

# Standing Strong in Undemocratic Times

Supporting Diversity and  
Enhancing Democracy in Education

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# Rise of Fascism in the United States

## A Critical Multicultural Antifascist Response

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*Our opponents, the media and the whole world will soon see as we begin to take further actions, that the powers of the president to protect our country are very substantial and will not be questioned.*

—Stephen Miller, Policy Adviser to President Trump  
(emphasis added) (as cited in Blake, 2017)

Fascist politics and an attempt to institutionalize a fascist regime characterize President Donald Trump's far-right administration. The political impact has been profound for the integrity of schooling, especially for children of color (Hagerman, 2024; Schultz, 2025). The White supremacist core of fascist politics has long attacked multicultural education as a "cult" undermining "American culture," most recently evident with a presidential order to eliminate alleged "illegal DEI and 'diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility'" (Huntington, 1997, p. 48; Stokely, 1999, p. 209; Trump, 2025b, sec. 2, para 1). A pedagogy for analyzing 21st-century fascist politics and taking antifascist civic action, however, is a missing curricular element in both formal and popular education. This curricular absence is most telling for analyses of social class inequality and the socioeconomic effects of discriminatory policies on schooling and life opportunities for marginalized youth, the primary theme of this chapter:

In examining the rise of fascism, I first clarify definitions of fascism, fascist politics, and antifascism. The contemporary appropriateness of these terms stems from a century of fascist political trajectories in the United States (Roberto, 2018; Rosenfeld & Ward, 2023). What follows are foundational definitions:<sup>1</sup>

- **fascism:** An ideal-type authoritarian far-right mass movement and governing regime characterized by a rabid form of social Darwinism, mythical "divine" ultrarationalism, cultural and phenotypic racism,

illiberal antidemocracy, patriarchal sexuality, militarism, extralegal violence, anti-intellectualism, and disempowerment of labor; all with decision-making power vested in a malevolent charismatic leader collaborating with capitalist class elites.

- **fascist politics:** Materializing from the far right, an advocacy and application of one or more traits of fascism rather than a complete fascist governing regime.
- **antifascism:** More than the opposite of fascism, an ideal-type countermovement characterized by nonviolent and militant self-defense actions responding to signs of fascist politics by supporting targets of fascist degradation and violence while prefiguratively promoting an inclusive and equitable democracy, mutual aid, and a socially useful political economy alternative to capitalism's profit motive.

Historical paths revealing inequitable schooling opportunities unearth racist and classist potholes of fascist politics (Givens & Ison, 2023; Kaestle, 1983; Paxton, 2004). Awareness of fascism's mutability over time contextualizes racial and socioeconomic class discrimination (Stanley, 2024; Toscano, 2023). To counter racial and socioeconomic discrimination amplified by fascist politics, an antifascist approach congruent with critical multiculturalism prioritizes reducing and eliminating educational effects of racist economic policies (Sleeter, 2024; Vavrus, 2022, 2024).

Mainstream histories in and out of schools distort both what antifascism actually represents and the diversity of individuals who become antifascists (Bray et al., 2020; Traverso, 2016). The often-overlooked Black anticolonial/antifascist tradition is part of antifascism's historical refusal of a one-dimensional definition of fascism (Hope & Mullen, 2024). Taken alone, a singular definition of fascism overlooks fascist traits and the evidence that "*fascism and US racism stemmed from the same root*" (Duensing, 2023, p. 249, emphasis added; Eley, 2023). The elements of fascist politics "from economic to ecological are confronted in relation to antifascism" (Burley, 2021, p. 19). An antifascist praxis provides a holistic approach challenging fascist tenets affecting schooling opportunities (Arbeit et al., 2024).

### IMPACT OF SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITY ON SCHOOLING OPPORTUNITIES

Class differences have everything to do with political projects.

—Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*

The Multicultural Education Series was initiated 30 years ago during a rise in economic inequality and wealth concentration. In those 3 decades, the

wealth of the top 1% collectively increased to 35% of all wealth. At the other end of the wealth spectrum, racially discriminatory economic policies disproportionately affected Black and Latinx households and their school-age children. Today, median Black and Latinx net wealth ranges from just 16–22% of White households (Sherman et al., 2024). Wealth differentials create glaring schooling opportunity differences between the wealthy and those most in need. Evidence of this disparity is how “schools remain divided along racial, ethnic, and economic lines,” according to the U.S. Governmental Accountability Office (GAO, 2022, n.p.). Where schools have 75% or more students of color, 80% live in poverty (p. 2). Once children are inside schools, tracking according to perceived ability too often sorts students, further generating social class and racial inequalities (Domina et al., 2023).

Housing segregation through racist real estate practices and gentrification perpetuate disparities in wealth and education (GOA, 2022; Hall et al., 2023; Mordechai & Ayscye, 2022). Additionally, law Professor Bernadette Atuahene’s (2025) research reveals that Black and Latinx populations pay an average of 10–13% higher property taxes than Whites for similar properties. Associated with racialized housing segregation are “underperforming schools, crumbling infrastructure, inadequate public services,” all of which adversely impact a racial achievement gap (Goldfarb, 2015, p. A22; U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

For financially struggling families, the GAO (2022) footnotes that “socioeconomic . . . status is not a protected class under federal law” (p. 8, fn. 13). In other words, the children of an increasing number of poor people, along with a declining middle class over the past half-century, lack federal protection or recourse. With intensifying economic inequality, the United States also experiences “the highest rate of child poverty compared to other wealthy, developed nations” (Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 2024, “Child Poverty Is Higher,” para. 1).

Fascism, as far-right movements do, opposes liberal and left-leaning social movements supporting, for example, a diversity of schoolbooks and socioeconomic equity. Fascist movements first leverage support by denigrating “the Other” as a societal problem, placing economic concerns as secondary (Vysotsky, 2021). But when fascism reaches the pinnacle of governmental power, an oligarchy of economic elites skews policies toward the already wealthy and away from social services such as public schools. For example, just as J. P. Morgan Corporation invested handsomely in fascist Italy and Nazi billionaires financed Hitler, unprecedented sums that poured into Donald Trump’s coffers during his second presidential term are nearly cementing a ruling oligarchy (de Jong, 2023; Pringle, 2024; Robinson & Gilmore, 2019).

### FASCIST POLITICS OF ILLIBERALISM

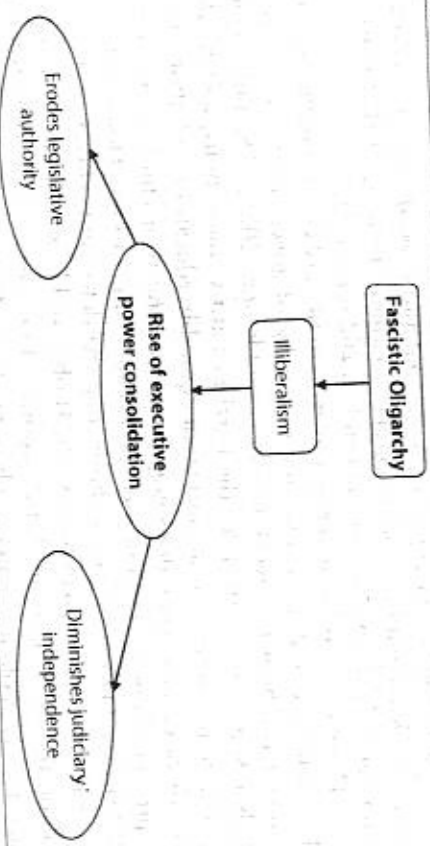
Preferences of economic elites have far more independent impact upon policy change than the preferences of average citizens do.

