

CHAPTER SIX

Spectacle of Terror, Spectacle of Security

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In his “Address to the Nation” on the evening of September 11, 2001, and persistently reiterated thereafter, George W. Bush enunciated the self-congratulatory litany by which we were to understand that “the terrorists” were obsessed with “America” and targeted it because it is “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” Soon this claim was embellished with the contention that “these people can’t stand freedom; they hate our values; they hate what America stands for” (Bush 2001a). The events of September 11, 2001, enabled the Bush administration and the full mass-mediated panoply of spectacular public discourse to repeatedly and extravagantly insist to the world that “everything changed”; indeed, that nothing would ever be the same again (De Genova, n.d.). In the years following these events, there has indisputably been a radical and rigorous material and practical overhaul of the U.S. sociopolitical order, predicated upon precisely this elaborate scaffolding of distinctly *metaphysical* premises, propositions, and inferences about “terror” and its changing, counterterror, which were now purportedly engaged in nothing less than a total global war, without limit, without borders, and apparently without end. That the Homeland Security State, by its own account, entails “the most extensive reorganization of the federal government in the past fifty years,” according to the *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, is merely the material and practical verification of the more decisive strategic reconfiguration, which has proclaimed: “The U.S. government has no greater mission” than “securing the American homeland . . . from terrorist attacks,” a new mandate that has furthermore been confirmed as “a permanent mission” (USOHS 2002, vii, 1, 4). The ascendancy of the Homeland Security State therefore signals a momentous new and ongoing process of state formation in the United States (De Genova 2007).

Indeed, in its essentials, this metaphysics of antiterrorism has in fact been reiterated and reanimated under the presidency of Barack Obama. In the Obama administration's *National Security Strategy*, we are reminded that the events of September 11, 2001, revealed "the dark side of this globalized world" and authorized "fighting a war against a far-reaching network of hatred and violence" (White House 2010, 1, 4; see also De Genova 2010b).¹

SECURITIZING EVERYDAY LIFE

However, in the face of this new "war"—this monumental struggle against evil itself, in Bush's phrase—the commander-in-chief's injunctions to the citizenry from the outset were consistently and remarkably quotidian. "Americans are asking: What is expected of us?" Bush ventriloquized, with the immediate reply, "I ask you to live your lives, and hug your children" (Bush 2001f, September 20, 2001). He went on to list a series of other modest, even pedestrian, requests: do not single out anyone for "unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith"; make charitable donations for the victims of the attacks; cooperate with the FBI; be patient with delays and inconveniences caused by more stringent security measures, for a very long time to come; continue to "participate" confidently in the U.S. economy; and pray for the victims, for the military, and "for our great country." In short, leave the war in the hands of the experts (including the prosecution/persecution of suspected enemies [see De Genova 2007]), submit to the authority of the antiterrorist security state, combine religious devotion with nationalist and militaristic acquiescence, work hard, spend money without inhibitions, and above all, just "live your lives"—which is to say, conform to the dreary lifeless conventions of an already alienated everyday life.

The demand for a dutiful and docile (and now, patriotic, even heroic) submission to the terrifyingly mundane business-as-usual of alienated labor and joyless consumption has to be recognized as the covert yet resplendently overt "truth" of the spectacle of terror, the antiterrorist regime of the new Homeland Security State, and its official "state of emergency" (promulgated by Bush on September 14, 2001, and never subsequently discontinued; see De Genova 2010b). The spectacle of "terrorism," however, electrified the overall sense that the everyday—if consistently disappointing, universally dissatisfying, and in general, excruciatingly boring—was now to become a sign that could trigger both a nostalgia for a putatively "lost" sense of safety and comfort, and a permanent if ineluctable sense of being imperiled by an elusive menace. Baudrillard notes incisively:

[The terrorists] have even—and this is the height of cunning—used the banality of American everyday life as cover and camouflage. Sleeping in their suburbs, reading and studying with their families, before activating themselves suddenly like time bombs. The faultless mastery of this clandestine style of operation is almost as terroristic as the spectacular act of September 11, since it casts suspicion on any and every individual. Might not any inoffensive person be a potential terrorist? . . . So the event ramifies down to the smallest detail—the source of an even more subtle mental terrorism. (2001/2002b, 19–20; cf. 2001/2002a, 409–10)

Furthermore, Baudrillard adds, “If *they* could pass unnoticed, then each of us is a criminal going unnoticed . . . and, in the end, this is no doubt true” (2001/2002b, 20). Here, indeed, is the most profound possible meaning to Baudrillard’s contention that “a globalized police state of total control” is being actualized through “a security terror” (Baudrillard 2001/2002a, 414).²

This subtle terrorizing that apparently disrupts and destabilizes the somnolence of the everyday, which Baudrillard attributes to the cunning of “the terrorists,” is figured as an effect of a larger “vertiginous cycle” in which the death of the terrorist is “an infinitesimal point,” a kind of miniscule puncture “that provokes a suction, a vacuum, a gigantic convection” around which power “becomes denser, tetanizes itself, contracts and collapses in its own superefficiency.” He goes on to claim that “all the visible and real power of the system” is virtually helpless against the merciless and irreducible potency of the minute but symbolically supercharged suicides of a few individuals—exactly because their deaths challenge power to match their exorbitant audacity and determination by doing what the system could never do (destroy itself), thus leaving it with no possibility of a symbolically adequate reply (Baudrillard 2001/2002b, 19–20; 2001/2002a, 409–10). Yet, in all of this, Baudrillard never parts company with the official story, by which we are instructed to believe—based on the “intelligence” of the police and secret police, the veracity of which may strictly never be demonstrated and is therefore never strictly verifiable—the unquestionable and irrefutable “truth” of what is finally a conspiracy theory *par excellence* about a handful of fanatics.³

