

## What is the role of higher education in authoritarian times?

**Henry A. Giroux**  
McMaster University

---

This article is the text produced by Henry Giroux for a “Conversation” event held at the University of West of Scotland on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2017.

**Keywords:** *authoritarianism; democracy; higher education; truth; politics; illiteracy*

---

Donald 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 the erosion of any sense of shared citizenship. Galvanizing his base of true-believers in post-election demonstrations, 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-20<sup>th</sup> 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 critical 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, government has taken on the workings of a disimagination 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. 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.

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 easier for politics to dissolve into entertainment, pathology, and a unique brand of criminality. The corruption of both the truth and politics is abetted by the fact that 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 reason 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). Defunded and corporatized, many institutions of higher education have been all too willing to make the culture of business the business of education, and the transformation has corrupted their mission. As a result, many colleges and universities have been McDonalized as knowledge is increasingly viewed as a commodity resulting in curricula that resemble a fast-food menu (Beck, 2010). In addition, faculty are subjected increasingly to a Wal-Mart model of labour relations designed "to reduce labour costs and to increase labour servility" (Chomsky, 2015, p.1). Students fare no better and are now relegated to the status of customers and clients. On a larger scale, the educational force of the wider 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 removes 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 has become a scourge and a political tool designed primarily to make war on language, meaning, thinking, and the capacity for critical thought. Chris Hedges (2009) 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 idioms of mass culture." Words such as love, trust, freedom, responsibility, and choice have been deformed by a market logic that narrows their meaning to either a commercial relationship or to a reductive notion

of getting ahead. 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 unbridled self-interest.

This 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 wilful 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 pretence of a community bound by a wilful denial of facts and 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). Or, for that matter, the willingness of his followers to put up with his contemptuous and boisterous claim that science and evidence-based truths are fake news, his dismissal of journalists who hold power accountable as the opposition party, and his willingness to bombard the American public with an endless proliferation of peddled falsehoods that reveal his contempt for intellect, reason and truth. What are we to make of the fact that a person who holds the office of the presidency has praised Alex Jones publicly and thanked him for the role he played in his election victory? Jones is a conspiracy trafficker who runs the website Infowars and believes that Sept. 11 was an "inside job" and that the massacre of children at Sandy Hook was faked.

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 political weapon and form of political repression that works to render critical agency 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.

This mode of illiteracy 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 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 prevalence of such manufactured 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 producing informed citizens is less of a failing on the part of education, 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, 2005).

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 endlessly tweeting lies and misrepresentations? What happens to democracy when individuals and groups are demonized on the basis of their religion? What happens to a society when critical thinking and facts become objects of contempt and are disdained in favour of raw emotion or undermined by an appeal to what U.S. Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway calls “alternative facts”? 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 public that 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 urgent for educators and concerned citizens all over the world to protect and enlarge the formative cultures and public spheres that make democracy possible. The attack on the truth, honesty, and the ethical imagination, makes it all the more imperative for educators to think dangerously, especially in societies that appear increasingly amnesiac—that is, countries where forms of historical, political, and moral forgetting are not only wilfully practised 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 mode of authoritarianism that views critical thought as both a liability and a threat.

Not only is manufactured illiteracy 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 the U.S. 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 members of the public 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 critical culture that expands the social imagination and makes the practice of freedom operational. Thinking dangerously is the cornerstone of not 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.

Across the globe, the forces of free-market fundamentalism are using the educational forces of the wider culture that include diverse cultural apparatuses such as the mainstream media, alternative screen cultures, and the expanding digital platforms 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 health centres, and the judicial system, among others, all the while undercutting public faith in the defining institutions of democracy.

This grim reality has been called by Honneth (2009) 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 (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 question of what education should accomplish in a society at a historical moment when it is 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 in the United States and other countries are being defunded and students are being punished with huge tuition hikes and crippling finance debts, all the while being subjected to right-wing policies and 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, 2015).

