

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF FASCIST PLAGUE

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Introduction

The horrors of fascism have returned, not as ghosts, but as a plague, fuelled by racial hatred and historical amnesia, infiltrating schools, universities, and the public sphere through state violence, fear, censorship, and manufactured ignorance (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024). Across the globe, fascist forces - emboldened by resurgent colonial logics, neoliberal cruelty, and virulent white nationalism - have transformed universities into battlegrounds for democracy's future. Dissent against a genocidal war in Gaza is not merely discouraged but criminalised, while political intimidation and extortion directed at major institutions (Belvedere, 2025), especially higher education, are recast as the new language of governance. In this critical moment, the urgency of defending higher education has never been clearer. As both a site of knowledge production and democratic possibility, higher education must resist becoming a tool of fascist and neoliberal control. Its role in nurturing critical thought, social responsibility, and civic courage is central to the survival of democratic values in the face of rising authoritarianism.

It is no longer enough to rehearse the familiar language of education's democratic mission or nostalgically invoke its emancipatory promise. Those ideals must be rethought and radicalised; they must be expanded, sharpened, and reclaimed as ethical and political imperatives equal to the darkness of our times, especially the threat posed by neoliberal fascism (Giroux and Karlin, 2018). In this instance, what is needed is an argument for understanding higher education not as a refuge from politics but as one of its most decisive battlegrounds, a place where public consciousness is shaped, where the struggle over truth and power unfolds, and where the pedagogical conditions for resisting emerging fascism must be forged anew. Such recognition forces us to confront the deeper forces shaping this crisis, to ask what forms of power are waging war on education and what is

truly at stake in this escalating assault? What is at stake, however, is far more than a rejection of gangster capitalism and the global misery it produces. The deeper danger lies in recognising that education has become the primary battlefield in the cultural and ideological wars waged by authoritarianism.

Neoliberal capitalism, in its fascist mutation, does not simply impoverish; it seeks to colonise consciousness, to erode the capacity for critical thought, and to replace democratic imagination with the deadening certainties of hierarchy and fear. Universities now sit at a dangerous crossroad where truth is contested, civic memory is either erased or preserved, and the formative conditions for democratic life are nourished, or systematically destroyed. To defend higher education, then, is to reclaim its power to cultivate the forms of agency, solidarity, and critical awareness necessary to challenge the lies, brutalities, racism, corruption, and manufactured ignorance that sustain authoritarian rule. It is to insist that education remain a crucial site of critique and possibility - one capable of expanding the horizon of the future at a moment when fascism seeks to close it down. Such a task demands thinking the unthinkable: not merely reforming neoliberal capitalism but abolishing it, and cultivating pedagogical spaces where new modes of agency, solidarity, value, and identity can be forged. Only through such radical reimagining can education become the ground from which democratic life is rebuilt and the struggle for a liberated future renewed.

The threat to American society is not merely external, evident in the lawlessness and militarisation that now permeate almost every aspect of public life. It resides in the pedagogical terrain itself, in the ways authoritarian movements mobilise cultural institutions, digital ecosystems, and state power to produce a public consciousness increasingly habituated to cruelty, disposability, white nationalism, and historical amnesia. Trump's educational politics, steeped in racial hatred, ultra-nationalism, and authoritarian contempt for reason, exemplify a broader global project: the transformation of education into a tool for consolidating hierarchy, manufacturing consent, and converting higher education into laboratories of indoctrination. To confront this project, it is not enough to criticise his corruption or his embrace of economic exploitation, staggering inequality, unadulterated cruelty, and racial hierarchies. We must expose the cultural fantasies and pedagogical practices that animate these policies, the false

promises of belonging they extend, and the forms of political and ethical illiteracy they cultivate.

What is required, then, is the radical reimagining of pedagogy. Higher education must reclaim academic freedom, dissent, critical thought, and democratic governance not as abstract principles but as urgent practices of resistance. This means creating pedagogical conditions that nurture individual and collective agency, reconnect critique with social change, and transform private suffering into shared political consciousness. It means building classrooms and campuses where justice can be named, where inequality can be confronted, and where democratic forms of life can be rehearsed and renewed. It also means forging solidarities among faculty, students, unions, workers, and social movements, nationally and internationally, as part of a broader struggle for equality, justice, and freedom.

