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Higher Education and the Politics of Hope in the Age of Authoritarianism: Rethinking the Pedagogical Possibilities of a Global Democracy

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Ongoing revelations in the *mainstream media* about the Bush administration's decision to allow the National Security Agency to spy on Americans without first obtaining warrants, the disclosure by the *Washington Post* of a network of covert prisons known as "black sites" established by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in eight countries, the rampant corruption involving some of the most powerful politicians in the Bush administration, the ongoing stories about widespread abuse and torture in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the recent passing of the Military Commissions Act of 2006 which--which conveniently allows the Bush administration to detain indefinitely anyone deemed as enemy combatant without recourse to the traditional right to challenge their detention and to disappear into the torture chambers of violent and repressive regimes are just some of the elements in the popular press that point to a growing authoritarianism in American life. The government, as many liberal critics ranging from Seymour M. Hersh and Gore Vidal to Robert Kennedy Jr. have pointed out, is now in the hands of extremists who have shredded civil liberties, lied to the American public to legitimize sending young American troops to Iraq, and alienated most of the international community with a blatant exercise of arrogant power. These right-wing extremists have also tarnished the highest offices of government with unsavory corporate alliances, used political power unabashedly to pursue legislative policies that favor the rich and punish the poor, and disabled those public spheres not governed by the logic of the market. Sidney Blumenthal, a former senior adviser to President Clinton and no radical, has argued that the Bush administration has created a government that is tantamount to "a national security state of torture, ghost detainees, secret prisons, renditions and domestic eavesdropping".² The consequences of the new U.S. imperium, however, are no less dramatic for global democracy.

In the United States, a silent war is being waged against poor young people and people of color who are being either warehoused in substandard schools or incarcerated at alarming rates. But

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² Sidney Blumenthal, "Bush's War on Professionals," Salon.com (January 5, 2006). Online: <http://www.salon.com/opinion/blumenthal/2006/01/05/spying/index.html?x>.



these are not the only targets. Universities are accused of being soft on terrorism and un-American in their critiques of the Bush administration; homophobia 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—most evident in Bush's Supreme Court appointments. While the legal rights and support services of people of color, the poor, youth, the middle class, the elderly, gays, and women are being attacked, the current administration is supporting a campaign to collapse the boundaries between the church and state to the extent that even a New York Times op-ed columnist such as Frank Rich and reformed conservative Kevin Philips believes that the United States is on the verge of becoming a fundamentalist theocracy.³

As war becomes the foundation for an empire-driven foreign policy in the United States, real and symbolic violence combine with a number of anti-democratic tendencies to make the world more dangerous and the promise of global democracy difficult to imagine in the current historical moment. Ultrationalistic imagery of empire disseminated by a largely right-wing media, now an echo chamber for the Bush administration, has made militaristic symbols widespread throughout American culture, **reasserting** racial hierarchies associated with earlier forms of colonialism. The language of patriotic correctness and religious fanaticism replaces the language of social justice and equality, bespeaking the enduring attraction if not "rehabilitation of fascist ideas and principles."⁴ Indeed, war and warriors have become the most endearing models of national greatness, mimicking President Bush's declaration one month after 9/11 that "[E]very American is a soldier."⁵ Rejecting any form of internationalism at odds with its own global interests, legitimized as a never-ending war on terrorism, the United States is currently refashioning a notion of sovereignty defined through a biopolitics in which "daily life and the functioning of power has been permeated with the threat and violence of warfare."⁶ Human beings are no longer protected by domestic and international law, and state violence becomes the defining feature of the imperial rogue state. As an instrument of unchecked biopower, law and violence become indistinguishable, and sovereignty is reduced to waging a war on terrorism that mimics the very terror it claims to be fighting. Within this notion of sovereignty, state violence is organized around the mutually determining forces of security and terrorism, which increasingly "form a single deadly system, in which they justify and legitimate each others' actions."⁷

While it would be ludicrous to suggest that the United States either represents a mirror image of fascist ideology or mimics the systemic racialized terror of Nazi Germany, it is not unreasonable, as Hannah Arendt urged in The Origins of Totalitarianism, to learn to recognize how different elements of fascism crystallize in different historical periods into new forms of authoritarianism. Such anti-democratic elements combine in often unpredictable ways, and I believe they can be found currently in many of the political practices, values, and policies that characterize U.S. sovereignty under the Bush administration. Unchecked power at the top of the political hierarchy is increasingly matched by an aggressive attack on dissent throughout the body politic and fuels both a war abroad and a war at home. The economic and militaristic powers of global capital—spearheaded by U.S. corporations and political interests—appear uncurbed by traditional forms of national and international sovereignty, the implications of which are captured in David

³ Frank Rich, "I Saw Jackie Mason Kissing Santa Claus," New York Times (December 25, 2005), Late Edition, p. 8.

⁴ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 148.

⁵ Cited in Jackie Orr, "The Militarization of Inner Space," *Critical sociology* 30:2 (2004), p. 452.

⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 13.

⁷ 7 Giorgio Agamben, "On Security and Terror," trans. Soenke Zehle. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (September 20, 2001). Online: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-on-security-and-terror.html>.



Harvey's serviceable phrase "accumulation by dispossession."⁸ Entire populations are now seen as disposable, marking a dangerous moment for the promise of a global democracy.⁹ The discourse of liberty, equality, and freedom that emerged with modernity seems to have lost even its residual value as the central project of democracy. State sovereignty is organized **no longer around the struggle for life but** an insatiable quest for the accumulation of capital, leading to what Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics" or the destruction of human bodies.¹⁰ War, violence, and death have become the principal elements shaping the biopolitics of the new authoritarianism that is emerging in the United States and increasingly extending its reach into broader global spheres, from Iraq to a vast array of military outposts and prisons around the world. The sources of this threat are multiple.

Market Fundamentalism

As the state of emergency, in Giorgio Agamben's aptly chosen words, becomes the rule rather than the exception, a number of powerful anti-democratic tendencies threaten the prospects for both American and global democracy.¹¹ **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—the current **sum total being** the Hobbesian rule of a "war of all against all" that replaces any vestige of shared responsibilities or compassion for others. The values of the market and the ruthless workings of finance capital become 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 **as the neoliberal mantra "privatize or perish" is repeated over and over again. Responsible citizens** are replaced by an assemblage of entrepreneurial subjects, each tempered in the virtue of self-reliance and forced to face the increasingly difficult challenges of the social order alone. Freedom is no longer about securing equality, social justice, or the public welfare, but about unhampered trade in goods, financial capital, and commodities. As the logic of capital trumps democratic sovereignty, low intensity warfare at home chips away at democratic freedoms, and high intensity warfare abroad delivers democracy with bombs, tanks, and chemical warfare. The global cost of these neoliberal commitments is massive human suffering and death, delivered not only in the form of bombs and the barbaric practices of occupying armies, but also in structural adjustment policies in which the drive for land, resources, profits, and goods are implemented by global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Global lawlessness and armed violence accompany the imperative of free trade, the virtues of a market without boundaries, and the promise of a Western-style democracy imposed through military solutions, ushering in the age of rogue sovereignty on a global scale. Under such conditions, human suffering and hardship reach unprecedented levels of intensity. In a rare moment of truth, Thomas Friedman, the famous columnist for the *New York Times*, precisely argued for the use of US power -including military force- to support this anti-democratic world order. And claimed that "The hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist ... And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Air Force,

⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 160-164.

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp.184-185. On disposable populations, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives* (London: Polity, 2004).

¹⁰ Of course, the relationship between sovereignty and death is further extended in the work of Giorgio Agamben. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).



Navy and Marine Corps."¹² As Mark Rupert points out, " In Friedman's twisted world, if people are to realize their deepest aspirations - the longing for a better life which comes from their very souls - they must stare down the barrel of Uncle Sam's gun."¹³

As neoliberals in the Bush administration implement policies at home to reduce taxation and regulation while spending billions on wars abroad, they slash funds that benefit the sick, the elderly, the poor, and young people. But public resources are diverted not only from crucial domestic problems ranging from poverty and unemployment to hunger; they are also diverted from addressing the fate of some 45 million children in "the world's poor countries [who] will die needlessly over the next decade" as reported by the British-based group, Oxfam.¹⁴ The U.S. commitment to market fundamentalism elevates profits over human needs and consequently offers few displays of compassion, aid, or relief for millions of poor and abandoned children in the world who do not have adequate shelter, who are severely hungry, who have no access to health care or safe water, and who succumb needlessly to the ravages of AIDS and other diseases.¹⁵ For instance, as Jim Lobe points out, "U.S. foreign aid in 2003 ranked dead last among all wealthy nations. In fact, its entire development aid spending in 2003 came to only ten percent of what it spent on the Iraq war that year. U.S. development assistance comes to less than one-fortieth of its annual defense budget."¹⁶

As public issues collapse into private concerns, a rabid individualism has replaced investing in the common good or taking seriously the imperatives of the social contract that informed the earlier policies of the New Deal and President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs of the 1960s. Advocates of neoliberalism wage a war against the gains of the welfare state, renounce its commitment to collective provision of public goods, and ruthlessly urge the urban poor, homeless, elderly, and disabled to rely on their own initiative. As the government is hollowed out, privatization schemes infect all aspects of society. As the state gives up its role as the guardian of the public interest and public goods, reactionary politics takes the place of democratic governance. And one consequence is a growing gap between the rich and the poor and the downward spiral of millions of Americans into poverty and despair. The haunting images of dead bodies floating in the flooded streets of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina along with thousands of African-Americans stranded in streets, abandoned in the Louisiana Superdome, and waiting to be rescued for days on the roofs of flooded houses **serve as** just one register of the despairing racism inequality, and poverty in America.

