

# Cultural Politics and the Crisis of Education and Political Agency

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## Education in the Age of Fascist Politics

The political war on education is now a central project of the menacing thrust toward authoritarianism in the United States. What is new is that the specter of fascism consists of both a right-wing attack to control and eliminate public and higher education as democratic public spheres and the waging of a full-scale attack on those elements of education that enable young people and others to become informed and critical citizens. This is a deeply anti-democratic movement increasingly embraced by states controlled by the Republican Party. The ideological thrust of this war on education is evident in recent remarks by Larry Arnn, president of Hillsdale College, who stated that “Teaching is our trade; also, I confess, it’s our weapon” (Joyce 2022b). He has also stated that “the philosophic understanding at the heart of modern education is enslavement” (Strauss 2022).

Hillsdale was at the forefront of Trump’s unreservedly propagandistic 1776 Commission, “established to create a ‘patriotic education’ alternative to contemporary scholarship on American racial history” (Strauss *ibid*). Valerie Strauss observes that the tendentious curriculum released in 2021 by the commission “equated American progressives with European fascists” and denied that “the founding fathers were hypocrites for enslaving people while calling for equality in the nation’s founding documents” (Strauss *ibid*). It should be noted that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis once introduced Larry Arnn as “one of the most important people living” (Ceballos and Sommer Brugal 2022). At the heart of this war on American education waged by Hillsdale and its GOP allies have been efforts to privatize public schools, ban books, ban curriculum, eliminate teaching about racism and the history of slavery, and denigrate teachers, school boards, and librarians. Kathryn Joyce (2022a), writing in *Salon*, points to a particularly vicious and dangerous contemporary example of this type of attack on libraries in Oklahoma and Wisconsin. She writes:

The 2022 legislation [in Oklahoma and Wisconsin] includes a lot more mandatory punishment. Oklahoma’s pending bill gives parents the right to object to any book in a public school library. If that book isn’t removed within 30 days, the librarian must be fired and cannot be rehired for two years, and the complainant is eligible for \$10,000 a day in damages until the book is removed. In Wisconsin, there are monetary damages up to \$50,000. It’s obvious these measures are designed to cripple public education. (Joyce 2022a). Hillsdale College’s attack on public education has become symptomatic of a larger conservative movement in Florida, Tennessee, and other right-wing controlled states to build a network of “classical” charter schools,” whose curricula are organized around “Judeo-Christian principles” designed to help students acquire a mature love for America” (Joyce *ibid*). Rooted in a rigid ideological and hyper-nationalistic project, it embraces Western civilization, Christian values, and the alleged great books as the only source of established knowledge. The Hillsdale model of education reinforces a colonial religious fundamentalist mindset with an appeal to white Christian nationalism, both of which are part of a larger goal of erasing “the separation between church and state while

push[ing] Christian values into the public sector.” (Strauss 2022). Fundamental to this reactionary fascist project is the notion that critical education and all forms of progressivism are anti-American. Its ideological and political project amounts to a fascist attack on the political, pedagogical, and cultural conditions that allow conscience, morality, and justice to catch up with reality. For example, Christopher Rufo, who has been attributed with convincing the Republican Party to attack critical race theory, has stated the latter is part of “a deliberate strategy to alienate communities from their local schools.” He has also argued that in order to privatize public schools and universalize school choice, it is necessary to promote among the American public “a premise of universal public-school distrust” (Joyce 2022c). Rufo and Hillsdale College are not alone in producing the Nazification of American education. Conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Manhattan Institute and far-right networks such as Fox News are deeply involved in what Ruffo told Michelle Goldberg, a columnist for *The New York Times*, was an ongoing “strategy of laying siege” to public and higher education in America. (Goldberg 2021).

A number of writers, politicians, and academics have warned that these repressive educational policies strengthened the far-right’s efforts to push America into the abyss of an upgraded version of fascist politics. What is even more disturbing is the simultaneous crisis of political agency, historical consciousness, and the breakdown of civic responsibility that has made it possible for the threat against democracy to reach such a perilous moment. Politics in education in the US is no longer grounded in a mutually informing regard for both its citizens and the institutions that provide for their well-being, freedoms, and a vast array of civic rights. In the midst of this widespread assault on education, there is the collapse of conscience and the breakdown of politics as the foundation for a democratic society. What we are witnessing is a full-fledged neo-fascist revival of social domination in the schools, one that finds its counterparts in the right-wing control of the GOP, the courts, and the political system.

