



Trumpism and the challenge of critical education

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Trumpism and the challenge of critical education

The United States government is on fire. For four years, the fundamentals of democracy and its mode of governance have been under attack by Trump, his Vichy-like Congressional Republicans, and right-wing media apparatuses along with numerous conservative digital and social media outlets. As the inferno gained momentum, it was doused with gasoline by reactionary media conglomerates such as Fox News, which spread disinformation, hate, and bigotry. At the same time, mainstream social-media companies such as Twitter and Facebook reproduced lies and conspiracy theories eagerly appropriated by a social base filled with fascists, neo-Nazis, militarists, and far right extremists. The slow burning fire of violence erupted on January 6th with a murderous assault on the Capitol.

The storming of the US Capitol in Washington DC by a mob of neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other right-wing extremists, incited prior to the march by Trump and his discourse of hate and call to violence, provided yet another example that the United States no longer lives in the shadow of authoritarianism and has tipped over into the abyss. But Trump was not alone in creating a pretext for such violence. Prior to the assault on the Capital, the right-wing media, especially “Parler, Twitter, TikTok and the pro-Trump message board The Donald,” posted messages incessantly “calling for violence—including the arrest and execution of politicians.” (Ludwig, 2021) Stoking the crowd’s sense of resentment and thirst for destruction, Trump added more fuel to the fire when at a January 6th rally, he repeated his delusional belief that election had been rigged, urged his supporters to march to the Capital, and told “the rowdy crowd that “you’ll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength.” (Steakin, 2021)

His inflammatory rhetoric of lies and call for retaliation was exacerbated further by a number of Republican politicians who actively promoted conspiracy theories and dangerous propaganda in order to invalidate the Biden election. Some of whom appeared at a rally just before the invasion of the Capital and used inflammatory language to further incite the crowd. For instance, Trump’s discredited lawyer, Rudy Giuliani told the crowd: “If we’re wrong, we will be made fools of. But if we’re right, a lot of them will go to jail. So, let’s have trial by combat.” (Pilkington, 2021) Senator Josh Hawley, in a display of shameful political opportunism, greeted the crowd of neo-Nazis, Confederacy defenders, and racist agitators with a raised fist as they marched on the Capital.

Under Trump’s rule, the lies, ignorance, and thirst for violence has taken on a more lethal direction. Within the last few years, it has moved from violence waged against immigrants, Black and brown people, and the poor to the violence of a right-wing mob attacking the police, rampaging through the Capital, and occupying the House and Senate chambers. Trump not only advertised a call for a demonstration among his supporters, but he also brought to the event a history of encouraging his supporters to express themselves through violence. (Pilkington, 2021)

The mob’s actions followed a Trump speech in which he once again claimed the election was fraudulent and urged the crowd to march on the Capital. What Trump and the mob shared was their hatred of democracy, however fragile, and the discredited belief that the election was stolen. In the aftermath of the mob violence, Trump sent out a series of tweets supporting the actions of the violent mob, only to be later removed by Twitter. (Bell, 2021) At the same time,

the domestic terrorism that took place on January 6th was about more than Trump's lies and his use of language in the service of violence.² (It is also about a new political formation called Trumpism, with its mix of white supremacy, voter suppression, market fundamentalism, and authoritarianism. Trumpism represents a new form of fascism in which older elements of a fascist past are recycled, modified, and updated. One example pertaining to Trumpism can be seen in the systemic lying that was not only at the heart of Hitler's regime but central to Trump's rise to power and the development of his social base, though the latter expressed itself in a different context and through a unique set of cultural apparatuses. Timothy Snyder is instructive on this issue.

Post-truth is pre-fascism, and Trump has been our post-truth president. When we give up on truth, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place. Without agreement about some basic facts, citizens cannot form the civil society that would allow them to defend themselves. If we lose the institutions that produce facts that are pertinent to us, then we tend to wallow in attractive abstractions and fictions. Truth defends itself particularly poorly when there is not very much of it around, and the era of Trump ... is one of the decline of local news. Social media is no substitute: It supercharges the mental habits by which we seek emotional stimulation and comfort, which means losing the distinction between what feels true and what actually is true. (Snyder, 2021)

Trumpism will have an afterlife long after Trump leaves the White House. As Samuel Farber observes, Trump may be leaving the White House, "But the conditions that gave rise to his brand of noxious politics aren't going away anytime soon." (Farber, 2021) Trading on a politics of resentment, an economy of decline, his ability to conceal his ties to big capital, and his alleged image as an outsider, Trumpism emerged as created a "political mood and state of mind, and ... movement" with a social base that "is more likely to endure than Trump himself." (ibid) Kenny Stancil, a writer for *Common Dreams* points out that "One indication of the blind loyalty of Trump's base can be seen in the fact that "Among Republican voters, 45% approve of the storming of Capitol, 30% think the perpetrators are 'patriots', 52% think Biden is at least partly to blame for it, and 85% think it would be inappropriate to remove Trump from office after this. (Stancil, 2021)

Trump's diverse mob of neo-Nazis and white supremacists along with the conditions for the attack on the Capital had been building for years in the dark recesses of conspiracy theories, lies, white rage, the backlash to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the sixties, and a hatred of those critics considered "enemies of the people." (Warzel, 2021) President-elect Biden called it an insurrection, making it clear that Trump through his language of denial and incitement had poured gasoline on a fire, particularly evident in the speech he gave before the mob stormed the capitol building. This was Trumpism in full bloom, with all of its ignorance, hatred, and penchant for lawlessness on full display. But it was more in that it testified to the notion that fascism begins with language and ends with violence. The mob violence aimed at shutting down the counting of electoral ballots was reminiscent of the thugs that roamed the streets of Germany in the 1930s attempting to brutalize dissenters and those considered other in the deranged Nazi notion of racial and political cleansing. Trump has unleashed his fascist impulses consistently through the language of violence and divisiveness aided by the right-wing media such as Fox News, Breitbart, and others. Under the Trump administration, ignorance has turned lethal. Moreover, as David Theo Goldberg (2021) has argued "politics today is nothing short of a civil war" marked by divisions and disunity in which life for most of the inhabitants of the United States becomes both unbearable and dangerous.