With the rise of market fundamentalism, economics is accorded more respect than human need, human rights, and democratic values; the citizen has been reduced to a consumer – the buying and selling of goods are all that seems to matter. Even children are now targeted as a constituency from which to make money, **as they are** 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 both the idea of citizenship and those very spaces and spheres (schools, media, labor unions, etc.) needed to make it a vigorous and engaged force for a substantive democracy.

¹² Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 373.

¹³ Cited in Mark Rupert, "The Anti Friedman Page," online:

<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/maxpages/faculty/merupert/Anti-Friedman.htm>

¹⁴ Jim Lobe, "45 Million Children to Die in Next Decade Due to Rich Countries' Miserliness," OneWorld.Net (December 6, 2004). Online: www.commondreams.org/headlines04/1206-06.htm.

¹⁵ Catherine McAloon, "UNICEF: Poverty, War, HIV Hurting Children," The Associated Press (December 9, 2004). Online: <http://www.aegis.com/news/ads/2004/AD042515.html>

¹⁶ Jim Lobe, "45 Million Children to Die in Next Decade Due to Rich Countries' Miserliness," OneWorld.Net (December 6, 2004). Online: www.commondreams.org/headlines04/1206-06.htm.



Antidemocratic tendencies gain power as forces such as labor unions, “that once constrained corporate economic and political power,”¹⁷ are dissolved. As the United States wages a relentless attack on union membership at home, which now constitutes a mere 7.9 percent of the labor force in the private sector, it reinforces the neoliberal backlash against organized labor throughout the globe (though with increasing resistance in Latin America). Once again, the authoritarianism of the Bush government represents a poisonous form of biopolitics in which unnecessary deaths appear utterly reasonable, especially if the “disposable populations” interfere with the system of accumulation under globalized monopoly capitalism. Waste, growing inequality, global warming, the rise in world sea levels, the decline of ecosystems on earth, and the extinction of many plant and animal species appear to the Bush administration to be a small price to pay for promoting the logic and reaping the rewards of market fundamentalism. And the consequences impact not just the United States but the entire globe, especially those nations that are defenseless to protect themselves from the toxins, waste, environmental damage, and economic looting affecting their villages, cities, and neighborhoods. Under such circumstances, hope is foreclosed, and it becomes difficult either to imagine a life beyond capitalism or to believe in a politics that takes democracy seriously.

Religious Fundamentalism

The second fundamentalism **now affecting the United States** can be seen in the religious fervor embraced by Bush and his cohorts that substitutes blind faith and intolerance for critical reason and social responsibility.¹⁸ **Under the Bush administration**, the line between the state and religion is being erased as government officials, many now proxies for radical Christian evangelicals, embrace and impose on American society a rigid moralism and set of values that are largely bigoted, patriarchal, uncritical, and insensitive to real social problems such as poverty, racism, the crisis in health care, and the increasing impoverishment of America’s children. Instead of addressing these problems, evangelicals with enormous political clout are waging a campaign to ban same-sex marriages, serve up creationism instead of science, privatize Social Security, eliminate embryonic stem cell research, and overturn *Roe v. Wade* among other abortion rights cases. Rampant anti-intellectualism coupled with Taliban-like moralism boldly translate into everyday cultural practices and **state practices** as right-wing evangelicals live out their messianic view of the world. Right-wing religious evangelicals such as Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and Jerry Falwell make public announcements on all manner of public and foreign policy issues while cultivating a close relationship with the White House. For example, Robertson, a Bush administration favorite has called for the assassination of Hugo Chavez, the president of Venezuela, and suggested that the devastating stroke suffered by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was “divine punishment for pulling Israel out of Gaza last summer.”¹⁹ In addition, many Christian conservatives have played a prominent role in anointing the war on terrorism as a “holy war” and have helped shape the Bush administration’s policies toward the Middle East, providing further

¹⁷ Gar Alperovitz, “Another World is Possible,” *Mother Jones* (January/February 2006), p. 68.

¹⁸ What now seems a typical occurrence is the takeover of school boards by right-wing Christian fundamentalists who then impose the teaching of creationism on the schools. See, for example, Associated Press, “Wisconsin School OKs Creationism Teaching,” *Common Dreams News Center* (November 6, 2004), <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines04/1106-08.htm>. The attack on science in the schools, of course, has been dealt a severe setback with the recent court ruling forbidding the teaching of intelligent design in the high school biology curriculum in Dover, Pennsylvania.

¹⁹ Grey Myre, “Israelis’ Anger at Evangelist May Delay Christian Center,” *New York Times* (January 12, 2006), p. A12.



legitimation for the “war on terrorism” and the ongoing assault on Palestinian rights and sovereignty. Not only has the Christian Right directed its anger at Islam, it has often made public statements expressing views so extreme that they were widely reported in the Arab world, further fueling hatred of the United States and providing a recruiting tool for Islamic terrorists.

