

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE AGE OF FASCIST POLITICS

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Ghosts of fascism

The long shadow of domestic fascism, defined as a project of racial and cultural cleansing, is with us once again both in North America and abroad. Educators have seen the ghosts of fascism before in acts of savage colonialism and dispossession, in an era of slavery marked by the brutality of whippings and neck irons, and in a Jim Crow age most obvious in the spectacularised horror of murderous lynchings. More recently, we have viewed fascist acts of terror in a politics of disappearances and genocidal erasures under the dictatorships of Adolf Hitler, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and others. And in each case, history has given us a glimpse of what the end of humanity would look like (Toscano, 2020). Yet the lessons of history with its language of hate, machineries of torture, death camps and murderous violence as a political tool are too often ignored.

The promise and ideals of democracy are receding as right-wing extremists breathe new life into a fascist past. This is particularly true as 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, trans people, immigrants from the global South, and others are considered disposable. Confronting this fascist counter-revolutionary movement necessitates creating a new language and the building of a mass social movement in order to construct empowering terrains of education, politics, justice, culture, and power that challenge existing systems of white supremacy, white nationalism, manufactured ignorance, civic illiteracy and economic oppression.

Rise of predatory neoliberalism

We now live in a world that resembles a dystopian novel. This is a world marked by new crises and the intensification of old antagonisms. 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 insists 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, consumerism is the only obligation of citizenship, and the only relations that matter are modelled after forms of commercial exchange. At the same time, neoliberalism ignores basic human needs such as universal healthcare, food security, decent wages, and quality education. Moreover, it disparages human rights and imposes a culture of cruelty upon young people, people of colour, women, immigrants, and those considered disposable.

Neoliberalism views government as the enemy of the market except when it benefits wealthy corporations, 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, the political collapses into the personal and therapeutic, rendering all problems a singular matter of individual responsibility, thus making it almost impossible for individuals to translate private troubles into wider systemic considerations. This overemphasis on personal responsibility depoliticises people by offering no language for addressing wider structural issues such as the call for better jobs, schools, safer neighbourhoods, free education, and a basic universal wage, among other issues. It also stresses the language of emotional self-management, producing a kind of ethical tranquilisation and indifference to wider democratic struggles for racial, gender, and economic reforms. Moreover, under neoliberalism economic activity is divorced from social costs further eviscerating any sense of social responsibility at a time when policies that produce systemic racism, 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 in a society?

Rise of fascist education in the United States

In the current historical moment, the threat of authoritarianism has become more dangerous than ever - one in which education has taken on a new role in the age of upgraded fascism. This authoritarian project is particularly evident in the United States as a number of far-right governors have put into place a range of reactionary educational policies that range from disallowing teachers to mention critical race theory and issues dealing with sexual orientation to forcing educators to sign loyalty oaths, post their syllabuses online, give up tenure, allow students to film their classes, and much more. Regarding the banning of books, Judd Legum (2023) notes:

“Across the country, right-wing activists are seeking to ban thousands of books from schools and other public libraries. Those promoting the bans often claim they are acting to protect children from pornography. But the bans frequently target books ‘by and about people of color and LGBTQ individuals’”.

Many of the books labelled as pornographic are actually highly acclaimed novels (Ibid.). Such policies echo a fascist past in which the banning of books eventually led to both the imprisonment of dissidents and the eventual disappearance of bodies (Ibid.).

Not only are these attacks on certain books and ideas aimed at 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 being critical, informed, and willing to engage in a culture of questioning. More generally, it is part of a concerted effort to destroy public and higher education and the very foundations of civic literacy and political agency. Under the rule of this emerging authoritarianism, political extremists are attempting to turn education into a space for killing the 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 holding power accountable. In this case, the attempt to undermine public schooling and higher education as public goods and democratic public spheres is accompanied by a systemic attempt to destroy the notion that

they are vital democratic public goods. Schools that view themselves as democratic public spheres are now disparaged by far-right Republican politicians and their allies as socialism factories, government schools, and citadels of left-wing thought.

In fact, as Jonathan Chait (2022) observes, what is being said by a right-wing Republican Party about American schools echoes a period in history in which fascist regimes used a similar language rooted in the cold war rhetoric of McCarthyism. For instance, Senator Marco Rubio of Florida has called schools ‘a cesspool of Marxist indoctrination’. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claims that ‘teachers’ unions, and the filth that they’re teaching our kids’, will ‘take this republic down’. Donald Trump has stated that ‘pink-haired communists [are] teaching our kids’ and that ‘Marxist maniacs and lunatics’ run higher education (Pengelly, 2023). Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, stated on Fox News that if he won the presidency in 2024, he ‘will ... destroy leftism in this country and leave woke ideology in the dustbin of history’ (Ibid.).

