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Universities in Dark Times: Beyond the Plague of Neoliberal Fascism



Photo by Nathan Dumlao

Education is not the filling of a vessel, but the lighting of a fire.

– bell hooks

In an era marked by unprecedented threats to democracy from rising authoritarian forces, universities—once celebrated citadels of democratic learning and public service—now find themselves caught in a profound political and ideological siege. Rather than championing social justice or fostering spaces for rigorous intellectual exchange, many institutions have shifted their priorities to profit, silencing dissent and embracing market-driven models that serve a predatory capitalism, thus betraying their democratic mission. This crisis has deep roots, but the recent onslaught by far-right politicians and a reactionary billionaire elite is without precedent in its intensity and scale. This trend

weakens the humanities and liberal arts, stripping higher education of its capacity to serve as a democratic public sphere and robbing it of the potential to cultivate socially aware students who challenge injustices and hold power to account. Increasingly, higher education runs the risk of becoming either right wing indoctrination centers or dead zones of the imagination.

Neoliberal ideology, marked by the irrational belief in the ability of markets to solve all problems, has deeply infiltrated public life, depoliticized critical issues and shifted education's focus to workforce training. As education becomes increasingly privatized and subordinated to right-wing agendas, students are steered away from engaging with collective issues, ethics, or democratic participation. In the neoliberal university, students are encouraged to abandon any commitment beyond personal gain. Education is stripped of its civic purpose, no longer a path to responsible citizenship but a high-stakes financial transaction—a competition for entry into the lucrative world of hedge funds and exploitative financial ventures. This transformation reduces learning to mere careerism, undermining the university's potential to cultivate engaged, socially conscious citizens.

In doing so, it fosters a dangerous form of historical and political amnesia, obscuring the reality that neoliberalism, which facing a crisis of legitimacy has aligned itself with a fascist politics steeped in white nationalism, white supremacy, and the politics of disposability. This alignment signals the rise of what I have called neoliberal fascism, a fusion of market-driven policies and authoritarian ideologies. Moreover, right-wing billionaires such as Bill Ackman, the hedge-fund CEO, are putting enormous pressure on universities to suppress dissent, particularly among critics of Israel's genocidal war in Gaza and Lebanon and impose a curriculum that weakens the power and autonomy of faculty and students while turning colleges such as New College in Sarasota, Florida into citadels of indoctrination—a MAGA model for all of higher education.

This market-driven transformation has reshaped universities, reorienting them toward profitability and marginalizing disciplines that foster critical thinking, social responsibility, and collective imagination. The resulting commodification of education deprives students of the tools to challenge injustice or envision a more equitable society. Under such circumstances, the language of the market replaces civic language with personal, consumer-oriented perspectives, isolating individuals and obstructing a shared understanding of public concerns. In short, the critical function of higher education is under siege. Under such circumstances, higher education increasingly resembles disimagination machines.

The shift has also marginalized public intellectuals—scholars who contribute to society’s understanding of critical issues by connecting academic work to larger social problems. Instead, universities increasingly favor faculty who align with corporate values, reinforcing depoliticized, market-oriented approaches to education. This trend has led to the rise of what George Scialabba calls the “anti-public intellectual,” figures who endorse market policies without addressing issues of justice and democracy. Or as in the case of anti- public intellectuals such as Niall Ferguson whose writing legitimizes an outright fascist such as Trump. These corporate-aligned “anti-public intellectuals,” supported by neoliberal foundations like the Heritage Foundation, champion policies that erode public resources and democratic institutions. The Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 manifesto, for instance, aims to dismantle the welfare state and punish dissenters—a blueprint for an authoritarian reordering of American society under a potential second Trump administration.

Against this tide, public intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky, Angela Davis, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Cornel West have long advocated for a different vision of education, one that invites students to question authority, seek justice, and cultivate democracy. Rather than focusing solely on producing economically viable graduates, universities must also strive to cultivate active, engaged citizens who can imagine a future free of climate catastrophe, militarism, systemic racism, and predatory capitalism.

Historically, universities have largely supported resistance and critical engagement, playing pivotal roles in movements for free speech, civil rights, and gender equality. However, this legacy is at risk. Neoliberal ideologies target universities because of their potential to promote democratic values and critical thought. As a result, right-wing movements and corporate interests increasingly attack universities’ public roles and democratic functions.

In response to these threats, a coalition of young people, critical public intellectuals, and progressive social movements has emerged, asserting that universities must be protected as bastions of democracy. As white nationalists, authoritarian billionaires, and neo-fascists wage war on education, it becomes clear that treating education as a public good is essential to sustaining a healthy democracy. Public intellectuals, students, and workers must defend educational institutions as sites of social justice and resistance against corporatization and the authoritarian impulses encroaching on democracy. Universities have a moral responsibility to press for social and economic justice, countering both corporatization and the rise of authoritarian ideologies.

The crisis in higher education is part of a broader neoliberal assault on democracy, which systematically privatizes education, undermines public trust, and weakens collective institutions. This relentless assault corrodes the very foundations of democratic life, replacing the values of cooperation, civic responsibility, and community with self-interest, competition, and social isolation. In this climate, public intellectuals play an essential role as guardians of engaged citizenship and intellectual integrity, equipping students and the public to see that democracy cannot sustain itself passively; it demands an active, vigilant defense. Universities, when aligned with their true purpose, become crucial spaces for cultivating the capacities, solidarity, and critical awareness necessary to confront and resist the encroachments of authoritarianism. What must be stressed here is that habits of power are learned and must in some cases be unlearned. This is an important pedagogical task.

