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## *Fascist Politics in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism: Confronting the Domestication of the Unimaginable*



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Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it has been faced. History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.

– James Baldwin

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The long shadow of domestic fascism, defined as a project of racial and cultural cleansing, is with us once again. Americans 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 spectacularized horror of murderous lynchings. More recently we have viewed fascist acts of terror in a politics 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.[1]

An upgraded form of fascism with its rabid nativism and hatred of racial mixing is currently at the center of politics in the United States. Traditional liberal values of equality, social justice, dissent, and freedom are now considered a threat to a Republican Party supportive of staggering levels of inequality, white Christian nationalism, and racial purity. Yet the lessons of history with its death camps, machineries of torture, and embrace of murderous violence as a political tool are too often ignored—though its mobilizing fascist passions are once again on the horizon.[2] This politics of numbness and denial is not only true of the mainstream press but also applies to many liberal and left-oriented academics.[3]

America's slide into a fascist politics demands a revitalized understanding of the historical moment in which we find ourselves, along with a systemic critical analysis of the new political formations that mark this period. This is especially true as neoliberalism can no longer defend itself. The destabilizing conditions of global capitalism with its mix of savage inequalities and expanding methods of control and repression point to both a legitimation crisis and a turn towards an upgraded form of fascism. This neo-fascist resurgence is part of a counter-revolution waged against the student revolts of the sixties, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and a range of resistance insurgencies that have gained force over the last sixty years.[4]

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, and economic oppression.

This is especially important as those marginalized by class, race, ethnicity, and religion become increasingly aware of how much they have lost control over the economic, political, pedagogical, and social conditions that bear down on their lives in the new era of

fascist politics. Visions have become dystopian, devolving into a sense of being left out, abandoned, and subjected to increasing systems of terror and violence. One consequence is an instructive moment of anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity marked by deflated values and an endless barrage of hateful rhetoric. We live in an age of fragmentation, psychic numbing, the declining of critical functions, and the loss of historical memory, all of which allow for the domestication of the unimaginable.

These issues can no longer be viewed as individual or isolated problems. They are manifestations of a broader failure of politics, if not the public imagination. Moreover, what is needed is not a series of stopgap reforms limited to particular institutions or groups but a dismantling of the capitalist order as a start toward more global acts of resistance.

Understood properly, neoliberal capitalism is a form of necropolitics, or more specifically, a type of gangster capitalism that is criminogenic. Gangster capitalism thrives on the silence of the oppressed and the complicity of those seduced by its power. It is a politics of subjugation and denial. As an educational project, it trades in moral blindness, historical amnesia, and racial and class hatred. One consequence is that as market mentalities and moralities tighten their grip on all aspects of society, democratic institutions and public spheres are being downsized, if not altogether disappearing, along with educated citizens, without which there is no democracy. The threat to democracy in the current historical moment is also evident in the unity of emerging disparate fascist movements in civil society—ranging from self-described neo-Nazis and Oath Keepers to Christian nationalists and Proud Boys—with the reactionary power of GOP governed states such as Florida, Texas, Idaho, Tennessee, among others.[5]

Authoritarian regimes trade in fear and the suppression of dissent. Fascists such as Gov. Ron DeSantis, as Judith Butler notes, “fear the power of speech, of critique, of open-ended inquiry.”[6] When critical thought aligns with political power, fascists shut down the institutions and individuals that give voice to holding power accountable. How else to explain the expulsion of two Black Democratic lawmakers in the Tennessee state house for peacefully protesting in the house chamber against gun violence?

