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ARTICLE

Education and the Crisis of Democracy: Confronting Authoritarianism in a post-9/11 America

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This article was written at a very dire time in American history. Motivated by both a sense of outrage and hope, it attempted to identify a number of dangerous threats to democracy at home and abroad as well as to offer a productive series of analyses of how to stop their poisonous effects on all aspects of public and private life. What was not clear to me at the time was the extent to which the horrific acts of September 11, 2001, would be used as a pretext to reinforce not simply the political and economic power of a number of hard-wired ideologues among a conservative, corporate and religious elite, but also to usher in an imperial presidency and administration that shredded civil liberties, lied to the American public to legitimate sending young American troops to Iraq, alienated most of the international community with a blatant exercise of arrogant power, tarnished the highest offices of government with unsavory corporate alliances, used political power to unabashedly pursue legislative policies that favor the rich and punish the poor, and disabled those public spheres not governed by the logic of the market.

What has become clear since 2003, when *The Abandoned Generation* first appeared, is that a silent war is being waged against people of color who are being incarcerated at alarming rates. Academic freedom is increasingly under attack, attacking immigrants has become the poster-ideology of the Republican Party, and a full-fledged assault on women's reproductive rights is being championed by Bush's evangelical supporters. While people of color, the poor, youth, the middle class, the elderly, gays, and women are being attacked, the current administration, even as it has lost the support of the American people, are relentless in supporting a campaign to collapse the boundaries between the church and state, deny poor children adequate health care, and promote those corporate and privatized interests that undermine the quality of public education. Under the pretext of waging a war on terrorism, the Bush administration has mimicked the very enemy it was attempting to contain. The U.S. government now kidnaps alleged terrorists and flies them to other countries willing to torture them, it incarcerates people in secret CIA run prisons called black sites, it has abolished habeas corpus as a result of the Military Commission Act of 2006, argues for indefinite detention, and not only defends torture but implements it, as was revealed in the images and tapes that have and continue to emerge in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal.

The Abandoned Generation suggested that the crisis that young people were facing in the United States could only be understood as part of the broader crisis in democracy itself. I think it is fair to argue that we are currently in the grip of such a crisis as a number of powerful anti-democratic tendencies now threaten to empty American democracy of any substance. As an introduction to my article, I want to enumerate on some of the major anti-democratic tendencies or fundamentalisms now threatening American democracy. The first is a market fundamentalism that not only trivializes democratic values and public concerns, but also enshrines a rabid individualism, an all-embracing quest for profits, and a social Darwinism in which misfortune is seen as a weakness and the Hobbesian rule of a "war of all against all" replaces any vestige of shared responsibilities or compassion for others. Within neoliberal ideology, the market becomes the template for organizing the rest of society. Everybody is now a customer or client, and every relationship is ultimately judged in bottom-line, cost-effective terms. Similarly, as Paul Krugman points out, "The hijacking of public policy by private interests" parallels "the downward spiral in governance."^[1] With the rise of market fundamentalism, economics is accorded more respect than politics; the citizen has been reduced to a consumer; and the buying and selling of goods is all that seems to matter. Even children are now targeted as a constituency from

which to make money, reduced to commodities, sexualized in endless advertisements, and shamelessly treated as a market for huge profits. Market fundamentalism not only makes time a burden for those without health insurance, child care, a decent job, and adequate social services, it also commercializes and privatizes public space, undermining not only the idea of citizenship, but also the spaces needed to make it a vigorous and engaged force for a substantive democracy. Under such circumstances with its ever-expanding culture of cruelty, deprivation, and punishment, hope is foreclosed, and it becomes difficult either to imagine a life beyond capitalism or to believe in a politics that takes democracy seriously.