—Gilens & Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics”

A governing capitalist class of oligarchs that dominates and shapes public policy such as schooling socialization is not new (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; de Lissovoy, 2022; Kaestle, 1983). Yet, for the past 50 years, public policies favorable to capitalism have accelerated socioeconomic inequality (Gibbs, 2024). Fascistic socioeconomic discrimination, especially within liberal democracies, is too often ignored. Nevertheless, fascist politics emerge most forcefully when normal liberal governance becomes dysfunctional. Not surprising then, Trump privileged the world’s wealthiest person—a Nazi-saluting sympathizer of misogyny and White supremacist nationalism—while installing his antidemocracy oligarchy (Kriener, 2025; Notti, 2025).

Figure 4.1, “Flow of Governance Traits of Fascist Politics,” features a fascist oligarchy and illiberal policies that enable wealthy elites to override a basic school lesson in the now mythical balance of power among governmental branches. Mirroring how both Mussolini and Hitler consolidated power and wealth in the executive branch, far-right politicians, with the

Figure 4.1. Flow of Governance Traits of Fascist Politics



Source: Author-created.

U.S. Supreme Court's help, have succeeded in eroding legislative authority and diminishing judiciary independence (e.g., Knutson, 2025; *Trump v. United States*, 2024). A "constitutional crisis" has unfolded in the face of indicators of fascist politics such as illegal detentions of U.S. residents and elimination of vital social services (Howard & Sheff, 2025; O'Donohue, 2025, para. 1). Trump fuels an illiberalism that diminishes executive branch responsibility to enforce court decisions contrary to far-right aims while ignoring the economic plight of those in need (Fear & Kanno-Young, 2025; *Wilcox v. Trump*, 2025).

Illiberalism goes hand-in-hand with economic austerity to decide who is deserving of economic resource redistribution. Historian Steven Hahn (2024) characterizes U.S. illiberalism as stemming from mid-20th century "fascist pulses" expressed in contemporary hostility toward DEI (pp. 210–246). By the mid-1990s, illiberalism's economic austerity accompanied a growing social class divide to marginalize "political engagement" and restrain "democratic impulses" (p. 313).

Socioeconomic austerity benefits an oligarchy by redistributing wealth upward while curtailing vital funding for low-income school districts and for special needs children and "raising the community eligibility threshold" (Prothero, 2025, para. 11; Foley, 2025). Contemporary economic austerity policies originated with Italian fascism, explains economic historian Clara Mattei (2022). Mattei documents how austerity "entrenches existing wealth and the primacy of the private sector," resulting in "public suffering" (p. 2). Mattei adds how "austerity policies underscore the most common tropes of contemporary politics: budget cuts (especially in welfare expenditures such as public education, healthcare, housing, and unemployment benefits)" (p. 2). In effect, technocratic "austerity economists conflate *the good of the whole* with good of the capitalist class" that allow social class inequality to fester while the public is told to accept economic "pain" (p. 131, emphasis in original; D. Trump, as cited in Dobkin, 2025, para. 1).

Those most visible suffering under austerity policies are millions who live unhoused and are considered unworthy of government support, including the homeless working poor (Goldstone, 2025; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Like the barriers Latinx, Indigenous, and Black populations can face in acquiring an equitable education and affordable health care, these same demographic groups and their children are over-represented among the unhoused (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2025). After nearly 60 years chronicling the deleterious effects of underfunded schools, Jonathan Kozol (2024) observed how austerity "takes its toll on the children of our least empowered families," often "long before they are old enough to enter public school" (p. 47). Or, as novelist Walter Mosley's (2024) narrator puts it, "My life was defined by the barbed wires of deep poverty" (p. 126).

