

**Fear and Loathing in H.S. Thompson's America:  
Searching for Hope Amidst Decadence**

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Grau en Estudis Anglesos**

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June 2016

## **Acknowledgments**

I thank my supervisor Dr Abel Debritto for his guidance, patience and support. His recommendation of Thompson's novel couldn't have been more appropriate; its style and themes challenged my perceptions and motivated me to engage in a process of personal growth.

I also thank my family for their unconditional love and support.

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## Abstract

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has received relatively little scholarly criticism, the bulk of which essentially focuses on the historical context of the 1960s and its consequences, as well as Thompson's style of journalism; Gonzo Journalism. In this paper, I will focus on the first of the aforementioned topics, together with an analysis and criticism of the main factors that influenced the ideological and cultural foundations of the United States. This way, I will argue that Thompson's *Fear and Loathing* exposes the decadence that accompanied the increasing power of a rich minority by commenting on the consequences Thompson sees projected onto his society.

Thus, I will illustrate Thompson's denunciation of the moral decadence that dominates American society, which is epitomized in the novel through the city of Las Vegas. This decadence is also seen as the trigger of the Vietnam War, which is supported by the vast majority of the American population as a result of the ideological manipulation imposed upon them by the powerful sectors of society. In this regard, I will argue that *Fear and Loathing* condemns the failure of the intellectuals to expose these lies. On the other hand, I will comment on the forces that fought against the dominant decadence during the 1960s, and the counterculture movement that emerged from the subsequent freedom of this fight. Finally, I will mention the reaction of the powerful, who joined efforts to reduce the "excess" of democracy that the Civil Rights Movement brought about, thus, giving place to the death of the American Dream.

The aim of this project is to show that one of the main *leit motifs* of the book, namely, the depiction of a group of "beasts" in society, refers to a rich minority that focuses on preserving their own interests at the expense of those of the rest of the world instead of the drug users who could be seen as "beasts" through a superficial reading of the novel.

## 1. Introduction

“He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man”

—Dr. Johnson

The quotation that introduces Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* summarizes very precisely, albeit not evidently, the content of the novel, understood as a deep criticism of the ideological and cultural foundations of the United States. In this context, the invocation of the word “beast” has to be taken in relation to two basic ideas that are recurrent in the novel. The first of these, and the most representative of the book from a superficial standpoint, is the idea that drug users become unreasonable creatures, “beasts”, and criminals under the effect of narcotics. The other, and the one that is less easily perceived without a critical predisposition, is the idea that the American elitist minority is formed by a group of “beasts” who, above all, preserve their own economic and political interests without any concern for their impact on any other human being. These, I will propose, represent the real “beasts” in Thompson’s novel, as well as the malefactors responsible for the “brutish reality” (p. 23) that has bereaved Americans of their democracy.

Taking this into account, I will argue that Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* exposes the decadence that accompanied the increasing power of the rich minority by commenting on the consequences Thompson sees projected onto his society. This way, I will talk about the moral decadence that dominates American society by illustrating its hedonistic mentality, epitomized in the novel through the city of Las Vegas. Moreover, the protagonist, Duke, finds out that “the mentality of Las Vegas is so grossly atavistic that a really massive crime often slips by unrecognized” (p.

173), indicating its propensity to violence, which suggests that the Vietnam War was triggered by this moral corruption.

In this regard, I will expose the lack of critical awareness among the majority of Americans, which Duke ascribes to the unwillingness of intellectuals to unmask the lies of the government and to the influence of Christianity. Furthermore, I will also comment on the reaction to this decadence, encapsulated in the events developed throughout the 1960s in favour of democracy, as well as the counterculture movement that profited from the resultant freedom of this period. In the novel, Duke condemns the lack of political involvement of this movement in a moment in American history when democracy is being attacked by the powerful sector of society. Finally, I will defend that this reduction of freedom and democracy has brought about the death of the American Dream given the shifts produced in the economic system, which has prevented the vast majority of Americans to climb the social ladder.