This is more than anti-democratic, authoritarian rhetoric. It also shapes poisonous policies in which education is increasingly defined as an animating space of repression, violence and weaponised as a tool of censorship, state indoctrination, and terminal exclusion. The examples have become too numerous to address. A short list would include a Florida school district banning a graphic novel version of *Anne Frank’s Diary*, the firing of a Florida principal for showing her class an image of Michelangelo’s ‘David’, and the publishing of a textbook that removed any hint of racism from Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. It gets worse and appears to be updated with each passing day.

Freire’s making education central to politics and rise of fascist policies

It is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for taking seriously Paulo Freire’s ongoing attempts to make education central to politics. At stake for Freire (2018) was the notion that education was a social concept, rooted in the goal of emancipation for all people. Moreover, his view of education encouraged human agency, one that was not content to enable people to only be critical thinkers, but also engaged individuals and social agents. Like John Dewey (2018), Freire’s political project recognised that there is no democracy without knowledgeable and

informed citizens. Today this insight is fundamental to creating the conditions to forge collective international resistance among educators, youth, artists, and other cultural workers in defence of public goods, if not democracy itself. Such a movement is important to resist and overcome the tyrannical fascist nightmares that have descended upon the United States, Italy, Hungary, India, and a number of other countries plagued by the rise of right-wing populist movements, far-right militias such as the Proud Boys, and neo-Nazi parties.

The signposts of America's turn towards a fascist notion of education are everywhere. Trans students are under attack, their history is being erased from school curricula, and the support of their caregivers is increasingly criminalised. African American history is sanitised and rewritten, while teachers, faculty, and librarians who contest or refuse this fascist script are being fired, demonised, and in some cases also subject to criminal charges. Mirroring an attack on trans people similar to the one that took place in the early years of the Third Reich, far-right politicians and white supremacists are waging a vicious war against trans youth and their teachers who are now treated as social pariahs while their supporters are slandered as paedophiles and groomers.

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 education has become normalised. Ignorance is now praised as a virtue and white supremacy and white Christian nationalism are now the organising principles of governance and education in many American states and a number of countries globally. This right-wing assault on democracy is a crisis that cannot be allowed to turn into a catastrophe in which all hope is lost. This suggests viewing education as a political 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 pedagogical practice that calls students beyond themselves, embraces the ethical imperative for them to care for others, embrace historical memory, work to dismantle structures of domination, and to become subjects rather than objects of history, politics, and power. If educators are going to develop a politics capable of awakening students' critical, imaginative, and historical sensibilities, it is vital to engage education as a project of individual and collective empowerment - a

project based on the search for truth, an enlarging of the civic imagination, and the practice of freedom.

Fascism begins with the language of hate, and as Thom Hartmann (2023) observes:

“Before fascism can fully seize power in a nation, it must first be accepted by the people as a ‘patriotic’ system of governance, representing the will of the majority of the nation. This is why fascists always scapegoat minorities first ... before they acquire enough power to subjugate the entire nation itself”.

Against this warning, it is important for us as educators to note that the current era is one marked by the rise of disimagination machines that produce manufactured ignorance and concoct lies on an unprecedented level, giving authoritarianism a new life. As the historian Federico Finchelstein (2020: 1) notes, it is crucial to recall that ‘one of the key lessons of the history of fascism is that racist lies led to extreme political violence’. We live at a time when the unthinkable has become normalised so that anything can be said and everything that matters unsaid. Moreover, this degrading of truth and the emptying of language makes it all the more difficult to distinguish good from evil, justice from injustice. Under such circumstances, the American public is rapidly losing a language and ethical grammar that challenges the political and racist machineries of cruelty, state violence and targeted exclusions (Wilderson, 2012).

Education both in its symbolic and institutional forms has a vital role to play in fighting the resurgence of false renderings of history, white supremacy, religious fundamentalism, an accelerating 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, the suppression of dissent, and hate. The merging of power, new digital technologies, and everyday life have not only altered time and space, but they have also expanded the reach of culture

as an educational force. A culture of lies, cruelty, and hate, coupled with a fear of history and a 24/7 flow of information now wages a war on historical consciousness, attention spans, and the conditions necessary to think, contemplate, and arrive at sound judgements (Crary, 2022).

Education as a cultural force

It is crucial for educators to learn that education and schooling are not the same and schooling must be viewed as a sphere distinctive from the educative forces at work in the larger culture (Mayer, 2019). The point of course is that an array of cultural apparatuses extending from the social media and streaming services to the rise of artificial intelligence and corporate controlled media platforms also constitutes a vast educational machinery with enormous power and influence. What both schooling and the wider cultural sphere of education have in common is that they often work in tandem with each other to shape and orchestrate dominant social relations, constitute prevailing notions of common sense, and open up conceptual horizons, modes of identification, and social relations through which consciousness and identities are shaped and legitimated.