### "COMMON SENSE" FASCIST POLITICS

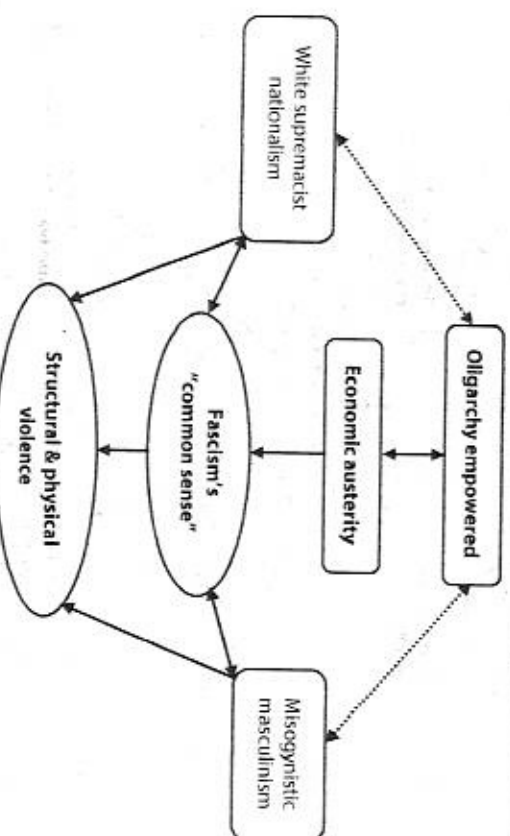
For Trump and Fox News, New Policies Are Simply "Common Sense"

—New York Times headline

Assertions of authoritarian "common sense" are a strategy to shut down socioeconomic class analyses. In contrast to "good sense" rooted in experience and history, absolutist common sense exists outside of history and asserts its authority merely through populist repetition. Such utterances of common sense "either derive from or are strongly influenced by fascist ideology" (Newth & Scopelliti, 2025, p. 375). Under a veil of common sense, fascist policies are not to be questioned nor contradicted. A presidential use of common sense deflects inquiries on troubling economic conditions with such a response as "your question is so stupid" (D. Trump, as cited in Montanaro & Inskeep, 2025, para. 15). As Antonio Gramsci (1929–1935/1999) noted while imprisoned by Italian fascists, hegemonic common sense requires no verifiable evidence.

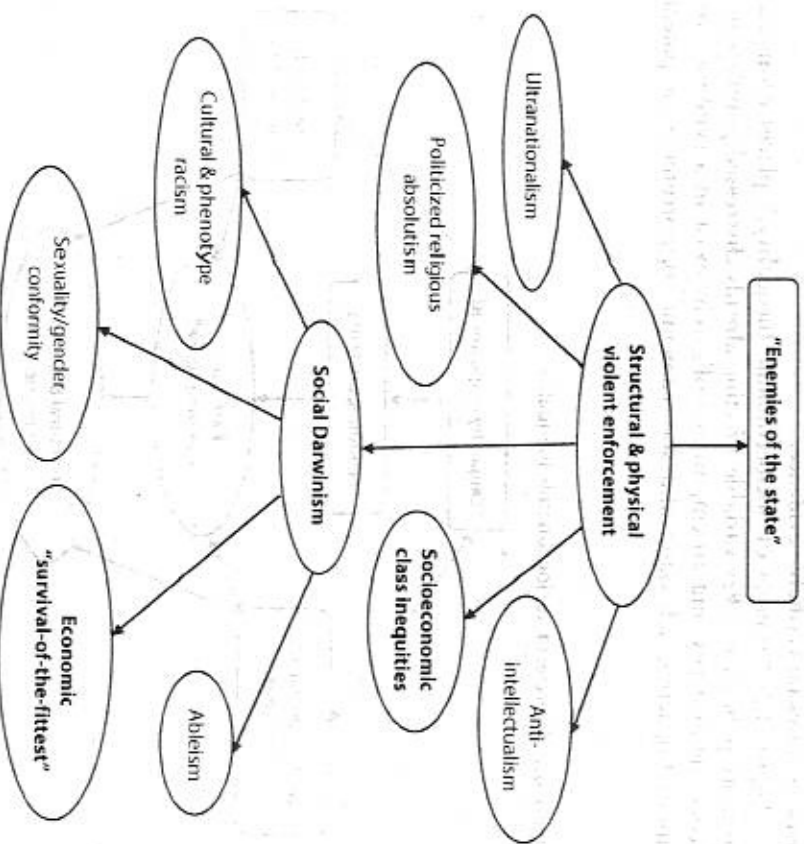
Figure 4.2, "Sources of Socioeconomic Inequality," places economic austerity policies as a key variable affecting already distressed populations. Economic austerity and an empowered oligarchy exist in a symbiotic relation. Impacting schooling and socioeconomic opportunities, a potent

