

## Ten Pillars of Neoliberal Fascist Education

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*Those convictions and motives, upon which the Nazi regime drew, no longer belong to a past that one can count by the intervening years: they have returned...to the democratic everyday. —Jürgen Habermas: Germany's Second Chance*

Few would disagree that public education in the United States—the kind that Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey imagined would support the emotional and intellectual “production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality”—is under siege. The current attack on public education, unlike other assaults over the past several decades, is notable for its support from SCOTUS, its determined base of grassroots ideologues, and its commitment to constructing a completely new system of schooling in the United States. Animated most visibly by censorious attacks on free speech, the individuals and political organizations laying siege to public education aspire to no less than a razing of the educational system first imagined by Jefferson, outlined in detail by Mann, and theorized and practiced by Dewey. Breaking clean from Jefferson, Mann and Dewey, those leading the assault, unlike the architects of the other

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21<sup>st</sup> century educational reform movements (*No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*), are explicitly and unapologetically anti-democratic. Their post-democratic, authoritarian vision for schooling in the United States represents, according to educational philosopher and cultural critic, Henry Giroux, a nascent form of neoliberal fascist ideology:

Neoliberalism's hatred of democracy, the common good, and the social contract has unleashed generic elements of a fascist past in which white supremacy, ultra-nationalism, rabid misogyny and immigrant fervor come together in a toxic mix of militarism, state violence, and a politics of disposability. Modes of fascist expression adapt variously to different political historical contexts assuring racial apartheid-like forms in the post-bellum U.S. and overt encampments and extermination in Nazi Germany. Fascism with its unquestioning belief in obedience to a powerful strongman, violence as a form of political purification, hatred as an act of patriotism, racial and ethnic cleansing, and the superiority of a select ethnic or national group has resurfaced in the United States. In this mix of economic barbarism, political nihilism, racial purity, economic orthodoxy, and ethical somnambulance a distinctive economic-political formation has been produced that I term neoliberal fascism.

Within this discourse, democracy, and by association, democratic education are seen as hindrances to the kind of political and cultural system they are trying to create within the United States.

In what follows, I will discuss how the current assault on public education is shaped by several of the major principles of contemporary fascist politics identified and outlined by Brad Evans and Henry Giroux in their recent essay, "American Fascism: Fourteen Deadly Principles of Contemporary Politics." From their work, I've identified and outlined what I call the Ten Pillars of Neoliberal Fascist Schooling that are in various stages of development in the United States. Some are in the earliest stages, barely audible whispers at the margins of an evolving radical discourse. Some have already taken root and are shaping what children are learning and teachers are teaching in schools today. Evans and Giroux's essay, although not taken whole cloth, is a concept map—it is a cartographic tool for measuring the work and progress of those people and political organizations who are attempting to raze the US system of taxpayer-supported public education, while erecting a radically different system of schooling on the ten pillars I discuss.

Just as Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey understood the synergetic relationship between public education and a functioning and sustainable democracy, the organized forces of neoliberal fascism in the United States also understand how important it is to have a formal system of mass schooling that will support their ideological agenda. Rather

than “produce free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality,” the neoliberal fascist school will function as a national, unified system of “repressive desublimation” which will produce docile bodies/minds and un-free human beings pitted against one another on terms of opportunity and competition. Unlike Jefferson, whose central argument for public education rested on the truism that citizens cannot be, at the same time, ignorant and free, neoliberal fascists imagine a school system that manufactures a kind of willful ignorance in the name of freedom.

The first pillar of the neoliberal fascist school is its appeal to individual desire and fear, what Evans and Giroux call the “Grammar of Fascism.” Drawing on the work of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, they argue that indexes of desire and fear within neoliberal fascism suggest a pedagogical relationship between citizens and leadership that is built on the promise of security and freedom. Its grammar helps create a veil of deception; it doesn’t just say “no,” as Foucault also has argued, but instead presents an illusion of freedom, what Erich Fromm called “negative freedom,” which organizes people’s desire for freedom along the lines of escape. Within this grammar, certain “differences” (skin color, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, gendered identities) are demonized, criminalized, and/or policed; political power is concentrated within the central office; and war, conflict, and competition are the lessons students will learn about the “hegemony of peace.”

