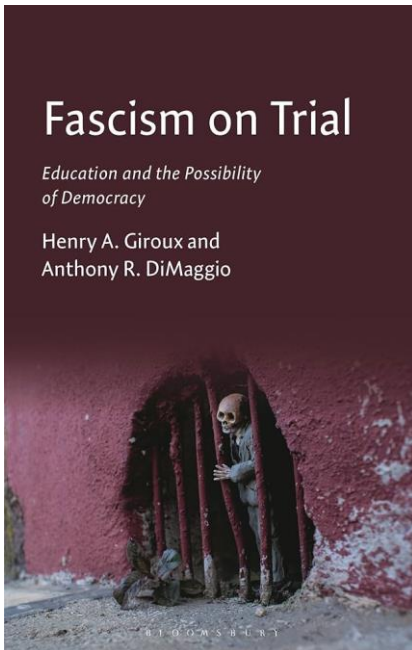


FASCISM ON TRIAL: EDUCATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF DEMOCRACY

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Henry A. Giroux and Anthony R. DiMaggio (2024) *Fascism on Trial: Education and the Possibility of Democracy*, Bloomsbury, London and New York: Bloomsbury.



This is an important book for a pivotal time. Not only because of the run up to the presidential election in the United States in November 2024 but also because of the growth of the far right around the world, and the consequent threat of fascism. It is a must read for anyone wanting to understand the current state of American politics, and the many levels and multiple institutional frameworks that are displaying fascist tendencies, beyond the personality of Trump alone. Although the book is a reflection on the United States (US), and as such mainly targets an American audience, it is of relevance to a global readership as educators the world over stand to gain from understanding how the continued

growth of extreme politics further weakens democracy and risks sliding into all out fascism.

Henry Giroux is one of the most important critical educators and cultural theorists of our time. His work has repeatedly shown the power of education to shape the future and the crucial need for education to be at the centre of politics. At a time when many academics are shying away from addressing controversial counter-hegemonic discourses, resultant from the infiltration of neoliberal logics into third level education, Giroux has for decades now been willing to place his head above the parapet. For this most recent publication, *Fascism on Trial: Education and the Possibility of Democracy*, Giroux has teamed up with the political scientist Anthony R. DiMaggio whose *Rising Fascism in America: It Can Happen Here* (2022) explored how fascism infiltrated American politics.

Although there is little need to add to the accumulated evidence presented in the book to support the premise that the US is in real danger of descending into fascism, there have been many worrying developments since the publication of the text that provide further support to the authors' stance. With a long list to choose from, some of the most disturbing examples are threats of civil war in the event of a loss for Trump proclaimed at the Republican national convention (Tait, 2024), renewed calls of election fraud despite no evidence to support such claims, and Trump's declaration to Christian nationalist supporters that they won't have to vote again in the future as 'It'll be fixed' (Vargas, 2024). Perhaps the most frightening development was the ruling by the Supreme Court on presidential immunity, providing freedom to presidents to commit crimes provided they act within their 'constitutional authority' (Serwer, 2024). A move that Giroux himself described as permission to Trump to 'become a domestic terrorist' (Giroux, 2024a).

Fascism is an emotive term that is not always used consistently and transparently in political discourse, despite the use of the term by all sides of the political spectrum. Writing in 2018 on Trump's presidential term in office, Fintan O'Toole cautioned that we need to be careful of casually using the term fascism but that we also must not hide from it 'when it is so clearly on the horizon' (O'Toole, 2018). The authors of this text provide a helpful sketch of their understanding of fascism in relation to the present context in the US, listing features such as authoritarianism, nativism, white supremacy, anti-intellectualism

and a politics of disposability, resentment and victimhood (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024). Throughout the text they engage with an array of literature, and close analysis of contemporary empirical examples, to further expand on their understanding of fascism and help the reader locate such tendencies in the contemporary moment.

Writing in relation to contemporary times, several authors have moved away from providing a set definition of fascism that may confine our understanding to particular historical moments and precise mechanisms of a monolithic authoritarian state (Stanley, 2018; Toscano, 2023; Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024). A more fluid approach can help us to understand how fascist tendencies are alive and thriving without necessarily having to emulate the classical fascism of Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany and Franco's Spain. This approach presents fascism as a political, social and ideological process that can take different forms in different contexts. Giroux and DiMaggio see fascism as a 'recurrent and infinitely flexible phenomenon' (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024: 103).

Giroux and DiMaggio show the importance of culture as an educational force, and how the right-wing polarisation of the media in America has supported the growth of fascism. Taking advantage of a void in critical historical consciousness, the mainstream media facilitates the growth of false memory that mourns a fabricated past that in truth served only the privileged few and criminalised or annihilated many other ways of life. This point is echoed in the work of Stanley (2018), who similarly reasoned that fascists call for a return to a mythic and glorious past. This is why the preservation of memory is one of the antidotes to fascism (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024; Stanley, 2018). However, protection of memories, particularly those of the oppressed and the marginalised, relies on a culture of critical education and historical conscientisation.

