



READING AGAINST FASCISM IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

LEITURA CONTRA O FASCISMO NA ERA DO TRUMP

LECTURA CONTRA EL FASCISMO EN LA ERA TRUMP

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Resumo: Este artigo explora a leitura como um ato de interpretação e um ato de resistência em uma época em que o neoliberalismo reduz a possibilidade de contemplação, pensamento crítico e ação coletiva. Defende-se a leitura como uma prática que envolve a memória histórica, a desaceleração do tempo, uma compreensão abrangente da política e uma pré-condição para a agência individual e coletiva. Argumenta-se que, contra uma indiferença entorpecente à ascensão do fascismo nos Estados Unidos, é difícil imaginar um momento mais urgente para desenvolver uma linguagem de crítica e possibilidade que servisse para despertar nossos sentidos críticos e imaginativos e nos ajudar a libertar-nos do mundo, pesadelo tirânico que desceu sobre os Estados Unidos sob o domínio de Donald Trump. Em uma era de isolamento social; excesso de informação; uma cultura de imediatismo, excesso de consumo e violência espetacularizada; ler livros críticos e outros textos representacionais, juntamente com o pensamento analítico, permanecem necessários, se quisermos levar a sério a noção de que uma democracia radical não pode existir ou ser defendida sem cidadãos informados e engajados.

Palavras-chave: Leitura Crítica. Fascismo. Donald Trump.

Abstract: This article explores reading as both an act of interpretation and an act of resistance in an age in which neoliberalism undercuts the possibility of contemplation, critical thought and collective action. The article makes a case for reading as a practice that engages historical memory, a slowing down of time, a comprehensive understanding of politics, and as a precondition for individual and collective agency. Giroux argues that against a numbing indifference to the rise of fascism in the United States, it is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for developing a language of critique and possibility that would serve to awaken our critical and imaginative senses and help free us from the tyrannical nightmare that has descended upon the United States under the rule of Donald Trump. In an age of social isolation; information overflow; a culture of immediacy, consumer glut and spectacularized violence; reading critical books and other representational texts coupled with thinking analytically remain necessary if we are to take seriously the notion that a radical democracy cannot exist or be defended without informed and engaged citizens.

Keywords: Critical reading. Fascism. Donald Trump.

Resumen: Este artículo explora la lectura como un acto de interpretación y un acto de resistencia en una época en que el neoliberalismo reduce la posibilidad de contemplación, pensamiento crítico y acción colectiva. El artículo defiende la lectura como una práctica que implica la memoria histórica, la desaceleración del tiempo, una comprensión integral de la política y una precondition para la agencia individual y colectiva. Giroux argumenta que, contra una indiferencia entorpecectiva a la ascensión del fascismo en Estados Unidos, es difícil imaginar un momento más urgente para desarrollar un lenguaje de crítica y posibilidad que sirviera para despertar nuestros sentidos críticos e imaginativos y ayudarnos a liberarnos del mundo. pesadilla tiránica que descendió sobre Estados Unidos bajo el dominio de Donald Trump. En una era de aislamiento social; exceso de información; una cultura de imediatismo, exceso de consumo y violencia espectacularizada; leer libros críticos y otros textos representacionales, junto con el pensamiento analítico, siguen siendo necesarios, si queremos tomar en serio la noción de que una democracia radical no puede existir o ser defendida sin ciudadanos informados y comprometidos.

Palabras-clave: Lectura Crítica. Fascismo. Donald Trump.

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The Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin once argued that every rise of fascism bears witness to a failed revolution. Benjamin was not only addressing elements of a failed political revolution, but also the failure of language, values, courage, vision and a critical consciousness. In the midst of a moment when an older social order is crumbling and a new one is struggling to define itself, there is always a moment of confusion and danger. We have arrived at such a moment in which two worlds are colliding.

