

RESISTING FASCISM AND WINNING THE EDUCATION WARS: HOW WE CAN MEET THE CHALLENGE

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Across the globe, democratic institutions such as the independent media, schools, the legal system, certain financial institutions and higher education are under siege. The promise and ideals of democracy are receding as right-wing extremists breathe new life into a fascist past and undermine the social imagination. Reinventing a sordid fascist legacy with its obsession with racial purity, white nationalism and the denial of civil liberties, white supremacists are once more on the move - subverting language, values, courage, vision and a critical consciousness.

Education has increasingly become a tool of domination as right-wing pedagogical apparatuses controlled by the entrepreneurs of hate attack workers, the poor, people of colour, refugees, undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) people and others considered disposable. In the midst of an era when an older social order is crumbling and a new one is struggling to define itself, there emerges a time of confusion, danger and moments of great restlessness. The present moment is once again at a historical juncture in which the structures of liberation and authoritarianism, fascism and democracy, are vying to shape a future that appears to be either an unthinkable nightmare or a realisable dream.

We now live in a world that resembles a dystopian novel. Since the late 1970s, a form of predatory capitalism, or what can be called neoliberalism, has waged war on the welfare state, public goods and the social contract. Neoliberalism believes that the market should govern not just the economy but all aspects of society. It concentrates wealth in the hands of a financial elite and elevates unchecked self-interest, self-help, deregulation and privatisation to the governing principles of society.

Under neoliberalism, everything is for sale and the only obligation of citizenship is consumerism. At the same time, it ignores basic human needs such as health care, food security, decent wages and quality education. Neoliberalism views government as the enemy of the market, limits society to the realm of the family and individuals, embraces a fixed hedonism and challenges the very idea of the public good. Under neoliberalism, all problems are personal and individual, making it almost impossible to translate private troubles into wider systemic considerations. In its recent incarnation, neoliberalism works to depoliticise and demobilise the majority of the population that opposes its agenda. At the same time, it supports gerrymandering, voter suppression and the power of big money to drive politics, while undermining all viable forms of civic and public education.

We live in an age when economic activity is divorced from social costs, while policies that produce racial cleansing, environmental destruction, militarism and staggering inequality have become defining features of everyday life and established modes of governance. Clearly, there is a need to raise fundamental questions about the role of education in a time of impending tyranny. Or to put it another way: What are the obligations of education to democracy itself? That is, how can education work to reclaim a notion of democracy in which matters of social justice, freedom and equality become fundamental features of learning to live with dignity in a democracy?

The growing authoritarianism in the United States (US), led largely by a far-right Republican Party, has revealed in all its ugliness the death-producing mechanisms of white supremacy: systemic inequality, censorship, a culture of cruelty and an increasingly dangerous assault on public and higher education. We now live in an age in which the threat of authoritarianism has become more dangerous than ever. This is evident as a number of red (Republican) states have put in place a range of reactionary educational policies that range from banning books and the teaching of ‘critical race theory’ to forcing educators to sign loyalty oaths, post their syllabuses online, give up tenure, allow students to film their classes and much more.

Not only are these laws aimed at critical educators and minorities of class and colour, this far-right attack on education is also part of a larger war on the very ability to think, question and engage in politics from the vantage point of critical thinking, informed citizenship and a willingness to address social injustice. More generally, it is part of a concerted effort to destroy public and higher education and the very foundations of political agency. Under the rule of this emerging authoritarianism, political extremists are attempting to turn public education into a space for killing the social imagination, a place where provocative ideas are banished and where faculty and students are punished through the threat of force or harsh disciplinary measures for speaking out, engaging in dissent and advancing democratic values. In this case, the attempt to undermine schooling as a public good and democratic public sphere is accompanied by a systemic attempt to destroy the capacity for critical thinking, compassion for others, critical literacy, moral witnessing, support for the social compact and the civic imagination. Schools that view themselves as democratic public spheres are now disparaged by Republican politicians and their allies, who sneeringly define public and higher education as ‘socialism factories’.

