

Teaching Anti-Fascism in Response to Far-Right Educational Absolutism

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“The path to save the nation is very simple – it’s going to go through the school boards.”

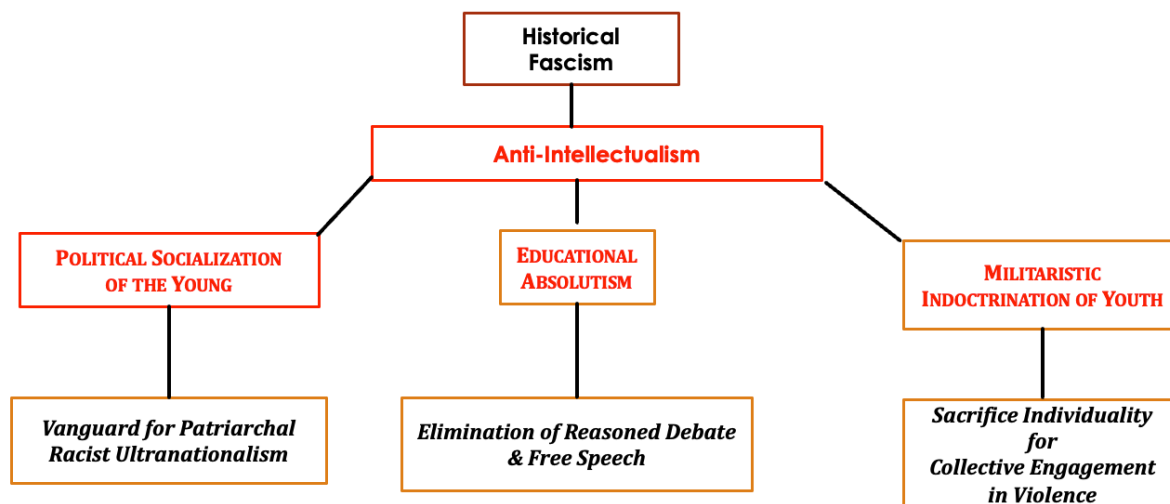
Steve Bannon (2021)
former adviser to President Trump

Political socialization in public schools through some form of citizenship education is universal and not necessarily unique to fascism (Jennings, 2015). An extreme form of anti-intellectual civic education was, however, a common socialization thread and priority under 20th century European fascism. Suffused with indoctrination and absolutism, fascist anti-intellectualism during the interwar years spread throughout the school curriculum and extracurricular activities. All aspects of schooling were critical for fascists to control. Under fascism schools were “to glorify the mythic past, elevating the achievements of members of the nation and obscuring the perspectives and histories of those who do not belong” (Stanley, 2018, p. 47). In this fascist construction of the role of the citizen, politically socialized children were prized to become part of a vanguard for ultranationalistic expectations (Goutam & Gautam, 2014).

Fascists sought the active involvement of young people who would internalize the patriotic project of mythic renewal of a nation embedded with cultural racism. To this end, fascist cultural artifacts portrayed children as the way forward to restore the virility of the nation and to break free from the subjugation of domestic and foreign enemies. What was needed, however, were institutional structures of the state to ensure that children unquestionably embraced the ideology of fascism. The totality of the lives of young people should not be left to chance in eliminating any doubts about asserted merits of fascism. Therefore, education in schools, clubs, and magazines that were aligned with fascist party politics became the primary means of instilling anti-intellectual expectations to patriotically serve the nation in any capacity without hesitancy (Fallace, 2017; Merjian, 2001). Education and extracurricular opportunities for young people were by no means intended to be democratic. Instead, conspiratorial theories replaced truth with loyalty by discrediting the liberal exchange of ideas of associated with universities and independent journalism (Stanley, 2018).

Figure 1, “Fascist Trait of Anti-Intellectualism and Educational Absolutism,” illustrates one key ideal characteristics of historical fascism: Anti-intellectualism. Hinged on anti-intellectualism in fascist-controlled schools was the *political socialization* of young people for service as the vanguard for patriarchal, racist ultranationalism; *educational absolutism* as a means to eliminate reasoned civic debate and free speech; and *militaristic indoctrination* of youth to sacrifice their individuality for collective engagement in violence.