First, there is the harsh and crumbling worlds of neoliberal globalization and its mobilizing passions that fuel a US-style fascism². Second, there is a counter movement with its search for a new politics that can rethink, reclaim and invent a new understanding of democratic socialism, untainted by capitalism (DERBER, 2017; GEISELBERGER, 2017). In the midst of this struggle, a new political movement and social order will be born, though one without guarantees. Something sinister and horrifying is happening to liberal democracies all over the globe. The global architecture of democracy is giving way to authoritarian tyrannies. As alarming as the signs may be, the public cannot look away and allow the terrors of the unforeseen to be given free rein. For those who believe in a radical democracy, we cannot allow the power of dreams to turn into nightmares.

It is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for developing a language of critique and possibility that would serve to awaken our critical and imaginative senses and help free us from the tyrannical nightmare that has descended upon the United States under the rule of Donald Trump. In an age of social isolation; information overflow; a culture of immediacy, consumer glut and spectacularized violence; reading critical books and other representational texts coupled with thinking analytically remain necessary if we are to take seriously the notion that a democracy cannot exist or be defended without informed and engaged citizens. This is especially true at a time when denial has become a national pastime matched only by

² See, especially, Stuart Hall, Chapter 1: “The Neoliberal Revolution,” *The Neoliberal Crisis*, ed. Edited by Jonathan Rutherford and Sally Davison, [London: Lawrence Wishart 2012]. Online: http://wh.agh.edu.pl/other/materialy/678_2015_04_21_22_04_51_The_Neoliberal_Crisis_Book.pdf; David Harvey: *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, (Princeton University Press, 2008). Wendy Brown, “Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution,” (New York: Zone Books, 2015). Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality* (St. Martin’s Press, 2017); George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage* (Verso Press, 2017); Henry A. Giroux, *American Nightmare: Facing the Challenge of Fascism* (City Lights 2018).



the increasing normalization of one of the most alarming administrations ever to take hold of the US presidency.

Against a numbing indifference, despair or withdrawal into the private orbits of the isolated self, there is a need to create those formative cultures that are humanizing, foster the capacity to hear others, sustain complex thoughts and engage social problems. We have no other choice if we are to resist the increasing destabilization of democratic institutions, the assault on reason, the collapse of the distinction between fact and fiction, and the taste for brutality that now spreads across the US like a plague. Reading critically means not only learning how to read the world, but also learning how to think analytically while refusing to succumb to the unthinkable. Reading is not only valuable as a form of translation, but also as George Steiner observes follows language as “the main instrument of [people’s] refusal to accept the world as it is.” (STEINER, 1999). The pedagogical lesson here is that fascism begins with hateful words, the demonization of others considered disposable, and moves to an attack on ideas, the burning of books, the disappearance of intellectuals, and the emergence of the carceral state and the horrors of detention jails and camps. As Jon Nixon suggests, reading as a form of critical “education provides us with a protected space within which to think against the grain of received opinion: a space to question and challenge, to imagine the world from different standpoints and perspectives, to reflect upon ourselves in relation to others and, in so doing, to understand what it means to ‘assume responsibility’ (NIXON, 2015). Reading against the grain offers opportunities for people to break out of their own experiences at a time when neoliberal ideology not only constrains our imagination but also imprisons them in almost impenetrable orbits of self-interest and hyper- individualism.

Trump's presidency may only be symptomatic of the long decline of liberal democracy in the United States, but its presence signifies one of the gravest challenges, if not dangers, the country has faced in over a century. A formative culture of lies, ignorance, corruption and violence is now fuelled by a range of orthodoxies shaping US life, including social conservatism, market fundamentalism, apocalyptic nationalism, religious extremism and white nationalism -- all of which occupy the centers of power at the highest levels of government. Historical memory and moral witnessing have given way to a bankrupt nostalgia that celebrates the most regressive moments in US history.