The path forward for universities is clear: they must resist corporatization and recommit to fostering critical thinking, academic freedom, civic engagement, and democratic renewal. If higher education is to fulfill its democratic mission, it must resist the neoliberal plague and foster young people equipped to challenge inequities and envision a just, compassionate society.

In an era of collapsing visions, emotional plagues, manufactured ignorance, staggering inequality, environmental ruin, human misery, and rising authoritarianism, it is vital for academics to affirm higher education's claim on democracy. Above all, academics need to stand firm in their ethical convictions, engage with the pressing social issues of our time and bridge the gap between learning and everyday life. Evoking the spirit of James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, Edward Said, Ellen Willis, Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Paulo Freire, our role as educators and citizens demands that we champion public intellectuals who dare to confront power, alleviate human suffering, and combat the moral vacuum of ultra-nationalism, white supremacy, and economic exploitation. Intellectuals, when aligned with these commitments, transcend the constraints of academic disciplines, engaging in society's most urgent struggles, resisting the commercialization of knowledge, and bringing truth to bear amid a deluge of lies and conspiracy theories. They embody, as Kiese Makeba Laymon notes, "the vital connection between a reflective self-awareness and a commitment to social responsibility. Without an informed public, democracy is imperiled; without a language that interrogates injustice, there can be no path to justice." At stake here is the recognition that without an informed public, there can be no democracy, and without a language critical of injustice, there can be no path to justice.

Today, the role of educators as public intellectuals aligned with broader social movements has never been more vital, especially when far-right extremists around the globe seek to turn education into a force for indoctrination. Education has always been political, but in this era of book bans, weakened faculty autonomy, restricted curricula, and whitewashed history, imagining education as a practice of freedom is a radical act. It is not merely a means to transfer knowledge or a method, but a site of struggle over agency, identity, history, and the future. In a time when education can also become a tool of oppression, it is crucial to imagine education as a living pathway toward a strong and vibrant democracy. This suggests that young people and academics engage in a profound dialogue with history, a commitment to honoring the memories of the forgotten, the silenced, and the oppressed as part of a relentless pursuit to hold power to account. It also suggests taking seriously the idea that pedagogy is a powerful force for shaping identities, agency, and social values. As Homi Bhabha rightly observes, pedagogy demands vigilance “at that very moment when identities are being produced and groups are being constituted.” In such contexts, pedagogy becomes a catalyst for empowering individuals to take responsibility not only for themselves but also for their communities, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to question authority and expose abuses of power. It urges us to learn from history, sharpening our ability to recognize, comprehend, and resist the insidious forces of fascism.

The McCarthyite rhetoric espoused by figures like J.D. Vance and Donald Trump poses a grave threat to the foundations of higher education. Vance has publicly branded professors as “the enemy,” while Trump has pledged to cleanse universities of so-called ‘leftists,’ whom he denigrates as ‘vermin.’ For Trump, labels like ‘leftists’ and ‘Marxists’ serve as sweeping condemnations for anyone who dares engage in critical thinking or challenges the status quo. These attacks reveal a deep-seated contempt for universities as spaces of intellectual freedom, dialogue, and the pursuit of truth. By framing educators, scholars, and the media as “enemies from within,” these political figures are not merely undermining public trust in academic institutions; they are working to extinguish open inquiry and eradicate the diversity of perspectives essential for a vibrant democratic society. Their ultimate aim is to strip universities of their cultures of criticism, unsettling knowledge, and democratic values—even those values that remain tenuous. The consequences of this discourse are severe, and we have seen a similar script played out in Nazi Germany, Pinochet’s Chile, and more recently in Orban’s Hungary. To put it bluntly, this rhetoric signals a project of repression that escalates toward expulsions,

imprisonments, and, if Trump's language is any indication, hints ominously at what Fintan O'Toole refers to as “so many of European history's lagers and gulags and prisoner-of-war camps.”

Reviving historical consciousness as a pedagogical practice illuminates patterns of repression and opens pathways for resistance. Simultaneously, it offers a vision of leadership that amplifies the power of both individual and collective agency—a fierce, binding force that calls us to the obligations of social responsibility, justice, and freedom. It is a foundation for a democracy that pulsates with the promise of a future where economic, social, and personal rights are not merely ideals but lived realities, untouched by fear, repression, or the shifting, ever-present ghosts of fascism.

Universities now stand at a crossroads: they can either continue down the path of market-driven values, eroding their purpose, or reclaim their democratic mission as spaces of critical inquiry and social responsibility. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism—a predatory form of capitalism—has systematically dismantled the welfare state, public sphere, and commitment to the common good, reshaping universities in its image. This ideology insists that the market should dictate not only the economy but all realms of society, concentrating wealth among a corrupt billionaire financial elite while promoting unchecked individualism, deregulation, and privatization as guiding societal principles. Under neoliberalism, education is commodified, and citizenship is reduced to consumerism. Universities—once spaces for cultivating democratic ideals and intellectual freedom—now risk becoming extensions of this form of gangster capitalism, mirroring the racialized inequalities, militarism, and extreme wealth gaps that define our broader social landscape. To surrender to the commodification, commercialism, and corporatization of education and the fascist currents shaping contemporary politics would be a profound betrayal of higher education's foundational mission. The stakes could not be higher: without an unrelenting commitment to radical democratic ideals, universities risk not only forfeiting their own relevance but also imperiling the very future of democracy at a moment when the specter of fascism looms with renewed force.

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(Bloomsbury ۲۰۲۲) and Insurrections: Education in the Age of Counter-Revolutionary Politics (Bloomsbury, ۲۰۲۳), and coauthored with Anthony DiMaggio, Fascism on Trial: Education and the Possibility of Democracy (Bloomsbury, ۲۰۲۲). Giroux is also a member of Truthout's board of directors.

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