

## Peace and Justice Activism in an Era of Disruptive Political Theater

By: J. Rinker, S. Jafari, and T. Seidel

As a binational organization committed to peacebuilding and social justice, the Peace and Justice Studies Association (PJSA) stands with the many Americans and our colleagues who are deeply concerned about the Trump administration's actions that are threatening civil rights, human rights and political freedoms. Representing a diverse constituency of peace and justice scholars and activists in the United States and Canada, we are also disheartened by the administration's use of structurally and culturally violent language. More than divisive, such language threatens the core values enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. We strongly support the nonviolent forms of resistance being waged across the continent, including by many PJSA members and colleagues. At a time of increased authoritarianism<sup>1</sup> as well as uncertainty and fear, our field of peace and justice scholars and activists has a vital role to play in providing strategies, insights and tools for effective nonviolent action and in support of vulnerable communities. This is not a time for the faint of heart—we cannot remain silent in the face of the disruptive political tactics of the new presidential administration.

Federal court rulings against the executive order that sought to ban entry into the United States of refugees and nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries is an important victory for the checks and balances within our political system, for human rights, and for political activism. Yet the administration's strong anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric and actions continue, from a new version of the ban, to aggressive plans to limit immigration,

---

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent analysis of the autocratic turn of the American electorate see Frum, David. "How to Build an Autocracy." *Atlantic Magazine*, March 2017. Accessed February 7, 2017 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/how-to-build-an-autocracy/513872/>

abolish sanctuary cities, initiate a US-Mexico border wall, and expand the net for immigration deportation. Additional executive orders have sought to cut funding for family planning programs and approve the Keystone and Dakota Access Pipelines—not to mention what is happening at the state level around the country to curtail LGBTQ rights.

As an anti-racist and anti-sexist organization committed to critical analysis of our political and social institutions and structures, however, it is imperative we stress that what we're seeing today is a continuation of the systemic racism and sexism of our country and our history of colonialism—albeit now in a more extreme and explicit form of white supremacy and neoliberal capitalism. For many in the United States, the current sense of unease and fear is nothing new, although there is greater awareness among more people, even as recent political discourse sews the seeds of distrust between Americans. We stand with the many Muslim American and other civil and human rights activists who remind us that, long before the Trump administration's Muslim Ban, "War on Terror" policies institutionalized Islamophobia by increasing the suspicion, targeting, and withholding of rights of people based solely on their religion or nationality. We stand strongly with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the Water Protector movement at Standing Rock, who have called out the forms of structural, cultural and direct violence that have long faced certain marginalized American communities.<sup>2</sup> The continued attempts to repress and chill dissent in these movements remain an important area of concern.<sup>3</sup> We stand with the domestic and international organizations that have long

---

<sup>2</sup> PJSA issued a statement following the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, condemning police brutality and in support of structural social justice approaches. See *PJSA Statement on Ending Police Brutality and Promoting Justice*. Peace and Justice Studies Association, August 2014. <https://www.peacejusticestudies.org/pjsa-statement-ending-police-brutality-and-promoting-justice>

<sup>3</sup> For example see recent news about FBI/DHS surveillance of the BLM movement and of Standing Rock water protectors: <http://www.salon.com/2016/10/20/fbi-homeland-security-sued-for-records-on-surveillance-of-black->

advocated for and provided support to the victims of what has become the largest refugee crisis our world has seen since World War II. In large part this crisis is a result of the neo-liberal economic policies and United States sponsored wars and yet, even before Trump, the United States had only accepted a token number of refugees.<sup>4</sup>

The election itself revealed a country deeply divided and distrustful of both major political parties, including among working class and poor communities left behind by neoliberal agendas. Like many, however, we are alarmed by how the current administration is exploiting these fears and frustrations to further strengthen authoritarianism, including through its lies or “alternative facts,” lack of transparency on its Russian connections, attacks on the media, fear mongering, and aggressive attempts to consolidate power. As an organization committed to nonviolent action as an effective strategy toward social change, we are also particularly troubled by recent attempts to target and punish protesters. Dissent is the bedrock of the U.S. democracy. On inauguration day in Washington, DC, no less than 230 people—including journalists, medical personnel and legal observers—were arrested, most of whom face felony rioting charges that carry the potential of up to 10 years in prison. Further, the executive order on policing threatens to target in particular protesters whose actions can bring them in conflict with law enforcement, including giving the attorney general the right to implement, “if warranted, legislation defining new crimes of violence and establishing new mandatory minimum sentences for existing crimes of violence against Federal, State, tribal, and local law

---

[lives-matter-activists/](#) and <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/10/standing-rock-fbi-investigation-dakota-access>.