Fantasies of absolute control, racial cleansing, unchecked militarism and class warfare are at the heart of a US social order that has turned lethal. This is a dystopian social order marked by hollow words, an imagination pillaged of any substantive meaning, cleansed of compassion and used to legitimate the notion that alternative worlds are impossible to entertain. What we are witnessing is an abandonment of democratic institutions and values and a full-scale attack on dissent, thoughtful reasoning and the radical imagination. Trump has degraded the office of the president and has elevated the ethos of political corruption, hyper-masculinity and lying to a level that leaves many people numb and exhausted. He has normalized the unthinkable, legitimated the inexcusable and defended the indefensible. Under such circumstances, the United States is moving into the dark shadows of a present that bears a horrifying resemblance to an earlier period of fascism with its language and/or racial purification, hatred of dissent, systemic violence, intolerance and its "glorification of aggressive and violent solutions to complex social problems" (HOPGOOD, 2017).

The history of fascism offers an early warning system and teaches us that language which operates in the service of violence, desperation and the troubled landscapes of hatred carries the potential for resurrecting the darkest moments of history. It erodes our humanity, and makes many people numb and silent under the glare of ideologies and practices that mimic and legitimate hideous and atrocious acts. This is a language that eliminates the space of plurality, glorifies walls and borders, hates differences that do not mimic a white public sphere, and makes vulnerable populations -- even young children -- superfluous as human beings. Trump's language, like that which characterized older fascist regimes, mutilates contemporary politics, disdains empathy and serious moral and political criticism, and makes it more difficult to criticize dominant relations of power. His toxic language also fuels the rhetoric of war, a super-charged masculinity, anti-intellectualism and a resurgent white supremacy. But it's not his alone. It is the language of a nascent fascism that has been brewing in the United States for some time. It is a language that is comfortable viewing the world as a combat zone, a world that exists to be plundered, one that views those deemed different because of their race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation as a threat to be feared, if not eliminated. When Trump uses the toxic rhetoric of "animals," "infest," "vermin," he is doing more than using ugly epithets, he is also materializing such discourse into policies that



rip children from their mother's arms, puts young children in cages, and forces children as young 1 year-old to appear before immigration judges (ASSOCIATED PRESS, 2018).

And while there is no perfect mirror, it has become all the more difficult for many people to recognize how the "crystalized elements" of totalitarianism have emerged in new forms in the shape of a US-style fascism. In part, this may be because history is no longer treated seriously, especially at a time when the need for instant pleasure and the language of tweets overrides the necessary discipline and potential pleasure that comes with the slowing down of time and the hard work of imaginative contemplation. Moreover, as Leon Wiesltier observes we live in an era in which "words cannot wait for thoughts [and] patience is a ... liability." [<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/books/review/among-the-disrupted.html>] In age of instant gratification, the history has become a burden to be treated like a discarded relic that no longer deserves respect. The past is now either too unpleasant to contemplate or is delegated to the abyss of willful ignorance and consigned to the memory hole. However frightening and seemingly impossible in a liberal democracy, neither history nor the ghost of fascism can be dismissed because Trump has not created concentration camps or engineered plans for genocidal acts, though he has caged children and denied immunity to immigrants who, if forced to return to their countries, face an almost certain death. Fascism is hardly a relic of the past or a fixed political and ideological system.

Renowned historian of modern Germany Richard Evans observes the Trump administration may not replicate all the features of Germany and Italy in the 1930s, but the legacy of fascism is important because it echoes a dangerous "warning from history" that cannot be written off (EVANS, 2017). Fascism is not static and the protean elements of fascism always run the risk of crystallizing into new forms. The ghosts of fascism should terrify us, but most importantly, the horrors of the past should educate us and imbue us with a spirit of civic justice and collective courage in the fight for a substantive and inclusive democracy. Historical consciousness is a crucial tool for unravelling the layers of meaning, suffering, search for community, the overcoming of despair, and the momentum of dramatic change, however unpleasant this may be at times. No act of the past can be deemed too horrible or hideous to contemplate if we are going to enlarge scope of our imaginations and the reach of social justice, both of which might prevent us from looking away, indifferent to the suffering around us. This suggests the need for rethinking the importance of historical



memory, civic literacy and the importance of reading as a critical act central to an informed and critical sense of agency. Rather than dismiss the notion that the organizing principles and fluctuating elements of fascism are still with us, a more appropriate response to Trump's rise to power is to raise questions about what elements of his government signal the emergence of a fascism suited to a contemporary and distinctively US political, economic and cultural landscape.