### Education and the Struggle over Agency

If the current move towards upgraded fascism in both the United States and across the globe is to be resisted and overcome, it is crucial to develop a new language and understanding regarding how matters of education, agency, identity, and consciousness are shaped in terms that are both repressive and emancipatory. This suggests that the struggle over the relationship between education and the production of agency cannot be separated from the struggle over consciousness, power, identity, and politics. Also at work here is the recognition that politics is defined as much by the educational force of culture as it is by traditional markers of society such as economics, laws, political institutions, and the criminal justice system. The poison of bigotry, anger, hatred, and racism are learned and cannot be removed from matters of culture, education, and the institutions that trade in shaping identities and consciousness.

A long tradition of theoreticians and politicians ranging from Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Raymond Williams to Stuart Hall and Vaclav Havel have argued that culture is not a secondary but fundamental dimension of society and politics. Moreover, they have all stated in different terms that politics follows culture in that it is the pedagogical baseline for how subjectivities are formed and inhabited. Theorists such as Paulo Freire and Stanley Aronowitz have rightly argued that matters of agency, subjectivity, and culture should be a starting point for understanding both the politics that individuals inhabit and how the most repressive forms of authoritarianism become internalized and normalized. As Leon Wieseltier acknowledges, people in a time of adversity and personal suffering “turn not to economics but to culture,” to the world of words and identity in order to “see saviors, not programs” (Wieseltier 2016). Havel was particularly prescient in recognizing that power in the twentieth century has been transformed, especially in light of the merging of culture and modern technologies such as the internet and social media. In light of this transformation, he stated that power was inseparable from culture and that it was:

grounded in an omnipresent ideological fiction which can rationalize anything without ever having to brush against the truth. [In addition, he states that] the power of ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial

languages, and political slogans [have reshaped] the horizons of our existence...We must resist its complex and wholly alienating pressure, whether it takes the form of consumption, advertising, repression, technology, or cliché — all of which are the blood brothers of fanaticism and the wellspring of totalitarian thought depriv[ing] us — rulers as well as the ruled — of our conscience, of our common sense and natural speech and thereby, of our actual humanity. (Havel 1985)

The role of culture as an educational force raises important, if often ignored, questions about the relationship between culture and power on the one hand and politics and agency on the other. For instance, what ideological and structural mechanisms are at work in corrupting the social imagination, infantilizing a mass public, prioritizing fear over shared democratic values, and transforming robust forms of political agency into an abyss of depoliticized followers? What forces created the conditions in which individuals are willing to give up their ability, if not will, to discern lies from the truth, good from evil? How are such pathologies produced and nourished in the public spaces, cultural apparatuses, and modes of education that shape meaning, identities, politics, and society in the current historical moment? What role does a culturally produced civic illiteracy play as a depoliticizing force, and what are the institutions that produce it? What forms of slow violence create the conditions for the collapse of democratic norms? Crucial to such questions is the need to recognize not only the endpoint of the collapse of democracy into a fascist state but also what the tools of power are that make it possible. At the same time, important questions need to be raised regarding the need for developing a language capable of understanding how these underlying paralyzing conditions work in the service of authoritarianism and how they are being sustained even more aggressively today to the benefit of a totalitarian state in the making. Language in the interest of social change and justice must be reinvented and function as a mode of critique and militant possibility. In part, this suggests the necessity for a language of informed resistance in which education becomes central to politics and furthers the efforts to create the conditions for new and more democratic forms of agency and collective struggle.

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that language is the only basis for power. Power is more expansive than language and also present in the institutions, economic forms, and material relations in which language is produced, legitimated, constrained, and empowered. It is important to note that language has a dialectical quality in that it is both the source of symbolic power and a product of material relations of power. In terms of its relationship to cultural politics, language is defined through notions of literacy, civic culture, and shifting symbolic and material contexts. Matters of language and civic literacy cannot be either instrumentalized or stripped of the power of self-determination, critical agency, and self-reflection. At its core and against the discourse of authoritarianism, cultural politics should be addressed from the point of view of emancipation—enabled through a discourse about education, power, agency, and their relationship to democracy. Cultural politics should be acknowledged and defended as a pedagogical project that is part of a broader political offensive in the fight for a radical democracy and its sustaining institutions.

What we are witnessing in the United States is not merely a threat to democracy but a modernized and dangerous expression of right-wing extremism that is a prelude to a full-blown version of fascist politics. One crucial starting point for mass resistance is articulated by Paul Morrow, who references Hannah Arendt, argues that authoritarian societies do “everything possible to uncouple beliefs from action, conviction from action” (cited in Morrow 2014). Any struggle for resistance must create pedagogical conditions that address the connection between agency and action. The great Frederick Douglass understood this when he stated that knowledge makes a man unfit... to be a slave” (Douglas 2003). While it is generally accepted that power cannot be divorced from knowledge, it is often forgotten that this suggests that agency is the central political category here and that at the heart of authoritarianism is the uniformed individual, an often isolated and depoliticized subject who has relinquished their agency to the cult of the strongman. This means acknowledging the power of cultural politics to connect one’s ideas and beliefs to those vital human needs, desires, and hopes that will persuade people to assert their voices and actions in the building of a new mass movement and a democratic socialist society.

