

By Henry A. Giroux

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*The following essay is excerpted from the preface to Henry Giroux's ["Hearts of Darkness: Torturing Children in the War on Terror"](#) (Paradigm Publishers 2010).*

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, we have lived through a historical period in which the United States relinquished its tenuous claim to democracy. The frames through which democracy apprehends others as human beings worthy of respect, dignity, and human rights were sacrificed to a mode of politics and culture that simply became an extension of war, both at home and abroad. At home, the punishing state increasingly replaced the welfare state, however ill conceived, as more and more individuals and groups were now treated as disposable populations, undeserving of those safety nets and basic protections that provide the conditions for living with a sense of security and dignity. Under such conditions, basic social supports were replaced by an accelerated production of prisons, the expansion of the criminal justice system into everyday life, and the further erosion of crucial civil liberties. Shared responsibilities gave way to shared fears, and the only distinction that seemed to resonate in the culture was between friends and patriots, on the one hand, and dissenters and enemies, on the other. State violence not only became acceptable, it was normalized as the government spied on its citizens, suspended the right of *habeas corpus*, sanctioned police brutality against those who questioned state power, relied on the state secrets privilege to hide its crimes, and increasingly reduced public spheres designed to protect children to containment centers and warehouses that modeled themselves after prisons. Fear both altered the landscape of democratic rights and values and dehumanized a population that was ever more willing to look the other way as large segments of the populace were either dehumanized, incarcerated, or simply treated as disposable. The dire consequences can be seen every day as the media report a stream of tragic stories about decent people losing their homes; more and more young people being incarcerated; and growing numbers of people living in their cars, on the streets, or in tent cities. The New York Times offers up a front-page story about young people leaving their recession-ridden families in order to live on the street, often surviving by selling their bodies for money. Reports surface in the dominant media about unspeakable horrors being inflicted on children tortured in the "death chambers" of Iraq, Cuba, and Afghanistan. And the American people barely blink.

The Bush administration further eroded a culture inspired by democratic values, replacing it with a culture of war and a culture of illegality that experimented with an extrajudicial detention system used to create torture chambers in Bagram, Kandahar, and Guantanamo Bay. After 2001, the language and ghostly shadow of war became all-embracing, not only eroding the distinction between war and peace but also putting into play a public pedagogy in which every aspect of the culture was shaped by militarized knowledge, values, and ideals. From video games and Hollywood films either supported or produced by the Department of Defense to the ongoing militarization of public and higher education, the notion of the common good was subordinated to a military metaphysics, warlike values, and the dictates of the national security state. War gained a new status under the Bush administration, moving from an option of last resort to a primary instrument of diplomacy in the war on terror. A dogmatic faith in war was supplemented by a persistent attempt to legitimate such a politics through another kind of war based on pedagogical struggle to create subjects, citizens, and institutions that would support such draconian policies. War was no longer the last resort of a state intent on defending its territory; it morphed into a new form of public pedagogy--a type of cultural war machine--designed to shape and lead the society. War became the foundation for a politics that employed military language, concepts, and policing relations to address problems far beyond the familiar terrains of battle. In some cases, war was so aestheticized by the dominant media that it resembled an advertisement for a tourist industry. The upshot is that the meaning of war was rhetorically, visually, and materially expanded to name, legitimate, and wage battles against social problems involving drugs, poverty, and the nation's newfound enemy, the Mexican immigrant.

As war became normalized as the central function of power and politics, it became a regular and normative element of American society, legitimated by a state of exception and emergency that became permanent rather than temporary. As the production of violence reached beyond traditionally defined enemies and threats, the state now took aim at terrorism, shifting its register of power by waging war on a concept, broadening its pursuits, tactics, and strategies against no specific state, army, soldiers, or location. The enemy was omnipresent, all the more difficult to root out and all the more convenient for expanding the tactics of surveillance, the culture of fear, and the resources of violence. War was now a permanent and commonplace feature of American domestic and foreign policy, a battle that had no definitive end and demanded the constant use of violence. War had become more than a military strategy: it was now a pedagogy and a form of cultural politics designed to legitimate certain modes of governance, create identities supportive of militaristic values, and provide the formative culture that supported the organization and production of violence as a central feature of domestic and foreign policy.