The task before us is clear: for higher education to endure as a democratic public good, it must take decisive action. It must recognise that democracy cannot exist without an informed public, that justice requires a language capable of confronting and narrating injustice, and that freedom depends on a pedagogy dedicated to nurturing the fragile yet vital work of civic courage - and the refusal of complicity with the mobilising passions of fascist politics. Stephen Rohde (2025), focusing on Northwestern University, warns that universities must resist succumbing to 'Trump's ongoing campaign, steeped in hypocrisy, self-delusion, bribery, and cowardice...to dismantle the independence of American colleges and universities', for doing so would make them complicit in cementing the bigoted regime of MAGA (Make America Great Again) (Hanlon, 2025). This article explores what this struggle demands and why the fight over higher education is, at its essence, a battle for the very meaning of radical democracy.

Higher education under siege: the rise of neoliberal fascism

Across the world, universities are under siege and democracy itself is approaching a terrifying threshold. From Hungary to India to Turkey, governments are hollowing out the university's democratic mission, attacking intellectual freedom, weaponising history, policing critical pedagogy, and stripping away the civic

imagination that sustains democratic life. What's at stake is not just the pursuit of truth but the moral and pedagogical fundamentals of democracy, a delicate balance between knowledge and responsibility, learning and the courage to bear witness. In these darkening times, it is not only knowledge that is being policed but agency itself, as the lifeblood of an informed, critical, and resistant citizenry. When education is severed from its moral and civic grounding, democracy erodes. Truth becomes suspect, knowledge becomes dangerous, and educators are seen as enemies by those who fear the power of enlightened judgment and the task of holding power accountable. Once the classroom loses its capacity for moral witnessing, critical thinking, and civic courage, the conditions for domination are set. Ignorance becomes virtue, conscience is silenced, and democracy's fragile bonds begin to fray from civil and legal rights to the institutions meant to protect them. In such a climate, the struggle for education is inseparable from the collective solidarities that make democratic life possible.

Theorists as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu (2003) and Thomas Piketty (2014) have noted how neoliberalism, a predatory form of capitalism, has waged war on the welfare state, dismantled the public sphere, and hollowed out the very notion of the common good. Masked by the rhetoric of freedom and efficiency, it elevates market logic into a totalising ideology, demanding that every domain of life bend to economic imperatives. In doing so, it separates economic practices from social costs and so disparages any viable notion of social responsibility. In practice, it concentrates wealth in the hands of a financial elite, celebrates ruthless individualism, and commodifies the most sacred dimensions of human existence (Giroux and Sardo, 2018). The social wreckage it leaves behind - systemic racism, militarism, mass precarity, and staggering inequality - is not an aberration but a defining feature of a politics built on dispossession, domination, and terminal exclusion. Paramjit Singh (2025), writing in the *Socialist Project*, insightfully sums up neoliberalism's bad-faith premises and the wreckage it produces. He is worth quoting at length:

“Across the world, neoliberalism has exhausted the moral and material foundations of the liberal order that once began as a promise of equality, justice, prosperity, efficiency, and freedom. In practice, it has produced deep inequality, widespread dispossession, ecological devastation, and

the disintegration of collective life. However, neoliberalism's most enduring damage lies not only in its economic consequences but also in its epistemic effects. It has weakened the categories through which societies understand justice, equality, community, and reason.... In the neoliberal era, both dissent and reason have been profoundly degraded. Decades of globalization, financialization, and privatization have depoliticized everyday life, replacing collective struggle with individualized anxiety. The rhetoric of choice, empowerment, and personal fulfilment has displaced the language of class. Under such conditions, dissent risks becoming spectacle, and reason risks degenerating into strategy, emptying both of their transformative political content. We inhabit a world that protests incessantly, yet rarely challenges the structural roots of crisis" (Singh, 2025).

As neoliberalism decays into an upgraded fascism, its machinery of repression intensifies. No longer able to legitimate itself, it blames its failures on immigrants, Black people, and all those deemed 'other'. Dissent is criminalised, social life militarised, immigrants are abducted, and hate is normalised. Under Trump, this assault has crystallised into open warfare, rooted in the belief that critical education poses a direct threat to the authoritarian project.

The role of higher education in defending intellectual freedom

This hostility is echoed at the highest levels of the regime. J D Vance, the United States Vice President, has called higher education a 'hostile institution' (Shepherd, 2025). Donald Trump rails against colleges as 'dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics', stating that student protesters as 'radicals', 'savages' and 'jihadists' have been brainwashed by faculty 'communists and terrorists' (Agenda 47, 2023). These poisonous declarations shape policies that transform education into a site of repression, censorship, and laboratories of indoctrination. Moreover, these comments play a powerful role in crushing the critical functions of higher education, which is central to consolidating authoritarian power.

