

What Is the Role of Higher Education in the Age of Fake News?

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Donald Trump's firing of James Comey as the director of the FBI caused a firestorm around the United States, but for the wrong reasons. Rather than see Trump's actions as another example of the unraveling of a lawless and crooked government, the mainstream press largely focused on the question of whether Trump or Comey are lying, in spite of Trump's long standing history of producing falsifications and maligning the truth. Even worse, the debate in some quarters has degenerated into the personal issue and question of whose side one is on regarding the testimony. Testifying before a Senate Intelligence Committee, Comey claimed that in meetings with the president, Trump had not only asked him if he wanted to keep his job, but also demanded what amounted to a loyalty pledge from him. Comey saw these interventions as an attempt to develop a patronage relationship with him and viewed them as part of a larger attempt to derail an FBI investigation into National Security Adviser Michael Flynn's links to Russia. What Comey implies but does not state directly is that Trump wanted to turn the FBI into the loyal arm and accomplished agent of corrupt political power.

Comey also stated that he did not want to be alone with the president, going so far as to ask Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General to make sure in the future that such meetings would not take place because he did not trust Trump. Comey also accused Trump of lying about the FBI being in disarray, slandering him, and misrepresenting the reasons for his firing. And most importantly, Trump had possibly engaged in an obstruction of justice. In fact, Comey was so distrustful of Trump that he took notes of his exchanges with him and leaked the content of some of the memos to a friend at Columbia University who passed on the contents to a reporter at the New York Times. Comey stated outright he leaked the information because he thought Trump would lie about their conversations and that he wanted to prompt the appointment of a special counsel.

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Suffering from what appears to be malignant narcissism and a pathological contempt for the truth, Trump has tweeted that Comey's testimony had vindicated him and that Comey was a liar and a leaker. Of course, Trump made no mention of the fact that Comey leaked non-classified information because he did not trust anyone at the Department of Justice, especially because it was lead by Trump's crony, Jeff Sessions. Since it goes without question that Trump is a serial liar, there is a certain irony in Trump accusing Comey, a lifelong Republican and highly respected director of the FBI, of lying. As Mehdi Hasan, appearing on *Democracy Now*, observes:

From a political point of view, we know that one of the biggest flaws in Donald Trump's presidency, his candidacy, his ability to be president, is that he's a serial fabricator. Now you have the former top law enforcement officer of this country going in front of the Senate, under oath, saying he—that, you know, “Those are lies, plain and simple,” he said, referring to Trump's description of his firing. He said, “I was worried he would lie.” He says, “I was worried about the nature of the man.”...And there was a quite funny tweet that went viral last night, which said, you know, “Trump is saying he's a liar. Comey is saying Trump's a liar. Well, who do you believe? Do you believe an FBI director who served under two—who served under three presidents from two parties? Or do you believe the guy who said Obama was born in Kenya?” And, you know, that's what faces us today. (Goodman 2017)

Trump cannot be trusted because he not only infects political discourse with a discourse of hate, bigotry, and lies, but also because he has allowed an ideology to take over the White House built on the use of a species of fake news in which the truth is distorted for ideological, political, or commercial reasons. Under the Trump administration, lying and fake news have become an industry and tool of power. All administrations and governments lie, but under Trump lying has become normalized, a calling card for corruption and lawlessness, one that provides the foundation for authoritarianism. What is crucial to remember is that state violence and terrorism starts with words and under Trump language is undergoing a shift: it now treats dissent, critical media coverage and scientific evidence as a species of “fake news”. This is language in the service of violence and is more characteristic of fascist states than democracies.

A democracy cannot exist without informed citizens and public spheres and educational apparatuses that uphold standards of truth, honesty, evidence, facts, and justice. Under Trump, fake news has become a weaponized policy for legitimating ignorance and civic illiteracy. Not only has Trump lied repeatedly, he has attacked the critical media, claimed journalists are enemies of the American people, and argued that the media is the opposition party. There is more at stake here than the threat of censorship or the normalization of lying, there is also an attack on traditional sources of information and the public spheres that produce them. Trump's government has become a powerful disimagination machine in which the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy are erased. Trump has democratized the flow of disinformation and in doing so has aligned himself with a culture of immediacy, sensationalism, and theater where thoughtful reading, informed judgments, and a respect for the facts disappear. Trump's propagation of fake news as a way to discredit facts, if not thinking itself, operates in the service of violence because it infantilizes and depoliticizes the wider public creating what Viktor

Frankl has called in a different context, “the mask of nihilism” (McWilliam 2015, p. 41). Trump capitalizes on a digital culture of immediacy and short attention spans in which complexity collapses in a barrage of tweets and the need for a narrative that offers a sense of consistency, a respite from fear, and a vision of the future in which people no longer experience a sense of invisibility.

Trump’s attack on Comey goes beyond a personal insult and act of egregious lying if not an obstruction of justice, it is also a register of his attempt to discredit criticism and the shared public reality among institutions that is central to a democracy. In an age in which the dissolution of public goods and the public sphere have been underway since the late 1970s, Trump attempts to both depoliticize and bind the American people through a kind of dystopian legitimacy in which words no longer matter and anything can be said functions largely to undermine the capacity for truth telling and political speech itself. Under the Trump regime, consistent narratives rooted in forms of civic illiteracy and a deep distrust of the truth and the ethical imagination has become the glue of authoritarian power. All of which is reinforced by a disdain for measured arguments, an embrace of the spectacle, and an alignment with a banal theater of celebrity culture. In these contexts, rumors are more important than truth telling and in this theater of the absurd society loses its auto-immune system as a safeguard against lies, corruption, and authoritarianism. In a culture of short-attention spans, Trump provides the lies and theater that offer up a tsunami of misrepresentations and values in which thinking is done by others, power is exercised by a ruling elite, and people are urged to dispense narrating their own experiences and give up their ability to govern rather than be governed. Trump offers his followers a world in which nothing is connected, diversion functions as theater, destabilized perceptions reinforce a politics that turns into a pathology and community becomes dystopian, unconnected to any viable democratic reality.

