

# **Necrocapitalism and U.S. Imperialism: The Gulf War, Hurricane Katrina, Palestine, Gentrification, and Police Violence**

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**ABSTRACT.** U.S. American law has been responsible for slavery and genocide through the use of imperial forces such as the military and policing since the beginning of the formation of this nation. In this essay, I present contemporary forms of State sanctioned violence that have ultimately increased the United States' economy through rendering particular communities as disposable. I use examples of war, removal, occupation, and murder perpetrated by American law in order to disrupt the notion that law guarantees security. Furthermore; I build from Foucault's theories of biopolitics and apply a more modern framework of necrocapitalism to further contextualize and problematize concurrent, violent injustices being executed through the weaponization of American law.

The necessity of law in the U.S. is something so fundamentally ingrained into social consciousness that its cultural function and utility may go unquestioned. Standardized education conditions students in the U.S. to believe that the current system of democracy and equal justice is carefully formulated and fully matured. Unfortunately, the U.S. frequently engages in undemocratic practices, as well as violent ones. In this essay, I engage with theories of biopolitics first developed by Michel Foucault and explore the potential of "necrocapitalism" as a means of reframing key episodes from recent U.S. history. Foucault's concept of biopolitics calls attention to the numerous, disparate ways in which regimes of authority value, devalue, commodify, or eradicate human life. In building on Foucault

and thinking with the concept of necrocapitalism, I aim to highlight the particularities of violence, displacement, enslavement, and imperialism that shape how biopolitics is practiced in the U.S. Throughout my discussion, I draw on recent episodes from U.S. history to put forth an argument about how the concept of “necropolitics” can be a generative way of thinking critically about law and its mechanisms. In this essay, I hope to amplify the voices of the authors and pieces I interrelate to demonstrate how the Gulf War, Hurricane Katrina, the illegal occupation of Palestine, displacement through Gentrification in the U.S., and Police Violence have been used intentionally to sustain and contribute to the embodiment of racism and classism that materializes into modern necrocapitalism.

### **The Misconception of Law as Security**

According to Nunn (2013), law professor Robert Gordon describes law as “one of the many systems of meaning that people construct in order to deal with one of the most threatening aspects of social existence: the danger posed by other people” (p. 558). After explaining this phenomenon of why law is created, Nunn (2013) then points out that it is actually the State that may kill and enslave us (Nunn, 2013). Therefore, a fear of law might be, or even should be, more justified than a fear of each other. Law is a system to determine what is rewarded, and what is punished by famine, death, captivity, or even genocide (Nunn, 2013, p. 558). Cultural critic Henry Giroux (2016) applies the framework to the horrific aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to expand of Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. The devastating events that followed Hurricane Katrina serve as impeccable examples of how biopolitics in the modern United States is executed. Days after Katrina had nearly annihilated the Gulf Coast, the aftermath was revealed:

hundreds of thousands of poor people – mostly black, some Latinos, many elderly, and a few white people – packed into the New Orleans Superdome and the city’s convention

center, stranded on rooftops, or isolated on patches of dry highway without any food, water, or any place to wash, urinate, or find relief from the scorching sun. (Giroux, 7-8)

There was either a clear lack of urgency to protect the lives and dignity of millions of people under the Bush administration or existing law and policy allowed for an urgency to be practiced in uneven, undemocratic ways.

According to Giroux (2016), news broadcasters depicted videos and images of “dead people, mostly poor African-Americans, left uncollected in the streets, on porches, and in hospitals, nursing homes, electric wheelchairs, and collapsed houses, prompted some people to claim that America had become like a ‘Third World Country’” (p.8) after the initial storm of Katrina. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) forbid “journalists to accompany rescue boats as they went out to search for storm victims” (Giroux, 2016, p. 9). As an elementary school student, I remember learning that Katrina was a natural disaster. Our classrooms raised money for the helpless victims of the catastrophe, with no concrete information about how the country was repairing the damages. Giroux (2016) applies Foucault’s theory of biopolitics that exemplifies “the death-function in the economy” where biopolitics is justified primarily through a form of racism in which biopower “is bound up with the workings of a State that is obliged to use race, the elimination of races and the purification of the race, to exercise its sovereign power” (p. 14). The primary bodies and lives that Katrina devastated and trapped were seemingly disposable under the Bush administration, despite the pervasive adherence to ideas of democracy and rule by law within U.S. society.