Against this backdrop, as fascist politics surges across the globe, it is crucial for educators to confront a set of urgent and unsettling questions. What does the rise of illiberal regimes mean for higher education in an age of

manufactured fear, state terrorism, and state-sponsored lies? What responsibilities fall to universities when the very idea of democracy is under siege? What happens to a society when education is disparaged for its claims on democracy, civic culture withers, and academics are told to look away? What happens when educators are pressured into refusing to speak the unspeakable? In Trump's America, and in countries around the world drifting toward fascism, silence becomes a form of complicity and inaction, a profound moral failure. The university cannot retreat into neutrality when the stakes are this high; its task is to defend the public imagination, nurture democratic agency, and refuse the tyranny that seeks to extinguish both.

Domestic terrorism and authoritarian rule

Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025 marks not only a political crisis but a profound tragedy for democracy. Under Trump, we face a terrifying new era of state terrorism (Klippenstein, 2025a) evident by the erosion of due process, mass abductions, vicious attacks on higher education, and the increasing presence of a police state (Klippenstein, 2025b). America is at war with itself at the same time as it wages war in Venezuela and threatens war on other countries in the region. Racism and hatred have moved from the shadows to the seat of power, reshaping the political landscape with brutal clarity. ICE operates as a modern Gestapo (Brody, 2025), patrolling American cities with the explicit aim of terrorising immigrants and people of colour. State violence has become a public spectacle, disinformation has supplanted truth, and the democratic bonds of shared responsibility have withered into a corrosive politics of shared fear.

Trump is unhinged in his gleeful embrace of white supremacy, a malignant worldview that saturates every policy he advances and every cruelty he authorises. His white nationalist rhetoric (Mother Jones, 2025) has grown so extreme that he publicly indulges in a fascist delirium of racial cleansing, declaring Somali immigrants 'garbage', insisting they 'contribute nothing', and claiming they come 'from a country that stinks and we don't want them in our country' (Stechyson, 2025). Such racist invective not only legitimises cruelty and a politics of disposability as governance; it also fuels his broader assault on higher education. Institutions committed to critical inquiry, dangerous memories, academic freedom, equality, justice, and pluralist imaginaries are now treated as

intolerable because they pose a direct threat to the racist hierarchies and exclusionary nationalism that anchor an authoritarian state. As Peter Beaumont (2025) noted, Trump's driving ideological conviction is that there is not enough racism in either the United States or Europe, a worldview that both fuels and legitimises his most extreme authoritarian policies.

Trump represents the endpoint of gangster capitalism, the culmination of its violence, disposability, and moral rot. He is the twenty-first-century, hyper-charged incarnation of Patrick Bateman from the film, *American Psycho*, a figure fashioned through cruelty, unchecked violence, narcissism, and the celebration of domination. Every policy Trump advances radiates this criminogenic logic, from the killing of 115 people in small boats in the Caribbean (Tait, 2025) to cutting off life-saving aid through USAID, condemning millions to misery and death (Oxfam, 2025). He is the living embodiment of a death-machine, a leader for whom state-sanctioned violence and ruthless governance become not just a tool of control but a source of perverse pleasure.

The assault on history: erasing memory and shaping power

Such hostility inevitably turns toward history, the most dangerous teacher of all. The subversive power of historical understanding, its capacity to illuminate suffering, expose injustice, and nurture democratic hope, is precisely why it has become a target for right-wing forces intent on erasing or sanitising uncomfortable truths. This is not abstract: it shapes policy. Efforts to censor critical ideas, erase episodes like slavery, and eliminate depictions of systemic racism exemplify this dangerous turn. Donald Trump has openly stated that 'he would punish schools that teach students accurate U S history, including about slavery and racism in the country' (Conley, 2024). Across the United States, an aggressive campaign is underway by right-wing groups to erase history and transform schools and universities into instruments of ideological control (Auh, 2025). Books are being banned (Berger, 2025), professors targeted, gender and ethnic studies eliminated, trans identity vilified, student protests criminalised, and honest historical narratives suppressed. This is not symbolic; it is the blueprint of fascist politics and governance, a state-sanctioned strategy to extinguish the democratic imagination.