The growing threat of authoritarianism is also visible in the emergence of an anti-intellectual culture that derides any notion of critical education. What was once unthinkable regarding attacks on public education has become normalised. Under attack by Republican legislators are teachers, students, parents and librarians who oppose book bans and support critical pedagogy. As such, they are increasingly harassed, threatened and smeared as paedophiles by far-right extremists. Furthermore, calls for social justice, racial equality and a critical rendering of history are disparaged as unpatriotic. Ignorance is now literally praised as a virtue.

This right-wing assault on democracy is a crisis. It cannot be allowed to turn into a catastrophe in which all hope is lost. It is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for taking seriously the necessity to make education central to politics. This suggests viewing education as a social concept rooted in the goal of empowerment and emancipation for all people, especially if we do not want

to default on education's role as a democratic public sphere. This is a form of education that encourages human agency by creating the conditions that enable students not only to be critical thinkers, but also critically engaged social agents. This is a pedagogical practice that calls students beyond themselves and embraces the ethical imperative to care for others, dismantle structures of domination and be subjects rather than objects of history, politics and power. If educators are going to develop a politics capable of awakening our critical, imaginative and historical sensibilities, it is crucial for us to remember education as a project of individual and collective empowerment - a project based on the search for truth, an enlarging of the imagination and the practice of freedom.

This is a political project in which civic literacy infused with a language of critique and possibility addresses the notion that there is no democracy without knowledgeable and civically literate citizens. Such a language is necessary to enable the conditions to forge a collective resistance among educators, youth, artists and other cultural workers in defence of public goods. An international movement for the defence of civic literacy, historical memory and critical pedagogy is crucial at a time when the right wing is flooding the media with falsehoods and conspiracy theories, further undermining the public's ability to distinguish between truth and lies, good and evil. Critical education - on multiple levels and in diverse spheres - is especially important in a society in which the democratisation of the flow of information has been subverted into the democratisation of the flow of misinformation. Moreover, since critical pedagogy connects knowledge to the power of identity and self-determination, it is deeply attentive to a language that is historical and contextual while keeping students aware of the questions that need to be asked in order for them to speak and act from a position of agency and empowerment.

It is important for us as educators to note that the current era is marked by the rise of 'disimagination machines' that produce manufactured ignorance on an unprecedented level, and in doing so give authoritarianism a new life. Even worse, we live at a time when the unthinkable has become normalised,

in which anything can be said and everything that matters is left unsaid. Consequently, the American public is rapidly losing both the language and the ethical grammar to challenge the political and racist machineries of cruelty, state violence and targeted exclusions.

In an age of social isolation, information overflow, a culture of immediacy, consumer glut and spectacularised violence, it is even more crucial to take seriously the notion that democracy cannot exist or be defended without critically literate and engaged individuals. Education, both in its symbolic and institutional forms, has a central role to play in fighting the resurgence of false renderings of history, white supremacy, religious fundamentalism, militarism and ultra-nationalism. As far-right movements across the globe disseminate toxic racist and ultra-nationalist images of the past, it is essential to reclaim education as a form of historical consciousness and moral witnessing. This is especially true at a time when historical and social amnesia have become a national pastime, further normalising an authoritarian politics that thrives on ignorance, fear, hate and the suppression of dissent. The merging of power, new digital technologies and everyday life have not only altered time and space, they have expanded the reach of culture as an educational force. A culture of immediacy, coupled with a fear of history and a 24/7 flow of information, now wages war on historical consciousness, attention spans, and the conditions necessary to think, contemplate and arrive at sound judgments.