Figure 1: Fascist Trait of Anti-Intellectualism & Educational Absolutism



U.S. Modern Educational Absolutism

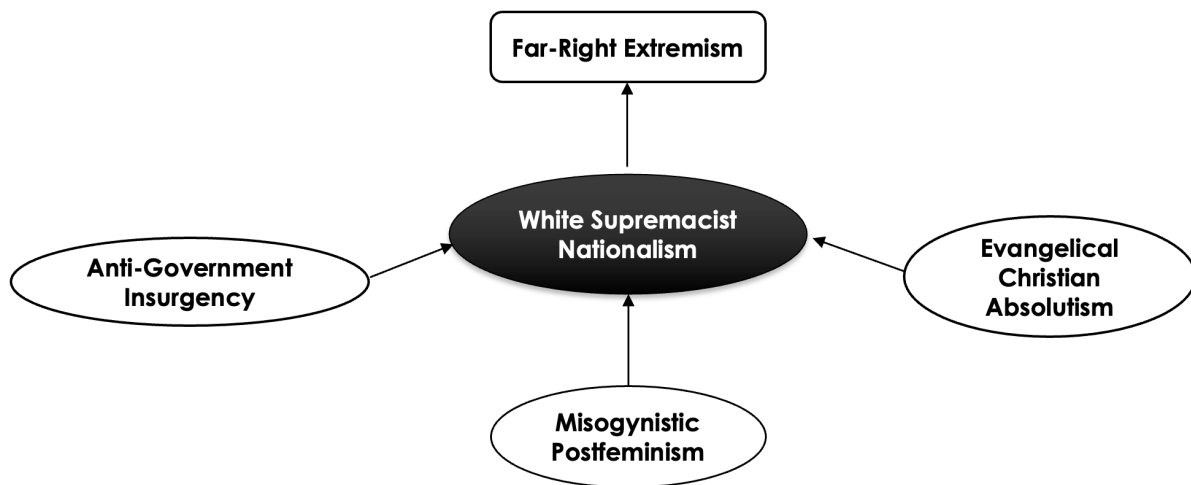
Echoes of fascistic educational absolutism are not new to the U.S. The 1974 case of the West Virginia Kanawha County textbook controversy set a political tone over the place of multiculturalism, religion, sexuality, and gender in the public school curriculum for the next half century. Far-right activists found support in massive protests against textbooks and curricular practices that appeared in any way to contradict White supremacist Evangelical Christian absolutism imbued with patriarchal values. Protesters in the WV state capital firebombed homes of textbook supporters, shot at school buses, fired on schools, dynamited the district’s office building, and violently attacked and injured the school superintendent, assistant superintendent, and two school board members (National Education Association, 1975/1991; Laats, 2015; Phillips-Fein, 2011).

The Trump-encouraged January 6, 2021, coup attempt at the U.S. Capitol is a vivid indicator of this long history of political violence by the far right that spills into local school board meetings. Today the far-right organizes at school board meetings for grievance ranting and disruption combined with death threats against teachers, administrators, and school board member. The far right demonstrates a willingness to condone incivility and the use of physical violence, including far-right Christian evangelicals acceptance of vigilante violence rationalized as “good guys with guns” (as cited in Stewart, 2022, p. A23). Much like 20th century fascist leaders who justified the use of “redemptive violence” because established state institutions failed to carry out ultranationalistic liberation (Paxton, 2004, p. 549), contemporary neo-fascists find confirmation of their turn to violence as a kind of divine righteousness. The far-right considers their fascistic tactics as a valid means to supposedly protect school children and their homeland against ideologically constructed domestic enemies, such as migrant refugees, Muslims, Black Lives Matter protesters, LGBTQ+ populations, and a multicultural curriculum.

Figure 2, “Centrality of White Supremacist Nationalism among Ideal Traits of U.S. Far Right Extremism” offers public school educators and teacher education programs a way

to conceptualize the basic elements of far-right extremism and its fascistic orientation. The ideal or common traits in this typology that feed White supremacist nationalism are anti-government insurgency, misogynistic postfeminism, and evangelical Christian absolutism – each of which is infused with sporadic vigilante violence. The centrality of White supremacy sounds eerily similar to Kochanski’s (2022) observation that “Nazi racial theory was the principal determinant of how the Germans would treat the conquered people” and that “various nationalities would be wooed on the grounds that they were ‘Aryans” (p. 19), much like we see today with the individuals in various ethnic group desiring and claiming Whiteness (see, Hall, 2010).

Figure 2: Centrality of White Supremacist Nationalism among Ideal Traits of U.S. Far Right Extremism



Banning Books with Fascist Violence

During the 2021-22 school year, 138 school districts in 32 states banned more than 2,500 books. These districts include 5,049 schools and in total enroll almost 4 million students (Freidman & Johnson, 2022). Figure 3, “Subject Matter of Banned Content,” provides a graphic representation of the types of books by percentage banned. As illustrated, at the top of the list are books with LGBTQ+ themes and prominent characters of color followed by sexual content, issues of race and racism, themes of rights and activism, biographical material, and stories with religious minorities.

