

You Have Always Been in Someone's Hell

Exceptionalization and Reification of State Violence

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Contents

Rising Waters	3
The Exceptionalization of ICE and Ceding Ground to Policing	4
The Exceptionalization of Trump	5
The Exceptionalization of Israel	7
It All Goes, or it All Stays the Same	8

Rising Waters

The present is unbearable. Genocidal violence continues to be the language of daily life. Mass starvation in Gaza has set in as Israel and its allies (most notably the United States) push onwards towards their objective of the total annihilation of the Palestinian people. Despite the marches and the banner drops and the sabotage and the blockades, the bombs keep getting dropped and the genocide continues.

Genocidal violence, no less devastating but less easily digestible by a broadly anti-Black consumer and less neatly mappable onto the preferred geopolitics of a certain brand of state-worshipping “radical”, continues to devastate a myriad of peoples in Sudan. Starvation grows alongside the profits reaped by weapons manufacturers in the U.S., China, the U.A.E., Iran, Ukraine, and Russia, just to name a few happy to make a buck off of massacres.

In the U.S., xenophobic violence continues to erupt in every locale as ICE attempts to will into existence the white supremacist wet-dream that is an “America”, built from the jump in the ideology of colonization and chattel slavery, taken to its logical conclusion. Where there are police (badged or otherwise) there continues to be the brutality of policing. Where there are prisons there are daily nightmares of imprisonment.

The flood waters rise and those tethered to the ground gasp for air as the mud rushes in.

Amidst the carnage that is the inherent logic of a world built on the horror of racial capitalism, many seem to be opening their eyes for the first time, struggling to make sense of the whirlwind of atrocities enacted, daily, before the clock even strikes noon. In a desperate flailing to grab onto any solid ground that may preserve the illusion of an America sans this myriad of unfathomable violence, I have seen many latch onto a series of discrete phenomena to explain where it all went wrong. They focus on the masks worn by the modern day gestapo, on decorum, on legal process, on “rights”. The present violence of mass deportations, of police brutality, of genocidal violence is stripped any historical context, exceptionalized as some aberrant force spontaneously erupting out of an otherwise “peaceful” status quo.

Self-described radicals even get in on the act, emphasizing these violences as exceptional in an attempt to court a liberal audience towards their moderately less liberal projects without risking too antagonistic a critique of the weapons they wish to one-day wield. They decry immigrant detention centers while ignoring the prisons in their downtowns. They call for pushing ICE out of the courthouses but make way for the judges and prosecutors sending their neighbors to fates equally as grim.

Even at the genocidal scale, exceptionalization creeps in to defend the nation state from the horrific demonstrations of its logical conclusions. Israel must be unique lest we be forced to contend with the violence inherent to every vestige of state power, lest we be forced to acknowledge the enemy is everywhere and the solution to genocide is not so simple as choosing a “righteous” state to align ourselves with.

I say this, not to take away from the necessity for resistance to ICE or to Israel’s genocide of the Palestinian people, but to push them further. I say this to demand the expansion of specific resistive antagonisms against discrete iterations of state violence into generalized antagonism against every death machine that is produced by, and in turn reproduces, the horror that is a world of racial capitalism.

In order for that antagonism to generalize, we must be able to recognize the ways in which this world has always been hell for so many. If you hear distant waves crashing on the shore,

someone has long been drowning. If you smell smoke, someone has been burning alive. The hell of this moment is a path of scorched earth that many (possibly you included) have long been forced to endure, well before the flames reached the horizon of the broader societal purview.

The present is unbearable, but so too was every present prior. Exceptionalization of discrete manifestations of systemic violence cannot bring about that violence's end, it can only serve to entrench and normalize all violence deemed less exceptional. In order to make this point clear, I want to focus on a few examples of present exceptionalization and then end with a reutterance of my belief that it either it all goes or it all stays the same. Either we recognize this system of racial capitalism (and the states which serve/are served by it) as a totality, or we will continue to live half-lives within a leviathan that can only make death. I hope you find some use in the words that follow.

The Exceptionalization of ICE and Ceding Ground to Policing

Ever since Trump began his second run for the presidency, he has riled up his base with xenophobic and racist promises of mass deportations. Since taking office, his administration has sought to make good on those promises. Every day brings new footage of raids in parking lots of hardware stores, courthouses, neighborhoods. The most spectacular of these raids have been occurring in major cities with prominent Latinx communities, most notably Los Angeles, but they are now endemic to any locale with a population vulnerable in the context of "legally" being in this country.