There are three cultural topographies central to analyzing the emergence of an upgraded form of fascist politics in the United States. First, there is the discourse of illiberal democracy, especially as developed in Hungary, which is now informing the politics of the Republican Party and used to legitimate a range of repressive policies. Second, there is the issue of how the racially charged discourse of “Great Replacement Theory” fans the flames of white supremacy and legitimates a range of repressive fascist policies in Florida under the rule of Governor DeSantis. (cf. Filkins 2022, Boot 2022). Third, there is the issue of the ongoing Nazification of American education and its influence in replicating an approach to education used by the Nazis. Relatedly, there is the issue of how it functions to repress historical consciousness and produces educational policies and practices that crush the capacities necessary for young people and others to become knowledgeable and critical citizens.

### **The Organization of Fascist Politics in the Age of White Replacement Theory**

The mobilizing passions of fascism are once again with us, evident in the emergence of diverse regimes of predatory repression and exclusion that increasingly legitimate their hatred of democracy through appeals to a notion of illiberal democracy—a project that calls for the elimination of freedom, dissent, and justice as essential elements of political life, if not democracy itself. Of particular importance is the growing attraction of nationalist Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, to conservatives in the United States. Orbán’s popularity is due to his disdain for democracy and his use of political power to implement a range of reactionary policies, especially his belief that “there is a liberal plot to dilute the white populations of the US and European countries through immigration.” (Garamvolgyi and Borger 2022). Expressing a notion of white replacement theory embraced by much of the Republican Party leadership, he has argued that “the western world was ‘committing suicide’ through immigration,” and has declared: “I see the great European population exchange as a suicidal attempt to replace the lack of European, Christian children with adults from other civilizations — migrants” (Garamvolgyi and Borger *ibid*). Orbán’s notion of the nation is purposely at odds with the democratic principles of freedom and equality because they are incompatible with a nation that defines itself assertively through the logic of white supremacy and racial purity.

Orbán has declared war on liberal democracy and, in doing so, appeals not only to anti-communists, right-wing Christians, nativists, and homophobes, but he also provides a model of Christian nationalism for those conservatives in the United States, such as Donald Trump, who want to hollow out liberal democracy from the inside (Tharoor 2022a). Orbán’s notion of “illiberal democracy” is a laboratory for an updated form of fascism and trades in corruption, corporate cronyism, repression, religious fundamentalism, the control of the media, hatred of refugees, a war on women, transgender people, and an attack on critical education and advocates of climate change (cf. Hartmann 2022a, Tharoor 2022c, Joyce 2022d). The historian Heather Richardson lucidly captures the anti-democratic elements at work in Orbán’s notion of “illegal democracy” (Richardson 2022b). She writes:

Orbán is the architect of what he calls “illiberal democracy,” or “Christian democracy.” This form of government holds nominal elections, although their outcome is preordained because the government controls all the media and has silenced opposition. Illiberal democracy rejects modern liberal democracy because the equality it champions means an acceptance of immigrants, LGBTQ rights, and women’s rights and an end to traditionally patriarchal society. Orbán’s model of minority rule promises a return to a white-dominated, religiously based society, and he has pushed his vision by eliminating the independent press, cracking down on political opposition, getting rid of the rule of law, and dominating the economy with a group of crony oligarchs. (Richardson 2022b)

What attracts American conservatives to Orbán is both his frontal attack on democracy and the methods he uses to consolidate power. As a populist authoritarian, he has become a global spokesperson for pathologizing democracy through a concerted and systemic appeal to white replacement theory. Orbán’s support for white nationalism, reactionary family values, and homophobia, among other regressive issues, has translated into a range



of discriminatory policies designed to make social pariahs out of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. As Ishaan Tharoor has noted, Orbán has “banned adoption by same-sex couples ... made it impossible for transgender people to legally change their gender [and] passed a law that prohibited sharing content with minors seen as promoting homosexuality or sex reassignment” (Tharoor 2022b). In addition, he has waged an attack on schools by implementing “provisions restricting education on homosexuality and establishing a searchable registry of convicted pedophiles” (Tharoor *ibid*).