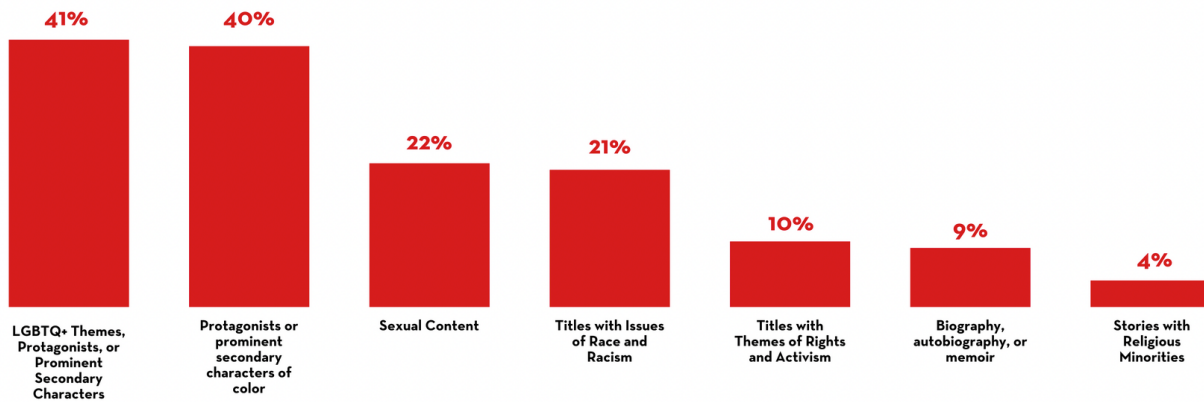
Figure 3: Subject Matter Banned Content

Subject Matter of Banned Content

By Percentage of Unique Banned Titles, July 1, 2021-June 30, 2022



Note: many titles contain more than one type of content.



source: Friedman & Johnson, 2022, "Data snapshot."

An example of extremist desires of the far right was a Virginia school board member who called for LGBTQ+ fiction in schools to be burned: "I think we should throw those books in a fire. I guess we live in a world now that our public schools would rather have kids read about gay pornography than Christ" (as cited in Graziosi, 2022, para. 8). A related Facebook social media post announced, "At the school board meeting we will have a fire pit in the parking lot. And will burn every last one of them. (para. 10).

Fascist violence looms over book banning that includes involvement of police and paramilitaries. A far-right

movement to involve police in efforts to ban books is another aspect of this campaign that is unprecedented in recent memory. Regardless of the legal outcome, the tactic of pressing criminal charges against educators for offering books to students is an attempt to intimidate and discourage librarians and teachers from teaching or offering books that might spark such a virulent response. (Freidman & Johnson, 2022, "Escalating Tactics," para. 2).

The paramilitary vigilante group Proud Boys, whose members participated in the Capitol siege, have disrupted school board meetings and library events (Harris & Alter, 2022). Some long-serving public school and librarians have resigned from their positions due to the stress of constant fascistic harassment. One librarian quit after the far-right attacked staff as "groomers and pedophiles, and saying we need to be fired,.. jailed,.. locked up, that all the books needed to be burned" (as cited in Harris & Alter, 2022, p.. A11). By late 2021 threats and violent acts toward school board members and school staff prompted the Justice Department to begin a process "to address the rise in *criminal conduct* directed toward school personnel" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021, para. 3, emphasis added), a

position that resulted in a well-orchestrated backlash by far-right legislators falsely declaring infringement on the free speech of parents (Rabinowitz, 2022). All of this was in a context of gun manufacturers making over \$1 billion in the past 10 years from just selling AR-15 semi-automatic assault rifles that have been used by paramilitaries and mass murders at public schools and elsewhere (Franklin, 2022; Whitehorse, 2022).

In summary, key ideological traits of far right extremism centered around White supremacist nationalism are those we are witnessing in our current historical moment being legislated into the public school curriculum and libraries.

Far-Right Dark Money and the War on Public Schools

The following section provides a brief overview of how far-right dark money helps to fuel a war against public schools. This includes the role of the Heritage Foundation, Koch foundations, and individual millionaires and billionaires.

The Heritage Foundation's Continuing Fascistic Legacy

The Kanawha County textbook case helped to provide impetus to the now well-funded Heritage Institute that holds more than \$367 million in net assets and provides financial support to contemporary far-right incursions into public schooling (Heritage Foundation, 2022, "2021 Audited Financial Statement"; Laats, 2021). In its formative years in the 1970s the Heritage Foundation stated that schools were teaching students to "embrace racism, fascism, or any other 'ism,' including cannibalism" and that parents "must stop trusting public education" and should, therefore, attack school board meetings by any means necessary (as cited in Laats, 2021, para. 9). The conspiratorial assertions by far-right extremists such as "racism" and "fascism" harkened back to post-WWII fascist strategies to deflect attention away from what they really are in the 21st century: neo-fascists.