The “shock and awe” publicity campaign for the obscenely asymmetrical and ruthlessly indiscriminate aerial bombardment of Iraq (to say nothing of the less trumpeted assault on an already prostrate Afghanistan before it, or the subsequent protracted military occupation of both countries) surely never matched the palpable symbolic momentousness of the collapse of the World Trade Center’s twin towers. Nonetheless, that spectacular “originary” moment indubitably did provide the ensuing onslaught of global militarism with the necessary

(and arguably adequate, if not sufficiently persuasive) symbolic “cause.”⁴ And if these spectacular events have indeed ensured that we are all now suspects (De Genova 2007), each a potential “criminal going unnoticed,” then the securitization of everyday life that has ensued from the gigantic convection generated by those events may itself be their supreme achievement. For the “terrorist” menace is the state’s pronouncedly evil changeling, its most perfect and ideal enemy, whose banal anonymity and phantasmagorical ubiquity prefigure and summon forth the irradiation of the everyday by the security state as our savior and redeemer. The ascendancy of the reanimated security state may even be an expression of the would-be superefficiency of the system of power, precisely not reeling from a symbolically mortal assault and careening toward an implosive collapse, but rather meticulously refortifying its foundations by seeking to assiduously secure and perpetuate what Raoul Vaneigem calls “the everyday eternity of life” with all its “abundant and bitter consolations” (1991/1994, 7, 8).

It is instructive here to revisit some of the critical insights of the critique of everyday life postulated by Henri Lefebvre (1947, 1961, 1968, 1981, 1992). In *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1968), his boldest reformulation of that critical itinerary, which he ultimately continued to elaborate and refine over the greater part of a long and remarkably prolific intellectual lifetime, Lefebvre arrives at an arresting conclusion: the outcome of an excessively bureaucratized capitalist society of controlled consumption and regimented everyday life is, precisely, *terrorism* (Lefebvre 1968/1971, 148). Beginning from the premise that publicity and advertising have acquired an eminently ideological role (106) and serve to communicate “a whole attitude toward life” (107), assuring the consumer, “you are being looked after, cared for, told how to live better, how to dress fashionably, how to decorate your house, in short how to exist,” Lefebvre identifies the peculiar contradiction of this form of social control: “you are totally and thoroughly programmed, except that you still have to choose among so many good things, since the act of consuming remains a permanent structure.” Hence, advertising commands: “Use this After-Shave, or you will be nobody and know it” (107). Beginning from the “carefully organized confusion” of the use-value and exchange-value of commodities (107), Lefebvre interrogates a kind of terrorism predicated upon a repressive social order “that, in order to avoid overt conflicts, adopts a language . . . that deadens or even annuls opposition . . . a certain type of (liberal) democracy where compulsions are neither perceived nor experienced as such,” which “holds violence in reserve . . . [and] relies more on the self-repression inherent in organized everyday life” (146). In *a terrorist society* (in emphatic contradistinction with the reign of political terror and its extravagant and convulsive recourse to outright violence to terrorize a polity),

Lefebvre continues, “compulsion and the illusion of freedom converge . . . terror is diffuse, violence is always latent, pressure is exerted from all sides.”

The putative “values” of such a society, Lefebvre continues, “need no explaining, they are accepted, they are compelling, and any desire to understand or question them savours of sacrilege” (147). In a terrorist society, “each individual trembles lest he ignore the Law . . . everyone feels guilty and is guilty—guilty of possessing a narrow margin of freedom and adaptability and making use of it by stealth in a shallow underground darkness, alas, too easily pierced” (159). Hence, “moral discipline [is] the insignia of terrorist societies . . . the façade exhibited for the benefit of a well-governed everyday life” (161). This sort of terror defines for itself a pure, formal, abstract, unified societal space of everyday life as the arena of its power, from which time—and thus, history and historicity—as well as original speech and desire, must be unrelentingly evicted. Here, human actions are merely “catalogued, classed, and tidied away,” isolated, estranged, and kept in order. Rather than a space of “false consciousness,” therefore, it is one of a true consciousness of a crippled reality—one severed from the sheer open-endedness of radical possibility and unscripted creativity—which renders terror *normal* (179).

T'ERROR IS HUMAN (BUT TERROR IS SUBLIME)

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, amidst the cacophony of heightened security alerts and the proclamations that we were living now in an altogether “different world” (Bush 2001f, September 20, 2001), there were also immediately discernable calls summoning ordinary U.S. citizens to demonstrably enact with patriotic fervor the “the steel of American resolve” and not allow those “despicable” terrorist bullies to intimidate “a great nation” (Bush 2001a, September 11, 2001). What was the precise content of this relentless flattery of “American resolve”? Anything less than a dazzling display of collective will to be “open for business” would be tantamount to conceding that the enemy had succeeded in their mission of depriving “Americans” of “our way of life, our very freedom.” The day after September 11, 2001, Bush appeared for a media “photo opportunity” with his National Security “team” to announce that the prior day’s events were indeed “more than acts of terror. They were acts of war.” He assured the public that the state was there to protect “the nation” and deliver it from darkness, that the federal government was fully operative, that all of its agencies were indeed “conducting business.” “But,” he continued, “it is not business as usual” (Bush 2001b, September 12, 2001). Evidently in a spirit of magnanimity that inadvertently confirmed that “our way of life, our very freedom”

was not in fact to be confused with free time, however, when Bush officially proclaimed Friday, September 14, 2001, to be a “National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001,” he “encourage[d] employers to permit their workers time off *during the lunch hour* to attend noontime services to pray for our land” (Bush 2001c, September 13, 2001; emphasis added).