Echoing fascists of the 1930s, Orbán has created a phantom set of enemies that include alleged threats from left-oriented intellectuals, communists, socialists, people of color, and those groups whose sexual orientation challenges white Christian notions of identity. Under Orbán, white replacement theory has become an ideological and cultural apparatus used to weaponize racial fears and legitimate a wide range of related assaults on education, the law, the press, LGBTQ individuals, progressive books, and corporations that support racial equity women’s reproductive rights, fair elections, and the most vital set of beliefs and values that are crucial to creating the informed citizens necessary to sustain a strong democracy. Orbán’s racist policies provide a direct link to the modern radical Republican Party, white supremacist pundits, reactionary journalists, and conservative educators in the United States who want to turn the United States into a hard-right oligarchy. Orbán has become a hero for those radical Republican politicians and their followers in the United States who believe in racial cleansing, view violence as a tool of political opportunism, use the state to crush their enemies, and promote an anti-democratic consolidation of power. With Orbán in power, they no longer have to take their cues, often hidden, from relevant fascist examples offered in the first half of the 20th century. They now have Orbán to provide them with an updated fascist playbook.

### **The Plague of White Replacement Theory**

While white replacement theory has a long history in the United States and Europe, it has taken on a new urgency given its compatibility with growing fascist politics and militant white nationalism. White replacement theory has become a central tenet of the modern Republican Party, which argues that white people as an alleged “native population” are being replaced by undocumented immigrants, Muslims, and others considered outside of the acceptable parameters of whiteness. Moreover, it is increasingly supported by prominent Republican officials, pundits, and media celebrities such as Fox News’ Tucker Carlson (cf. Bump 2022, Bort 2021, Blow 2021). Carlson may be the most prominent advocate of the white replacement theory, given that he has an audience of over 3 million viewers and is host to one of the highest-rated and most-watched cable news programs in the United States. He saturates media space with racist, anti-government rants and calls white supremacy a hoax while defending white replacement theory knowing full well that it was used as a rallying cry for a Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 (cf. Blest 2021, Cole 2021). The rally was organized by white nationalists and white supremacist groups, including neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klan members. The marchers chanted slogans reminiscent of rallies held in Nazi Germany by the Hitler Youth, in which they shouted, “Blood and soil!” “You will not replace us!” “Jews will not replace us!” (Heim 2017).

Trump won the presidency in 2016 by bashing immigrants and referencing the public sphere as the privileged space of white Christian nationalism. As Judd Legum has reported, J.D. Vance, the Republican nominee for a 2022 US Senate seat in Ohio, willingly endorsed Trump’s racism by asserting “that Democrats were plotting to let in 15 million additional immigrants because they were confident that 70% would vote Democratic” (Legum 2022). This racist sentiment was repeated by the notorious Texas Lt Governor Dan Patrick, who stated on Fox News that Biden and the Democrats were “trying to take over our country without firing a shot” by allowing millions of immigrants to enter the country. He went on to repeat a central tenet of white replacement theory by claiming that Biden’s policies not only encourage immigrants to come to the US in order to vote for the Democrats but that they will have “two or three children,” adding up to millions of new voters who will take power away from the Republican Party (Legum *ibid*). Orbán’s view of white replacement theory is alive and well in the United States and is endorsed

by a growing range of American politicians in order to both dehumanize non-Christians and non-whites and, in doing so, expel them from any claim to what it means to be an American.

There is more at stake here than a racist discourse that sets up a conflict between racial groups in the United States; there is also a counter-revolutionary movement that denies the “victories of the civil rights, women, and gay rights movements” (Collins 2022). As Adam Tooze observes, this was a movement that began in the seventies and got more radicalized in the 1990s with the rise of the Tea Party and the emergence of Republicans such as “Newt Gingrich and Karl Rove all of which set the tone for a bare-knuckle, brawling style rooted in a friend/enemy world view, white nationalism, the legitimation of violence for political ends, and deep-rooted racism, particularly aimed at the first Black president (cf. Tooze 2019, Peters 2019, DiMaggio 2011a, DiMaggio 2011b). All of these conditions helped set the tone not only for a deep distrust of government responsibility but also set the conditions for the rise of Donald Trump.

This counter-revolutionary movement, then and now, is not merely a struggle over language and ideals. There is also the dangerous notion of racial displacement that fuels violence against those individuals and groups considered responsible for taking the place of whites. As Juliette Kayyem observes, the notion of violence at work here is not just about censoring and erasing “the ideas, or politics, or voting patterns” but about eliminating the very presence of those groups that threaten the power and presence of whites (Kayyem 2022). As has been observed in the mainstream media, the white replacement theory, with its claim that whites are being replaced and threatened by immigrants and people of color, has motivated a number of mass shooters ranging from Dylan Roof to Payton Gendron. White replacement theory has animated them not only to espouse white supremacist views but also the belief that they are foot soldiers in a civil war to protect the existence of white people, if not white civilization itself. One of the most publicized events in which white replacement theory took place and later mentioned in compromising language by then-President Trump took place at a 2017 “Unite the right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where torch-carrying white nationalists and neo-Nazis chanted “you will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us.” In response to the rally, Trump stated that there were “very fine people on both sides,” a position he still defends (Coaston 2019).