## **2. Moral Decadence and Lack of Critical Awareness**

In this chapter, I will argue that *Fear and Loathing* exposes the moral decadence of the American society through an analysis of their deep-seated ideological beliefs commenting on their lack of critical thinking towards Christianity and the government's ideological discourses. The main sources I used to develop my arguments here are chapter 5 in Stephenson's *Gonzo Republic* (2012), which deals with the relationship between *Fear and Loathing* and the imperialistic tendencies of the US, and Chomsky's book on American power and the responsibility of intellectuals.

Regarding morality, "Americans have always struggled to accumulate goods and cultivate goodness." (Tindall, Shi, 2006: 542). From the first settlers who carried out a massive annihilation of the natives to the imperialist venture of the end of the 19th

century, Americans have always found a way to ennoble the justification of their colonial hysteria. This way, the justification of colonialism was the “moral obligation” to civilize savages, which, of course, implies race superiority and racism. Thompson deals with race issues in *Fear and Loathing* through the addition of a Samoan character, Dr. Gonzo, who is Duke’s attorney, the protagonist. “The attorney’s race works as a device to throw Anglo culture into relief” (Stephenson 2012: 139), which allows Duke to give him almost paternalistic, and not necessarily true, explanations about America. In this regard, the following comment should be taken in a satirical way: Duke states that his attorney should have more “faith in the essential decency of the white man’s culture” because receiving money from total strangers for their Vegas trip is “the American Dream in action!” (p. 11). This is because American white man’s culture is deprived of decency; it is simply a “greed-driven lottery” (Stephenson 2012: 139), long distanced from the values present in the Horatio Alger novels that Duke constantly invokes, namely, the achievement of success through hard work and determination.

Part of the ever-present moral decadence that surrounds American history is precisely this boundless greed for material goods and, in this sense, Las Vegas represents America’s greatest exponent of this culture of unapologetic materialism and ambition, a key factor in Thompson’s analysis of American society. The protagonists of *Fear and Loathing*, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, are sent to Las Vegas by the sports magazine *Rolling Stone* to cover two separate events, the motorcycle race “Mint 400” and the “National District Attorney’s Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs”. They see this trip as an opportunity to discover what the American Dream is, as seen from the perspective of “the white man’s culture”, and interestingly they decide to take with them a suitcase which contained:

“[T]wo bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole

galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls” (Thompson 1998: 4).

Despite the potential of these substances to fundamentally alter their capacity to act like normal human beings, Duke realizes that in a town like Vegas which is “full of bedrock crazies, nobody even notices an acid freak” (p. 24). Shortly after this, Duke experiences hallucinations in a bar, which he believes is full of reptiles engaged in an orgy of violence and booze, which implies that the greedy people visiting Vegas are beasts that live by decadent values.

Therefore, “the drug-saturated, dysfunctional Duke and Gonzo [serve] as a mirror to expose the legitimized hedonism and materialism of the society around them, and its propensity to violence and racism, fused above all in the Vietnam War” (Stephenson 2012: 140). The implication of this statement is that a hedonistic society that has created Las Vegas is also capable of creating a criminal war in a tiny country of the antipodes with the pretext that a communist victory in Vietnam would generate a communist upheaval across Asia and therefore, “[Americans] must stand in Vietnam or else [communists] will ‘sweep over the United States and take what [they] have’” (Chomsky 2002: 249). The arrogance of the excuses used to justify the killing of innocent people shows that far from holding an image of civilized defendants of freedom and justice, American society looks more like “a fucking reptile zoo”(p. 24), as Duke puts it. What’s more, if American society continues to think that “the United States has the right [...] to use military force anywhere in world [...] [through the] ‘exaltation [of qualities such as] ‘avarice and usury and precaution as [the highest virtues]’” (Chomsky 2002: 244-319), then America is doomed to re-experience and reproduce atrocities like the Vietnam War in the future. This is because a deep-seated belief in American exceptionalism overshadows the possibility of discovering and dismantling the manipulative ideological



discourses on the part of the population, who gladly tolerate any immoral decision that the government makes on the assumption that they know what is best for America and for the countries where they use military intervention.

