covid-19 had positive results. By June, there were more than 42,000 reported Covid-19 infections and 510 deaths. The infection rate within US prisons had become five and

a half times higher than the general population. In other words, these are death camps.

The increased likelihood of Covid-19 death within prison is attributable to several factors. Like the rest of the country, US prisons did not have sufficient testing equipment, which made it difficult to determine how many prisoners and staff were infected. This resource gap was compounded by the government's failure to accurately count the number of positive cases that it did find. For example, in May 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that nearly 5,000 prisoners had tested positive for coronavirus. Two weeks later, Reuters documented more than 17,000 cases within local, state, and federal facilities. Such gross discrepancies made it difficult to properly track the pandemic or produce an appropriate response.

In the peak of the pandemic in New York, no place on Earth was more infectious than the Rikers Island jail complex. As of July 2020, infection rates were 7.86 percent, as compared to 2.62 percent in New York City and 0.81 percent throughout the entire United States. How do we arrive at such astronomically high numbers without an outcry from the public or an urgent response from the government?

Of course, no one deserves to die from Covid-19. But it is worth noting that 75 percent of the people incarcerated in Rikers have not been convicted of a crime. Most of them are awaiting trial and remain in prison because they cannot afford cash bail. Since the US legal system allegedly deems everyone "innocent until proven guilty," this means that there

are countless innocent people dying in prison simply because they do not have enough money to live. Covid-19 has turned their ordinary criminal cases into death sentences without benefit of trial, judge, or jury.

The burden of poverty also shows up in the prison health-care system. In prisons around the country, incarcerated people are charged medical co-pays in order to schedule a doctor's visit, receive dental care, or access medicine. These co-pays can range from two to five dollars per visit. Since most incarcerated people earn little or no money—the average non-industry prison worker earns between fourteen and sixty-three cents an hour—these co-pays are unconscionably high. In some states, a prisoner can spend an entire week's pay just to visit a doctor. Like in the outside world, these high co-pays discourage people from seeking medical attention until their health condition becomes more serious or, at times, irreversible.

Another factor within prisons is the lack of PPE. Masks, gloves, and other materials are rarely distributed within many of the nation's prisons. Adding insult to injury, many incarcerated people have been asked to produce these very materials while being denied access to them. For example, governor Andrew Cuomo responded to state-wide shortages in New York by making state prisoners sew masks and bottle hand sanitizer. Imagine the cruel irony of being asked to risk your life in a crowded and unsafe work area, for less than a dollar a day, to make materials that you might not be able to use.

Social distancing is a primary way of preventing infection. But how can one consistently remain six feet apart from others within a prison? Many prison cells are overcrowded, leaving people with literally no room to safely distance from others. In most prisons, it is not uncommon for beds to be only a few feet apart. Lines for food, phone calls, and showers often do not allow for adequate social distancing. Prison guards can also contribute to the spread of coronavirus, as many are untested and asymptomatic. They interact with the outside world every day and can bring the virus into the prison and spread it across various parts of the building without knowing it.

Many prisons have responded to the threat of coronavirus through repressive tactics. Rather than investing in resources that create safer and healthier conditions for everyone, prison officials in many states have intensified the use of solitary confinement, also known as "restrictive" or "segregated" housing. Regardless of the name, the practice is the same: social isolation and deprivation, as well as the denial of recreation, exercise, or any form of communication with the outside world. Medical doctors, psychologists, prison scholars, and international bodies like the United Nations have stated that solitary confinement is a form of torture that should be eliminated. Still, before Covid-19, there were sixty thousand people in solitary confinement in US state and federal prisons. After the pandemic, that number skyrocketed to three hundred thousand.

Consider what this means for the incarcerated. For many, their fate is either to die slowly from the torture of solitary

confinement or die quickly from exposure to Covid-19. The absurdity of these options reflects the cruelty of our criminal justice system and our gross indifference to the well-being of those caged inside of US prisons. But it's not just prisoners who have been ignored. We must also look to other spaces of confinement within the United States, from nursing homes to immigrant detention centers, which became even more dangerous, dehumanizing, and deadly during the pandemic.

Why is it important for us to think about confinement as a concept?

