

Gangster Capitalism: Corruption in Trump's America

The rise of gangster capitalism, authoritarian corruption, and the political culture that normalizes greed, cruelty, and unchecked power.

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This is the power of critical thought, mass resistance, and militant hope.

Tradition is not the worship of ashes. It is the preservation of fire.—Gustav Mahler

Corruption as Authoritarian Spectacle

Corruption has never been far from the center of American politics. Some of the most notorious scandals stretch from the [cronyism](#) of [Warren G. Harding](#) to the [abuses of power exposed during the Watergate scandal under Richard Nixon](#). [Yet many historians](#) argue that what distinguishes Donald Trump from earlier corrupt presidencies is that corruption no longer operates behind closed doors, shielded by the liberal rituals of institutional legitimacy and the euphemisms of political

decorum. [Under Trump, corruption is performed openly as spectacle, celebrated as a sign of strength, wealth, vengeance, and personal loyalty.](#)

Trump's ever-expanding regime of corruption is no longer simply hidden financial misconduct but a public display of sociopathic avarice designed to normalize greed, lawlessness, unconstrained power, and the collapse of civic accountability. It reflects a politics of moral nihilism in which [fascism](#) no longer appears as a distant threat, [but as the future already taking shape.](#)

As a badge of honor, Trump embraces corruption not simply as a mode of governance, but as a spectacle designed to legitimate greed, cruelty, and unchecked power. It functions as what [Dominic Wetzel has called the “pornification of the American dream,”](#) a culture in which excess, lawlessness, and predation are celebrated as signs of success and strength. In Trump's America, corruption metastasizes into a theater of cruelty and violence, saturating political life with the values of fear, spectacle, and disposability. It feeds a broader architecture of domination rooted in toxic hierarchies of race, class, [misogyny](#), and white Christian [nationalism](#), while turning lawlessness and untethered aggression into forms of political entertainment.

Corruption, in this sense, is more than a symptom of institutional decay, moral depravity, or political vulgarity. It becomes one of the central pedagogical and political mechanisms through which fascist politics takes hold, eroding democratic values while legitimating a culture organized around brutality, humiliation, and civic abandonment. In this formulation, corruption functions as a kind of fascist staging ground, creating the conditions that nourish what [Jonathan Crary calls in *Scorched Earth*](#) an “implacable engine of addiction, loneliness, false hopes, cruelty, psychosis, indebtedness, squandered life, the corrosion of memory, and social disintegration.”

The Criminalization of Governance

What defines the Trump regime, then, is not merely corruption in the conventional sense of bribery or financial misconduct. Rather, it is the systemic fusion of [authoritarian](#) power, organized greed, spectacle, state-sponsored cruelty, and impunity, a fusion that transforms corruption into a governing principle and a cultural ideal. [The display of greed and the ensuing scandals are staggering in scope: the use of Trump hotels and resorts as political cash machines](#) for lobbyists, foreign governments, and Republican operatives seeking influence; [the funneling of taxpayer money into Trump-owned properties through Secret Service and](#)

[government expenditures](#); the [diversion of inauguration funds into private enrichment schemes](#); [the use of cryptocurrency ventures](#) and opaque political action committees as modern slush funds; [the acceptance of lavish gifts, luxury travel, and aircraft linked to billionaire benefactors and foreign interests](#); and the open monetization of political access itself.

Added to this are [Jared Kushner's multibillion-dollar Saudi investment connections](#) following his White House role, [Ivanka Trump's trademark deals and business expansions](#) during the administration, and the nepotistic appointment of family members to positions of immense political influence. What emerges is a scale of self-dealing and lawlessness [unprecedented in modern American politics](#). But these scandals are not isolated abuses of office. They point to a deeper transformation in which corruption becomes institutionalized as a governing logic, a mode of public pedagogy, and a defining feature of authoritarian power.