Figure 4.2. Sources of Socioeconomic Inequality



combination of populist White supremacist misogyny feeds into fascist common sense rhetoric that marshals both structural and physical violence. Figure 4.3, “Violent Enforcement of Socioeconomic Inequality,” further considers common sense rhetorical effects. Direct violence upon an individual is evident with harsh discipline feeding a school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately criminalizes students of color (Cremín, 2020; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). Structural violence, however, is more easily overlooked (Pilisuk & Rountree, 2015). Structural violence is normalized through status quo neglect of inadequate educational resources that can limit future opportunities, especially for students in low-income school settings. Regardless of whether one is turning a blind eye or voicing fascist common sense tropes, the political economy reality of physical and structural violence remains a lived experience of social class inequality for vulnerable populations and their school-age children.

Figure 4.3. Violent Enforcement of Socioeconomic Inequality



Source: Author-created.

Butly threatens and physical violence are directed at the nebulous category of domestic “enemies” of the state. DEI advocates, antiracistists, immigrants, foreign policy critics, and other marginalized groups become fascist targets simply because they are politically left of far-right agendas. Yale-educated Vice President J. D. Vance even claimed as a U.S. Senate candidate that “[t]he professors are the enemy” (as cited in Reichman, 2021, para. 1). Trump’s list of “enemies” further reflects a fascist desire to deport U.S. “home-grown” citizens to foreign concentration camp prisons (as cited in Mann, 2025, para. 3).

The Executive Order “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling” promoted mythic ultrationalism for “patriotic” education programs, a common fascist practice (Stanley, 2018; Trump, 2025a). Emilio Gentile (2001/2006) describes fascist education as “[t]otalitarian pedagogy, carried out from above in accordance with ideal models for men and women established in conformity with principles and values of paligenetic [spiritual rebirth] ideology” (p. 47, emphasis in original). Such an essentializing curriculum suppresses the realities young people face with social class inequalities and economic dispossession—in part by normalizing fictitious social Darwinism.

As a post-Civil War legacy, “social Darwinism . . . helped solidify a national socioeconomic elite by linking the industrialists of the North with the planter class of the South,” Lawrence Goldstone explains (2011, p. 72). Redirecting the collective gaze away from political economy sources of inequality, fascist politics employ social Darwinism to scapegoat and attack marginalized populations (Finchelstein, 2024; Paxton, 2004). Through a trope of economic survival-of-the-fittest, struggling populations are cast as lacking merit in a natural order of inequality promoted long ago by Andrew Carnegie (1889) in *The Gospel of Wealth*. Today’s oligarchy expresses similar hubris (Piketty, 2024).

### ANTIFASCIST POLITICAL ACTION

The times are literally crying for a new vision of American destiny. The teaching profession, or at least its progressive elements, should eagerly grasp the opportunity which the fates have placed in their hands.

—George Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*

In the midst of the Great Depression, educational sociologist George Counts (1932/1978) sought “some form of a socialized economy” when “dire poverty walks hand in hand with the most extravagant living the world has ever known” (pp. 30, 45). Seeking a socially useful political economy in our current historical moment, antifascism resonates with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s

(1967/1991b) observation of an intersectional “triple evil”: “racism, economic exploitation, war” (p. 250). Related to King’s point, antifascist actions are linked to how “antiracism means anticapitalism” (Kundhani, 2023, pp. 113–126). Moreover, Alberto Toscano (2023) reasons, “Whoever is not willing to talk about anti-capitalism should also be quiet about anti-fascism” (p. 158). However, opponents of far-right authoritarian movements must be open, according to Toscano, to a range “of anti-fascist traditions that might not call themselves anti-fascist” (Lewis et al., 2024, p. 536).