This pillar of neoliberal fascist schooling reflects the human desire and need for safety and security, while simultaneously exacerbating fear and anxiety. Within the grammar of neoliberal fascism, as Evans and Giroux explain, the promise of freedom can be realized only when the individual “voluntarily” rejects her relation to the social, replacing it with tribal associations, which are themselves presumed subservient to the individual. It follows then that schools must work to teach students to denounce and deny their political agency in the name of security and they must do this voluntarily, i.e., as a reflex of common sense.

The second pillar of the neoliberal fascist school system articulates with the principle of fascism that Evans and Giroux call the “Normalization of the Emergency.” Against the democratic impulse of Jefferson and Mann, but particularly Dewey, who saw a personal crisis as an opportunity for learning how to problem-solve collectively and democratically, “neoliberal fascists glom onto economic and political chaos—whether they create it or not—to rewrite the crisis as ‘a fascist condition of possibility.’”

This notion of possibility turns the promise of democratic education on its head. Within this new system of schooling, problems are

blamed via representations in standardized curricula on the actions or existence of “the other,” while solutions come exclusively from the central offices of official power. Students are then taught to trust and depend on the authority of individuals in positions of power to solve whatever crisis is disrupting the promise of peace and security.

The third pillar articulates with the political principle that Evans and Giroux identify as the “Liberation of Prejudice.” They write, “the active liberation and the effective mobilizations of prejudicial desires” release the political imagination from the principled constraints of democracy. Within the neoliberal fascist educational imaginary, forms of real and symbolic violence against vulnerable and minority communities are represented as necessary evils in the fight for peace and security. Blaming the victims of predatory capitalism for their own victimization, for example, becomes a pedagogical response to poverty.

Compassion, empathy, and shared responsibility for the suffering of others in our diverse communities, essential markers of a democratic education, are replaced by the criminalization of suffering and the policing of difference. Liberating prejudice, according to Evans and Giroux, also has the effect of pitting vulnerable populations against each other. While students of the ruling classes reap the educational benefits of neoliberal capitalism in the form of private schools and segregated neighborhoods, the general population of students is taught to mistrust those who are also struggling under similar conditions and even blame them, in whole or in part, for their own precarious circumstances.

In curricular and pedagogical terms, Social Darwinism will play a central role in these neoliberal fascist schools. Everyone, regardless of their place on the grid of power, will be encouraged to see themselves as potential victims of violence and injustice; “scapegoating” is rationalized as a way to protect oneself or tribe against an attack. “In order for such scapegoating to become a central aspect of [educational] discussions and awareness,” Evans and Giroux argue, “[schooling] must be reduced to questions of survival.”

All schooling—democratic or neoliberal fascist—interprets a past and imagines a future. Democratic education as imagined by Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey, requires students to learn—along with the triumphs and accomplishments—the complicated, troubling, and sometimes painful events of our past. The future depends on learning about the nation’s history in a way that prevents students from repeating the mistakes and missteps of those who came before them, but also teaches them to emulate the attitudes and behaviors of our most enlightened and courageous leaders. Democratic education requires, as Giroux explains, both a “language of critique and a language of possibility.” Na-

tional mythologies about a mythic past have no place in schools that are preparing citizens for direct participation in a democracy, but they do cohere with the assumptions of neoliberal fascist schooling.

Neoliberal fascism's "naked appeal to mythical violence," the fourth pillar and political principle in Evans and Giroux's political map, suggests how neoliberal fascist schools will teach students to have "a certain nostalgia for a mythical and glorious Paradise Lost." Yet unlike 20<sup>th</sup> century versions of fascism, today's neoliberal version is "now re-narrated as a system of preservation." Today's neoliberal fascists demand the preservation of the "Anglosphere" which they imagine to be under siege from the invasion of the other. Borders, walls, policing, domestic militarization, invasion, sanctioned police violence, and the right to assault weapons and other military tools of containment and surveillance are all part of the grammar of preservation. Schools become vital sites for the normalization of these concerns through pedagogies of cultural literacy and the alignment of curricula and assessments to this grammar.

Cultural literacy within the neoliberal fascist educational imagination "harnesses the emotions of nostalgia, a yearning for a past that was pure, marked by a robust nationalism, and literally cleansed of its dark moments." Historical amnesia is more about erasing than forgetting; it refers to a pedagogical process that frames the past in a way that flips the sociological imagination on its head. Public issues, social struggle, collectivist-driven change are reduced to stories about individual people doing remarkable things. Our collective history, with all its painful and triumphant moments, is rewritten, as James Loewen describes it, as "heroification." Presenting little more than historical caricatures of the real people who played important roles throughout history, this process of heroification not only erases the "dark moments" of history from the official record, but it also affects people's ability to think critically about the present and engage the social imagination. Within neoliberal fascist schools, mythology replaces history, provoking students to yearn for a past that never was and denying them the critical tools of perspective consciousness and sociological analysis.