According to Chomsky, it is the responsibility of intellectuals to “expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions” (Chomsky 2002: 324). Instead, we find that in *Fear and Loathing* these intellectuals put their efforts on manipulating and diverting opinions about who the real criminals are by lecturing cops about the danger that drug users pose to society. Although it is also interesting to note that these lecturers “get paid anywhere from \$500 to \$1000 a hit for lecturing to cop-crowds” (p. 139), which indicates that they would rather obtain money than exposing the lies of the American government. Thus, their attitude resonates with the hedonistic mentality of Las Vegas. For this reason, “Vegas implies that a society that can create the Vietnam War [and deny it is an atrocity] is more criminal and less safe than a subculture that uses hallucinogenic drugs. In fact, war creates delusions as powerful as those generated by acid” (Stephenson, 2012: 139), which is exemplified by Duke’s encounter with some retired officers on their dune-buggies, which are covered with American and violent symbols in addition to a machine-gun mount. These men are apparently hallucinating about being in Vietnam, destroying anything unpatriotic, like a man in a black jeep that Duke claims is “responsible for The Selling of the Pentagon.” (p. 40). Therefore, Thompson denounces the role of certain intellectuals who, despite having a lot of influence to make people understand and oppose the immorality and brutality of the Vietnam War, choose to join the prevailing decadence in which the greatest profit is the main priority.

As a consequence of the idea that drug people are dangerous criminals, Duke and Gonzo are constantly suffering blasts of paranoia and are trying to avoid violent

encounters with the police. One incident summarizes these concerns: Dr. Gonzo arrives to Vegas again after having abandoned an increasingly paranoid Duke on the occasion of the drug conference. Gonzo is accompanied by Lucy, a teenage girl who has run away from home and to whom he has given LSD in order to help her calm down. Duke puts some pieces together and realizes that if they get caught by the police with a drugged girl they will be in great trouble because he knows cops would recreate the most perverted story their exalted imaginations are capable of. This prompts them to send Lucy to another hotel before she comes out of the effects of LSD while they hope she won't remember them and try to report them. This makes Duke extremely paranoid, fearing they could both face a corrupt trial. He imagines the Prosecution showing:

“Exhibit Z, sworn testimony by three professional narcotics experts [who] have testified that the drug cache in the possession of these defendants [...] was enough to kill an entire platoon of United States Marines...and gentlemen, I use the word kill with all due respect for the fear and loathing I'm sure it provokes in every one of you when you reflect that these degenerate rapists used this galaxy of narcotics to completely destroy the mind and morals of this once-innocent teenager, this ruined and degraded girl [whom] they used for their own unspeakable ends!” (Thompson 1998: 127).

This reveals that “professional narcotics experts” only exist to divert public attention from the fact that it is self-interested politicians and decadent greedy “beasts” who are the real degenerates for “using [young boys] for their own unspeakable ends” in a terrible war which “completely destroys their mind and morals.” Besides, the emphasis on the word “kill” indicates that, while Duke and Gonzo would be unjustifiably sentenced for degenerating a girl, their alleged crime would seem trivial when compared to the excesses of those in charge of a war where thousands die. Indeed, the word “kill” provokes “fear” at the thought that the culprits of those killings would continue to perpetuate terrible crimes and get away with it, and “loathing” for their self-interested reasons behind the war and for manipulating the masses into supporting them.

This manipulation of the masses carried out by the powerful sectors of society is quite obviously accomplished thanks to their unlimited purchasing power. *Fear and Loathing* contains a passage in which Duke denounces that “‘the high side’ of Las Vegas is probably the most closed society west of Sicily” (p. 155), implying that Vegas functions as a closed society, a mafia, from which “gunsels, hustlers, drug cripples and all the other losers” (p. 156) are excluded. He continues by stating that “a gold mine like Vegas breeds its own army, like any other gold mine [since] big money [...] is synonymous with the Power to protect it” (pp. 155-6). This passage suggests the idea that the American government, or any other government that uses violence against its own population, can be equally considered a mafia.