Roger Berkowitz in a critical analysis of Trump and his followers that draws upon the work of Hannah Arendt argues that his supporters don’t care about his lies or immunity to facts. What they prefer is a consistent narrative of a reality of which they are a part. Berkowitz is worth citing at length. He writes:

The reason fact-checking is ineffective today — at least in convincing those who are members of movements — is that the mobilized members of a movement are confounded by a world resistant to their wishes and prefer the promise of a consistent alternate world to reality. When Donald Trump says he’s going to build a wall to protect our borders, he is not making a factual statement that an actual wall will actually protect our borders; he is signaling a politically incorrect willingness to put America first. When he says that there was massive voter fraud or boasts about the size of his inauguration crowd, he is not speaking about actual facts, but is insisting that his election was legitimate. ‘What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part.’ Leaders of these mass totalitarian movements do not need to believe in the truth of their lies and ideological clichés. The point of their fabrications is not to establish facts, but to create a coherent fictional reality. What a movement demands of its leaders is the articulation of a consistent narrative combined with the ability to abolish the capacity for distinguishing between truth and falsehood, between reality and fiction. (Berkowitz 2017)

As important as the Trump–Comey affair is, it repeats a pattern in the Trump administration of running the risk of both turning politics into theater and reinforcing what Todd Gitlin refers to as Trump’s support for an “apocalyptic nationalism, the point of which is to belong, not to believe. You belong by affirming. To win, you don’t need reasons anymore, only power” (Gitlin 2017). Trump values loyalty over integrity and he lies in part to test the loyalty of those who both follow him and align themselves with his power. The Trump–Comey affair must be understood within a broader attack on the fundamentals of education, critical modes of agency, and democracy itself. This is especially important at a time when the United States is no longer a functioning democracy and is in the presence of what Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis refer to as “the emergence of modern barbarity” (Bauman and Donskis 2016, p. 79). Trump’s discourse of lies, misrepresentations, and fakery give new meaning to what it means to acknowledge that education is at the center of politics because it is crucial in the struggle over consciousness, values, identity, and agency. Ignorance in the service of education targets the darkness and reinforces and thrives on civic illiteracy. Trump’s fake news machine is about more than lying, it is about using all of the tools and resources for education to create a dystopia in which authoritarianism exercises the raw power of ignorance and control.

Artists, educators, young people, and others need to make the virtue of truth-telling visible again. We need to connect democracy with a notion of truth-telling and consciousness that is on the side of economic and political justice, and democracy itself. If we are going to fight for and with the powerless, we have to understand their needs, speak to and with them in a language mutually understandable, and create narratives in which they can both identify themselves and the conditions through which power and oppression bear down on their lives. This is not an easy task, but nothing less than justice, democracy, and the planet itself are at risk. In what follows, I want to extend this argument about fake news by looking at both Trump’s dystopian mode of governance and what it suggests about the role of higher education in addressing a post-truth era and an emerging authoritarianism.

Trump’s ascendancy in American politics has made visible a plague of deep-seated civic illiteracy, a corrupt political system, and a contempt for reason that has been decades in the making; it also points to the withering of civic attachments, the undoing of civic culture, the decline of public life, and erosion of any sense of shared citizenship. Galvanizing his base of true-believers in post-election rallies, the world is witnessing how a politics of bigotry and hate is transformed into a spectacle of fear, divisions, and disinformation. Under President Trump, the scourge of mid-twentieth century authoritarianism has returned not only in the menacing plague of populist rallies, fear-mongering, hate, and humiliation, but also in an emboldened culture of war, militarization, and violence that looms over society like a rising storm.

The reality of Trump’s election may be the most momentous development of the age because of its enormity and the shock it has produced. The whole world is watching, pondering how such a dreadful event could have happened. How have we arrived here? What forces have allowed education to be undermined as a

democratic public sphere, capable of producing the formative culture and critically engaged citizens that could have prevented such a catastrophe from happening in an alleged democracy? We get a glimpse of this failure of civic culture, education, and civic literacy in the willingness and success of the Trump administration to empty language of any meaning, a practice that constitutes a flight from historical memory, ethics, justice, and social responsibility. Under such circumstances and with too little opposition, the government takes on the workings of a dis-imagination machine, characterized by an utter disregard for the truth, and often accompanied, as in Trump's case, by "primitive schoolyard taunts and threats" (Gopnik 2017). In this instance, Orwell's "Ignorance is Strength" materializes in the Trump administration's weaponized attempt not only to rewrite history, but also to obliterate it. Moreover, Trump's cries of "fake news" work incessantly to set limits on what is thinkable. Reason, standards of evidence, consistency and logic no longer serve the truth, according to Trump, because the latter are crooked ideological devices used by enemies of the state. Orwell's "thought crimes" are Trump's "fake news". Orwell's "Ministry of Truth" is Trump's "Ministry of Fake News". What we are witnessing is not simply a political project but also a reworking of the very meaning of education both as an institution and as a cultural force. Trump's contemptuous and boisterous claim that science and evidence-based truths are fake news, his dismissal of journalists to hold power accountable as the opposition party, and his willingness to bombard the American public with an endless proliferation of peddled falsehoods reveal his contempt for intellect, reason, and truth.

