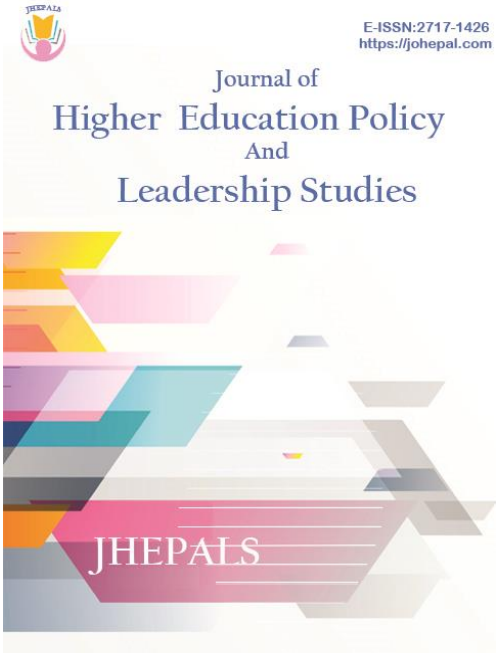
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Making Education Central to Politics in the Age of Pandemics

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"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world".

Nelson Mandela

Henry A. Giroux *

In an age when education becomes nothing more than a training center for global capital, defined by modes of governance modeled after a business culture, both public and higher education run the risk of defaulting on their role as a democratic public sphere, dedicated to creating informed and engaged critical citizens. In an age marked by the withering of civic culture, the erosion of any sense of shared citizenship, and the emergence of a culture of immediacy and self-absorption, intellectuals, artists, educators, and other cultural workers withdraw or are pressured to look away or give up their responsibility to use education to address grave social problems such as the threat of nuclear war, ecological devastation, and the sharp deterioration of democracy. At the level of public education, schools are defunded, teachers lose control over the conditions of their labor, and unions are relentlessly undermined in the ability to work for the rights of teachers and students. At the level of higher education, neoliberal modes of governance have turned higher education into an adjunct of corporate logic and in doing so view students as consumers, faculty as a pool of casual labor, and knowledge as a commodity. Gone is the age of the academic as a public intellectual whose academic work and public interventions were a model for enriching public life and addressing staggering forms of economic inequality, needless wars, and class and racial injustices.

Gone are the diverse teachers and academics who worked tirelessly to inspire individuals and social movements to unleash the energy, insights, and passion necessary to keep alive the spirit, promises, and ideals of a radical democracy. It almost seems quaint to talk about an age when educators as Khalid Lyamlahy argues produced research that focused on "silent questions and neglected connections," produced a language that generated a "more active affinity between people," and engaged in pedagogical practices and cultural work that highlighted a politics that refused "to divorce itself from social institutions and material relations of power and domination."[i] No longer taking on the role of border crossers, too many academics are reduced to short term

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contracts and temporary work that both undermines academic freedom and reduces them to part time clerks trying to survive. This is an especially difficult time for educators, many of whom have pushed back against the utter degradation of teaching and learning that has gone on with full force since the 1980s in the United States. Educators need a new language, vision, politics, and renewed sense of solidarity.

They need to bring truth out of shadows and create a space for critical thought and civic action, while pushing at the frontiers of the social imagination. Most of all they need to acknowledge and fight for the centrality of education in shaping modes of agency, identity, values, social relations, and visions of the future. It may be too much to ask, but can those of us in various pedagogical spaces, sites, and terrains in which knowledge is produced and the future is re-imagined contribute to inventing a politics that gives meaning to the promises and ideals of a radical democracy. Can we invent a politics capable of both operating and challenging a society defined by the scourge of market values and the growing registers of a fascist politics? Toni Morrison was right in observing that the work of teachers, public intellectuals, and other cultural workers "is more indispensable then ever before because the world is more dangerous than ever before."[i] In what follows, I want to explore such work by examining education, pedagogy, and teaching and learning in the broadest terms and in relationship to the multiple sites in which it takes place.

Across the globe, democratic institutions such as the independent media, schools, the legal system, certain financial institutions, and higher education are under siege. Education has increasingly become a tool of domination as right-wing pedagogical apparatuses controlled by the entrepreneurs of hate attack workers, the poor, people of color, refugees, immigrants from the south and others considered disposable. In the midst of an era when an older social order is crumbling and a new one is struggling to define itself, there emerges a time of confusion, danger, and moments of great restlessness. The present moment is once again at a historical juncture in which the forces of democracy and authoritarianism are vying for shaping a future that appears to be either an unthinkable nightmare or a realizable dream.

