

Higher Education Must Champion Democracy, Not Surrender to Fascism

Critical education must become a key organizing principle to defeat the emerging authoritarianism in the US.

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For decades, [neoliberalism](#) has systematically attacked the welfare state, undermined public institutions and weakened the foundations of collective well-being. Shrouded in the alluring language of liberty, it transforms market principles into a dominant creed, insisting that every facet of life conform to the imperatives of profit and economic efficiency.

But in reality, neoliberalism consolidates wealth in the hands of a financial elite, celebrates ruthless individualism, promotes [staggering levels of inequality](#), perpetuates systemic injustices like racism and militarism, and commodifies everything, leaving nothing sacred or untouchable. Neoliberalism operates as a relentless engine of capitalist accumulation, driven by an insatiable pursuit of unchecked growth and the ruthless concentration of wealth and power within the hands of a ruling elite. At its core, it's a pedagogy of repression: crushing justice, solidarity and care while deriding critical education and destroying the very tools that empower citizens to resist domination and reclaim the promise of democracy.

As neoliberalism collapses into authoritarianism, its machinery of repression intensifies. Dissent is silenced, social life militarized and hate normalized. This fuels a fascistic politics which is systematically dismantling democratic accountability, with higher education among its primary targets. For years, the far right has sought to undermine education, recognizing it as a powerful site of resistance. This has only accelerated, as MAGA movement adherents seek to eliminate the public education threat to their authoritarian goals.

Vice President-elect J.D. Vance openly declared "[the professors are the enemy.](#)" **President-elect Donald Trump** has stated that "pink-haired communists [are] teaching our kids." In response to the Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's killing, MAGA politicians like **Sen. Tom Cotton** openly called for deploying military force against demonstrators.

The authoritarian spirit driving this party is crystallized in the words of right-wing activist [Jack Posobiec](#), who, at the 2023 Conservative Political Action Conference, said:

"We are here to overthrow democracy completely. We didn't get all the way there on January 6, but we will. After we burn that swamp to the ground, we will establish the new American republic on its ashes."

This is more than anti-democratic, authoritarian rhetoric. It also shapes poisonous policies in

which education is transformed into an animating space of repression and violence, and becomes weaponized as a tool of censorship, conformity and discrimination.

As authoritarianism surges globally, [democracy is being dismantled](#). What does this rise in illiberal regimes mean for higher education? What is the role of universities in defending democratic ideals when the very notion of democracy is under siege? In Trump's United States, silence is complicity, and inaction a moral failing. Higher education must reassert itself as a crucial democratic public sphere that fosters critical thought, resists tyranny and nurtures the kind of informed citizens necessary to a just society.

Trump's return to the presidency marks the endpoint of a deeply corrupt system, one that thrives on anti-intellectualism, scorn for science and contempt for reason. In this political climate, corruption, racism and hatred have transformed into a spectacle of fear, division and relentless disinformation, supplanting any notion of shared responsibility or collective purpose. In such a degraded environment, democracy becomes a hollowed-out version of itself, stripped of its legitimacy, ideals and promises. When democracy loses its moral and aspirational appeal, it opens the door for autocrats like Trump to dismantle the very institutions vital to preserving democratic life.

The failure of civic culture, education and literacy is starkly evident in the Trump administration's success at emptying language of meaning — a flight from historical memory, ethics, justice and social responsibility. Communication has devolved into exaggerated political rhetoric and shallow public relations, replacing reason and evidence with spectacle and demagoguery. Thinking is scorned as dangerous, and news often serves as an amplifier for power rather than a check on it.

Corporate media outlets, driven by profits and ratings, align themselves with Trump's disimagination machine, perpetuating a culture of celebrity worship and reality-TV sensationalism. In this climate, the institutions essential to a vibrant civil society are eroding, leaving us to ask: What kind of democracy can survive when the foundations of the social fabric are collapsing? Among these institutions, the mainstream media — a cornerstone of the fourth estate — have been particularly compromised. As [Heather McGhee notes](#), the right-wing media has, over three decades, orchestrated "a radical takeover of our information ecosystem."

Universities' Neoliberal Audit Culture

As public-sector support fades, many institutions of higher education have been forced to mirror the private sector, turning knowledge into a commodity and eliminating departments and courses that don't align with the market's bottom line. Faculty are increasingly treated like low-wage workers, with labor relations designed to minimize costs and maximize servility. In this climate, power is concentrated in the hands of a managerial class that views education through a market-driven lens, reducing both governance and teaching to mere instruments of economic need. Democratic and creative visions, along with ethical imagination, give way to calls for efficiency, financial gain and conformity.

