

## How to Be an Antifascist Educator

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**Abstract:** Education must prioritize antifascism, equipping educators with principles and strategies actively to resist authoritarianism. Ensuring educators are committed to antifascism is essential for combating growing fascist political threats and preserving democratic freedom. The U.S. is confronting a crisis of democratic backsliding in conjunction with an ever-increasing threat of fascism. Antifascist education is essential to countering the rise of far-right extremism and ensuring schools remain spaces of critical thinking, empathy, and democratic engagement. By knowing, teaching, and modelling principles of antifascism, educators can help shape a generation resilient against fascist ideologies and committed to building a more just and equitable society..

*“If you want to keep a secret, you must also hide it from yourself.”*  
– George Orwell

Orwell’s (1949/2021) dystopian, antifascist novel, *1984*, highlights, as a hallmark of fascism, the self-deception required to avoid recognizing reality. Fascist politics undermine reality through gaslighting, a psychological manipulation technique by use of which a person or group attempts to get others to question their own reality, memory, or perceptions thereby creating doubt and confusion, making the victim dependent on the gaslighters for a sense of validation, stability, and truth. Gaslighters deny their actions even when there is evidence demonstrating what they are doing. They spread disinformation, accuse victims of the very faults the gaslighters themselves possess (a psychological technique called negative projection), dismiss victims’ feelings, and isolate their victims from support systems to increase dependency on the gaslighter. (Vaccarino, 2018; McGrath, 2021).

Fascist gaslighting often utilizes conspiracy theories and “alternative facts” to manipulate perceptions and beliefs, undermining trust in established facts and authoritative sources. By suggesting hidden sinister forces are at play fascist gaslighters undermine trust in relationships, institutions, media, and authorities. For example, making baseless claims of election fraud causes supporters to doubt the legitimacy of the electoral process. Such manipulation can cause anxiety, paranoia, confusion, depression, and a sense of helplessness, increasing the perceived need for a “savior” to show them the way, creating a loyal base of true believers who distrust opposing viewpoints. Fascist gaslighters undermine opposition groups by labeling dissenters as traitors or mentally unstable, discrediting legitimate criticism. They exaggerate or fabricate threats from minority groups, political opponents, or foreign nations to unify the populace against a common enemy. This creates a state of confusion and fear, making individuals more likely to rely on the fascist for information and decision-making, further consolidating the fascist's power. Such gaslighting normalizes unacceptable actions and policies, weakening social cohesion (Steinmetz, 2021; Corn, 2022).

Antifascist education is crucial in cultivating an informed, critically thinking, and psychologically resilient populace capable of resisting manipulative tactics. This paper explores how to be an antifascist educator, articulating the necessary skill and stressing social-psychological acuity. Antifascist educators defend democracy and prevent fascism by promoting and engaging in active citizenship, practicing inclusivity, developing psychological strength, and committing to social justice and human rights. Antifascist educators are democratic educators committed to taking action against fascism to prevent it from taking hold. In *How to Be an*

*Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi (2019) argues that it is not enough to identify as “not a racist,” rather, one must actively struggle against racism, i.e., they must be an “antiracist.” Similarly, it is not enough to identify as “not a fascist” or even as pro-democracy, rather, as an “antifascist” educator, one must actively struggle against fascism. Since antifascism is opposed to oppression and repression in all its forms and is focused on defending democratic values and institutions through actions that thwart oppression and repression, education for democracy must also be antifascist education.

### **Democratic Backsliding towards De-Liberal Democracy**

Liberal democracy is rooted in classical liberalism and representative government, emphasizing individual liberty and protection from arbitrary authority. Key features include multiple political parties, separation of powers, the rule of law, a market economy, and the protection of human, civil, and political rights. Universal suffrage and political participation ensure all adult citizens can vote and engage in civic activities ("Liberal Democracy," n.d.). Constitutions in liberal democracies outline governmental powers, enshrine the social contract, and limit governmental authority, protecting rights such as due process, privacy, property, equality before the law, and freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion (Rawls, 1971).

Democratic backsliding refers to the deterioration of democratic performance and the rise of authoritarianism. Hudson (2021, para. 2) defines democratic backsliding as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy." Unlike generalized democratic erosion, backsliding is characterized by targeted actions that undermine political institutions, attack legislatures and courts, and interfere with media integrity and civil liberties. Democratic backsliding is an incremental process involving the gradual erosion of institutions, rules, and norms due to the actions of elected governments. It often involves social and political polarization, governmental dysfunction, and a lack of trust in institutions. This incremental nature allows incumbents of antisystem parties to slowly accumulate power, making the erosion of democratic institutions difficult to detect and counter until it is too late (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021).