It is no accident that the contemporary far right in the US are so consumed by education, schooling and curriculum (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024). They understand its power. It is imperative that both schooling and wider education, through cultural and civic modes of pedagogy, create an environment that supports critical reflection, fosters the development of civic virtues and increases the capacity to question hegemonic discourse, identify bias and bigotry

and situate the current moment in the long arc of history. The authors point out that critical education is indispensable in countering the rise of the far right. However, drawing from the work of Zembylas (2021), I would add that an engagement with pedagogies of emotion and affect complement this in the cultivation of non-fascist communities and publics.

Although the Trumpification of the Republican Party is central to the analysis in the book, the authors importantly avoid the risk of attributing the rise of fascism in the US too closely to the spectacle of Trump. At various points throughout the text the vital connection between fascism and the trajectory of American history is excellently foregrounded. As the authors rightly claim, ‘the roots of such violence and the politics that inform it lie deep in American history and its machinery of elimination and terminal exclusion’ (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024: 138). An additional resource to help to further understand the intimate connection between colonialism, white supremacy and capitalism is Alberto Toscano’s (2023) *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*. Toscano supports the authors’ assessment of the current political climate in the US, summarising the situation as ‘a continuation of a sort of white settler, patriarchal form of privilege and violence that has a lot of historical continuity’ (Tyson, Krabbe and Toscano, 2024: 7). Giroux and DiMaggio constantly remind us that the failure of American schooling, and wider cultural pedagogies, to adequately address the long dark history of mass slavery, white supremacy, and the genocide of the indigenous population at the foundation of the US, greatly reduces the capacity of the public to understand systemic racism and critique dominant white Christian nationalist discourses, cultural myths and conspiracy theories. The lack of historical memory is particularly important in the American context given this history.

One of the most important features of the book is the analysis of how colonial capitalism, currently neoliberalism, intersects with and enables the growth of fascism. The authors use the term ‘neoliberal fascism’ to describe our increasingly authoritarian present (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024: 114). The authors show how through increasing inequality and precarity, capitalism, suffering from a legitimisation crisis, ‘needed a new ideology to sustain itself’ (Ibid.: 209). ‘Neoliberalism capitalism, even as it is going through a major crisis, has

morphed into a fascist politics that is embraced and proclaimed openly through a language and set of policies that are rooted in U.S. history and culture' (Ibid.: 81). Far from seeing liberal democracy as the antithesis of fascism, Toscano too argues that anti-fascism is not compatible with liberal democracy. He demonstrates that 'to speak of fascism is to speak of capitalism, and that anti-fascism should necessarily be anti-capitalist' (Gordillo, 2024). The authors importantly stress that the Democrats are just as much bastions of neoliberalism as the Republicans (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024).

Back in 2018, O'Toole characterised Trump's presidency as pre-fascism, a trial run for what was to come through the normalising of unspeakable cruelty, in particular against racialised and minoritised communities (O'Toole, 2018). Extending his analysis to the actions of the wider far right in Europe, O'Toole wrote that 'millions and millions of Europeans and Americans are learning to think the unthinkable' and accept the unacceptable. Who would have imagined at that time that the normalisation of extreme violence could go as far as reaching genocide fatigue? The ongoing annihilation of the Palestinian people in Gaza shows the connection between colonial capitalism, white supremacy and the fascistic normalisation of obscene levels of death and destruction. Giroux recently wrote, '[t]he morally reprehensible killing of children in Gaza is part of a larger problem that haunts the modern period: the merging of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism' (Giroux, 2024b: 123). It is important to remember that the illegal occupation of Palestine, continued apartheid, and now ongoing genocide has been, and continues to be, facilitated and supported by both the Democratic and Republican administrations, alongside liberal leaders of Canada and Europe. As tempting as it may be to singularly focus on the emergence of Trump, and other authoritarian leaders like him the world over, we need to remember that business as usual is deeply problematic and itself reveals fascistic drives for power.

The Democratic Party have long sought to subdue progressive power within the party. A win for the Democrats in November 2024 will not bring about a fairer, more just, egalitarian society, as the US will continue to be plagued by long standing white supremacy, militarisation, gun violence, mass incarceration, and gross inequality. However, defeating Trump is a necessary step in the right direction. If the conservative Heritage Foundation's Project 2025

(Leingang, 2024) is any indication as to what a second Trump presidency would entail, certainly a win for Trump would turn the tides further in the direction of fascism, and given the unfortunate global reach of US power, make the long road to a better future for all further out of sight.

But we ought not to settle for a lesser evil and be radical in our commitment to the belief in a better world for all. This important text stresses that need and provides hope in that possibility, pointing to the types of solutions that are needed to counter the rise of fascism. The authors mention social movements that offer us hope, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. We could add to this the recent historic pro-Palestine student protests across university campuses in the US. There have also been important moments of hope internationally, like the recent success of the strategic alliance of the political left in France through the formation of the New Popular Front in opposition to the rising popularity of the far right National Rally. Let us all hope, as the authors do, for the prioritisation of critical education as a public good in combating fascist politics and ideology and a ground swell of grassroots activism that mobilises communities in the fight for a radical anti-capitalist future.

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