Five days after the events, on the same occasion when President Bush notoriously announced that the so-called war on terrorism was a “crusade” in which “we will rid the world of evil-doers,” the complementary and truly emphatic message of his prepared remarks was nonetheless that it was time to “go back to work” and “work hard like you always have” (Bush 2001e, September 16, 2001). In this brief outdoor press conference, for which the prepared opening statement consisted of only five short paragraphs, Bush remarkably uttered the words “work” or “job” fifteen times. In a subsequent media event, staged in an airport to shore up confidence in the ailing airline industry, Bush ventriloquized the air travelers in attendance by proclaiming “their” clear message to the “American public”: “get about the business of America . . . we must stand against terror by going back to work” (Bush 2001g, September 27, 2001). In the face of increasing evidence of an economic recession, these ham-fisted injunctions to collectively shake off the proverbial posttraumatic stress syndrome and return to productive labor were also coupled with tinny bids to go shopping. However uncannily, Bush even declared it “one of the great goals of this nation’s war . . . to restore public confidence in the airline industry . . . to tell the traveling public: Get on board. . . . Fly and enjoy America’s great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed.” On the one hand, one could scarcely miss the spectacular code-switching between the commander-in-chief’s millenarian scenarios of “a new type of war” against an elusive network of “evildoers” “who know no borders,” whose intent was to “terrorize America,” and the chief executive cheerleader’s feeble pleas for what Dana Heller has called “the promise of closure through consumption” and “America-as-cure marketing,” on the other, luridly strung together in absurd dissonance, alternating currents within the same speech (Heller 2005, 20, 21). Hence, the message: Be scared, be very, very scared . . . but don’t neglect your patriotic duty in the war against terrorism to get on board . . . and enjoy life; just be mindful to do so “the way we want it to be enjoyed.”

As if to verify that his own incessant labor “to rout out and destroy global terrorism” was enough to work up a beastly appetite, Bush opened his remarks on September 27, 2001, with mention that Chicago’s mayor, who was on hand,

had reportedly promised to buy him lunch. Bush predictably pandered to what Benjamin DeMott (1990) has called “the imperial middle”: “I like my cheeseburger medium.” It should suffice to say nothing more of Bush’s mediocrity other than it supplies only the most perverse instance that cynically confirms, indeed *displays*, nothing so much as the veritable status of *all* U.S. presidents—precisely, as mere speech-making devices. They simulate a voice for power in a manner akin to the metallic communiqués of an electrolarynx responding to the twitching of throat muscles, but instead of the otherworldly estrangement effects of the mechanical fabrication of speech, they instead provide human expression—more or less persuasive, more or less sympathetic, even visibly fallible—for the soulless machinery of power, dissimulating its message. Bush’s oh-so-human cheeseburger cravings, however, offer a revealing instance of just what kind of theatrical work is required of those who come to serve as such prominent devices in the larger spectacle.

In his retrospective *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Guy Debord offers crucial insight into precisely the deep connections between this sort of spectacular politics and the spectacle of terror, as such. He contends:

This perfect democracy fabricates its own inconceivable enemy, terrorism. It wants, actually, *to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*. The history of terrorism is written by the State and it is thus instructive. The spectating populations must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else seems rather acceptable, in any case more rational and democratic. (Thesis IX 1988, 2005 transl.)

Especially in light of this bold and arresting, if not entirely unthinkable or implausible, proposition, our present and unrelenting moment of crisis summons forth reanimated considerations of the enduring explanatory power of Guy Debord’s austere theoretical formulation of *spectacle*.⁵ In the *Comments*, Debord provides a concise summation of the society of the spectacle as he had originally depicted it in 1967: “the autocratic reign of the market economy, which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government that accompanied this reign” (Debord 1988/2005). Debord further elaborates upon his original formulation, however, calling attention to “five principal features: incessant technological renewal; fusion of State and economy; generalized secrecy; forgeries without reply; a perpetual present” (Debord 1988/2005).⁶ Among the new techniques of government that Debord emphasizes, state power itself has come to rely, both intensively and extensively, on the propagation of mass-media public discourse. Debord argues that “the

social requirements of the age . . . can be met only through their mediation,” and that “the administration of society . . . now depends on the intervention of such ‘instant’ communication.” This is fundamentally because all such instantaneously circulated mass mediation is “essentially *one-way*” (Debord 1967/1995, 19; emphasis in original). Various notorious or celebrated for his awkward but folksy manner of speech, his clumsy inarticulateness, and his malapropisms (see, e.g., Miller 2001), Bush’s language perfectly enacted this sort of spectacular unidirectional garrulousness—what Lawrence Schehr has depicted as not merely a dialogue of the deaf but in fact a monologue of the deaf, an utter “abandonment of principled dialogue in favor of affect” through a use of “empty rhetoric and gesture politics” that obfuscate “nonmeaning and insidious action behind nice expression” (Schehr 2006, 139, 143, 144, 147). “The simple fact of being without reply,” Debord elucidates further, “has given to the false an entirely new quality. At a stroke it is truth which has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis that can never be demonstrated” (Debord 1988/2005). Uncertainty, ambiguity, equivocation, dissimulation, intransigent secrecy, inconceivable enemies, falsehoods without reply, truths that cannot be verified, hypotheses that can never be demonstrated—these have truly become the hallmarks of our (global) political present.