The dark times that haunt the current age are also exemplified in the deeply antidemocratic forces that have come to rule the United States and now dominate the major political parties and other commanding political and economic institutions in the United States. Truth is now viewed as a liability and ignorance a virtue. Under the reign of this normalized architecture of alleged commonsense, literacy is now regarded with disdain, words are reduced to data, and science is confused with pseudo-science. All traces of critical thought appear only at the margins of the culture as ignorance becomes the primary organizing principle of American society. For instance, two-thirds of the American public believe that creationism should be taught in schools and a majority of Republicans in Congress do not believe that climate change is caused by human activity, making the U.S. the laughing stock of the world (Ellingboe and Koronowski 2016). Politicians endlessly lie knowing that the public is addicted to exhortation, emotional outbursts, and sensationalism, all of which mimics celebrity culture. Image selling now entails lying on principle making it all the easier for politics to dissolve into entertainment, pathology, and a unique brand of criminality. The corruption of both the truth and politics is made all the easier since the American public has become habituated to overstimulation and live in an ever-accelerating overflow of information and images. Experience no longer has the time to crystalize into mature and informed thought. Opinion now trumps reasoned and evidence-based arguments. News has become entertainment and echoes reality rather than interrogating it. Popular culture revels in the spectacles of shock and violence (Evans and Giroux 2016). Too many colleges and universities have become McDonalized as knowledge is increasingly subject to

image of a commodity resulting in curricula that resemble a fast-food menu (Beck 2010, pp. 53–59). Unsurprisingly, the educational force of the larger culture has been transformed into a spectacle for violence, trivialized entertainment, and a tool for legitimating ignorance. As education becomes central to politics itself, it becomes essential to the formation of an authoritarian politics that has gutted democratic values and a compassion for the other from the ideology, policies, and institutions that now control American society.

I am not talking simply about the kind of anti-intellectualism that theorists such as Richard Hofstadter, Ed Herman, Noam Chomsky, and Susan Jacoby have documented, however insightful their analyses might be. I am pointing to a more lethal form of illiteracy that is often ignored. Illiteracy is now a scourge and a political tool designed primarily to make war on language, meaning, thinking, and the capacity for critical thought. Chris Hedges is right in stating that “the emptiness of language is a gift to demagogues and the corporations that saturate the landscape with manipulated images and the idiom of mass culture” (Hedges 2009). Words such as love, trust, freedom, responsibility, and choice have been deformed by a market logic that narrows their meaning to either a relationship to a commodity or a reductive notion of self-interest. We don’t love each other, we love our new car. Instead of loving with courage, compassion, and desiring a more just society, we love a society saturated in commodities. Freedom now means removing one’s self from any sense of social responsibility so one can retreat into privatized orbits of self-indulgence and self-interest.

The new form of illiteracy does not simply constitute an absence of learning, ideas, or knowledge. Nor can it be solely attributed to what has been called the “smartphone society” (Aschoff 2015). On the contrary, it is a willful practice and goal used to actively depoliticize people and make them complicit with the forces that impose misery and suffering upon their lives. At the same time, illiteracy bonds people, offers the pretense of a community bound by a willful denial of its celebration of ignorance. How else to explain the popular support for someone like Donald Trump who boldly proclaims “I love the poorly educated!” (Stuart 2016).

Illiteracy no longer simply marks populations immersed in poverty with little access to quality education; nor does it only suggest the lack of proficient skills enabling people to read and write with a degree of understanding and fluency. More profoundly, illiteracy is also about refusing to act from a position of thoughtfulness, informed judgment, and critical agency. Illiteracy has become a form of political repression that discourages a culture of questioning, renders agency as an act of intervention inoperable, and restages power as a mode of domination. Illiteracy both serves to depoliticize people because it becomes difficult for individuals to develop informed judgments, analyze complex relationships, and draw upon a range of sources to understand how power works and how they might be able to shape the forces that bear down on their lives. Illiteracy provides the foundation for being governed rather than how to govern.

It is precisely this mode of illiteracy that now constitutes the *modus operandi* of a society that both privatizes and kills the imagination by poisoning it with falsehoods, consumer fantasies, data loops, and the need for instant gratification. This is

a mode of manufactured illiteracy and education that has no language for relating the self to public life, social responsibility or the demands of citizenship. It is important to recognize that the rise of this new mode of illiteracy is not simply about the failure of colleges and universities to create critical and active citizens; it is about a society that eliminates those public spheres that make thinking possible while imposing a culture of fear in which there is the looming threat that anyone who holds power accountable will be punished (Furedi 2006). Under such circumstances, the attack on education as a public good and literacy as the basis for critically engaged agents is less of a failing, as many conservative pundits claim, than a deliberate policy to prevent critical thinking on the part of both teachers and students. At stake here is not only the crisis of a democratic society, but a crisis of education, memory, ethics, and agency (McChesney 2015; de Zengotita 2006).