This is not surprising given Trump's support and display of affection (We love you) and allegiance to an array of neo-fascists and right-wing extremists, many of whom marched on the capitol building. More specifically, Trumpism is the culmination of a cultural and fascist politics that has been evolving and intensifying for years through the incitement of lies, conspiracy theories, and the heated rhetoric of racism and a brutal war on the welfare state and working-class people. (DiMaggio, 2021) The acts of domestic terrorism on display in the storming of the Capital

reach far beyond the toxic personal politics, incompetency, and corruption of Trump himself. Such violence has a long history in the U.S. and has been normalized under the aegis of Trumpism as a right-wing populist movement, which Trump brought it to the surface of American politics as a badge of honor. What is necessary to comprehend is that the violence in Washington, D.C. with the storming of the Capital did not begin today with the march by right-wing fanatics and white supremacists; it erupted more openly with Trump in 2016 when he seized upon and manipulated the fears of powerless whites and white supremacists who imagined themselves as under siege and oppressed outsiders. For four years, he has incited violence through attempts to inspire and energize his white supremacists and fascist followers.

Every era produces a language and cultural markers that offer insights into its politics, values, and vision of the past, present and future. This is especially true regarding the economic, public, and cultural influence of the Trump presidency and mode of governance. Trumpism is not limited to the personal behavior of Donald Trump. It refers less to a person than to a dangerous movement and social base and operates as a social pathology whose endpoint is the destruction of democracy itself. As a new cultural and political construct, Trumpism merges a ruthless capitalist rationality, widening inequality, and a commitment to white supremacy. These forces have deep historical roots in the United States. However, what is distinctive is that they have congealed into a unique political and cultural formation under the Trump regime marked by an emotively charged, spectacularized and updated form of authoritarianism that echoes elements of a fascist past. In the current historical moment, Trumpism has intensified and quickened the dark forces of hate, racism, ultra-nationalism, and white supremacy.

At the same time, Trump has merged the mobilizing passions of an updated fascist politics with the financial institutions and regressive values of a cruel and savage capitalism in order to undermine democratic institutions and values. Trump's presidency has its roots in the long-standing history of economic inequality, racial injustice, nativism, and a war on the social state, while Trumpism as a social movement merged from the shadows of history, revealing fascist elements that moved from the margins to the centers of power.

At the heart of Trumpism is a shocking political and ideological system of repression created by a hateful, heartless, and pathologically lying president who, as Masha Gessen (2020) argues, "taught Americans that no one will take care of us, our parents, and our children, because our lives are worthless, disposable . . . that this country is a dangerous place [and that] we are forever on the brink of disaster and that no one will protect us, whether from illness or economic hardship." (Gessen, 2020) Trumpism has accelerated a culture of fear while using a variety of tools of repression—ranging from mass incarceration, surveillance, and police brutality to a full-fledged attack on those who would bring reality into play and hold power accountable—to enforce a world view in which lawlessness and political corruption have become the order of the day.

Trumpism is an ongoing historical and political interlude dominated by a language of forgetting, moral irresponsibility, and the spectacle of cruelty and violence. Relying upon the insights of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Trumpism occupies the interregnum between "the old world [which] is dying, and [a] new world [struggling] to be born." Trumpism is the in-between or third space between the old and the new in which "a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." While it is not clear what is being born, it is obvious that the struggle between the forces of authoritarianism and new modes of collective resistance have taken on a new urgency. That we now live in a time of monsters suggests such symptoms are upon us. This is especially true as Trump was about to leave office, in that he defended the legacy of the Confederacy, spewed lies about the legitimacy of a free and fair presidential election, which he lost, pardoned war criminals, corrupt politicians, loyalists, and personal friends, and threatened to use martial law to force a new election. (Dernbach & Schulman, 2020)

As journalist Jennifer Evans (2020) observes, Trump may have lost the election, "but Trumpism is alive and well, along with the conditions that propelled him to power in the first place. At best, the post-election future might be one of regrouping and rebuilding; at worst,

there will be more challenges to legal norms and truths by the outgoing president and the Republican Party.” As the enemy of democracy, Trumpism is a mix of a capacious authoritarian ideology, a right-wing propaganda machine, and a fascist ethos. Its power and influence far exceed Trump’s presidency, and it will not come to an end with the election of Biden. In its afterlife, it will continue to sabotage democracy in the name of minority rule and its only end-point is the tyranny of authoritarianism. As an anti-democratic ethos, it has opened a political chasm in which any attempt to unify the nation appears almost impossible. Trump’s relentless politics of divisiveness is a toxic platform for inciting violence, affirming a culture of cruelty, and promoting a politics of exclusion and racial cleansing.

Trump’s ongoing penchant for violence is obvious in the urging of his right-wing followers to engage in “wild” protests when they gather on January 6, in Washington. DC, the day Congress is due to certify President-elect Joe Biden’s electoral college victory. (Ankel, 2020) Trump extremist supporters, like the Proud Boys, not only need someone to blame for their seething resentment of immigrants and Black and brown people, they also value violence as the only cathartic remedy available to offer them any sense of resolve, emotional relief, and gratification. There is more at work here than a long-standing assault on the truth, reality, and democracy. There is also an embrace of the more dangerous elements of a fascist politics with its regressive authoritarian impulses and its embrace of politics as an extension of war, and violence as the ultimate register of battle in which there are only winners and losers. Trumpism makes clear that the dark forces of barbarism are no longer hiding in the dark; if it is to be resisted there is a need for a new language, politics, and sense of collective struggle.

