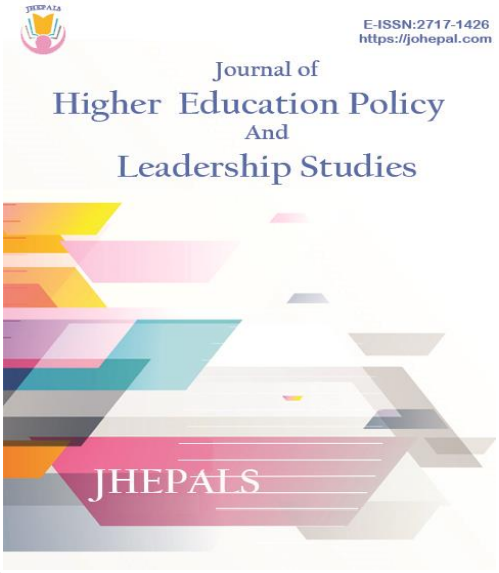
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The Nazification of American Education

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Abstract

This article argues that education is under siege in the United States by a right-wing Republican Party that wants to turn it into a propaganda tool for promoting its white supremacist ideology and updated version of fascist politics. Its aim is to use public and higher education in order to prevent young people from thinking critically, learning how to hold authority and power accountable, and to imagine a future different from a present that is sliding into tyranny. History serves as a warning sign which clearly shows that this current attack on education by the far-right in the United states has similarities to this pedagogical practices and educational policies used in Nazi Germany. The article calls for educators across the globe to analyze the current attacks on education through a historical lens that offers the tools to both understand its threat to democracy and in the midst of this urgency to find ways to fight it.

Keywords: Fascism; Patriotic Education; Critical Pedagogy; Resistance; Propaganda

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"If all this is not fascism, let's acknowledge it looks a lot like it."
Eduardo Galeano

Fascist Education as Propaganda Factories

The crisis of education in the United States presents not only a danger to democracy, but also advances the ideological and structural foundations for the emergence of a fascist state. The slide towards lawlessness and authoritarianism is now aided and abetted by educational policies that are repressive and dystopian, wedded to social control and the death of the social imagination. Repressive forms of education are crucial to bringing the surface elements of fascism to the center of politics and culture. An unimagined catastrophe now characterizes how American education is being shaped by far-right Republican Party politicians. President Joe Biden is right in his claim that the far-right Republican Party "represents an extremist that threatens the very foundations of our republic. This is a party is allied with white militia groups, enact voter suppression policies, view violence as a legitimate political tool, and are waging a war against women's reproductive rights. They engage in a politics of fear, and embrace an incipient fascism, and draw much of its ideological energy from the extremist white Christian evangelical movement and from authoritarian governments in Hungary, Brazil, India, and Turkey. Coercion, conformity, and toxic forms of religious, political, and economic fundamentalisms now threaten to destroy education as a democratic public sphere, however weak it may be. The Republican Party is on the forefront of transforming American education into a feral propaganda tool for producing and legitimating what is euphemistically called "patriotic education." Institutions of learning at all levels in the red states are becoming laboratories for what I term the Nazification of American education, replicating pedagogies of repression similar to those that were at work in Germany in the 1930s.

Education in Nazi Germany

Education under the Third Reich offers significant insights into how repressive forms of pedagogy become central to shaping the identities, values, and worldviews of young people. Nazi educational policies also made visible how in the final analysis education is always political in that it is a struggle over agency, ideology, knowledge, power, and the future. For Hitler, mattes 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" (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

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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 Holocaust Explained, n.d.). Turning Nazi schools into propaganda factories functioned through a massive pedagogical machinery of conformity, censorship, repression, and indoctrination. The attack on teachers also took place through Nazi efforts to encourage students and loyal faculty to spy on those considered politically unreliable. Even worse, teachers who did not support either Nazi ideology or the restructuring of education were dismissed along with Jewish educators who were banned from teaching in the Nazi educational system (Evans, 2005).

What critics often fail to acknowledge is that the open glorification of "Aryan" races in Nazi Germany has its counterparts in a range of policies now pushed by Republican politicians such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. This is not only visible in white replacement theory and the rise of white supremacy in the United States, but also in voter suppression laws, the elimination of the history of oppressed groups from school curricula, the banning of books, and the assault on educators who do not agree with the transformation of American education into right-wing propaganda factories. Not unlike what we have seen in the United States, Nazi education exhibited a contempt for critical thought, open dialogue, provocative books, intellectual ability, and those youth considered unworthy. The comparisons are particularly evident under the leadership of Republican Party Florida Governor Ron DeSantis with his deeply anti-intellectual view of schooling, whitewashing of history, outlawing books, supporting "patriotic education," passing anti-LGBTQ+ bills and using perpetual fear and intimidation directed at teachers, parents, and youth of color. A particularly egregious echo of the fascist past can be seen in the current attack on librarians. Increasingly, they are being harassed, threatened, and called pedophiles by far-right extremists because they have books on their library shelves that deal with LGBTQ rights and racial equality. Some fascist book censors have gone as far as claiming that librarians who refuse to remove banned books are "grooming" children to be sexually exploited and have attempted to "seek criminal charges against" them (Harris & 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

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the strongman (see Appleby, 2013; Pine, 2010; 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, supporting textbooks as crucial tools for spreading propaganda to students, and controlling teacher's classroom actions are closely related to the Nazi playbook for making education a tool for indoctrination and control.