Trump's corruption reaches beyond the traditional language of political scandal and increasingly resembles the operational logic of a criminal enterprise. The proposed [\\$1.786 billion slush fund](#), tied to settlements for insurrectionists, corrupt opportunists, and other Trump allies, signals more than financial gangsterism; it reveals a governing structure in which enormous pools of money function as instruments of loyalty, reward, intimidation, and political protection. [Walter Olson](#) quoting Nick Catoggio is right in stating that "It's simple theft packaged in the argle-bargle of "weaponization" and "compensation." ... The president behaves with impunity because he believes most of his party will unthinkingly defend anything he does, and he's correct."

Taken together, these actions reveal a regime that increasingly resembles a criminal enterprise. Such practices build upon [Trump's decision to pardon more than 1,600 individuals convicted in connection with the January 6 attack on the Capitol](#), including participants involved in violent assaults on police officers defending the democratic process. The pardons transformed political violence into a badge of allegiance, signaling that acts committed in defense of the leader would not only be excused but sanctified as patriotic service.

At the same time, Trump has repeatedly used the pardon power to shield political allies, wealthy donors, and figures associated with spectacular forms of criminality. [Among the most notorious was the pardon of Ross Ulbricht](#), associated with one of the largest online drug trafficking operations in American history. Added to this were pardons and commutations granted to numerous allies and supporters convicted of fraud, corruption, and financial crimes. For example the pardon of

Philip Esformes, who was convicted in one of the largest [Medicare](#) fraud schemes in U.S. history involving roughly \$1.3 billion in fraudulent claims. Esformes became emblematic of a politics in which white-collar criminality is treated not as a threat to the public good but as negotiable currency within a system of transactional loyalty.

As journalist [David D. Kirkpatrick reported in *The New Yorker* the Trump family has pocketed roughly \\$4 billion](#) through a vast network of business dealings, political branding operations, cryptocurrency ventures, and influence-based transactions linked directly or indirectly to Trump's political power. What emerges from these revelations is not merely a pattern of isolated ethical violations but the consolidation of a political culture in which corruption becomes normalized as both spectacle and governance. Wealth extraction, patronage, legal immunity, and political violence converge into a single authoritarian machinery fueled by fear, manufactured grievance, and ritualized loyalty to the leader.

Corruption, Fascist Culture, and the Death of Civic Conscience

If one face of fascist politics appears in the transformation of the state into an instrument of domestic terrorism, the other emerges in the fusion of political power and systemic corruption. Here, gangster [capitalism](#) reveals itself in its most predatory form as public institutions are hollowed out to enrich ruling elites, reward loyalists, punish dissenters, and normalize lawlessness as a mode of governance. Yet corruption under fascist politics does not operate only through institutions and economic arrangements; it also works through culture, emotion, spectacle, and the shaping of everyday consciousness.

In this sense, corruption cannot be reduced to isolated scandals or individual acts of criminality. It becomes a cultural force and pedagogical weapon that assaults civic consciousness, erodes the social bonds essential to democratic life, and legitimates the [mobilizing](#) passions of fascism through spectacles of degradation, disposability, cruelty, and manufactured hatred. [It functions as part of a broader neoliberal pedagogy](#) in which civic life is reorganized around the values of self-interest, commodification, hyper-individualism, and ruthless competition. Decades of market-driven propaganda, celebrity culture, anti-intellectualism, and disimagination machines have normalized a moral language in which greed becomes aspiration, cruelty becomes entertainment, and public goods become objects of contempt. Under such conditions, corruption becomes woven into everyday consciousness as common sense rather than recognized as an assault on the ideal and promise of a strong democracy.

Under fascist politics, corruption performs an even deeper and more insidious function. It not only rots institutions but destroys the ethical and civic sensibilities necessary for democratic life itself. By collapsing the distinction between public service and private plunder, between social responsibility and criminality, [it deadens conscience](#), normalizes dishonesty and cruelty, and strips politics of any moral obligation to the common good.

What emerges is a culture in which greed becomes a civic virtue, lawlessness a measure of power, and the suffering of others merely collateral damage in the pursuit of domination. It is precisely this collapse of conscience into moral numbness and thoughtlessness that, as Hannah Arendt argued in [Eichmann in Jerusalem](#) and later in [Responsibility and Judgment](#), creates the conditions in which authoritarianism flourishes.