The war on democracy and children took an ugly turn in Tennessee as two Black legislators, Representatives Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, were expelled for protesting in favor of gun control laws. Their white counterpart was not expelled. The charge that the three protesting lawmakers broke decorum is ironic coming from Republican politicians who “reject life-saving controls on deadly weapons” and repeatedly pass laws that stifle debate.[7] As the editorial board of the *Los Angeles Times* noted, “it has been

Republicans, in the years of the post-Trump presidency, who are perfecting the dark art of silencing Americans.... it has sadly become the Republican norm to stifle debate. Don't say gay, don't say gun control, don't say racism, don't let kids read the "wrong" books or be read to by the "wrong" people, don't permit children to learn about their bodies or their rights." [8] The appeal to decorum by Tennessee Republican party lawmakers is simply a cheap defense for denying fundamental liberties while legitimatising white supremacy and fascist politics as tools of domination.

The racism behind the expulsion is obvious but what is not being discussed in the corporate controlled media are the profits made by the gun industries and those politicians in Tennessee who receive blood money from the merchants of death. The mainstream press claims this far-right assault on democracy is about the GOP wanting to uphold the second amendment. That is just a cover for refusing to admit the link between a feral capitalism and corrupt politicians who would rather pull in profits than taking steps to prevent nine-year-olds from being ripped apart by assault weapons.

One GOP spokesperson claimed that the protest by the Black lawmakers were comparable to the Jan. 6 insurrection. Only a fascist could argue that a far right-wing mobs' attack on the Capitol supported by Trump and his allies in order to overturn an election is comparable to a protest by three brave legislators to protect young children from being slaughtered by AK 15 assault rifle. Such rhetoric suggests that we live an age of barbarism—one that resonates with a past in which black bodies were lynched, books were burned, critics were jailed, and people ended up in death chambers.

Not only are dissent and bodies disappearing in this age of unapologetic fascism. Increasingly, institutions such as education are under siege in Tennessee, Florida, Texas, and other GOP controlled states. They too are being expelled from the script of democracy, because what far right GOP politicians fear about education is that it is the one site where young people can learn the responsibilities of being critical and engaged citizens. As Moira Donegan argues, education at all levels "are foundational to democracy and this is the reason why DeSantis and the far right are attacking education." She writes: Schools and universities are laboratories of aspiration, places where young people cultivate their own capacities, expose themselves to the experiences and worldviews of others, and learn what will be required of them to live responsible, tolerant lives in a pluralist society. It is in school where they learn that social hierarchies do not necessarily correspond to personal merit; it is in school where they discover the mistakes of the past, and where they gain the tools not to repeat them. No wonder the DeSantis right, with its

fear of critique and devotion to regressive modes of domination, seems to hostile to letting kids learn: education is how kids grow up to be the kinds of adults they can't control.[9]

What is needed in response to these assaults is a socialist democracy defined by visions, ideals, institutions, social relations, and pedagogies of resistance. Fundamental to such a call is the formation of a cultural politics that enables the public to imagine a life beyond a capitalist society in which racial-class-and-gender-based violence produces endless assaults on the public and civic imagination, mediated through the elevation of war, militarization, violent masculinity, and the politics of disposability to the highest levels of power. Neoliberal capitalism is a death-driven machinery that infantilizes, exploits, and devalues human life, and the planet itself.

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 recognizing 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 recognize themselves, identify with the issues being addressed, and place the privatization of their troubles in a broader systemic context. We live at a time in which a scourge of fascism emerges from both the political arena and the powerful right-wing media, such as Fox News. Fascist politics thrives on disimagination machines that normalize relations of power, infantilize individuals, and reproduce oppressive ideologies masking as common-sense. As C. Wright Mills has made clear, when the social disappears and everything is privatized and commodified, it is difficult for individuals to translate private troubles into public issues and see themselves as part of a larger collective capable of mutual support and resistance. The erosion of public discourse and the onslaught of a culture of manufactured ignorance enables the intervention of criminality into politics. This is especially true when education takes place not only in schools but also in a range of cultural apparatuses including the social media, the internet, and other online platforms.

