

Reclaiming culture and pedagogy in the fight against fascism

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Abstract – This text analyzes the contemporary crisis of democracy, arguing that it is no longer toppled by overt military coups but eroded from within through cultural and pedagogical mechanisms. It highlights how fascism today operates through digital technologies, social media, and cultural symbols that normalize cruelty, exclusion, and historical erasure. Culture is depicted not merely as a reflection of society but as an active battlefield where power shapes identities, desires, and common sense. Drawing on thinkers such as Gramsci, Hall, Adorno, and Mujica, the text emphasizes the vital role of culture and education as sites of both domination and resistance. The author critiques left-wing policy for underestimating the cultural dimension of political struggle, warning that without a cultural revolution grounded in solidarity, care, and critical pedagogy, democracy and civic conscience will be lost. The Trump era is portrayed as a manifestation of resurgent fascism marked by cruelty, corruption, and state terrorism, with culture deployed as a “disimagination machine” that sustains authoritarianism. The text concludes with a call to center culture and education in progressive politics, envisioning a transformative cultural politics capable of combating fascism and renewing democratic hope.

Keywords: Culture. Democracy. Fascism. Pedagogy. Resistance.

Reivindicando a cultura e a pedagogia na luta contra o fascismo

Resumo – O texto analisa a crise contemporânea da democracia, argumentando que ela não é mais derrubada por golpes militares explícitos, mas corroída internamente por meio de mecanismos culturais e pedagógicos. Destaca como o fascismo hoje opera por meio de tecnologias digitais, redes sociais e símbolos culturais que normalizam a crueldade, a exclusão e o apagamento histórico. A cultura é apresentada não apenas como um reflexo da sociedade, mas como um campo de batalha ativo onde o poder molda identidades, desejos e o senso comum. Baseando-se em pensadores como Gramsci, Hall, Adorno e Mujica, o texto enfatiza o papel vital da cultura e da educação como espaços tanto de dominação quanto de resistência. O autor critica a esquerda por subestimar a dimensão cultural da luta política, alertando que, sem uma revolução cultural fundamentada na solidariedade, no cuidado e na pedagogia crítica, a democracia e a consciência cívica estarão perdidas. A era Trump é retratada como uma manifestação do fascismo ressurgente, marcada pela crueldade, corrupção e terrorismo de Estado, com a cultura utilizada como uma “máquina de desimaginação” que sustenta o autoritarismo. O texto conclui com um chamado para colocar a cultura e a educação no centro da política progressista, vislumbrando uma política cultural transformadora capaz de combater o fascismo e renovar a esperança democrática.

Palavras-chave: Cultura. Democracia. Fascismo. Pedagogia. Resistência.

Reivindicando la cultura y la pedagogía en la lucha contra el fascismo

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Resumen – Este texto analiza la crisis contemporánea de la democracia, argumentando que ya no es derrocada por golpes militares explícitos, sino que se va corroyendo desde dentro mediante mecanismos culturales y pedagógicos. Destaca cómo el fascismo actual opera a través de tecnologías digitales, redes sociales y símbolos culturales que normalizan la crueldad, la exclusión y el borrado histórico. La cultura se presenta no solo como un reflejo de la sociedad, sino como un campo de batalla activo donde el poder moldea identidades, deseos y el sentido común. Basándose en pensadores como Gramsci, Hall, Adorno y Mujica, el texto enfatiza el papel fundamental de la cultura y la educación como espacios tanto de dominación como de resistencia. El autor critica a la izquierda por subestimar la dimensión cultural de la lucha política, advirtiendo que, sin una revolución cultural sustentada en la solidaridad, el cuidado y la pedagogía crítica, la democracia y la conciencia cívica están destinadas a perderse. La era Trump se retrata como una manifestación del fascismo resurgente, caracterizada por la crueldad, la corrupción y el terrorismo de Estado, donde la cultura es utilizada como una “máquina de desimaginación” que sostiene el autoritarismo. El texto concluye con un llamado a situar la cultura y la educación en el centro de la política progresista, vislumbrando una política cultural transformadora capaz de combatir el fascismo y renovar la esperanza democrática.

Palabras clave: Cultura. Democracia. Fascismo. Pedagogía. Resistencia.