It is difficult to imagine how any democracy can avoid being corrupted when war becomes the foundation of politics, if not culture itself. Any democracy that makes war and state violence the organizing principles of society cannot survive for long, at least as a democratic entity. The United States descended into a period in which society was increasingly organized through the

production of both symbolic and material violence. A culture of cruelty emerged in the media, especially in the talk radio circuit, in which a sordid nationalism combined with a hypermilitarism and masculinity that scorned not merely reason but also all those who fit into the stereotype of other--which appeared to include everyone who was not white and Christian. Dialogue, reason, and thoughtfulness slowly disappeared from the public realm as every encounter was framed within circles of certainty, staged as a fight to the death. As the civic and moral center of the country disappeared under the Bush administration, the language of the marketplace provided the only referent for understanding the obligations of citizenship and global responsibility, undeterred by a growing war machine and culture that produced jobs and goods and furthered the war economy.

The war abroad entered a new phase with the release of the photos of detainees being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison. War as organized violence was stripped of its noble aims and delusional goal of promoting democracy, revealing state violence at its most degrading and dehumanizing moment. State power had become an instrument of torture, ripping into the flesh of human beings, raping women, and most abominably torturing children. Democracy had become something that defended the unthinkable and inflicted the most horrible mutilations on both adults and children deemed to be the enemies of democracy. But the mutilations were also inflicted against the body politic as politicians such as former vice president Dick Cheney defended torture while the media addressed the question of torture not as a violation of democratic principles or human rights but as a strategy that might or might not produce concrete information. The utilitarian arguments used to defend a market-driven economy that only recognized cost-benefit analyses and the priority of exchange values had now reached their logical end point as similar arguments were used to defend torture, even when it involved children. The pretense of democracy was stripped bare as it was revealed over and over again that the United States had become a torture state, aligning itself with infamous dictatorships such as those in Argentina and Chile during the 1970s. The U.S. government under the Bush administration had finally arrived at a point where the metaphysics of war, organized violence, and state terrorism prevented leaders in Washington from recognizing how much they were emulating the very acts of terrorism they claimed to be fighting. The circle had now been completed, as the warfare state had been transformed into a torture state. Everything became permissible both at home and abroad, just as the legal system along with the market system legitimated a punishing and ruthless mode of economic Darwinism that viewed morality, if not democracy itself, as a weakness to be either scorned or ignored. Markets not only drove politics, they also removed ethical considerations from any understanding of how markets worked or what effects they produced on the larger social order. Self-regulation trumped moral considerations and became the primary force driving the market, while narrowly defined individual interests set the parameters of what was possible. The public collapsed into the private, and social responsibility was reduced to the arbitrary desires of the hermetic, asocial self. Not surprisingly, the inhuman and degrading entered public discourse and shaped the debate about war, state violence, and human rights abuses; it also served to legitimate such practices. The United States unabashedly entered into a moral vacuum that enabled it to both justify torture and state violence and to mobilize successfully a war culture and public pedagogy in the larger culture that convinced, as a Pew Research Center poll indicated, 54 percent of the

American people that "torture is at least sometimes justified to gain important information from suspected terrorists." [\[1\]](#) Torture was normalized and duly accepted by the majority of the American people while the promise of an aspiring democracy was irreparably damaged.

Hearts of Darkness: Torturing Children in the War on Terror examines how the United States under the Bush administration embarked on a war on terror that not only defended torture as a matter of official policy but also furthered the conditions for the emergence of a culture of cruelty that profoundly altered the political and moral landscape of the country. As torture became normalized under Bush, it corrupted American ideals and political culture, and the administration passed over to the dark side in sanctioning the unimaginable and unspeakable--the torture of children. Although the rise of the torture state has been a subject of intense controversy, too little has been said by intellectuals, academics, artists, writers, parents, and politicians about how state violence under the Bush administration set in motion a public pedagogy and political culture that legitimated the systemic torture of children and did so with the complicity of dominant media that either denied such practices or simply ignored them. The focus on children here is deliberate because young people provide a powerful referent for the long-term consequences of social policies, if not the future itself, and also because they offer a crucial index to measure the moral and democratic values of a nation. Children are the heartbeat and moral compass of politics because they speak to the best of its possibilities and promises, and yet they have, since the 1980s, become the vanishing point of moral debate, either deemed irrelevant because of their age, discounted because they are largely viewed as commodities, or scorned because they are considered a threat to adult society. I have written elsewhere that how a society educates its youth is connected to the collective future the people hope for. Actually, how youth were educated became meaningless as a moral issue under the Bush administration because youth were not only devalued and considered unworthy of a decent life and future (one reason they were denied adequate health care), they were also reduced to the status of the inhuman and depraved and were subjected to cruel acts of torture in sites that were as illegal as they were barbaric. In this instance, youth became the negation of politics and of the future itself.