The United States, once a leading liberal democracy, has experienced significant democratic decline. Between 2006 and 2016, it slipped from 12th to 17th place among the world's 52 liberal democracies (Mechkova, Lindberg, & Luhrmann, 2017). In a 2021 report, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) classified the U.S. as a "backsliding democracy" highlighting a drift towards authoritarian tendencies. IDEA's assessment, based on 28 indicators across five core pillars — representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration, and participatory engagement — revealed a gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions. Recent polling underscores the alarming trend toward authoritarianism. The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that in 2022-2023 38% of Americans, including 48% of Republicans, 38% of Independents, and 29% of Democrats, support authoritarianism due to the country's current direction. Additionally, in 2023, 23% of all Americans, including 33% of Republicans and 31% of White Evangelical Protestants, agreed that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence to save our country” (Westheimer, 2022, p. 51). Among 75% of Americans polled, 77% of Republicans, 73% of Independents, and 84% of Democrats believe that the future of American democracy is at stake in the 2024 presidential election. In 1995, just 1 in 16 Americans agreed

that it would be “good” or “very good” for the military to run the country rather than elected democratic officials, while today, 1 in 5 agree (World Values Survey, 2020).

According to Westheimer (2022), the decline in support for democratic institutions is sharpest among younger generations. Two-thirds of Americans could not name all three branches of the federal government, and declining proportions view free elections as important in a democratic society (Kahlenberg & Janey, 2016). From 2017-2020 the World Values Survey revealed that 42% of American millennials prefer a political system led by a strong leader unburdened by elections or congressional oversight, and in 2017 the Pew Research Center found that 22% of Americans favor a political system with unchecked executive power (Westheimer, 2022).

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2020) demonstrate how America's democratic norms have unraveled over the last three decades, tracing early signs back to the 1990s. They highlight contemporary polarization in the U.S. is rooted in racial and cultural identity, creating profound and emotionally charged divisions. This division is underpinned by the historical racial exclusion that has consistently stabilized modern American democracy, originally designed for a predominantly white and Christian political community that, in the American South most clearly, forcibly excluded millions of African Americans. The backlash against the first Black president, Barack Obama, and cultural shifts in human rights and social justice ideologies set the stage for the rise of Trump-era racism and xenophobia. Addressing these challenges requires reinvigorating education to stem the tide of fascism supported by a Supreme Court that all too often no longer acts as a check on executive power and a Congress in gridlock, only sporadically able to enact laws to guide executive action.

### **A Call for Moving Forward: Democratic/Antifascist Education**

Over the past twenty-five years, the decline of democratic education in public schools has paralleled the weakening of democracy in the United States (Weiner, 2022). The original goal of public education — developing free individuals on equal terms — is facing unprecedented challenges from forces seeking an anti-democratic schooling system. Neoliberal capitalism's influence on education exacerbates these issues. Giroux (2019) noted that authoritarianism's rise and the correlative erosion of democratic values are driven by a culture prioritizing speed and utility over critical thought. He urged educators to empower young people to think critically and defend democratic principles. Apple and Beane (1995) called for democratic schools that promote participation in governance, cooperation, and social justice, while Milligan and Ragland (2011) advocate for preparing teachers to educate, equip, engage, and empower students in democratic ways of life. If we are to move forward most effectively, we need to know with what and whom we are dealing. Natasha Lennard's (2019) *Being Numerous: Essays on Non-Fascist Life* argued that liberal appeals to truth will not break through a fascist epistemology of power and domination. Understanding how we become fascist and exhibit fascistic behavior in the neoliberal mode is crucial to recognizing fascistic habits when they manifest in work environments as illustrations of the institutional and family conditions of micro-fascism (Peters, 2022). Examination of fascist patterns of thought reveals steps to take in carrying out antifascist education.

*Fascism (Know Your Enemy!)*: Fascism is a multifaceted ideology with interpretations spanning historical-ideological, economic, and social psychological perspectives. Each of these perspectives will be examined more closely below. At the core of fascism lies the exploitation of

human psychological vulnerabilities, especially during periods of economic and social distress (Feigenbaum, 2022). Fascism's unique feature — exploitation of human vulnerability as a tool for political power — becomes clearer when distinguishing among fascism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism.