We no longer live in an era where democracy is shattered by the blunt force of military coups; instead, it is hollowed out from within, undermined by the ghosts of past tyrannies reanimated through symbols, digital technologies, and the ever-churning machinery of social media. Today, power speaks in the seductive language of images laced with bigotry, seeded with cruelty, and driven by the logics of exclusion and ethnic cleansing. Culture is no longer merely a reflection of the past; it has become its erasure. It functions as pedagogy—through what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay names as “imperial technologies,” and what I have called “disimagination machines.” Both of which are designed to strip the colonized not only of their futures but of their histories, their very presence in the world. In this age of resurgent fascisms, we see its devastating effects in the genocidal assault waged by Israel against the Palestinian people, and in the scorched-earth war on historical memory and civic belonging carried out by the Trump regime in the United States. Culture is no longer a backdrop to political struggle—it is its very stage, its arsenal, and its battleground. Culture as an educational force is no longer subordinate to relations of power, it is the very essence of politics.

Too many on the Left have long overlooked a fundamental truth: the real battle against gangster capitalism and its updated fascist versions is not merely over policies or economies, but over culture itself, over the values, desires, and everyday practices that shape how people see the world and their place within it. Historically, [some strands of Marxist and progressive thought](#) (Herring, 2007) have dismissed culture as secondary or irrelevant --a critique that [Judith Butler](#) (1998) powerfully challenged in her 1997 essay. She argued that the Left’s cultural focus was wrongly seen as abandoning the materialist core of Marxist politics, often accused of being “factionalizing, identitarian, and [narrowly] particularistic”.

While this critique has lost some of its potency, even today, [as the forces of fascism](#) (Giroux; Dimaggio, 2024) tighten their grip globally, prominent voices like [Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor](#) (2025) and [Alberto Toscano](#) (2023) fail to fully engage with the cultural and pedagogical terrain on which this crisis unfolds. This results in a dangerous absence, where calls for resistance become hollow, detached from the very forces shaping mass consciousness, identities, desires, and legitimizing authoritarianism. What seems to have been forgotten in this moment of crisis is that culture has become the front line where authoritarianism feeds on

manufactured ignorance, historical erasure, and the insidious normalization of cruelty, now passed off as common sense.

This is not just a tactical misstep--it is a fundamental error. As [Antonio Gramsci](#) (1971) warned, all politics is pedagogical, and every exercise of 'hegemony' is inherently an educational act. In a capitalist society, the power of education does more than repress critical thought and informed consciousness, it actively shapes and empowers. It creates subjects, molds emotions, and defines what we accept as common sense.

As [Theodor Adorno](#) (2001) argued, capitalism is not merely an economic system but a totalizing cultural force, shaping desire through the "culture industry"--reducing human experience to commodified clichés and reinforcing conformity through repetition and distraction. [Raymond Williams insisted that culture is both ordinary and political](#) (*apud* Wall, 2016), embedded in the everyday practices through which people live and make meaning. Like [Vaclav Havel](#) (1985), he believed that "the political is not independent of the cultural, but it follows it."

In this view, politics follows culture because the culture is the terrain in which politics establishes itself, the framework through which individuals are shaped, and the force that reproduces societies in ways that sustain distinct political systems. [Stuart Hall's](#) (1990) work is crucial here in illuminating how culture is the site where ideology takes root, where identities are formed, contested, and secured. He argued that everyday life could not be separated from politics as a matter of lived experience, and that culture could not be removed from "[the political and economic structures that constrained it](#)". This was particularly true for [his critique of neoliberalism](#) (Silk; Francombe-Webb; Andrews, 2015), which he viewed not only as an economic system but also as a pedagogical project. According to Hall, capitalism is not just enforced from above; it is lived, felt, and reproduced from below, woven into the most intimate structures of daily life, particularly given its notion that the market is the template for all social relations and embracing Margaret Thatcher's toxic claim that there is no such thing as society.

We are, in this Trumpian historical moment, suffocating under a dominant culture that functions as a powerful disimagination machine, shaping desires, identities, and common sense through a vast network of pedagogical sites, from social media and news platforms to advertising, entertainment, and relentless political spectacles. Education is no longer merely an institutional force; it has become the most decisive cultural arena where individual and collective consciousness is produced and contested. Hall understood this with prophetic clarity. For Hall, culture is never outside politics, it is the terrain on which political struggle is fought, particularly through the politics of identification.