In order to adequately theorize the society of the spectacle, then, Debord’s critique invites us to comprehend its rampant fetishism as, in effect, a fusion of the fetishism of the commodity with the fetishism of the state. The brazenness of the spectacle—its reliance on unrelenting mass mediation, publicity, advertising, and exuberant display in order to manifest itself as a specious unity, “an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute” (Debord 1967/1995, 15)—remains, as in Marx’s classic account of the thing-like reification of relations between people, inevitably accompanied by the *invisibility*—hidden in plain sight, as it were—of the real social relations of (alienated, exploited, and subjugated) life. Prefiguring the spectacle indeed, the “secret” of the commodity, as Giorgio Agamben notes in his reflections on Debord, was one that capital sought to most effectively conceal “by exposing it in full view” (2000, 74). “The self-movement of the spectacle consists in this,” Debord clarifies, “it arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form—as things that, being the *negative* expression of living value, have become exclusively abstract value. In these signs we recognize our old enemy the commodity, which appears at first sight”—very much like the cheeseburger that the mayor is going to *buy* for the president—“a very trivial

thing, and easily understood, yet which is in reality a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties” (1967 [1995, 26]).

Bush’s seemingly trite and ephemeral remark about an apparently trifling cheeseburger, which he was so performatively eager to consume, abounds in the sort of metaphysical subtleties that command immanent critique. Indeed, the gesture recalls Andy Warhol’s famous observation about the metonymic relation between “America,” the illusory egalitarianism of the market, and the absolute supremacy of the commodity:

You can be watching tv and see Coca-Cola, and you know the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.⁷

Bush’s cheeseburger thus signaled both his fatuous equality (his primacy among equals, we might say) with the citizens and denizens alike who comprise the U.S. populace and are routinely interpellated into varying degrees of subjection by his discourse. The cheeseburger’s prospective consumption promised to consummate what would be, by implication, the well-deserved but emphatically humble reward for Bush’s tireless labor of protecting “the American people” by waging and winning the so-called War on Terror.

Earlier during the media event, in an awkward effort to strike a measured balance between the potentially competing demands of compassion and “resolve,” tragedy and opportunity, mourning and war-making, Bush had remarked: “I am a loving guy, and I am also someone, however, who has got a job to do—and I intend to do it” (Bush 2001g, September 27, 2001). The middle-brow, “Middle America,” and compulsively “middle-class” (reactionary) populism of U.S. politics aside, and its egalitarian ethos of wholesome and unpretentious sameness notwithstanding, the message was clear. The president was simply and dutifully doing *his* job, just as he urged everyone else to get back to work and do theirs.

And we have got a job to do—just like the farmers and ranchers and business owners and factory workers have a job to do. My administration has a job to do, and we’re going to do it. We will rid the world of evil-doers (Bush 2001e, September 16, 2001).

The just reward for each and every hardworking drone (as patriotic citizen-bystanders in the larger passion play of “America” versus evil) would also be “at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing,” which upon closer inspection

is revealed to be “a very strange thing, abounding in . . . theological niceties” (Marx 1867/1976, 163)—the sublime and otherworldly commodity—in this instance, dressed down in the homely and diminutive garb of so many unassuming cheeseburgers, all the same, and all good.

Or, at least, as good as anyone should have any right to expect.

THE SPECTACLE OF SECURITY

If the fetishism that conjures the image of the commodity as an alien power is deeply imbricated in the fetishism of the state itself—the ultimate manifestation of “power” as an alien “thing” beyond our reach—then the force of the spectacle must always refer also to coercive force of the state. Likewise, the spectacle of terror is inseparable from a spectacle of security. If the spectacle is “the self-portrait of power,” quintessentially characterized by its incessant monological tyranny and voluble redundancy, “a sort of eternity of non-importance that speaks loudly,” such a spectacular self-portrait nevertheless dissimulates state power (Debord 1967 [1995, 19]; cf. 1988/2005). The spectacle of security, conjured by all the ideological apparatuses and governmental techniques of the antiterrorist security state, must produce—above all else—the state’s most precious and necessary political resource, and must advance what may likewise be its most politically valuable end; namely, heightened *insecurity*. Thus, unprecedented securitization and the more general militarization of everyday life on an evermore expansive scale and intensity conjures the permanent spectacle of its own purported insufficiency, preemptively supplying the justificatory rationale for still more state power.

In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, the antiterrorism regime needed to generate and intensify the fetish of a “terrorist” menace as a “fact” of the contemporary sociopolitical moment. Thus, immigration law enforcement was deployed selectively, “preventively” (indeed “preemptively”) in the production of pretexts for surveillance and detention. Immigration law provided the perfect matrix through which to mobilize minor violations of what were often mere procedural technicalities to serve as pretexts for the *indefinite* detention of “suspect foreigners” who could then remain “under investigation” indefinitely (Cole 2003). Selectively targeted indefinite and protracted detentions directed against an identifiable “foreign” minority (almost entirely comprised of Arab and other Muslim noncitizen men) have operated to uphold and sustain racialized suspicion, and apparently confirmed that minority’s more general susceptibility for detention—their *detainability*. Thus, the antiterrorist security state disclosed its crucial role as an apparatus that *produces the specter*

of “guilt,” which presumptively hovers over these migrants’ mere detainability. Whereas detainability was contingent upon nothing more than *susceptibility to suspicion*, actual detention appeared to confirm *susceptibility to culpability*. The enforcement spectacle generated by these selective detentions involved a staging of presumptive “guilt” that, in effect, *produced culprits*. The distinctly secretive spectacle of these protracted detentions then sustained and enhanced what I have called *the “terrorism” effect*. Antiterrorism’s requisite phantom menace of elusive “evildoers” ultimately commands a *material* enemy. The detention dragnet rendered the detained “suspects” collectively to be de facto “enemy aliens” and still more important, at least by implication, it has appeared to substantiate the allegation of a palpable and imminent threat of terrorism in the “homeland.” Whereas border enforcement conventionally provides a highly *visible* spectacle of what appears to be an “illegal alien invasion,” the antiterrorist security state’s tedious, unrelenting, and above all secretive enforcement of inconspicuous technicalities produces the rather more mysterious, indeed terrifying, spectacle of an *invisible* infiltration of “sleepers” (the War on Terror’s “secret agents”)—and serves to justify increasingly invisible government (De Genova 2007).