Trumpism is a cancer whose roots have long infected the body politic. In the current age of brutality, it symbolizes governance without empathy or compassion. As is largely recognized, Trumpism exhibited a deafening silence to the shocking and unnecessary deaths of hundreds of thousands infected and dying from Covid-19. (Chomsky, 2020) All the more appalling since the deadly effects of the raging pandemic were largely the result of the bungling leadership of an administration that chose conspiracy theories over science, replaced the authority of public health officials with Fox News incompetents, and lied about the severity of a virus that spread through the population and across the globe like an out-of-control wildfire. As a death-dealing form of cultural politics, Trumpism further removed the government from any sense of social responsibility. National leadership disappeared both with respect to controlling the spread of the virus and organizing the vaccination campaign. Instead, apathy, cruelty, and moral indifference were elevated to a central mode of governance. In another example, Trump and his army of sycophants and cult followers remained shockingly silent in the face of the murder a young woman, Heather Heyer, who was killed protesting in Charlottesville against neo-Nazis. In addition, indifferent to human suffering, Trump and his white supremacist senior speech writer Stephen Miller delighted in enacting unjust travel bans, cruel deportation laws and the separation and caging of migrant children who have experienced conditions defined as “horrific” in a detailed report by Americans for Immigrant Justice. (Armus, 2020)

Trump’s election and reign of power made clear not only that authoritarianism was once more on the march, but also that a new and revised form of fascist politics had emerged in the United States, mimicking a similar pattern abroad. Of course, the seeds for this updated model of authoritarianism had long been in the making under capitalism, especially since the 1970s, with its marriage of money and politics and its willingness to make corruption and inequality an instrument of control. Under Trump, the merging of power and repression no longer hid in the shadows but became glaringly visible given Trump’s claim to holding what appeared to be a call for unchecked power and the right to exercise flagrant acts of lawlessness.

Under the reign of Trumpism, the merging of power, repression, and corruption was mobilized increasingly in the political and cultural spheres in order to both shape public consciousness and to undermine, if not destroy, any institution that held authority to a measure of accountability. Trumpism redefined corrupt power relations, flagrantly displayed immoral and

criminogenic behavior, and unabashedly brandished the trappings of tyranny. As Masha Gessen writes in describing Trump's presidency:

In plain view, Trump was flaunting, ignoring, and destroying all institutions of accountability. In plain view, he was degrading political speech. In plain view, he was using his office to enrich himself. In plain view, he was courting dictator after dictator. In plain view, he was promoting xenophobic conspiracy theories, now claiming that millions of immigrants voting illegally had cost him the popular vote; now insisting, repeatedly, that Obama had had him wiretapped. All of this, though plainly visible, was unfathomable, as Trump's election itself had been. (Gessen, 2020)

Trumpism enacts a form of power on steroids, intent on not only capturing institutions of the state for personal and political gain, but also in order to redefine and control language, the social media and popular culture as a way of emptying politics of any substance by turning it into a spectacle. Language now operates in the service of violence, and all forms of criticism are relegated to the category of fake news, unworthy of serious reflection or critical analysis. Trumpism at its core is a cultural politics that shreds any viable notion of shared values, national unity, and in doing so transforms essential human connections into bonds of distrust and fear. It views the space of the social, common good, and democratic values, as a register of weakness and resentment bristling with hatred if not a seething logic of disposability.

The distinctiveness of Trump's reign, however debated, emerged as a new political formation, increasingly defined as Trumpism, and came to signify a merging of power, culture, politics, and everyday life that combined the harshest elements of a cut-throat global capitalism with the lingering malignancy of neo-fascist forces that ranged from: "white supremacist, white nationalists, militia, and neo-Nazis and Klans, to the Oath Keepers, the Patriot Movement, Christian fundamentalists, and anti-immigrant vigilante groups." (Robinson, 2020) Molded in the language of populist, racist, and authoritarian nationalism, Trumpism gave birth to a tsunami of repressive political, economic, and social policies that moved from the margins of society to the White House and to state and local governments around the country. For instance, voter suppression and border terrorism were embraced as a legitimate policy measure. The children of undocumented immigrants were put in cages, walls emerged as a normalizing symbol of nativism, state terrorism defined the role of ICE and became visible in the use of military forces to attack peaceful demonstrators in cities such as Portland and Washington, D.C. As the social state came under severe attack, the punishing state grew with its ongoing militarization of civil society and its increasing criminalization of social problems. War, dehumanization, divisiveness, hate, and the language of racial cleansing and sorting became central governing principles and set the stage for the rebirth of an updated fascist politics.

Trumpism reached into every niche and crack of civil and political society and in doing so cross-pollinated politics, culture, and everyday life with a range of right-wing policies, authoritarian impulses, and the emerging presence of right-wing movements. Right-wing militia were now used to patrol the southern border of the United States, authoritarian forms of parliamentary state governments wrapped in the mantle of democratic elections waged wars on people of color through voter suppression laws, and, the Republican Party mobilized by an unmitigated hatred of democracy and support for minority government, became the political arm of Trumpism, embracing the dictates of white nationalism, white supremacy, and an unapologetic right-wing version of American exceptionalism. Increasingly, near the end of Trump's term, many members of the party voiced attempts to overthrow an American election based on bogus conspiracy theories and no evidence of fraud, which in some cases appears to come close to committing a criminal act of sedition.³ That the President and his enablers may have committed a seditious act was all the more resonant in the face of the mob of pro-Nazis and white supremacists storming of the Capital and their direct and indirect support for such actions—a view that appeared to be supported by President elect-Biden in a speech given in the aftermath of the "failed insurrection." Biden stated that such lawless actions "bordered on sedition." (Dovere, 2021) The violence, racism, bigotry, and lawlessness that marked the assault on the Capital

represent the new face of a politics inhabited by “genuine fanatics and ideologues” who in their blind loyalty to Trump and their own need for power prove that “cowardice is contagious.” (Nichols, 2021)

Trumpism on one level emerged out of the crisis of transnational neoliberalism which could no longer lay claim to democratic values while concentrating wealth and power in the hands of the ruling class, all the while further accelerating wars and an unprecedented degree of economic inequality in wealth, income, and power worldwide. While many critics have defined Trumpism in terms of its debasing, toxic language, and cruel policies—all of which are important issues—few have analyzed it as a pedagogical practice whose impact on political culture redefined and reshaped the collective consciousness of millions who embraced Trumpism more as a cult than as an ideology fabricated in lies, false promises, and authoritarian populism. (Finchelstein, 2020) Trump’s egregious bungling of the Covid-19 crisis, which cost the lives of over 300,000 by the end of 2020, his “disdain for immigrants, for women, for disabled people for people of color, for Muslims—for anyone who isn’t an able-bodied white straight American born male,” and his blunt embrace of ignorance have had lethal consequences. Yet, his actions did little to undermine his base of support. (Gessen, 2020) In mobilizing the support of over 74 million Americans, Trumpism made clear that changing consciousness through his use of the social media and right-wing cultural apparatuses were more persuasive politically and ideologically than the use military force.