A politics euphemistically served up as democracy and employed through the force and violence of an occupying army abroad gives rise to a “holy war” and a war for oil while Bush-style moralism at home wages a war against women’s reproductive rights, and promotes an all-out national effort to insert intelligent design in high school biology classes. Evangelicals across the country are passing legislation to sponsor “abstinence-only education,” in spite of a spate of research suggesting that such programs do not work. Similarly, **the Bush administration has also succumbed to pressure from** religious fundamentalists by eliminating information from government Web sites about alternative forms of birth control, citing falsified scientific information such as assertions that using the birth control pill promotes higher rates of breast cancer, and producing curricula that claim that “half of all gay male teenagers in the U.S. are HIV positive.”²⁰

Bush’s much exalted religious fundamentalism does more than promote a disdain for critical thought, reinforce retrograde social policies, and promote despicable forms of homophobia and patriarchy. It also undermines scientific reason, shuts down debate, and banishes criticism to the dustbin of history. Even popular culture is not immune from the Christian Right’s morality squad, given that it inspires a wave of criticism and censorship against all but the most sanitized facets of the entertainment industry. What is one to make of the Christian Right’s attack on children’s shows that allegedly offer up homoerotic representations, such as those attributed to the animated cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants?²¹ Prior to 25 December 2005, many Christian fundamentalists launched a relentless attack on all the major media outlets claiming that Christmas was under siege by all manner of secularists, barely disguising a strong anti-Semitic tradition that dates back to Henry Ford’s infamous 1921 publication “The International Jew.” The rise and impact of religious fundamentalism on the landscape of American politics and culture represent more than a “chapter of irrational hysteria in America’s cultural history”; **it also make visible the warm welcome religious extremists receive at the highest reaches of American political power and in the dominant media, both of which increasingly pander to alleged “people of faith.”**²² While religious extremism is an old story in American history, ²³ the current influence that Christian fundamentalists now exercise in shaping both domestic and foreign policy is unprecedented and has very dangerous implications for diminishing democracy both at home and abroad.

The Attack on Critical Education

The third antidemocratic dogma **can be seen** 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 secular critical thought and diversity is** evident in the attempts to corporatize education, exclude poor and minority youth, standardize curricula, and use the language of business as a model for governance; it is also evident in the ongoing efforts of corporations and neoconservative ideologues to weaken the power of **university** faculty, turn full-

²⁰ Cited in Laura Flanders, “Bush’s Hit List: Teens and Kids,” Common Dreams News Center (February 13, 2005). Online: www.commondreams.org/views05/0213-11.htm

²¹ Frank Rich, “The Year of Living Indecently,” New York Times (February 6, 2005), p. AR1.

²² Frank Rich, “I Saw Jackie Mason Kissing Santa Claus,” New York Times (December 25, 2005), p. A8.

²³ See, especially, Noah Feldman, *Divided by God* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).



time jobs into contractual labor, and hand over those larger educational forces in the culture to a small group of corporate interests. **The rise of the national security state has also taken a toll on academic freedom as prominent international scholars such as the internationally recognized Islamic scholar, Tariq Ramadan, have been denied entry into the U.S., often on trumped up charges suggesting that they are terrorist sympathizers.** In the state of Ohio, applicants at some public institutions have to sign what amounts to loyalty oaths declaring that they have no ties to terrorist organizations as defined by Bush, Darth Vader Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld. As one Canadian academic journal noted, “it is a measure that brings to mind the McCarthy-era loyalty oaths.”²⁴

Higher education has also been attacked by right-wing ideologues such as David Horowitz and Lynne Cheney who view it as the “weak link” in the war against terror and a potential fifth column.²⁵ Horowitz also acts as the figurehead for various well-funded and orchestrated conservative student groups such as the Young Americans and College Republicans, which perform the groundwork for his “Academic Bill of Rights” policy efforts **that seek out** juicy but rare instances of “political bias” – whatever that is or however it might be defined – in college classrooms. These efforts have resulted in considerable sums of public money being devoted to hearings in multiple state legislatures, most recently in Pennsylvania, in addition to helping impose, as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* put it, a “chilly climate” of self-policing of academic freedom and pedagogy.²⁶ It gets worse. Professors such as Joseph Massad of Columbia University and Ward Churchill of the University of Colorado are just two high profile cases of academics who are under attack by the right-wing through a highly organized campaign of intimidation and an all-out assault on academic freedom, critical scholarship, and the very idea of the university as a place to question and think.²⁷ Ward Churchill, in particular, has been used as a poster boy by right-wing extremists for broadening their efforts to transform the university. For instance, Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House, argued with reference to Churchill: “We are going to nail this guy and send the dominoes tumbling. And everybody who has an opinion out there and entire disciplines like ethnic studies and women’s studies and cultural studies and queer studies that we don’t like won’t be there anymore.”²⁸ Gingrich’s view that the firing of Ward Churchill is only the first step in a purge of those departments, programs, and academics that “despise America” (by criticizing its government’s policies) is echoed in the comments of some of the University of Colorado regents who, pondering Churchill’s future, assented to Regent Tom Lucero’s insistence that “It naturally follows that I will be seeking justification for all departments and their academic value and merit to the university community. I want to scrutinize whether or not it is necessary to eliminate courses and departments of questionable merit.”²⁹ This sends a chilling message to faculty in Colorado and across the nation, especially to young, non-tenured faculty who are doing critical scholarship. This warning was actually reinforced when the

²⁴ Editorial, “New Challenges to Academic Freedom,” *Academic Matters* (Fall 2006), p. 3.