Later in his life, he warned that the Left had failed to grasp the educative dimension of politics, the need to transform not just policies but the very framework through which people interpret the world and their place in it. In an interview with [The Guardian's Zoe Williams](#) (Williams, 2012), Hall put it bluntly: "The left is in trouble. It's not got any ideas, it's not got any independent analysis of its own, and therefore it's got no vision. It just takes the temperature: 'Whoa, that's no good, let's move to the right.' It has no sense of politics being educative, of politics changing the way people see things". For Hall, without this pedagogical imperative, the Left forfeits its ability to generate hope, build alliances, and forge new political subjectivities.

The promise of democracy is torn asunder. In the shadow of rising state terrorism, bodies are broken, abducted, and freedoms extinguished. Silence spreads like a fog. It blankets the cries of the young, [the starving children of Gaza](#) (United Nations, 2025), lives obliterated by bombs and buried by indifference; [entire families are killed by Israel in Gaza](#) (Amnesty International, 2023). The horror knows no borders, reproduced at [home as immigrant youth in the United States are torn from their families](#) (Taylor; Hesson; Cooke, 2025), thrust into a trauma so vast it swallows the future. Meanwhile, as [Peter Baker](#) (2025) notes in the *New York*

Times, the demagogue-in-chief revels in gifts from dictators, ranging from a luxury flying palace from Qatar to collecting “\$320 million in fees from a new cryptocurrency and shamelessly brokering “overseas real estate deals worth billions of dollars”. Trump displays his vast corruption while openly normalizing the widespread abuse of presidential power. How else to explain his “[opening an exclusive club in Washington called the Executive Branch \[while\] charging \\$500,000 apiece to join](#)”, all the while presiding over a regime that slashes “[funding for health care, food and education through some of the largest cuts in U.S. history, while even raising taxes on many low-income families \(UnidosUS, 2025, s/p\)](#)”.

This is a Trump-Musk-engineered culture of cruelty, ramped up to grotesque extremes, a form of state terrorism that [Bill Gates](#) (Wang, 2025) aptly describes as “killing the world’s poorest children”, both here and abroad. Beneath the surface, the agenda is clear: Trump’s budget, which he calls “one big, beautiful bill” is a deliberate weapon of mass inequality, ruthlessly crafted to fatten the coffers of the financial elite while punishing the most vulnerable. In addition, it has the “[potential to increase the federal deficit by up to \\$3.8 trillion over the next decade](#)”(Mascaro at. al., 2025). This monstrous budget, born from the twisted minds of Trump and his MAGA sycophants, is so brutal that [Paul Krugman](#) (2025) condemns it as a product of “sadistic zombies”, a horrifying manifestation of cruelty that reflects the regime’s moral decay. His anger is rightly focused on a budget that slashes taxes for the ultra-wealthy while funneling endless resources into instruments of state violence, all in the name of control, domination, and the obliteration of any semblance of social justice, both within our borders and beyond.

This is more than a policy crisis. It is a cultural catastrophe. Fascism today is not only wrapped in lawless decrees and armed repression. It is also cloaked in spectacles of cruelty and a language steeped in hate and terminal exclusion. Trump’s fervent advocates, Elon Musk and Steve Bannon, raise Nazi salutes, as though rehearsing for the dark future they are determined to summon. Stephen Miller channels Hitler’s rhetoric under the guise of patriotism, declaring that “America is for Americans and Americans only”. Trump resurrects the Confederacy, embracing its monuments, symbols, and genocidal logic. In their hands, the culture of fascism is not hidden. It is performed, televised, and normalized. The horror of fascist violence is back, though it is now draped in AI guided bombs, ethnic cleansing, and white supremacists basking in their project of racial cleansing while destroying every vestige of decency, human rights, and democracy.

What we are witnessing is the death not just of democracy but of [moral and civic conscience](#) itself (Giroux, 2025a). A collective numbness has settled in, a culture of forgetting, cruelty, and complicity, where silence speaks louder than resistance, enabling the violence to grow unchecked. In part, this is fueled by an anti-intellectualism and culture that embraces civic illiteracy, a culture of immediacy that banishes informed judgment, contemplation, and institutions that embrace critical thought as a foundation for creating critical citizens. We are not merely talking about the death of the imagination, but an attack on any institutions that provide what [Hannah Arendt](#) once called “thinking without a banister” (Miller, 2018).