Because confinement is a quintessentially American practice and a centerpiece of American life. At every juncture in history, the practice of human confinement has been used to expand empire, justify the dehumanization and exploitation of vulnerable populations, and hide the ugliest blemishes of what bell hooks aptly refers to as a White supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist empire.

Confinement reflects the conditions under which so many vulnerable people have lived within the United States. The enslavement of African people is the inaugural practice of the nation-state. Mass incarceration is another state-sanctioned form of captivity that prevents the exercise of Black freedom. The "ghetto" was constructed to contain those ethnic groups that lacked access to American Whiteness. The home has historically been a space of confinement for women, marking the boundaries of their labor and naturalizing male domination. The metaphor of "the closet" signals

the physical and discursive limits of legitimate identity and performance for those queer folk trapped inside of it.

Confinement not only restricts human freedom but also denies the fundamental humanity of those being confined. The practice of confinement has become increasingly prevalent as the country further embraces what critical theorist Henry Giroux calls the "politics of disposability." More than ever before, human confinement has become a normalized condition of the American social contract.

What is the politics of disposability?

The politics of disposability is part and parcel of the current neoliberal moment. The logic of the market shapes every aspect of our lives. Our values, our political choices, our social interactions, and our cultural practices are all bound up in the logic of profit making. The language of competition and efficiency has come to color nearly every dimension of our lives. The public good has been trumped by the private interest. Individual success, rather than collective well-being, is understood as the definition of social progress.

Within this neoliberal universe, citizenship is measured by our ability to be consumers. Individuals are only as valuable as their ability to produce and consume. The most vulnerable populations, those who need the most from our social safety net, are viewed as burdens unworthy of investment, protection, or care. Since they have no value to us in terms of market logic, we express no collective concern for

them. We do not care whether they live or die. They are disposable.

In the United States, there has always been a relationship between disposability and confinement. Our willingness to consign people to spaces of confinement is directly related to our assessment of their economic value. This assessment is informed by the logics of White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Confinement has long been used as a way of meeting the needs of the capitalist market. Think about how mass incarceration emerged in the aftermath of legal slavery. After emancipation, Black people were no longer the private property of White slaveowners. This rendered them less valuable with regard to the Southern economy. Since the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed human slavery except for punishment of a crime, the government ensured that everything Black people did became a crime. The creation of the Black Codes led to the widespread criminalization of Black people, which led to their confinement within jails and prisons. Through the convict-lease system, Black prisoners were leased to private businesses like railroad companies, coal mines, and sometimes the very same plantations from which they had been emancipated.

The practice of lynching, as a widespread form of racial terrorism and extrajudicial violence, did not begin until the end of slavery. This is not a coincidence. When Black people were the legal property of White men, there was no desire to kill them. Slave masters would prefer to sell them or, if necessary, have the court system impose punishment. That way,

they could be legally compensated for their losses. After all, Black people were property. Why would they destroy something from which they generated wealth? It was only after the end of slavery, when our captivity was no longer directly linked to profit making, that Black lives were so easily disposable. This is a quintessentially American logic: the moment you are no longer exploitable, you become death-eligible.

In the current neoliberal moment, the politics of disposability has become the dominant order of the day. Over the past four decades, we have responded to so many of our social crises by "throwing away" the people suffering from them. Consider, for example, how we have come to treat mental illness. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the Mental Health Systems Act. This legislation was designed to increase and expand resources for people with mental illnesses. The following year, President Ronald Reagan repealed the act, beginning decades of federal divestment from mental health resources. This placed many people with mental illness on the street, left to fend for themselves. At the same time, we passed numerous state and local laws that criminalized living on the street. Prisons were increasingly filled with people dealing with untreated mental illnesses.

By essentially criminalizing people with mental illness, we demonstrated our investment in their disposability. We've done this with so many other social challenges, like poverty, drug addiction, and homelessness. We have committed to resolving our contradictions by hiding, erasing, and confining people. And if they perish, they perish.

This politics of disposability follows an economic logic. But how are people convinced to accept it?

Confinement and disposability are shaped by economic logics, but they are also reflected in our social beliefs and cultural practices. They become part of the everyday, taken-for-granted ways that we navigate the world.