The raids are often horrific. Children are ripped from the arms of screaming parents and care givers. Heavily armed men in masks kidnap people just going about their day, throwing them into unmarked cars, taking them to concentration camps, and seeking to deport them wherever as fast as possible. This violence *is* horrific, but it *is not* exceptional and it does not arise out of thin air. It is painfully banal to the operation of this world. This is what policing the border has always meant, at least for those being policed. Hell, this is what *policing*, itself, has always been to those caught within its field of view.

While often coming from a place of genuine concern, the effort to evoke a reaction by exceptionalizing present, spectacular, violence of ICE can only serve to entrench the violence of borders and police more broadly. By fixating on the masks worn by agents seeking to hide their identities, one inherently cedes rhetorical (and ethical) ground towards the agents who show their face. By fixating on "due process" one inherently justifies the deportation of all those who have been granted the great privilege of being dehumanized by the sociopaths wearing robes and banging gavels.

The problem is not with the masks, it is not with a lack of "due process", the problem is that people are being targeted as legitimate prey by machines that want only their annihilation. If their kidnappers showed their faces, if every deportee was paraded in front of a judge before being shipped away, the violence they face would still be an incomprehensible brutality that I cannot live with. This isn't even hypothetical. The millions of people deported under the Obama administration were subjected to this same system of violence, just in less spectacular fashion. The present escalation of scale and spectacle amounts to a gaining of ground for the machine of border policing. Even if, at some point, the scale of this violence is rolled back slightly (which will surely be touted as a victory for the activists and liberal politicians), the ground gained in

this moment will ensure that any rolling back maintains the steady march forward for the death machine of border enforcement. That is, if we remain unable to articulate a position against the death machine in totality.

Similar to the fixation on discrete escalations, the hyper fixation on the “good” immigrants being targeted, implicitly cedes that there are people who are, in fact, legitimate prey for these machines. When you speak only towards defending those without criminal records, who have never been a part of a gang, who have never been “violent”, you create a categorization of people for whom an imposition of this suffering (that of concentration camps, torture, humiliation, deportation) is justified. This categorization can only every expand once it has been set, an expansion aided by those who believe themselves to be “on the right side of history”.

Not only does the exceptionalization of present ICE violence reify the violence of border policing writ large, it also deepens the entrenchment of the violence of all policing and imprisonment. Every arrest is an immediately violent act and a promise of violence in the future. There is the obvious violence of police brutality that has become mundane in a daily life of genocidal images on screens. Police crack necks with their knees, fill bodies full of holes with their bullets, break limbs and ribs and connective tissue as they pin and subdue their targets. People are turned into meat beneath the weight of law enforcement. This is a phenomenon that has existed as long as there have been police. None of this is new, none of this is exceptional.

Even the arrests that occur “without incident” carry an inherent violence that is difficult to explain to someone who has not experienced it. There is an inherent humiliation, subjugation, to being bound, thrown into the back of a car, brought against your will to a cage. You become an object to be disposed of, you realize you may always have been.

Imprisonment has always been violent. You are kept from those you love, from those who love you. You are tortured with inedible food, solitary confinement, threats of beatings, actual beatings. Again, none of this is new, none of this is a recent escalation (beyond the expansion of who is considered legitimate prey for these systems). Prisons are, and always have been, concentration camps. Understanding points of escalation is necessary in order to find ways to undermine the death machines of imprisonment. However, speaking towards the concentration camps built to house undocumented migrants as though they are wholly removed from the prisons built to house the non-migrant “criminal” can only serve to simultaneously legitimize those non-migrant concentration camps and hinder our ability to undermine the systems of imprisonment writ large.

For those of us who desire an end to the world of police and prisons, it is vital that we are able to analyze the alterations and escalations within those systems without exceptionalizing discrete phenomena. All exceptionalization can ever lead to is the normalization of all that is deemed non-exceptional, a category that will grow to include ever more incomprehensible brutality as those in power grow bolder in their desire to punish and more desperate in their need to project control.

The Exceptionalization of Trump

I will attempt to keep this section as concise as possible, given any discussion of Trump runs the risk of becoming a game of whack-a-mole in trying to make sense of the hundred absurd statements made or actions taken each day. My focus here will be on how the exceptionalization of Trump as some unique phenomenon, rather than a single manifestation of a myriad of decades

long projects that span multiple continents, exposes the vulnerability of a liberal populace who believe themselves to be facing a localized aberration of their country's "true" nature.