Fifteen years prior to Katrina, President George H. W. Bush administered the war in Iraq. In 1991, the Gulf War was executed in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait (“Gulf War Fast Facts,” 2018). The U.S. Department of Defense has estimated the incremental costs of the Gulf War at \$61 billion (Daggett, 2010). During this time, unpleasant images of the war were censored or white washed (Giroux, 2016, p. 4). In

fact, “instead of providing images of the real consequences of war, the Bush administration and the dominant media present[ed] images of the Gulf War that offer[ed] viewers a visual celebration of high-tech weaponry” (Giroux, 2016, p. 4). This blatant censorship and redirection of public attention is difficult to align with U.S. ideals. Thousands of people were slaughtered, billions of dollars were spent, but public understandings of the military campaign were contradictory and confused. The U.S.’s obsession with exhibiting unmatched military technology rather than the tragedies of the war demonstrated unconcern with not only the lives of people in the Middle East, but also with the lives of Americans on the frontline.

Nunn (2013) alludes to the ways in which laws are supposedly enforced to keep people safe. Laws are advertised to the people as the State’s mechanisms of protection and security. However, as Nunn (2013) indicates, protection is only afforded to a specific demographic of the most privileged people in society. Ultimately, the government is run by an elite group of people that does not represent the diversity of racial or class status that represents the U.S. This lack of representation manifests as the acceptance of the Katrina-affected poor people of color and people in the Middle East dying due to the U.S. government’s unwillingness to respect their humanity. The resources, funding, and volunteers were available to assist people devastated by Katrina, but the Bush administration preferred to let people perish in horrifyingly undignified ways. This failure to act during a time of duress parallels how the law and the State directly sanctioned a meaningless war that resulted in hundreds of deaths that were not at all broadcasted to the public. Keeping the realities of these injustices out of the media is yet another mechanism that enables necrocapitalism to persist.

## Colonization, Palestine, and Imperialism

English professor Steven Salaita was offered a position at the University of Illinois in 2013, but the offer was withdrawn in 2014 due to a series of remarks he made on Twitter condemning Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine (Mackey, 2013). In Salaita's (2016) work, "How Palestine Became Important to American Indian Studies," he discloses how "American Indian studies has recently forged connections with Palestine at an institutional level – that is, scholars in the field are now producing systematic analyses of Palestine as a geography of interest to our understanding of decolonization in North America" (Salaita, 2016, p. 2). The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS) emphasizes how Palestinian dispossession must be recognized as part of a "framework of world-wide neoliberal practices, rather than merely as a consequence of communal strife or historical misfortune" (Salaita, 2016, p. 5). Much like the war in the Middle East and Katrina, it is crucial that the occupation of Palestine is to be understood as a political and economic issue that arises from the U.S.'s system of biopolitics enacted domestically and abroad. Tremendous parallels have been articulated between the colonization of the Americas and the current situation in Palestine (Salaita, 2016). Salaita (2016) argues that the U.S. actually functions through plutocratic governance that "invariably dispossesses Indigenous peoples and further impoverishes them through resource appropriation, military occupation, environmental destruction, and sponsorship of neocolonial corruption" (p. 9).

As part of his arguments, Salaita shows that social, economic, and ideological incentives exist to encourage U.S. citizens to move into Jewish settlements (Salaita, 2016, p. 11). These incentives are a prime example of the dangers of Western law Nunn (2013) presents in his essay "Law as a Eurocentric Enterprise." In the U.S., Nunn (2013) argues, it is taken for granted how often our politicians and courts practice "self-congratulatory references to the majesty of the

law, the continual praise of European thinkers, the unconscious reliance on European traditions, values, and ways of thinking all become unremarkable and expected” (Nunn, 2013, p. 560). Americans are socialized from a young age to believe that their country’s laws have been carefully refined over centuries. What is sometimes forgotten is that:

law was used at each step in the conquest and enslavement of African and other native peoples...whenever the European American majority in the United States desires to ostracize, control, or mistreat a group of people perceived as different, it passes a law—an immigration law, a zoning law, or a criminal law. (Nunn, 2013, p. 558)

U.S. citizens need to critically access their laws in a historical context and understand that, while they are continuously told they live in a democracy, citizens and noncitizens are afforded limited political agency to challenge the established legal systems.