The horrors of authoritarianism are back supported by white supremacists such as DeSantis (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 a public to govern themselves. At its core, it is an attack on both the promise of democracy and the social imagination.

Critical education is the scourge of white supremacists, because it offers a counterpoint to right-wing educational practices that seduce people into inhabiting the ecospheres of hate, bigotry, and racism. Such anti-racist pedagogies are especially important because of the threat posed by white supremacists to white youths, who are especially vulnerable given how many of them are alienated and isolated, lacking a sense of purpose and excluded, while in need of some sense of community. Racism is learned and white supremacists have enlisted several educational tools, particularly online video games, chat groups, Tik Tok, and other social platforms, to promote and enlist white youths. Ibram X Kendi rightly raises the question of how "white children are being indoctrinated with white supremacist views, what causes them to hate, and how they have become the prime target of white supremacists" (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, 2022). In response to this fascist threat, there is a need to acknowledge the political importance of anti-racist education in teaching young people how to recognize the threats posed by white supremacy, how to resist racism in all of its forms, how to turn away from hate, and how to discern truth from falsehoods and right from wrong (Giroux, 2020, 2021, 2022). In reference to the ongoing threat of white supremacy to white kids, with its broad cultural reach and presence in the social media, Kendi writes of the importance of anti-racist pedagogy. He writes:

> But how can white kids—or any kids—guard against this threat if they can't recognize it? How can kids repel ideas of hierarchy if they haven't been taught ideas of equality? How can kids distinguish right from wrong if they haven't been shown what's right and wrong? Recognizing that "an increasing number of U.S. teens are getting 'radicalized' online by White supremacists or other extremist groups," an article published by the National Education Association concluded: "The best place to prevent that radicalization is U.S. classrooms" (Kendi, 2022).

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Republicans such as DeSantis reproduce and accelerate the adoption of white supremacist views among many vulnerable white youths. They do this by censoring critical ideas, eviscerating history of its genocidal and racist past, banning books, imposing degrading constraints on teachers, and in doing so undermining the critical capacities crucial to teaching about systemic racism and its Jim Crow history. DeSantis' attack on teaching history in the schools draws much of its energy from nostalgic rendering of the past when whites could be proud of a society in which whiteness was an unapologetic mark of privilege, inequality, and state violence. For DeSantis and his Republican Party allies that past is now threatened by people of color, justifying a "political programme that indicts the present as a crime against the past" (Mann, 2022). His attacks on public and higher education constitutes a form of apartheid pedagogy.

What is clear is that the histories told in schools are tied to the society we want to create. This is a dangerous assumption for the Republican Party because it has no interest in drawing upon history in terms of both its deadly consequences and its democratic achievements and values. Such an approach would be part of a democratizing educational practice designed to free the United States from repeating its acts of genocide, legacy of racism, and its anti-democratic policies. Instead, the Republican Party's whitewashing and censorship of history is designed to create a present that ignores the injustices of the past while using history to merely justify their white supremacist beliefs.

DeSantis's fascistic educational policies thrive on a deadly mix of ignorance and racial hatred. The consequences, while indirect, are deadly, as we have witnessed from a number of mass shootings, including the massacre of 10 Black shoppers in a Tops grocery store in Buffalo by a young hate-filled racist and self-proclaimed fascist. As historical consciousness and critical knowledge and skills disappear in schools under DeSantis' policies, young people are not merely misinformed, they are powerless to recognize in the realm of popular culture how supremacists are using history for their own toxic purposes. For instance, Jeffrey St. Clair writes about how far right groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers have appropriated the image of the late Chilian fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet, adorning his image on "shirts, stickers, and flags" (Clair, 2022; see also Dorfman, 2022). In the educational world being produced by DeSantis and his Republican Party zombies, Pinochet would be erased from history, leaving young people ignorant of how history can be used for fascist goals. In this instance, educational repression is directly connected to the violence of organized forgetting.

Let's be clear about what is at stake in the fascistic and racist forms of education currently in place in over thirty-six states by the Republican Party (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). This is an attack on the very possibility of thinking critically along with the pedagogies and institutions that support the capacity for analytical thought and informed judgment as a foundation for creating informed individuals. It also constitutes a full-fledged attack not just on critical race theory but also critical pedagogy in general. Of course, critical pedagogy is not just about anti-racist education, it is also part of a much broader project. It is a moral and political pedagogical theory whose purpose is to equip students with the vital knowledge, skills, values, and sense of social responsibility that enable them to be critical and engaged agents. In this sense, it is the essential foundation, regardless of where it takes place, for creating as knowledgeable and socially responsible citizens necessary to combat all elements of fascism and authoritarianism while envisioning a social order that deepens

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and extends power, democratic values, equitable social relations, collective freedom, economic rights, and social justice for everyone. This is precisely why it so dangerous to the white supremacists, fascists, and extremist forces now driving politics in the United States.

While the times we live in seem dire, it is worthwhile to take heed from Helen Keller who in a letter to Nazi youth stated: "History hasn't taught you anything if you think you can kill ideas. The tyrants tried to do so often in the past, but the ideas revolted against them and destroyed them" (Kant, 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). Not only were Willis's insights prescient for the times, but they are more urgent now given that the increasing danger of fascism that threatens to engulf and destroy the last vestiges of an already weakened democracy in the United States.

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