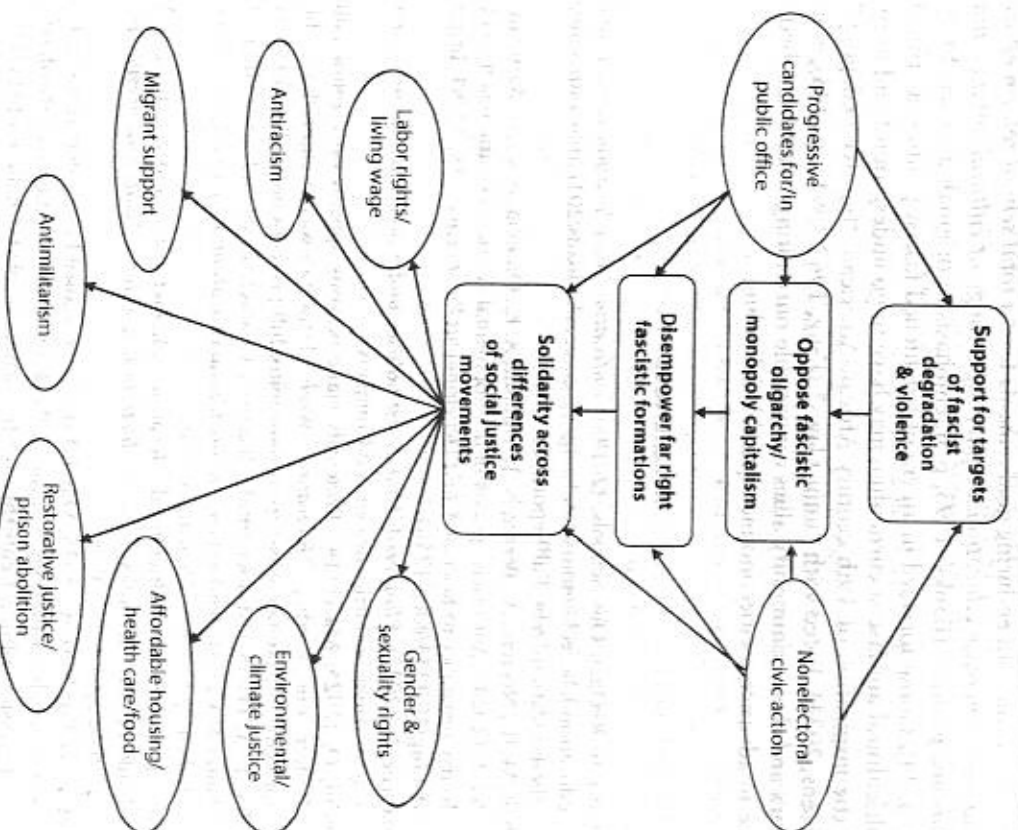
Figure 4.4, “Antifascist Political Action,” highlights activities that can challenge and disrupt a fascist oligarchy. The aim is to disempower far-right fascist formations through social justice movements uniting together. Necessary elements to build robust responses to fascist politics include nonelectoral civic groups and progressive politicians who oppose monopoly capitalism and advocate for targets of fascist degradation and violence, a similar conclusion W.E.B. Du Bois reached (1935/1962; Stimmetz-Jenkins, 2023). Demands for social class equality through economic redistribution are most apparent among groups organizing for labor rights; a living wage; migrant rights; affordable housing, health care, and food; and reallocation of excessive funding for military, prisons, and policing schools.

To draw increased attention to socioeconomic and health effects on children at schools located in toxic environments, schooling equity advocates can join climate justice movements up against capitalism’s “fossil fascism” (Mahn & Zetkin Collective, 2021; Washington, 2019). Political scientists who study authoritarianism pointedly observe that “the most energetic opposition . . . has come from everyday citizens” and unspeakably “not from civic leaders” (Levitky et al., 2025, p. SR5). Growing at the time of this writing, it is “everyday citizens” who are forming movements highlighting racism, gender identity, and sexuality discrimination intersecting with economic redistribution for struggling families and their schools—together with strikes “withholding labor power and purchasing power” (Chenoweth et al., 2025, para. 9; Dewan et al., 2025).