The divisive language of the far-right and their evangelical supporters denigrates multiculturalism, according to religious scholar Katherine Stewart (2021): "It says that human existence in an inevitable pluralistic, modern society committed to equality is inherently worthless" (p. 6sr). As Stewart (2022) more recently pointed out, "Breaking American democracy is not an unintended effect of Christian nationalism. It is the point of their project" (p. A23). Rather than framing radical evangelicals operating as "grass roots" protests, Stewart further explains, "This is a leader-driven movement [whose] main goals are power and access to public money" (p. A23). The same could be said about pseudo grass roots group such as "Moms for Liberty."

Moms for Liberty

Moms for Liberty originated with the participation of the wife of the vice chairman of the Florida Republican Party who was a former Heritage Foundation congressional fellow. His wife was listed as the co-founder on the Moms for Liberty incorporation papers and publicly praised by far-right Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. When the group started in 2020, website links led to the Heritage Foundation for a guide to action. Flush with dark money, Moms for Liberty finds support with other far-right anti-democracy groups,

including far-right media, pastors, and politicians – and in some instances local sheriffs (Hayasaki, 2022; Little, 2021).

At an Arkansas meeting of a far-right “parent’s rights” group, Moms for Liberty suggested that local librarians be “plowed down” with a lethal weapon (as cited in Stewart, 2022, p. A11). This rabid hostility and call for violence stems from Moms for Liberty advocacy against any books that hint at gender identity, multiculturalism, sexuality, and historical civil rights struggles. In some cases, county commissioners have worked with Moms for Liberty to censor public library books by denying online access to any of the titles and to terminate librarians for apparently upsetting far-right constituents (Hayasaki, 2022).

The far-right ideologically frames their opposition in an apocalyptic narrative of impending disaster and revelations of the future if far-right evangelical Christians don’t act now : “May God protect our children from this FILTH” and “God is using this to bring awareness to people... It’s a battle between good and evil” (as cited Hayasaki, 2022, p. 38). At one school board meeting, for example, no public objections were heard at the time from board members, the district superintendent, or the audience to a man who contended that, according to the Christian bible and God, anyone identified as transgender is “worthy of death” (as cited in Hale-Shelton, 2022, para. 12). Added into this mix is a Texas cell phone company that financially supports far-right school board members and whose executives contend, “We’re going to put God first” and “to honor God” (as cited in Goodman, 2022, p. A14).

Koch Money Undermining Public Trust in Education

The billionaire Koch family network provided financial support for the initial creation of a far-right boogeyman: the formerly little know critical race theory (CRT). During the first half of 2021 Koch family money and affiliated think tanks produced 72 documents with “talking points, briefed legislators, and generally pushed state governments to censor their conception of CRT wherever possible” (UnKoch My Campus, 2021, “Critical Race Theory in the Biden Era,” para. 4). The primary goals of the attack on public education and multiculturalism by the Koch network are to:

- Implement a school voucher system, part of a long campaign to defund public schools.
- Deregulate teacher licensing, to decrease the influence of universities and allow private corporations more influence in schools.
- Relax certain restrictions on which public schools parents can send their kids, a component of modern initiatives to desegregate schools.
- Increase civics education, falsely portrayed as incompatible with teaching about racism.
- Censor educational materials that teach about slavery as a foundational part of the economic development of the US.
- End anti-bias or diversity training in government institutions.

(UnKoch My Campus, 2021, “What it Does,” para. 2).

To advance these goals, Koch “dark money” finds its way to a variety of far-right groups masquerading as “grass roots” organizations, sounding alarms over the curriculum of schools (Legum, Zekeria, & Crosby, 2021). On top of this massive far-right funding, millions of dollars of Koch money have flowed to the electoral campaigns of at least 52 candidates who continue to deny that Biden won the 2022 presidential election and still support overturning the results of that valid and legitimate election (Stone, 2022).

The long-term strategy of destabilizing public education has accelerated during the third decade of the 21st century and continues to undermine belief in and, therefore, support in K-12 public education. During the Trump administration, the Koch organization made an appeal to ostensibly assist public schools with the help of 634 donor who pledged to contribute \$100,000 *annually* to Koch-related groups with the goal to alter “the trajectory of the country” (Hohmann & Greve, 2019, para. 20). The Koch network is most visible in financially enabling of Moms for Liberty, representing a half century far-right anxiety and attacks on public schools. Nevertheless, whereas 57% Republicans contend that public schools have a negative effect, the majority of Americans –61% – polled by the Pew Research Center held a positive toward public schools along with 77% of Democrats (Gramlich, 2022).