In Trump's political universe, corruption becomes an authoritarian performance of raw domination, flaunted openly because the point is not to hide criminality but to normalize it. The endless gifts, payoffs, family profiteering, intimidation campaigns, pardons, and transactional loyalties send a clear message to the public: democracy is no longer a shared ethical project but a marketplace of cruelty, patronage, and gangster capitalism.

[As historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat has argued, these payoffs and pardons should not be viewed merely as rewards for past loyalty.](#) They function as retainers for future acts of political violence and authoritarian allegiance. Like organized crime syndicates and [autocratic](#) regimes across the globe (particularly Hungary before recent Orban's defeat in recent elections), such systems bind followers to the leader by making their legal troubles disappear while preparing them for future service to the movement. Pardons, financial settlements, political favors, and selective protections become mechanisms for constructing what amounts to a state-funded loyalty network, one designed to secure obedience not through democratic consent but through fear, dependency, corruption, and shared complicity.

Corruption as Public Pedagogy

Under such conditions, corruption takes on a pedagogical force. It teaches that democracy is for sale, that injustice is more important than justice, and that power belongs to those wealthy and ruthless enough to place themselves above accountability. The danger lies not only in the criminal practices involved, but in the broader cultural lessons they impart: that gangsterism can function as [statecraft](#), that loyalty to the leader overrides loyalty to the law, and that democracy can be

hollowed out through a fusion of choreographed outrage, corruption, and organized forgetting—fostered by an endless array of disimagination machines. To understand how such corruption secures mass consent, it is necessary to examine the cultural and media apparatuses that circulate its values and transform authoritarianism into a [form of everyday pedagogy and language that colonizes consciousness](#).

Digital Authoritarianism and the Culture of Spectacle

Corruption in the Trump regime does not operate in isolation from culture, media, and everyday life. It is enabled and amplified through a vast network of cultural apparatuses, digital platforms, and billionaire-owned media systems that normalize greed, celebrate ruthless self-interest, and elevate the values of neoliberal capitalism into a governing common sense. [The tech oligarchs](#) who dominate social media and digital communications do more than control information; they shape the emotional and pedagogical landscapes through which people learn how to see themselves, others, and the very meaning of politics. In this environment, corruption is no longer viewed primarily as a violation of public trust. In this environment, algorithmic domination and digital feudalism are presented as entrepreneurial cunning, personal branding, and competitive success, and the unapologetic pursuit of power in a [winner-take-all](#) culture. In reality, it represents a [hyper charged form of instrumentalized evil](#).

The contemporary pedagogical terrain of gangster capitalism overwhelmingly favors the rich, the reactionary, and the politically powerful. Increasingly, large segments of the public, especially swing voters and [younger audiences, no longer receive political information through traditional journalism or democratic public spheres, but through social media platforms](#), YouTube channels, influencer networks, and podcasts dominated by right-wing personalities such as Tucker Carlson, while algorithm-driven systems controlled by tech oligarchs such as Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg amplify outrage, misinformation, and authoritarian resentment. Some of the most listened-to political podcasts are hosted by reactionary figures who traffic in conspiracy theories, manufactured grievance, [white nationalism](#), misogyny, and anti-democratic rhetoric.

At the same time, [conservative](#) political forces exercise enormous influence across YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and X, where outrage, fear, resentment, and spectacle circulate with extraordinary speed and emotional intensity. These platforms reward sensationalism, aggression, and emotional manipulation because outrage generates clicks, attention, and profit. They foster social fragmentation,

alienation, atomization and, as Jonathan Crary notes, increasingly represent a [“comprehensive global apparatus for the dissolution of society.”](#)

In doing so, they create a cultural and pedagogical environment in which authoritarian values acquire enormous legitimating force while critical thought, historical memory, and civic literacy are increasingly erased, punished, or rendered suspect. At the same time, they reproduce and normalize the poisonous grammar of fascist politics: lawlessness elevated to a governing principle, racial hatred and fantasies of racial cleansing shamelessly defined as matters of security and national purity, critical ideas banned or criminalized, genocidal violence in Gaza rationalized as policy, and the killing of journalists in war zones normalized as collateral damage in an age of organized barbarism. Under these conditions, digital culture no longer merely communicates politics; it becomes one of the primary pedagogical forces through which authoritarian identities, desires, and emotional investments are produced.