What happens to democracy when the President of the United States labels critical media outlets as “enemies of the people” and derides the search for truth by disparaging such efforts with the blanket term “fake news”? What happens to democracy when individuals and groups are demonized on the basis of their religion? What happens to a society when critical thinking becomes an object of contempt and is disdained in favor of raw emotion or disparaged as fake news? What happens to a social order ruled by an “economics of contempt” that blames the poor for their condition and subjects them to a culture of shaming? What happens to a polity when it retreats into private silos and becomes indifferent to the use of language in the service of a panicked rage that stokes anger but not about issues that matter? What happens to a social order when it treats millions of illegal immigrants as disposable, potential terrorists, and criminals? What happens to a country when the presiding principles of a society are violence and ignorance? What happens is that democracy withers and dies, both as an ideal and as a reality.

In the present moment, it becomes particularly important for educators and concerned citizens all over the world to protect and enlarge the formative cultures and public spheres that make democracy possible. Under a relentless attack on the truth, honesty, and the ethical imagination, the need for educators to think dangerously is crucial, especially in societies that appear increasingly amnesiac—that is, countries where forms of historical, political, and moral forgetting are not only willfully practiced but celebrated. All of which becomes all the more threatening at a time when a country such as the United States has tipped over into a social order that is awash in public stupidity and views critical thought as both a liability and a threat. Not only is this obvious in the presence of a celebrity culture that collapses the distinction between the serious and frivolous but it is also visible in the proliferation of anti-intellectual discourses and policies among a range of politicians and anti-public intellectuals who are waging a war on science, reason, and the legacy of the Enlightenment. How else to explain the present historical moment with its collapse of civic culture and the future it cancels out? What is to be made of the undermining of civic literacy and the conditions that produce an active citizenry at a time when massive self-enrichment and a gangster morality at the highest reaches of government undermine the public realm as a space of freedom, liberty, dialogue, and deliberative consensus?

Authoritarian societies do more than censor, they punish those who engage in what might be called dangerous thinking. At the core of thinking dangerously is the recognition that education is central to politics and that a democracy cannot survive without informed citizens. Critical and dangerous thinking is the precondition for nurturing both the ethical imagination and formative culture that enable engaged citizens to learn how to govern rather than be governed. Thinking with courage is fundamental to a notion of civic literacy that views knowledge as central to the pursuit of economic and political justice. Such thinking incorporates a critical framework and set of values that enables a polity to deal critically with the use and effects of power, particularly through a developed sense of compassion for others and the planet. Thinking dangerously is the basis for a formative and educational culture of questioning that takes seriously how imagination is key to the practice of freedom. Thinking dangerously is the cornerstone of not an only critical agency and engaged citizenship, but the foundation for a democracy that matters.

Any viable attempt at developing a democratic politics must begin to address the role of education and civic literacy as central not only to politics itself but also to the creation of individuals capable of becoming critical social agents willing to struggle against injustices and fight to reclaim and develop those institutions crucial to the functioning and promises of a substantive democracy. One place to begin to think through such a project is by addressing the meaning and role of higher education and education in general as part of the broader struggle for and practice of freedom.

The reach of education extends from schools to diverse cultural apparatuses such as the mainstream media, alternative screen cultures, and the expanding digital screen culture. Far more than a teaching method, education is a moral and political practice actively involved not only in the production of knowledge, skills, and values but also in the construction of identities, modes of identification, and forms of individual and social agency. Accordingly, education is at the heart of any understanding of politics and the ideological scaffolding of those framing mechanisms that mediate our everyday lives.

Across the globe, the forces of free-market fundamentalism are using the educational force of the wider culture to reproduce a culture of privatization, deregulation, and commercialization while waging an assault on the historically guaranteed social provisions and civil rights provided by the welfare state, higher education, unions, women's reproductive rights, and civil liberties, among others, all the while undercutting public faith in the defining institutions of democracy.

This grim reality has been called by Axel Honneth a "failed sociality" characteristic of an increasing number of societies in which democracy is waning—a failure in the power of the civic imagination, political will, and open democracy (Honneth 2009, p. 188). It is also part of a politics that strips the social of any democratic ideals and undermines any understanding of education as a public good and pedagogy as an *empowering* practice, a practice which acts directly upon the conditions which bear down on our lives in order to change them when necessary.

One of the challenges facing the current generation of educators, students, and others is the need to address the role they might play in educating students to be

critically engaged agents, attentive to addressing important social issues and being alert to the responsibility of deepening and expanding the meaning and practices of a vibrant democracy. At the heart of such a challenge is the question of what education should accomplish not simply in a democracy but at a historical moment when the many democracies are about to slip into the dark night of authoritarianism. What work do educators have to do to create the economic, political, and ethical conditions necessary to endow young people and the general public with the capacities to think, question, doubt, imagine the unimaginable, and defend education as essential for inspiring and energizing the citizens necessary for the existence of a robust democracy? In a world in which there is an increasing abandonment of egalitarian and democratic impulses, what will it take to educate young people and the broader polity to challenge authority and hold power accountable? This is a particularly important issue at a time when higher education is being defunded and students are being punished with huge tuition hikes and crippling finance debts, all the while being subjected to a pedagogy of repression that has taken hold under the banner of reactionary and oppressive educational reforms pushed by right-wing billionaires and hedge fund managers (Saltman 2016; Ravitch 2014; Giroux 2015a, b).

