

The Astroworld festival disaster and the normalization of death

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Grisly details continue to surface in the aftermath of the deadly Astroworld music festival held Friday, November 5 in Houston, Texas, where eight audience members died and hundreds more were seriously injured during a performance by rapper Travis Scott.

With festival grounds severely overcrowded and escape routes blocked, what unfolded in Houston was a nightmarish mass suffocation and trampling. The catastrophe was allowed to continue for over an hour, even as the dead and dying were dragged from the crowd and people screamed and pleaded with festival staff to stop the show.

Survivors describe how the crush of human bodies was “literally suffocating us so bad that people were bleeding out of their mouth and nose.” Those who fell were “stomped on,” as “layers and layers” of people fell on top of one another and others stampeded over them.

There were countless red flags in the months, days and hours leading up to the disaster. Concert organizers were repeatedly warned about the threat of injuries and deaths. Videos show that earlier in the day the crowd overpowered security and broke down a gate, allowing hundreds of people to run into the festival without presenting a ticket or undergoing a security check. The chief of the Houston Police even visited Scott in his trailer before the performance to express his concern about the potential for violence.

In each of these instances, the organizers, authorities and the performer himself turned a blind eye, declaring that the show would go on.

The massive death toll displays a shocking disregard for human life on the part of the festival organizers and authorities, as well as Scott himself, who is seen on video acknowledging the presence of ambulances and injured fans in the crowd but keeps the show going.

There is no doubt that Scott bears a portion of the blame and may well be held legally and criminally liable. But demonizing one individual evades broader social issues. What accounts for this systematic indifference to death?

The disaster is the latest in a series of “mass casualty events” in the United States, from school shootings to building collapses, floods and hurricanes, that have become shockingly normalized. The disaster in Houston took place against the backdrop of the greatest “mass casualty event” of them all, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has so far killed over 775,000 Americans.

There were definite financial interests involved. Scott (net worth \$50 million), together with guest performer Drake (\$150 million) and Scott’s girlfriend Kylie Jenner (\$700 million), are at the center of a massive money-making machine in the business of public spectacles.

The festival was a joint venture with Live Nation Entertainment Incorporated. The sale of 100,000 tickets alone brought in upwards of \$37 million.

Live Nation is the largest live entertainment firm in the world. It runs more than 235 venues in 44 countries and organizes massive music festivals across the US like Lollapalooza and Bonnaroo. The company took in \$11.5 billion in revenue in 2019. Amid the abandonment of restrictions on the spread of COVID-19, Live Nation’s stock price has soared well above its pre-pandemic peak.

The event itself should never have taken place, but it is part of a broader effort of the ruling class to reopen everything even as more than 1,000 people in the US are dying of COVID-19 every day. With the aim of generating profits for its shareholders and executives, Live Nation staged a massive super-spreader event in

Houston during a global pandemic, with cases surging around the world.

In Texas, there have been 4.2 million COVID-19 cases and 72,000 deaths. The state's governor, Greg Abbott, is a leading advocate of "herd immunity" and mass infection. In April, Abbott signed an executive order banning state agencies and corporations that take public funding from requiring proof of vaccination. The next month, he signed a bill that punishes businesses that require customers to have proof of COVID-19 vaccination for services.

It was impossible to enforce even the minimal COVID-19 protocols that are in place. The crowd was overwhelmingly unmasked, and there was no social distancing to speak of. It was clear that, even had no one been trampled, the event would have led to COVID-19 infections and likely deaths.

The concert was held despite the inevitability that it would contribute to the further spread of the pandemic. Is it a surprise then, that the same organizers and authorities turned a blind eye when it became clear that the venue was overcrowded, security staff were unable to control the crowd, and medical staff were overwhelmed even before Scott started his performance?

More is involved, however, than just the financial considerations. There is a broader brutalization of American society, promoted in the media and the entire political establishment, within which the Houston concert took place. It is worth noting that Texas leads the United States in executions, with more than 830 people killed since 1930, nearly twice as many as the next state.

This finds its reflection in what passes for the "cultural life" of the country. For decades, the ruling class has promoted a toxic combination of individualism and selfishness, the cultural corollary to its own massive enrichment at the expense of society as a whole, and the working class in particular.

The content of the concert reflects a general backwardness that is systematically promoted. Margaret Thatcher's declaration that "there is no society" could describe much of contemporary rap music, with this single-minded focus on personal advancement, greed, hedonism and the glorification of violence.

Scott's music is themed around making as much

money as possible while "living in the moment," topics that pervade much of commercial hip-hop music. Days before the deadly concert, Scott released a song titled, ironically, "Escape Plan," in which he raps about one day having a fortune of "12 figures." That would put him on par with Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, who each control over \$100 billion. The music video features Scott posing in front of a succession of hypercars, yachts and luxury mansions.

High culture, meanwhile, is starving. Classical musicians have had their pay slashed year after year, and budgets for cultural education in schools are withering. There is a systematic and ongoing attack, orchestrated by the media and political establishment, on the legacy of the American Revolution and Civil War. The level of cultural degradation has reached a point where a professor, Bright Sheng at the University of Michigan, can be targeted and ostracized for showing a film version of one of Shakespeare's great plays, *Othello*.

It is this toxic mix of social inequality, greed, political reaction and backwardness that created the shocking indifference to human life on display in Houston.



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