If the emerging fascism in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere is to be confronted, critical education must again become a vital force in democratic life. Higher education has to be understood not as a problem to be tamed but as an indispensable resource for rebuilding democracies in crisis (Usher, 2025). This begins with reclaiming a language capable of exposing lies, dismantling systems of oppression, and illuminating the corrupt relations of power that shape everyday life. Hannah Arendt understood that language reveals the hidden ‘crystallized elements’ that make authoritarianism possible (Medium, 2016). The language of critical pedagogy, rooted in historical memory, justice, and ethical imagination, offers a powerful arsenal for truth-telling, resistance, and the refusal of untruths. Under such circumstances, one crucial goal of critical pedagogy is to cultivate historical awareness, equipping students to use history as a vital lens for understanding the present. Through the critical act of remembrance, the history of fascism can be illuminated not as a relic of the past but as a persistent threat, its dormant traces capable of reawakening even in the most robust democracies. In this sense, history has to retain its subversive function, drawing on archives, historical sources, and suppressed narratives to challenge conventional wisdom and dominant ideologies.

Higher education complicity: universities as enablers of authoritarianism

From Florida to Texas, far-right governors are transforming education into a vehicle for repression. Teachers are threatened with criminal charges for acknowledging gender diversity or reproductive rights. At the national level, student activists, particularly those protesting US support for Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza (Giroux, 2025a), are being surveilled, detained, and, in some cases, forcibly abducted and held in detention centres without transparency or due process (Giroux, 2025b). These actions mark a dangerous escalation in the use of state terrorism to crush dissent and stifle free speech. Under Trump, the assault on higher education has taken on the character of political extortion. Universities are threatened with funding cuts, targeted investigations, and public humiliation unless they align with the regime’s ideological demands (Rippberger, Riedl and Katz, 2025). Faced with this mafia-like pressure, many institutions, such as Columbia University (Benedict, 2025), Brown, Northwestern, and Harvard, capitulate: some pay large financial ransoms to keep research programmes afloat, submit to monitored or pre-approved syllabuses,

push faculty into self-censorship, and watch as entire fields from gender studies to critical race scholarship are eliminated.

Once considered bastions of critical thought and academic freedom, these institutions have now aligned with the very political and ideological forces they should resist, transforming into silent collaborators in the rise of fascist politics. In capitulating, they have not only abandoned the integrity of higher education but become complicit in the creeping authoritarianism that seeks to control not only knowledge but the very language of dissent. These once-revered institutions are now incubators of conformity, breeding grounds for a new authoritarian oligarchy and class of billionaires that serves power rather than truth, injustice rather than justice, racial and class hierarchies rather than equality. In the face of this onslaught, they have traded their moral compass for the illusion of survival, surrendering their role as guardians of democracy to become facilitators of its destruction. Academic freedom becomes a privilege dispensed by administrators rather than a right grounded in democratic life, and universities shrink into obedient service providers, enablers of authoritarianism rather than spaces of critique and possibility. The result is a culture of fear in which marginalised students and critical scholars endure the deepest betrayals, their histories and identities recast as political liabilities (Darian-Smith, 2025). This is the university remade by coercion, subject to racial cleansing, drained of its civic responsibility, and stripped of its public purpose. In this punitive vision, neo-fascism on steroids, education is no longer a democratic necessity; it becomes an instrument for policing memory, enforcing obedience, and erasing those who fall outside the boundaries of white nationalist belonging.

Higher education and the militarisation of race: confronting white nationalism

The assault on education, then, cannot be separated from the broader pedagogical struggle unfolding across the globe. The current fight against a growing fascist politics is not simply a struggle over state power, it is a fight over the production of historical memory, over who gets to speak, who gets erased, and who is allowed to imagine a future. The horrors of the past, from Nazi Germany to apartheid South Africa, make clear that the rewriting of history is always tied to the whitening of the nation, to the violent sorting of populations into those who

belong and those who do not. Universities are central to this battle because they are the institutional guardians of historical memory and critical knowledge. When they are attacked, censored, or hollowed out, the very capacity of a society to learn from its past is imperilled.