Given the crisis of education, agency, and memory that haunts the current historical conjuncture, educators need a new language for addressing the changing contexts and issues facing a world in which there is an unprecedented convergence of resources—financial, cultural, political, economic, scientific, military, and technological—increasingly used to exercise powerful and diverse forms of control and domination. Such a language needs to be self-reflective and directive without being dogmatic and needs to recognize that pedagogy is always political because it is connected to the acquisition of agency. In this instance, making the pedagogical more political means being vigilant about “that very moment in which identities are being produced and groups are being constituted, or objects are being created” (Olsson and Worsham 1999). At the same time, it means educators need to be attentive to those practices in which critical modes of agency and particular identities are being denied.

In part, this suggests developing pedagogical practices that not only inspire and energize people but are also capable of challenging the growing number of antidemocratic practices and policies under the global tyranny of casino capitalism (Ness 2015). Such a vision suggests resurrecting a democratic project that provides the basis for imagining a life beyond a social order immersed in massive inequality, endless assaults on the environment, and elevates war and militarization to the highest and most sanctified national ideals. Under such circumstances, education becomes more than an obsession with accountability schemes, an audit culture, market values, and an unreflective immersion in the crude empiricism of a data-obsessed market-driven society. In addition, it rejects the notion that colleges and universities should be reduced to sites for training students for the workforce and that the culture of higher education is synonymous with the culture of commercialization, commodification, and narrow market-driven values. I think that the Nobel Prize winner J. M. Coetzee is right in criticizing the current collapse of

education into training when he points out that “All over the world, as governments retreat from their traditional duty to foster the common good and reconceive of themselves as mere managers of national economies, universities have been coming under pressure to turn themselves into training schools equipping young people with the skills required by a modern economy” (Coetzee 2013).

At issue here is the need for educators to recognize the power of education in creating the formative cultures necessary to both challenge the various threats being mobilized against the ideas of justice and democracy while also fighting for those public spheres, ideals, values, and policies that offer alternative modes of identity, thinking, social relations, and politics. But embracing the dictates of making education meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative also means recognizing that cultural apparatuses such as the mainstream media and Hollywood films are teaching machines and not simply sources of information and entertainment. Such sites should be spheres of struggle removed from the control of the financial elite and corporations who use them as workstations for propagandizing.

In this instance, education as the practice of freedom emphasizes critical reflection, bridging the gap between learning and everyday life, understanding the connection between power and difficult knowledge, and extending democratic rights and identities by using the resources of history and theory. At the core of analysing and engaging culture as a pedagogical practice are fundamental questions about the educative nature of the culture, what it means to engage common sense as a way to shape and influence popular opinion, and how diverse educational practices in multiple sites can be used to challenge the vocabularies, practices, and values of the oppressive forces that are at work under neo-liberal regimes of power. Consequently, any discussion of pedagogy must be attentive to how pedagogical practices work in a variety of sites to produce particular ways in which identity, place, worth, and above all value are organized and contribute to producing a formative culture capable of sustaining a vibrant democracy (Giroux 2015a, b).

There is an urgent political need for both Canada and the United States, among other countries, to understand what it means for an authoritarian society to both weaponize and trivialize the discourse, vocabularies, images, and aural means of communication in a society. How is language used to relegate citizenship to the singular pursuit of cravenly self-interests, legitimate shopping as the ultimate expression of one’s identity, portray essential public services as reinforcing and weakening any viable sense of individual responsibility, and, among other, instances, using the language of war and militarization to describe a vast array of problems often faced by citizens and others.

I do not believe it is an overstatement to argue that education can all too easily become a form of symbolic and intellectual violence, one that assaults rather than educates. Examples of such violence can be seen in the forms of an audit culture and empirically driven teaching that dominates higher education, especially in the United States, but increasingly in other countries such as the United Kingdom and more and more in Canada. These educational projects amount to pedagogies of repression and serve primarily to numb the mind and produce what might be called dead zones of the imagination. These are pedagogies that are largely disciplinary

and have little regard for contexts, history, making knowledge meaningful, or expanding what it means for students to be critically engaged agents. Of course, the ongoing corporatization of the university is driven by modes of assessment that often undercut teacher autonomy, treat knowledge as a commodity, students as customers, and impose brutalizing structures of governance on higher education. Under such circumstances, education defaults on its democratic obligations and becomes a tool of control, powerlessness, and deadens the imagination.

The fundamental challenge facing educators within the current age of an emerging authoritarianism worldwide is to create those public spaces for students to address how knowledge is related to the power of both self-definition and social agency. In part, this suggests providing students with the skills, ideas, values, and authority necessary for them to nourish a substantive democracy, recognize antidemocratic forms of power, and to fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systemic economic, racial, and gendered inequalities. As Hannah Arendt, once argued in “The Crisis of Education”, the centrality of education to politics is also manifest in the responsibility for the world that educators have to assume when they engage in pedagogical practices that lie on the side of belief and persuasion, especially when they challenge forms of domination.

Education in this sense speaks to the recognition that any pedagogical practice presupposes some notion of the future, prioritises some forms of identification over others, upholds selective modes of social relations, and values some modes of knowing over others (think about how business schools are held in high esteem while schools of education are often disparaged and an object of contempt). Moreover, such an education does not offer guarantees as much as it recognizes that its own policies, ideology, and values are grounded in particular modes of authority, values, and ethical principles that must be constantly debated for the ways in which they both open up and close down democratic relations, values, and identities.