²⁵ This charge comes from a report issued by the conservative group, American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), founded by Lynne Cheney (spouse of Vice President Dick Cheney) and Joseph Lieberman (Democratic senator). See Jerry L. Martin and Anne D. Neal, *Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done about It*. (February 2002). Online: <http://www.goacta.org/publications/Reports/defciv.pdf>. ACTA also posted on its website a list of 115 statements made by allegedly “un-American Professors.”

²⁶ See “Forum: A Chilly Climate on the Campuses,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 9, 2005), pp. B7-B13.

²⁷ I take these cases up in great detail in Henry A. Giroux, “Academic Freedom Under Fire: The Case for Critical Pedagogy,” *College Literature* 33:4 (Fall 2006), pp. 1-42.

²⁸ Newt Gingrich cited in Scott Smallwood, “Ward Churchill Gets a Warm Welcome in Speech in U. Of Hawaii,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 24, 2005), <http://chronicle.com/daily/2005/02/2005022402>.

²⁹ Lucero cited in Ellen Schrecker, “The New McCarthyism in Academe,” pp. 105-106.



Colorado committee reminded Churchill that he might not have been investigated if had he just kept his head down and remained quiet: "Public figures who choose to speak out on controversial matters of public concern naturally attract more controversy and attention to their background and work than scholars quietly writing about more esoteric matters that are not the subject of political debate."³⁰

Couple this remarks with an op-ed piece in which *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman calls upon the State Department to draw up a blacklist of those critics he calls "excuse makers," including those who believe that U.S. actions are at the root cause of contemporary global violence. According to Friedman, "These excuse makers are just one notch less despicable than the terrorists and also deserve to be exposed."³¹ This kind of McCarthyite connection that collapses democratic dissent with terrorism has become so commonplace in the United States that it is openly championed by a famous columnist in one of the world's leading newspapers.

Under attack as a repository for critical thought, debate, and the shaping of an informed and engaged citizenry, higher education is increasingly being reduced to either the imperatives of job training or the ideological demands of patriotic conformity. But there is more at stake here than simply substituting training for education, and ideological conformity for critical learning; higher education is also a central player in the construction of the national security state. Universities now supply resources, engage in research contracts, and accept huge amounts of defense contract money to provide the personnel, expertise, and tools necessary to expand the security imperatives of the U.S. government, and with no apologies.

Of course, higher education is not the only site of education under siege. Under the sway of a market fundamentalism and government bullying, the dominant media, which drive the educational force of the culture, have deteriorated into a morass of commercialism, propaganda, televangelicism, and entertainment.³² Rather than perform an essential public service, they have become the primary pedagogical tool for promoting a culture of consent and conformity in which citizens are misinformed and public discourse is debased. Engaged in a form of public pedagogy that legitimates dominant power rather than hold it accountable to the highest ethical and political standards, giant media conglomerates such as Clear Channel Communications and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (Fox News) have become advertising appendages for dominant political and corporate interests. Such media restrict the range of views to which people have access and thereby undermine democracy by stripping citizens of the possibility for vigorous public debate, critical exchange, and civic engagement. Even where critical thought does appear, whether in the university, the media, or other educational sites, it is often attacked and disarmed through right-wing campaigns of intimidation, appeals to fear and security in order to refuse accountability, and pernicious suggestions that such criticism is un-American or even treasonous.

Racism and Surveillance

Other tendencies that support the Bush administration's efforts to extend and exercise its power regardless of the consequences for democracy include the brutal sexism, the homophobia, and a

³⁰ Baron, "Churchill Fallout."

³¹ Thomas Friedman, "Giving the Hatemongers No Place to Hide," *New York Times* (July 22, 2005), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/22/opinion/22friedman.html?ex=1279684800&en=17fb5beb19b09d86&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>.