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" (Olson and Worsham, 1999, p. 3). 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 educational policies and practices that not only inspire and motivate people but are also capable of challenging the growing number of anti-democratic 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—a reductive vision now being imposed on public education by high tech companies such as Facebook, Netflix, and Google who want to encourage what they call the entrepreneurial mission of education, which is code for collapsing education into training (Singer, 2017).

Central here is a notion of pedagogy that should provide the conditions for students to recognize how to use the knowledge they gain both to critique the world in which they live and, when necessary, to intervene in socially responsible ways in order to change it. Critical pedagogy is about more than a struggle over assigned meanings, official knowledge, and established modes of authority: it is also about encouraging students to take risks, act on their sense of social responsibility, and engage the world as an object of both critical analysis and hopeful transformation. In this paradigm, pedagogy cannot be reduced only to learning critical skills or theoretical traditions but must also be infused with the possibility of using interpretation as a mode of intervention, as a potentially energizing practice that gets students to both think and act differently.

I think that JM Coutzee, the Nobel Prize winner, 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).

What is lost in this instrumentalized view is that students are not just workers but also citizens, and education is about more than training. Learning skills for the work place is no excuse for purging from education what it means to teach students how to think critically, embrace the common good, exercise a sense of social responsibility and support a world of values, feelings, and the ethical and political foundation necessary for a democratic society (Bauman and Donskis, 2013, p. 196). Yes, we must educate young people with the skills they need to get jobs but as educators we must also teach them to learn “to live with less or no misery [and ] to fight against those social sources” that cause war, destruction of the environment, “inequality, unhappiness, and needless human suffering” (Bauman, 2001, p. 215).

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 viewed as spheres of struggle that need to be removed from the control of the financial elite and monopolistic corporations that use them as workstations for propagandizing a culture of vulgarity, self-absorption, and commodification while eroding any sense of shared citizenship and civic culture.

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 weaponize and trivialize the discourse, vocabularies, images, and aural means of communication in a variety of education and cultural sites. And also to grasp that a market-driven discourse does not provide the intellectual, ethical, and political tools for civic education (Brenkman, 1995). How is such language used to relegate citizenship to the singular pursuit of unbridled 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, while using the vocabulary of war, militarization, and violence to address 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 also increasingly in other countries such as the United Kingdom, Hungary, and Turkey. 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 critical and 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 corporate interests and market driven values, all the while deadening the capacity to think otherwise in order to act otherwise.

One of the fundamental challenges facing educators within the current age of an emerging authoritarianism worldwide is to create safe educational spaces for students to address “how knowledge is related to the power of self-definition” and social agency (Mohanty, 1989 p.192). 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. Moreover, such an education does not offer guarantees as much as it recognizes that its own visions, policies, and practices 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.

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 embrace a culture of questioning, dialogue, and an ongoing 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).

When viewed as an important democratic public sphere, education can provide opportunities for educators, students, and others to redefine and transform the connections among language, desire, meaning, everyday life, and the material relations of power as part of a broader social movement to reclaim the promise and possibilities of an open society.

In an age when authoritarianism is spreading across the globe, it should come as no surprise that many governments consider any notion of critical education dangerous because it creates the conditions for students and the wider public to exercise their intellectual capacities, cultivate 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 to translate their hidden despair and private grievances into public transcripts. At best such transcripts can be transformed into forms of public dissent or what might be called “a moment of ‘rupture’” one that has important implications for public action in a time of impending tyranny and authoritarianism (Falk, 2011). In taking up this project, educators and others should attempt to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and courage necessary to make desolation and cynicism unconvincing and hope practical.

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 in many societies, and is most evident in the discourse Donald Trump and his merry band of anti-intellectuals and white nationalists. Civic illiteracy collapses the distinction between opinion and informed arguments, erases collective memory, and becomes complicit with the growing criminalization of a range of behaviours and the increasing militarization of places such as public schools and society itself.