At the same time, any critical comprehension of those wider forces that shape public and higher education must also be supplemented by an attentiveness to the historical and conditional nature of pedagogy itself. This suggests that pedagogy can never be treated as a fixed set of principles and practices that can be applied indiscriminately across a variety of pedagogical sites. Pedagogy is not some recipe or methodological fix that can be imposed on all classrooms. On the contrary, it must always be contextually defined, allowing it to respond specifically to the conditions, formations, and problems that arise in various sites in which education takes place. Such a project suggests recasting pedagogy as a practice that is indeterminate, open to constant revision, and constantly in dialogue with its own assumptions.

The notion of a neutral, objective education is an oxymoron. Education and pedagogy do not exist outside of ideology, values, and politics. Ethics on the pedagogical front demands an openness to the other, a willingness to engage a “politics of possibility” through a continual critical engagement with texts, images, events, and other registers of meaning as they are transformed into pedagogical practices both within and outside of the classroom. Education is never innocent and is always implicated in relations of power and specific visions of the present and

future. This suggests the need for educators to rethink the cultural and ideological baggage they bring to each educational encounter; it also highlights the necessity of making educators ethically and politically accountable and self-reflective for the stories they produce, the claims they make upon public memory, and the images of the future they deem legitimate. Understood as a form of educated hope, education in this sense is not an antidote to politics, a nostalgic yearning for a better time, or for some “inconceivably alternative future”. Instead, it is an “attempt to find a bridge between the present and future in those forces within the present which are potentially able to transform it” (Eagleton 2000, p. 22).

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the notion of the social and the public are not being erased as much as they are being reconstructed under circumstances in which public forums for serious debate, including public education, are being eroded. Reduced either to a crude instrumentalism, business culture, or defined as a purely private right rather than a public good, our major educational apparatuses are removed from the discourse of democracy and civic culture. Under the influence of powerful financial interests, we have witnessed the takeover of public and increasingly higher education and diverse media sites by a corporate logic that both numbs the mind and the soul, emphasizing repressive modes of ideology that promote winning at all costs, learning how not to question authority, and undermining the hard work of learning how to be thoughtful, critical, and attentive to the power relations that shape everyday life and the larger world. As learning is privatized, depoliticized, and reduced to teaching students how to be good consumers and obedient workers, any viable notion of the social, public values, citizenship, and democracy wither and die (Wolin 2008).

Conceived as an important democratic public sphere, education, in its various forms, when linked to the ongoing project of democratization can provide opportunities for educators, students, and others to redefine and transform the connections among language, desire, meaning, everyday life, and material relations of power as part of a broader social movement to reclaim the promise and possibilities of a democratic public life. Education is dangerous to many people and others because it provides the conditions for students and the wider public to exercise their intellectual capacities, embrace the ethical imagination, hold power accountable, and embrace a sense of social responsibility.

One of the most serious challenges facing administrators, faculty, and students in colleges and universities is the task of developing a discourse of both critique and possibility. This means developing discourses and pedagogical practices that connect reading the word with reading the world, and doing so in ways that enhance the capacities of young people as critical agents and engaged citizens. In taking up this project, educators and others should attempt to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to become critical and engaged citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make desolation and cynicism unconvincing and hope practical. But raising consciousness is not enough. Students need to be inspired and energized to address important social issues, learning to narrate their private troubles as public issues, and to engage in forms of resistance that are both local and collective, while connecting such struggles to more global issues.

Democracy begins to fail and political life becomes impoverished in the absence of those vital public spheres such as public and higher education in which civic values, public scholarship, and social engagement allow for a more imaginative grasp of a future that takes seriously the demands of justice, equity, and civic courage. Democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting equity to excellence, learning to ethics, and agency to the imperatives of social responsibility and the public good. The question regarding what role education should play in democracy becomes all the more urgent at a time when the dark forces of authoritarianism are on the march all across the globe. As public values, trust, solidarities, and modes of education are under siege, the discourses of hate, racism, rabid self-interest, and greed are exercising a poisonous influence all across the globe, and is most evident in the discourse Donald Trump and his merry band of anti-intellectuals and white nationalists. Civic illiteracy collapses opinion and informed arguments, erases collective memory, and becomes complicit with the militarization of both individual, public spaces, and society itself.

Yet, all across the globe, there are signs of hope. Far from being normalized, fake news is increasingly seen as a weapon of power, one that makes clear that education can function in the wrong hands as a practice of violence. Alternative public spheres and what a generation of younger radicals called the creating of a parallel polis, which are emerging on social media and a variety of other alternative spaces in order to educate people, raise political consciousness, and rescue thoughtfulness and civic literacy from the clutches of armed ignorance. At the same time, young people are protesting against student debt; environmentalists are aggressively fighting corporate interests; teachers in a variety of countries extending from Canada and Brazil to the United States are waging a courageous fight against oppressive neoliberal modes of governance; young people are bravely resisting and exposing state violence in all of its forms; prison abolitionists are making their voices heard, and once again the threat of a nuclear winter is being widely discussed. In the age of financial and political zombies, casino capitalism has lost its ability to legitimate itself in a warped discourse of freedom and choice. Its poisonous tentacles have put millions out of work, turned many Black communities into war zones, destroyed public education, undermined the democratic mission of higher education, flagrantly pursued war as the greatest of national ideals, turned the prison system into a default institution for punishing minorities of race and class, pillaged the environment, and blatantly imposed a new mode of racism under the silly notion of a post-racial society.