In the current age of barbarism and the crushing of dissent, there is a need for educators to acknowledge how the wider culture and pedagogies of closure operate as educational and political forces in the service of fascist politics and other modes of tyranny. Under such circumstances, educators and others must question not only what individuals learn in society, but what they must unlearn, and what institutions provide the conditions for them to do so. Against those cultural apparatuses producing apartheid pedagogies of repression and conformity - rooted in censorship, racism, and the killing of the imagination - there is the need for critical institutions and pedagogical practices that value a culture of questioning, view critical agency as a fundamental condition of public life, and reject indoctrination in favour of the search for justice within educational spaces and institutions that function as democratic public spheres.

Call for a shift in consciousness

Any viable pedagogy of resistance needs to create the educational and pedagogical visions and tools to produce a radical shift in consciousness; it must be capable of recognising both the scorched earth policies of neoliberalism and the twisted

fascist ideologies that support it. This shift in consciousness cannot occur without pedagogical interventions that speak to people in ways in which they can recognise themselves, identify with the issues being addressed, and place the privatisation of their troubles in a broader systemic context.

An education for empowerment that functions as the practice of freedom should provide a classroom environment that is intellectually rigorous, critical, while allowing students to give voice to their experiences, aspirations, and dreams. It should be a protective and courageous space in which students should be able to speak, write, and act from a position of agency and informed judgment. It should be a place where education does the bridging work of connecting schools to the wider society, connect the self to others, and address important social and political issues. It should also provide the conditions for students to learn how to make connections with an increased sense of social responsibility coupled with a sense of justice. A pedagogy for the practice of freedom is rooted in a broader project of a resurgent and insurrectional democracy - one that relentlessly questions the kinds of labour practices, and forms of knowledge that are enacted in public and higher education.

If the emerging authoritarianism and rebranded fascism in the United States, Canada, Europe and elsewhere is to be defeated, there is a need to make critical education an organising principle of politics and, 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 in arguing that language is crucial in highlighting the often hidden 'crystalized elements' that make authoritarianism likely (Arendt, 2001). 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 made clear that fascism does not reside solely in the past and that its traces are always dormant, even in the strongest democracies.

Ignorance now rules America. Not the simple, if innocent ignorance that comes from an absence of knowledge, but a malicious manufactured ignorance forged in the arrogance of refusing to think hard and critically about an

issue, and to engage language in the pursuit of justice. James Baldwin was certainly right in issuing the stern warning in *No Name in the Street* that ‘Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have’ (Baldwin, 2007: 147). For the ruling elite and modern Republican Party, thinking is viewed as an act of stupidity, and thoughtlessness is considered a virtue. Traces of critical thought increasingly appear at the margins of the culture, as ignorance becomes the primary organising principle of American society and a number of other countries across the globe. A culture of lies and ignorance now serve as a tool of politics to prevent power from being held accountable.

Under such circumstances, there is a full-scale attack on thoughtful reasoning, empathy, collective resistance, and the compassionate imagination. In some ways, the dictatorship of ignorance resembles what John Berger once called ‘ethicide’, defined by Joshua Sperling (Appignanesi, 2019) as:

“The blunting of the senses; the hollowing out of language; the erasure of connection with the past, the dead, place, the land, the soil; possibly, too, the erasure even of certain emotions, whether pity, compassion, consoling, mourning or hoping”.

Words such as love, trust, freedom, responsibility, and choice have been deformed by a market and authoritarian logic that narrows their meaning to either a commodity, a reductive notion of self-interest, or generates a language of bigotry and hatred. Freedom in this context means removing oneself from any sense of social responsibility making it easier to retreat into privatised orbits of self-indulgence and communities of hate. Such actions are legitimated through an appeal to what Elisabeth R. Anker has called ugly freedoms. That is, freedoms emptied of any substantive meaning and used by far-right politicians and corporate controlled media to legitimate a discourse of hate and bigotry while actively depoliticising people by making 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 for addressing 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. As a political and moral practice, critical pedagogy combines a language of critique and a vision of possibility in the fight to revive civic literacy, civic activism, and a notion of shared and engaged citizenship. Politics loses its emancipatory possibilities if it cannot present the educational conditions for enabling students and others to think against the grain, and realise themselves as informed, critical, and engaged individuals. There is no emancipatory 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.