Yet, all across the globe, there are signs of hope. 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 brave 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 war is being widely discussed. In the age of financial and political zombies, finance 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 welfare institution for punishing minorities of race and class, produced massive inequities in wealth, income, and power, 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 go back to a central concern of this talk by raising the question of how as educators we begin a meaningful conversation about how to redefine and

reclaim the mission of colleges and universities as democratic public spheres? In doing so, I want to address in general terms the importance of what I have called the need for a new language of governance accompanied by reclaiming of the discourse of civic courage and the ethical imagination, all of which I believe are central to any viable notion of change that I am suggesting.

Regarding the politics of governance, 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 the a market fundamentalism called neoliberalism, which is an economic system that argues that market principles should govern not just the economy but all of social life including education. This is an ideology that has produced cruel austerity policies, defunded public goods, and created what amounts to a culture of cruelty. 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 accountability and evaluation, and the narrow and harmful view that 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 but less so in Canada.

Regarding the discourse of civic courage and the ethical imagination, 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. These should be spaces in which education focuses on “dispositions and qualities, on human flourishing, and on the fulfilment of individual potential” (Nixon, 2015). Education in the more critical sense aims to overcome the moral blindness and undermining of the social and ethical imagination that accompanies those deadening repressive pedagogies rooted in utterly instrumental approaches to teaching and learning. These are educational zones that accelerate the deadening of the mind, social responsibility, and the ability to imagine a future different from the present.

There is also the need for providing faculty not only with time and resources necessary for critical teaching and meaningful scholarship but also 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 a few initiatives, though incomplete, that might mount a challenge to the current oppressive historical moment in which many societies and their respective colleges and universities now find themselves (Aronowitz, 2014). First, there is a need for what can be called a revival of the social imagination and the defence of the public good in order to reclaim higher education’s 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, 2014). 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 deliberative inquiry, dialogue, 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 might hopefully provide the platform for moving onto the larger issue of developing a social movement in defence 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 creating an informed citizenry. Pedagogically, this points to modes of teaching and learning willing to sustain a culture of questioning, and enable pedagogical practices through what Kristen Case calls moments of classroom grace (Case, 2014). Pedagogies of classroom grace point to the conditions for students and others to interrogate 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, a surveillance state, and a range of other problems. 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.

These are not merely a methodical considerations but also moral and political practices because they presuppose the creation of 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 extends the meaning of learning 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 in which only corporate CEOs are hired as university presidents; it undermines its democratic mission of the university when tenure-line faculty are filled with contract labour, students are treated as customers and learning is increasingly defined in instrumental terms removed from community needs. In the U.S. over 70 percent of faculty occupy non-tenured and part-time positions, many without benefits and salaries so low

that they qualify for food stamps. It gets worse. In some parts of the United States, adjunct faculty are now hired through temp agencies. Faculty need more security, full-time positions, autonomy, and the support needed to function as professionals. While not all countries emulate this model of faculty servility, it is part of a neoliberal legacy that has increasingly gained 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 electronic cultures. 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 expanding the parameters of literacy and educating students to develop skills necessary for them to both produce and work in 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 accomplished 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. As I mentioned earlier, what is often lost by many educators and progressives is that 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 (2008) 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” (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. This means young people should have more influence in the shaping of their education and what it means to expand and deepen the practice of freedom and democracy. Put simply, educators need to be attentive to their histories, needs, aspirations, and hopes. At the very least, if higher education is to be taken seriously as a public good, it should be tuition free, at least for the poor, and affordable for the affluent. This is not a radical demand and is not unprecedented as countries such as Germany, France, 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 “spectre 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.

Moreover, 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. 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 educated hope. Informed and educated hope goes beyond critique extending it into the realm of the possible. Critique is important for breaking through the hold of commonsense assumptions that legitimate a wide range of injustices. It is also crucial for making visible the workings of unequal power and the necessity of holding authority accountable. But critique is not enough and lacking a discourse of hope can lead to a paralyzing sense of despair or, even worse, a crippling cynicism. Hope speaks to imagining a life beyond commodities, profits, and branding, 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 and realistic 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.

