Responding to Fascist Thought in Education: Resources for Anti-Fascist Pedagogy from Paulo Freire

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"Our Democracy is in crisis" proclaim the news outlets.[1] Yet one might be rightly suspicious of the blusterous claims of a fascist-boogeyman-politics that lies behind every new policy decision. Some might argue that such claims are nothing more than an overblown case of the boy who cried wolf. Yet, the aphoristic wisdom that where there is smoke, there is fire, perhaps does offer a reason to pause and consider whether an incipit fascist politics is, perhaps, one way the democratic time in which we live is being challenged. For there are certainly signs of fascist smoke in the global political matrices, whether in the now trite mockery of "alternative fact" or perhaps more significantly in the rhetoric employed by the new Italian governing party or in the strong man politics of Hungary, Turkey, and Brazil. In these developments, I have in mind actually-existing democracies that are arguably being altered by fascist advances. These alterations are certainly not the only way democracies are being challenged, but that fascism is a distinct challenge worthy of attention is the premise for this paper. Therefore, I will not be addressing other worthy challenges to democracy, such as the challenge of making society more democratic. Nor will I venture into the ethically tricky challenge of creating or spreading democracy to peoples and places not currently engaged in iterations of democratic governance. Or any other number of challenges to democracy that may be considered. Instead, I will argue that Paulo Freire's pedagogical contributions offer a means of resisting fascist challenges to democracy by undermining modes-of-thought present in fascism.

The aim of this paper, then, is to offer two aspects of Freire's political-educational project—anti-sovereignty and dialogue—as resources for anti-fascist education that can resist, usurp, or neuter fascism as it is developing, insofar as fascism is reliant on its own modes-of-thought. By mode-of-thought I mean something akin to Gilles Deleuze's "Image of Thought," wherein thought occurs in a patterned way, not in a rigidly structuralist sense, but in a sense where

patterns of thinking, ways of reasoning, and sequences of argumentation occur repeatedly such that a pattern can be identified.[2] My approach is, therefore, not to oppose fascism head-on through the content of fascist politics but to undermine from behind by offering educators modes-of-thought that can be practiced in educational contexts that are perhaps more resistant to or perhaps incompatible with fascist politics. I will develop my argument in the following steps: first, in an attempt to deflate the omnipresent fascist boogey-man, fascism will be introduced as a conglomerative formulation of beliefs, practices, and traits. I will do so by briefly rehearsing two functional definitions of fascism: one by Umberto Eco containing fourteen features of fascism as articulated in his 1995 essay "Ur-Fascism,"[3] and a second list by Jason Stanley who identifies ten tactics of fascism in his 2018 book *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*.[4] For both Eco and Stanley, stating that fascism is merely ultranationalist and right-wing is insufficient in its description and therefore they both take up a conglomerate-description approach.[5] Second, from these functional-conglomerate definitions, I will propose two modes-of-thought that can be distilled from these definitions; modes-of-thought that are, therefore, present in various traits and tactics of fascism. Third, after developing these modes-of-thought, I will introduce Paulo Freire's work as offering anti-fascist educational resources and propose that Paulo Freire can be understood as an anti-fascist educational theorist. Finally, I will briefly explicate two countering modes-of-thought that can be found in Paulo Freire's writing and pedagogical project that can be used to oppose the fascist conceptual arrangements identified.

FASCISM: FROM FEATURES AND TACTICS TOWARDS IDENTIFYING MODES-OF-THOUGHT

Not everything is fascist. Not every objectional political position is fascist. And not every fascist thing is even fascist. Such is the difficulty of wielding the charge that a certain iteration of politics is fascist. Though on the last point regarding singular elements, Eco, unlike Stanley, does state that "it is enough that one of them [that is a tactic] be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it."[6] Yet, even here, Eco is careful not to reduce fascism to a single trait; he only acknowledges something like a snowball effect being a potentiality given the presence of a singular fascist trait.