Commodification of Public Education

In “Sowing the Seeds of White Supremacy through Education,” Jasmine Banks (2021) analyzes how the Koch project has been intent on destabilizing public education:

Since its conception, the Koch network has worked to undermine the rights and liberties of non-white demographics, starting with an anti-civil rights crusade that challenged *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Koch network has made no secret about how it views public education as a critical arena for influencing U.S. policy and culture. Through a variety of tactics—including charter schools and vouchers; influence on curriculum, textbooks, and trainings; and using state politicians to engage in culture war against progressive ideas. (para. 3)

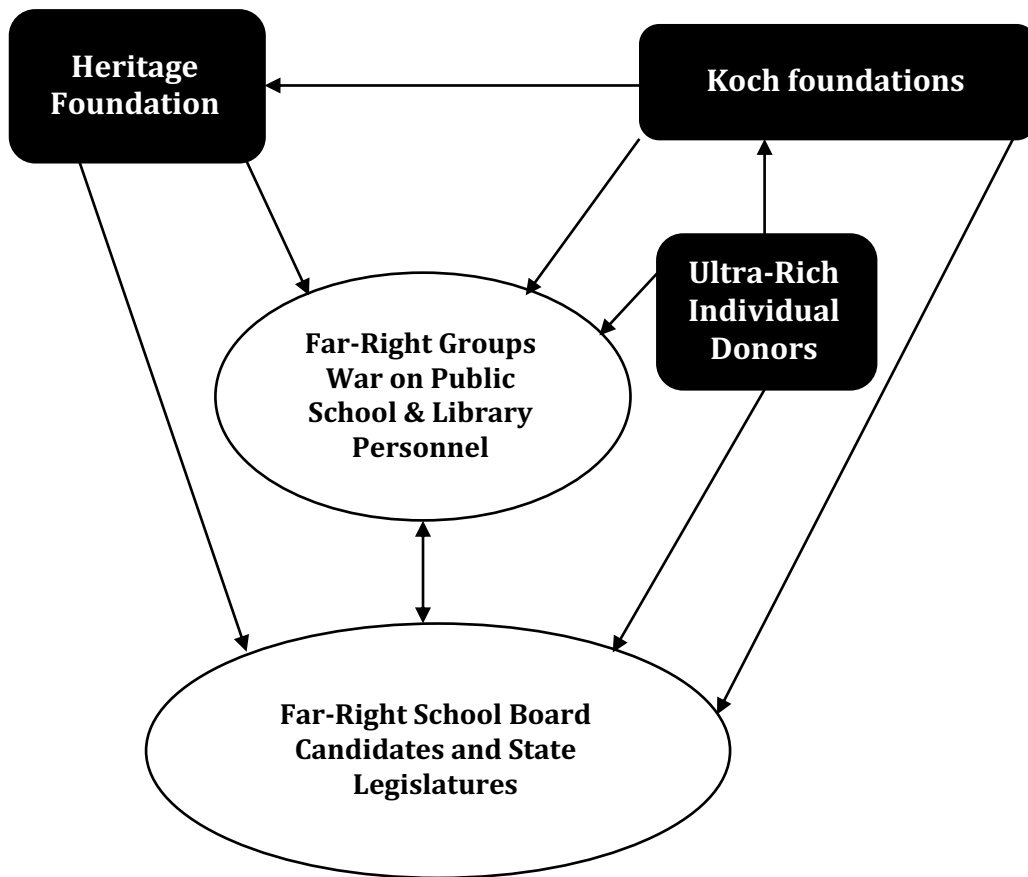
Opaque far-right funding and the elevation of far right Republican leadership discourse that considers the destruction and deaths during the Capitol siege as “legitimate political discourse” provide unique challenges to anti-fascists (as cited in Dawsey & Sonmez, 2022, para. 3).

Figure 4, “Flow of Dark Money to Control & Privatize Public Education,” illustrates how far-right dark money supports the symbiotic relationship between (a) far-right groups and individuals warring on public school and library personnel and (b) far-right school board candidates and Republican state legislatures. For example, just considering federal elections alone, billionaires provide a 3 to 2 advantage in electoral donations to Republicans over Democrats: “Though they represent just 0.000002% of the American population, billionaires were...responsible for 7.4% of all political donations” during the 2022 mid-term elections – totally at least \$881 millions (Rice & Tashman, 2022, p. 6).

In today's politics, we can hear echoes of the political economy of historical fascism:

- Conservatives aligning with far-right extremists who advocate violence using electoral politics to gain inroads in local, state, and national elections,
- Millionaires and billionaires donating huge sums to right-wing groups and candidates, and
- Elected liberals and progressives unable to work together to mount an effective response to stem the rising tide of far-right extremism and neo-fascism.

Figure 4: Flow of Dark Money to Control and Privatize Public Education



Taken together, dark money and conservatives gravitating to authoritarianism through electoral politics provide significant challenges to those who oppose the rise of fascist politics.