The term mafia “is very often used to refer to cohesive clans or cliques engaging in ‘doubtful behaviour’ and robust or violent practices to protect and maintain income gained from positions of power” (Gaudino, 1999, cited in Mattina, 2012: 229). In light of this explanation, it can be concluded that in the case of the American government this “doubtful behaviour” could be equated with the Vietnam War, and the violent practices used to protect their positions of power are carried out through the police force. This way, while the police is supposed to protect civilians, it is ironic to note that when the population of the 1960s showed opposition to the government through demonstrations - many of them non-violent - the police charged against them to protect the government. This proves that the American government acts as a mafia-like group that focuses on protecting their own interests by means of ideological manipulation, that is, through the exaltation of patriotic, self-complacent and pragmatic arguments, swiftly replaced by brute police force when unsuccessful.

In any event, when the discourses of ideological indoctrination do serve their purpose we find that there is a considerable lack of critical thinking among the

population. Hence, cops in *Fear and Loathing* are pictured as ignorant, irrational, impulsive and violent, and they see their authority and their freedom to be violent as prerogatives especially given to them by God and the State, both of which they consider sacred and unquestionable. Thus, if the government tells them that the war on drugs is a very serious and legitimate quest because of the dangers that drugs entail, the outcome will be that cops will believe at face value any over-exaggerated story about the atrocities that drug users are capable of, even if they are completely made up and unbelievable, like the stories Gonzo tells a cop after the drug conference (pp.145-9).

In this regard, Gonzo seems to go on a moral responsibility rhapsody when he starts screaming to two couples of cops with their wives in a car. He pretends he is a traumatized Vietnam veteran selling “cheap heroin!” (p. 151) in a frustrated attempt to make the policemen understand that the real criminals were not drug people, who were just but victims of the “beasts” that had sent them to a war that degenerated their minds far more than heroin would. If successful, Gonzo expected his message to show the ironic implication of sending people to jail for not going to war, namely, sending them to war inevitably corrupts their minds and potentially turns them into criminals anyway. Unfortunately, Gonzo only manages to infuriate the cops, which is why they abandon the location as fast as they can, although they don’t worry too much about facing any trouble since they conclude that nobody else would believe “prima facie absurd” (p.153) stories about drug people except ignorant cops.

Analogously, faith and Christianity, which are at the center of American life, are condemned in *Fear and Loathing* as the culprits of the great lack of critical thinking among the population. In this sense, it is no accident that Gonzo calls cops “good vicious Catholics” (p. 14); they believe in “an avenging God [...] that teaches its followers [...] to punish those who disagree with their views” (Fowler, 2009: 443). But

the impact of Christianity is much bigger than that in American society, as can be understood from Duke's statement about how his "primitive Christian instincts have made [him] a criminal" (p. 87). The "gibberish" he claims he took seriously is the aspect of Christianity that places men above nature, hierarchy which allows men to justify the extraction of their own profit from the natural world, thus, giving place to a materialistic mentality. This, accompanied with a message for everybody to engage in a divine mission to better themselves, leads to a competitive individualism that fragments society and impedes them to fight for their collective interests, such as equality and democracy. In this sense, Duke condemns Christian faith for allowing him to justify his hedonistic, destructive behaviour.

The decadence of Las Vegas prompts Duke to say that it "is not a good town for psychedelic drugs; [r]eality itself is too twisted" (p. 47), which Dr. Gonzo also understands: "this place is getting to me. I think I'm getting the Fear" (p. 47). Indeed, reality in Vegas is so perverse that its decadence is even contagious, as can be deduced from Gonzo's attitude towards Duke when he asks him to let him sleep for two hours, to which Gonzo replies: "Of course, [...] I'll give you all the time you need, at my normal rates: \$45 an hour - but you'll be wanting a cushion, so why don't you just lay one of those \$100 bills down there beside the radio, and fuck off?" (p. 59). Given that Duke and Gonzo represent, to a certain extent, the values that the counterculture (or the hippies) of the 1960s stood for, the above incident could indicate that Thompson thought hippies were as decadent and hedonistic as the rest of American society despite fostering love, collective understanding and coexistence with nature.