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the immigration and refugee crisis, see PJSA’s position paper on the topic: Rinker, Jeremy and Laura Finley, *International Migration and Refugee Crisis Intervention*. Peace and Justice Studies Association, March 2016. <https://www.peacejusticestudies.org/position-paper-international-migration-and-refugee-crisis-intervention>

enforcement officers, as well as for related crimes.”<sup>5</sup> Such policy and discourse takes the United States in a regressive direction on issues of racial, economic, and gender justice—it does not “make America great again.”

We are aware that many PJSA members and our colleagues are directly impacted by the encroachment of civil liberties and increased instability. As our public spaces are increasingly under attack, we keep in our minds and hearts:

- the many students and scholars who are made particularly vulnerable by anti-immigration or anti-Muslim policies, as well as, a corporatist neo-liberal agenda in public education;
- those that face the continued, or escalating, targeting and harassment as they speak their moral conscience;
- all marginalized communities who remain silent out of a fear of retribution.

As many around the country and world struggle with how to make sense of the current political climate, our field of researchers, scholars and experts in conflict, peace, justice, reconciliation—and therefore in matters such as authoritarianism and fascism—serves as a critical resource. Outside of systematically debunking “alternative facts” that the new administration unleashes, members of our field provide critical analysis of the strategies and tactics of those in charge, and how to effectively respond. Research shows that nonviolent campaigns are more effective than armed ones, and the peace and justice field has identified hundreds of strategies and techniques of nonviolent civil resistance. Peace and justice scholars

---

<sup>5</sup> Presidential Executive Order on Preventing Violence against Federal, State, Tribal, and Local Law Enforcement Officers, February 9, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/09/presidential-executive-order-preventing-violence-against-federal-state>

provide insight on how to mobilize collective action, remain resilient, and strengthen civil society movements. As educators, many PJSA members and colleagues train young students to use situational analysis to transform destructive social conflict into constructive social change. Teaching about different forms of social, political and economic restructuring, they are well positioned to foster alternative social visions of what it will take to build safe, inclusive and prosperous communities for all.

In this critical moment, PJSA calls on Americans to support the work of empowerment education: an education that critically assesses systems of privilege, whether they be based on gender, race, religion, or class. Uplifting a pedagogy of oppression, we call on our members and colleagues to resist the urge to be lulled to sleep by the disruptive political theater of the new administration and to be vigilant about our own privilege, and privileged place, in the world. In doing this, we believe that we position activists with a clear sense of informed dissent to creatively envision what Micah White calls “a new approach to activism and a new kind of protest.”<sup>6</sup> This means that we must be supportive of independent journalism, skeptical of social media communication, and staunch in our insistence that all our elected officials are accountable to all Americans. Whereas we call for strong support of truly independent news media, we also call for skepticism toward dependence on social media, since research shows Americans increasingly receive only ‘news’ that confirms their views, and use social media precisely for this purpose. Sometime subtle, sometimes not, the disruptive tactics of the new Trump administration are calculated to enrage progressives and push the boundary of acceptable policy change further towards the right.

---

<sup>6</sup> White, Micah. *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution* (Canada: Alfred Knopf, 2016), 39.

Be clear, the pace and disruptive deployment of change by the new administration is far from haphazard. We believe that it is calculated to lay the groundwork to institute neoliberal ideological changes that continue to increase the power of the executive branch at the expense of our historic system of checks and balances, as well as silence marginal voices. We call on PJSA members and colleagues to use the skills and expertise of our field to nonviolently resist the disruptive theater in our current political landscape. Our field's passion and creativity towards peace must remain an unlimited resource for positive change in the face of on-going calculated political disruptions.

*NOTE: The PJSA publications committee welcomes members to propose specific position papers that challenge recent executive actions only touched upon in the above statement. While we encourage all types of nonviolent resistance and know that each of our members brings their own unique skills to this important work, if you have an idea for a position paper please reach out to publications committee chair Michael Minch ([MMinch@uvu.edu](mailto:MMinch@uvu.edu)).*