Barriers to Normative Anti-Fascist Actions

A purpose of anti-fascism is to halt or neutralize fascistic displays and movements. As a nontraditional countermovement, anti-fascism “exists outside of the realm of policy or state appeals” and, therefore, does not attempt to influence public policy but instead

focuses on undermining and disrupting any fascist formations (Vysotsky, 2021, p. 10). With a growing number of far-right political candidates and elected legislators backed by big money, however, normative anti-fascist actions since the 1980s now face new 21st century challenges.

The far-right's White supremacist nationalism is not going to fade away. Various groups opposed to inclusive public schools such as far-right Christian evangelical nationalists and Moms for Liberty will continue to flourish with handsome donations from millionaires and billionaires. Additionally, the substantial inroads into electoral politics the past five years by far-right candidates and elected officials present further challenges to 21st century anti-fascists who are most active in monitoring and exposing far-right operatives and most publicly visible in self-defense street confrontations with far-right paramilitaries.

Besides far-right movements into electoral politics, anti-fascist popular education must contend with the massive chatter on social media and cable news. Those who regular turn to social media, especially younger adults, tend not to pay close attention to current political events compared to those who tune into cable news (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Oliphant, & Shearer, 2020). The top 10 cable shows generally watched are sports events with the exception of Fox's neo-fascist Tucker Carlson (Nielsen, 2022), a major media propaganda obstacle for anti-fascism.

Although more than half of adults over 50 still tune into TV for news, only 16% of those 18 to 29 do (Shearer, 2021). According to an extensive research study of the media and news consumption habits,

young people are less likely to go directly to news apps and websites, and spend much of their time online with social media and entertainment services. Against this background, it has proved hard to attract attention to traditional news content—which is often seen as a chore—or to news brands that often feel irrelevant to their personal lives. (Galan, Osserman, Parker, & Taylor, 2019, p. 55)

In effect, it is unclear to the extent young adults grasp the perils to their own personal lives with the increasing incursions of fascist politics into both the both private and public spheres.

Legal scholar and researcher of the far right David Renton (2022) encourages anti-fascists to recognize how the growing entrenchment of the far-right internationally poses a different kind of struggle. He notes,

We face a new populist right willing to ally with fascists, and to mimic their language on immigration, cultural wars, et cetera.... Why should we expect a return to democratic innocence when more countries are abandoning democracy than joining in? Why should we expect liberalism to prosper in the US when it is dying in Italy, in Britain, and in France? (p. 478)

Renton's observations suggest that anti-fascist approaches from even a few years ago must be rethought.

Anti-Fascism as a Resistance Movement

Educators can learn from the challenges of resistance movements against mid-20th century fascism as they need to make necessary connections with supportive community groups. Anti-fascist educators can reframe their actions as resisters, recalling those civilians who resisted and fought WWII fascism. During the 1930s and 1940s resisters were not always as self-identified anti-fascists as many were not part of a larger resistance movement. These Europeans were sometimes medical personnel offering aid to resisters and other civilians simply trying to escape the tyranny and violence of fascism. As Kochanski (2022) notes about those resisting fascism, "[P]eople needed to know that they were not alone and they needed to know what do" (p. 38). Much could be said the same today: Solidarity and strategies are needed to resist the violence of far-right fascist politics. And in this way educators can also take encouragement from progressive teachers in the late 1930s and into the 1940s.

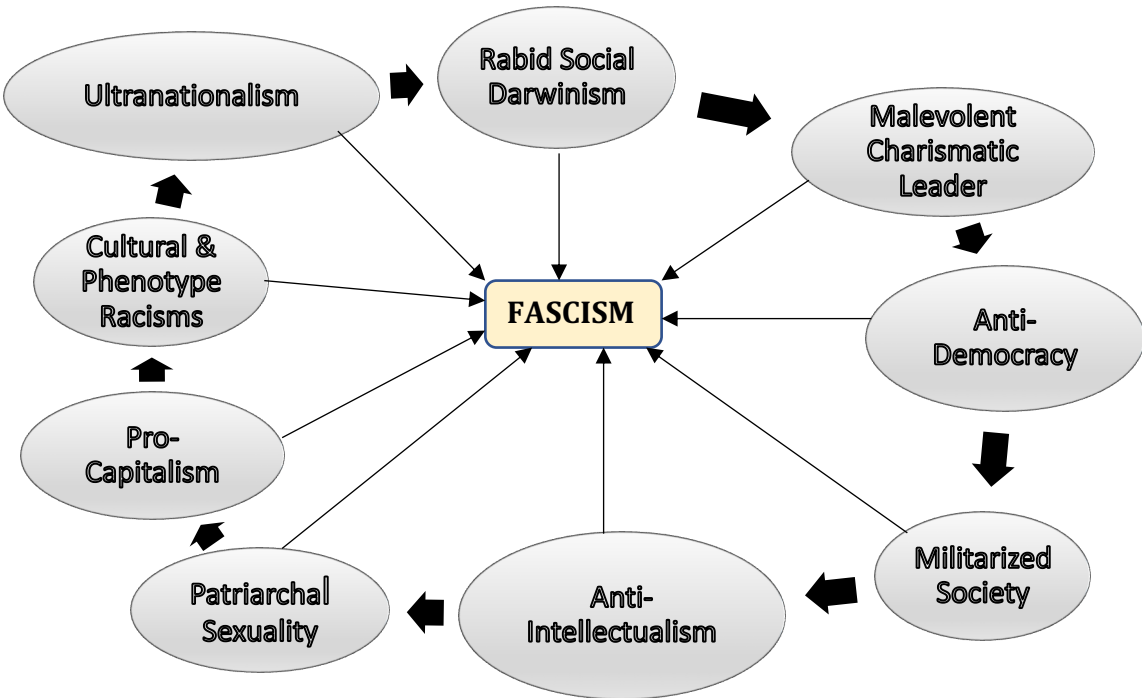
The New York City Teachers Union was quite explicit about naming cultural and phenotype racism as "*a fascist weapon* with which the enemy planned to conquer the world" (as cited in Taylor, 2011, p. 17, emphasis added). During this era Black teachers in racially segregated schools were already teaching "Negro history" but boldly expanded their pedagogy "[b]y contextualizing the American battle against White supremacy as part of the global struggle *against fascism*" (Beadie & Burkholder, 2021, p. 133, emphasis added).