### **3. Idealism, Political Dissidence and the Counterculture Movement**

In this chapter, I will focus on establishing the historical context relevant to Thompson's novel. This way, I will talk about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the backlash that followed that movement, which greatly limited the democracy attained up to then. I will also comment on the role of the counterculture movement in history, as seen by Duke, and his condemnation of its lack of political involvement. This chapter is mainly based on Thompson's correspondence and essays, where he deftly deals with the problems he sees in society.

Prosperity, conformism and materialism were interpreted by the postwar generation as symptoms of decadence in the context of their vastly unfair and unequal society. This motivated a significant number of white students, inspired by the Greensboro sit-ins initiated by four African American young men, to take the streets and join sit-ins and demonstrations during the 1960s in order to demand more freedom and equality for African Americans, which in turn inspired other groups, like women, to fight for their rights as well. Escalating military involvement in Vietnam produced a youth revolt across the country with two differentiated groups of rebels: the New Left, which was a greatly political force against injustice and inequality; and the counterculture or the hippies, a virtually apolitical group concerned with more personal matters like experimentation of psychedelic drugs, sexual freedom and spiritual development. The pressure exercised by the political activists of groups like the New Left made possible a very palpable sense of freedom. Duke describes this period during a nostalgic reflexion:

“San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. [...] There was madness in any direction, at any hour. [...] There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning. [...] We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave.

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water

mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back” (Thompson 1998: 66-8).

This reflexion “offers a lucid flashback of a unique moment of surging idealism and hope” (Alexander, 2012: 20) in American history, although it also reveals that it was a fleeting moment, and that the freedom attained during the 1960s was immediately repressed by the government through both a brutal police backlash and economic and political measures taken in order to reduce democracy.

On the other hand, the counterculture grew stronger in 1968, a year of great distress in which Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and violent clashes between youngsters and the police intensified greatly. The hippies, as well as the New Left, perceived and emphatically rejected the “crass corporate mentality that equated the good life with material goods” (Tindall, Shi, 2006: 642). This spirit is epitomized by Dr. Gonzo, while both protagonists are heading towards Vegas and Gonzo starts taking the drugs they are carrying: “Let’s forget about that bullshit about the American Dream [...] The important thing is the Great Samoan Dream” (Thompson 1998: 20). The materialistic aspect of the American Dream is taken here to the fore in order to denounce it, and the Great Samoan Dream is randomly selected as an alternative that encompasses the values of the counterculture, especially the need to take drugs.

This need to break from mainstream society and live in an environment of love and openness motivated hippies to live in communal urban enclaves such as San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district or in rural communes. With regard to Haight-Ashbury, Thompson explains that the excitement “was all done in by the time the big-league press got hold of those hippy spokesmen and guru caricatures. [...] By that time the Haight-Ashbury had become a commercial freak show and everybody on the street was selling either sandals or hamburgers or dope.” (Thompson, 2000: 11). This reveals

that hippies ruined San Francisco for Thompson and that he very much disliked them for that reason and for a number of other factors exposed in *Fear and Loathing*.

One of the reasons why Thompson rejects the hippy lifestyle is revealed when Duke is experiencing a paranoid hysteria because he thinks the police is after him for not paying his hotel bills in Vegas. He first comments on his mental state explaining that he recognizes that “the possibility of physical and mental collapse is very real now...but collapse is out of the question; as a solution or even a cheap alternative, it is unacceptable. Indeed. This is the moment of truth, that fine and fateful line between control and disaster” (Thompson 1998: 89). If we read this statement in the light of the political and social realities of 1971, we notice that Thompson is emphasizing the need for a renewed social pressure, which had essentially ended by then, in a decisive moment in history that will define the future of the nation. But Duke continues his argument by using the words of a hippy personality, Ken Kesey: “Buy the ticket, take the ride...and if it occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...chalk it off to forced consciousness expansion; Tune in, freak out, get beaten” (Thompson 1998: 89). The contrast between the unacceptable apathy advocated before and the complacent attitude spread by hippy leaders like Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey shows how disappointed Thompson is in them. More specifically, Thompson disliked the counterculture movement because they ultimately ended up embracing the same decadent values that they had previously rejected, namely, their hedonistic attitude and the creation of a new set of marketable goods together with unfortunate teachings that only benefited the pockets of the hippy leaders while many of their followers struggled to survive.