Reviving the Social Imagination

I want to conclude by pointing to a few initiatives, though incomplete, that might mount a challenge to the current oppressive historical conjuncture in which many societies and their respective colleges and universities now find themselves (Aronowitz 2016). At issue here is the question of how do we begin a meaningful

conversation about how to define the mission of colleges and universities. In doing so, I want to address what I have attempted to map as a crisis of memory, agency, and education and reclaim what I call a pedagogy of informed critique and educated hope that is central to any viable notion of change that I am suggesting. At the level of critique, I have argued both explicitly and implicitly that educators, students, and others concerned about the fate of higher education need to mount a spirited attack against the managerial takeover of the university that began in the late 1970s with the emergence of a market-driven ideology, what can be called neoliberalism, that argues that market principles should govern not just the economy but all of social life including education. Central to such a recognition is the need to struggle against a university system developed around the reduction in faculty power, the replacement of a culture of cooperation and collegiality with a shark-like culture of competition, the rise of an audit culture that has produced a very limited notion of regulation and evaluation, and the narrow and harmful view that students are clients and colleges “should operate more like private firms than public institutions, with an onus on income generation” (Hill 2016, p. 13). In addition, any movement for reforming colleges and universities must both speak out against modes of governance that have reduced faculty to the status of part-time employees and join the fight to take back the governing of the university from the new class of managers and bureaucrats that now outnumber faculty, at least in the United States and increasingly in Canada.

At the level of educated hope, I have argued that informed citizens are crucial to a democracy and that the university must play a vital role in creating the formative cultures that make such citizens possible. In part, this would mean creating intellectual spaces free of coercion and censorship and open to multiple sources of knowledge in the pursuit of truth, the development of critical pedagogies that inform, energize, inspire, empower, and promote critical exchanges and dialogue. At the same time, there is a need for not only enabling learning from below but also for guarantees of full-time employment and protections for faculty while viewing knowledge as a public asset and the university as a public good. With these issues in mind, let me conclude by pointing to six further considerations for change.

First, there is a need for what can be called a revival of the social imagination and the defense of the public good, especially higher education, in order to reclaim its egalitarian and democratic impulses. This call would be part of a larger project “to reinvent democracy in the wake of the evidence that, at the national level, there is no democracy—if by ‘democracy’ we mean effective popular participation in the crucial decisions affecting the community” (Aronowitz 2016). One step in this direction would be for young people, intellectuals, scholars and others to go on the offensive against a conservative-led campaign “to end higher education’s democratizing influence on the nation” (Nichol 2008). Higher education should be harnessed neither to the demands of the warfare state nor the instrumental needs of corporations. Clearly, in any democratic society, education should be viewed as a right, not an entitlement. Educators need to produce a national conversation in which higher education can be defended as a public good and the classroom as a site of engaged inquiry and critical thinking, a site that makes a claim on the radical

imagination and a sense of civic courage. At the same time, the discourse on defining higher education as a democratic public sphere would provide the platform for moving onto the larger issue of developing a social movement in defense of public goods.

Second, I believe that educators need to consider defining pedagogy, if not education itself, as central to producing those democratic public spheres capable of producing an informed citizenry. Pedagogically, this points to modes of teaching and learning capable of enacting and sustaining a culture of questioning, and enabling a critical formative culture that advances at least in the schools what Kristen Case calls moments of classroom grace (Case 2014). Pedagogies of classroom grace should provide the conditions for students and others to reflect critically on commonsense understandings of the world, and begin to question, however troubling, their sense of agency, relationship to others, and their relationships to the larger world. This can be linked to broader pedagogical imperatives that ask why we have wars, massive inequality, and a surveillance state. There is also the issue of how everything has become commodified, along with the withering of a politics of translation that prevents the collapse of the public into the private. This is not merely a methodical consideration but also a moral and political practice because it presupposes the creation of critically engaged students who can imagine a future in which justice, equality, freedom, and democracy matter. In this instance, the classroom should be a space of grace—a place to think critically, ask troubling questions, and take risks, even though that may mean transgressing established norms and bureaucratic procedures. Such pedagogical practices are rich with possibilities not only for understanding the classroom as a space that ruptures, engages, unsettles, and inspires, but also extend the meaning of the classroom into wider cultural apparatuses in which education functions often by stealth to shape subjects, identities, and social relations, often so as to mimic the values of a market-driven society. Education as democratic public space cannot exist under modes of governance dominated by a business model, especially one that subjects faculty to a Walmart model of labor relations designed “to reduce labor costs and to increase labor servility” (Chomsky 2015). In the U.S., over 70% of faculty occupy nontenure and part-time positions, many without benefits and salaries so low that they qualify for food stamps. Faculty needs to be given more security, full-time jobs, autonomy, and the support they need to function as professionals. While many countries do not emulate this model of faculty servility, it is part of a neoliberal legacy that is increasingly gaining traction across the globe.

Third, educators need to develop a comprehensive educational program that would include teaching students how to live in a world marked by multiple overlapping modes of literacy extending from print to visual culture and screen cultures. What is crucial to recognize here is that it is not enough to teach students to be able to interrogate critically screen culture and other forms of aural, video, and visual forms of representation? They must also learn how to be cultural producers. This suggests developing alternative public spheres such as online journals, television shows, newspapers, zines, and any other platform in which different modes of representation can be developed. Such tasks can be done by mobilizing the

technological resources and platforms that many students are already familiar with. It also means working with one foot in existing cultural apparatuses in order to promote unorthodox ideas and views that would challenge the affective and ideological spaces produced by the financial elite who control the commanding institutions of public pedagogy in North America. What is often lost by many educators and progressives is that a popular culture is a powerful form of education for many young people and yet it is rarely addressed as a serious source of knowledge. As Stanley Aronowitz has observed, “theorists and researchers need to link their knowledge of popular culture, and culture in the anthropological sense—that is, everyday life, with the politics of education” (Aronowitz 2008, p. 50).