## REFERENCES

- Aronowitz, S. (2008) *Against Schooling*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Aronowitz, S. (2014) What kind of left does America need? *Tikkun*, 29(2), 46-49.
- Aschoff, N. (2015) The smartphone society. *Jacobin Magazine*, 17, from <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/smartphone-usage-technology-aschoff/> [Accessed: 07 April 2017].
- Bauman, Z. (2001) *Liquid Modernity*. London: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. and Donskis, L. (2013) *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*. London: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. (2010) *Twenty Observations on a World in Turmoil*. London: Polity Press.
- Benjamin, A., (1997) *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism*. New York: Routledge.
- Brenkman, J. (1995) Raymond Williams and Marxism. In C. Prendergast. (ed.). *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 237-267.
- Case, K. (2014) The Other Public Humanities, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. From <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Ahas-Ahead/143867> [Accessed: 09 June 2017].
- Chomsky, N. (2015) The Death of American Universities, *Reader Supported News*. From <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/29348-the-death-of-american-universities> [Accessed: 18 March 2017].
- Coetzee, J.M. (2013) Universities head for extinction, *Mail & Guardian*. From <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-11-01-universities-head-for-extinction> [Accessed: 11 May 2017].
- de Zengotita, T. (2005) *Mediated: How the media shapes your world and the way you live in it*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Eagleton, T. (2000) *The Idea of Culture*. Malden, MA: Basil Blackwell.
- Ellingboe, K. and Koronowski, R. (2016) Most Americans disagree with their congressional representative on climate change, *ThinkProgress*. From <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2016/03/08/3757435/climate-denier-caucus-114th-new-research/> [Accessed: 06 March 2017].
- Evans, B. and Giroux, H.A. (2016) *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers.
- Falk, B. (2011) Between Past and Future, *Eurozine*, from <http://www.eurozine.com/between-past-and-future/> [Accessed: 18 May 2017].
- Furedi, F. (2006) *Culture of fear revisited*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Giroux, H. (2015) *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Education*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Gopnik, A. (2017) Orwell's "1984" and Trump's America. *The New Yorker*. From <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/orwells-1984-and-trumps-america> [Accessed: 26 February 2017].
- Hedges, C. (2009) The War on Language. *TruthDig*. From [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20090928\\_the\\_war\\_on\\_language/](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20090928_the_war_on_language/) [Accessed: 25 March 2017].
- Hill, R. (2016) Against the Neoliberal University, *Arena Magazine*, 140, 12-14.
- Honneth, A., (2009) *Pathologies of reason*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McChesney, R.W. (2015) *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. New York: Free Press.
- Mohanty, C.T. (1989) On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal education in the 1990s, *Cultural Critique*, (14), pp.179-208.
- Ness, I. (2016) *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class*. London: Pluto Press.
- Nichol, G.R., 2008. Public universities at risk abandoning their mission, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(10). From <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i30/30a02302.htm> [Accessed: 03 June 2017].
- Nixon, J. 2015. Hannah Arendt: Thinking Versus Evil. *Times Higher Education*. From <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/hannah-arendt-thinking-versus-evil/2018664.article?page=0%2C0> [Accessed: 27 April 2017].
- Olson, G.A. and Worsham, L. (1998) Staging the politics of difference: Homi Bhabha's critical literacy, *JAC*, 18(3), 3-35.
- Ravitch, D. (2014) *Reign of Error*. New York: Knopf.
- Robbins, B. (2016) A Starting Point for Politics. *The Nation*. From <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-radical-life-of-stuart-hall/> [Accessed: 19 June 2017].
- Saltman, K.J. (2016) *Scripted Bodies: Corporate Power, Smart Technologies, and the Undoing of Public Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Singer, N. 2017. The Silicon Valley Billionaires Remaking America's Schools, *New York Times*. From [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/technology/tech-billionaires-education-zuckerberg-facebook-hastings.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/technology/tech-billionaires-education-zuckerberg-facebook-hastings.html?_r=0) [Accessed: 06 June 2017].
- Stuart, T. 2016. Watch Trump Brag About Uneducated Voters, 'The Hispanics'. *Rolling Stone*. From <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/watch-trump-brag-about-uneducated-voters-the-hispanics-20160224> [Accessed: 23 April 2017].