Twenty-first century North American neoliberal fascism, write Evans and Giroux, "shows a willful disregard for human life. It has thrown millions into the abyss of human misery and despair." The notion of acceptable disposability—the fifth pillar of neoliberal fascist schooling—teaches students to compete for scarce and/or diminishing resources while manufacturing ignorance about how and why these resources might be scarce and diminishing. For example, we know that some of this scarcity is manufactured, such as when agri-business de-

stroys grains and other food products and/or obliterates the local production of food to increase shareholder profits. Diminishing resources like clean water is in large part a result of unregulated industrial pollution and privatization. Privatization within modernity, according to eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, leaves people vulnerable to being labeled redundant; indeed, redundancy is a sign of progress within neoliberal fascist ideology. “People for whom there is no good room in society,” Bauman writes, “should be either separated from the rest and put somewhere in an enclosure, or completely disposed of—very often, particularly in our times, just left to their own initiative what to do with themselves.”

As a pillar of neoliberal fascist schooling, the hegemony of disposability no longer hides, as it did within the discourse of neoliberal democracy, within the official curricula of history, social science, and literature education. As a pillar of neoliberal fascist education, acceptable disposability turns public issues into private concerns. Poverty, food insecurity, and joblessness are represented within the curricula as arising either from the subaltern’s own deficiencies or from the encroachment of the subaltern onto territory assigned through manifest destiny. The first option suggests the need for rigorous policing and containment of subaltern communities while the second demands a more aggressive, militaristic intervention. Reframing the refugee crisis at the Southern border as an invasion, as some within the nascent neoliberal fascist wing of the GOP have begun to do, reflects both the concept of acceptable disposability and the militaristic response that it engenders.

Barred windows, metal detectors, armed teachers, and a heavy police presence signal the introduction of “the militarization of educational life,” the sixth pillar. Within the fascist imaginary, militarization is a sign of safety, security, and strength. Many people within these communities welcome such a presence even though it naturally limits their freedoms. Violence and the threat of violence in schools suggests the need for protection. “A defining feature of fascism,” Evans and Giroux write, “is to wage war upon its own population, to enact a civil war where the lines of battle take place at every door, down every street, through every conversation, in every possible setting.”

From schools to shopping areas across the country, community policing is replaced by militarization; armored vehicles, military grade weapons and surveillance technologies, coupled with “hidden” security forces, signal a shift in how safety and security are being defined within the logic of neoliberal fascism. Militarization of the everyday is not seen as a threat to autonomy but welcomed as protection against the violence perpetuated by “the other.” In many public schools in the

United States, surveillance is ubiquitous and accepted as the price of safety and security.

The militarization of school life does not require actual military force to be used against students and teachers. This would in fact work against the interests of established neoliberal fascist power. See Kent State for a 20<sup>th</sup> century example of the consequences of what can happen when militarization moves beyond representation and engages in acts of violence against students in schools. Instead, militarization, within the neoliberal fascist educational imagination, reframes the fundamental relationship between students and teachers and between the school and society. Within the school culture of neoliberal fascism, there is no contradiction between freedom and militarization; the former depends upon the latter. Importantly, students, teachers, and parents must voluntarily accept the militarization of their schools and communities, i.e., it must become hegemonic or risk stirring resistance in both students and teachers. Through thousands of hours of instruction, beginning in kindergarten (or earlier), students and teachers learn to read the militarization of their schools and neighborhoods as a precondition of their political freedom.

The seventh pillar of a neoliberal fascist education rests on Theodore Adorno's seminal study of leadership within fascist ideologies, "The Authoritarian Personality." Adorno showed how fascism depends on a form of pedagogical leadership that hides its autocratic desires and aspirations behind the veil of a harmless clown. As history has shown, these clownish leaders are anything but harmless and their desire for power is ruthless and violent. Yet, to their followers they are entertaining, brave, smart, and funny. Always the victim (or potential victim) of hidden, dark forces, the authoritarian personality appeals to those people who perceive their struggles within the democratic system as part of a larger conspiracy to keep people like them (i.e., race, class, gender, religion, culture, language) from the centers of official power and privilege. Within the schools, the idea of the authoritarian personality gets registered across the official curriculum, through pedagogies that reinforce hierarchies of oppression, and the autocratic administration of the school itself.