### **Florida is the New Hungary**

Authoritarianism is not merely on the march in Europe and other places in the world. It has secured a strong and dangerous footing in the United States. While the growing fascist threat in America has been made clear by a number of academics and journalists, extending from historians such as Jason Stanley, Timothy Snyder, Ruth Ben-Ghiat to Paul Street, Chris Hedges, and Anthony DiMaggio, to name only a few, what has received too little attention is how the American appropriation of white replacement theory with its fascist undercurrents is producing a range of repressive state policies, many based on Orbán’s governing model. For instance, Orbán’s Hungary has become an exemplar, if not a right-wing utopia, for many conservative politicians, especially Gov. Ron DeSantis. One conservative commentator, Rod Dreher, went so far as to claim that “Florida is becoming our American Hungary” (cited in Tharoor 2022b). Thom Hartmann asserts that “Orbán’s Fidesz Party and the GOP in most Red States have become virtually indistinguishable, from cronies owning the media, to packing the courts, to rigging elections through purging voters and gerrymanders, to putting polluting businesses in charge of regulatory agencies” (Hartmann 2022b). Zach Beauchamp adds to this view writing in Vox claims that “DeSantis is inventing what he calls an “American Orbánism and that “there is no doubt that Hungary, an authoritarian state in all but name, is becoming more and more important in the American right-wing imagination.” (Beauchamp 2022).

Both Orbán and DeSantis have their sights set on the American federal government, with Orbán now inserting himself into American Republican politics in a big way. Such claims are borne out by the fact that DeSantis has taken a number of lessons from Orbán. For instance, he signed the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill banning “classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity” up through

third grade.” By cracking down on LGBTQ rights, he expands his war against the youth of color by including another vulnerable population. He also mimics Orbán’s tactic of using state power to punish critics, corporations, educators, and others considered alleged enemies of the right. This is particularly clear in DeSantis’s attack on the Walt Disney Corporation. In retaliation for Walt Disney’s belated opposition to the “Don’t Say Gay” law, DeSantis passed a law terminating the self-governing privileges, special tax regulations, and legal status held by Disney World in Orlando for 55 years. In going to war against Disney and transgender people, DeSantis follows in Orbán’s footsteps of intimidating corporations and groups that refuse to follow his fascist agenda. Just as Orbán wields the power of the state to punish businesses “for not falling in line with his brutal and discriminatory attacks” (Glueck and Robles 2022), DeSantis is using the political power of the state to punish not only Disney but other corporations such as Google and Coca-Cola, all of whom refused to buy into his racist and discriminatory policies.

DeSantis is also punishing the people of Florida, mostly Democratic Party voters in Osceola and Orange County, who will be held responsible for “Disney’s \$2 billion bond debt, which translates into “a 20% to 25% tax hike costing \$2,200 to \$2,800 per family of four [while also picking up] the tab for the operating services that Disney currently provides” (Richardson 2022a). The attack on Disney, in particular, is also part of DeSantis’s attempt to make the false claim that the GOP is protecting their kids from the bogus claim of grooming them for sexual violence. Such attacks are part of the GOP’s broader culture of fear that instructs white Christians to protect themselves not only against Black people, undocumented immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and women defending their reproductive rights, but also trans-gender youth who are now relegated to the status of social pariahs. DeSantis’s attack on transgender youth is particularly vicious because the supporters of the Don’t Say gay bills have adopted the shocking strategy of claiming that supporters of the bill are both sympathetic of pedophiles and “grooming” children to be gay or question their gender” (Bronski 2022).

Ironically, this type of pernicious discourse is put forth by Republicans in the name of protecting children when in fact, it serves to terrorize them, their families, and their caregivers (Strangio 2022). Journalist Will Bunch (2022b) wrote in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that the GOP’s expanding war on LGBTQ children not only channels hatred against these youth but is creating the conditions for mass violence. One high-profile example of the potential for such violence, while prevented, took place in Idaho on June 12, 2022. On that date, the police arrested thirty-one people linked to the white nationalist group, the Patriot front. The group, armed with metal poles, and a smoke grenade, was on its way to disrupt an annual Pride in the Park event to celebrate gay and lesbian people. The police charged the group with conspiracy to riot. Natasha Lennard writing in *The Intercept*, pointed out that “Earlier this month, self-described “Christian fascists” attempted to force their way into an LGBTQ+ bar in Dallas, Texas, which was hosting a family-friendly drag queen brunch for Pride. The fascists threatened attendees, chanting that the adults were “groomers” — a dangerous, dated trope once again gaining furious traction in right-wing media” (Lennard 2022). Will Bunch provides two terrifying examples of how the Christian fascist insurgency is creating the conditions for deadly violence against schoolteachers who support transgender rights. He writes:

We are now seeing a dangerous loop in which the most extreme voices on the far right — led, ironically, by so-called pastors — are making genocidal comments about our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community. . . . The increasingly dangerous, violent rhetoric has been amplified to “11” by the likes of Mark Burns, a prominent South Carolina televangelist and Donald Trump enthusiast who just ran for Congress (and lost, thankfully) and who said this month that LGBTQ-friendly schoolteachers are “a national security threat” guilty of treason, which should be punishable by execution. In Idaho, where that Pride parade violence was narrowly averted, Pastor Joe Jones of Shield of Faith Baptist Church in Boise kicked things up a notch by declaring in a video that subsequently went viral: “God told the nation that he ruled: Put them to death. Put all queers to death.” (Bunch 2022b)

DeSantis, along with Governor Gregg Abbott of Texas, are on the frontlines of a barrage of hate-filled

homophobic language and punitive bills aimed at trans individuals and LGBTQ rights more broadly. These are policies that echo the genocidal discourse of Nazi Germany. DeSantis is an especially dangerous politician who echoes Orbán's embrace of a radicalized notion of white Christianity, a regressive notion of family values, and the use of the state to punish groups, corporations, and institutions that he views as a threat to his power. His association with Orbán's policies is important to stress because it not only reveals the deeply fascist politics in Hungary that he mimics but also provides a blueprint of how Orbán's white replacement theory and brand of authoritarianism is being implemented in the United States. Commenting on DeSantis's danger to the United States, the liberal commentator for *New York Magazine* states that "He has ignored the slice of Republicans who disdain Trump's authoritarianism and courted anti-vaxxers, QAnon believers, and insurrectionists. And he has demonstrated repeatedly a 'no enemies to the right' strategy that inevitably binds him to the party's most fanatical elements" (Chait 2022).

DeSantis's fascist politics and feral contempt for democracy are not just an effort to score campaign points. It is part of a larger project to move the country to an authoritarian state. The attacks on trans people and transgender children are fueled by an expansive notion of white replacement theory that has become the signature narrative to legitimate a range of regressive policies to ensure the concentration of economic, political, and social power in the hands of white Americans. This is a version of white supremacy based on unadulterated fear, one committed to the mobilizing passions of racism, disposability, religious fundamentalism, and racial cleansing. It is rooted in a view of hyper-masculinity that celebrates violence as a crucial element of virility, identity, and agency. It also believes that anyone who does not live up to this masculine code is weak, feminized, and a threat to white Christians. White replacement theory offers the central trope in asserting and acting on the merging of the charge of weakness and impurity with the call to violence.

If DeSantis mirrors a larger version of global fascism, he has created his own model for destroying those institutions that create the conditions for individuals to be critically engaged citizens. DeSantis is one of the larger players in a Republican Party rooted in the politics of retrenchment, a politics embedded in fear, bigotry, and hatred, which is attempting to rewrite history in the image of a militant Confederacy, the fascist politics of the 1930s, and the racist 1950s. Under the reign of the modern Republican Party, the merging of historical amnesia and repressive forms of education have become the major tools in which to produce the language of white supremacy. At stake here is an ongoing attempt to reproduce and legitimate the lie that America is a white nation and that citizenship is exclusively reserved for white Christians.

DeSantis has become a success story and a bellwether for where this fascist project is heading, revealed most recently in the far-right 2020 platform produced by the Texas GOP state party. Setting a hate-filled and racist tone for going into the 2022 election and the presidential race of 2024, the platform embodied an extremist agenda tantamount to what Will Bunch writing in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, termed "a strikingly antebellum feel" (Bunch 2022a). Among its shamelessly racist and homophobic declarations were the following: the repeal of the Voting rights act of 1965; defining homosexuality as "an abnormal lifestyle choice;" "rejecting the certified results of the 2020 presidential election;" retaining the right to secede from the US; teaching students that life begins at fertilization, and any attempt at gun control is a violation of both the Second Amendment and Texans' God-given rights (Paybarah and Montgomery 2022). There is more at work here than an authoritarian project reeking with the potential for violence, if not a full-fledged insurrection; there is also an attempt to normalize violence while aiming it at specific groups. DeSantis and the Texas Republican Party share the same call to white supremacy and project a future based on a rebranded version of fascism. For DeSantis, Trump, and their allies, white supremacy is the thread that holds together their voter suppression policies and ongoing attacks on critical race theory, Black and Brown people, educators, students, abortion rights, and gay and LGBTQ rights. It is also the bare-knuckle ideology at the heart of politics that has made democracy a meaningless word and inspired Trump's most fanatical and unhinged supporters to inflict violence on anyone who gets in their way. How else to explain that in the United States today, it is dangerous to be a health worker, school-committee member, local alderman, or a public-school



teacher (Nichols 2022). In the age of Trumpism and unchecked violence in the service of political opportunism, it is also dangerous for anyone to question Trump's lawlessness, his utter contempt for the constitution, and his deep-seated disdain for democracy (Street 2022).