In between anti-fascists and resisters to fascism, however, were collaborators with the fascists, making enemies of anti-fascism more difficult to identify. "The resisters faced great danger from the enemy within, the collaborators" (Kochanski, 2022, p. 332), a contemporary condition resisters face today (see Braune, 2022). Educators cannot assume, however, that their fellow teachers are opposed to far-right extremism as was the situation progressive educators faced during the 1930s and 1940s. For example, the pro-fascist curricular pedagogy of teachers in New York city's American Education Association was both anti-Black and anti-Jewish (Taylor, 2011). Sentiments sympathetic to fascism were already prevalent across a significant swath of White-dominated towns whose Christian populations in early decades of the 20th century had participated in extralegal violent "waves of ethnic cleansing across the United States" (Loewen, 2005, p. 23).

Progressive teachers and their community allies can no longer ignore far-right extremism and neo-fascism in their midst. However, unlike explicitly mid-20th century anti-fascist teachers, most contemporary educators do not understand nor identify with anti-fascism. A beginning point is for educators to learn and teach about anti-fascism and what it opposes. A first step is recognition of key characteristic of historical fascism and how they relate to today's far-right extremism. Figure 5, "Circulation of Key Historical Traits of Fascism," includes (a) a rabid form of social Darwinism; (b) an extreme form of nationalism or ultranationalism; (c) the malevolent charismatic leader as the embodiment of "truth"; (d) anti-democracy; (e) patriarchal sexuality and its attendant anti-feminism and intolerance of sexual minorities; (f) anti-intellectualism and educational absolutism; (g)