Thus, in the wake of September 11, 2001, any public discussion of immigration reform, much less any suggestion of a prospective “legalization” of the undocumented, became for a significant period, at the level of official legislative and policy debate, literally unspeakable. In addition to the detention of Arab and other Muslim “terror suspects,” approximately ten thousand airport screeners were summarily fired from their jobs and refused rehire on the singular grounds that they were not U.S. citizens, as the federal government took over the screening of travelers’ luggage.⁸ In the highly publicized Operation Tarmac, the INS raided 106 airports and arrested 4,271 migrants—overwhelmingly Latino service workers—deporting hundreds of them (USGAO 2003). Recall, however, that by 2002, an estimated 20.3 million migrant workers constituted 14 percent of the U.S. workforce, of whom an estimated 6.3 million were undocumented. Over the ensuing years and in the subsequent “immigration debate,” the continuously circulated estimate of the number of undocumented migrants has been inflated to 11 million. The numbers, of course, are not pertinent here, except inasmuch as they verify a truly unanimous and ubiquitous explicit acknowledgment that undocumented migrants and their “unauthorized” labor are in fact a perfectly mundane and routine feature of the U.S. social formation. Nonetheless, the spectacle of security has fixated upon the fetish of the “illegal alien” as the embodiment of nebulous “foreign” menaces and the icon of borders perceived to be woefully violable, signaling a putative border

crisis synonymous with a nation-state in the throes of a veritable “invasion.” Thus, migrants came to be easy stand-ins for the figure of “terrorism,” generally. Indeed, the purportedly antiterrorist security state stages transnational mobility as a menacing figure of transgression, and fashions “immigration” in general as an utterly decisive material site where the ostensible War on Terror may be practically and physically realized (De Genova 2007, 2009, n.d.; cf. Fernandes 2007).

During the spring of 2006, forcefully galvanizing widespread public awareness of the U.S. Senate’s ongoing deliberations in response to the House bill that sought to criminalize all undocumented migrants, truly unprecedented mass protest mobilizations in defense of the “rights” of “immigrants”—especially the undocumented—took the United States by storm (De Genova 2009; 2010c). Ultimately, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act proved to be politically untenable, and no significant federal immigration legislation has been passed subsequently. Nevertheless, the parties to the legislative debate finally did approve a similarly punitive but dramatically more limited and perfunctory law, the Secure Fence Act of 2006, ostensibly providing for further fortification of the U.S.-Mexico border with hundreds of miles of new physical barriers to be added to the existing 125 miles of fence. This, after all, is the standard fallback position of all U.S. immigration politics: when in doubt or at a loss for some other sort of resolution, further militarize the U.S.-Mexico border. Furthermore, state-level lawmaking has responded to the Congressional stalemate with a new proliferation of more local immigration laws. Of 1,562 bills introduced nationally during 2007 alone, 240 were enacted in forty-six states. In the first quarter of 2008, another 1,100 bills were introduced across forty-four states. A new law in the state of Mississippi, for instance, made it a felony for an undocumented migrant to hold a job. In Oklahoma, it became a felony to provide an undocumented migrant with shelter. Accompanying these legislative tactics has been an ensuing and unrelenting campaign of intensified immigration enforcement. Indeed, by the end of 2008, the number of U.S. Border Patrol agents was legally mandated to have more than doubled since 2001, to a record high of 20,000 by the end of 2009.⁹ In addition, an unprecedented profusion of local police departments are now being deployed to enforce immigration violations (a distinctly post-September 11, 2001, phenomenon) (Cave 2008). In 2010, Arizona notoriously passed a law effectively sanctioning racial profiling by authorizing police officers to detain and verify the immigration status of anyone whom they suspected might be undocumented.

As an intimidation tactic in anticipation of the May 1, 2006, rallies, and evi-

dently in response to the audacious upsurge in migrant labor and community organizing, the Department of Homeland Security announced on April 20, 2006 (a few days after what at the time had been the largest workplace enforcement raid operation against undocumented workers in recent memory), the initiation of a new “aggressive” and “hard-hitting” campaign of raids and deportations to “[reverse] the growing tolerance for . . . illegal immigration” (USDHS-ICE 2006b), and to ensure that undocumented workers “not be allowed to think *they* [are] *safe* once they [are] inside the country” (BBC News 2006; emphasis added). On that occasion, immigration authorities had arrested 1,187 employees of a single company across twenty-six states as an explicit warning to put “employers and workers alike . . . on notice that *the status quo has changed*” (USDHS-ICE 2006a; emphasis added). Numerous raids followed in locales across the country, and only subsided in 2009 with the introduction under the Obama administration of a revised policy of “silent raids” by which immigration authorities audit workplace records and then compel employers to fire undocumented workers en masse (Preston 2010). This strategy of *not* deporting the undocumented workers identified through these audits, of course, merely *circulates* undocumented migrants in the labor market, and likewise introduces still more severe conditions of protracted precariousness to their already manifold vulnerabilities. As the alternating current of these enforcement policies reveal, and as I have argued in considerable detail elsewhere, U.S. immigration authorities have almost never even pretended to try to achieve the presumed goal of a mass deportation of all undocumented migrants (De Genova 2005). On the contrary, it is *deportability*, and not deportation as such, that ensures that *some are deported in order that most may remain* undeported as workers, whose pronounced and protracted legal vulnerability may thus be sustained indefinitely.

