

Article

A Time for Hope in Dark Times

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Abstract: This article explores the political importance of embracing a notion of hope in a time of growing authoritarianism across the globe. It defines hope as the ability to both mobilize what might be called a democratic imaginary and a notion of hope rooted in a realistic assessment of what it means to engage in forms of struggle for economic and social justice, both pedagogically and politically. We argue that hope is the bases for agency and that without hope, there is no agency of possibility of civic engagement and struggle.

Keywords: dark times; fascism; education; hope; optimism; resistance; agency; pedagogy; fascist politics

The dark times that haunt the current age are epitomized by the barbarians who echo the politics of a fascist past and have come to rule the United States, Hungary, Turkey, Poland, Brazil, the Philippines, and elsewhere. The designers of a new breed of fascism increasingly dominate major political formations and other commanding political and economic institutions across the globe. Their nightmarish reign of misery, violence, and disposability is legitimated, in part, in their control of a diverse number of cultural apparatuses that produce a vast machinery of manufactured consent. This reactionary educational formation includes the mainstream broadcast media, digital platforms, the Internet, and print culture, all of which participate in an ongoing spectacle of violence, the aestheticization of politics, the legitimation of opinions over facts, and an embrace of a culture of ignorance. Under the reign of this normalized architecture of neoliberal ideology, critical education is now regarded with disdain, words are reduced to data, and science is confused with pseudo-science.

The promise of a robust democracy is receding as present-day fascists work to subvert language, values, courage, vision, and a critical consciousness. We live at a time when the language of democracy has been pillaged, stripped of its promises and hopes. If fascism is to be defeated, there is a need to make education an organizing principle of politics and, in part, this can be done with a language that exposes and unravels falsehoods, systems of oppression, and corrupt relations of power while making it clear that an alternative future is possible. Hannah Arendt was right in arguing that language is crucial in highlighting the often hidden “crystalized elements” that make fascism likely (Arendt [1973] 2001). Language can be a powerful tool in the search for truth and the condemnation of falsehoods and injustices. Moreover, it is through language that the history of fascism can be remembered and the lessons of the conditions that created the plague of genocide can provide the recognition that fascism does not reside solely in the past and that its traces are always dormant, even in the strongest democracies. Historical memory in this case becomes a pedagogical tool that prevents us from looking away both from the horrors of the past and the way they linger on in the present.

Under such circumstances, resurrecting the social imagination in order to affirm a politics of hope becomes a central political and moral practice in the fight to revive civic literacy, civic culture, and a notion of shared citizenship. Politics loses its emancipatory possibilities if it cannot provide the conditions for enabling students and others to think against the grain and realize themselves as informed, critical, and engaged citizens. There is no radical politics without a pedagogy capable of

awakening consciousness, challenging common sense, and creating modes of analysis in which people discover a moment of recognition that enables them to rethink the conditions that shape their lives.

This suggests that one of the most serious challenges facing teachers, artists, journalists, writers, and other cultural workers is the task of developing a discourse of both critique and possibility. This means developing discourses and pedagogical practices that connect a critical reading the word with reading the world, and doing so in ways that enhance the creative capacities of young people and provide the conditions for them to become critical agents. Not only does this mean teaching students to understand the world in an imaginative way, it also means keeping alive the hope of democracy and the institutions that make it possible. In taking up this project, educators and others should attempt to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to become critical and engaged citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make desolation and cynicism unconvincing and hope practical.

Hope in this instance is educational, removed from the fantasy of an idealism that is unaware of the constraints facing the dream of a radical democratic society. This is a notion of hope that is attentive to addressing the difficult conditions that shape the larger social order and rejects theoretical analyses that function as a predetermined blueprint removed from specific contexts and struggles. On the contrary, it is the precondition for providing those languages and values that point the way to imagining a future that does not replicate the nightmares of the present.