This neoliberal model not only undermines faculty autonomy but also views students as mere consumers, while saddling them with exorbitant tuition fees and a precarious future shaped by economic instability and ecological crisis. In abandoning its democratic mission, higher education fixates on narrow notions of job-readiness and cost-efficiency, forsaking its broader social and moral responsibilities. Stripped of any values beyond self-interest,

institutions retreat from fostering critical citizenship and collective well-being.

Pedagogy, in turn, is drained of its critical content and transformative potential. This shift embodies what Cris Shore and Susan Wright term an “[audit culture](#)” — a corporate-driven ethos that depoliticizes knowledge, faculty and students by prioritizing performance metrics, measurable outputs and rigid individual accountability over genuine intellectual and social engagement.

In this process, higher education relinquishes its role as a democratic public sphere, shifting its mission from cultivating engaged citizens to molding passive consumers. This transformation fosters a generation of self-serving individuals, disconnected from the values of solidarity and justice, and indifferent to the creeping rise of authoritarianism.

The suppression of student dissent on campuses this year, particularly among those advocating for Palestinian rights and freedom, highlights this alarming trend. Universities increasingly prioritize conformity and corporate interests, punishing critical thinking and democratic engagement in the process. These developments lay the groundwork for a future shaped not by collective action and social equity, but by privatization, apathy and the encroachment of fascist politics.

Education, once the bedrock of civic engagement, has become a casualty in the age of Trump, where civic illiteracy is celebrated as both virtue and spectacle. In a culture dominated by information overload, celebrity worship and a cutthroat survival ethic, anti-intellectualism thrives as a political weapon, eroding language, meaning and critical thought. Ignorance is no longer passive — it is weaponized, fostering a false solidarity among those who reject democracy and scorn reason. This is not innocent ignorance but a calculated refusal to think critically, a deliberate rejection of language’s role in the pursuit of justice. For the ruling elite and the modern Republican Party, critical thinking is vilified as a threat to power, while willful ignorance is elevated to a badge of honor.

If we are to defeat the emerging authoritarianism in the U.S., critical education must become a key organizing principle of politics. In part, this can be done by exposing and unraveling lies, systems of oppression, and corrupt relations of power while making clear that an alternative future is possible. The language of critical pedagogy can powerfully condemn untruths and injustices.

History’s Emancipating Potential

A central 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 must retain its subversive function — drawing on archives, historical sources, and suppressed narratives to challenge conventional wisdom and dominant ideologies.

The subversive power of history lies in its ability to challenge dominant narratives and expose uncomfortable truths — precisely why it has become a prime target for right-wing forces determined to rewrite or erase it. From banning books and [whitewashing historic injustices like slavery](#) to punishing educators who address pressing social issues, the assault on history is a calculated effort to suppress critical thinking and maintain control. Such

assaults on historical memory represent a broader attempt to silence history's emancipatory potential, rendering critical pedagogy an even more urgent and essential practice in resisting authoritarian forces. These assaults represent both a cleansing of history and what historian Timothy Snyder calls "[anticipatory obedience](#)," which he labels as behavior individuals adopt in the service of emerging authoritarian regimes.

The fight against a growing fascist politics around the world is more than a struggle over power, it is also a struggle to reclaim historical memory. Any fight for a radical democratic socialist future is doomed if we fail to draw transformative lessons from the darkest chapters of our history, using them to forge meaningful resolutions and pathways toward a post-capitalist society. This is especially true at a time when the idea of who should be a citizen has become less inclusive, fueled by toxic religious and [white supremacist](#) ideology.

Consciousness-Shifting Pedagogy

One of the challenges facing today's educators, students and others is the need to address the question of what education should accomplish in a historical moment when it is slipping into authoritarianism. In a world in which there is an increasing abandonment of egalitarian and democratic impulses, what will it take to educate young people and the broader polity to hold power accountable?

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 the global tyranny of capitalism. Such a vision of education can move the field beyond its obsession with accountability schemes, market values, and unreflective immersion in the crude empiricism of a data-obsessed, market-driven society. It can also confront the growing assault on education, where right-wing forces seek to turn universities into tools of ideological tyranny — arenas of pedagogical violence and white Christian indoctrination.

Any meaningful vision of critical pedagogy must 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 genocidal violence, mass poverty, the destruction of the planet and the threat of nuclear war, among other issues. A true shift in consciousness is not possible without pedagogical interventions that speak directly to people in ways that resonate with their lives, struggles and experiences. Education must help individuals recognize themselves in the issues at hand, understanding how their personal suffering is not an isolated event, but part of a systemic crisis. In addition, activism, debate and engagement should be central to a student's education.

In other words, 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 helps them imagine and fight for a world where they are active agents of change.