MAGA Aesthetics and the Pedagogy of Cruelty

What emerges under Trumpism is not simply a politics of corruption but a broader pedagogical cultural regime of criminality and state terrorism. Unlike older forms of authoritarian propaganda that demanded ideological belief and disciplined obedience, contemporary authoritarian culture demands shallow participation, emotional surrender, anti-intellectual performance, and compulsive circulation through the endless flows of digital media and [the dangerous use of AI](#). Politics is transformed into political theater, meme warfare, and performative outrage. Participation no longer requires informed judgment or critical literacy; it requires emotional investment in spectacles of humiliation, cruelty, resentment, and tribal loyalty. Corruption becomes part of the ritualized displays of domination, flaunted openly as a sign of power, unchecked control, and immunity from accountability.

The endless circulation of memes, AI-generated fantasies, conspiracy theories, staged outrage, and celebrity-driven political performances creates a culture in which authoritarian values are absorbed affectively before they are ever examined critically. In this mediated universe, the language of democracy dissolves into branding exercises and algorithmically engineered emotional reactions. Here [Guy Debord’s notion of the spectacle](#) becomes indispensable because politics no longer functions primarily through reasoned argument but through a theater of commodified images, manufactured emotions, and endless distraction. Equally important, [Jean Baudrillard’s](#) work helps explain how AI-generated fantasies and hyperreal political imagery circulate not because they are believable in any

conventional sense, but because they produce emotional gratification untethered from truth, evidence, or historical memory. At the same time, [Neil Postman foresaw a culture in which public life would dissolve into amusement and spectacle](#), eroding the very capacities necessary for democratic judgment and critical thought.

Increasingly, the corruption of politics is mirrored in the corruption of civic culture, public conscience, and moral judgment. The grotesque AI-generated videos and staged spectacles circulated endlessly by Trump and amplified through right-wing media ecosystems do more than entertain. They function as forms of authoritarian public pedagogy that normalize humiliation, cruelty, racism, hypermasculinity, and civic illiteracy as public virtues. In these digitally manufactured fantasies, Trump appears as a divinely ordained savior embraced by Jesus, critics are reduced to targets of ridicule and fantasies of degradation, and aggression against dissenters is staged as a source of popular amusement and emotional gratification. [In one egregious AI-generated racist video, Trump portrays former President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama as apes](#). Such spectacles matter because they erode the ethical foundations of democratic life, replacing civic responsibility, compassion, historical memory, and critical judgment with a politics of mockery, resentment, manufactured rage, and authoritarian pleasure. Politics no longer appeals to informed consent, ethical responsibility, or reasoned debate. Instead, it trains audiences to take pleasure in humiliation, celebrate unchecked power, and embrace cruelty as entertainment.

Disimagination Machines and Neo-Fascist Culture

Under this pedagogical regime, neoliberal values of toxic competition, unchecked self-interest, disposability, a commodified culture of immediacy, and market-driven survival merge seamlessly with authoritarian politics. Celebrity culture, algorithmic media systems, Christian nationalism, anti-intellectualism, and fascist theatricality fuse into what I have elsewhere called a disimagination machine, a powerful apparatus of public pedagogy that educates people emotionally before it persuades them intellectually. Its deepest power lies not merely in disseminating lies, but in shaping desires, identities, and emotional dispositions that render corruption, cruelty, and gangster capitalism commonplace features of everyday life. Authoritarianism becomes pleasurable, [white nationalist](#) movements and cult-like loyalties replace democratic solidarity, and public life is reduced to a brutal game organized around humiliation, extraction, and the thrill of domination.

What emerges from this machinery is a form of neo-fascist politics in which corruption is no longer a deviation from governance but one of its central [organizing](#) principles. Yet mainstream media often treats corruption as little more than scandal and spectacle, obscuring its role within a broader politics of disposability, extraction, and authoritarian control. What is at stake is a predatory system that hollows out democratic institutions while concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a financial and political [oligarchy](#) bound together by fear, loyalty, and organized greed. But corruption alone is not the deepest threat. The greater danger lies in the cultural and pedagogical conditions that normalize it. In an age dominated by neoliberal disimagination machines, spectacle-driven politics, and manufactured ignorance, gangsterism is recast as strength, cruelty as authenticity, and lawlessness as freedom.