The United States has 2.2 million people living inside jails and prisons, a number unprecedented in human history. We allow this to happen by convincing ourselves that there is a criminal class of people, a group that deserves the fate of incarceration. We convince ourselves that no one in these prisons is wrongfully accused. We ignore the fact that the average person commits multiple crimes every day—as Harvey Silverglate describes in his book *Three Felonies a Day*—and decide that anyone in prison is a bad person. And where do we put bad people? Prison. It becomes a circular logic.

And think about how often we've heard jokes about "not dropping the soap" in prison. The fact that these jokes occur within mainstream conversations and popular culture speaks to the pervasiveness of rape culture, which normalizes and justifies various forms of sexual violence, as well as homophobia. But it also shows how the politics of disposability determines that those living in confinement deserve whatever fate happens to them.

I would also push back against the idea that the politics of disposability is purely a reflection of economic logic. Consider, for example, the role of heteropatriarchy in normalizing domestic violence and sexual assault against women. As Black feminist scholars have noted, issues of intimate partner violence have historically been considered a private rather than public concern. This is due to the belief that women are the property of their male partners and therefore shielded from public accountability. In this regard, the home is not only a space of confinement but a site of what Angela Davis calls "the privatized punishment of women."

Covid-19 is just another reminder of the extraordinary sense of disposability that we assign to those who are in spaces of confinement.

In addition to prisons, what were some other spaces of confinement whose vulnerabilities were exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Well, let's continue with the domestic sphere, which is one of the most ignored spaces of confinement. For many women around the globe, the home remains a site of containment and violence. Through legal mandates, cultural norms, and economic realities, many women are formally or informally confined to their homes. Within these spaces, intimate partner violence and sexual assault remain the norm. According to UN Women, 243 million women and girls reported that they had been subjected to physical and sexual violence by an intimate partner between 2019 and 2020. These conditions were only exacerbated by the pandemic.

Experts say that domestic violence increases when people face economic pressure, lose their jobs, or experience mo-

ments of crisis. For many households, Covid-19 produced all three factors, while also eliminating opportunities for escape. Women, girls, and femmes who could normally escape violent situations at least temporarily by going outside, visiting family and friends, or going to work were now confined to their homes with their abusers. One month into the pandemic, domestic violence hotlines around the world reported an increase in calls. Those areas that did not report an increase may signal an even graver danger, as many women no longer have the physical space or adequate conditions to seek help.

Home confinement created other problems for child-bearing people. In April 2020, the United Nations Population Fund predicted that 44 million women in 114 low and middle-income countries could lose access to contraception, leading to 1 million unwanted pregnancies during a three-month lockdown or 7 million for a six-month lockdown. In addition, they predicted the possibility of an additional 13 million child marriages and 2 million cases of female genital mutilation, as the pandemic undermined efforts at stopping both.

These examples are reminders of the gendered blind spots of our Covid-19 analysis. While the home is typically constructed as a safe space and refuge from danger, it remains the opposite for many women, girls, and femmes. Too often, however, we still think about the violence that occurs inside of homes as a private rather than public matter. We also continue to decenter the experiences of anyone who is not gendered male.

You mentioned nursing homes earlier. Where do the elderly fit into this politics of disposability?

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the elderly. As of June 2020, nearly 40 percent of all Covid-19 deaths occurred in long-term care facilities. This includes nursing homes, hospices, and residential care facilities. This stands to reason, as nursing homes are overwhelmingly populated by the elderly, for whom it is a greater challenge to fight coronavirus than it is for their younger counterparts. Still, it would be a mistake to dismiss the death rates of the elderly within these spaces as a mere "natural" occurrence.

Like prisons, nursing homes are institutions where death is normalized. When a prisoner dies, we view it as an unfortunate but acceptable consequence of someone who made bad choices. When someone in a nursing home passes, we view it as a sad but "natural" part of life. Of course, death is indeed a natural and inevitable part of the human experience. But too often, we consign the elderly to death even when it is entirely avoidable. For example, four hundred thousand nursing home residents die every year from infections. Many of these deaths are preventable when nursing home staff are performing their jobs with the proper care and consistency. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. Between 2017 and 2020, 75 percent of US nursing homes were cited for failing to properly monitor and control infections.