Education has always been foundational to politics, but it is rarely understood as a site of struggle over how identities are shaped, values are legitimated, and the future defined. Unlike schooling, education permeates a range of corporate-controlled apparatuses that extend from the digital airways to print culture. Under the GOP's reign of terror, these apparatuses have become updated sites of apartheid pedagogy. What is different about education today is not only the variety of spaces in which it takes place, but also the

degree to which it has become an element of organized irresponsibility and a prop for white supremacy, the crushing of dissent, and a corrupt cultural and political order. This is clear in the policies of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and others whose attack on public and higher education sanctions civic illiteracy, codifies whiteness a tool of dominance, and censors the past in order to abolish the future as well.

This is a model of education reminiscent of what took place in the Third Reich. Reverberations of history are at work in the current historical moment in which book burning, censorship, faculty firings, and the racial cleansing of history merge with an attempt by the extremists GOP to turn public and higher education into right-wing, white supremacist fueled indoctrination centers operating under the power of state control. Policies that embrace censorship and historical amnesia force students into the fog of a present without a past, a manufactured ignorance covered over in the blatantly anti-intellectual claim to make people comfortable. In a democratic society, the purpose of education is not to make people feel comfortable, but to enable them to think critically, challenge common-sense assumptions, take risks, make informed judgments, use their imaginations, and come to terms with their power as individual and social agents. Education should disturb, energize, inspire, and teach people to question and think critically about themselves, their relations with others, and the world around them.

Education as a form of mass ignorance is evident in the firing of a Florida charter school principal for showing students in a sixth-grade classical arts class a picture of Michelangelo's "David." One of the three parents who complained about the lesson called the masterpiece "pornographic."<sup>[10]</sup> In another instance, a Southlake, Texas school administrator advised teachers "that if they have a book about the Holocaust in their classrooms, they should also offer students access to a book from an 'opposing' perspective."<sup>[11]</sup> One teacher asked how she was to oppose the Holocaust. The administrator committed to the spread of state sanctioned ignorance, if not a flight from moral and social responsibility, answered "Believe me. That's come up."<sup>[12]</sup> In an effort to comply with Gov. Ron DeSantis' so called Stop W.O.K.E. act, textbook publisher, Studies Weekly, whitewashed Rosa Park's act of resistance against racial discrimination when she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955. Rather than stating that she was told to move because of a "law that said African Americans had to give up their seats on the bus if a white person wanted to sit down," the revised version of the textbook stated, "She was told to move to a different seat."<sup>[13]</sup>

All of these examples signal a fascist mode of education that produces enforced ignorance, systemic racism, and suppresses a history that makes white supremacists and their base feel uncomfortable. As Michael Datcher rightly notes, it is not surprising that when “U.S. District Judge Mark Walker issued a preliminary injunction against Stop WOKE for violating the First and 14th Amendments, [he called] it ‘positively dystopian.’”<sup>[14]</sup> Yet there is more at work here than the Orwellian language of censorship and mass-produced ignorance, there are also echoes of a project of cultural genocide that has always been fundamental to the language of fascism.

Culture as an educational force has been poisoned and plays a key role in normalizing fascist politics in America and around the globe. Mass media has turned into a flame thrower of hate and bigotry, stylized as spectacle. Alienating misery, social atomization, the death of the social contract, the militarization of public space, concentrations of wealth and power in the hands of the financial and ruling elite, all fuel a fascist politics. The signs of fascism no longer hide in the shadows. This is especially clear as a modern-day fascist politics draws much of its energy from a culture of fear, resentment, blind faith, and a state of mind in which the distinction between truth and falsehoods collapses into alternative realities.