But more is at stake here than making such crimes visible: there is also the moral and political imperative of raising serious questions about the challenges the Obama administration must address in light of this shameful period in American history, especially if it wants to reverse such policies and make a claim on restoring any vestige of American democracy. Of course, when a country makes torture legal and extends the disciplinary mechanisms of pain, humiliation, and suffering to children, it suggests that far too many people looked away while this was happening and in doing so allowed conditions to emerge that made the unspeakable act of justifying the torture of children a matter of state policy. It is time for Americans to face up to these crimes and engage in a national dialogue about the political, economic, educational, and social conditions that allowed such a dark period to emerge in American history and to hold to account those who were responsible for such acts. The Obama administration is under fire for its embrace of many of Bush's policies, but what is most disturbing is its willingness to make war,

secrecy, and the suspension of civil liberties central features of its own policies. Obama, in his desire to look ahead and embrace a depoliticizing and morally empty notion of postpartisan politics, recycles a dangerous form of historical and social amnesia, while overlooking the political and civic pathology he inherited. Hopefully, this book will remind us that memory at its best is unsettling and sometimes even dangerous in its call for individuals to become moral and political witnesses; to take risks; and to embrace history not merely as a critique but also as a warning about how fragile democracy is and what will often happen when the principles, ideals, and elements of the culture that sustain it are allowed to slip away, overtaken by forces that embrace death rather than life, fear rather than hope, insularity rather than solidarity. Robert Hass, the American poet, has suggested that the job of education, its political job, "is to refresh the idea of justice going dead in us all the time." [\[2\]](#) Justice is slipping away, once again, under the Obama administration, but it is not just the government's job to keep it from "going dead": it is also the job of all Americans--as parents, citizens, individuals, and educators--not merely as a matter of social obligation or moral responsibility but as an act of politics, agency, and possibility.

This book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter analyzes the emergence of a set of predatory economic, social, and political conditions that were intensified, particularly under the administration of George W. Bush, setting the stage for the transformation of the welfare state into the warfare and torture state. As democratic values were increasingly subordinated to market values and as a culture of fear replaced a culture of compassion, restraints previously placed on the play of market and financial forces were removed. Public issues now collapsed into private concerns, and people became more vulnerable to those economic and political forces promoting uncertainty, instability, and insecurity. As any notion of the common good and the institutions that supported it were increasingly viewed with disdain, the culture became more self-absorbed, mean-spirited, competitive, and ruthless in its unwillingness to show compassion for the other, especially those who were most vulnerable to uncertain times--the young, the elderly, immigrants, poor minorities, and Muslims. As the culture of fear and competitiveness seemed to spin out of control, the punishing state replaced the social state, and politics was largely reduced to protecting the benefits of the rich and expanding those policing apparatuses that were used to contain and punish the poor. As more and more social problems were criminalized, the punishing state became the sole source of legitimation for a state weakened by the forces of a destructive globalization and the free-floating forces of capital and finance. As the laws of the market, an excessive individualism, and an unchecked notion of self-interest became the most important principles shaping society, democratic values, identities, and relations were subordinated to the interests of an economic formation that had freed itself from all constraints. The conditions were now developing in which matters of justice, human rights, and truth were sacrificed to the forces of political and economic expediency. In the second chapter of the book, I analyze how torture became state policy through a series of "illegal legalities" concocted by various members of the Bush administration and how the media, in collusion with the government, refused to acknowledge that torture was not something that simply emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 but had been practiced by the U.S. government for decades. In the third chapter, I analyze how the debate about torture seemed to free itself from human rights abuses committed by the United States historically and also how the Bush

administration actively promoted new forms of torture in violation of every major international treaty dealing with torture as an illegal and criminal act. The fourth chapter details the government denial of state-legitimated torture and the gruesome acts of violence and abuse committed on numerous detainees in various U.S.-controlled sites and prisons. Chapter 5 provides ample evidence of how these various conditions along with numerous violations of human rights ultimately resulted in the unthinkable--the torture of children. This chapter is as detailed as it is shocking, invoking both testimony from third parties and testimony from children who were actually tortured. The final chapter of the book raises a series of questions about whether Obama will challenge the horrible legacy of the Bush administration by redefining American democracy or whether he will simply become another victim of the culture of cruelty and suffering that is the legacy of the Bush-Cheney years.

### Footnotes:

[1] Heather Maher, " [Majority of Americans Think Torture Sometimes Justified](#) ," CommonDreams.org (December 4, 2009).

[2] Hass cited in Sarah Pollock, "Robert Hass," Mother Jones (March-April 1992), p. 22.