What this suggests is that politics follows culture and the struggle over the hearts and minds of people is the first step in creating the social base to support a fascist politics in which justice dies, language loses its moral and critical bearings, and the right to lie becomes a virtue. Massive inequality has made the struggle to survive a central component of everyday life for millions. In this instance, what is at risk is not just the ability to fulfill basic needs, but the very nature of one’s identity, dignity, and sense of agency. Trumpism created a culture that induced a moral and political blackout, legitimated by a syncophantic, Vichy-like Republican Party, and normalized by a right-wing corporate controlled mainstream social media. Trumpism is a giant pedagogical disinformation machine whose aim is to colonize culture, public consciousness, and undermine any viable form of robust and critical modes of agency, identification, and solidarity.

Trumpism is a pedagogical tool and cultural force designed to reshape the public sphere by emptying it of democratic values along with destroying the institutions that nurture critical thought and civic courage. How else to explain Trump’s reactionary call for “patriotic education,” and his disdain for the *New York Times* “1619” educational project which attempted to place the history of slavery and the achievements of black Americans at the center of history. (Tharoor and Mellen, 2020; Madhani & Riechmann, 2020). In addition, there is his concerted effort to destroy public education with the appointment of Betsy DeVos a publicly acknowledged sworn-enemy of public schooling and higher education. (Ishaan & Ruby, 2020) Unsurprisingly, *The New York Times* editorial board described DeVos “as perhaps the most disastrous leader in the Education Department’s history.”⁴

Under Trumpism, the centrality of education to politics became obvious with the growing use of 21st century cultural apparatuses such as Twitter, Facebook, Google, along with new media outlets such as Fox news, Newsmax, and Breitbart. These pedagogical apparatuses produced a distinctive cultural space that furthered the marriage of power and manufactured civic illiteracy and worked to eliminate the crucial question of what civic education and literacy should accomplish in a democracy. (Mayer, 2019) Favoring instant reactions and a culture of immediacy, the new media and new image-based cultural forms turned chaos, catastrophe, and collapse into a spectacle that called forth instant gratification, along with a kind of “digital sublime” in which such platforms are “mythologized as both convenient and infallible.” (Mertha, 2020) Flooding the media ecosphere with lies, misrepresentations, and dangerous, if not deadly falsehoods, these new cultural-pedagogical apparatuses packaged hate and undermined the critical role of intellectuals, journalists, experts, and other voices working on the side of truth, evidence, and

meaningful authority. (Taibbi, 2019) Regardless of design, one outcome was to undermine and weaken traditional markers of freedom of expression and democracy.

Trumpism performs politics as a form of entertainment and digital drama. It does so by transforming the political realm and society into a form of spectacularized theater, not unlike what Guy Debord once called a *Society of the Spectacle*. (Debord, 2002) As a right-wing cultural apparatus, spectacle of disintegration, and tribal ethos, Trumpian politics becomes an all-encompassing tool of propaganda and pedagogy of repression, functioning as a form of cultural politics under the control of a corporate elite. As a reactionary cultural and pedagogical conduit, Trumpism undermines critical dialogue, shared values, shared responsibilities, and informed judgments while promoting authoritarian narratives that disdain historical consciousness, critical thinking, and the idea, if not principles of participatory democracy. Hard boundaries, precarity, a culture of fear, untrampled individualism, an all-encompassing ethos of self-help, and a profound unease constitute the currency of Trumpism. In this instance, economic justice, meaningful solidarities, and the common good are removed from the discourse of politics and citizenship.

In addition, Trumpism enacts, without apology, a form of historical amnesia that proves particularly dangerous in a world wrought with anxiety, uncertainty, and a precarious present enveloped in deadly surge of pandemics and plagues. Subject to a politics of erasure by government and corporate disinformation machines, historical consciousness loses its sense of critique, contexts, and buried memories of the value of individual and collective resistance in the face of systemic oppression. Historical vision, moral witnessing, and democratic ideals are now buried in a glut of misinformation and the spectacle of political corruption, plague of consumerism, and a culture of immediacy. Bombarding the culture and public spheres with a blitz and barrage of events that are comparable to bombs exploding on a daily basis, Trumpism produces a relentless tsunami of events that obliterate the space and time for contemplating the past while freezing the present in a fragmented display of shocks and spectacles.

Under such circumstances, the lessons of history disappear along with similarities between an authoritarian past and an authoritarian present. One consequence is that public consciousness of the space needed for critical reflection withers along with a rendering of the past as a source of critical insight. History, with its dangerous memories, becomes something that cannot happen in the present; that is, it cannot happen in a country that makes a claim to exceptionalism and in doing so argues that Trump's behavior is more performative than dangerous. In this discourse, the dark shadows of an updated fascist politics disappears in the claim that Trump is merely incompetent and that his politics are inept and bear no resemblance to an incipient dictator.⁵ Conservatives who believe that the market is the only template for politics and governance refuse to see Trump's reign as an outgrowth of their own disdain for the welfare state and redistribution of wealth and power while liberals live in fear of recognizing that neoliberal capitalism poses the greatest threat to democracy, and creates the conditions for the ongoing threat of fascism. (Solomon, 2021) This view provides a breeding ground for liberals who argue that Trumpism is a passing and failed anti-democratic exception to the rule.