Nevertheless, with the advent of the Homeland Security State and its characteristic expansiveness, aggressiveness, and general bombast, U.S. immigration authorities in the DHS’s Office of Detention and Removal did indeed enunciate a ten-year “strategic enforcement plan” (called “Endgame”), whose express mission was to promote “national security by ensuring the departure from the United States of all removable aliens” (USDHS-ICE 2003, ii). The avowed commitment to eventually “developing full capacity to remove all removable aliens” plainly sustained and vigorously reaffirmed the conventional goal of “removal” that has long distinguished the regime of deportability. Now however, there has been a significantly new tactical emphasis on *targeted* policing, and its predictable capacity for generating a spectacle of law enforcement “results.”¹⁰ Thus, the

U.S. immigration authorities could regularly trumpet their “successes” in highly publicized sweeps that dredged up hundreds and even upwards of a thousand undocumented migrants, and which simultaneously allow them to conflate the great mass of humdrum “illegal alien” workers with so-called “criminal” and “fugitive aliens,” who were the officially designated targets of the raids. Commonly, the utterly mundane and pervasive practice of working with fraudulent documents came to be routinely depicted as “identity theft” or “fraud” and increasingly prosecuted as a criminal (rather than a mere immigration) violation—fuelling the more general moral panic surrounding this newfound phantom, and conflating it with the despised and unsettling “foreignness” of the migrant working poor (Cole and Pontell 2006).

Similarly, those who have evaded deportation orders now came to be characterized as “criminal fugitives.” Thus, on May 12, 2008, an immigration raid on Agriprocessors, Inc., a meatpacking plant in Iowa—which led to the arrest and detention of 389 migrant workers, culminating in federal criminal convictions for 270 of them—was distinguished for being “the largest criminal enforcement operation ever carried out by immigration authorities at a workplace” (Preston 2008a). There have, of course, been larger workplace raids. What made this one so special was that the prosecutions were strictly focused on federal *criminal* charges (almost entirely for the use of fraudulent Social Security cards or immigration documents), leading not to immediate deportations but rather to prison sentences in federal penitentiaries (to be followed later by deportations). Thus, 297 undocumented migrants, mainly from Guatemala, were marched with hands and feet in shackles in groups of ten into a makeshift court room staged in a dance hall, adorned for the occasion with black curtains, as well as adjacent mobile trailers, on the fair grounds of the National Cattle Congress. The proceedings went from 8:00 A.M. until late at night, over several days, with the undocumented workers, who had been threatened with much harsher penalties, pleading guilty in rapid succession and being summarily sentenced to five-month prison terms. In one instance, they set the record for the highest number of sentences issued on any single day in that judicial district. As one of the convicted migrants, Isaías Pérez Martínez, resolutely and repeatedly replied in response to the efforts of lawyers to explain his putative legal options in the case: “I’m illegal, I have no rights. I’m nobody in this country. Just do whatever you want with me” (Preston 2008b). The U.S. attorney for the district who oversaw the spectacle called the whole affair an “astonishing success.”¹¹

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Heightened terror for undocumented migrant workers came to be offered frankly as the necessary price of a kind of publicity campaign. This more stringent enforcement regime, unquestionably the most severe crackdown in at least two decades, was distinguished by a remarkably candid, if seemingly paradoxical, strategy to compel more widespread acquiescence with the proposed *expansion* of guestworker schemes for the importation of migrant labor. Former Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, remarked candidly, “It would be hard to sustain political support for vigorous work-site enforcement if you don’t give employers an avenue to hire their workers in a way that is legal, because you’re basically saying, ‘You’ve got to go out of business’” (quoted in Hsu and Lydersen 2006). Chertoff continued, “We are not going to be able to satisfy the American people on a legal temporary worker program until they are convinced that we will have a stick as well as a carrot” (quoted in Preston 2008). Indeed, in their newfound and increasingly vocal enthusiasm for expanded guestworker arrangements as a peculiar and distinctly circumscribed recipe for the “legalization” of undocumented migrants, employers rallying behind the fig leaf of legality have adopted an ironic but revealing rallying cry. In reply to anti-immigrant lobbies, demanding “What part of ‘illegal’ don’t you understand?”, an employers’ coalition in the state of Arizona promoted a state-level guestworker program, with the slogan: “What part of *legal* don’t you understand?” (Preston 2008a).

The deep continuities of this “new” antiterrorist regime of migrant “illegality” with that upon which it is historically predicated, therefore, remain to haunt it. Recall that the very title of the House legislation that instigated so much controversy explicitly coupled “Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration.” Migrant labor is plainly the irrepressible ghost in the machine of Homeland Security, and the resurgence of the conventional and pedestrian preoccupations with mundane “illegal alien” workers in the current immigration debate in the United States exposes labor subordination as one of the constitutive if suppressed conditions of possibility for the metaphysics of antiterrorism. Subjected to excessive and extraordinary forms of policing, denied any semblance of supposedly fundamental “human rights” or “civil liberties,” and thus, consigned to an always uncertain social predicament, often with little or no recourse to any semblance of protection from the law, undocumented migrant labor-power has increasingly become the commodity of choice for employers in an ever-expanding range of industries and enterprises. But if this is so, it is

only *because*, and to the extent that, migrant labor may continue to be subjugated under the stigma of “illegality.”

The more profitable it is to exploit undocumented labor, the more bellicose and fanatical must be the sanctimonious political denigration of “illegal aliens.” Hence, undocumented migration must be perennially *produced* as a “problem”: as an invasive and incorrigibly “foreign” menace to national sovereignty, as a racialized contagion that undermines the presumed national culture, and as a recalcitrant “criminal” affront to national security. Undocumented migrants need not be branded as actual “terrorists.” Indeed, given that they are absolutely desired and demanded for their labor, to do so would be counterproductive in the extreme. Rather, it is sufficient to mobilize the metaphysics of antiterrorism to do the crucial work of continually and more exquisitely stripping these “illegal” workers of even the most pathetic vestiges of legal personhood, such that their own quite laborious predicament of rightlessness may be further amplified and disciplined. The more that the figure of the “illegal alien” can be conjured as the sign of a crisis of national security, the more guestworker proposals are promoted as a congenial panacea that satisfies U.S. employers’ deeply entrenched historical dependency on, and enduring demand for, the abundant availability of legally vulnerable and ever-disposable (deportable) migrant labor, while simultaneously pandering to the pervasive rhetoric of “securing” borders against nebulous and nefarious threats.