Against those politicians, pundits, and academics who falsely claim that fascism rests entirely in the past, it is crucial to recognize that fascism is always present in history and can crystallize in different forms. Or as the historian Jason Stanley observes, “Fascism [is] ‘a political method’ that can appear anytime, anywhere, if conditions are right.”<sup>[15]</sup> The historical arc of fascism is not frozen in history; its attributes lurk in different forms in diverse societies, waiting to adapt to times favorable to its emergence. As Paul Gilroy has noted, the “horrors [of fascism] are always much closer to us than we like to imagine,” and our duty is not to look away but to make them visible.<sup>[16]</sup> The refusal by an array of politicians, scholars, and the mainstream media to acknowledge the scale of the fascist threat bearing down on American society is more than an act of refusal, it is an act of complicity.

At the current moment, it would be wise for educators and others to heed the words of Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi who in his book *The Black Hole of Auschwitz* writes:

Every age has its own fascism, and we see the warning signs wherever the concentration of power denies citizens the possibility and the means of expressing and acting on their own free will. There are many ways of reaching this point, and not just through the terror

of police intimidation, but by denying and distorting information, by undermining systems of justice, by paralyzing the education system, and by spreading in a myriad subtle ways nostalgia for a world where order reigned, and where the security of a privileged few depends on the forced labor and the forced silence of the many.[17]

Levi's words remind us of the importance of critical education, historical memory, civic literacy, and collective resistance as a counterweight to the current language of nativism, ultra-nationalism, bigotry, and violence. It is an urgent call to resist the erasure of history. This is particularly important at a time when America moves closer to a fascist abyss as thinking becomes dangerous, language is emptied out of any substance, politics is driven by the financial elite, and institutions that serve the public good begin to vanish.

Under the current regime of fascist politics, education is increasingly defined as an animating space of violence, revenge, resentment, and victimhood as a privileged form of white Christian identity. Right-wing legislators are weaponizing education by calling for the firing of faculty who simply refer to critical race theory, critically engage with African American history, teach gender studies and resist "anti-trans legislation that seeks to codify antiquated gender roles." [18] The fascist wing of the GOP wants the state to monitor the views of teachers, reproduce pedagogies of repression, eliminate tenure, and redefine the role of higher education in fundamentalist theocratic terms. In this scenario, we are reminded of James Baldwin's claim in *No Name in the Street* that when ignorance merges with power, "education is a synonym for indoctrination, if you are white, and subjugation, if you are black."

The current age of barbarism points to the need to emphasize how the cultural realm and pedagogies of closure operate as an educational and political force in the service of fascist politics. Under such circumstances, educators and others must question not only what individuals learn in a given society but what they have to unlearn, and what institutions provide the conditions for them to do so. Against apartheid pedagogies of repression and conformity—rooted in censorship, racism, and the killing of the imagination—there is the need for critical pedagogical practices that value a culture of questioning, view critical agency as a fundamental condition of public life, and reject indoctrination in favor of the search for justice within educational spaces and institutions that function as democratic public spheres.

At a time when learning is tied to a pedagogy of repression and citizenship becomes synonymous with white Christian nationalism, it is crucial for individuals to become critical and autonomous citizens capable of interrogating the lies and falsehoods spread by



politicians, right-wing pundits, anti-public intellectuals, and right-wing social media platforms while being able to struggle for a more democratic and just future. But there is more at work here than learning how to be self-reflective; there is also the art of learning how to turn memory and critique into a form of collective resistance, especially with respect to creating a multi-racial working-class movement.

To fight the ghosts of the past as they emerge in new forms, it is essential to learn from history. As Stuart Jeffries argues, it is imperative for critical intellectuals to excavate that which has been “consigned to oblivion by the victors....to find the forgotten, the obsolete [and] the allegedly irrelevant.”<sup>[19]</sup> Any viable form of resistance needs to expand the public’s understanding of the power of historical consciousness, moral witnessing, and the power of a social contract in which political and personal rights are joined with economic rights. Redemptive memory allows us to confront the dark truths of history and resist a paralysis of ethical consciousness and a state of depoliticized inattentiveness that breeds horrors and creates monsters. In addition, a massive pedagogical campaign is also needed to deconstruct the regressive notions of freedom and self-interest at the heart of neoliberal ideology. At the same time, the poisonous refuge of racism and economic inequality must be confronted in multipole sites as a deeply interwoven political and educational struggle. Matters of education are crucial to developing a democratic socialist vision. Education is a place where individuals should be able to imagine themselves as critically and politically engaged agents. In a time of oppression, education becomes even more fundamental to politics. Educators, public intellectuals, artists, workers, union members and other cultural workers need to make education essential to social change and, in doing so, reclaim the role that education has historically played in developing political literacies and civic capacities, both of which are essential prerequisites for developing a socialist democracy.