Nonetheless, it was another aspect of the hippy lifestyle that Thompson found intolerable, which was their lack of political involvement. In his opinion, hippies had



tried to live their lives based on the ancient rural values of colonial America, such as liberty and equality, but he hopelessly states that those values are not valid anymore (Thompson, 2000: 7) since the arrival of, what he called, “swine” to power. Thus, hippies failed to anticipate that in a society where money is everything, “dropping out” is a suicidal act; an unsustainable practice, which they soon found out as scarcity of food and drugs hit them. This innocence of believing that the system would change only by ignoring it, is what disappointed Thompson about the counterculture; it was the syndrome of the “Good German”, that is, the tolerance and passivity adopted while terrible things happen all around. In this regard, the unviable, innocent and fanatic aspects of the counterculture are best exemplified by Lucy in *Fear and Loathing*, who is a young religious fanatic who runs away from home with nothing to live on and a bunch of paintings portraying Barbra Streisand which Lucy plans to give to her. Her encounter with Gonzo, who drugs her with LSD, is only but one of the dangers she ignores as she innocently assumes “Peace and Love” are ubiquitous.

However, the syndrome of the “Good German” has been adopted by the vast majority of the American population, especially after the backlash reaction to the democratizing effects of the civil rights movement of the 60s. Many of these changes produced “panicked sheep”, as Thompson calls them, which is the term for the apathetic, submissive and terrified bulk of the population. Therefore, the only option available for the American people, who were terrified at the intensity of the government’s reaction, was to passively contribute to capitalism.

As a result, the increasing ideological manipulation of the population through media, religion and fear created what for Thompson has been a “Generation of swine”, in which the young have developed an extremely conformist, hedonistic and competitive attitude, and with it, a demented fixation about money and progress. *Fear*

*and Loathing* culminates precisely with the introduction of this “Generation of swine” by Duke, which is personified by two Marines, and his transformation into one of them: “I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger...a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident” (p. 204). Thus, the new generation is so utterly brainwashed that they obediently and confidently perpetuate the decadent practices of capitalism; they are the new “beasts” that have once and for all destroyed the American Dream, that is, the idea that honesty and hard work can lead to a decent life.

#### **4. The Death of the American Dream**

In this chapter, I will talk about how the American Dream was perceived throughout the history of the United States as well as the reasons Thompson ascribes to its decay by making reference, once again, to his correspondence.

With regard to the American Dream, Duke sees their trip as “a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in [America]” (p. 18), it is a “Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream” as the subtitle of the novel indicates. These fantastic possibilities to which Duke refers, the American Dream that makes them possible, seem to have their origin in one of the most well-known statements of the Declaration of Independence of the United States: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Archives.gov, 2016). From the first settlers of North America to the massive waves of immigrants that followed them throughout the history of the country, these truths accompanied them in their quest of a more stable, decent, and even richer life. This way, a German exile who was fleeing political persecution after the failed

Revolution of 1848 indicated: “[We come] into a country free from the despotism, privileged orders and monopolies, intolerable taxes, and constraints in matters of belief and conscience. [...] Fidelity and merit are the only sources of honor here” (Bogen, 1851 cited in Ozment and Beaver, 2004: 170-1). This passage illustrates that the American Dream was possible thanks to a more just economic system that allowed honesty and hard work to be the means by which people achieved a decent standard of living.

