

**HENRY A. GIROUX\***

McMaster University (Canada)

ORCID: 0000-0003-1637-9142

## **Education, fascism, memory, and the crisis of democracy in the 21st Century: Rethinking 9/11**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the intersection of memory, militarism, and the rise of fascism in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. It explores how the post-9/11 era, initially marked by national unity and solidarity, quickly devolved into militarism, xenophobia, and the erosion of civil liberties. The manipulation of collective memory and a regressive form of education have played a central role in the rise of far-right authoritarianism, with fear and historical amnesia fueling fascist politics. The commodification of loss and the disavowal of collective responsibility have undermined democracy, contributing to the current crisis of authoritarianism in America. Central to the fight against this authoritarian drift is the crucial notion of making education central to politics and the production of what might be called a radical democratic imaginary, which plays a vital role in shaping critically informed citizens. The article emphasizes that reclaiming educational spaces—both formal and cultural—as sites of critical inquiry and resistance is essential for resisting fascism and reimagining a democratic future.

### **KEY WORDS**

fascism, 9/11, memory, authoritarianism, democracy, education

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\* [henrygiroux.com](http://henrygiroux.com)

At this moment in history, we find ourselves in a society defined by relentless speed, overwhelming amounts of information, the proliferation of misinformation, and widening inequality (Crary 2014). Fascist politics are increasingly legitimized, long-term commitments are devalued, and the far-right's vision of society constantly shifts, maintaining control through chaos and confusion. In such an environment, memory becomes fragmented and diluted, stripped of its complexity. The gravity of loss and its emancipatory possibilities are divorced from both the past and present, with little effort made to examine how it shapes politics, democracy, and the future. Loss is now produced and legitimized through historical amnesia—a refusal to interrogate, critically engage, or unearth history as a resource for addressing current crises.

Now, 23 years after 9/11, we must ask ourselves: what lessons have we truly learned from that tragic day? How did we, as a society, squander the political and moral opportunities to nurture the newfound sense of solidarity that emerged from such a profound crisis? And how did American foreign policy, through the war on terror, contribute to shaping contemporary Afghanistan—now one of the most repressive countries in the world, especially for women? (Tharoor 2024).

Today, the rise of far-right authoritarianism and fascism, especially in the United States, is exacerbated by a society that prioritizes instant gratification, the commodification of experience, and a relentless focus on material self-interest. The triumph of corporate capitalism has led to staggering economic and political inequities and a disavowal of collective civic engagement. Public life has become privatized, government is demonized, and a culture of cruelty and hyper-individualism reigns. Within this landscape, “loss tends to be an experience we are advised to ‘get past.’” (Frank and Tambornino 2000). But the consequences of this loss—whether it’s the erosion of democracy or the undermining of civic duty—are profound. What was once called “a war on terror” following 9/11 has produced in the last 23 years a country in which fear, if not domestic terrorism, has become central to politics itself.

### **The post-9/11 landscape: memory, militarism, and fascism’s roots**

The decades following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, have been pivotal in shaping this shift toward authoritarianism and fascist politics in the U.S. Initially, 9/11 triggered a collective moment of grief and shared vulnerability, but it also laid the groundwork for militarism, xenophobia, and the erosion of civil liberties. The way in which 9/11 has been remembered and commemorated reflects a tension between genuine collective memory and the manipulation of that memory for political opportunism.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the United States experienced a fleeting moment of national unity, idealism, and solidarity. The loss of nearly 3,000 Americans, followed by over 6,000 more due to illnesses linked to toxic exposure at Ground Zero, sparked a profound collective mourning. In our vulnerability, we found compassion, a renewed dedication to public service, and a shared purpose grounded in sacrifice. Public servants—firefighters, police officers—were hailed as heroes, and the social contract seemed

temporarily rebuilt around common goals. In that brief window, the country appeared to embrace a sense of community that transcended a poisonous and unchecked individualism.