Education as empowerment must be able to take on the task of shifting consciousness to enable individuals to narrate themselves, prevent their own erasure, address the economic, social, and political conditions that shape their lives, and learn that culture is an instrument of power. For this to happen, people must recognize something of themselves and their condition in the modes of education in which they are addressed. This is a matter of awakening both a sense of identification and a moment of recognition. As a political project, education must press the claims for economic and social justice and strengthen the call for civic literacy and positive collective action.

In the face of the current fascist threat, progressives need to recover and reframe the discourse and purpose of education as an empowering political project. Malcolm X was

right when he said, 'Education is a passport to the future.' He built upon this insight when he wrote 'Power in defense of freedom is greater than power on behalf of tyranny and oppression, because power, real power, comes from our conviction which produces action, uncompromising action.' The language of critique, compassion, and hope must be collective, embracing our connections as human beings, and respecting our deeply interrelated relationship to the planet.

A democratic socialist politics and movement need a language of connections. Any affirmation of the social must ensure that public services and social provisions bind us together as human beings. Capitalism has proven that it cannot respond either to society's most basic needs or address its most serious social problems. Once again, neoliberalism has lost its legitimacy and can no longer fulfil its empty promises. It is a death machine rooted in the logic of racial purity, social abandonment, and terminal exclusion. Its criminality, cruelty, inhumanity, and its alignment with an emerging fascist politics are now on full display in the fascism of the Republican Party. There is a need for educators both to reclaim the histories of insubordination and resistance and to update and enact them accordingly in the current historical moment. It has become clear in the age of the plagues and barbarism that any successful movement for resistance must not only be democratic and anti-capitalist; it must also be anti-fascist. We owe such a challenge to ourselves, to future generations, and to the promise of a global socialist democracy waiting to blossom.

Fascism is one of the major crises of our times; its presence cannot be relegated to an isolated moment in history. Memory must be a site of activation, a productive site that wages a struggle against misremembering, misinformation, and engineered ignorance. The mobilizing passions of fascism must be understood and made visible in order to prevent them from engulfing society and menacing the future. Educators not only need to be aware of the importance of historical memory and the roots of fascism and its different forms but must also work individually and collectively to make sure that a twenty-first century fascist politics fails to materialize. Moreover, it is crucial for educators not only to learn from the past but also to recognize what has been *unlearned* and what has been purposely forgotten or rewritten in order to camouflage and hide the emergence of a rebranded fascist politics.

In a society in which democracy is under siege, it is crucial to remember that alternative futures are possible and that acting on these beliefs is a precondition for making radical change possible. At stake here is the courage to take on the challenge of what kind of

world we want—what kind of future do we want to build for our children? The great philosopher, Ernst Bloch, 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.”<sup>[20]</sup> Now more than ever educators must live up to the challenge of keeping the fires of resistance burning with a feverish intensity. Only then will we be able to keep the lights on and the future open. Only then will fascism be defeated.

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*Menace of American Authoritarianism* (Routledge, 2018), and *the American Nightmare: Facing the Challenge of Fascism* (City Lights, 2018), *On Critical Pedagogy*, 2nd edition (Bloomsbury), and *Race, Politics, and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis* (Bloomsbury 2021). His website is [www. henryagiroux.com](http://www.henryagiroux.com).

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