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The Nazification of American Education

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I consider the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy.

–Theodor Adorno 1959

DeSantis’s View of Education as Propaganda Factories

The crisis of education in the United States presents not only a danger to American democracy, but also the ideological and structural foundations for the emergence of a fascist state. The slide towards lawlessness and authoritarianism is now aided and abetted by educational policies that are repressive and dystopian, wedded to social control and the death of the social imagination. An unimagined catastrophe now characterizes how American education is being shaped by far-right Republican Party politicians. Nowhere is this more evident than in the policies of Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, who is on the forefront of transforming American education into a feral propaganda tool for producing and legitimating what is euphemistically called “patriotic education.” Coercion, conformity, and toxic forms of religious, political, and economic fundamentalisms now threaten to destroy education as a democratic public sphere, however weak it may be. Institutions of learning at all levels in the red states are becoming laboratories for what I term the Nazification of American education, replicating pedagogies of repression that were at work in Germany in the 1930s.

The mean-spirited, far-right DeSantis and his Republican allies have inverted an insight taken from the renowned, late educator John Dewey who recognized that politics required informed judgments, public dialogue, dissent, critical exchange, judicious discrimination, and the ability to discern the truth from lies. Instead of embracing these democratic elements of education as central to creating citizens with an open mind and with a willingness to engage in a culture of questioning in order to expand and deepen the conditions necessary for a flourishing democracy, DeSantis and the GOP are doing everything they can to remove such practices both from schools and other cultural apparatuses that function as teaching machines. Under such circumstances, DeSantis and the GOP are producing what Dewey claimed amounted to the “eclipse of the public,” which he considered the most serious threat to the fate of democracy.^[1] DeSantis has put into place a range of reactionary educational policies. These include banning books and critical race theory, requiring educators sign loyalty oaths, and forcing them to

post their syllabus's online. He has also instituted legislation that restrict tenure and allows students to film faculty classes without consent, and much more. [2] Not only are these laws aimed at minorities of class and color, but this GOP attack on education is part of a larger war on the very ability to think, question, and engage in politics from the vantage point of being critical, informed, and willing to hold power accountable. More generally, it is part of a concerted effort not only to destroy public education, but the very foundations of political agency.[3] DeSantis poses a dangerous threat to higher education, which he would like to turn into "a dead zone for killing the social imagination, a place where ideas that don't have practical results go to die and where faculty and students are punished through the threat of force or harsh disciplinary measures for speaking out, engaging in dissent and holding power accountable." [4] In this case, the attempt to undermine schooling as a public good and democratic public sphere is accompanied by a systemic attempt to destroy the capacity for critical thinking, compassion for others, critical literacy, moral witnessing, support for the social compact, and the civic imagination. DeSantis justifies these acts of repression by claiming that "Florida schools have become socialism factories" and that students at all levels of education should not be subjected to classroom material that would make them uncomfortable.[5] This is code for a pedagogy of repression that revels in deception, kills the social imagination, depoliticizes students, and transforms schools into militarized punishing machines, propaganda factories, and components of the security-surveillance state. In many ways, the GOP and DeSantis approach to education is not unlike what Putin is doing in Russia. As a senior Kremlin bureaucrat, Sergei Novikov, recently put it, Putin's goal is "impart state ideology to schoolchildren.... We need to know how to infect them with our ideology. Our ideological work is aimed at changing consciousness." [6] Indeed! Max Boot, writing in *The Washington Post*, argues that DeSantis' educational policies represent "one of the most alarming assaults on free speech and academic freedom [and reveal] a troubling pattern of authoritarianism and vindictiveness that would be extremely dangerous in the Oval Office." [7]

DeSantis's policies have been particularly cruel and repressive with respect to punishing youth who are marginalized by way of their race, religion, and sexual orientation. He has expanded his attack on Black people by pushing policies that translate "hate speech into proposed laws that would make societal pariahs out of transgender kids" and has made homophobia a driving force of his politics. [8] He

shares the disgraced legacy of Trump and other far-right Republican politicians who believe that the threat of violence, if not its actual use, is not only the best way to resolve issues in the name of political opportunism, but also amounts to a display of patriotism.[9] DeSantis' policies reek of fear, intimidation, and the threat of violence against his critics, especially those educators, teachers, parents, youth, and community groups that reject his attacks on public education and his anti-gay legislation. His policies are also in line with the violence expressed by Christian fascists such as Joe Ottman, founder of Faith, Education, and Commerce United, who as Paul Rosenberg remarked "stated on his podcast, *Conservative Daily*, that teachers are 'recruiting kids to be gay' and that LGBTQ teachers should be 'dragged behind a car until their limbs fall off.'"[10] There is little doubt that such measures echo the infamous anti-communist hysteria reminiscent of the dark days of McCarthyite period in the 1950s when thousands of people were banned from their jobs for holding left wing views, and in some cases jailed. DeSantis' model of politics and reactionary education are closely related to the attacks on education and history that took place in Nazi Germany, a point that is almost completely missed in the mainstream and progressive press when analyzing DeSantis's war on education.