It would be too simplistic, however, to attribute the death of the elderly to simple human cruelty. The failure of

nursing homes to protect the elderly is a reflection of the neoliberal system that produces them. More than 70 percent of the nursing home industry operates on a for-profit basis. This means economic efficiency becomes more important than health. As a result, overcrowded facilities, underpaid staff, and low-quality care are common features of nursing homes. These conditions only worsened after Covid-19.

The pandemic placed considerable pressure on nursing homes to protect their extremely vulnerable elderly population. Still, despite the clear need to hire more staff, institute new procedures, and purchase more equipment, many nursing homes were reluctant to implement changes that would compromise their profit margins. Many nursing home staff are low-wage employees who are forced to work multiple jobs in order to piece together a living. This increases their own health vulnerability as well as the risks to the patients they serve.

And our disregard for the elderly isn't exclusive to nursing homes. At every turn during the pandemic, political calculations were made that conceded the disposability of the elderly. At the beginning of the pandemic, when ventilators and hospital beds were in short supply, it quickly became "common sense" that age should be a deciding factor for who received them. In New York and New Jersey, policies were created that demanded that nursing homes accept all patients, regardless of their Covid-19 status. These mandates also prohibited the testing of potential new residents. These decisions cleared hospital space for younger and healthier people, while placing the elderly at a heightened risk.

Our willingness to sacrifice the elderly became most clear in the public debates about ending the shutdowns. President Trump, in his initial desire to reopen the country by Easter, ignored the extraordinary risk that such a move would make for highly vulnerable elderly populations. But Trump was not alone. The most clear and unabashed example of this perspective came from Texas lieutenant governor Dan Patrick, who argued that people over seventy years old should be willing to risk their lives as a "sacrifice" to prevent "ruining America" through economic collapse. Patrick said the elderly should endorse reopening the country, even though it meant greatly increasing their chances of dying, in order to protect US economic interests. Such attitudes reflect the belief that the decision of who lives or dies should be determined through market logic. Based on this ideology, the elderly have the least to contribute and are the most disposable.

Of course, there are economic counterarguments to this position. Americans over fifty years old make up 35 percent of the population, 40 percent of the gross domestic product, and 43 percent of the tax base. There is a strong case to be made that high death rates among the elderly would compromise the stability of the economy. But to appeal to such arguments is to lend legitimacy to a gross necropolitical calculation. Instead, we must critically interrogate the current system: Why do we have such little regard for the elderly? How do we ethically determine who gets to live or die? What does it mean for us to prioritize profit making over life saving?

Until we confront these questions, and seriously imagine new possibilities, we will continue to live in a state of disposability.

THE SPECTACLE OF VIOLENCE

In recent years, video footage has been instrumental in the fight against police brutality and other forms of racism. Why has this been the case?

Over the past decade, advanced video, photo, and audio technologies have become increasingly easy to obtain. This is largely due to the emergence of cell phones as a central part of everyday life. According to a 2015 Pew poll, more than 90 percent of Americans own a cell phone and nearly 70 percent have a smartphone. Among youth ages eighteen to twenty-nine, smartphone ownership is more than 85 percent. Second, the expansion of smartphone-centered technologies has allowed for high-resolution photography, video recording, and live broadcasting. These tools enable everyday people to engage in what I refer to in my research as "new surveillances," or a reshaping of the relationships of surveillance between individuals and the state.

Since Black people were brought to the Americas, we have

been the subjects of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned surveillance. From slavery-era flesh branding to COINTELPRO-era phone tapping, various technologies have been used to monitor, control, discipline, and punish Black folk. Since 9/11, these forms of surveillance have not only continued but have been codified into law under the guise of economic efficiency, public safety, and national security.

These new surveillances have created greater space for resistance. In the current moment, everyday citizens can pull out a cell phone to record an act of police violence and photograph the inhumane conditions of a prison. These technologies allow us to produce tangible and legible evidence of the various forms of violence experienced by Black people in the United States.

Why is the emergence of video technology particularly significant for Black people?