These intertwined assaults on education and democracy become even more visible in the racialised militarisation of public life. The deployment of troops into cities with large Black and brown populations is not merely a spectacle of state power; it is another expression of white nationalism and racial cleansing, a violent pedagogy that teaches citizens who counts and who is disposable. This narrowing of citizenship is not unique to the United States. Across the globe, from India to Hungary, the question of who belongs is being reshaped by religious zealotry and fantasies of racial purity. Viktor Orbán makes this logic unmistakable in his declaration that the aim of his illiberal democracy is to eliminate what he calls ‘mixed races’ (Walker and Garamvolgyi, 2022). As Nicola Bertoldi (2018) observes, any struggle for a radical democratic society requires that ‘the lessons from our dark past [be] learned and transformed into constructive resolutions’ for building a post-capitalist future. That task is impossible without institutions, especially schools and universities, that nurture critical memory, cultivate democratic agency, and resist the machinery of erasure.

Confronting the challenges of authoritarianism in education

One of the challenges facing the current generation of educators, students, and others is the need to address the question of what education should accomplish in a society at a historical moment when it is slipping into the dark night of an emerging fascism. What work do educators have to do to create the economic, political, and ethical conditions necessary to endow young people and the general public with the capacities to think, question, doubt, imagine the unimaginable, and defend education as essential for inspiring and energising the citizens necessary for the existence of a robust democracy? What language must higher education reclaim to redefine its mission, to help faculty and students imagine futures beyond the present, see themselves as agents rather than victims or clients, and take responsibility for shaping democratic public life? In an age marked by the abandonment of egalitarian and democratic impulses, what will it take to

educate young people, and the broader public, to challenge repressive forms of authority and hold power accountable? (Saltman, 2016).

In part, this suggests developing educational policies and practices that not only inspire and motivate people but are also capable of challenging the growing number of anti-democratic tendencies under a global tyranny of gangster capitalism. Such a vision suggests resurrecting a democratic project that provides the basis for imagining a life beyond a social order immersed in massive inequality, endless assaults on the environment, and elevates war and militarisation to the highest and most sanctified national ideals. In this view, education becomes something other than an obsession with accountability schemes, market values, imagination-crushing methodologies, or the crude empiricism of a data-driven society. Rather than function as an instrument of pedagogical terrorism and deadening conformity, it should open a space for thinking, translating, acting, and imagining otherwise.

In light of the current assaults on education, what might it mean for educators to take seriously the notion that democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting equity to excellence and learning to modes of agency that embrace the demands of social and economic justice and the virtues of the common good. Any meaningful vision of critical pedagogy should have the power to provoke a radical shift in consciousness, a shift that helps us see the world through a lens that confronts the savage realities of geopolitical issues including genocidal violence, mass poverty, the destruction of the planet, and the threat of nuclear war, among other issues. Global capitalism thrives on staggering inequalities, settler colonialism, and the twisted anti-democratic ideologies that uphold it. A true shift in consciousness is not possible without pedagogical interventions that speak directly to people in ways that resonate with their lives, their struggles, and their experiences.

Education has to help individuals recognise themselves in the issues at hand, understand how their personal suffering is not an isolated event, but part of a broad, systemic crisis. In addition, activism, debate, and critical engagement should be central to a student's education (Grossberg, 2025). Activism is a form of education, a way of guiding students to become both knowledgeable and

engaged citizens. In this sense, critical pedagogy must cultivate conditions that empower students not only to think critically, but to act with purpose and conviction. There can be no authentic politics without a pedagogy of identification, an education that connects people to the broader forces shaping their lives, an education that not only helps them understand the roots of their oppression but also empowers them to imagine and fight for a world where they are no longer victims but active agents of change. Without this, we risk perpetuating a politics that is disconnected from the lived realities of those it seeks to empower. The poet Jorie Graham (2024) emphasises the importance of engaging people through experiences that resonate deeply with their everyday lives. She states that ‘it takes a visceral connection to experience itself to permit us to even undergo an experience’ (Ibid.). For language and appeals to truly matter, they must be anchored in the tangible realities and struggles that shape people’s existence. Only then can communication penetrate consciousness, forging connections between body, mind, and others beyond the poisoned solidarities that sustain hatred, war, and consumerist obsessions.

When teaching loses this visceral, grounded quality, pedagogy risks numbing the mind and body, a condition easily reinforced by a broader culture dominated by screens, virtual spectacles, disconnections, and reductive oversimplifications. To resist this drift into a culture of immediacy and regressive distraction which is never removed from the experiences students bring to the classroom, educators must reclaim their role as public intellectuals, embracing their responsibilities as both critical teachers and active citizens in ways that spark dialogue and mobilise action. This means speaking to wider publics about urgent social issues, developing a language that links everyday troubles to the systemic forces that produce them, and advancing a politics committed to economic and social justice. It also requires creating conditions in which educators have real agency over their labour and a meaningful voice in university governance. Yet this aspiration is continually undermined by the growing neoliberally produced precarity of academic life: without tenure or secure positions, many are cast into spaces marked by fear, repression, crushing workloads, powerlessness, isolation, and, for some, conditions approaching poverty.