Under such circumstances, it is important to acknowledge that education as a form of cultural work extends far beyond the classroom and that its pedagogical influence, though often imperceptible, is crucial to challenge and resist. We must remember that education and schooling are not the same, and that schooling must be viewed as a sphere distinctive from the educative forces at work in the larger culture. Education is more than schooling, and that reinforces the notion of how important it has become as a tool to shape consciousness, the public imagination and agency itself. One important pedagogical lesson to be learned at a time when language is under assault and stripped of any viable meaning is that fascism begins with hateful words, the demonisation of others considered disposable, and then moves on to attack

ideas, burn books, arrest dissident intellectuals, attack gender minorities, and expand the reach of the carceral state while intensifying the horrors of jails and prisons.

This is especially important to remember now, since education in the last four decades has diminished rapidly in its capacities to educate young people and others to be reflective, critical and socially engaged agents. Increasingly, the utopian possibilities formerly associated with public and higher education as a public good capable of promoting social equality and supporting democracy have become too dangerous for the apostles of authoritarianism. Public schools more than ever are subject to the toxic forces of privatisation and mindless standardised curricula, while teachers are deskilled and subject to intolerable labour conditions. Unfortunately, public and higher education now mimic a business culture run by a managerial army of bureaucrats. At the same time, all levels of education are under attack by right-wing Republicans who seek to censor history, forbid discussions about racism, ban books, eliminate tenure and impose restrictions on teacher autonomy.

The current forces of white supremacy are not the only threat to public and higher education. Since the 1980s, conservatives and liberals have increasingly sought to model public education after business culture, standardise curriculum, teach for the test and flood teachers with ‘one-size-fits-all’ models of teaching. This model was reinforced during the pandemic with its heavy emphasis on a crude instrumentalisation of pedagogy. This continues to be seen in an endless emphasis on training exercises to familiarise teachers and students with Zoom, Teams and other methods of online teaching. The commanding visions of democracy are in exile at all levels of education.

Critical thought and the imaginings of a better world present a direct threat not only to white supremacists but also to ideologues who embrace a narrow, corporate vision of the world in which the future must always replicate the present in an endless circle, in which capital and the identities that it legitimates merge into what might be called a dead zone of the imagination

and pedagogies of repression. One consequence is that the distinction between education and training has collapsed, and the most valued educational experiences are geared to job preparation. Corporate models of education attempt to mould students in the market-driven mantras of self-interest, harsh competition, unchecked individualism and the ethos of consumerism.

Young people are now told to ‘invest’ in their careers, reduce education to job training, and achieve success at any cost. It is precisely this replacement of educated hope with an aggressive dystopian neoliberal project and cultural politics that also represents another dangerous assault on public and higher education. Under this corporate and market-based notion of schooling, the mantras of privatisation, deregulation and the destruction of the public good are matched by a toxic merging of inequality, social sorting, racial cleansing and the nativist language of borders, walls and camps.

In the shadow of this impending nightmare, the lesson we cannot forget is that critical pedagogy provides the promise of a protected space within which to think against the grain of received opinion, a space to question and challenge, to imagine the world from different standpoints and perspectives, to reflect upon ourselves in relation to others and, in so doing, to understand what it means to ‘assume a sense of political and social responsibility’. If the emerging authoritarianism and rebranded fascism in the United States is to be defeated, critical education needs to become an organising principle of politics. In part, this can be done with a language that exposes and unravels falsehoods, systems of oppression and corrupt relations of power while making clear that an alternative future is possible. Hannah Arendt was right to argue that language is crucial in highlighting the often hidden ‘crystalized elements’ that make authoritarianism more likely (The Hannah Arendt Center, 2016).

The language of critical pedagogy and literacy are powerful tools in the search for truth and the condemnation of falsehoods and injustices. Moreover, it is through language that the history of fascism can be remembered and the lessons of the conditions that created the plague of genocide can inform the understanding that fascism does not reside solely in the past and that its

traces are always dormant, even in the strongest democracies. Paul Gilroy argues correctly that it is crucial in the current historical moment to re-engage with fascism, to address how it has crystallised in different forms and in doing so to ‘work toward redeeming the term from its trivialization and restoring it to a proper place in discussions of the moral and political limits of what is acceptable’ (Gilroy, 2000: 144).