Because Black witness has always been insufficient. Whether in a court of law or everyday life, the idea of Black people being credible observers has never been accepted. This is partly due to longstanding White supremacist questions about our character ("Are they telling the truth about what happened?"), our intelligence ("Are they capable of properly assessing what happened?"), and our fundamental worth ("Do we care even if something did happen?"), which have made attempts to articulate our experiences both unpersuasive and uncompelling.

The other issue is denial. American culture is committed to nostalgia, erasure, and outright dishonesty as its response to trauma. Instead of reckoning with our violent history of conquest and plunder, we tell romantic stories of brave and principled European explorers. Rather than viewing slavery as a foundational component of the country, with ongoing impacts in every sector of our lives, we dismiss it as a brief and morally troublesome interruption to an otherwise principled and longstanding journey toward democracy. We ignore painful truths as a strategy for maintaining national pride and justifying acts of evil.

For White Americans, the denial of racism allows them to justify their unearned power. It also enables them to justify doing nothing to disrupt the systems that privilege them. When White people are forced to view spectacles of violence against Black people, they are forced to bear witness to truths that they previously denied. They must then reconcile these truths with their previously held beliefs, understandings, and claims about the world.

So why hasn't the recent wave of video footage led to more arrests and convictions, or at least more national outrage?

I believe that it has. The killing of Ahmaud Arbery, the unarmed Black male jogger killed by Travis McMichael with the help of his father, Gregory McMichael, was one of the most brutal instances of violence that we've seen in recent years. Even the people who attempted to posthumously depict Ar-

bery as a criminal generally conceded that his death was unnecessary. There was nearly universal outrage at the killing of George Floyd at the hands of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who kept his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Even media outlets like Fox News, which ritually excuse police brutality and criminalize Black victims of state violence, conceded that Chauvin's behavior was wrong.

Video footage has done more than just sway public sentiment. The firing of the four police officers associated with Floyd's death only occurred because of video footage, which not only captured brutal details but also contradicted police claims that he had resisted arrest. Arbery was killed in February 2020, but there was no movement on the case until the video footage was released to the public in May. Even when the state is not invested in justice, video footage can force its hand.

Still, we must be careful not to overestimate the power of video footage. Even in the face of video evidence, many White people struggle to accept new findings. For example, in 1991, the entire country watched a videotape of Rodney King, an unarmed Black man, being kicked and beaten by four Los Angeles police officers for fifteen minutes. When the King tape was released and broadcast widely, many White people expressed shock and outrage that the incident had occurred. Still, the following year, a nearly all-White jury acquitted all four officers of assault and three of the four of excessive force.

In the face of hard video evidence, how could the jury not find the officers guilty? Ultimately, they were persuaded

by the defense's argument, which was that King was a "PCP-crazed giant." The jurors were convinced by the argument that brutally beating King was the only way to stop him from harming the officers and other innocent people throughout the city. In essence, the jury ignored what they saw in order to justify a clear and egregious case of police brutality.

How could this happen? What must one have to believe about King to accept such an argument? In this case, the jury accepted arguments about King as being evil and prone to violence. They also accepted the claim that he was not capable of experiencing pain in the same way as "normal" people. Such beliefs were informed by deeply rooted White supremacist narratives about Black immorality, as well as the belief that our inhuman status renders us impervious to pain. Rather than accepting what they could plainly see, a Black man mercilessly beaten by police, they chose to cling to wildly irrational White supremacist logic.

This is why we cannot fetishize the power of video. We cannot convince ourselves that "hard proof" was the missing link in the struggle against racialized state violence. To do so would be to let White people off the hook for their active and intentional investments in White supremacy.

Of course, many White people would do better if they knew better. But it would be naïve to believe that White people have not dismantled the current system simply because they were unaware of it, or even because they were untrusting of Black witness. We have to be honest about the fact that White ignorance is often *willful*. It is easier to embrace

racist myths than to admit that one's privilege is unearned. It is more convenient to ignore compelling evidence than to concede unjust power.