Education should rise to meet these challenges, offering a vision capable of resisting what Mark Fisher (2014) called neoliberalism's 'slow cancellation of the future' and helping us imagine a life beyond massive inequality, environmental destruction, and the glorification of war and militarisation as national ideals. In this context, education cannot surrender to academics who insist there is no room for politics in higher education or the classroom, nor to administrators who claim that universities have a responsibility to remain neutral. This position is not only deeply flawed but also complicit in its silence over the current far-right politicisation of education or the utterly damaging transformation of higher education into an adjunct of corporations; it is also a script for depoliticising schooling as an institution as well as both faculty and students.

Neutrality and the erosion of academic freedom

The call for neutrality in many North American universities is a retreat from social and moral responsibility, masking the reality that these institutions are deeply embedded in power relations. As Heidi Matthews, Fatima Ahdash and Priya Gupta (2024) aptly argue, neutrality 'serves to flatten politics and silence scholarly debate', obscuring the inherently political nature of university life. From decisions about enrolment and research funding to event policies and poster placements, every administrative choice reflects a political stance. Neutrality, far from apolitical, is a tool that silences dissent and shields power from accountability. It is essential for educators to recognise that learning unfolds across a multitude of sites, circulating not only through formal institutions but through the wider currents of everyday life. As Shea Howell (n.d.) warns, this truth carries immense weight in a moment when 'controlling public culture is essential to the consolidation of fascist power'. And following Raymond Williams (2015), we are reminded that education must do more than transmit knowledge, it must be woven into the very fabric of social transformation, for 'learning must be a crucial part of the process of social change'.

The most powerful forms of education now operate far beyond schools and universities. In an age of recent technologies, concentrated power, and ubiquitous social media, culture has become a dominant pedagogical force, shaping how people see, feel, and imagine the political world. Democracy is no longer toppled only by coups; it is hollowed out from within, eroded by the ghosts

of past tyrannies revived through symbols, digital spectacles, and the relentless machinery of propaganda. What appears as entertainment, distraction, or common sense is increasingly the terrain where political identities are forged and the boundaries of the imaginable enforced.

Beyond thresholds of disappearance and the colonisation of the mind

The current historical moment is defined by what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls ‘thresholds of disappearance, the proliferation of depoliticized multiplicities’, those institutions and cultural spaces that domesticate power differences, transforming systemic projects of resistance into commodified, private acts of rebellion (Mohanty 2013). In this landscape, neoliberal culture and pedagogy form one of the most consequential thresholds of disappearance, draining politics of substance while stripping education of its radical possibilities. At stake is the recognition that education, whether mediated through schools, digital platforms, or the wider culture, has become an urgent site of struggle, a decisive political terrain where agency is fashioned, desires are mobilised, oppression is normalised and hope itself becomes either militarised or rekindled.

This machinery of disappearance is amplified by cultural forces that speak through images laced with bigotry, saturated with violence, and driven by the logics of cruelty, exclusion, and ethnic cleansing. Culture no longer reflects the past; it erases it, functioning as a pedagogical regime that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2025) argues ‘colonizes the mind’. We inhabit a world saturated with disimagination machines, engines of civic stupidity and right-wing narcotisation, designed to sever people not only from the material conditions that rob them of rights, agency, and hope, but also from the histories, knowledges, and modes of critical thought that make genuine freedom possible. These apparatuses do more than distort reality; they shrink political imagination, corrode critical thought, and render individuals increasingly susceptible to the authoritarian scripts that shape everyday life.

Fascism thrives in precisely these manufactured silences and curated amnesias. Once the public is habituated to disappearance, to the erasure of histories, the trivialisation of suffering, the commodification of dissent, the ground is laid for more overt forms of authoritarian control. Fascist politics feed on this

hollowing out of civic memory, replacing the complexities of historical truth with mythologised narratives of purity, grievance, and fear. Consider how right-wing movements sanitise the 6 January 2021 riot at the US Capitol by recasting it as a patriotic uprising: the goal is not merely to distort an event but to reengineer the collective memory that anchors democratic life. What emerges is a political culture in which cruelty becomes a language of belonging, exclusion a measure of citizenship, and forgetting a civic duty. In this sense, the assault on history is never merely symbolic; it is a pedagogical strategy that shapes desires, identities, and the very possibility of democratic agency.