Likewise, economic opportunity was the motivation of another great number of immigrants such as the Chinese or the Italians, who saw great opportunities for life in the rapid industrialization and urbanization of America between the years 1880 and 1920. From the Great Depression of the 1930s onwards, immigration to the US declined sharply (HISTORY.com, 2016). However, the strong identification of the nation with success up until the Gilded Age that preceded the Great Depression helped define that “national character” that Duke mentions, and led James Truslow Adams to coin and define the concept “American Dream” in his book *The Epic of America* (1931) in which he highlighted the possibility of upward mobility with hard work and determination. This statement resonated with the spirit of the Americans during that time, because despite the devastating effects of the Great Depression on the American population they had reasons to be optimistic and hopeful due to the support of the government through legislation such as the New Deal. Nonetheless, this type of legislation most probably finished around the 1960s, at least in Thompson’s perception.

On November 22, 1963, Thompson wrote about the assassination of John F. Kennedy in a letter to his friend William J. Kennedy:

“We now enter the era of the shittrain, President Johnson and the hardening of the arteries. Neither your children nor mine will ever be able to grasp what Gatsby was after. [...] I was not prepared at this time for the death of hope, but here it is. [...] The savage nuts have shattered the great myth of American decency” (Thompson, Brinkley, 1997: 419-21).

This statement is significant for various reasons. First, it reveals Thompson's support for President Kennedy's political career, given the importance of the social changes that developed during his presidency, and the consequent sense of hopelessness that his assassination produced. Second, it verbalizes what most Americans had in their minds about the conspiracy behind Kennedy's assassination, which in the eyes of Thompson it had something to do with the military intervention of the US in the Vietnam War: in a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Thompson said that Johnson had "badly disappointed" him and that he had "put the US in a position very much resembling Nazi Germany's in the Spanish Civil War" (Thompson, Brinkley, 1997: 496). This political decision demonstrated that the interests of the few were placed before those of the majority, thus highlighting the increasing lack of democracy in the country.

Finally, it dismantles, in a satirical way, what the American Dream has meant to most Americans by referring to *The Great Gatsby's* quest for and a celebration of material abundance. Be that as it may, Thompson points to the fact that the American Dream is most probably doomed and that there is no hope for future generations to achieve it since all prospects of upward mobility will disappear with the imminent increase in social inequality. This concern about the prospective poverty and hopelessness of younger generations is also explored in *Fear and Loathing* when Duke, his attorney and a "kid" they had picked up are driving towards Las Vegas in a rented convertible and Duke finds himself "vaguely haunted by [their] hitchhiker's remark about how 'he'd never rode in a convertible before' [despite] living in a world of convertibles zipping past him [...] all the time. [...] It made [him] feel like King Farouk" (Thompson, 1998: 17), that is to say, like one of the few privileged ones in a greatly unequal society.

In *Fear and Loathing*, Duke actually claims that the American Dream can be found in Las Vegas, which is “the main nerve” (p. 191) of it. To exemplify what he means, he makes reference to the story of the owner of the Circus-circus, who “wanted to run away and join the circus when he was a kid”, and now he owned “his own circus, and a license to steal” (p. 191). Thompson is here implying that the American Dream as it was conceived in the 1930s, which represented a possibility for poor people to aspire to a better life through honesty, hard work and determination, is no longer possible since the economic system that supported it has collapsed. Instead, a “monstrous” version of the American Dream has emerged: aspiring to accumulate the most exorbitant amount of money that one is capable of through stealing, manipulating and coercing. In this new interpretation, it is implicit that poor people will continue to be poor, and rich people will be even richer. Therefore, if the American Dream is now only attainable for an oppressive minority and it is denied to the vast majority, then it is as good as dead.

#### 4.1 Democracy’s Decline

In this section, I will explain why American society has seen a decrease in their democracy by referencing to the Constitution of the United States as analyzed by Noam Chomsky. At the same time, I will illustrate the consequences of this decline in democracy through Duke’s account of the injustices he perceives.