Although distinct forms of governance, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and fascism share many overlapping characteristics. Authoritarianism is symbolized by centralized power in a single leader or small group of elites, limited political freedoms, and controlled societal attributes, often lacking a guiding ideology and maintaining power through selective legal applications. Totalitarianism extends authoritarianism by holding absolute control over all public and private life, driven by an all-encompassing ideology. It features single-party rule, mass mobilization, extensive surveillance, repression, and control of communication and education to indoctrinate citizens. Fascism is characterized by ultranationalism, strong dictatorial leadership, militarism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism, and corporatism. It suppresses political pluralism and uses propaganda for mass mobilization, differing from other totalitarian systems through its unambiguous nationalist and militaristic ideology (Ben Ghiat, 2024; Stanley, 2018). Consequently, fascism involves both totalitarian and authoritarian characteristics, but not all authoritarian or totalitarian regimes are fascist. With this broad framework in mind, we can see deeper into the specific characteristics and development of fascism through various lenses. The next subsections will examine the historical-ideological, economic, and social psychological perspectives of fascism, shedding light on its origins, evolution, and the ideological underpinnings that have shaped its manifestation across different contexts and periods.

*Historical-Ideological Perspective of Fascism:* Opposing communism and liberal democracy, fascism collaborates with capitalist interests to suppress leftist movements and promote a narrative of national decline followed by a miraculous rebirth. Social Darwinism influences its racist and xenophobic policies (Griffin, 1993). Fascist leaders glorify a mythic past and justify authoritarian measures as law-and-order defenses, often incorporating misogyny and, for lack of a better word, homophobia into their rhetorical attacks on women's and LGBT+ rights as cultural and moral threats. Finally, fascist leaders cultivate personas of infallibility, use violence to suppress opposition, and engage in corruption and cronyism, undermining democratic institutions (Ben-Ghiat, 2020; Stanley, 2018). Fascist regimes use propaganda to control public opinion, masking corruption with anticorruption rhetoric and fostering mistrust among citizens (Stanley, 2018). Fascism undermines intellectualism, science, expertise, and the press, replacing truth with manipulated narratives.

Fascism's adaptability and propagandistic appeal to diverse groups poses a persistent threat to democracy. Antifascism counters this by recognizing fascism's origins, features, and psychological warfare tactics. Recognizing fascism on sight is essential for preventing its resurgence. Teaching about contemporary antifascism is crucial for integrating various social justice movements into a broader antifascist resistance. This involves supporting victims of fascist violence and taking actions to disrupt far-right formations, especially when traditional policing is inadequate. Forming alliances with community-based, anti-fascist groups is vital to defending educators and school officials under fascist attack. For example, anti-fascist activists can support teachers, schools, and school districts who pledge to teach history truthfully as part of the Zinn Education Project which goes beyond traditional textbooks to teach an accurate, complex, and engaging history of the United States, a "people's history" (Vavrus, 2022).

*Economic Perspective of Fascism:* Economic fascism, linked to neoliberal policies, merges corporate and governmental powers to suppress dissent and maintain social hierarchies. The structural basis of fascism is fully realized through corporate-government (corp-gov) merger (Jenkins, 2019). “Democratic” capitalism masks its hegemony through commodified difference and atomic individuality, decimating community and democratic life (Weiner, 2003). Extreme capitalism and neoliberalism concentrate wealth and power, forming an oligarchy that exploits citizens. In this way, fascism, combined with social constructs like patriarchy and white supremacy, oppresses marginalized groups, fostering anger and resentment that fascists exploit to polarize populations and breed violence among citizens.

When driven by international finance capital, neoliberalism enforces policies prioritizing finance over working-class interests, causing wage stagnation and increasing inequality. Neoliberalism’s opposition to state intervention creates political stasis, weakening class resistance and facilitating fascism’s rise (Patnaik, 2020). Neoliberalism claims to ensure economic growth and social justice through competitive markets, but it redefines equality as market competition freedom, shifting social equality responsibility from the state to individuals, masking the resulting inequality. Neoliberalism’s failure to achieve justice necessitates arguments for fundamental rights like housing, education, healthcare, and living wages (Hursh, 2006).

To transcend this threat, it is essential to move beyond neoliberal capitalism towards socialism, mobilizing anti-fascist forces and envisioning a post-neoliberal future (Patnaik, 2020). Antifascist educators teach that socialism is not a threat but a way of living in cooperation with one another. A pedagogical resurgence of antifascism must provide an intellectual, philosophical, and strategic battle plan, understanding the systemic forces of capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy. Paulo Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy of class consciousness emphasizes grasping the systemic roots of oppression and engaging in radical pedagogy. His problem-posing pedagogy encourages a critical perception of reality and personal transformation through dialogue, helping students break free from internalized domination and participate in their liberation (Aronowitz, 1993).