Trump is not some fluke, some aberrant force that has wandered aimlessly into power. Trump is simply the current, American, face of a collection of movements (Christian nationalism, techno-feudalism, white nationalism, etc.) that have been building in many countries for the last fifty years. And while Trump has served those movements well (and continues to serve them well) he is not the movement, and they will continue without him. Italy has Giorgia Meloni, Germany has the AfD, the UK has Nigel Farage, to name only a few faces of right-wing, white nationalist movements perfectly capable of carrying the torch of bringing racial capitalism to its logical conclusion of neo-fascism and genocide.

I see many, from liberals to radicals, seeming to hold their breath and wait for the Trump administration to pass. Leaving aside the possibility (likelihood?) of this administration refusing to even allow another election, the movements who have given rise to Trump will not cease even if his administration exits the executive branch of governmental power. These movements have already gained far too much ground culturally, socially, politically. Any time these movements find themselves without explicit governmental control, they will continue to build social control. They will pour billions of dollars into further entrenching the ideologies of anti-Blackness, xenophobia, cisheterosexism, colonization, etc. into every cultural space they can while they wait for a new figure head to lead them back to governmental power.

Not only will the movements Trump represents continue well beyond his exit as their figure head, the window of mainstream politics has lurched so far rightward that even the politicians of the so-called "resistance" mostly range from collaborators to outright participants in these movements. For fuck's sake, the Biden administration are explicit collaborators in one of the most visible genocides in recent history. The democrats shift ever rightward in an effort to court some non-existent "moderate" voter, furthering the expansion of legitimate prey to the death machines they yearn to regain control of. As I write this, Gavin Newsome continues to build his own cult of personality much to the delight of liberals desperate for a more agreeable boot to lick. Pay no mind towards his policy of brutality against California's homeless and incarcerated. Surely his possible ascendancy to the presidency wouldn't be another example of the steady rightward march of American governmental politic.

There also exists this bizarre lost-cause rhetoric around a republican party that was once noble but has now "lost its way" that I've seen make its way into much of the mainstream liberal discourse as though Reagan and Bush were not part of the very movements those same liberals now decry. This rewriting of history can only serve to entrench the actual politics of those individuals as acceptable and even desirable to the liberals espousing such rhetoric. If anyone in this moment mentions Reagan with any hint of fondness, please remind them of his genocidal position towards the faggots and junkies by introducing a used needle to their eye socket. If anyone mentions Bush in a similar light, consider beating them to death with a shoe.

Exceptionalizing Trump as some aberrant force, rather than the logical conclusion of a colonial state flailing to maintain power in the slow death march of racial capitalism can only blind us to the mechanisms that actually produce and reproduce the hell world around us. Everything Trump represents has always been present in some form and will not end with his administration. There is no "normalcy" worth returning to, unless by "normalcy" you mean your willingness to ignore the incomprehensible suffering of those around you when it didn't affect you personally.

If we really wish to live differently, if we wish to combat the broader movements Trump represents, we must be able to understand their inherent relationship with racial capitalism writ large and work to undermine that system entire. Exceptionalization can only ever obfuscate, hide the totality behind a discrete manifestation.

The Exceptionalization of Israel

For the last two years I have spent every introduction of any essay I work on highlighting the brutality of Israel's genocide (both it's current and historical manifestations) against the Palestinian people. I have urged myself and all those around me to continue to fight against the systems and individuals that allow such violence to exist with an immediacy that can only be held within the context of building resistance as daily life. I say this explicitly to make it abundantly clear that this section is not meant to undermine the fight against this specific genocide, but rather push for the analysis necessary to combat the violence of genocide writ large.

Over the last two years, I have seen a number of radicals speak to the violence of Israel's genocide as though it is some unique phenomenon without any historical (let alone concurrent) comparison. Israel is positioned as some unique evil, as some *illegitimate* state standing in contrast to all the supposed *legitimate* states. I understand the urge to reach for this language. The incomprehensible images we have all had seared into our brains of people burning alive, of bomb after bomb being dropped on schools and hospitals and markets demand some way of making sense of how such violence could be enacted so wantonly. An Exceptional Evil becomes the most easily digestible explanation for this unfathomable violence. Unfortunately, this is a woefully inadequate explanation for how genocide (both this particular manifestation and the phenomenon broadly) comes about.

Genocide is not an aberrant force of a world otherwise bending towards metaphysical justice. Genocide is the language of a world built on racial capitalism. Genocide is the banal necessity of state-craft.