The architects of a new breed of fascist politics increasingly dominate major cultural apparatuses and other commanding political and economic institutions across the globe. Their nightmarish reign of misery, violence, and disposability is legitimated, in part, through their control of all sorts of knowledge producing settings that construct a vast machinery of manufactured consent. This reactionary educational formation includes the mainstream broadcast media, digital platforms, the Internet, and print culture, all of which participate in an ongoing spectacle of violence, the aestheticization of politics, the legitimation of opinions over facts, and an embrace of a culture of ignorance. In a system that generates human needs that it cannot satisfy, pedagogies of distraction and diversion begin to emerge which offer in the midst of massive misery and suffering the false promises of demagogues. As democratic institutions and political culture are undermined and hollowed out, emotional responses undermine reason, truth, and evidence. Rituals of emotional catharsis are organized through mass rallies of hate, social media relentless reproducing a culture of dehumanization, and educational institutions wedded to instrumental rationality and the accumulation of profits. The need for community is reduced to a cult like allegiance to the strongman and the emotive charge provided by conspiracy theories, lies, and paranoia. At this point education becomes the breeding ground in various cultural apparatuses for transforming "democratic citizens into totalitarian subjects."[i] [i] [i]

It is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for taking seriously the call to make education central to politics. The rule of authoritarianism is imposed less and less by military coups than it is

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through elections subverted by the force of oppressive forms of education that extend from the schools to the social media and other cultural apparatuses. The educational force of the cultural sphere is now amplified by the merging of power and new instruments of culture that have produced powerful sites of struggle in an effort to normalize and legitimate dominant ideas, values, and social relations. This can be illustrated not only by the unprecedented power of social media platforms such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, and other sites, but also by the way in which former President Donald Trump used the educational force of the social media to influence drastically the political culture of the United States as well as his further legitimating right-wing insurgencies across the globe. The domain of culture has never been as powerful as it is today.

Making education central to politics means addressing the cultural forces shaping policies and society so as to create a formative culture in the service of democratic modes of agency, desires, and identities. If education is going to work in the service of democracy, it needs a new vision and language in which the call for real change resonates with the concrete needs, desires, values, and modes of identification that working-class people of every stripe can understand and relate to critically.

If we are going to develop a politics capable of awakening our critical, imaginative, and historical sensibilities, it is crucial for educators and others to create a political project infused with a language of critique and possibility, informed by the crucial notion that there is no substantive democracy without informed citizens. Such a language is necessary to enable the conditions to forge a collective international resistance among educators, youth, artists, and other cultural workers in defense of not only public goods, but also a democracy with the guarantee of not only civil and political rights, but also economic rights that ensure both dignity and a meaningful sense of agency.[i] [v] In an age of social isolation, information overflow, a culture of immediacy, consumer glut, and growing right-wing populist movements, it is all the more crucial to take seriously the notion that a democracy cannot exist or be defended without informed and critically engaged citizens.

Education must be broadly understood as taking place in various locations and defined, in part, through its interrogation on the claims of democracy. As Ariel Dorfman argues, it is time to create the cultural institutions and pedagogical conditions in multiple sites extending from the mainstream press to the online digital world in order "to unleash the courage, energy, joy and, yes, compassion with which rebellious millions [can] defy fear and keep hope alive in these traumatic times."[v] As Pierre Bourdieu has argued, "important forms of domination are not only economic but also intellectual and pedagogical and lie on the side of belief and persuasion [making it all the more] important to recognize that intellectuals bear an enormous responsibility for challenging this form of domination,"[v] This is an especially crucial demand at a time when educational and pedagogical force of the culture works through and across multiple places. Schooling is only one site of education, while movies, television, books, magazines, the Internet, social media, and music are incredibly significant forces in shaping world views, modes of agency, and diverse forms of identification.

In a time when truth has become malleable and people are being told that the only obligation of citizenship is to consume, language has become thinner, and more individualistic, detached from history and more self-oriented, all the while undermining viable democratic social spheres as spaces where politics brings people together as collective agents willing to push at the frontiers of the political and moral imagination. Too many people across the globe have forgotten their civic lessons, and in doing so cede the ground of history to the purveyors of lies, militarism, and white supremacy. As educators and intellectuals, it is crucial to remember that there is no genuine democracy without the presence of citizens willing to hold power accountable, engage in forms of moral witnessing,

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break the continuity of common sense, and challenge the normalization of anti-democratic institutions, policies, ideas, and social relations. Critical pedagogy opens up the space of translation, critical reflection, and bridges the gap between learning and everyday life, the self and others, and between the private and the public. Not only is pedagogy about the possibility of interpretation but also about the act of intervention. Put differently, pedagogy should provide the conditions where individuals realize themselves as critically engaged and socially responsible citizens.