³² On the relationship between democracy and the media, see Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: The New Press, 1999) and John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney, *Tragedy: How the American Media Sell Wars, Spin Elections, and Destroy Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2006).



resurgent racism taking place in the United States coupled with the language of hate and scapegoating that spews forth daily on talk radio and from infamous conservative talking heads such as Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and Michael Savage, all of whom reflect a disdain for human rights and reveal something dreadful about the new narratives that this government wants to define American culture. The war on terrorism has produced the “crudest expression of racial antipathy ... redolent of imperial and colonial domination.”³³ Inside the blandest discourses of nationalism and patriotism, racist practices shape the widest dimensions of culture, symbolizing all “racial others” as an alleged external threat to American civilization. This is amply illustrated in the war against African-Americans – exemplified in the images from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, but perhaps even more emphatically by the fact that 70 percent of all prisoners incarcerated in the United States are people of color. The threat to domestic order has now been expanded to others from the global south who are now perceived to threaten national security. From political theorist Samuel P. Huntington, who rails against the threat of “Hispanization”³⁴ to CNN television host Lou Dobbs **who** believes the country is being overrun by illegal immigrants, to Pat Robertson, who publicly stated that Muslims were “worse than Nazis,”³⁵ there is a growing discourse of racist invective directed toward Mexican immigrants, Arabs, Muslims, and others who threaten the “civilizational” distinctiveness of American culture, take away American jobs, or allegedly support acts of terrorism directed against the United States. There is also an increase in the surveillance of citizenry, called euphemistically the “special collection program,” which is being conducted outside the jurisdiction of the courts; an increase in reports of U.S. human rights abuses such as torture, kidnapping, and making people disappear; and the emergence of a hypernationalism fueled by racism in which immigrants are now constructed as a threat to both American jobs, safety, and law and order – just as the country has become more and more obsessed with national security, crime, and the increased surveillance of its citizens. Such rhetoric and practices increasingly make the United States look like the ruthless Latin American dictatorships that seized power in the 1970s, all of which appealed to fear, security, and the use of extralegal practices to defend barbaric acts of torture, abuse, and disappearance.

Militarism

Couple these **particularly** insidious **abuses** of human rights with the aforementioned antidemocratic tendencies, an expanding hyper nationalism and the emergence of an unbridled militarism, and the counters of an ascendant authoritarianism become more visible in the United States. All of these forces gain strength through a fourth antidemocratic dogma that is shaping American life: the ongoing militarization of public life – the emergence of militarism as what David Theo Goldberg calls a “new regime of truth,” a new epistemology defining what is fact and fiction, right and wrong, just and unjust. Americans are not only obsessed with military power; “it has become central to our national identity.”³⁶ 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.... this country is obsessed with war: rumors of war, images of war, ‘preemptive’ war, ‘preventive’ war, ‘surgical’ war, ‘prophylactic’ war, ‘permanent’ war”³⁷ Bush’s permanent war policy with its unilateral legitimation of preemptive strikes against potential enemies not only sets a dangerous precedent for ushering in

³³ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 142.

³⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Challenge to America’s Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

³⁵ On Robertson’s statement, see Kaplan, *With God on Their Side* p. 13.

³⁶ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 1.

³⁷ Tony Judt, “The New World Order,” *The New York Review of Books* (July 14, 2005), p. 16.



authoritarianism, but also encourages similarly demagogic policies among other right-wing nations. As President Bush explained at a news conference on 13 April 2004 and has repeated again and again in different public venues as 2006 has unfolded, “This country must go on the offense and stay on the offense.”³⁸ Assuming that military power is the highest expression of social truth and national greatness, the Bush administration opens a dangerous new chapter in American military history that now gives unfettered support to what C. Wright Mills once called a “‘military metaphysics’ – a tendency to see international problems as military problems and to discount the likelihood of finding a solution except through military means.”³⁹ Such aggressive militarism is fashioned out of an ideology that not only supports a foreign policy based on what Cornel West calls “the cowboy mythology of the American frontier fantasy,” but also affects domestic policy as it expands “police power, augments the prison-industrial complex, and legitimizes uncurbed male power (and violence) at home and in the workplace. It views crime as a monstrous enemy to be crushed (targeting poor people) rather than as an ugly behavior to change (by addressing the conditions that often encourage such behavior).”⁴⁰

The influence of militaristic truths, values, social relations, and identities now permeates and defines American culture. Major universities, for example, aggressively court the military establishment for Defense Department research 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, public institutions such as Pennsylvania State university, Carnegie-Mellon, the University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins and a host of others, shamelessly expand the reach and influence of the national security state by entering into formal agreements with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in order to “create a link between leading research university and government agencies.”⁴¹ And as Graham Spanier, the president of Penn State argues in a statement pregnant with irony, the establishment of the National Security Higher Education Advisory Board, which he heads, “sends a positive message that leaders in higher education are willing to assist our nation during these challenging times.”⁴² Such commentary reads like a page out of George Orwell’s *1984*, countering every decent and democratic value that defines higher education as a democratic public sphere. It is difficult not to read such developments cynically. Maybe Spanier can bring the power of his office and the resources of the university to solve problems associated with the FBI’s enhanced program of domestic spying, provide new recruits for CIA “black sites” [torture prisons] abroad, or perhaps train technical specialists to work in the Extraordinary Rendition Program, which kidnaps alleged terrorists in foreign lands and sends them to countries less inclined to fuss over legal rights and civil liberties. Or maybe he and his fellow board members will offer the resources of these great research universities to provide information on Muslim and Arab students who pose a potential threat to the United States, not to mention those faculty and students opposed to Bush’s foreign and domestic policies who allegedly present a similar threat. On a more optimistic reading, maybe Spanier and his colleagues can provide frank critique and crucial advice to the FBI in light of how to handle recent revelations concerning its role in domestic spying, behavior reminiscent of its COINTELPRO days when it harassed and spied on antiwar

³⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁹ For the C. Wright Mills reference, see C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 222. The quotation is from Bacevich, *New American Militarism*, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Bacevich, *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴¹ Penn State News Release, “Penn State’s Spanier to Chair National Security Board.” (September 16, 2005).