The second assault on American democracy can be seen in a religious fervor embraced by Bush and his cohorts that not only serves up Creationism instead of science, but substitutes blind faith for critical reason and intolerance for a concern and openness to others.^[2] This is a deeply disturbing trend in which the line between the state and religion is being erased as radical Christian evangelicals embrace and impose a moralism on Americans that is largely bigoted, patriarchal, uncritical, and insensitive to real social problems such as poverty, racism, the crisis in healthcare, and the increasing impoverishment of America's children. Instead of addressing these problems, a flock of dangerous evangelicals who have enormous political clout are waging a campaign to ban same-sex marriages, privatize social security, eliminate embryonic stem cell research, and overturn *Roe v. Wade* and other abortion rights cases. Rampant anti-intellectualism coupled with a rigid moralism now boldly translate into everyday cultural practices and political policies, as right-wing evangelicals live out their messianic view of the world. For instance, more and more conservative pharmacists are refusing to fill prescriptions for religious reasons. Mixing medicine, politics, and religion means that some women are being denied birth control pills, or any other product designed to prevent conception. Bush's much exalted religious fundamentalism does more than promote a disdain for critical thought and reinforce retrograde forms of homophobia and patriarchy; it also inspires a wave of criticism and censorship against all but the most sanitized facets of popular culture, including children's cartoon shows that either allegedly portray lesbian families positively or offer up homoerotic representations attributed to the animated cartoon character Spongebob SquarePants.^[3] All of the 2008 Republican presidential candidates not only talked as if the line between religion and politics has entirely collapsed but defined their politics largely through their appeal to Christianity. John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate, eagerly, if not shamelessly courts endorsements from some of the most bigoted, powerful, and right-wing Christian evangelicals in the United States. Kevin Phillips has argued that under the Bush administration, the Republican Party emerged as "America's first religious party," while Chris Hedges insists that the Christian extremists that are aligned with the Bush administration constitute a homegrown form of fascism and represent a growing and increasing threat to both the ideal and practice of democracy.^[4] What has become clear in the last seven years is that the Bush administration's attempt to undo the separation between church and state is driven by a form of fundamentalism and animated by a biblical ideology that both discredits democratic values, public goods, and critical citizenship and spawns an irrationality evident in the innumerable contradictions among its rhetoric of "compassionate conservatism," its religious commitments, and its relentless grab for economic and political power—an irrationality that is the hallmark of both the old fascism and the new authoritarianism.

The third antidemocratic dogma is visible in the relentless attempt on the part of the Bush administration to destroy critical education as a foundation for an engaged citizenry and a vibrant democracy. The attack on all levels of education is evident not only in the attempts to corporatize and militarize education, standardize curricula, denude public schooling of any critical substance, and use the language of business as a model for governance, but also in the ongoing effort to weaken the power of faculty, turn full-time jobs into contractual labor, and hand over those larger educational forces in the culture to a small group of corporate interests. Schooling is increasingly reduced to training, and

educators are now viewed as either technicians, depoliticized professionals, grant writers, or potential recruits for the national (in)security state.

At the same time as democracy is removed from the purpose and meaning of schooling, the dominant media engage in a form of public pedagogy that appears to legitimate dominant power rather than holding it accountable to the highest ethical and political standards. Under the sway of a rigid market discourse, the dominant media have deteriorated into a combination of commercialism, propaganda, and entertainment.^[5] In such circumstances, the media neither operate in the interests of the public good nor provide the pedagogical conditions necessary for producing critical citizens or defending a vibrant democracy. Instead, as Bob McChesney and John Nichols point out, concentrated media depoliticize the culture of politics, commercially carpet bomb citizens, and denigrate public life.^[6] Rather than perform an essential public service, they have become the primary tool for promoting a culture of consent and conformity in which citizens are misinformed and public discourse is debased. Media concentration restricts the range of views to which people have access and, in doing so, does a disservice to democracy itself.

As the critical power of education within various public spheres is reduced to the official discourse of compliance, conformity, and reverence, it becomes more difficult for the American public to engage in critical debates, translate private considerations into public concerns, and recognize the distortions and lies that underlie much of current government policies. How else to explain how Bush was reelected in 2004 in the face of flagrant lies about why the US invaded Iraq, the passing of tax reform policies that reward the ultra-rich at the expense of the middle and lower classes, and the pushing of a foreign policy platform that is largely equated with bullying by the rest of the world? What is one to make of Bush's winning popular support for his re-election in light of his record of letting millions of young people slide into poverty and hopelessness, his continued "assault on regulations designed to protect public health and the environment," and his promulgation of a culture of fear that is gutting the most cherished of American civil liberties?^[7] Fortunately, as the 2008 Presidential elections come into view, Bush's popularity is at an all time low, due primarily to the catastrophic economic, social, and political problems facing the country, coupled with a highly unpopular war in Iraq. In this instance, the right-wing propaganda machine has taken a back-seat to a reality that is difficult to distort or hide.