The ongoing threat of fascist politics and its assault on the foundations of critical consciousness is one more reason for educators to make the political more pedagogical and the pedagogical more political. Pedagogy is always political in that it is first and foremost a struggle over agency, identities, desires and values while it also has a crucial role to play in addressing important social issues, defining the future and defending public and higher education as democratic public spheres. Critical pedagogy makes clear that education is not neutral and that matters of agency, knowledge, consciousness, and desire are the grounds of politics. Making the political pedagogical, in this instance, suggests producing modes of knowledge and social practices that not only affirm oppositional ideas and pedagogical practices but also offer opportunities to mobilise instances of collective outrage, coupled with direct mass action, against a ruthless casino capitalism and an emerging fascist politics. Such a mobilisation must oppose the glaring material inequities of our society as well as the growing cynical belief that democracy and gangster capitalism are synonymous. At the very least, critical pedagogy proposes that education is a form of political intervention in the world, one that can create the possibilities for individual and social transformation.

Ignorance now rules America. Not the simple, allegedly innocent ignorance that comes from an absence of knowledge, but a malicious ignorance, forged in the arrogance of refusing to think hard about an issue or to engage language in the pursuit of justice. James Baldwin was correct in issuing this stern warning in *No Name in the Street*: ‘Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have’ (Morrison, 1998: 437). In the far-right fascist playbook, thinking is now viewed as a threat - and

thoughtlessness is considered a virtue. All traces of critical thought appear only at the margins of the culture, as ignorance becomes the primary organising principle of American society. As is well known, Donald Trump's prideful ignorance is still on display daily and lives on through a Republican Party thoroughly taken over by far-right extremists.

A culture of lies and thoughtlessness now serves to prevent power from being held accountable. Ignorance is the enemy of critical thinking, engaged intellectuals and emancipatory forms of education. Ignorance is now increasingly dangerous, especially when it defines itself as common sense while exhibiting a disdain for truth, scientific evidence and rational judgment. There is more at stake here, however, than the production of a toxic form of illiteracy celebrated as common sense, the normalisation of fake news and the emerging discourse of white supremacy. There is also the closing of the horizons of the political, coupled with explicit expressions of cruelty and a 'widely sanctioned ruthlessness'. Such ruthlessness is evident in the attack on women's right to abortion, an expansion of gun rights fuelling mass violence in the United States, staggering levels of inequality, voter suppression laws and ongoing incidents of state violence against minorities of colour and class. The very conditions that enable people to be knowledgeable and socially responsible are under siege as schools are defunded, media becomes increasingly corporatised, opposition journalists are labelled as 'enemies of the people' and so-called reality TV becomes the model for mass entertainment. We now live in a new age in which we are told that the central mark of our agency is to be at war with others, unleash our most ruthless and competitive side and learn how to survive in the war against all, survival of the fittest jungle of neoliberal capitalism.

Under such circumstances, there is a full-scale attack on thoughtful reasoning, empathy, collective resistance and the compassionate imagination. Words such as love, trust, freedom, responsibility and choice have been deformed by a market logic that commercialises and commodifies all relations of exchange. Freedom now means removing oneself from any sense of social responsibility in order to retreat into privatised orbits of self-indulgence. And

so it goes. The new forms of illiteracy do not simply constitute an absence of learning, ideas or knowledge. Nor can they be solely attributed to what has been called the ‘smartphone society’. On the contrary, ignorance is a wilful practice and goal used by the Republican Party and its allies to actively depoliticise people and make them complicit with the forces that impose misery and suffering upon their lives.

Given the current crisis of politics, agency, history and memory, educators need a new political and pedagogical language to address the changing contexts and issues facing a world in which anti-democratic forces draw upon an unprecedented convergence of resources -financial, cultural, political, economic, scientific, military and technological - to exercise powerful and diverse forms of control. If educators and others are to counter the forces of market fundamentalism and white supremacy, it is crucial to develop educational approaches that reject a collapse of the distinction between market liberties and civil liberties, a market economy and a market society. It is also crucial to make visible and attack all attempts to turn public education into white supremacy factories that erase history, degrade LGBTQ and students of colour, and define any talk about racism, equality and social justice as un-American or unpatriotic.