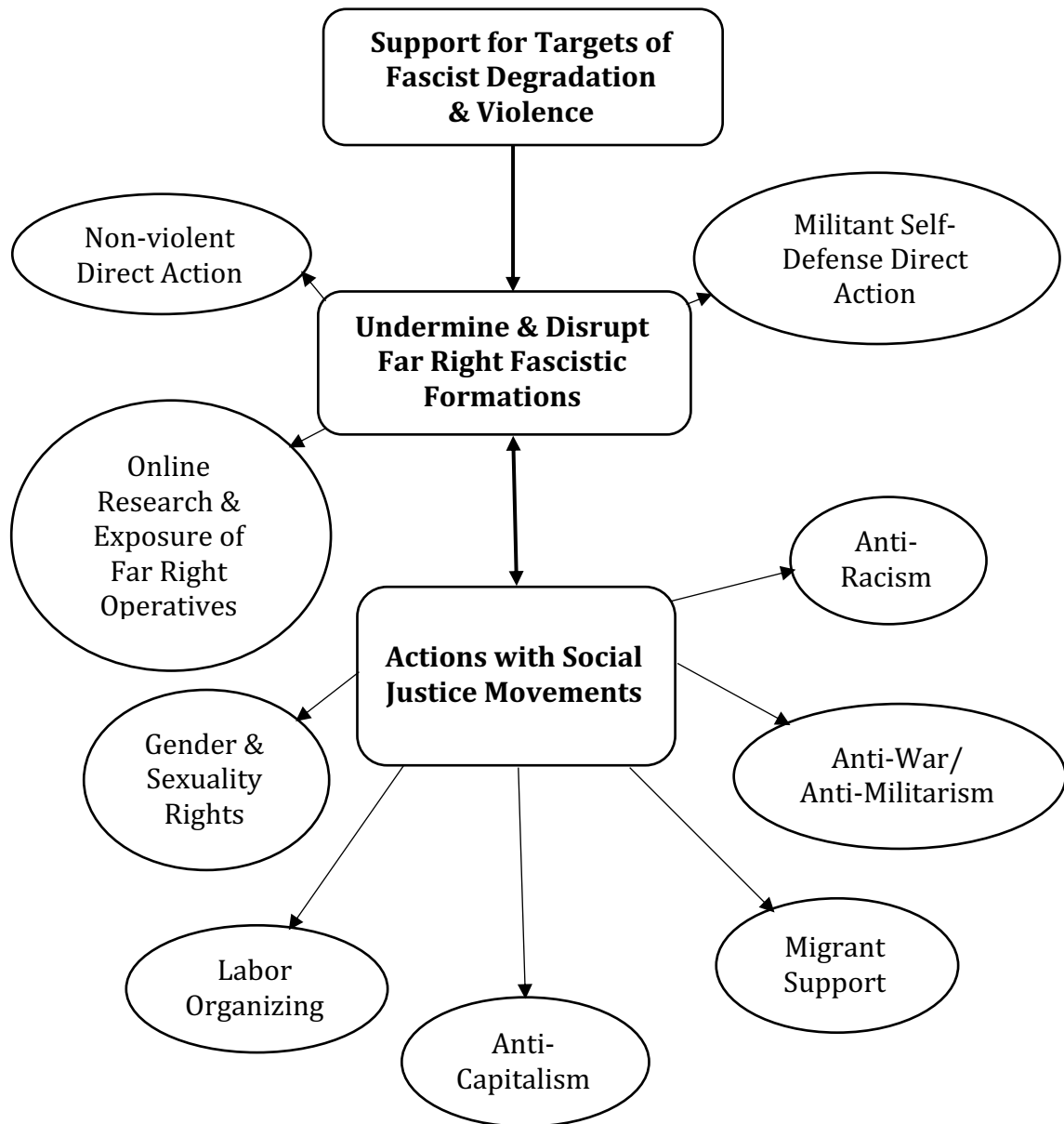
centrality of phenotype and cultural racist scapegoating; (h) anti-socialism and pro-capitalism; (i) and a militarized society. By recognizing these historically traits of fascism, educators may find similar variations in our current political climate, particularly how educational absolutism of anti-intellectualism exists within a circulating array of fascism traits.

Figure 5. Circulation of Key Historical Traits of Fascism



Secondly, learning and teaching about contemporary anti-fascism and anarchism is critical to understanding how various and discrete social justice movements can be reconceived as a collective part of a larger anti-fascist resistance movement (see Vavrus, 2022). Figure 6, “Anti-Fascist Approaches toward Social Action,” summarizes a flow of anti-fascism that starts with support for targets of fascist degradation and violence and leads to actions that strive to undermine and disrupt far-right fascistic formations that policing regularly fails to confront.

Figure 6. Anti-Fascist Approaches toward Political Action



Anti-fascist coordinated efforts can help to fend off this far-right surge against public school personnel and librarians. Community-based anti-fascists can make alliances that defend attacked teachers and other school officials by showing up at school board meetings, demonstrating in support of harassed teachers and librarians, and connecting with concerned parents and educators. For example, anti-fascist community activists can make visible their support of the 8,000 teachers who by the beginning of 2022 signed a pledge to teach history truthfully (Zinn Education Project, 2022). Educators committed to a critical multiculturalism can reframe themselves as everyday anti-fascists as a Portland

flyer suggests: “If you oppose racism, white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and the xenophobic, ultranationalist ideologies of the far right..., you are an EVERYDAY ANTIFASCIST” (as cited Mathias & Campbell, 2019, para. 9). Going forward, to counter the fascist politics of educational absolutism, anti-fascist educators with community backing can help to claim the contested cultural space of schools as anti-fascist zones for civic discourse and reasoning.

Conclusion

Reconsideration of strategies are heightened by Renton’s (2022) historical observation that “there are few examples of antifascists in history following their rival’s defeat” (p. 478). If the liberals and the left fail to realize that even with Trump’s presidential defeat, the neo-fascist ideologies and practices of Trumpism will continue and anti-fascists in particular will be targeted among other groups that the far right demonizes. Progressive teachers, school board members, and librarians along with their potential community-based allies must come together in a resistance movement and not depend on support from the state (Burley, 2022) because far-right incursions into the public sphere, especially in education, are not going to disappear. Learning and teaching what anti-fascism actually is a basic necessity. An anti-fascist posture of resistance with allies in and out of schools will need to be embraced to fend off the onslaught of the war of fascist politics on public education and libraries.

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