For instance, the historical record needs to be revisited regarding the liberal view of Trumpism especially evident in the work of Professor Samuel Moyn, who argued that traditional institutional checks proved successful against Trumpism. He also claimed falsely that Trump provided a "portal for all comers to search for alternatives beyond [neoliberalism], and never provided a systemic threat to American democracy" (Moyn, 2020). Moyn's notion that Trump was anti-militarist and a champion of the working class, at least initially, rings especially false. Not only did Trump give the financial elite a \$1.5 trillion tax break at the expense of funding crucial social programs; he also passed endless policies that promoted what research assistants for Economic Policy at the Center for American Progress Action Fund Saharra Griffin and Malkie Wall call corporate wage theft. These included derailing "an Obama-era plan to extend overtime protections to more Americans and instead lowered the salary threshold Workers [were] denied an estimated \$1.2 billion in earnings annually due to Trump's overtime protection rollback."

(Griffin & Wall, 2019) Trumpism made it difficult for workers to unionize while making it easier for employers to eliminate unions. This anti-worker campaign also included reducing workplace safety regulations, discriminating against people with disabilities, and the weakening of civil rights protections for workers.

What is lost in this view is that Trumpism is the endpoint of the historical failure of capitalism which has morphed into a nihilistic death drive—a quickened call to ugliness, violence, and dehumanization—reinforced by market values that destroy any sense of moral and social responsibility. According to John Bellamy Foster's *Trump in the White House: Tragedy and Farce*.⁶ Trumpism is not simply about Trump the bungling leader, a decrepit Republican Party, or a weak president as Moyon, Jeet Heer, Cass Sunstein, Ross Douthat and others have wrongly argued. What is lost in this view's politics of denialism is an honest look at the emergence of Trump's undisguised authoritarian impulses. Also overlooked here are the mobilizing elements of a fascist politics that is an extension of capitalism and whose recent endpoint emerged with the violent assault on both the Capital and democracy itself (Moyn, 2020). What disappears in this politics of denialism is an honest look at the emergence of Trump's undisguised authoritarian impulses and mobilizing elements of a fascist politics. What is lost in this view's politics of denialism is an honest look at the emergence of Trump's undisguised authoritarian impulses. Also overlooked here are the mobilizing elements of a fascist politics that is an extension of capitalism and whose recent endpoint emerged with the violent assault on both the Capital and democracy itself. Trumpism may not constitute a fully formed fascist regime, but as Sarah Churchill, Paul Street and Timothy Snyder, have argued, the Trump regime has consistently embraced the long standing and malignant traditions of American fascism. (Churchwell, S, 2020)

The historian Timothy Snyder dismisses the liberal claim, most recently advanced by the Richard Evans, (Evans, 2021) that the fascist label does not apply to Trump because his ideology and policies do not invite a direct comparison. Snyder writes:

These last four years, scholars have discussed the legitimacy and value of invoking fascism in reference to Trumpian propaganda. One comfortable position has been to label any such effort as a direct comparison and then to treat such comparisons as taboo. More productively, the philosopher Jason Stanley has treated fascism as a phenomenon, as a series of patterns that can be observed not only in interwar Europe but beyond it. My own view is that greater knowledge of the past, fascist or otherwise, allows us to notice and conceptualize elements of the present that we might otherwise disregard and to think more broadly about future possibilities. (Snyder, 2021)

Moyon, Sunstein, and others such as Corey Robin engage in a politics of denial refusing to look honestly at key elements of fascism that Trumpism has mobilized. These include: flooding America with lies and launching a full-fledged attack on the truth and science; enacting racist fear-mongering and a politics of disposability; promoting extreme nationalism and celebrating an alignment with dictators; endorsing a discourse of winners, along with a list of losers and enemies who became the object of contempt, if not violence; Trump labeled the American press as the "enemy of the people"; legitimated a culture of cruelty and dehumanization that normalized, among other morally depraved acts, putting children in camps; reinforcing the language of misogyny and xenophobia; and using a powerful right-wing propaganda machine to legitimate a culture of lawlessness and political corruption.

What is missed by these centrist liberals, often parading as leftists, is that Trumpism is the unapologetic plague of neoliberal capitalism that induces massive inequalities, manufactured ignorance, and horrific degrees of hardship and suffering among diverse groups of people, who are rendered excess. It concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a financial elite. Moreover, it is the logical outcome of a savage neoliberal capitalism that colonizes subjectivity in order to turn people into isolated consumers and atomized individuals, willing to suspend their sense of agency and deem all social bonds untrustworthy. In this discourse, fate is solely a matter of individual responsibility, irrespective of wider structural forces. Lost here is what the late Tony Judt called "the thick mesh of mutual obligations and social responsibilities" to be found in

any substantive democracy.⁷ The logical outcome this upending of social connections that expand the common good is an individual and collective need for the comfort of strongmen—a default community that offers the swindle of fulfillment. Trumpism is a worldview in which critical thought collapses into what Robert Jay Lifton calls “ideological totalitarianism.” (Lifton, 2019) Under the influence of “ideological totalitarianism,” narratives of certainty are produced through a language frozen in the assumption that there is “nothing less than absolute truth and equally absolute virtue,” all of which provides the conditions for “sealed off communities.” (ibid, 2019)

Frank Bruni, an opinion writer for the *New York Times*, raised the question of just how rotten must Trump be for his followers to wake up and realize what a threat he is to both democracy and their very lives. In raising this issue, Bruni puts into high relief the cult-like and mind-boggling submission and irrationality that shapes the consciousness of many of Trump’s followers. He writes:

Trump was impeached. A plague struck. Tens of millions of Americans lost their jobs and huge chunks of their savings. Trump responded with tantrums, lies and intensified attacks on democratic traditions. Trump’s supporters reinvented or decided to ignore his coronavirus denialism, which made America a world leader in reported infections and recorded deaths and has had catastrophic economic consequences. They disbelieved or forgave all of his cheating: on his taxes, in his philanthropy, when he tried to extort the president of Ukraine, when he grabbed another Supreme Court seat in defiance of the Merrick Garland precedent. They accepted or outright embraced his racism and nativism. They shrugged off his lying, which is obvious even through the pore-minimizing filters of Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. They endorsed his cruelty and made peace with his tantrums and erratic behavior. (Bruni, 2020)

Coco Das goes further and argues that America has a Nazi problem that will not go away on its own and has to be addressed. Das observes:

We have a Nazi problem in this country. Some 73 million people voted for it. ... They don’t, for the most part, wave swastikas and salute Hitler, but we have a Nazi problem in this country as deeply as the German people had a Nazi problem in the 1930s. Their minds waterlogged with conspiracy theories, they take lies as truth, spread hate and bigotry, wrap themselves in several flags – American, Confederate, Blue Lives Matter – and use the Bible as a weapon of violence and repression. They are a grotesque expression of the worst of this country, of its ugly narcissism, its thuggish militarism, its ignorance ... They carry the torch of slavery, genocide, and Jim Crow terror. Gunned up and mask-less, they exalt above all the right to kill. (Das, 2020)

In light of the refusal to view seriously the emergence of an updated fascism under Trumpism, a more comprehensive critical analysis of Trumpism is necessary. Such an approach should offer insights into the blind allegiance of Trump’s followers and the legacy of an authoritarian malignancy, such as white supremacy among others, that has resurfaced in American political culture. One necessary insight is the recognition that any rendering of Trumpism as a version of authoritarianism carries with its elements of a fascist past that can easily disappear into a discourse in which historical similarities are dismissed. For example, Corey Robin goes so far as to make the claim that Trump was a weak leader marked by political incompetence and failed in his attempt to change the political culture. This wild misreading of Trumpism goes hand in hand with the charge that those who claim Trump has resurrected the mobilizing passions of fascism represent what David Klion called “unhinged reactions to the Trump era.” (Klion, 2020)

It is difficult to take such a charge seriously in light of a range of policies enacted under the Trump regime that are as cruel as they are oppressive. These range from voter suppression and the unleashing of the military on peaceful protesters to savagely cruel anti-immigration policies and a politics of disposability that mimics what Richard A. Etlin calls the Nazi policy of “*Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*,” that is, the ‘destruction’ or ‘extermination’ of ‘lives not worth living.’” (Etlin, 2002) The effect that Trump has had on political culture in the United States is far more significant than the policies he enacted. The real damage and corrosive impact produced under the Trump regime is on the assault on ethics, the rule of law, the normalization

of white supremacy, the blatant disregard for the truth, evidence, and science. Trump legitimated a culture and pedagogy of hate, dehumanization, uncertainty, and authoritarian nationalism. These forces will surely outlast Trump's retreat to Mar-a-Lago, his Palm Beach estate.

There is no acknowledgment by Moya, Robin, and others of this ilk of the centrality and the power of cultural politics and neoliberal and authoritarian pedagogies at work under Trumpism and how they "get people to give up their ideas of freedom and civility [while] giving them a taste for savagery."⁸ Moreover, dismissing left critics who address authoritarian, if not fascist elements in Trumpism as unhinged is an egregious example of bad faith. Michael Yates responds to this derogatory attack on left critics of fascism, buttressed by the alleged whitewashing of the danger Trumpism poses. Focusing on Corey Robin's position, he states:

Corey Robin has been spouting nonsense about Trump for 4 years now, showing how little, he knows about his own country ... [alleging] Trump was too incompetent to generate a fascist coup. But he has laid waste to the environment, the rights of working people, and the legal system. More than 70 million people voted for him, and most seem to think he was robbed of a second term. They think the news is fake, all of it. He has by his denial of science, caused at least a quarter million people to die needlessly. He has brought to the surface, with a vengeance, extreme racism, and misogyny. Not to mention his hatred of immigrants, mirrored by his fanatical followers. Robin appears to believe that the left and democracy have never been stronger. He needs to get out of his Brooklyn bubble and its shallow coterie of faux radicals and see the ugly human behavior that is out there and has been encouraged by Trump. (Yates, 2020)

The lessons of history wither in the discourse of denial, especially since "the all too protean origins of totalitarianism are still with us: loneliness as the normal register of social life, the frenzied lawfulness of ideological certitude, mass poverty and mass homelessness, the routine use of terror as a political instrument, and the ever-growing speeds and scales of media, economics, and warfare." (Dixon, 2014) Moreover, the argument ignores the groundwork of forces laid long before Trump came to power and it says little about the enormous ways in which he used Twitter, the Internet, conservative foundations, and the right-wing media to turn the Republican Party into a group of morally and politically vacuous sycophants. More specifically, it both ignores and underestimates the power of Trumpism in creating slightly more than 74 million followers who inhabit right-wing populist spaces where "reality can be dispensed and controlled." (Lifton, 2019) It also overlooks, the power of Trumpism to create cult-like followers who disregard reason and reality for the image of the strongman who demands unmitigated loyalty and ideological purity. (Ben-Ghiat, 2021)

The power of Trumpism in the cultural realm affirms the success of a new cultural/social formation and testifies less to the personalized issue of incompetence than to the success of Trumpism to shape consciousness among large segments of the American public and create regressive modes of identification that further strengthened and integrated into centers of governmental power once marginal elements of a fascist politics. Thoughtlessness and the collapse of civic culture and moral agency echo a dark period in history in which criminality and corruption entered into politics and as Stephen Spender once argued "the future is like a time bomb buried but ticking away at the present." In the age of Trump, language reinforces the central fascist notion of friend/enemy distinction as an organizing principle of politics. In this instance, language is used to vilify those considered other; the language of environmental justice and racial sensitivity disappears. More shockingly, Trump used language to imply a moral equivalence between white supremacists and neo-Nazis marching in Charlottesville and peaceful protesters. At the same time, he employs the language of white supremacists to protest against removing Confederate flags and symbols from the American landscape. There is more at stake here than simply labeling Trump incompetent or ascribing his toxic beliefs and dangerous actions to his narcissistic personality. (Wolf, 2020)

Trumpism is a worldview that defines culture as a battleground of losers and winners, a world in which everything is rigged against whites. (O'Toole, 2020) This is a world in which unity disappears into Trump's right-wing assault on the public good, truth, the common good, as reality

itself dissolves into a right-wing propaganda machine in which politics becomes “a plot to steal from [whites] their natural due as Americans.” (DeVega, 2020) Trumpism defines power as immunity from the law, and that the most admirable representatives of power are those who are “triumphant and innocent in the face of every accusation of incapacity, criminality and unethical conduct.” (Butler, 2019) How else to explain Trump’s pardoning of grifters, political cro-nies, and war criminals?