⁴² Ibid.



demonstrators, civil rights activists, and other dissenters.⁴³

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out in *Multitude*, war has become the organizing principle of society and the foundation for politics and other social relations.⁴⁴ Militarism has become the most powerful form of public pedagogy, a mode 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 is in this case either severely narrowed and trivialized in the media or is converted into training and character reform in the schools. In 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 become worse.

Given that the Bush administration governs by “dividing the country along [the] fault lines of fear, intolerance, ignorance and religious rule,”⁴⁵ the future does not look bright for democracy. Critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg correctly argues that the message of Bush’s reelection boils down to: don’t get ill, lose your job, or retire; don’t breathe, swim in the ocean, travel, or think critical thoughts; invest your life-savings in the stock market even though you will likely lose it all; go to community college for two years of technical training rather than to four-year universities where your mind will be turned to liberal mush; support tax cuts for the wealthy, and military service for the poor. If you step out of line, remember the Patriot Act is there to police you at home and a loaded B52 bomber hovers overhead abroad.⁴⁶

Conclusion -- The Struggle for Critical Education

Abstracted from the ideal of public commitment, the new authoritarianism represents a political and economic practice and form of militarism that loosens the connections among substantive democracy, critical agency, and critical education. In opposition to the rising tide of authoritarianism, individuals and social movements across the globe must make a case for linking learning to progressive social change while recognizing that the crisis mobilized by the growing authoritarianism is about more than economics and ideology, it is also a crisis of education.

Education has assumed an unparalleled significance in shaping the language, values, and ideologies that legitimize the structures and organizations that support the imperatives of global capitalism. The educational force of the culture along with various forms of schooling is the terrain where consciousness is shaped, needs are constructed, and the capacity for individual self-reflection and broad social change is nurtured and produced. 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, authorized, and made operational 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 political and offers not only the theoretical tools for a systematic critique of authoritarianism, but also a language of possibility for creating actual movements for democratic

⁴³ COINTELPRO was the code name for the FBI’s counterintelligence program, which operated between 1956 and 1971. The government used secret surveillance techniques, political harassment, and sometimes violence to obstruct alleged dissenters accused of being un-American. Many of these alleged terrorists targeted by the FBI were black and two of them, Fred Hampton, and Mark Clark, Black Panther Party members, were assassinated by the Chicago Police.

⁴⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), pp. 12-13.

⁴⁵ Maureen Dowd, “The Red Zone,” *New York Times* (November 4, 2004), p. A27.

⁴⁶ David Theo Goldberg, “The Sovereign Smirk,” *Open Democracy* (November 3, 2004), p. 3.



social change and a new biopolitics that affirms life rather than death, shared responsibility rather than shared fears, and engaged citizenship rather than the stripped-down values of consumerism. Education remains a crucial site combining symbolic forms and processes conducive to democratization with broader social contexts and the institutional formations of power itself. In its diverse spaces, spheres, and forms it is a major political arena for the production and struggle over those pedagogical and political conditions that provide the possibilities for people to develop forms of agency that enable them individually and collectively to intervene in the processes through which the material relations of power shape the meaning and practices of their everyday lives.

For too long, the progressives have ignored **that** the strategic dimension of politics is inextricably connected to questions of critical education and pedagogy, to what it means to acknowledge that education is bound up with larger relations of power, always tangled up with ideologies, values, and the acquisition of both particular forms of agency and specific visions of the future. Education has to be embraced not merely as schooling but as a form of public pedagogy—a political and moral practice-- that permeates the entire social order through various technologies, sites, and social practices. This is not only a more capacious notion of education and a theoretical attempt to make the political more pedagogical. It also stresses the important point that central to any viable political movement is the recognition that all spheres of social life constitute in different ways and through diverse relations of power sites of public pedagogy marked by political, social, and cultural struggles that are crucial to any attempt to forge the knowledge, identifications, affective investments, and social relations that constitute political subjects and social agents capable of energizing and spreading the basis for a substantive global democracy.

Two of the most challenging issues facing the academy today are grasping what we mean by the political and theorizing a politics of and for the twenty-first century. Academics, activists, artists, youth and other cultural workers need to be more self-consciously about politics and the knowledge we seek to produce together, and connect such knowledge to broader public spheres and issues while heeding Hannah Arendt's warning that "Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance."⁴⁷ We need to be more clear that changing consciousness is not the same as altering the material relations of oppression; but at the same time, institutional reform and material relations of power cannot take place without a change in consciousness capable of recognizing not only injustice but also the very possibility for reform, the capacity to reinvent the conditions and practices that make a more just future possible. We must be careful about reproducing a particularly insidious form of anti-intellectualism that wrongly believes that activism can be disassociated from theory and critical reflection or that critical ideas can be removed from the messy politics of public life.