Memory, however, can serve as both a symbol of despair and a threshold for hope, often blurring the line between the two. The shock and violence of 9/11 ruptured an era that had prematurely declared the end of ideology, history, and global conflict, replacing that narrative with unbearable grief, sorrow, and loss. Two and a half decades later, we face the burden of not only remembering the victims of that barbaric violence but also of asking what remains of the fleeting moment when community, solidarity, and compassion briefly reemerged from the shadows. What does it mean to expand our understanding of the loss experienced after 9/11 and recognize that, for a short time, this tragedy presented a rare opportunity—a "crucial experiment" in which the very possibility of the social state and democracy itself was once again up for debate? (Balibar and Swenson 2004: 116).

In the days following 9/11, the American public glimpsed what philosopher Étienne Balibar has termed "the insurrectional element of democracy," a moment when "the very possibility of a community among humans" came into sharp focus (Balibar and Swenson 2004: 119). Yet, just as quickly, this idealism was hijacked. The Bush administration exploited the tragedy as a springboard to expand the military-industrial complex, erode civil liberties through the Patriot Act, and launch a series of unjust wars. Instead of nurturing democratic values, 9/11 became a pretext for fear-mongering, increased surveillance, and hyper-nationalism, laying the groundwork for the rise of far-right extremism in the U.S. and perpetuating a culture of fear and suppression.

As the memory of 9/11 was weaponized, it shifted from a moment of unity to a tool for fostering divisions. The so-called "War on Terror" was steeped in racism and xenophobia, with Muslims and immigrants becoming scapegoats. "Within a short period of time, the notorious war on 'terror' 'included invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, unleashed blood and brutality from the Middle East, Asia and Africa to major European capitals [and] resulted in nearly a million dead and 38 million refugees.'" Not only did the "anti-terrorist wars" cost \$1.5 trillion dollars, they unleashed a regime of torture, abductions, Black sites, and a regime of terror. This laid the groundwork for authoritarian policies that have only intensified in the years since. Fascism, which thrives on fear, resentment, and the dehumanization of the "other," found fertile soil in this post-9/11 landscape, and is now a central organizing principle of the Republican Party in the United States.

### **The rise of fascism in the United States: from 9/11 to trumpism**

The rise of fascist politics in the U.S. is partly indebted to the post-9/11 period. After the initial surge of patriotism, the Bush administration's policies ushered in a new era of militarism and nationalism that blurred the lines between democracy and authoritarianism. The erosion of civil liberties, mass surveillance, and the expansion of the security state created a framework for the far-right to build upon. These seeds blossomed under Donald Trump's presidency, which took the latent fascist tendencies of the post-9/11 era and amplified them.

Trumpism represents the most overt manifestation of fascism in modern America. His presidency was characterized by the embrace of white nationalism, the rejection of democratic norms, and the stoking of fear, division, and hate. Trump's rhetoric targeted immigrants, Muslims, and people of color, framing them as existential threats to the American way of life. His administration's policies mirrored this fascist ideology, from the family separation policy at the U.S.-Mexico border to the Muslim travel ban. Trump's alignment with far-right extremists, including his tacit endorsement of neo-Nazis and white supremacists, fueled the rise of violent far-right movements.

This shift toward authoritarianism was further cemented by Trump's attacks on the media, judiciary, and democratic institutions. His refusal to accept the results of the 2020 election and the subsequent January 6th insurrection were the culmination of years of undermining the pillars of democracy. Trump's influence continues to loom large, as far-right extremism remains a potent force in American politics, emboldened by his rhetoric and policies. In his September 10<sup>th</sup> debate with Vice President Kamal Harris, Trump made clear both his embrace of authoritarianism and his addiction to lies, racism, pathological misogyny, contempt for democracy, and embrace of dictators like Viktor Orban—a modern dictator who has claimed he is against mixed races and democracy itself.

### **The crisis of memory and the erosion of democracy**

The rise of fascism in the U.S. cannot be understood without recognizing the role that memory—or the lack thereof—plays in shaping contemporary politics. Memory is both a tool of resistance and a weapon of manipulation. In the post-9/11 world, collective memory has been eroded, commodified, and weaponized by those in power. The memory of 9/11 has been used to justify wars, normalize surveillance, and erode civil liberties. Meanwhile, historical amnesia about the dangers of fascism has allowed far-right movements to rebrand themselves and grow.