We live in dangerous times. Consequently, there is an urgent need for more individuals, institutions, and social movements to come together in the belief that the current regimes of tyranny can be resisted, that alternative futures are possible, and that acting on these beliefs through collective resistance will make radical change happen. Put differently, it is crucial in a time of tyranny to embrace a politics of hope not out of desperation, but to recognize its importance as a foundation for being able to think otherwise in order to act otherwise. In this sense, hope is inextricably connected both to social change and the possibility of a more just world, one that demands merging matters of ethics and social responsibility with taking a stand against injustice.

In an age of rising right-wing populist movements and authoritarian governments, it is more and more difficult to think beyond an era of foreclosed hope, or to take up the notion that there is a different future beyond the dark times marked by the current resurgence of a global fascist politics. For us, one of the great dangers and challenges of the contemporary moment is that the power of hope becomes illusory and privatized, suggesting that the space of the possible is not larger than the one in which people now find themselves. Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult for individuals to translate private troubles into public issues and systemic considerations. Our optimism is based on the belief that the dream of a just and equitable society must challenge neoliberalism's ability to use corporate controlled cultural apparatuses and state violence as weapons to impose what the novelist Toni Morrison states is "a coma on the population" producing misery and traumas so deep and cruel that they kill the moral imagination and "purge democracy of all of its ideals" (Morrison 2019).

Our optimism is also based on the perception that there is a growing resistance around the world, especially among young people, who live in an age in which the problems that extend from the threat of an ecological disaster and nuclear war to the ongoing assault on any viable notion of democracy by a savage neoliberalism are too urgent to ignore. Such dissatisfaction is growing globally as, for instance, indicated by a recent poll conducted by the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer that indicates 56% of people in 28 countries believe "that capitalism as it exists today does more harm than good in the world."¹ The critical awareness of such problems is central to numerous youth movements that realize that their future has been cancelled and that they have been written out of the script of democracy.

Central to our optimism about the next decade is the recognition that hope cannot take place without a struggle. We believe that such struggles are the outgrowth of radical social visions, expanding

¹ Edelman Trust Barometer (19th January 2020). Online: <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>.

critical consciousness, and social movements that draw on the rich histories and legacies of resistance movements fighting for equality, democracy, social justice, and human rights. Evidence of such struggles can be found in the growing resistance to global neoliberalism in Chile, France, Peru, and Ecuador, among other countries.

Another reason for our sense of hope is based on a developing consciousness among a majority of people in the United States who support a range of progressive values that include Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, student loan forgiveness, free tuition, abortion rights, human immigration policies, legislation that sustains the environment, a living minimum wage, and taxing the ultra-rich and big corporations. An embrace of similar essential democratic values is sparking revolts in a range of other countries.

We believe that the threat to the planet and humankind is so urgent that there is no space in between from which to choose. The machinery of death unleashed by the avatars of neoliberal greed, disposability, and exploitation wears its horrors like a badge of honor, all the while producing death-dealing global networks of finance and social irresponsibility. Nevertheless, power is not only about domination but also about resistance, which is now worldwide, mobilized by millions, and the call here is not just to win justice through phony elections but to shut down militarized institutions, cultures, and ideologies of racism, exploitation, and human suffering through direct action. We are optimistic when thousands take to the streets, and the punishing state loses the only weapon it has left—sheer repression.

Our optimism stems from the belief that without hope, there is no possibility for producing radical democratic mass movements that can both hold power accountable and implement transformative structural changes. We believe that agency is the condition of struggle, and hope is the condition of agency. Hope expands the space of the possible and becomes a way of recognizing and naming the incomplete nature of the present. It also recognizes in the words of the novelist, Lukas Bärfuss, that “cynicism and resignation are simply other words for cowardice” and that the possibility of a more just and humane world rests on the assumption that no society is ever just enough (Bärfuss and Lewis 2020). Our optimism stems from a militant optimism which suggests a deep understanding of history, the importance of individual and collective agency, civic courage, and a sense of educated hope that believes that resistance is no longer an option but a necessity.

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