In this instance, critical pedagogy becomes a political and moral practice in the fight to revive civic literacy, civic culture and a notion of shared and engaged citizenship. Politics loses its emancipatory possibilities if it cannot provide the educational conditions for enabling students and others to think against the grain, and to realise themselves as informed, critical and engaged individuals. There is no radical politics without a pedagogy capable of awakening consciousness, challenging common sense and creating modes of analysis in which people discover a moment of recognition that enables them to rethink the conditions that shape their lives.

As a rule, educators should do more than create the conditions for critical thinking and nourishing a sense of hope for their students. They also need to responsibly assume the role of public intellectuals and border-crossers

within broader social contexts, and to be willing to share their ideas with other educators and the wider public by making use of new media technologies and a range of other cultural apparatuses, especially those outlets willing to address critically a range of social problems. Educators can speak to more general audiences in a language that is clear, accessible and rigorous. More importantly, as teachers organise to assert both the importance of their role as citizen-educators in a democracy, they can forge new alliances and connections with broader social movements that include and expand beyond working with unions. We see evidence of this movement among teachers and students currently organising against gun violence and systemic racism or aligning with parents, unions and others in order to fight the gun lobbies and politicians bought and sold by the violence industries.

Education operates as a crucial site of power in the modern world. If teachers are deeply concerned about safeguarding education, they will have to take seriously how pedagogy functions on local and global levels. Cultural apparatuses are no longer bound to national boundaries. Critical pedagogy has a key role to play in both understanding and challenging how power, knowledge and values are deployed, affirmed and resisted within and outside traditional discourses and cultural spheres. In a local context, critical pedagogy becomes an important theoretical tool for understanding the institutional conditions that place constraints on the production of knowledge, learning, academic labour, social relations and democracy itself. Critical pedagogy also provides a discourse for engaging and challenging the construction of social hierarchies, identities and ideologies as they traverse local and national borders. In addition, pedagogy as a form of production and critique offers a discourse of possibility - a way to provide students with the opportunity to link understanding to commitment, and social transformation to seeking the greatest possible justice.

This suggests that one of the most serious challenges facing teachers, artists, journalists, writers and other cultural workers is the task of developing discourses and pedagogical practices that connect a critical reading of the word and the world in ways that enhance the creative capacities of young people and

provide the conditions for them to become critically engaged agents. In taking up this project, educators and others should work to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, values and civic courage that will enable them to struggle toward make desolation and cynicism unconvincing - and hope practical. Hope, in this instance, is educational, removed from the fantasy of an idealism that is unaware of the constraints facing the struggle for a radical democratic society. Educated hope is not a call to overlook the difficult conditions that shape both schools and the larger social order, nor is it a blueprint removed from specific contexts and struggles. On the contrary, it is the precondition for imagining a future that does not replicate the nightmares of the present, the precondition for not making the present into the future.

Educated hope provides the basis for dignifying the labour of teachers. It offers up critical knowledge linked to democratic social change, affirms shared responsibilities and encourages teachers and students to recognise ambivalence and uncertainty as fundamental dimensions of learning. Educated hope is tempered by the complex reality of the times and is understood as a project and condition for providing a sense of collective agency, opposition, political imagination and engaged participation. Without hope, even in the direst times, there is no possibility for resistance, dissent and struggle. Agency is the condition of struggle, and hope is the condition of agency. Hope expands the space of the possible and becomes a way of recognising and naming the incomplete nature of the present. Such hope offers the possibility of thinking beyond the given and learning to act otherwise. As difficult as this task may seem to educators, if not to a larger public, it is a struggle worth waging.