At the heart of this decay lies a cultural ethos cultivated by capitalism for decades: to live is to consume, freedom is selfishness, personal responsibility eclipses systemic problems, and solidarity is weakness. Culture has become a site of struggle, now more intense than ever, amplified by new digital technologies, social media, podcasts, and a host of other pedagogical platforms. These platforms not only empower resistance but also amplify the forces of domination, shaping the contours of public discourse and ideological control. Society fragments further, social atomization rises, and the numbing routines of a consumer-driven spectacle are matched by what [Jonathan Crary](#) (2022) calls “vacant forms of attentiveness”. Corporate-controlled [cultural apparatuses](#) (Mills, 2018) now hold immense pedagogical and political power, reshaping the relationship between power, culture, and daily life. Everyday existence is

captive to new modes of socialization, a tsunami of fragmentation, and the dissolution of society, driven by the morally numbing routines of a punishing state and its ever-expanding criminalization of free speech and social problems. In such a climate, [the ideological mobilization of memory](#) (Berezin, 1997), agency, and desire becomes inseparable from the pedagogical construction of neoliberal public spaces and civic life, laying the foundation for an emerging authoritarianism.

Central to the emerging fascism in the United States is not merely the dissolution of community, public spaces, and the rise of state terrorism that fuels an unabashed embrace of white supremacy, though these are undeniably crucial. At its core, it is a culture where memory is disabled, critical thinking is scorned, and dissent is branded as treason, subject to harsh penalties imposed by a regime of terror--one that includes abductions, attacks on due process, an unprecedented assault on higher education, and a growing culture of corruption and lawlessness. Yet this is not to suggest that culture is simply absorbed into an all-encompassing system of domination, subjugated by the unchecked power of sociopathic billionaires and Vichy-like politicians.

On the contrary, culture has moved to the front lines of struggle, central to the effort to normalize gangster capitalism, erase institutions that promote democratic values, and create an army of loyal fascist subjects. The savage attacks by the Trump administration on [higher education](#) (Giroux, 2024), [public schools](#) (Hagopian, 2025), journalists, oppositional media, and dissident politicians demonstrate the fear of Trump and his enablers who recognize dangerous power of these institutions in potentially educating students and the wider public to hold power accountable, to engage in refusal, rather than in conformity, adaptation, and political resignation. At the same time, these attacks have eroded the responsibility of institutions like [Columbia University](#) (Khalidi, 2025) to stand against Trump's assault on academic freedom and free speech. In failing to resist, they become complicit in what [Chris Hedges](#) (2025) describes as 'capitulations and crackdowns on pro-Palestine activism,' resulting in the suspension, expulsion, and firing of students and professors protesting the genocide in Gaza.

In this context, as I recently stated in an interview on [Rabble](#) (Giroux; Budhu, 2025), critical education is the glue that stands as a bridge, connecting hope, justice, and the fight for a real, radical democracy. If we fail to recognize the centrality of education--both its power and its role, within and outside of schooling--the Left and progressives will be in serious trouble. But equally crucial is the need to rethink the power of culture as a site of both domination and empowerment, a site that holds profound pedagogical, economic, and political significance in the digital age. Cultural politics has a long legacy in Marxist thought, from Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall to Robin D.G. Kelley, from the Frankfurt School and the Situationists to the radical movements of the sixties and the Black Lives Matter movement today. It is time to reignite and propel this work forward, to shape it anew in the crucible of our present crisis and the urgency of this historical moment.

In this context, it is worth noting that José Mujica, the late former president of Uruguay, in one of his speeches, reprinted in [Jacobin](#), argued poignantly "that capitalism is not just property relations but a set of cultural values that the Left must confront with a culture of solidarity" (Mujica, 2025). He argued strongly that social change could not be reduced to changing capitalist economies and that "capitalism is a culture" with enormous power that must be understood, analyzed and resisted. The late cultural critic [Ellen Willis](#) (2000) adds to this insight by noting that at the core of cultural politics is the recognition "that the project of organizing a democratic political movement necessarily entails the hope that one's ideas and beliefs are not merely idiosyncratic but speak to vital human needs, interests, and desires, and therefore will be persuasive to many and ultimately most people."

Mujica's reflection on the limits of revolutionary strategy underscores the crucial role of culture in any transformative movement, emphasizing that without a profound shift in cultural

consciousness, systemic change remains unattainable. This insight directly ties into the larger thesis that fascism cannot be countered merely through political and economic reforms but requires a radical transformation of culture itself, a cultural shift that challenges the very values and ideologies that sustain authoritarianism. He makes clear that struggles over culture are not just about struggles over meaning and identity, but struggles over power, human freedom and equality.