INCONCEIVABLE ENEMIES

In an important sense, “foreign” (and commonly, also racially subordinate) deportable migrant labor presents a striking analogy to racially subjugated “minority” citizens. In their analysis of the Watts rebellion of 1965, the situationists (the political formation around Debord and Vaneigem) posited that impoverished African Americans served as “a perfect spectacular prod,” supplying the spectacle of a loathsome “threat of . . . underprivilege [that] spurs on the rat race” (S.I. no. 10, December 1965; in Knabb 1981, 157). In contrast to this sort of tacit threat of permanent marginalization and the subordinate status enforced through protracted un- and underemployment, however, the spectacular prod of the “illegal alien” is that of a predicament of unrelenting and unforgiving overemployment, super-exploitation. What the two have in common, of course, is excessive misery. What they further have in common is the stigmata of racialized *difference*, reassuring the racial “majority” (or, alternately, the racially heterogeneous but still unequal polity of proper “citizens”) that their own misery is not so bad after all, while also simultaneously unset-

ting the presumed assurance that such excesses of suffering could ever be reserved only for someone else (the “others”), a population condemned—be it as an effect of their “natural” (racial) inheritance, their “alien” juridical status, or both—to an inferior social station.

Deportable (migrant) labor, therefore, conceals within it—and yet, simultaneously *reveals* and proclaims—the universal disposability of *all* labor. And inasmuch as, under capitalism, labor is but the most commonplace and ubiquitous objectified, alienated, and fetishized form of *life* itself (in its active practical expression as open-ended creative capacity and productive power), so must the *deportable* labor of global capitalism’s multifarious transnational migrant denizens signal the ultimate disposability of human life in general, on a planetary scale. In her brilliant interpretation of the sniper shootings in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, Susan Willis describes how randomly chosen “ordinary people doing ordinary things were transformed into targets” and “the cloak of uneventful malaise that passes for security was torn asunder.” Willis elucidates how the principal sniper, a military veteran, “manifests the repercussions of U.S. imperialism on the home front” by straddling “the blurred boundary between military and civilian life that is fast becoming every American’s common lot. . . . The only common characteristic of the dead,” she clarifies, with regard to the victims, “is their civilian status”; they were selected “not as collateral damage (people inadvertently killed for their proximity to a designated enemy), but targets chosen for want of a more clearly defined enemy—or perhaps chosen because the civilian has become the enemy” (Willis 2005, 51, 52, 65, 68, 69). In the truly terrifying irruption of random and utterly unpredictable deadly violence in the otherwise somnolent and unsuspecting realm of the everyday, the logic of U.S. militarism was ominously exposed: the War on Terror’s inconceivable enemies are we, the empire’s sitting ducks.

The spectacle, Debord proclaims, is “the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity” (1967/1995, 15). Bathed in its unforgiving light, we are subjected to its incessant display of images and its endless monologue of one-way communiqués, inculcated into “a generalized autism” (153). The passivity that is such a chief feature of the society of the spectacle, moreover, is inextricable from a social order predicated upon privacy. The egotism of the global capitalist sociopolitical order operates as the unencumbered reign of private property and private aggrandizement, but also as the atomizing individuation that ubiquitously accompanies an alienated everyday life, where privacy is haunted always by privation (cf. Lefebvre 1947/1991, 149; 1961/2002, 70–74). And as Marx incisively notes, “Security is the supreme social concept of civil

society; the concept of the police. . . . Security is . . . the *assurance* of its egotism” (1843/1978, 43]; emphasis in original). If security is the assurance of the generalized poverty, tedium, and humiliation that together comprise the most elementary preconditions of capitalist social relations of both production and consumption, the spectacle of security, like all propaganda, must necessarily take everyday life as its premier object (Lefebvre 1961/2002, 73). The spectacle of security thus entails a strategic campaign to possess everyday life by unremitting tactical calculation, to “[smother] it under the spurious glamour of ideologies,” and to perpetrate and perpetuate “a passive awareness of disaster and gloom” (Lefebvre 1968/1971, 33). Yet, the spectacle finally derives its force from what Marx depicted as the more elemental process through which capital (dead labor) extracts life from the wakeful death of the living, ensconced as we are in the routinized subordination of our work and the subordinated routinization of our everyday life. For the spectacle of security, therefore, our life and labor supplies the antiterrorist state with the innumerable and assorted manifestations of its inconceivable enemy, in yet another more fundamental sense: the inexorable antagonism of its denizens.

NOTES

1. Although this revised formulation specifies that “this is not a global war against a tactic—terrorism” (White House 2010, 20), it reaffirms nonetheless that “the United States is waging a global campaign” to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qa’ida” (19), “a specific network . . . and its terrorist affiliates” (20).

2. If I have relied upon the Turner translation (2002b) in the previous citations, I have opted in favor of the Valentin translation (2002a) here and hereafter as a matter of preference for the suggestiveness of his choice of language in these particular passages.

3. For a more extended critique of Baudrillard, see De Genova (n.d.).

4. For the foundational text proposing the military doctrine associated with “shock and awe,” see Ullman and Wade (1996); for a critique, see Goff (2004).