This is why, even after watching Walter Scott get shot in the back in 2015 by officer Michael Slager in North Charleston, South Carolina, as Scott ran away from him, the first jury could not reach a unanimous guilty verdict. This is how the entire world witnessed Eric Garner being choked to death by Daniel Pantaleo on Staten Island, yet the officer was never indicted. For many White Americans, it is better to accept a comforting lie than an unsettling truth. To accept that Black people are routinely terrorized by the state would force them to confront their most coveted beliefs about the country. To concede that Black people are treated as subhuman because they are not White would force them to forge new moral, ethical, psychological, and political commitments. If they aren't prepared to do this, then it will never happen.

This doesn't mean that video footage isn't valuable. Many people have radically altered their beliefs and actions after being forced to reckon with some of these images. In practical terms, the mobilization of video has been one of the only tactics that has produced accountability for harm done to Black people. Still, if someone is committed to worshipping a lie, the truth cannot convert them.

Have you seen the actual video of George Floyd's death?

Yes, but I didn't want to.

Why not?

It was a question of self-care. I have to protect my own emotional and psychological well-being. As an activist and scholar of state violence, I knew that I would eventually watch it. But after hearing the brutal details of Floyd's death, I wasn't prepared to view the actual footage.

Years of watching Black people die, both in my personal life and my professional work, have taken a severe toll on me. I have to prepare myself. Unfortunately, I was not given the opportunity. As I scrolled through social media, I was assaulted by numerous videos and photos that showed every second of Derek Chauvin brutally killing George Floyd. No preparation. No warning. It left me shaken.

And this was not an isolated incident. Every day, we are bombarded by the spectacle of violence. Television, film, music, billboards, videogames, social media, and traditional media all confront us with extraordinary levels of violence. This violence takes many forms, but anti-Black violence is near the top of the list. From Eric Garner to Ahmaud Arbery to George Floyd, we are constantly forced to witness the brutal killings of Black people, both by the state and citizens.

So there's a danger in showing these images so frequently?

Absolutely, but it is also quite complicated. Given the denial of Black people's experiences with racism and state violence, these images can be quite valuable. Black people now have

unprecedented access to visual testimonies, which corroborate the stories we have been telling for centuries. The proliferation of images can be powerful because they resonate with our own experiences and help articulate our pain.

At the same time, and for many of the same reasons that they are valuable, these images are also deeply harmful. Given the ordinariness of racialized violence in the lives of Black people, both from the state and ordinary citizens, the constant exposure to images of anti-Black violence can be triggering for many of us. Every time we turn on the news or log on to our social media accounts, we are forced to reengage some of our most traumatic individual and collective experiences. No other group of people in America has to routinely deal with that.

We must also consider how the constant representation of violence against Black people can undermine collective outrage. We already live in world where Black death is normalized. Our vulnerability doesn't provoke the same sympathy, outrage, or political response as that of our White counterparts. When there is a school shooting in a White suburb, the public says things like, "This shouldn't happen here." This corresponds with the dominant belief that White suburbs, White schools, and White lives are entitled to uninterrupted peace and safety. The unspoken corollary to this belief is that such tragedies can be reasonably expected to occur elsewhere. And, of course, "elsewhere" is wherever those on the bottom of the social ladder dwell.

This is why, when we hear media stories about famine in Africa or shootings in Chicago, so many people are unmoved.

It's not that people *want* death to occur in these places, but that they have come to "naturally" associate these places with disaster, misfortune, violence, and premature death. This is because we only hear media stories about the continent of Africa in relation to violence and poverty. Mainstream media discourse has made Chicago shorthand for tribalized violence and political corruption. As a result, events that correlate with these storylines do not upset us. This is the same for images of anti-Black violence. The more we see it, the easier it is to be unbothered by it.

In the aftermath of the Rodney King trial, many experts argued that the constant repetition of the beating desensitized the jury to its brutality. They suggested that they saw King's body beaten so frequently that the event was stripped of its brutality. They no longer saw King as a human being with whom they could empathize, but as a text available for close reading.

In the era of twenty-four-hour cable news and social media, a similar desensitization happens to all of us. When we are repeatedly forced to view Black people being beaten, tortured, and killed, it becomes harder to sustain our outrage. How many times can we watch Ahmaud Arbery getting shot down like an animal before we begin to objectify his body? How does witnessing the repetition of inhumane treatment against Black people reinforce the White supremacist belief that we are indeed not human? These questions aren't just abstract or academic. They have a real impact on how we navigate the world.