The current fight against an emerging authoritarianism and white nationalism across the globe is not only a struggle over economic structures or the commanding heights of corporate power. It is also a struggle over visions, ideas, consciousness and the power to shift the culture itself. It is also, as Arendt points out, a struggle against ‘a widespread fear of judging’ (Berkowitz, 2020). Without the ability to judge, it becomes impossible to

recover words that have meaning, to imagine a future that does not mimic the dark times in which we live, and to create a language that changes how we think about ourselves and our relationship to others. Any struggle for a radical democratic order will not take place if ‘the lessons from our dark past [cannot] be learned and transformed into constructive resolutions’ and solutions for struggling for and creating a post-capitalist society.

In the end, there is no democracy without informed citizens and no justice without a language critical of injustice. Democracy begins to fail and political life becomes impoverished in the absence of those vital public spheres such as public and higher education in which civic values, public scholarship and social engagement allow for a more imaginative grasp of a future that takes seriously the demands of justice, equity and civic courage. Without financially robust schools, critical forms of education, and knowledgeable and civically courageous teachers, young people are denied the habits of citizenship, the critical modes of agency and the grammar of ethical responsibility. Democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting pedagogy to the practice of freedom, social responsibility and the public good. I want to conclude by making some suggestions, however incomplete, regarding what we can do as educators to save public education and connect it to the broader struggle over democracy itself.

Amid the current assault on public and higher education, educators can reclaim and expand its democratic vocation and in doing so align itself with a vision that embraces its mission as a public good. They can also acknowledge and make good on the claim that there is no democracy without informed and knowledgeable citizens. Education should be defended as a crucial public good and funded through federal funds that guarantee a free, quality education for everyone. The larger issue here is that education cannot serve the public good in a society marked by staggering forms of inequality. Inequality is a curse and must be overcome if public and higher education are to thrive as a public good. In order to keep alive the critical function of education, educators should teach students to engage in multiple literacies, extending from print and visual culture to digital culture. Students need to learn

how to become border-crossers who can think dialectically. Moreover, they should learn not only how to consume culture but also how to produce it; they should learn how to be both cultural critics and cultural producers.

Educators must defend critical education both as the search for truth and also the practice of freedom. Such a task suggests that critical pedagogy should shift not only the way people think but also encourage them to shape for the better the world in which they find themselves. As the practice of freedom, critical pedagogy arises from the conviction that educators and other cultural workers have a responsibility to unsettle power, trouble consensus and challenge common sense. This is a view of pedagogy that should disturb, inspire and energise a vast array of individuals and publics. Such pedagogical practices should enable students to interrogate common-sense understandings of the world, take risks in their thinking, however difficult, and be willing to take a stand for free inquiry in the pursuit of truth, multiple ways of knowing, mutual respect and civic values. Students need to learn how to think dangerously, push at the frontiers of knowledge and support the notion that the search for justice is never finished and no society is ever just enough. These are not merely methodical considerations but also moral and political practices, because they presuppose the creation of students who can imagine a future in which justice, equality, freedom and democracy matter and are attainable.

Educators need to argue for a notion of education that is inherently political - one that relentlessly questions the kinds of labour, practices and forms of teaching, research and modes of evaluation that are enacted in higher education. While such a pedagogy does not offer guarantees, it defines itself as a moral and political practice that is always implicated in power relations because it offers particular versions and visions of civic life and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, our physical and social environment and the future itself.

Finally, I want to suggest that in a society in which democracy is under siege, it is crucial for educators to remember that alternative futures are possible and that acting on these beliefs is a precondition for making radical

change possible. At stake here is the courage to take on the challenge of what kind of world we want to build for our children. The philosopher Ernst Bloch (1995) insisted that hope taps into our deepest experiences, and that without it reason and justice cannot blossom. Now more than ever, educators must live up to the challenge of keeping the fires of resistance burning with a feverish intensity. Only then will we be able to keep the future open.

The fascist plague is upon us, making it all the more urgent for educators and others to think differently in order to act differently, especially if we want to imagine and fight collectively for a future grounded in the principles, values and institutions of a socialist democracy.

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