Finally, a fourth antidemocratic dogma that is shaping American life, and one of the most disturbing, is the ongoing militarization of public life. This is truly one of the gravest consequences of the post-9/11 world, one that was neither as evident nor as celebrated when I first wrote *The Abandoned Generation*. Americans are not only obsessed with military power, "it has become central to our national identity."^[8] How else to explain the fact that the United States has "725 official military bases outside the country and 969 at home"? Or that it "spends more on 'defense' than all the rest of the world put together . . . [T]his country is obsessed with war: rumors of war, images of war, 'preemptive' war, 'preventive' war, 'surgical' war, 'prophylactic' war, 'permanent' war. As President Bush explained at a news conference on April 13, 2004, 'This country must go on the offense and stay on the offense.'^[9] But as Cornel West also points out, such aggressive militarism is fashioned out of an ideology that not only supports a foreign policy based on "the cowboy mythology of the American frontier fantasy," but also affects domestic policy because it expands "police power, augments the prison-industrial complex, and legitimates unchecked male power (and violence) at home and in the workplace. It views crime as a monstrous enemy to crush (targeting poor people) rather than as an ugly behavior to change (by addressing the conditions that often encourage such behavior)."^[10]

The influence of militaristic values, social relations, and ideology now permeates American culture. For example, major universities aggressively court the military establishment for Defense Department grants, and, in doing so, become less open to either academic subjects or programs that encourage

rigorous debate, dialogue, and critical thinking. In fact, as higher education is pressured by both the Bush administration and its jingoistic supporters to serve the needs of the military-industrial complex, universities increasingly deepen their connections to the national security state in ways that are boldly celebrated. For example, Penn State University, the University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie-Mellon University, and a number of other universities have recently created the National Security Higher Education Advisory Board, charged with creating a link between major research universities and the FBI. The president of Penn State, Graham Spanier, has been appointed head of the board and claims, in a statement pregnant with irony, that the purpose of the board is “to foster outreach and to promote understanding between higher education and the nation’s national security, law enforcement and intelligence agencies....It will also assist in the development of research, degree programs, course work, internships, opportunities for graduates and consulting opportunities for faculty related to national security.”^[11] This reads like a page out of George Orwell’s novel *1984* and appears to counter every decent and democratic value that defines higher education as a democratic public sphere. Unfortunately, public schools are faring no better. Public schools not only have more military recruiters; they also have more military personnel teaching in the classrooms. In addition, schools now adopt the logic of “tough love” by implementing zero tolerance policies that effectively model urban public schools after prisons, just as students’ rights increasingly diminish under the onslaught of a military-style discipline. Students in many schools, especially those in poor urban areas, are routinely searched, frisked, subjected to involuntary drug tests, maced, and carted off to jail. The not-so-hidden curriculum here is that kids can’t be trusted; their actions need to be regulated preemptively; and their rights are not worth protecting. But children and schools are not the only victims of a growing militarization of American society. The civil rights of people of color and immigrants, especially Arabs and Muslims, are being violated, often resulting in either imprisonment, or deportation, or government harassment. Similarly, black and brown youth and adults are being incarcerated at record levels as prison construction outstrips the construction of schools, hospitals, and other life-preserving institutions.

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out, war has become the organizing principle of society, the foundation for politics and other social relations.^[12] Militarism has become a new public pedagogy, a form of biopolitics shaping all aspects of social life, and one of its consequences is a growing authoritarianism that encourages profit-hungry monopolies, the ideology of faith-based certainty, and the undermining of any vestige of critical education, dissent, and dialogue. Education either is severely narrowed and trivialized in the media or is converted into training and character reform in the schools. Within higher education, democracy appears as an excess, if not a pathology, as right-wing ideologues and corporate wannabe administrators increasingly police what faculty say, teach, and do in their courses. And it is going to get worse regardless of what political party comes to power in 2008.