While we could point to the historical record for literal pages of examples of states committing acts of genocide no less brutal than what Israel is currently committing against Palestinians (the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, the Cambodian Genocide, the hundreds of genocides of indigenous people colonized by European powers to name a miniscule fraction to capture the scale of this violence) we don't even need to look to the past. There are multiple, existent, present genocides of the same scale and horror as what is being waged against the Palestinians. If Israel's genocidal violence were truly evidence of some uniquely evil character of that specific state, how then do you explain the genocidal violence actively being waged in Sudan, in Tigray? I could sit here and list numbers of the murdered, missing, injured, traumatized to demonstrate the comparability of scales, but honestly, numbers of this magnitude are so large they become meaningless.

When we exceptionalize Israel as uniquely positioned to commit acts of genocide through some argument about the legitimacy of one state over another, we inherently obfuscate the violence inherent to all state craft. We obfuscate (and in many ways offer apologia for) the genocidal violence waged historically and concurrently by all those wielding state power who aren't caught in the net of that exceptionalization. Simultaneously, we obfuscate the action necessary to meaningfully fight back against a world of genocide in its entirety.

We sell a myth that if only we align ourselves with the righteous wielders of state power (or become such wielders ourselves) then the genocides will end. We distance ourselves from our participation in the production and reproduction of genocidal violence, making room for the cognitive dissonance necessary to believe the daily lives we lead are somehow unrelated to exploitation and murder of all those targeted under racial capitalism the world over.

Genocide has always been about power and who holds it. In modern history, it has been part and parcel with state power. Fundamentally, there is no meaningful way to end this world of genocide that does not completely dismantle the death machines that make such violence possible. There is no way to end a world of genocide that does not attack the very concept of the state. The exceptionalization of Israel obfuscates this fact.

While I genuinely believe that most people who exceptionalize Israel's violence do so from a place of good faith, being truly shocked and horrified by the actions beamed into their social media feeds every morning and scrambling for answers, I hold a particular disgust for those who knowingly, and cynically, exceptionalize the violence of Israel while aligning themselves with states actively participating in genocides elsewhere. For example, I ask those who proclaim the state of Iran to be a bastion of resistance and liberation what liberatory aims Iran sought when selling arms to the genocidaires in Sudan? Or does their nominal objection to the genocide of Palestinians mean that they get a pass for participating in the genocide of peoples with whom you feel less affinity? Do you actually desire an end to the machines that make genocide inevitable, or do you hope to one day wield such machines?

The exceptionalization of present genocidal state violence, the separation of *legitimate* states from *illegitimate* ones can only ever serve to obfuscate genocidal violence writ large to the point of bordering on apologia. It sells the lie that if we were only to end particular states in particular moments that "justice" may reign. It obfuscates what we must undermine, what we must destroy if we really wish to live in a world beyond this one of death and only death. It ensures that genocide remains a permanent fixture, ever present, and ever on this horizon.

It All Goes, or it All Stays the Same

In the end, exceptionalization takes all of the horror that is daily life under racial capitalism and forces it into the mold of a singular boogeyman. While you assure yourself that you stand against this singular boogeyman, just outside your purview incredibly normal people, wielding the power of incredibly unexceptional states, commit incomprehensibly horrific and banal violence against people inexplicably similar to you. This boogeyman may help you sleep at night, make the task at hand seem more manageable (or at least more comprehensible) but it is and always has been a myth.

The violence of ICE is the violence that has always been inherent to policing and prison. The neo-fascist thrust of Trump's administration has been decades in the making, and isn't going anywhere any time soon (even after the current figurehead bites the dust). The genocidal violence of the Israeli state is horrifyingly banal in the project of state craft. These are horrifying times, filled with horrifying violence, but it is not exceptional and exceptionalization will not help us fight back if we really mean to end the horror.

I recognize I've become a cliché at this point, but I will repeat anyway that either it all goes or it all stays the same. Either we recognize the death machines we live within as a totality to

act against or we will forever be doomed to mistake discrete manifestations of their violence as unique enemies. If we cannot understand the totality as our enemy we will inevitably and continuously participate in the reproduction of violences we claim to want to end.

We must push ourselves to name, explicitly, the machines we are fighting and why we are fighting them. You must learn to speak for yourself, speak towards what you actually want of this world and help others to do the same. I refuse to accept anything less than the end of this world entire. I refuse to accept that some manifestations of genocidal violence are exceptional against a pastoral backdrop of equally horrific brutality. I refuse police, and prisons, and borders, and politicians, and every vestige of the death machines that have already taken so much more from me than I ever had to give.

Exceptionalization cedes normalization.

Normalization cedes reification.

Reification cedes the assumed permanence of this world of death and only death.

I refuse this world entire.

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