Far from being the “almost opposite of fascism,” Trumpism paves the way for deeply entrenched legacies of hate to be passed on to his followers and future generations. His goal is to destroy any vestige of democracy as we know it, however flawed, and replace it with a form of neoliberal capital unmoored from any sense of social, political, and ethical ethos. Trumpism will long outlive the language, actions, values, and views that have defined Trump’s presidency.

What is crucial to recognize is that any starting point for challenging Trumpism and its fascist politics must begin as Kali Holloway and Martin Mycielski observe by “recognizing the reality of what is happening ... how much damage is being done, how much earth was already scorched. The year has somehow flown by yet seemed interminable. It’s good to remember the very big, very frightening picture before us, how far we’ve already come, and to consider what recourse we have with complicit and corrupt forces standing in the way.” (Holloway & Mycielski, 2017) Trumpism will not disappear once Trump leaves office. On the contrary, its afterlife seems assured as long as its politics is endlessly reproduced through the reactionary cultural workstations that produce and distribute its lies, regressive notions of agency, hatred, and disdain for the truth. Trumpism represents both a crisis of the civic imagination and an educational crisis.

Until it is understood as a cultural crisis rather than defined as an economic and narrowly political crisis, Trumpism will continue to undermine the ability of individuals and institutions to think critically, question themselves, and produce informed citizens and aligned social movements that can fight collectively for and sustain a radical democracy. There is no democracy without an educated citizenry and no democracy can survive under the banner of Trumpism with its glut of ignorance, commercialization, concentration of power, corporate owned media, and illusion of freedom. (Brown, 2015)

Drawing upon history, Masha Gessen argues that Trump’s defeat offers a choice “between two paths: the path of reckoning and the path of forgetting.” (Gessen, 2020) She further argues that the price for forgetting is too high and would leave in place a rationale for giving immunity to terror, lawlessness, and corruption. On the other hand, to avoid becoming complicitous with the crimes of Trumpism, it is necessary for the Biden administration to put in place a national project—which would include investigations, hearings, court trials, public assemblies, journalistic inquiries, and other invented formats—in order to hold accountable those who committed crimes under the Trump regime, including, I would hope, those individuals and politicians who advocated sedition by baselessly claiming voter fraud and attempting to overturn results of the Biden election. Georgetown University professor, Neal Katyal,⁹ goes further and argues that Trump should be impeached again for trying to illegally overturn the election in the hope that he would then be barred from holding any political office in the future. Moreover, a signal needs to be sent to the 12 Republican Senators and more than half of Congressional Republicans who are dousing the Constitution with fire through their attempts to create what amounts to a coup by invalidating Biden’s election and creating the groundwork for undermining free and fair elections in the future, if not democracy itself.

Impeaching Trump is a step forward in holding him accountable, but he did not act alone. The broader forces aligned with his ongoing acts of violence, cruelty and lawlessness must also be held accountable, and this must include the crimes of Wall Street, the right-wing extremist media conglomerates who lied about the election, and the financial elite who provided the funds for Trump’s political and cultural workstations of denial, diversion and falsehoods. The violence Trump used to stay in power did not happen in a vacuum. The governing principles of genocide, militarism and violence have a long history and should also be on trial as a moment

of self-reckoning in a time of political and ethical crisis. It is impossible to separate the violent attack on the Capitol from both Trump's language of violence and the systemic violence characteristic of neoliberal governance in the U.S. As Charles H. Clavey observes, violence is a core principle of Trumpism. He writes:

At the very heart of Trumpism ... stands the threat of violence: the agitator's constant promise that his followers will visit revenge—in the form of physical harm, political persecution, and social sanction—on those who, they believe, demonized and excluded them. Violence is both the animating principle of Trumpism and one of Trump's most powerful tools. Trump's most fervent followers, from QAnon conspiracists to white nationalists, glory in the conviction that arrests of prominent Democrats, purges of pedophiles, and pitched street battles against the left are just around the corner. From his assertion that there were "good people on both sides" at Charlottesville to his order that the Proud Boys "stand back and stand by," Trump has shown, time and again, that there is no Trumpism without violence. During an October rally in Michigan, Trump casually remarked that there is "something beautiful" about watching protestors get "pushed around" by the National Guard. "You people get it," he told his loyal followers. "You probably get it better than I do." (Clavey, 2020)

It is astonishing that in the face of Trump's attempt to overthrow the election, which closely resembles the actions of authoritarian regimes around the world, there is a resounding silence by many academics about America being at the tipping point of becoming a full-fledged authoritarian regime. *New York Times* journalist Peter Baker has not missed the threat of authoritarianism posed by Trump's actions regarding his attempt to overturn an election he decisively lost, even entertaining the use of martial law to do so. Quoting Professor Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Baker writes:

Mr. Trump's efforts ring familiar to many who have studied authoritarian regimes in countries around the world, like those run by President Vladimir V. Putin in Russia and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary. 'Trump's attempt to overturn the election, and his pressure tactics to that end with Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state, are an example of how authoritarianism works in the 21st century,' said Ruth Ben-Ghiat, the author of "Strongmen: From Mussolini to the Present." "Today's leaders come in through elections and then manipulate elections to stay in office—until they get enough power to force the hand of legislative bodies to keep them there indefinitely." (Baker, 2020)