Mujica's lament is our warning. My generation, he said, made the mistake of believing that revolution meant taking over the means of production. We thought we could change the system without changing the culture. But capitalism, he insisted, survives not through force alone, but through the everyday values it instills, values stronger than any army. You cannot build a new world with people shaped by the old one. "[You can't build a socialist building with bricklayers who are capitalists](#)" (Mujica, 2025), he warned, because their consciousness will reproduce the very system they seek to overthrow.

This insight could not be more relevant and urgent. If we are to resist the death cult of fascism, if we are to reclaim democracy not as a slogan but as a living, breathing ethos, we must begin with culture. Not the commodified culture of products and performances, but culture in its deepest sense: the web of values, relationships, and meanings that shape how we live and what we imagine possible. We need, in short, a cultural revolution rooted in a politics of solidarity, care, limits, and humility.

To be revolutionary today means more than redistributing wealth and changing economic structures, however necessary. It also means redefining what it means to live well. It means teaching each other to resist the seductions of greed and the numbness of cruelty. It means building new ways of being together, of listening, of imagining. As Mujica said, "[Poor is the one who needs a lot](#)" (Mujica, 2025). The Left must reclaim a culture of enough, of sufficiency rather than excess, of cooperation rather than conquest.

The challenge for left progressives and others is to produce an anti-capitalist culture that provides the modes of literacy, comprehensive analysis, historical consciousness, and vision to make clear and resist a long legacy of colonialism with its fantasies of displacement, dispossession, and extermination. One cannot be silent or ignore a cultural politics in which Trump calls for a policy that amounts [to the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from northern Gaza](#) (Johnson, 2024).

As [I have said elsewhere](#) (Giroux, 2025b), "drunk on the bloodlust of empire", Trump wraps himself in the degrading fantasies of conquest. Too power-mad to comprehend his own moral vacuity, cruelty, and white supremacist delusions, Trump has proposed that "[the United States take over Gaza and that all Palestinians there ... leave](#)", as if occupation were salvation, as if two million lives could be erased with the stroke of a pen" (ABC News, 2024) This is a familiar madness, an ancient horror that becomes normalized in a culture soaked in blood, greed, and historical amnesia. Under Trump, colonialism's echo is now a roar.

This is not policy, it is cultural imperialism draped in empire, a death wish spoken aloud, a nightmare clawing its way into daylight. The rigor mortis of ethical and political decay, born from colonial and imperial fantasies, is made even more visible by Trump's call to annex Canada, Panama, and Greenland. Intoxicated with power, this resurgent view of globalization is fashioned on a toxic mix of greed, fear, delusions of grandeur, and cruelty. This is cultural politics in the service of death, a form of politics that not only perpetuates violence but also reshapes society in its own image, normalizing annihilation and dispossession as acceptable byproducts of imperial ambition.

There is no future without a cultural shift away from gangster capitalism. Without it, the Left risks fading into a mere ghost, clinging to slogans while the world burns, as the politics of extermination, displacement, and ethnic cleansing rage on. The horrors of the past are back, but so too must be our memory, our imagination, and our courage to begin again—not as mourners

of a failed nostalgia, but as creators of a new, insurgent radical democratic culture. A culture that remembers the children, hears the silences, and refuses to let the future be stolen without a fight. The fight against fascism demands a new language, one that integrates materialist and cultural concerns, where the critique of structural domination is inseparable from cultural and educational struggles. This language must reshape how we think about power, justice, and agency, emphasizing the need for a critical pedagogy and cultural transformation that challenges the ideologies sustaining authoritarianism and empowers collective resistance.

In this struggle, pedagogy is not peripheral; it is central. Education, culture, and everyday life are crucial battlegrounds where fascism rises or falls. In this understanding lies the hope for a meaningful awareness, a foundation for developing a mass consciousness that can fuel a transformative, mass-political movement. There is no time for the luxury of despair, for despair is a form of surrender. In an age where silence becomes complicity, and culture serves as a powerful instrument of domination, what is needed is a cultural politics that empowers us to teach, to remember, and to imagine otherwise--a revolutionary pedagogical practice and a form of political action. The late critical theorist [Sheldon Wolin](#) (2016) argued that “the central challenge of our time... is about nurturing a discordant democracy,” a challenge that can only be met by nurturing “the civic consciousness of the nation”. This task demands that we place culture at the center of how we understand, agency, critique, the power of the radical imagination, and politics itself.

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