In curricular terms, the authoritarian personality is celebrated in the books, films, articles, and art the students will be expected to learn. The individual is the primary subject of analysis in neoliberal fascist curricula. Power is centralized and students will be taught to "look up" for solutions and "look around" for blame. This is the opposite of what a democratic education would teach; that is, a democratic education teaches students to "look around" for solutions and "look up" for the potential source of the problem.



At the pedagogical level, teachers and students mirror the authoritarian personality within the classroom. This means that students learn to think about the relationship between knowledge and power in a way in which the latter legitimates the former. The authoritarian personality within the school context inverts the idiom that knowledge is power. Power unapologetically determines what counts as knowledge. As such, teachers are the center of power, deploy a system of reward and punishment that maintains order in the classroom and school, and are the ones who know. To question the authoritarian teacher is perceived as a challenge to her authority specifically, but more importantly, it represents a threat to the status quo of power. The environment of learning within these spaces is defined by the teacher while the students are seen as objects to be trained. Training rather than education articulates with the authoritarian personality. Students are trained not only for jobs but also to follow. If a democratic education teaches students to lead as opposed to being led, the authoritarian personality trains students and teachers to respect and trust the authority of their sanctioned leaders to know what is best.

Administratively, the institution is hierarchical and overtly serves the interests of official power outside of the school. Charismatic yet ruthlessly rigid and anti-collectivist, the authoritarian leadership in the neoliberal fascist school makes sure that teachers and students follow the dictates of power. Surveillance of content as well as behavior and speech is a vital lever of ideological coherence and control.

The eighth pillar demands the regular production of the “Spectacle.” Spectacles are cultural events within the school that involve students, teachers, and families and celebrate the superiority of the neoliberal fascist system and its established leaders. The spectacle is a vital component of the neoliberal fascist school experience. They are multi-sensory experiences that demand allegiance to both the school as well as the social and political systems of which it is a part. The spectacle is always a form of politicized entertainment. “Pep” and political rallies, music concerts, and sporting events are four common spectacles that create a sense of belonging and community but not on an ethos of love and empathy. Love within the spectacle of fascism is, as Evans and Giroux argue, artificial; it makes a spectacle out of love by turning hatred of “the other” into a form of entertainment. But maybe even more insidious is the spectacle’s ability to create community and a sense of deep belonging through the production of symbolic associations. Uniforms, mascots, flags, and shared songs provide the semiotic support that the spectacle needs to broaden and deepen its appeal to its members.



The ninth pillar of the neoliberal fascist school aligns with the ideology of white supremacy. The curricular and pedagogical implications of such an alignment results in the censoring of all content and the state regulation of pedagogies that would bring attention to the systemic and institutional realities of racism in the United States. The nascent development of this pillar is already beginning to take root in some of the nation's schools. Heather McGee writes, "According to PEN America, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting free expression, legislatures in 36 states have proposed 137 bills that would limit teaching about race, gender and American history. Nineteen censorship bills have become law in the past two years." The move away from Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey suggests a complete rejection of public education's historical and ideological relationship to constitutional democracy. The centralization of white supremacist ideology within neoliberal fascist schools if/when completed would represent a return to a time when white Christians in the United States violently wielded their official power (governmental, economic, cultural) without apology.

The tenth and last pillar of neoliberal fascist schooling is the Privatization Reflex. All things public—parks, schools, transportation, housing, media—are associated with socialism and inefficiency. At the governmental level, this reflex translates into the desire for a small but powerful government whose legitimacy comes in large part from the support it receives from the judiciary and economic elite. Unlike 20<sup>th</sup> century autocratic systems that relied on a committed military, 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal fascism relies in large part on the juridical and legislative spheres, both influenced and shaped by the economic power of a shrinking number of individuals and shareholders. This allows for concentrated power to legally dismantle institutional protections against anti-democratic forces. The privatization reflex also places enormous power in the hands of business while taking it out of the hands of the people. Once a small but powerful private group of stakeholders, largely unaccountable to the masses of people who may disagree with their interests and beliefs, takes over government, how schools function and for what purposes narrow to reflect those private concerns. The move over the past ten years to normalize voucher and charter schools, while desensitizing the public to the complementary issues of economic and racial segregation, has resulted in a form of public education that looks less like an experiment in democratic preparation and more like a system of social and economic reproduction. The privatization reflex essentially turns what C. Wright Mills described as the sociological imagination on its head. This inversion hollows out the promise of democratic education. What appeared pos-