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Eco and Stanley both develop something of a family of traits of fascism to attend to its malleability. Unlike biological family, each one dismisses that there is a genotype or "essence" to fascism. I want to take seriously this approach of describing a family of tactics and traits, so while I am about to suggest that there are two modes-of-thought that are present in a number of these traits and tactics, I do not want to be misunderstood as essentializing fascism. In line with this approach, I do not limit fascism to its twentieth-century manifestations, nor do I claim there is a coherent fascist ideology with long genealogical roots, rather, drawing on historically informed descriptive work I attempt to identify two modes-of-thought that are present in several the fascist tactics—not as necessary nor sufficient conditions for fascism but as aspects of fascism.[7] I am suggesting that as aspects of fascism these modes-of-thought may be addressed and resisted through a pedagogical response, not at the discursive level of ends (as those vary depending on the fascist iteration), nor on rebutting specific tactics of fascist politics, but by weakening each trait or tactic of fascism that includes the identified mode-of-thought.

Prior to discussing the modes-of-thought I contend are present in fascist politics, as evident in Eco's and Stanley's articulations, it is useful to situate my argument in these two conglomerate definitions by rehearsing a summary of the two lists of fascist traits.

Eco describes his list of traits as being made up of "ways of thinking and feeling, a group of cultural habits, [and] obscure instincts and unfathomable drives."[8] These varied traits are as follows: first, a cult of tradition that is syncretistic in the sense that it tolerates contradiction; second, a rejection of modernism; third, a cult of action for action's sake, fourth, categorizing disagreement as treason; fifth, a fear of difference; sixth, utilizing individual and social frustration; seventh, an obsession with a plot that explains a challenge to a social identity: a plot that appeals to xenophobia; eighth, cultivating humiliation by projecting onto enemies wealth and power, but also insisting this strong, threatening enemy can be defeated; ninth, a belief that life is to be lived for struggle, that is, life is understood as perpetual war; tenth, a popular elitism and contempt for the weak, such that everyone despises their own underlings; eleventh, a cult of heroism; twelfth, machismo; thirteenth, selective populism

where a section of the people are accepted as demonstrating a common will that usurps individual rights; fourteenth, a utilization of Orwellian "Newspeak," that is a diminished vocabulary, and syntax, which precludes complicated reasoning.

Stanley's list of ten traits is explicated more clearly as tactics of fascism. These tactics are as follows: first, a mythic past of the military for the sake of nationalism; second, propaganda to create reality through friend-enemy distinction; third, anti-intellectualism to support a cult of the leader and their authority, and is therefore against multiple perspectives; fourth; unreality against truth, reality, and political equality; fifth, assertion of hierarchy—a big lie that one group is inherently better than another; sixth, cultivation of victimhood—so that a population can see themselves as a victim of political equality, this relies on the previous assumption of innate hierarchy; seventh, law and order—casting the minority group as not law-abiding if they challenge hierarchy; eighth, sexual anxiety—a strong man is needed because of a threat to family, and is not aiming for equality; tenth, Sodom and Gomorrah—urban-rural divide, asserting pure work only occurs in rural areas; tenth, Arbeit Macht Frei—work shall make you free (the entrance sign at Auschwitz), asserting that a minority are lazy by nature, and hard work is a virtue.

I find Eco's and Stanley's approach laudable for distilling and thematizing a vast array of political situations across space and time into a communicable list. This non-essentialist definitional approach, taken up by these two thinkers offers a broad yet helpfully curtailed, descriptive account of fascism. While perhaps frustrating if one is seeking singularity in one's definition, perhaps even seeking singularity for genuine purposes such as the task of clearly delineating fascism from other authoritarian, despotic, or totalitarian governance, these conglomerative definitions helpfully offer a textured terrain from which to think and theorize further regarding the fascist challenge to democracy.

In that vein of theorizing further, the first mode-of-thought—that I contend is evident in the descriptions of fascism—is what I will call "A frail logic of the One." By this I mean that fascism appears to utilize a feeble attempt at a reassertion of a logic of the One for its political ends. Of course, the philosophical problem of the One and the Many has a long history of thought, and I by no means will attempt to rehearse it, let alone offer a position on it here.