Education in Nazi Germany

Education under the Third Reich offers significant insights into how repressive forms of pedagogy become central to shaping the identities, values, and worldviews of young people. Nazi educational policies also made visible how in the final analysis education is always political in that it is a struggle over agency, ideology, knowledge, power, and the future. For Hitler, matters of indoctrination, education, and the shaping of the collective consciousness of young people was an integral element of Nazi rule and politics. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler stated that "Whoever has the youth has the future." According to Lina Buffington and her co-authors, he viewed this battle to indoctrinate youth as part of a wider strategy of Nazi control over education. As Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, Germany needs an "educational regime [where] young people will learn nothing else but how to think German and act German...And they will never be free again, not in their whole lives." [11] Under this regime, education was reduced to a massive propaganda machine whose purpose was to indoctrinate young people with "robot-like obedience to Nazi ideologies," while privileging physical strength, racial instruction, and nationalist fanaticism.[12] At the same time, the most

valued form of knowledge under the Nazi educational system emphasized a pedagogy of racial purity.

Race consciousness was a crucial pedagogical goal which was used to both unify young people and elicit political loyalty based on national honor and a “budding nationalistic fanaticism.”^[13] To achieve this goal and reduce resistance to fascist ideology, history books were censored, banned, destroyed, and rewritten to align with Nazi ideology. Any knowledge or information deemed dangerous was not only eliminated from books and the curricula, but also purged “from libraries and bookstores.”^[14]

Nazi education was designed to mold children rather than educate them. Races deemed “inferior” and “less worthy” were banned from the schools while any positive reference to them and their history was expunged from history books and other curricula materials. The Nazi educational system was deeply anti-intellectual and created modes of pedagogy that undermined the ability of students to think for themselves. As stressed by the writers of *The Holocaust Explained*, the Nazis “aimed to de-intellectualize education: they did not want education to provoke people to ask questions or think for themselves. They believed this approach would instill obedience and belief in the Nazi worldview, creating the ideal future generation.”^[15] Turning Nazi schools into propaganda factories functioned through a massive pedagogical machinery of conformity, censorship, repression, and indoctrination. The attack on teachers also took place through Nazi efforts to encourage students and loyal faculty to spy on those considered politically unreliable. Even worse, teachers who did not support either Nazi ideology or the restructuring of education were dismissed along with Jewish educators who were banned from teaching in the Nazi educational system.^[16] What critics often fail to acknowledge is that the open glorification of “Aryan” races in Nazi Germany has its counterparts in a range of policies now pushed by Republican politicians such as DeSantis. This is not only visible in white replacement theory and the rise of white supremacy in the United States, but also in voter suppression laws, the elimination of the history of oppressed groups from school curricula, the banning of books, and the assault on educators who do not agree with the transformation of American education into right-wing propaganda factories. Not unlike what we have seen in the United States, Nazi education exhibited a contempt for critical thought, open dialogue, provocative books, intellectual ability, and those youth considered unworthy. The comparisons are particularly evident under the leadership of DeSantis with his

deeply anti-intellectual view of schooling, whitewashing of history, outlawing books, supporting “patriotic education,” passing anti-LGBTQ+ bills and using perpetual fear and intimidation directed at teachers, parents, and youth of color. A particularly egregious echo of the fascist past can be seen in the current attack on librarians. Increasingly, they are being harassed, threatened, and called pedophiles by far-right extremists because they have books on their library shelves that deal with LGBTQ rights and racial equality. Some fascist book censors have gone as far as claiming that librarians who refuse to remove banned books are “grooming” children to be sexually exploited and have attempted to “seek criminal charges against” them.[17]

The model of Nazi Germany’s educational system has a great deal to teach us about the ideologies that produced a society wedded to the related doctrines of racial purity, the banning of books, the suppression of historical memory, ultra-nationalism, and the cult of the strongman.[18] Under DeSantis, white supremacy, systemic racism, and the indoctrination of youth have the official power of the state on their side. DeSantis’ attacks on youth considered unworthy (LGBTQ youth), his embrace of lower academic standards, subjecting faculty to political litmus tests through “viewpoint diversity surveys” aimed to “gather evidence” on non-compliant faculty, censoring books that do not follow his ideological proclivities, racializing knowledge, supporting textbooks as crucial tools for spreading propaganda to students, and controlling teacher’s classroom actions are closely related to the Nazi playbook for making education a tool for indoctrination and control.

The horrors of authoritarianism are back supported by white supremacists such as DeSantis.[19] The long simmering mobilizing passions of fascism are evident not only in a range of reactionary GOP policies that extend from undoing women’s reproductive rights and the right to vote, but also in a more insidious and less acknowledged attack on America’s educational institutions. These attacks amount to a counter-revolution against essential public institutions, critical agency, informed consciousness, engaged citizenship, and the capacity of individuals and a public to govern themselves. At its core, it is an attack on both the promise of democracy and the social imagination.