sible in terms of democratic life and the education that could support such a system of self-governance now seems improbable. The crisis and chaos of imagination that ensues opens the door for a system radically different than the one Jefferson, Mann, or Dewey desired. It is not, however, a system that they could not foresee. Their relentless pursuit of mass, public education funded through taxation was driven in large part by the fear that democracy would fail without it.

These ten pillars of neoliberal fascist education, to varying degrees throughout the United States, are taking root. Attacks on Critical Race Theory, LGBTQ+ curriculum, tenure/academic freedom, and public education itself are direct challenges to the kind democratic education Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey imagined would be necessary for the viability of democracy in the United States. The weakening of democratic institutions in the United States and throughout the world is well-documented. As the authors of Freedom House succinctly report, "Democracy is in retreat." What is also true is that as democracy retreats so does democratic education. As democratic education loses legitimacy, democracy's hegemony weakens.

It's true that the kind of democratic education that Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey envisioned has been in retreat for quite some time. And there is a good argument to be made that the weakening of democracy in the United States today can, at least in part, be mapped to the decline of democratic education within our public schools over the past twenty-five years. But we seem to be on the cusp of something bigger than we have ever seen in the United States regarding the state of public education and its implicit connection to democratic ideology. The belief that what we are seeing within government and schools is just another type of reform movement ignores how radically distinct these efforts are from the educational reform movements of the past. These ten pillars of neoliberal fascist education suggest a complete severing of public education from democratic life and a suturing of schooling to neoliberal fascist ideology. Although it's impossible to say with certainty what our schools will look like under the regime of neoliberal fascism, or if neoliberal fascism will continue to dismantle constitutional democracy in the United States and elsewhere, these pillars provide a glimpse into what, even twenty years ago, seemed impossible with regards to the future of public education in the United States.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky, "Democracy and education," *Counterpoints* 422 (2012): 55–70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981754>.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. Giroux, *Thinking dangerously: The terror of the unforeseen*. (Los

Angeles: LARB, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> B. Evans and H.A. Giroux, "American fascism: Fourteen deadly principles of contemporary politics," *symploke* 28, no. 1-2, (2020).

<sup>4</sup> H. Marcuse, *One dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Giroux, H. A. *Pedagogies of resistance: Against manufactured ignorance*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich, *1900-1980, Escape from freedom*. New York: Rinehart, 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Weiner, Eric J. July. "Constructions of innocence in times of war: Breaking into the hegemony of peace." (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Evans and Giroux, *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Evans and Giroux, "American fascism."

<sup>11</sup> Giroux, Henry A., "Schooling as a form of cultural politics: Toward a pedagogy of and for difference," pp. 125-151 in Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, eds., *Critical pedagogy, the state, and cultural struggle*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Loewen, James W. *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong*. New York: New Press, 1995. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, B. & Giroux, H. A. 2020, 'American fascism: Fourteen deadly principles of contemporary politics', *symploke*, vol. 28, no. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/4055-global-agribusiness-two-decades-of-plunder>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jan/22/us-drinking-water-contamination-forever-chemicals-pfas>

<sup>18</sup> <http://opentranscripts.org/transcript/disposable-life-zygmunt-bauman/>

<sup>19</sup> Evans, B. & Giroux, H. A. 2020, 'American fascism: Fourteen deadly principles of contemporary politics', *symploke*, vol. 28, no. 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*.

<sup>21</sup> Evans, B. & Giroux, H. A. 2020, 'American fascism: Fourteen deadly principles of contemporary politics', *symploke*, vol. 28, no. 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> McGhee, Heather C., and Victor Ray. "For making citizens." *New York Times* 4 Sept. 2022: 8(L). *Business Insights: Global*. Web. 5 Sept. 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Mills, C., 1959. *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/democracy-retreat>; Steve Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, "The crisis of American democracy," *American Educator* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2020) quoted in Henderson, "Business can't take democracy for granted."; See also, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/democracy-governance/warning-democracy-peril-harvard-scholars-join>