Under American law, rigidly set boundaries exist for what is deemed acceptable as political resistance (Nunn, 2013, p. 559). According to Nunn (2013), “Black resistance can go but so far; it cannot infringe on the law of white Eurocentric societies” (p. 559). Western thought is positioned in a framework of dichotomous reasoning, separating self from objects, and then asserting dominance over anything that is not the self. Through this understanding of legitimacy, hierarchies are created to categorize the “superior” and “inferior.” This conceptualization is an extremely harmful. Nunn (2013) emphasizes how this method of forming conclusions has been persistent in upholding racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and more. He juxtaposes this Eurocentric ideal of reasoning with Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity allows for a more holistic understanding of reason and existence. Rather than valuing only what is deemed objective and solidified according to Western empiricism, an Afrocentric worldview includes subjectivity, emotion, and an array of possibilities. It is extremely unfortunate that law school is:

[not only] one of the most conservative educational experiences possible; it is also one of the most racist. Additionally, black law students are forced to reason in the doctrinal and analytical way that Eurocentricity prefers. They are taught to think in narrow, rule-bound terms and to write in the detached, sparse, technical style that lawyers favor." (Nunn, 2013, p. 560)

American law is becoming increasingly untouchable as law school becomes even more unattainable due to the expanding unequal distribution of wealth and poverty. Even if completing law school is possible for an underrepresented person, they are still subject to traditional Western ways of thinking rooted in bigotry and empiricism.

The traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples around the globe is another alternative worldview. In the collaborative book, *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future*, Priscilla Settee (2008) demonstrates how "Indigenous Knowledge represents the accumulated experience, wisdom and know-how unique to cultures, societies and/or communities of people, living in an intimate relationship of balance and harmony with their local environments" (Settee, 2008, p. 45). She condemns the ways in which neocolonial greed legalizes genocide and biopiracy (Settee, 2008, p. 43). She and many other Indigenous authors expose Western science as irresponsible and unethical. As I presented at the beginning of this essay, the Bush administration glorified military technology as a strategy to redirect the attention away from the war. But, this technology is rooted in a culture that needs to be condemned for its violent and domineering characteristics.

### **Death as Profit: From Palestine to Police Violence**

I will now help to further develop the concept of necrocapitalism to expand upon how the U.S. requires physical and social death to sustain the current systems of government. In Achille Mbembé's (2017) work

“Necropolitics,” he identifies the current occupation of Palestine as the most accomplished contemporary form of necropower (p. 27). He stresses that:

military manpower is bought and sold on a market in which the identity of suppliers and purchasers means almost nothing. Urban militias, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security firms, and state armies all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill. (Mbembé, 2017, p. 32)

He argues that biopower is an economy (Mbembé, 2017). Mbembé (2017) claims that the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death (p. 17). The state creates an acceptability of certain deaths, even in the masses, further illuminating my argument throughout this essay that law, specifically enforced by the U.S., currently and historically holds the power to determine which deaths are legitimate and which deaths are crimes. Some fatalities under Western law are considered massacres, while others are simply bureaucratic decisions.

While I agree with Mbembé that Palestine is a nearly perfect example of the U.S.’s’ monopoly on biopower, I want to expand this idea to American prisons and police violence that disproportionately persecute people of color, specifically Black, brown, and Native peoples. Kwame Holmes’s (n.d.) “Necrocapitalism” details the deliberateness of police brutality against Black people in the United States. Holmes (n.d.) argues that “police have been empowered to treat poverty with deadly force” and that this is evident in the deaths of Oscar Grant, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling who were murdered by police in the same low-income neighborhoods (Holmes, n.d.). Holmes also emphasizes how gentrification and the emergence of suburbs are posing a new threat to Black folks in regard to police violence. In the year following Philando Castile’s death at the hands of a police officer in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, the price of homes in that area increased by 13% (Holmes, n.d.). Holmes states that Castile’s murder sent “potential homeowners in Falcon Heights a clear message: the state, via the police, will

protect the long-term value of your home against the stain of Blackness” (Holmes, n.d.). This chilling statistic and interpretation demonstrates how the middle class directly benefits from racist, killer cops.