In the era of digital media, platforms like Fox News, Elon Musk's X and corporate giants such as Facebook, Netflix, and Google have become powerful teaching/propaganda machines, amplifying far-right values and the predatory ethos of gangster capitalism. What we confront is not simply a political failure, it is an educational crisis. Fascism no longer announces itself merely through decrees or armed repression. It is a pedagogical project that shapes memory, desire, and the boundaries of the imaginable. Fascism also colonises memory, determining what needs to be remembered, forgotten, mourned, and celebrated. It wraps itself in spectacles of cruelty, in a language steeped in hate and terminal exclusion. It operates through laws, yes, but also through habits, images, and the daily language games that dull moral sensibility. Trump's most fervent acolytes, Elon Musk, Steve Bannon, and others, perform Nazi salutes as if rehearsing the dark future they are resolved to summon. Stephen Miller, Trump's White House Deputy Chief of Staff, channels Hitlerian rhetoric under the banner of patriotism, insisting that 'America is for Americans and Americans only' (Guerrero, 2024). Trump resurrects Confederate symbols and the mythology of white supremacy, elevating monuments to genocide as emblems of national pride. Under his rule, the culture of fascism is neither subtle nor hidden; it is staged, broadcast, and normalised as the new common sense.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Trump administration's decision to downgrade the swastika, a symbol of fascism, white supremacy, and mass murder, from a hate emblem to something merely 'potentially divisive' (Copp and Boorstein, 2025). In a move that defies history and moral clarity, the US Coast Guard will soon place the swastika, the noose, and the Confederate

flag in the same sanitised category. This moral inversion is not an accident. It aligns seamlessly with Trump's claim that Europe faces a 'civilizational erasure' (Mackenzie et al., 2025) a thinly veiled invocation of white replacement theory that casts non-Europeans as existential threats to Western civilisation. Such rhetoric, and the policies that follow, reveal an administration committed to the normalisation of hatred, the erasure of historical memory, and the legitimisation of white supremacist fantasies.

The horror of fascist violence has returned, now draped in AI-guided bombs, ethnic cleansing, and white supremacists who revel in racial purification while dismantling every vestige of decency, human rights, and democratic life. What we are witnessing is not only the death of democracy but the erosion of moral and civic conscience itself. Education, at its best, is never mere job training, nor should it serve as an indoctrinating machine for white Christian nationalism and its narrow vision of who belongs as a citizen. True education cultivates empowered spaces of grace, rigour and, engagement where students think rigorously and speak freely, where their experiences, aspirations, and dreams can be voiced without fear. It is a courageous and protective site in which students learn to act with agency and critical judgment, and where their voices are heard, valued, and challenged. In such spaces, education becomes a bridge linking school to society, self to other, and theory to practice, urging students to confront the urgent social and political realities of their time while embracing the practice and promise of a radical democratic society.

Furthermore, education should help students cultivate a deeper commitment to justice, equality, community, and freedom (Singh, 2025). Critical pedagogy, as a rupturing practice, must refuse to equate capitalism with democracy, making it clear that one cannot discuss fascism without addressing capitalism. To be truly transformative, any viable critical pedagogy should be inherently anti-capitalist, reviving the discourse of radical democracy, and creating new political formations beyond the conventional liberal and conservative paradigms. Neoliberal capitalism strips education of its utopian possibilities and insists that capitalism and democracy are indistinguishable, that to imagine anything beyond its rule is to invite disaster. In an age of resurgent fascism, education must do more than defend reason and critical judgment; it also needs

to mobilise organised collective resistance to neoliberal fascism. Critical pedagogy in this context is not a naïve ideal but a radical necessity, a defiant force that urges us to envision possibilities beyond the suffocating confines of the present. It requires confronting the forces that seek to extinguish the radical imagination before it can inspire broader change. This struggle, though daunting, demands relentless urgency and unyielding conviction from educators and the public alike.