What is often missed by liberals and the mainstream media is how these issues are connected as part of a wider totalitarian project, made clear in the war on critical education. It is impossible to fight this fascist project without recognizing how Republicans are making education central to a politics that views history and critical thinking as dangerous. At the forefront of this project is a systemic effort to produce widespread forms of pedagogical repression that whitewash history and, as James Baldwin once noted, define Black people in the American imagination only in reference to slave codes. This is not only a project given new life by Orbán. It has been updated by DeSantis and provides a model for the rest of the country. DeSantis attacks education in order to both mobilize his base and to do away with public education. His repressive educational policies are designed to create the conditions for destroying schools as democratic public spheres while simultaneously undermining the critical tasks of educators to teach young people and others how to be ethical, thoughtful, and engaged citizens.

At the core of this attack is a depoliticizing project whose aim is to teach students how to obey, inhabit a deadening regimen of conformity, and adjust to living in a world in which repression and violence are normalized. DeSantis and his Republican allies live in a moral vacuum that has betrayed the social contract, justice, and democracy itself. White replacement theory fuels the notion that power and whiteness are synonymous, mutually inform each other, and are sanctioned by God. Any criticism of this mutually degrading relationship constitutes one as an enemy to be dehumanized, objectified, and subject to violence. The collective use of us versus them serves as a measure by which to validate whiteness against all others while also "serving as a handy mechanism for crushing opposition" (Buffington et al. 2011). White supremacy is constantly being replenished by a form of historical and social amnesia coupled with the use of right-wing disimagination machines to promote widespread forms of manufactured ignorance. The main instruments for doing so center around right-wing attacks on public and higher education and the educational force of the wider culture, including apparatuses such as social media and the internet that constitute broader forms of miseducation.

DeSantis's ideological war is also matched by a number of policies designed to criminalize dissent and provide the blueprint for turning GOP-led states into laboratories of authoritarianism. For instance, DeSantis has created the Office of Elections crimes, which would enforce with the threat of a felony any alleged electoral violation. The real purpose of this office has little to do with voter fraud since there is almost no evidence it exists at a scale warranting an election police office. On the contrary, it is code for intimidating Black voters and adds another repressive tool to enforce voter suppression (Zhang 2022). In an effort to eliminate any constraints on his power, DeSantis is willing to punish anyone he views as a political enemy, including, as I have mentioned, corporations that refuse to endorse his policies. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes, he "punished the popular Tampa Bay Rays for having the temerity to express sadness about the recent mass shooting of children in Texas—and for making a \$50,000 donation to Everytown for Gun Safety's Support fund. Opposing GOP gun rights policies earned the team a veto of their planned \$35 million baseball complex" (Ben-Ghiat 2022a). DeSantis disdains dissent, as was evident in his signing a bill that criminalizes peaceful protests in residential neighborhoods. Moreover, his white supremacist ideology was on full display when he created a poll tax that prevented over a million ex-felons from voting, most of whom are "low-income individuals and racial minorities" (Luscombe 2019).

DeSantis's desire to instill fear in others and engage in a culture of cruelty appears boundless. One of his "most disgraceful new low[s]" included going after the Special Olympics by forcing them to give up a mask mandate among athletes with intellectual disabilities, knowingly endangering the lives of people who are more vulnerable to Covid (Benen 2022). He shamelessly publicly bullied teens to take off their masks while he held a press conference at the University of South Florida" (Ellis 2022). In the same vein of cruelty, just a few days from the five-year anniversary of Orlando's Pulse nightclub massacred, he "vetoed \$150,000 in state funds that would have provided

counseling for survivors — despite a budget that has \$9.5 billion in reserves”(Stantich 2021). In line with his Orbán-like ‘war’ “on LGBTQ+ Floridians, DeSantis “eliminated \$750,000 approved by the Florida Legislature for the Orlando-based Zebra Coalition to create housing for homeless gay and transgender youth” (Stantich *ibid*). Apparently, DeSantis’s drive and cruelty were on display long before he entered politics and have served him well in his attempt to be “the GOPs combatant-in-chief.” One of his former baseball teammates at Yale recalls that “he was the most selfish person I have ever interacted with...He always loved embarrassing and humiliating people. I am speaking for others—he was the biggest dice we knew” (cited in Filkins 2022).