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But what I think is evident in fascist politics is a frail attempt at a reassertion of a politics of the One that deals with the Many by simply not dealing with them. This can be seen in Eco's traits: the faux traditionalism, the rejection of modernity, the fear of diversity, and understanding disagreement as treason, each of these as a mode-of-thinking, weakly reasserts homogeneity and singularity. In Stanley's work, this frail logic of the One is evident in the cult of the leader and the assertion of hierarchy and victimhood over-against equality. In all these traits, the mode-of-thought is an assertion of the One over against the Many, without a thorough defence or explanation of how the many are accounted for in the One. As a mode-of-thought it might be simply stated as the assumption that the One functions as primary for thinking, and when challenged it merely doubles down on an assertion of that primacy rather than an engagement with the many as indeed many. As a mode-of-thought, a frail logic of the One relegates thought as the answer is already known. It also relegates the agency of a person, as the person is merely labour, not an actual entity; this in turn is evident in the belief that hard work will set you free in that it will subsume the worker into the One. Furthermore, one can see this mode-of-thought playing out in the trait of action for action's sake, in that it is not thoughtful action, a personal action, or a novel action, but an action as frailly dictated by the One.

A second mode-of-thought that I suggest can be identified within the traits listed by Eco and Stanley is that of binary categorization that are not held dialectically; rather, they are asserted as stasis or static entities. Within Eco's family of traits this conceptualization of static binaries is evident in the categorization of disagreement as treason, difference as a threat, and in the xenophobia necessary for the plot narrative. Stanley, arguably discloses this mode-of-thought more clearly, even subtitling his book "The Politics of Us and Them." Binary categorizations are throughout the tactics but are clearly evident in the apparently permanent urban-rural divide and the cultivation of the friend-enemy distinction, which facilitates the tactics of hierarchy and victimhood. In these tactics the permeability of the binaries is not facilitated; one is not encouraged to think, for example, that people readily move back and forth across the urban-rural divide or that the friend group is composed of groups that historically were seen as enemies. These transgressions of static

categorizations are not acknowledged by the fascist tactics.

THE LIMITED SCOPE OF THE ARGUMENT

Again, by articulating that there seems to be modes-of-thought that are evident within fascism, I am not arguing that these modes-of-thought are necessary nor sufficient conditions for identifying fascism, for doing so would only invite a counterfactual example. Rather, I am merely suggesting that the presence of these modes-of-thought may be part of what enables the cultivation of a fascist political climate.

It is from this fairly limited claim—that there are a few identifiable modes-of-thought that can be found within fascist dispositions and politics—that I move on to the next part of my argument: that these modes-of-thought can be countered educationally as modes-of-thought, rather than countering fascist tendencies and politics at the level of specific content, or even the level of practices.

IN DEFENCE OF A FREIREAN RESPONSE TO FASCISM

While Paulo Freire needs no introduction, it may be worth noting that I am taking up Freire, and his educational project, as being that of an anti-fascist thinker and project. Freire, of course, did not, and is not, primarily identified as an anti-fascist thinker, perhaps due to the overwhelming focus on liberation that comes through his Marxist and Catholic heritage of thought; or perhaps because Freire is engaged in precisely what I bracketed at the beginning: that is, a project that tries to address the challenge of increasing democratic futures, rather than a specific focus on responding to fascist challenges degrading democracy. But here, let me suggest that reading Freire as an anti-fascist is not too far a stretch. Considering present political events, I could marshal evidence beginning with Jair Bolsonaro—whose politics I would contend exemplify more than a few fascist traits listed by Eco and Stanley—and Bolsonaro's explicit contempt of the legacy of Freire in Brazil and his overhauling of the Brazilian education system. But perhaps rather than marshalling such evidence, it is more collegial in the present company to point towards Freire's own writing, especially his early work, as being situated in a post-WWII context, and as such it has an anti-fascist concern throughout. Of note is Freire's ongoing engagement with the Frankfurt School and its ethics, sentiments, and concerns as being so significantly shaped

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by the early and mid-century fascism in the European context. Freire's ongoing use and engagement with the work of Erich Fromme of the Frankfurt School is a prime example of Freire's scholarly connection to more explicitly anti-fascist projects.[9] Thus, it seems reasonable given this connection, to consider Freire's offering again in our own time of bourgeoning fascist politics.