*Social Psychological Perspective of Fascism:* The social psychology of fascism examines the interplay between individual psychological states and broader societal conditions that contribute to authoritarianism and development of fascist attitudes. In *Escape from Freedom* (1946), Erich Fromm explained why individuals in Nazi Germany were drawn to authoritarian figures. He differentiated between negative freedom (freedom from external authority) and positive freedom (freedom to realize one’s individuality). Fromm argued that while negative freedom liberates individuals from traditional constraints, it leaves them feeling isolated and anxious. This existential void drives people to seek refuge in authoritarian systems. Fromm suggested that overcoming these tendencies involves achieving positive freedom through personal authenticity and creative self-expression. He also emphasized the socio-psychological effects of alienation in capitalist societies, stating that fascism results from the unhealthy psychological condition caused by alienation (Sakurai, 2018).

Theodor Adorno and colleagues expanded Fromm’s ideas in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), identifying traits that predispose individuals to fascist ideologies. They developed the F-scale to assess authoritarian tendencies, which include conventionalism, authoritarian submission, and aggression, among others. These traits cluster together to form an authoritarian personality susceptible of fascist propaganda. Bob Altemeyer’s concept of Right-Wing

Authoritarianism (RWA) posits that traits like submission to authority, adherence to conventional norms, and aggression toward those who challenge these norms are socially acquired attitudes rather than innate characteristics. Altemeyer emphasized that socialization practices in institutions such as schools, media, families, and religious organizations play a crucial role (Feigenbaum, 2022).

The socialization perspective provides a compelling explanation for the development of authoritarian personalities. By recognizing that authoritarian traits are learned and rooted in social structures, we can more effectively address the psychological needs and desires that fascism exploits, particularly by preparing antifascist educators. Antifascist education should emphasize self-awareness, autonomy (positive freedom), historical knowledge, civic engagement, critical thinking, and countering far-right ideologies. The 4E model of Milligan & Ragland (2011) — Educate, Equip, Engage, Empower — provides a practical framework for preparing educators in civic education. This model includes educating students to recognize historical knowledge, equipping them with practical tools for critical thinking, engaging them in participation, and empowering them to apply their knowledge as active citizens. By adopting this framework, educators can transform classrooms into spaces for critical dialogue and action against oppressive practices and ideologies, thereby fostering a democratic and just society. Respecting student autonomy is critical. Teachers should allow students to make choices, develop social relations, engage creativity by creating a safe environment for open discussion, cooperation, and respect. Educators must model core democratic values like freedom, equality, and justice, creating an inclusive environment where all students feel respected, regardless of their background (Subba, 2014). Incorporating democratic values in curricula involves methods of teaching that allow for freedom of expression and shared decision-making, like collaborative projects and student-led activities (EUDEC, 2022).

### **How to Be an Antifascist Educator**

A commitment to constructing a new, antifascist system of schooling in the U.S. is vital to counter these anti-democratic forces. Education's role in preventing atrocities and fostering humanity is critical. Adorno (2014, p. 1), emphasized that education's primary goal must be to prevent atrocities like Auschwitz, famously stating, "The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again." Turcotte-Summers (2023) echoed Adorno, calling for antifascist education emphasizing critical thinking and a commitment to truth to combat the rise of the post-truth, authoritarian, fascist era. This principle aligns with Karl Marx's notion of radicalism, "getting to the root of things" (Reich, 1946, p. 7), guiding educators to address the underlying causes of societal issues. Drawing from the philosophies of Paulo Freire and Angela Davis, being a radical pedagogue means engaging deeply with the root causes of oppression and fostering revolutionary class consciousness. Freire emphasized that revolutionary class consciousness is realized through radicalism, a process Davis describes as "simply grasping things at the root" (Jenkins, 2019, p. 28). This approach requires understanding the systemic foundations of societal problems and applying this knowledge to real-world contexts.