The poet [Jorie Graham](#) emphasizes 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." Without this approach, pedagogy risks reinforcing a broader culture engrossed in screens and oversimplifications. In such a context, teaching can quickly transform into inaccessible jargon that alienates rather than educates.

Resisting Educational “Neutrality”

In the current historical moment, education cannot surrender to the call of academics who now claim in the age of Trump that there is no room for politics in the classroom, or the increasing claim by administrators 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 politicization of education.

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](#) aptly argue, neutrality “serves to flatten politics and silence scholarly debate,” obscuring the inherently political nature of university life. From decisions about enrollment and research funding to event policies and poster placements, every administrative choice reflects a political stance. Far from apolitical, neutrality is a tool that silences dissent and shields power from accountability.

It is worth repeating that the most powerful forms of education today extend far beyond public and higher education. With the rise of new technologies, power structures and social media, culture itself has become a tool of propaganda. Right-wing media, conservative foundations, and a culture dominated by violence and reality TV created the fertile ground for the rise of Trump and his continued legitimacy. Propaganda machines like *Fox News* have fostered an anti-intellectual climate, normalizing Trump’s bigotry, lies, racism and history of abuse. This is not just a political failure — it is an educational crisis.

In the age of new media, platforms like Elon Musk’s X and tech giants like Facebook, Netflix and Google have become powerful teaching machines, actively serving the far right and [promoting the values of gangster capitalism](#). These companies are reshaping education, turning it into a training ground for workers who align with their entrepreneurial vision or, even more dangerously, perpetuating a theocratic, ultra-nationalist agenda that views people of color and marginalized groups as threats. This vision of education must be rejected in the strongest terms, for it erodes both democracy and the very purpose of education itself.

Education as Mass Mobilization

Education, in its truest sense, must be about more than training students to be workers or indoctrinating them into a white Christian nationalist view of who does and doesn’t count as American. Education should foster intellectual rigor and critical thinking, empowering students to interrogate their experiences and aspirations while equipping them with the agency to act with informed judgment. It must be a bold and supportive space where student voices are valued and engaged with pressing social and political issues, cultivating a commitment to justice, equality and freedom. In too many classrooms in the U.S., there are efforts to make students voiceless, which amounts to making them powerless. This must be challenged and avoided at all times.

Critical pedagogy must expose the false equivalence of capitalism and democracy, emphasizing that resisting fascism requires challenging capitalism. To be transformative, it should embrace anti-capitalist principles, champion radical democracy and envision political alternatives beyond conventional ideologies.

In the face of growing attacks on higher education, educators must reclaim their role in

shaping futures, advancing a vision of education as integral to the struggle for democracy. This vision rejects the neoliberal framing of education as a private investment and instead embraces a critical pedagogy as a practice of freedom that disrupts complacency, fosters critical engagement, and empowers students to confront the forces shaping their lives.

In an age of resurgent fascism, education must do more than defend reason and critical judgment — it must also mobilize widespread, organized collective resistance. A number of youth movements, from Black Lives Matter and the Sunrise Movement to Fridays for Future and March for Our Lives, are mobilizing in this direction. The challenge here is to bring these movements together into one multiracial, working-class organization.

The struggle for a radical democracy must be anchored in the complexities of our time — not as a fleeting sentiment but as an active, transformative project. Democracy is not simply voting, nor is it the sum of capitalist values and market relations. It is an ideal and promise — a vision of a future that does not imitate the present; it is the lifeblood of resistance, struggle, and the ongoing merging of justice, ethics and freedom.

In a society where democracy is under siege, educators must recognize that alternative futures are not only possible but that acting on this belief is essential to achieving social change.

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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Henry A. Giroux currently holds the McMaster University Chair for Scholarship in the Public Interest in the English and Cultural Studies Department and is the Paulo Freire Distinguished Scholar in Critical Pedagogy. His most recent books include: *The Terror of the Unforeseen* (Los Angeles Review of books, 2019), *On Critical Pedagogy*, 2nd edition (Bloomsbury, 2020); *Race, Politics, and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis* (Bloomsbury 2021); *Pedagogy of Resistance: Against Manufactured Ignorance* (Bloomsbury 2022) and *Insurrections: Education in the Age of Counter-Revolutionary Politics* (Bloomsbury, 2023), and coauthored with Anthony DiMaggio, *Fascism on Trial: Education and the Possibility of Democracy* (Bloomsbury, 2025). Giroux is also a member of Truthout's board of directors.

Featured image: Organizers began setting up early Monday morning on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene. They say the encampment isn't intended to interfere with campus activities or classes. (Source: Nathan Wilk / KLCC)

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