In an age when memory is under attack, critical reading becomes both a source of hope and a tool of resistance. Reading critically is fundamental to connect the past to the present and to viewing the present as a window into those horrors of the past that must never be repeated. The US is sinking into the abyss of fascism. The signs are all around us, and we cannot afford to ignore them. A critical reading of history provides us with a vital resource that helps inform the ethical ground for resistance -- an antidote to Trump's politics of disinformation, division, diversion and fragmentation. Memory as a form of critical consciousness is crucial in developing a form of historical and social responsibility to offset a willful ignorance that reinforces the American nightmare (GIROUX, 2018). In the face of this nightmare, thinking and judging must be connected to our actions³. At the very least, thinking critically, reading contemplatively, slowing time down, and refusing the commodified emotional management produced by neoliberalism provides the opportunity and space for people to say no and refuse "to settle for fast solutions, easy answers [and] formulaic resolutions." (Davis, 2016). In this instance, as I have said elsewhere "Historical learning is not about constructing a linear narrative but about blasting history open, rupturing its silences, highlighting its detours, acknowledging the events of its transmission, and organizing its limits within an open and honest concern with human suffering, values, and the legacy of the often unrepresentable or misrepresented" (GIROUX, 2004).

We live at a time when the corruption of discourse has become a defining feature of politics, reinforced largely by an administration and a conservative media apparatus that does not simply lie, but also works hard to eliminate the distinction between fantasy and fact. As

³ See, for example, the classic essay: Jerome Kohn, "Totalitarianism: The Inversion of Politics," The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress Essays and lectures---"On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding" (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.) Online at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml/essayb1.html>



Hannah Arendt has argued, at issue here is the creation of modes of agency that are complicit with fascist modes of governance. She writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exists" (ARENDDT, 1973).

Under the reign of hyperactive neoliberalism, time and attention have become a burden, subject to an "excess of stimuli, information, and impulses [and] radically changes the structure and economy of attention. Perception becomes fragmented and scattered" (Han, 2015). The contemplative attention central to reading critically and listening attentively now give way to a hyperactive flow of information in which thinking is overcome by speed, compulsion, sound bytes, fragments of information, and a relentless stream of disruptions. There is a type of violence in which the fragmented mind undercuts the capacity to think dialectically, undermining the ability to make connections, imagine capaciously, and develop comprehensive maps of meaning (HAN, 2017). At work here is a form of depoliticization that leaves individuals isolated, exhausted, ignorant of the forces that bear down on their lives, and susceptible to a high-charged culture of stimulation.

The terror of the unforeseen becomes ominous when history is used to hide rather than illuminate the past, when it becomes difficult to translate private issues into larger systemic considerations, and people willingly allow themselves to be both seduced and trapped into spectacles of violence, cruelty and authoritarian impulses. Reading the world critically is the precondition for intervening in the world. That is why critical reading and reading critically is so dangerous to Trump, his acolytes and those who hate democracy. Democracy can only survive with a public attentive to the power of language, reading and books and texts that matter. It can only survive when we refuse to engage the power to think otherwise in order to act otherwise.

The crisis of neoliberalism with its financial ruin for millions, its elimination of the welfare state, its deregulation of corporate power, its unchecked racism and its militarization of society, has to be matched by a crisis of ideas, one that embraces historical memory, rejects the normalization of fascist principles and opens a space for imagining that alternative worlds can be brought into being. While the long-term corrosion of politics and the emerging



fascism in the US will not end by simply learning how to read critically, the spaces opened by reading critically creates a bulwark against cynicism and fosters a notion of hope that can be translated into forms of collective resistance. That is why reading and thinking critically is so dangerous and is so necessary. Thinking critically and acting courageously in dark times is not an option, but a necessity.

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