Tightly related with the fixation with money and power is the idea that the inequality produced by a system constructed to benefit the rich has a harmful effect on democracy. In fact, this type of system has dominated the American political arena since the foundation of the country, which Chomsky describes in the documentary *Requiem for the American Dream* (2015). Following James Madison’s proposal, the

American Constitution was designed to allow rich people to have power through their capacity to choose the Senate. Therefore, Madison defended the idea that society's priority should be to "protect the minority of the opulent against the majority" (Yates, 1838 cited in Hutchinson, Nyks, Scott, 2015) and he justified this by saying that if poor people could choose their representatives freely they would organize to "take away the property of the rich" and that this would be unjust, which led him to conclude that the Constitution should be designed to "prevent democracy". For this reason, a great effort to reduce democracy has been developing in the United States since the 1970s as a backlash to the democratizing measures of the 1960s. One of these efforts consisted in redesigning the economy, allowing the rich minority to increase their power and wealth, which produced a logical decrease in democracy, since measures like job insecurity keep workers afraid of losing their jobs if they demand more rights.

This increasing lack of democracy is explored in *Fear and Loathing* through a few incidents in Las Vegas. The first instance is a reflexion Duke makes about how he thinks he is a good citizen, someone who is not dangerous, which should keep him away from jail even if he gets caught for some minor crime. However, he remembers that Muhammad Ali had been recently sentenced to five years for "refusing to kill 'slopes'" (p.74) in Vietnam. The fact that a person cannot decide freely whether they are sent to kill other people or not shows that far from being a democratic nation, the United States is pictured as a totalitarian state. The same is true of what happened to a friend of Duke, a harmless drifter, who "spent a week in the Vegas jail for 'vagrancy'" (p. 173). Furthermore, this implies that poor people, apart from having no rights at all, are criminals for not engaging in the demented fixation with progress that dominates the rest of society.

These two examples expose the violence used by the powers that be to destroy individual rights. In this sense, the reduction of democracy by the powerful sectors of society is seen by Duke as their refusal to communicate with the rest of the population in a reasonable and civilized way, which means that they have “deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts” (p. 8). On the other hand, all the workers of Vegas are showed in the book as victims of the mistreatment of the decadent “beasts” that visit or live in Las Vegas, like the cleaning lady who is attacked by a half-delirious Gonzo. This also shows that a diminishment of democracy in America, apart from destroying the American Dream, has generated a climate of moral decadence exercised by the wealthy over the less privileged.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to analyze Thompson's satirical perspective on the problems of American society as a result of the decline in democracy. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has been often misunderstood since its first publication, being usually interpreted as a biographical account of Thompson's excesses, which harmed to a certain extent the political impact of his writings. Nonetheless, this proves the aforementioned ideological manipulation of the population and their lack of critical awareness. In this regard, the fact that drug users as "beasts" prevails as a *leit motif* in the novel shows that it requires a considerable effort to discover the logic behind Thompson's contradicting ideas in order to understand that the real "beasts" are the owners of the big corporations, who manipulate the economy to serve their own interests. Consequently, having a decadent system ruled by "swine" greatly reduces democracy, elevates the level of moral decadence, and creates poverty and massive inequality. That this is happening right in front of Thompson's eyes and that he does not perceive anymore the willingness of Americans to continue to fight for their rights at such a crucial moment in history adds to his frustration and sense of hopelessness, as can be inferred from his use of the term "shittrain" to describe the beginning of this new era.

This way, *Fear and Loathing* marks the end of an era that represented a fragile and fleeting hope for the egalitarian values, professed since the foundation of America. Nonetheless, these values seem to have always been an illusion if we take into account that the American Constitution was actually designed to "prevent democracy" and, therefore, it seems logical to assume that the current system that has allowed a super-wealthy plutocracy to rule the world was only but a ticking bomb whose detonator was the democratizing events of the 1960s.



However, there seems to exist an implicit hopefulness in Thompson novel, conveyed through his condemnation of the conformism that has settled in society, which, if properly understood, it has the potential to infuriate and revolutionize consciences. Thus, despite, or maybe because of, his foul language and his morbid humour one is able to extract powerful counterarguments in favour of critical awareness and political dissidence. In this sense, despite Thompson's affection for certain aspects of the counterculture movement of the 1960s, such as its propensity to seek freedom and egalitarianism, he chooses to condemn it in terms of its failure to understand that nobody will be truly free until democracy is restored, which means that the counterculture's main priority should have been getting involved in the social upheaval to demand democracy, which is ultimately the road to hope.

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