Academics as public intellectuals

Against the emerging fascism, educators should assume the role of public intellectuals and border crossers within broader social contexts. For example, this might include finding ways, when possible, to share their ideas with the wider public by making use of new media technologies and a range of other cultural apparatuses, especially those outlets that are willing to address critically a range of social problems. Embracing their role as public intellectuals, educators can speak to more general audiences in a language that is clear, accessible, and rigorous. As public school teachers organise to assert their role as citizen-educators in a democracy, they can forge new alliances and connections to develop social movements that include and expand beyond working simply with unions. For example, we see evidence of such actions among teachers and students organising against gun violence and systemic racism and doing so by 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 and 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 of traditional discourses and cultural spheres. This suggests that one of the most serious challenges facing teachers, artists, journalists, writers, parents, and other cultural workers is the task of developing discourses and pedagogical

practices that connect, as Freire (2018) once suggested, a critical reading of the word and the world.

On educated hope

In taking up this project, educators should create the conditions that enable young people to view cynicism as 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, for not making the present 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. Without hope, even in the darkest 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.

As Martin Luther King Jr, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Nelson Mandela argued, there is no project of freedom and liberation without education and that changing attitudes and institutions are interrelated. Central to this insight is the notion advanced by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Grass, 2000: 26) that the most important forms of domination are not only economic but also intellectual and pedagogical and lie on the side of belief and persuasion. This suggests that academics bear a certain responsibility here in acknowledging that 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' (Arendt, 2003). Without the

ability to judge, it becomes impossible to recover words that have meaning, imagine a future that does not mimic the dark times in which we live, and 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 lies cancel out reason, ignorance dismantles informed judgments, and truth succumbs to demagogic appeals to unchecked power. As Francisco Goya (1799) warned, ‘the sleep of reason produces monsters’.

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, 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 (Giroux, 2019). I want to conclude by making some suggestions, however incomplete, regarding what we can do as educators to save public and higher education and connect them to the broader struggle over democracy itself.

Elements of reform

First, in the midst of the current assault on public and higher education, educators should reclaim and expand its democratic vocation and in doing so align itself with a vision that embraces its mission as a public good. Second, they should also acknowledge and make good on the claim that there is no democracy without informed and knowledgeable citizens. Third, education should be free and funded through federal funds that guarantees a 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. Rather than build bombs, fund the defence industry, and inflate a death-dealing military budget, we need massive investments in public and higher education. This is an investment in which youth are written into the future, rather than potentially eliminated from it.

Fourth, in a world driven by data, metrics, and the replacement of knowledge by the overabundance of information, educators need to teach students to be border crossers, who can think dialectically, comparatively, and historically. Educators should teach students to engage in multiple literacies extending from print and visual culture to digital culture. Students need to learn how to think intersectionally, comprehensively, and relationally while also being able to not only consume culture but also produce it; they should learn how to be both cultural critics and cultural producers. Fifth, 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 in the pursuit of social justice. 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 that 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.

Sixth, educators need to argue for a notion of education that is viewed as inherently political - one that relentlessly questions the kinds of labour, practices, and forms of teaching, research, and modes of evaluation that are enacted in public and 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 produces particular versions and visions of civic life, how we construct representations of ourselves, others, our physical and social environment, and the future itself. Seventh, in an age in which educators are being censored, fired, and in some cases subject to criminal

penalties, it is crucial for them to fight to gain control over the conditions of their labour. Without power, faculty are reduced to casual labour, play no role in the governing process, and work under labour conditions comparable to how workers are treated at Amazon and Walmart. Educators need a new vision, language and collective strategy in order to regain the power, rightful influence, control and security over their work conditions and their ability to make meaningful contributions to their students and larger society.

It is crucial to remember that there is no democracy without informed citizens and no justice without a language critical of injustice. The central question here is what the role of education in a democracy is and how we can teach students to govern rather than be governed. There is no hope without a democratically driven education system. The greatest threats to education in north America and around the globe are anti-democratic ideologies and market values that believe public schools and higher education are failing because they are public and should not operate in the interests of furthering the promise and possibility of democracy. If schools are failing it is because they are being defunded, privatised, and modelled after white nationalist indoctrination spheres, transformed into testing centres, and reduced to regressive training practices.

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 social change possible. At stake here is the courage to take on the challenge of what kind of world we want - what kind of future we want to build for our children? The great philosopher, Ernst Bloch (Thompson, 2013), insisted that hope taps into our deepest experiences and that without it reason and justice cannot blossom. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin adds a call for compassion and social responsibility to this notion of hope, one that is indebted to those who will follow us. He writes: 'Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them.... [T]he moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out' (cited in Morrison, 1998: 710). Now more than ever educators must live up to the challenge of keeping fires of resistance burning with a feverish intensity. Only then will we be able to keep the lights on and the future open. In addition to that eloquent appeal, I would say that history is open and it is time to

think differently in order to act differently, especially if, as educators, we want to imagine and fight for alternative democratic futures and build new horizons of possibility.

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