## The Nazification of American Education

The mean-spirited and pugnacious Governor 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, a willingness to engage in a culture of questioning, and 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 (Dewey 1954). DeSantis has put into place a range of reactionary educational policies that range from banning books and critical race theory to “requiring the state’s public universities to survey students and faculty on their political beliefs,” post their syllabi online, restrict tenure, and allow students to film their classes, and much more (Joyce 2022c).

Not only are these laws aimed at minorities of class and color, but this GOP attack on education also 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 a political agency (cf. Joyce 2021, Joyce 2022a, Joyce 2022c, Strauss 2022). 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.” (Giroux 2014). 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 (Horowitz 2021). 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. 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 [reveal] a troubling pattern of authoritarianism and vindictiveness that would be extremely dangerous in the Oval Office” (Boot 2022).

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 pushed 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 (Bunch 2022b). 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 (Ben-Ghiat 2022b). DeSantis’s 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’” (Rosenberg 2021). There is little doubt that such measures echo the infamous anti-communist hysteria reminiscent of the dark days of the 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 repressive education are not unrelated 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 the Third Reich

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” (cited in Buffington et al. 2011). 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 (Buffington et al. 2011). 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.” (Simkin 2020). 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” (Buffington et al. 2011).

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.” (The Wiener Holocaust Library 2020).

Turning Nazi schools into propaganda factories functioned through 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 (Evans: 263-298). Not unlike what we have seen in the United States, particularly under the leadership of DeSantis, with his deeply anti-intellectual view of schooling, banning of books, censoring of history, support for “patriotic education,” the use of fear and intimidation used against teachers, and anti-LGBTQ+ bills, Nazi education exhibited contempt for critical thought, open dialogue, intellectual ability, and those youth considered unworthy.

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. 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, support for “patriotic education,” passing of anti-LGBTQ+ bills and the use of perpetual fear and intimidation aimed 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 so far as to claim that librarians who refuse to remove banned books are grooming children to be sexually exploited and have attempted to “seek criminal charges against” them (Harris and Alter, 2022).

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 (cf. Evans 2005, Pine 2010, Appleby 2013, Wilkins 2022). 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, incorporating 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 (Lavin 2021). 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 the 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, isolated, lack a sense of purpose, excluded, and in need of some sense of community. Racism is learned, and white supremacists have used a number of 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” points to this threat (Kendi 2022). 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.” (Kendi *ibid*). In response to this fascist threat, there is a crucial 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, and how to turn away from hate, and how to discern truth from falsehoods and right from wrong (cf. Giroux 2020, Giroux 2021, Giroux 2022).

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, whitewashing history, banning books, imposing degrading constraints on teachers, and in doing so, it undermines the critical capacities crucial to teaching about systemic racism and its Jim Crow history. His attacks on public and higher education constitute a form of apartheid pedagogy; its 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. Of course, critical pedagogy is not just about anti-racist education; it is a much broader project. It is a moral and political pedagogical theory whose purpose is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, values, and 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 the informed and socially responsible citizens necessary to combat all elements of fascism while envisioning a social order that deepens and extends power, democratic values, equitable social relations, collective freedom, economic rights, and social justice for everyone.

Democracy needs knowledgeable and socially responsible citizens along with the institutions that create them. Defending critical education and all the sites in which it takes place demands more than a reaction to the ongoing assaults waged by an authoritarian Republican Party. It also suggests going beyond criticizing crude instrumental notions of educational reform traditionally promoted by the Democratic Party, as we saw under Clinton and Obama. What is needed is a new vision of education as a crucial and fundamental public sphere that provides critical learning environments, gives educators control over their classrooms, views young people as a valuable resource for creating a democratic society and future, and connects education with the struggle against racism, economic inequality, ecological justice, and the political, economic, and social rights at the heart of radical democracy. What is needed is a vision of education as the practice of freedom, along with the funding necessary to support the educational institutions that make it possible. Quality and meaningful education should be free for everyone. Once it is viewed as a right rather than an economic investment and/or a right-wing propaganda machine, it will become clear that education is the foundation of a socialist democracy and central to all aspects of political life.

While the times we live in seem dire, it is worthwhile to take heed from Helen Keller, who, on May 9, 1933, addressed students in Germany who intended to burn all books deemed “un-German,” including her books. She wrote: “History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them.” (Keller cited in the Zinn Education Project 2022). 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” (Willis 1999: 45). Not only were Willis’s insights prescient for the times, 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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