Teacher organizations have a role to play with their local communities, especially around affordable housing and rent stabilization. Incorporating “common good bargaining” into contract negotiations, a Boston teachers union focused on low-income schools and partnered with parents to win “increased funding to house homeless students and their families” (Finkel, 2023, para. 4, “Housing Justice,” para. 15). Students can learn about their labor rights with workers seeking union protection against exploitive capitalism and diluted child labor protection laws (Feffeman, 2025; Mast, 2024). Efforts of parent groups opposing dark-money financing removal of DEI-themed schoolbooks can be broadened as part of an antifascist movement for economic redistribution.

The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (2018) recommends combating budgetary cuts by lobbying all levels of government to make the wealthy

Figure 4.4. Antifascist Political Action



Source: Author-created.

pay their fair share of taxes and to eliminate police in schools to reallocate funds so that children are surrounded “with educational resources, not security personnel” (p. 16). An immediate priority to stem an erosion of public school financing is amplifying opposition to siphoning off tax dollars for politicized religion in public schools and religiously based private schools (Liptrak, 2025; Walters, 2024). Additionally, both *Rethinking Schools* (2025) and the Zinn Education Project’s (2025) “Teachers Dely Fascism” provide resources for educators to redress socioeconomic class inequality.

Regardless of future political dynamics as the Multicultural Education Series continues, an enduring goal remains for "a total school reform effort designed to increase educational equity for a range of cultural, ethnic, and economic groups" (Banks, 1993, p. 6, emphasis in original; also see 2020, pp. 3–24). Going forward in an era of heightened fascist politics, a critical multicultural antifascist curriculum may have to go underground and draw on the inspiration of 19th century African-American "fugitive pedagogy" (Givens, 2021). Faced with "unjust laws" (King, 1963/1991a, p. 293), educators and their community allies cannot rule out uniting in civil disobedience to advance socioeconomic equitable schooling.

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# Endnotes

## Chapter 1

1. "Negro" was the accepted term in the mid-1960s.

## Chapter 2

1. By "democratic function," I mean the university's role in preparing students for civic engagement, fostering pluralistic debate, advancing public knowledge, and holding power accountable.

## Chapter 4

1. Definitions are a synthesis of studies of fascism, fascist politics, and antifascism (Bray et al., 2020; Burley, 2021; Griffin, 2018; Mullen & Vials, 2020; Passmore, 2009; Paxton, 2004; Renton, 2019; Ross, 2017; Stanley, 2018; Traverso, 2016; Trump, 2025c; Vavrus, 2022; Vysotsky, 2021).

## Chapter 5

1. With gratitude to my sons, Maketa Born and Benjie Howard, for introducing me to the concept of creative resistance, and to my daughter, Reya Born, for modeling how creative resistance can be applied in the medical profession.

## Chapter 9

1. Henceforth, BIPOC will be used in this essay to designate "Black, Indigenous, and People of Color."

## Chapter 11

1. The Comprehensive Center Network website is currently unavailable due to a lack of federal funding to support it.
2. Most of these terms can be found in Executive Order 14190, Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling. Members of the right have also attached these terms to critical race theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## Chapter 14

1. U.S. federal statutory law states that if an individual is born outside of the territory of the United States, they will be citizens at birth if at least one of their parents is a U.S. citizen (Keyes, 2013, p. 137).
2. A lawful permanent resident is a noncitizen who is granted permission to reside in the United States indefinitely, but they are subject to the federal deportation grounds.
3. The expansion of expedited removal has been legally challenged; however, previous expansions of expedited removal have been upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. That court determined that the expansion was consistent with the Immigration and Nationality Act, and did not address the argument that expedited removal violated the noncitizen's constitutional due process rights (Aramayo & Smith, 2025, p. 2).