5. Debord would indubitably have had as his principal frame of reference the state repression of “terrorism” associated with the left-wing “armed struggle” movements that emerged in Europe during the 1970s, as well as the various military formations associated with separatist movements demanding national self-determination in Europe, such as in Northern Ireland or the Basque country. Writing in the late 1980s, during the waning years of the cold war, when anti-imperialist national liberation struggles throughout the so-called third world were routinely branded as “terrorist,” and in the aftermath of vari-

ous sensational airline hijackings, however, Debord would already have recognized the increasing salience of the figure of “international” terrorism. Thus, in retrospect, we may appreciate his insights with regard to the discourse of antiterrorism, not merely as a commentary on the devolution of the social and political struggles of the 1960s but also as a remarkably prescient anticipation of post-cold war geopolitical realignments.

For more extended elaborations of Debord’s conception of the society of the spectacle, see De Genova (2010a, n.d.). For other recent engagements with Debord, see, e.g., Agamben (2000; cf. 1995/1998, 6, 10–11); Hussey (2001); Merrifield (2004, 2005); Retort (2004, 2005, 2008); Rogin (1993); Weber (2002); for critical engagements with Retort (2005), see Balakrishnan (2005); Campbell (2008); Katz (2008); Mitchell (2008); Stalabrass (2006); Tuathail/Toal (2008); for more general invocations of the significance of spectacle, see also the contributions to Garber, Matlock, and Walkowitz, eds. (1993); for a discussion of “the banality of images” for a consolidation of global power through visibility, see Mirzoeff (2005, 67–115).

6. The more prosaic of these themes have already been remarkably prominent in critical scholarship regarding the antiterrorist security state. For work addressing the intersection of “incessant technological renewal” with the operations of state power, see Monahan (2006) and Webb (2007). For work on the fetishization of technology, see Campbell (2006), Johar Schueller (2007), and Parenti (2007). For work on the “fusion of State and economy,” see Hughes (2007), Martin (2007), and Wolin (2008).

7. The Andy Warhol Museum, “Andy Warhol: Life and Art.” www.warhol.org/education/pdfs/art_and_life.pdf.

8. The Aviation and Transportation Security Act (signed November 19, 2001) mandated that all airport security staff be U.S. citizens, directly employed by the newly created federal Transportation Security Administration, with no legal right to be organized in unions. There were approximately 28,000 baggage screeners working in over 440 commercial airports at that time, with noncitizens comprising as much as 80 to 90 percent in some major airports. By November 2002, one year after the law’s passage, there were more than 55,000 newly hired federal security screeners.

9. Over the preceding five-year period, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 had already mandated a dramatic increase in the numbers of Border Patrol agents (by 1,000 per year), toward what then was the ambitious goal of a total of 10,000 by 2001. With the rapid increase in the Border Patrol, there has been a predictably sharp rise in cases of corruption within the agency, notably including Border Patrol agents deeply implicated in extensive migrant smuggling and trafficking rings (Archibold and Becker 2008).

10. In addition to the initial targeting of undocumented workers employed at airports and military installations, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement bureau (ICE) of the Department of Homeland Security has executed this explicit strategy of “fugitive apprehension” (as in Operation Return to Sender) through well-publicized raids primarily targeting undocumented migrants with final orders of deportation or previous deportations, but coupling these always with the more menacing figure of “criminal aliens” with

pending arrest warrants, alongside any other random undocumented migrant who may be swept up in the course of a raid. In April 2006, in the midst of the immigrants' rights mobilizations, the Identity and Benefits Fraud Unit (established in September 2003) created ten local task forces to perpetrate a campaign of workplace raids targeting undocumented workers for the use of fraudulent documents, which it has publicly depicted as "identity theft" for alarmist effect. The Compliance Enforcement Unit (established in June 2003) is charged with the targeted detection and prioritized apprehension of visa overstayers and other immigration status violators who allegedly "pose national security or public safety threats." Other targeted campaigns have included Operation Community Shield, devised to expedite the deportation of noncitizen alleged street gang members as "criminal aliens," and the Secure Border Initiative, intended to expedite the deportation of (specifically) non-Mexicans apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border. For broader discussions of targeted policing as a distinctly neoliberal form of governmentality, see Valverde (2003); Valverde and Mopas (2004); cf. Henman (2004).

11. Subsequently, a professional legal interpreter, Erik Camayd-Freixas, revealed that many of the Agriprocessors workers who were convicted could not have knowingly committed the crimes in their pleas. "Most of the clients we interviewed," he wrote, "did not even know what a Social Security card was or what purpose it served." He reported that many of the migrants could not distinguish between a Social Security card and a residence visa, (a.k.a. a "green card"). They said they had purchased fake documents from smugglers, or had obtained them directly from supervisors at the Agriprocessors plant. Most did not know that the original cards could belong to U.S. citizens or "legal" residents, Camayd-Freixas explained. See Camayd-Freixas (2008, 6; cf. 2009); see also Preston (2008b).

The threat of more severe punishments relied upon the prospect of charging the defendants with "aggravated identity theft," which would have required the prosecution to demonstrate that the workers in question had not only used false identification numbers but had known that those numbers belonged, in fact, to other individuals. On May 4, 2009, in the *Flores-Figueroa v. United States* decision, regarding precisely this construal of whether or not the mere use of the identification numbers satisfied the stipulation that it was done "knowingly" (i.e., that the numbers in question were known to belong to other persons), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the federal law concerning "identity theft" could no longer be used to routinely prosecute undocumented workers who have used false Social Security numbers to secure employment.

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Accumulating Insecurity

VIOLENCE AND DISPOSSESSION
IN THE MAKING OF EVERYDAY LIFE

**Edited by SHELLEY FELDMAN
CHARLES GEISLER and
GAYATRI A. MENON**

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