Critical education is the scourge of white supremacists, because it offers a counterpoint to right-wing educational practices that seduce people into inhabiting the ecospheres of hate, bigotry, and racism. Such anti-racist pedagogies are especially important because of the threat posed by white

supremacists to white youths, who are especially vulnerable given how many of them are alienated and isolated, lacking a sense of purpose and excluded, while in need of some sense of community. Racism is learned and white supremacists have enlisted several educational tools, particularly online video games, chat groups, Tik Tok, and other social platforms, to promote and enlist white youths. Ibram X Kendi rightly raises the question of how “white children are being indoctrinated with white supremacist views, what causes them to hate, and how they have become the prime target of white supremacists.”^[20] He points to a 2021 Anti-Defamation League report which states: “An estimated 2.3 million teens each year are exposed to white-supremacist ideology in chats for multiplayer games [and] that 17 percent of 13-to-17-year-olds ... encounter white-supremacist views on social media.”^[21] In response to this fascist threat, there is a need to acknowledge the political importance of anti-racist education in teaching young people how to recognize the threats posed by white supremacy, how to resist racism in all of its forms, how turn away from hate, and how to discern truth from falsehoods and right from wrong.^[22] In reference to the ongoing threat of white supremacy to white kids, with its broad cultural reach and presence in the social media, Kendi writes of the importance of anti-racist pedagogy. He writes:

But how can white kids—or any kids—guard against this threat if they can’t recognize it? How can kids repel ideas of hierarchy if they haven’t been taught ideas of equality? How can kids distinguish right from wrong if they haven’t been shown what’s right and wrong? Recognizing that “an increasing number of U.S. teens are getting ‘radicalized’ online by White supremacists or other extremist groups,” an article published by the National Education Association concluded: “The best place to prevent that radicalization is U.S. classrooms.”^[23] Republicans such as DeSantis reproduce and accelerate the adoption of white supremacist views among many vulnerable white youths. They do this by censoring critical ideas, eviscerating history of its genocidal and racist past, banning books, imposing degrading constraints on teachers, and in doing so undermining the critical capacities crucial to teaching about systemic racism and its Jim Crow history. DeSantis’ attack on teaching history in the schools draws much of its energy from nostalgic rendering of the past when whites could be proud of a society in which whiteness was an unapologetic mark of privilege, inequality, and state violence. For DeSantis and his Republican Party allies that past is now threatened by people of color, justifying a “political programme that

indicts the present as a crime against the past.”^[24] His attacks on public and higher education constitutes a form of apartheid pedagogy.

DeSantis’s fascistic educational policies thrive on a deadly mix of ignorance and racial hatred. The consequences, while indirect, are deadly, as we have witnessed from a number of mass shootings, including the massacre of 10 Black shoppers in a Tops grocery store in Buffalo by a young hate-filled racist and self-proclaimed fascist. As historical consciousness and critical knowledge and skills disappear in schools under DeSantis’ policies, young people are not merely misinformed, they are powerless to recognize in the realm of popular culture how supremacists are using history for their own toxic purposes. For instance, Jeffrey St. Clair writes about how far right groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers have appropriated the image of the late Chilean fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet, adorning his image on “shirts, stickers, and flags.”^[25] In the educational world being produced by DeSantis and his Republican Party zombies, Pinochet would be erased from history, leaving young people ignorant of how history can be used for fascist goals. In this instance, educational repression is directly connected to the violence of organized forgetting.

Let’s be clear about what is at stake in the fascistic and racist forms of education currently in place in over 36 states by the Republican Party.^[26] This is an attack on the very possibility of thinking critically along with the pedagogies and institutions that support the capacity for analytical thought and informed judgment as a foundation for creating informed individuals. It also constitutes a full-fledged attack not just on critical race theory but also critical pedagogy in general. Of course, critical pedagogy is not just about anti-racist education, it is also part of a much broader project. It is a moral and political pedagogical theory whose purpose is to equip students with the vital knowledge, skills, values, and sense of social responsibility that enable them to be critical and engaged agents. In this sense, it is the essential foundation, regardless of where it takes place, for creating as knowledgeable and socially responsible citizens necessary to combat all elements of fascism and authoritarianism while envisioning a social order that deepens and extends power, democratic values, equitable social relations, collective freedom, economic rights, and social justice for everyone. This is precisely why it so dangerous to the white supremacists, fascists, and extremist forces now driving politics in the United States.

While the times we live in seem dire, it is worthwhile to take heed from Helen Keller who in a letter to Nazi youth stated: “History hasn’t taught you anything if

you think you can kill ideas. The tyrants tried to do so often in the past, but the ideas revolted against them and destroyed them.”[27] For Keller, history without hope is lost and opens the door to fascism, while ideas that draw upon history and combine with mass movements can serve to offer a model for fighting fascism. Ellen Willis builds upon Keller’s sense of hope when she once urged the left to become a movement again. In doing so, she called for a new language, a new understanding of education and a cultural politics that spoke to people’s needs. Most importantly, she called for a “new vision of what kind of society we want,” along with a mass movement capable of “creating institutions...and new ways of living to figure out how our vision might work.”[28] Not only were Willis’s insights prescient for the times, but they are more urgent now given that the increasing danger of fascism that threatens to engulf and destroy the last vestiges of an already weakened democracy in the United States.

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