Similarly, social criticism has to be coupled with a vibrant self-criticism and the willingness to take up critical positions without becoming dogmatic or intractable. Critical education links knowledge and learning to the performative and worldly space of action and engagement, energizing people not only to think critically about the world around them but also to use their capacities as social agents to intervene in the larger social order and confront the myriad forms of symbolic, institutional, and material relations of power that shape their lives. These connections between pedagogy and agency, knowledge and power, and thought and action must be mobilized in order to confront the current crisis of authoritarianism looming so large in the United States and elsewhere around the globe today.

Individuals and collectivities have to be regarded as potential agents and not simply as victims or ineffectual dreamers. It is this legacy of critique and possibility, of resistance and agency, that infuses intellectual work with concrete hope and offers a wealth of resources to people within the

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 149.



academy and other public spheres who struggle on multiple fronts against the rising forces of authoritarianism. Hannah Arendt recognized that any viable democratic politics must address the totality of public life and refuse to withdraw from such a challenge in the face of totalitarian violence that legitimates itself through appeals to safety, fear, and the threat of terrorism.⁴⁸ Against this stripped down legitimation of authority is the promise of public spheres that in their diverse forms, sites, and content offer pedagogical and political possibilities for strengthening the social bonds of democracy and for cultivating both critical modes of individual and social agency and crucial opportunities to form alliances in the collective struggle for a biopolitics that affirms life, hopeful vision, the operations of democracy, and a range of democratic institutions—that is, a biopolitics that fights against the terror of totalitarianism.

In a complex and rapidly changing global world, public intellectuals are confronted with the important task of taking back control over the conditions of intellectual production in a variety of venues in which the educational force of the culture takes root and holds a powerful grip over the stories, images, and sounds that shape people's lives throughout the globe. Such sites constitute what I call "new spheres of public pedagogy" and represent crucial locations for a cultural politics designed to wrest the arena of public debate within the field of global power away from those dangerous forces that endlessly commodify intellectual autonomy and critical thought while appropriating or undercutting any viable work done through the collective action of critical intellectuals. Such spheres are about more than legal rights guaranteeing freedom of speech; they are also sites that demand a certain kind of citizen informed by particular forms of education, a citizen whose education provides the essential conditions for democratic public spheres to flourish. Cornelius Castoriadis, the great philosopher of democracy, argues that if public space is not to be experienced as a private affair but instead as a vibrant sphere in which people experience and learn how to participate in and shape public life, then it must be shaped through an education that provides the decisive traits of courage, responsibility, and shame, all of which connects the fate of each individual to the fate of others, the planet, and global democracy.⁴⁹ Artists, cultural workers, youth, and educators need not only to create new discourses of understanding and criticism but also to offer up a vision of hope that fosters the conditions for multiple collective and global struggles that refuse to use politics as an act of war or markets as the measure of democracy. The challenge posed by the current regime of religious extremism, market fundamentalism, state-sponsored terrorism, and the incursion of corporate power into higher education presents difficult problems for educators and demands a profoundly committed sense of individual and collective resistance if all of those who believe in a vibrant democracy are going to fight for a future that does not endlessly repeat the present. At the current moment, higher education faces a legitimation crisis—one that opens a political and theoretical space for educators to redefine the relationship between higher education, the public good, and democracy. Higher education represents one of the most important sites over which the battle for democracy is being waged. It is the site where the promise of a better future emerges out of those visions and pedagogical practices that combine hope and moral responsibility as part of a broader emancipatory discourse. The ideas of justice and democracy are under siege just as democratic politics and values appear to be relegated to the back burner of individual and social agency. But justice and a substantive democracy are far too important to disappear under the force of the new religious, militaristic, and economic fundamentalisms that govern America and increasingly much of the world. We may live in dark times as Hannah Arendt reminds us, but history is open and the space of the possible is larger than the one on display. Resisting the new authoritarianism demands a new politics, language, and

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), p. 162

⁴⁹ See, especially, Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy," *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 81-123.



sense of civic courage. Jacques Derrida touched on the political task ahead when he stated that “We must do the impossible, we must do and think the impossible. If only the possible happened, nothing more would happen. If I only did what I can do, I wouldn’t do anything.”⁵⁰ Making human beings superfluous is the essence of totalitarianism, and making the political more pedagogical along with militant hope, and collective are the antidote in urgent need of being reclaimed.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, “No One is Innocent: A Discussion with Jacques Derrida About Philosophy in the Face of Terror” Sueddeutsche Zeitung (September 21, 2001). Online: <http://www.hudsoncress.org/html/library/western-philosophy/derrida%20-%20A%20discussion%20with%20Derrida%20on%20Terror.pdf>