This crisis of memory is reflected in how the public increasingly disconnects from the past, failing to learn from the lessons of history. Fascism thrives on this amnesia, presenting itself as a new solution to old problems while obscuring the horrors of its past iterations. In the U.S., the failure to reckon with the country's legacy of racism, violence, and inequality has allowed far-right movements to flourish under the guise of nationalism and patriotism. Moreover, corporate culture has not only normalized fascist politics in the U.S., it embraces it in its cultural politics and the powerful media platforms at its disposal. For instance, Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News star who is currently hosting one of America's top podcasts, followed by millions, hosted for two hours in 2024 an apologist for Adolf Hitler. In the course of the conversation, the audience was treated to another version of Holocaust denial, the lie that Churchill not Hitler was responsible for WWII, and that everything we have been told about Nazi Germany is a lie. Michelle Goldberg captures profoundly what the implications of this type of fascist myth making means politically. She writes:

[...] the weakening of the intellectual quarantine around Nazism — and the MAGA right's fetish for ideas their enemies see as dangerous — makes it easier for influential conservatives to surrender to fascist impulses.... Ultimately, Holocaust denial isn't really about history at all, but about what's permissible in the present and imaginable in the future. If Hitler is no longer widely understood as the negation of our deepest values, America will be softened up for Donald Trump's most authoritarian plans, including imprisoning masses of undocumented immigrants in vast detention camps (Goldberg 2024).

The attack on and falsification of memory is central to the rise of fascism. Instead of engaging with the complexities of the past, public memory is increasingly reduced to spectacle. Events like 9/11 are transformed into symbols of victimhood and used to stoke fear and division, rather than being platforms for reflection and dialogue. This pathological rewriting of memory erases the possibility of solidarity and collective responsibility, leaving a vacuum that fascism fills with its narrative of fear and exclusion.

### **Democracy in crisis: fighting fascism today**

In the face of these rising threats, the fight against fascism and the defense of democracy have become urgent. The authoritarian drift in the U.S., intensified by post-9/11 policies and accelerated by the Trump era, has placed democratic institutions in peril. The suppression of voting rights, the rise of disinformation, and the erosion of trust in public institutions are all part of this broader attack on democracy. Yet, there is hope. The resurgence of democratic movements—whether through racial justice protests, climate activism, or efforts to protect voting rights—demonstrates that the fight for democracy is not over. These movements are a reminder that solidarity, memory, and collective responsibility remain powerful antidotes to fascism. They challenge the authoritarian narrative of division and exclusion with one of inclusivity and shared purpose.

### **Conclusion: memory, fascism, and the future of democracy**

The rise of fascism in the U.S. post-9/11 is a stark reminder that democracy is fragile and requires constant vigilance. The erosion of memory, the commodification of loss, and the manipulation of fear have all contributed to the current crisis. Far-right movements thrive in this environment, exploiting societal divisions, fostering fear, and undermining democratic institutions. At the heart of this crisis of memory, historical consciousness, and the scourge of manufactured ignorance is a crisis of education. Education is central to politics because it is about the struggle over identities, values, power, and the future. As Marx once said history may be open, but its fate is politically and ethically is not guaranteed. The struggle over memory, history, and agency are crucial to the fate of democracy, and, once again, this is not only a struggle over economic institutions but also pedagogical struggle over consciousness, social responsibility, persuasion, and individual and social agency.

But the future is not yet written. The challenge now is to reclaim the memory of past struggles against fascism, rebuild collective solidarity, and reimagine a democratic future.

This means confronting the forces of neoliberalism and authoritarianism, resisting the pull of fascist politics, and embracing a vision of democracy rooted in justice, equality, and shared responsibility. Memory must be a tool for resistance, guiding us as we confront the dangers of fascism and work to create a future where democracy can truly flourish.

It is crucial to recognize that democracy cannot exist without critically informed and engaged citizens. Education, in all its forms, is at the heart of this struggle. From classrooms to digital platforms, from media outlets to the arts, every site of learning becomes a battleground for the soul of society. These diverse educational spaces are not merely industries; they are cultural forces that shape how we understand ourselves, our history, and our possibilities for the future. In this age of rising authoritarianism, we must broaden our understanding of education to encompass these spaces, interrogating them not just as machineries of domination, but also as powerful tools for emancipation. If we are to build a truly democratic society, every corner of culture must become a site of critical inquiry and resistance, a space where citizens are empowered to challenge oppressive forces and reimagine a more just world.

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