In an age dominated by neoliberal disimagination machines, media-driven politics, and manufactured ignorance, fascist values and passions are no longer hidden; they are marketed, performed, and celebrated. In this scenario, corruption functions as political theater, a site where politics dissolves into the visual grammar of fascism.

[Militarism, Hypermasculinity, and White Christian Nationalism](#)

At its extreme, this culture of corruption and authoritarian spectacle converges with a politics that glorifies militarism, violence, and hypermasculine domination. One of the driving forces behind the systemic corruption that defines the Trump regime is the fusion of toxic militarism, white Christian nationalism, and a hypermasculine politics that glorifies violence, domination, and war. This deadly convergence is visible in Trump's appeals to divine authority, biblical rhetoric, and crusader imagery used to justify military aggression and war-crime-level violence in Iran. It also appears in the militarized language of Pete Hegseth, Trump's self-styled "Secretary of War," for whom war becomes a theater of masculine redemption in which cruelty is defined as a badge of strength. Hegseth's swaggering militarism might appear absurd were it not tied to the power of the state and its capacity to unleash violence at home and abroad. [As Jasper Craven observes, his rhetoric is steeped in "Islamophobia, misogyny, and a distinctly toxic version of masculinity,"](#) a poisonous language that turns militarism into a spectacle of aggression while elevating authoritarian brutality into a model of national identity and civic virtue.

Toward a Politics of Resistance and Struggle for Democratic Socialism

It is worth repeating that the crisis we face is not simply one of corruption, but of the accelerating destruction of democracy, as justice, historical memory, civic agency, and public conscience are hollowed out by the forces of predatory [neoliberalism](#) and authoritarian rule. Trumpism reveals how gangster capitalism, fused with authoritarian politics, transforms the state into an instrument of domestic terrorism, economic predation, and moral nihilism. It colonizes consciousness, erases historical memory, and rewrites history. Under such conditions, resistance cannot be reduced to legal reforms, ethics commissions, or appeals to civic decorum. [History has shown where such forces culminate](#): in torture chambers, mass incarceration, concentration camps, and the institutionalization of cruelty as a governing principle.

What is needed is a fundamental rupture with a political and economic order that concentrates wealth and power in the hands of financial oligarchs while dismantling public goods, social protections, and democratic institutions in the service of organized greed. This is a struggle that must make education central to politics in order to change public consciousness as part of a wider struggle to dismantle the economic and political institutions of gangster capitalism.

In the end, the corruption at the heart of the Trump regime cannot be separated from the broader authoritarian and neo-fascist culture that both nourishes and legitimates it, a culture in which militarism, apocalyptic nationalism, toxic masculinity, gangster capitalism, and a politics of disposability fuse into a machinery of domination. This is a politics that wages war not only on democratic institutions, critical ideas, and public values, but also on the very conditions that make justice, solidarity, compassion, and collective freedom possible.

The struggle against authoritarian corruption must therefore become part of a broader struggle to reclaim politics as a moral, social, and collective project rooted in historical memory, economic justice, shared responsibility, and the radical promise of democracy life. Yet, this struggle must heed Frederick Douglass's admonition that "[power concedes nothing without a demand](#)." For Douglass, oppressive power never retreats on its own. It yields only when confronted by a collective force capable of disrupting its authority, exposing its injustices, and making domination increasingly difficult to sustain. In this instance, resistance becomes dangerous to authoritarian power not simply because it opposes domination, but because it embodies a collective moral and political energy capable of unsettling the very foundations upon which that power rests.

What is at stake is not merely the defense of liberal democratic norms, but the creation of a fundamentally different future. The challenges before us are to dismantle gangster capitalism and the fascist politics it breeds. In its place, there is the task of building a democratic socialist vision rooted in human dignity, solidarity, compassion, justice, equality, and the common good. As Douglass famously noted, “[if there is no struggle, there is no progress.](#)” This is the power of critical thought, mass resistance, and militant hope.