Abstracted from the ideal of public commitment, the new authoritarianism represents a political and economic practice and form of militarism that loosens the connection among substantive democracy, critical agency, and critical education. In opposition to the rising tide of authoritarianism, educators must make a case for linking learning to social change, pluralizing and critically engaging the diverse sites where public pedagogy takes place, and must make clear that every sphere of social life is open to political contestation and comprises a crucial site of political, social, and cultural struggle in the attempt to forge the knowledge, identifications, affective investments, and social relations which constitute a political subject and social agent capable of energizing and spreading the basis of a global radical democracy. Educators need to develop a new discourse whose aim is to foster democratic politics and pedagogy that embody the legacy and principles of social justice, equality, freedom, and rights associated with the democratic concerns of history, space, plurality, power, discourse, identities, morality, and the future.

Under such circumstances, pedagogy must be embraced as a moral and political practice, one that is both directive and the outgrowth of struggles designed to resist the increasing depoliticization of political culture that is the hallmark of the current Bush revolution. Education is the terrain where consciousness is shaped; needs are constructed; and the capacity for self-reflection and social change is nurtured and produced. Education has assumed an unparalleled significance in shaping the language, values, and ideologies which legitimate the structures and organizations that support the imperatives of global capitalism. Rather than being simply a technique or methodology, education has become a crucial site for the production and struggle over those pedagogical and political conditions that offer up the possibilities for people to believe it is possible to develop forms of agency that enable them individually and collectively to intervene into the processes through which the material relations of power shape the meaning and practices of their everyday lives. Within the current historical context, struggles over power take on a symbolic and discursive as well as a material and institutional form. The struggle over education is about more than the struggle over meaning and identity; it is also about how meaning, knowledge, and values are produced, legitimated, and operate within economic and structural relations of power. Education is not at odds with politics; it is an important and crucial element in any definition of the notion of the political and offers not only the theoretical tools for a systemic critique of authoritarianism, but also a language of possibility for creating actual movements for democratic social change. At stake here is combining an interest in symbolic forms and processes conducive to democratization with broader social contexts and the institutional formations of power itself. The key point here is to understand and engage educational and pedagogical practices from the point of view of how they are bound up with larger relations of power. Educators, students, and parents need to be clearer about how power works through and in texts, representations, and discourses while at the same time recognizing that power cannot be limited to the study of representations and discourses. Changing consciousness is not the same as altering the institutional basis of oppression, but at the same time institutional reform cannot take place without a change in consciousness capable of recognizing the very need for such reform or the need to reinvent the conditions and practices that make it possible. In addition, it is crucial to raise questions about the relationship between pedagogy and civic culture, on the one hand, and what it takes for individuals and social groups to believe that they have any responsibility whatsoever to even address the realities of class, race, gender, and other specific forms of domination, on the other. For too long, educators, progressives, and other concerned citizens have ignored that the issue of politics as an ideal and set of strategies is inextricably connected to the issue of critical education and to what it means to acknowledge that education is always tangled up with power, ideologies, values, and the acquisition of both particular forms of agency and specific visions of the future.

Finally, I want to return to the question of youth: Youth signifies in all of its diversity the possibilities and the fears adults must face when they re-imagine the future while shaping the present. To the degree that large segments of youth are excluded from the language, rights, and obligations of democracy indicates the degree to which many adults have abandoned the language, practice, and responsibilities of critical citizenship and civic responsibility. This is a lesson that cannot be ignored in light of the endless number of tragedies youth face daily in this country, including lack of food, decent schools, health insurance, and a positive sense of the future. There can be little doubt that American society is failing its children. The crisis of youth represents the crisis of democracy writ large. Educators need to focus attention on this crisis and work with others to address the complex issues that define and the resources and strategies needed to address it. We need to approach educational reform as a question of political and moral leadership and not simply as an issue of management. As engaged educators, we need to honor the lives of children by asking important questions such as what schools should accomplish in a democracy and why they fail, and how can such a failure be understood within a broader set of political, economic, spiritual, and cultural relations. Educators need to remind ourselves in this time of emerging authoritarianism that militarism and consumerism should not be the only forms of citizenship offered to our children, and that schools should function to serve the public good

and provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to struggle for a future in which they can glimpse the promise of a real democracy.

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