Making education central to politics suggests that as artists, researchers, and academics we ask uncomfortable questions about what Arundhati Roy calls "our values and traditions, our vision for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our 'democratic institutions,' the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary, and the intellectual community."[v] [i] [i]

In opposition to pedagogies aligned with fascist politics, education has the task of creating the conditions in which people develop a collective sense of urgency that prompts a desire to learn how to govern and rather than learn merely how to be governed. Education for empowerment means creating informed and critically engaged social movements willing to fight the emotional plagues, economic inequality, human misery, systemic racism, and collapse of the welfare state caused by neoliberal capitalism and other forms of authoritarianism. Democracy's survival depends upon a set of habits, values, ideas, culture, and institutions that can sustain it. Democracy is both precarious and always unfinished and its fate and future are not only a political issue but an educational one as well.

In the end, there is no democracy without an informed public and no justice without a language critical of injustice. Democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting pedagogy to the practice of freedom, learning to ethics, and agency to the imperatives of social responsibility and the public good. In the age of nascent fascism, it is not enough to connect education with the defense of reason, informed judgment, and critical agency; it must also be aligned with the power and potential of collective resistance. We live in dangerous times. Education cannot be reduced to the notion of methods, it must be associated with ideas that are connected to power, justice, and learning from history. Consequently, there is an urgent need for more individuals, institutions, and social movements to come together in the belief that the current regimes of tyranny can be resisted, that alternative futures are possible and that acting on these beliefs through collective resistance will make radical change happen.

Educators need to develop a politics infused with the notion that history is open, and that it is necessary for people to think otherwise to act otherwise, especially if we want to imagine and bring into being alternative democratic futures and horizons of possibility. At stake there is the need to develop a vision infused with a mix of justice, hope, and struggle, a task in the age of pandemics that has never been more important than it is today. Moreover, in the face of the emerging tyranny and fascist politics that are spreading across the globe, it is time to merge a sense of moral outrage with a sense of civic courage and collective action. At the very least, education is central to politics because it provides the foundation for those of us who believe that democracy is a site of struggle, which can only be engaged through an awareness of both its fragility and necessity. There is a need to rethink and relearn the role that critical education and civic literacy have and can play in producing a collective anti-capitalist consciousness. There is no democracy without an educated public and there is no educated public without the support and existence of institutions that define education as a public good and as a crucial public sphere. Educators, artists, intellectuals, and other cultural workers have a moral and political responsibility to put into place those pedagogical sites that enable the critical agents and social movements willing to refuse to equate capitalism and democracy and

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uphold the conviction that the problems of ecological destruction, mass poverty, militarism, systemic racism, and a host of other social problems cannot be solved by leaving capitalism in place. Education in its multiple sites and expressions must reclaim the role that pedagogy can play in developing the political capacities and civic literacies that make democracy possible and write the future in the language of justice, compassion, and the fundamental narratives of freedom and equality.

Professor Henry A. Giroux - an internationally renowned writer and cultural critic- has authored, or co-authored over 65 books, written several hundred scholarly articles, delivered more than 250 public lectures, been a regular contributor to print, television, and radio news media outlets, and is one of the most cited Canadian academics working in any area of Humanities research.

In 2002, he was named as one of the top fifty educational thinkers of the modern period in Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education: From Piaget to the Present as part of Routledge's Key Guides Publication Series. In the same year, he delivered the prestigious Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford University. In 2007, he was named by the Toronto Star as one of the "12 Canadians Changing the Way We Think." He has received honorary doctorates from Memorial University in Canada, Chapman University in California, and the University of the West of Scotland.

He is on the editorial and advisory boards of numerous national and international scholarly journals, and he has served as the editor or co-editor of four scholarly book series. He co-edited a series on education and cultural studies with Paulo Freire for a decade. He is on the Board of Directors for Truthout. His books have been translated into many languages and his work has appeared in the New York Times and many other prominent news media. He is interviewed regularly on a number of media.

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