In Holmes’s (n.d.) other project, “Not in the Family Way: Urban ‘Life Cycles’ and the Culture of Black Displacement,” he demonstrates the criminalization of Black folks whose neighborhoods are invaded by whites attracted to developing infrastructure or the revitalization of “deteriorating neighborhoods” (p. 6). In this work, Holmes (n.d.) specifically focuses on Washington D.C.’s staggering loss of “94,703 or 25% of its Black population to emigration, incarceration or death” since the 1950s (p. 1). The cost of living in D.C. has skyrocketed and the economic developments have completely failed to reach the Black working class in these areas (Holmes, n.d., p. 1). A specific project on U street has especially harmed and displaced Black folks who traditionally occupied this area. While the project on U street was to exemplify the area’s rich history, especially in the Civil Rights movement, it ultimately resulted in this region fluctuating from 71% Black to 65.4% white between 1990 and 2010 (Holmes, n.d., p. 3). This displacement is exactly how the U.S. economy profits. Even a well-intentioned project acted as modern colonialism over its supporters, many of whom were non-profits and Black organizations that sought to empower Black folks and their history.

When people are displaced, their options become very limited. Poverty makes people much more vulnerable to incarceration. The hyper-surveillance of the poor is one of the mechanisms that allows the prison industrial complex to exist and flourish. Angela Davis (2003) shines light on how “prison building and operation began to attract vast amount of capital from the construction industry to food and health care provision” (p. 12). Hundreds of corporations rely on prison labor for profit. Over the last few decades, the risk of being imprisoned in the United States has skyrocketed, especially for poor people and people of color. Gentrification

makes it easier for people to become displaced; therefore, displaced are more susceptible to arrest.

Geographer Ruth Gilmore, as cited in Davis's (2003) *Are Prisons Obsolete*, declares prisons as "[the] geographical solution to socio-economic problems" (Davis, 2003, p. 14). Gilmore, also cited in Holmes (n.d.), states that:

rather than pursue universal basic income or full employment, California built prisons; and expanded the punitive power of the criminal justice system in order to fill them. The militarization of municipal police departments—so powerfully on display during the Ferguson and Baltimore uprisings—has strengthened the bottom line of private defense contractors at the expense of black suffering. (Holmes, n.d.)

From the Gulf War to Katrina, to Palestine and prisons, death has been hidden, mandated, and economically advantageous by and for American imperialism. American law has proven to work solely within a rigid framework of Western objectivity and binary ways of thinking. Other world views, such as Afrocentricity and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, have been erased and devalued in our cultural practices that ultimately produce policy and justice. The ugly truths of the U.S. government must be exposed and disrupted. The history and existence of the laws must be challenged. And at this point, effective social and political reform will largely need to be acts of resistance that are currently forbidden in the precious State.

## **Conclusion**

Necrocapitalism is a useful framework to apply to U.S. imperialism's modern displays of injustice sanctioned. By critically analyzing the ways in which the systematic displacement and disposal of certain lives and bodies economically benefits American capitalism, we can hold such systems accountable for their massively disturbing and destructive practices. We need to recognize the ways in

which outdated philosophies and ideologies influence our government to organize state institutions that are opposed to the well-being and livelihood of millions of people. The way we define and attempt to solve “crime” through prisons and excessive policing is completely irresponsible and extremely racist. But, these responses are immensely profitable for the labor markets that lie as the foundation of American capitalism. Requiring people to commit their lives to producing cheap labor by law has served as the backbone for the financial success of American capitalism since chattel slavery. Furthermore, gentrification and infrastructure marketed as “progressive developments” further disenfranchise low-income communities, making people more susceptible to homelessness, food insecurity, and police brutality. Rather than investing in affordable housing and healthy community building, people are being displaced from their homes and neighborhoods that are becoming exceedingly expensive and unlivable. The framework of necrocapitalism can demonstrate through empirical data and research how much money is spent to fund imperialist projects, such as wars like the Gulf War and occupations like that of Palestine. I hope this essay has exposed readers to how modern practices of violence are authorized by the law and State that have been contingent on the U.S.’s reliance on racism to justify these displays of brutality. I hope that necrocapitalism has been explained clearly so that you, as the readers, can apply this framework to different instances of injustices that you experience or witness in your own life. We need to hold U.S. imperialism accountable for the ways in which it thrives upon the disposal of certain bodies and lives, and continue to critically think about the material implications law and policy has on people’s lives and freedom.

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