Conclusion: reclaiming education for collective resistance

Effective resistance to the rise of fascist politics in the United States and beyond cannot occur without making education central to political struggle. This begins with recognising that the transformation of consciousness and the transformation of institutions are deeply interrelated. We must heed Pierre Bourdieu's (Miller, 2010) warning that the most insidious forms of domination are not only economic; they are also intellectual and pedagogical, rooted in belief and persuasion. This insight calls on academics to recognise that the current battle against emerging fascist politics and white nationalism is not only a contest over economic structures or corporate power. It is equally a battle for ideas, for the very consciousness of society, and for the power to reshape culture itself. Education is the crucible where agency is forged, where the foundations of subjectivity are laid, and where the very essence of politics takes shape. It is here, in the spaces of learning and dialogue, that the seeds of democracy can either take root or wither away. The struggle to fulfil the promises of democracy cannot thrive in the shadows of deceit, where lies eclipse reason, ignorance erodes critical understanding, and truth is drowned by the seductive chorus of unchecked power. In this battleground of ideas, education should stand as both shield and sword, a force that defends reason and nurtures the capacities of individuals to question, to resist, and to act with the integrity democracy demands.

Amid the current assault on public and higher education, educators must reclaim their role as architects of imagined futures, fostering a language of possibility that aligns education with the broader struggle for democracy. They should consider taking control of the labour process in order to engage in academic freedom and set the conditions for teaching, learning, and policy. Such a vision of education must reject the neoliberal paradigm of education as a private investment in 'human capital' and instead cultivate a critical pedagogy that

disturbs complacency, inspires critical thinking, and energises students to confront the societal forces shaping their lives. Education's critical function lies in its power to create informed, engaged citizens who possess the civic courage to challenge injustice. This necessitates teaching students to think intersectionally, historically, and relationally. In a world dominated by fragmented knowledge, staggering levels of inequality, and the tyranny of metrics, students must be educated to become border crossers, fluent in multiple literacies, print, visual, and digital, capable not only of consuming culture but producing it as cultural critics and creators. Critical pedagogy should be defended as the search for truth. It is a pedagogy that empowers students to act from a position of agency, equipping them to unsettle power, challenge common sense, and take risks in pursuit of justice and mutual respect. Educators must inspire students to think dangerously, imagining futures where democracy, equality, and freedom are not only values but achievable goals. This involves confronting injustice as an ongoing struggle and recognising that the fight for justice is never fully complete.

In a society where democracy is under siege and fascism casts a growing shadow, educators should recognise that alternative futures are not only possible but that acting on this belief is essential to achieving social change. This urgent political and pedagogical mission demands both a language of critique and a language of possibility. Critique exposes abuses of power, unmasking deceit, and holds authority accountable, while a vision of educated hope dares us to imagine new horizons, empowering us to think and act beyond the confines of the present. It calls on us to reject the inevitability of injustice, to defy the predatory forces shaping our future, and to summon the courage to envision a world grounded in justice, equity, and freedom, a world we must actively strive to build. At stake is the courage to confront the world we want to build, the world we owe to future generations. As Ernst Bloch reminds us, hope taps into our deepest experiences, and without it, reason and justice cannot flourish (Bloch 1986: 3). The great novelist and critic James Baldwin understood with unmatched clarity that a society's fate is sealed the moment it abandons its responsibility to those who have not yet arrived. In *Nothing Personal* (Baldwin, 2021), he warned that when we break faith with one another, we forfeit the very possibility of a shared world. Today, that warning is no longer metaphor, it is the condition of our times.

As authoritarianism weaponises ignorance, as cruelty becomes a governing principle, and as whole populations are written out of the category of the human, the struggle for the future falls squarely on the shoulders of educators and cultural workers. Our task is nothing less than to disrupt the pedagogy of fascism: to nurture forms of critical memory that cannot be erased, solidarities that cannot be bought off, imaginations that refuse to be colonised. If we fail, the future will be engineered by those who thrive on amnesia and revel in disposability. But if we rise to the challenge, insisting on truth, defending the vulnerable, and widening the moral vocabulary of democracy, we create the conditions under which new generations can breathe, speak, and begin again. Resistance, then, is not an option; it is the only means by which the future survives. In these dark times, hope may be wounded, but it is not lost. Resistance and the promise of collective struggle endure, for power is never absolute, and domination cannot extinguish the will to fight back. The global rise of fascism casts a long shadow, marked by state violence, silenced dissent, and the assault on critical thought. Yet history is not a closed book; it is a call to action, a space for possibility. Now, more than ever, we must dare to think boldly, act courageously, and forge the democratic futures that justice demands and humanity deserves.

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