To understand how systemic inequalities may be addressed locally, antifascist educators must engage in meaningful dialogue with oppressed communities, confronting oppressive structures without claiming proprietorship over history or liberation. Freire's pedagogy highlights the importance of entering into dialogue with people, listening, confronting, and seeing the world unveiled. Antifascist educators commit to fight alongside the oppressed *within*

history rather than acting as proprietors or liberators (Jenkins, 2019, p. 28). Integrating antifascism into education involves more than recognizing fascist traits; it requires active engagement with contemporary antifascist movements and building community alliances to support those targeted by fascist tactics. As Vavrus wrote (2022, pp. 11-12 and p. 13, respectively), [1] “Community-based antifascists can defend these educators by showing up at school board meetings, demonstrating in support of harassed teachers and librarians, and connecting with concerned parents and educators.” and [2] “To counter the fascist politics of educational absolutism, antifascist educators with community backing can help to claim the contested cultural space of schools as antifascist zones for civic discourse and reasoning.”

Antifascist education is inherently activist. It encourages students to learn about historical insurgent struggles and recontextualize them in contemporary terms. This includes analyzing power dynamics in schools, researching structural change strategies, and understanding civil disobedience's risks and benefits (Weiner, 2003, p. 73). Antifascist educators should also develop skill in public address, legal policy, and unionization to defend progressive practices. An activist curriculum could take various forms, including historical contextualization, power analysis, civic engagement, and critical reflection. By fostering a socially and politically engaged pedagogy, educators can counter the ideological forces of neoliberalism and authoritarianism, promoting critical thinking, empathy, and collaboration.

Antifascist educators must possess the psychological readiness to counter fascist indoctrination and socialization. This involves developing resilience to withstand potential backlash and opposition, as well as cultivating adaptability to navigate complex and evolving social and political landscapes. Antifascist educators must be equipped with the emotional intelligence to manage their own feelings and respond empathetically to students' diverse experiences and reactions. This readiness includes a deep commitment to continuous self-reflection and growth, recognizing and addressing one's own biases and assumptions. Moreover, antifascist educators must have the psychological acuity necessary for recognizing propaganda and gaslighting. This includes being able to identify manipulative language, misinformation, and deceptive narratives used to distort reality and manipulate public perception. Educators should be trained to analyze media sources critically and teach students to do the same, fostering media literacy and critical thinking. Understanding the psychological tactics used in propaganda and gaslighting helps educators and students remain vigilant and critically question authoritarian claims.

Antifascist educators must be prepared to confront and challenge entrenched power structures, often facing significant resistance. They should foster a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where critical dialogue can thrive. Developing strategies to inspire and sustain collective action among students is essential, helping them to recognize and resist fascist ideologies in their communities. Giroux (2024, pp. 6-7) emphasized “the necessity for educators to engage in collective resistance, think on the edge of possibilities, and educate students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change.”

Integrating antifascism into education is not merely an academic exercise but a call to action. Active participation in democratic processes and social activism is vital. Antifascist educators should engage in direct action and community organizing, encouraging students to participate and develop a sense of agency and responsibility. Building partnerships with community organizations and social movements provides students with opportunities for hands-

heads-, and hearts-on learning. Teaching history as a tool for understanding the present and shaping the future is essential, as is developing historical and sociopolitical consciousness. Encouraging students to envision a more equitable and just society, fostering hope, and motivating action towards social change are crucial aspects of antifascist education. This proactive stance transforms schools into zones for civic discourse and reasoning, reclaiming educational spaces from authoritarian influences. An antifascist educator is prepared to teach students how to develop skill in public address and legal policy by fostering a socially and politically engaged pedagogy.

Becoming an antifascist educator is an ongoing process of self-reflection and growth. Educators must develop their identity, understand their psychological vulnerabilities, and engage in regular self-care. Reflecting on values and aligning them with democratic and antifascist principles is crucial. This process involves continuous learning and adaptation to remain effective in promoting democratic ideals and resisting oppressive ideologies, a kind of psychological readiness often overlooked in traditional democratic education. Freire's pedagogy emphasizes that educators must engage students in confronting their own lives and fears, breaking the cycle of psychological oppression. This involves teachers in dialoguing with their own fears, too, as representations of the oppressor's power within themselves, thus attaining freedom from these internalized oppressive relationships (Aronowitz, 1993, pp. 14-16). At bottom, antifascist education requires of educators what good teaching requires of all teachers: A commitment to fostering among the students they teach use of critical consciousness, promotion of social justice, and engagement in civic activism. Antifascist educators are advocates *with* their students. Antifascist educators guide and aid students in putting what they learn in school to use in the world to enhance their lives and improve their life chances. Antifascist educators uphold, defend, and model the democratic ideals that form the foundation of our society.

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