With the possibility of instituting various layers of democratic accountability, including impeachment or the invoking of the 25th Amendment, the conditions can be laid for not only a project of truth-telling and answerability but also a narrative of remembrance in which crimes can be revealed and the stories of the victims heard. Under such circumstances, the historical record can become an object of critical inquiry, culpability, and the rectifying of moral injury. Such reckoning can also serve as an educational and learning project in which the lessons of the past can create the conditions for connecting education to democratic values, relations, goals, and a redemptive notion of equity and inclusion. Desmond Tutu in his opening remarks before the convening of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996, rightly invoked the power of historical memory and the need to bear witness in the fight against tyranny. He stated: "We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past, to lay the ghosts of the past so that they will not return to haunt us." Cited in Block, (1996) The power of education, reason, and the search for truth and justice are one mechanism for learning from the past and resisting the ghosts ready to emerge in the present.

The eradication of the public good, the continued growth of neoliberalism's disimagination machines, the individualizing of social problems, a collective indifference to the rise of the punishing state, the repression of historical consciousness, the failure to engage honestly with the full scope of America's racist history, and the crushing role of racial and economic inequality are at their core educational issues. These issues speak powerfully to the task of changing consciousness by dismantling those depoliticizing forces that create apocalyptic visions that render the current social order a world without alternatives. In part, this means intellectuals, artists, and other cultural workers must make the work they produce meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative. This demands a revolutionary vision matched by a collective effort to create

alternative public spaces that unpack how common sense works to prevent people from recognizing the oppressive nature of the societies in which they find themselves. The ideological tyranny and cultural politics of Trumpism demands a wholesale revision of how education and democracy mutually inform each other and how they are understood as part of a broader politics in which the oppressed can be heard and a world can be created in which the voices of the suffering find a public space for articulation.

Any movement for resistance needs to become more accessible to working class people, and there is a crucial need to connect personal and political rights with economic rights. Democracy can only survive as a social state that guarantees rights for everyone. The question of who holds power, and how power is separated from politics, with politics being local and power being global, has to be addressed as condition for international resistance. Neoliberal capitalism has morphed into a form of Trumpism which produces zones of abandonment where individuals become unknowable, faceless, and lack human rights.

Under Trumpism, society increasingly reproduces pedagogical “death zones of humanity” that triumph not only in violence but also ignorance and irrationality. (Aibar, 2004) These are zones that undermine the capacity for people to speak, write, and act from a position of empowerment and be responsible to themselves and others. Against this form of depoliticization, there is the need for modes of civic education and critical literacy that provide the bridging work between thinking critically and the possibility of interpretation as intervention. Critical pedagogy is a moral and political practice committed to the realization that there is no resistance without hope, and no hope without a vision of an alternative society rooted in the ideals of justice, equality, and freedom.

Trumpism evokes the shadow of authoritarianism in the form of a resurgent fascist politics that dehumanizes all of us in the face of a refusal to confront its specter of racism, lawlessness, and brutality. Trump’s impeachment is only the beginning of confronting the fascist ghosts of the past which Trump proved are no longer in the shadows or on the margins of American politics. The influence and legacy of Trumpism will long outlast the aftermath of Trump’s presidency making it all the more urgent to reclaim the redemptive elements of government responsibility, democratic ideals, and the public spheres that make a radical democracy possible. In the current historical moment, the time has come to reclaim the great utopian ideals unleashed by a long history of civil rights struggles, the insights and radical struggles produced by the Black Lives Matter movement, and a cultural politics and pedagogy written in the language of justice, compassion, and the fundamental narratives of freedom and equality.

Notes

1. This article includes ideas first published online in *Truthout*. See <https://truthout.org/articles/attack-on-capitol-affirms-trumpism-will-live-on-after-trump-leaves-white-house/>
2. Editorial Board, Trump Is to blame for the capital attack, *New York Times* (January 6, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/opinion/trump-capitol-dc-protests.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>
3. Ashton Carter, Dick Cheney, William Cohen, Mark Esper, Robert Gates, Chuck Hagel, James Mattis, Leon Panetta, William Perry, and Donald Rumsfeld, All 10 living former defense secretaries: Involving the military in election disputes would cross into dangerous territory, *The Washington Post* (January 3, 2021). https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/10-former-defense-secretaries-military-peaceful-transfer-of-power/2021/01/03/2a23d52e-4c4d-11eb-a9f4-0e668b9772ba_story.html. See also, Jennifer Rubin, It’s impeachable. It’s likely illegal. It’s a coup, *The Washington Post* (January 3, 2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/01/03/its-impeachable-its-likely-illegal-its-coup/>
4. As mentioned by The Editorial Board, The wreckage betsy DeVos leaves behind, *New York Times* (January 2, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/02/opinion/sunday/education-department-cardona-biden.html>
5. One particularly egregious reading of this sort can be found in the work of Ross Douthat, Donald Trump doesn’t want authority, *New York Times* (May 2019). Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/opinion/coronavirus-trump-orban.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytopinion>

6. A brilliant analysis of this issue can be found in John Bellamy Foster, *Trump in the White House: Tragedy and farce* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018).
7. Cited in Terry Eagleton, Reappraisals: What is the worth of social democracy? *Harper's Magazine* (October 2010), p. 78.
8. Fintan O'Toole, Trial runs for fascism are in full flow, *Irish Times* [June 26, 2018]. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-trial-runs-for-fascism-are-in-full-flow-1.3543375>
9. For different views on such accountability, see Jill Lepore, Let history, not partisans, prosecute Trump, *The New Yorker* (October 16, 2020). https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/truth-reconciliation-tribunal-trump-historians/2020/10/16/84026810-0e88-11eb-b1e8-16b59b92b36d_story.html and Elie Mystal, "We're going to need a truth and reconciliation commission to recover from Trump," *The Nation* (October 20, 2020). <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/trump-truth-reconciliation/>

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