Fourth, academics, students, community activists, young people, and parents must engage in an ongoing struggle for the right of students to be given a free formidable and critical education not dominated by corporate values, and for young people to have a say in the shaping of their education and what it means to expand and deepen the practice of freedom and democracy. At the very least college and university education if taken seriously as a public good should be virtually tuition free, at least for the poor, and utterly affordable for the affluent. This is not a radical demand and countries such as Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Brazil already provide this service for young people.

Accessibility to higher education is especially crucial at a time when young people have been left out of the discourse of democracy. They are the new disposable populations who lack jobs, a decent education, hope, and any semblance of a future better than the one their parents inherited. Facing what Richard Sennett calls the “specter of uselessness”, they are a reminder of how finance capital has abandoned any viable vision of the future, including one that would support future generations. This is a mode of politics and capital that eats its own children and throws their fate to the vagaries of the market. The ecology of finance capital only believes in short-term investments because they provide quick returns. Under such circumstances, young people who need long-term investments are considered a liability. If any society is in part judged by how it views and treats its children, the United States by all accounts is truly failing in a colossal way. This is not a script to be repeated in Canada. If young people are to receive a critical and comprehensive education, academics might consider taking on the role of public intellectuals, capable of the critical appropriation of a variety of intellectual traditions while relating their scholarship to wider social problems. This raises questions about the responsibility of faculty to function as intellectuals relating their specialized knowledge to wider social issues, thinking hard about “how best to understand how power works in our time,” and how education might function in the interest of economic and social justice (Robbins 2016).

Fifth, in a world driven by data, specialisms, and the increasing fragmentation of knowledge, educators need to enable students to develop a comprehensive vision of society that “does not rely on single issues” (Aronowitz 2008, p. 50). It is only through an understanding of the wider relations and connections of power that young people and others can overcome uninformed practice, isolated struggles, and modes of singular politics that become insular and self-sabotaging. In short, moving

beyond a single-issue orientation means developing modes of analyses that connect the dots historically and relationally. It also means developing a more comprehensive vision of politics and change. The key here is the notion of translation; that is, the need to translate private troubles into broader public issues and understand how systemic modes of analyses can be helpful in connecting a range of issues so as to be able to build a united front in the call for a radical democracy.

Sixth, another serious challenge facing educators who believe that colleges and universities should function as democratic public spheres is the task of developing a discourse of both critique and possibility or what I have called a discourse of educated hope. This means developing discourses and pedagogical practices that connect reading the word with reading the world, and doing so in ways that enhance the capacities of young people as critical agents and engaged citizens. In taking up this project, educators and others should attempt to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to become critical and engaged citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make desolation and cynicism unconvincing and hope practical. Critique is important and is crucial to break the hold of commonsense assumptions that legitimate a wide range of injustices. The language of critique is also crucial for making visible the workings of unequal power and the necessity of holding authority accountable. But the critique is not enough and without a discourse of hope, it can lead to a paralyzing despair or, even worse, a crippling cynicism. Hope speaks to imagining a life beyond capitalism, and combines a realistic sense of limits with a lofty vision of demanding the impossible. Reason, justice, and change cannot blossom without hope because educated hope taps into our deepest experiences and longing for a life of dignity with others, a life in which it becomes possible to imagine a future that does not mimic the present. I am not referring to a romanticized and empty notion of hope, but to a notion of informed hope that faces the concrete obstacles and realities of domination but continues the ongoing task of “holding the present open and thus unfinished” (Benjamin 1997, p. 10).

The discourse of possibility not only looks for productive solutions, it also is crucial in defending those public spheres in which civic values, public scholarship, and social engagement allow for a more imaginative grasp of a future that takes seriously the demands of justice, equity, and civic courage. Democracy should encourage, even require, a way of thinking critically about education, one that connects equity to excellence, learning to ethics, and agency to the imperatives of social responsibility and the public good. Authoritarianism has created in many societies a predatory class of unethical zombies—who are producing dead zones of the imagination that even Orwell could not have envisioned, while waging a fierce fight against the possibilities of a democratic future. One only has to look at the U. S., Turkey, the Philippines, and Hungary, to realize that the time has come to develop a political language in which civic values, social responsibility, and the institutions that support them become central to invigorating and fortifying a new era of civic imagination, a renewed sense of social agency, and an impassioned international social movement with a vision, organization, and set of strategies to challenge the neoliberal nightmare engulfing the planet. The dark shadow of

authoritarianism may be spreading, but it can be stopped. And that prospect raises serious questions about what educators, youth, intellectuals, and others are going to do today to make sure that they do not succumb to the authoritarian forces circling so many countries across the globe, waiting for the resistance to stop and for the lights to go out. My friend, the late Howard Zinn rightly insisted that hope is the willingness “to hold out, even in times of pessimism, the possibility of surprise.” To add to this eloquent plea, I would say, that history is open and it is time to think otherwise in order to act otherwise, especially if as educators we want to imagine and fight for alternative futures and horizons of possibility.

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