Every time that Black people are forced to witness systematic violence against people who look like us, and those whom we love, we are taught about our lack of value within this country. We are sent a message that unmerited suffering is an inevitable part of Black life. We are reminded of the precarity of our own lives. This does profound damage to our spirits, our psyches, our culture, and our politics.

Derek Chauvin stayed with his knee on Floyd's neck for four minutes after Floyd had lost consciousness. A firefighter who watched as this unfolded said to Chauvin, "Check his pulse." Still, Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck for four minutes while Floyd was already unconscious. Is the dehumanization so profound that for Chauvin it is like killing an animal?

The specifics of this case are complicated because there are many unresolved questions about Chauvin's background, whether he knew George Floyd from a job they previously shared, and whether or not his actions were the product of personal animus. What we know for certain is that Chauvin's behavior, with his knee on that man's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, is a common police practice.

As I mentioned before, this indifference to Black people's lives is not only indebted to the racist hatred of Black people, but also the White supremacist narrative that Black people are impervious to normal human pain because we are not actually human. But we also do not want to let the perpetrators of violence off the hook. We cannot pretend

that White violence is merely a product of bad information or lack of information. We cannot ignore the fact that Derek Chauvin showed a vicious indifference to George Floyd's suffering. Chauvin did not care about Floyd's painful screams, his desperate cries for his mother, his repeated assertion that he could not breathe, or his dreadful declaration that he was going to die. And although Chauvin was the only person with his knee on Floyd's neck, we cannot ignore the fact that there were three other officers standing there, watching this happen. They were all complicit in this spectacle of violence.

You've used the word spectacle *a few times. Why is it important to think of these incidents as spectacles?*

I use the term *spectacle* to draw attention to the role of visuality in how we come to understand incidents of violence. Our individual and collective response to these incidents is directly connected to our ability to see, and in many cases hear, what has transpired. The current technological moment enables us to record and distribute these incidents in ways that allow global communities of people to bear witness.

The spectacle of violence is also about the public nature of these events. When the state inflicts violence in full public view, the impact reaches beyond just the person who suffers the violence. As the philosopher Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish*, public forms of state violence also have a profound impact on those who bear witness to it. Within

the American context, we must also look at how this plays out along racial lines.

Think about the practice of lynching in the United States. Lynchings were not only executions but social events. White southerners ate lunch and drank whiskey as Black bodies dangled from trees in front of them. The severed fingers, toes, and genitalia of murdered Blacks were taken as physical keepsakes of the festivities. Postcards with images of the lynchings were routinely sent through the mail. White lynch mobs did not just kill Black people, they turned them into public spectacles that reinforced White supremacy.

The lynching was not only a sadistic and illegal form of punishment but also a form of racial terrorism. The public torture, killing, and desecration of Black bodies sent a clear message about the practical consequences of disrupting or even questioning the system of racial hierarchy. The spectacle of violence was used as a perpetual reminder that the institutions of American democracy—the law, the court system, the prisons, the police—were incapable of protecting Black people from White supremacist fear, rage, and violence.

Today, we continue to witness the public executions of Black people through extrajudicial means. Police officers like Darren Wilson and Derek Chauvin, as well as private citizens like George Zimmerman and Travis McMichael, continue to operate as the judge, jury, and executioner of Black people like Michael Brown, Renisha McBride, George Floyd, Rekia Boyd, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery.

When Michael Brown was killed by officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, his body lay on the ground for four and a half hours. As I write in my book *Nobody*, the spectacle of his death not only sent a chilling message to the local community, but its mass distribution and consumption on social media transformed it into a global event.

Digital technologies have made the audience for such events even broader and the circulation of them much faster. Now, every time we watch the news or log on to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter, we become audience to the spectacle of Black death, whether we want to or not. When we are watching Derek Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds or witnessing Michael Brown's bullet-ridden body lying on the ground for four and a half hours, we are witnessing more than brutal acts of state violence. We are also being taught a message about the limited value of Black lives, the power of White supremacy, and the state's capacity to determine whether we live or die.