ALTERNATIVE MODES-OF-THOUGHT FROM FREIRE

The first pedagogical offering of Freire I suggest can be used to challenge the mode-of-thought within fascism is that of Freire's anti-sovereigntist thought both in terms of inter-human interaction and in relation to knowledge through language, which undermines the "frail logic of the One" tactically deployed in fascist politics. The example of this anti-sovereigntist thought I explicate here occurs in Freire's 1986 forward to James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation.*[10] Freire, over the course of three paragraphs, utilizes theological language, and racial and socioeconomic categorization to overturn entrenched interpretations that legitimate the theo-political status quo.

In the first of the three paragraphs considered, Freire names "white theology" as being "just as political as black theology or a theology of liberation in Latin America" in that its orientation is towards "defending class interests" even while it "seeks to hide" this orientation. Furthermore, white theology, Freire writes, simulates "neutrality" and offers "modernizing reforms that shore up the status quo." In this analysis, through naming white theology as white, and not as theology proper, Freire unmasks the discursive sovereign in its racialized form and thereby removes white theology as the sovereign by placing it among its peers typologically, thus making its violence viewable as violence rather than the unquestionable act of the sovereign.

In the second paragraph, Freire takes up his socioeconomic scalpel to the theological task. He names the "mystifying language" that is needed to speak from an "impossible neutrality" which is required by "the dominant classes." Additionally, Freire positions himself outside of this dominant class through the use of "they" as he describes their tactics as attempts to "soften the harsh, oppressive real world and exhort dominated classes to face their sacrifice with resignation." Furthermore, this pseudo-therapeutic offering from the dominant class moves them, and Freire's analysis, beyond the sovereign power as that of

putting to death, and toward a relegation of people to death-worlds, when he writes "their very existence is a form of death." Here Freire seemingly mocks the outcome of the pseudo-therapeutic offered by the dominant class theology as only resulting in death pervading life and existence, thus a parody in its reversal of the dead but alive in Christ refrain in the Pauline formulation. The next phrase, however, spins chronologically backward and forward, when Freire intones a white theological voice that the dominated should accept their death-in-life status as the "purification for their sin." The "their" of this sentence, however, also opens itself up to radical contextual interpretation as the explicit sin being named in the paragraph is that of the dominator, therefore one might justifiably wonder if it is the sins of the dominators being transposed onto the dominated, for their (the dominator's) purification in a perverse fascist purification myth.

The final of the three paragraphs, perhaps not surprisingly, offers life out of death. Notably, not life after death, but a faith-born life-in-death. By contrasting transformation against submission, specifically "submission to suffering [a]s a form of alienation," Freire states that "transformation of suffering rekindles a faith that gives life." Through the introjection of *faith* as that which *gives*, Freire carves out a zone of life in the midst of accounting of the dominated as "their very existence is a form of death." Freire then concludes these three paragraphs by highlighting that the faith born in the "today" of the struggle, the faith that gives life, can also "give meaning to the future," a meaning that is "involved in the task of construction." Or we might say, a meaning that is never involved in "impossible neutrality" with its "mystifying language" but only ever made, as Freire states, in the "deed of freedom."

This example depicts a pedagogical and analytical refusal to the logic of the One being deployed in human affairs and in relation to language as a participant of thought. The double refusal to allow white theology to frailly masquerade as theology proper, and the refusal to epistemically succumb to a frail Gnosticism employed by mystifying language, demonstrates a mode-of-thought that through a return to the material, socio-economic, and lived experience of people and linguistically-informed-knowers, has the radical potential to unseat the fascist assertion of a frail logic of the One.

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The second pedagogical offering—and perhaps one that is better known—that can be used to undermine the static binary mode-of-thought in fascist tactics is that of dialogue which Freire significantly develops in the third chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Dialogue, in the Freirean sense, is interfused with dialectical thought from Marx, but dialogue as Freire develops it is specifically focused on the word; he writes, "When we enter into dialogue, as a human phenomenon, something is revealed to us that we can already say is itself: *the word*."[11] Beyond the theological overtones, Freire's sense of the word is beyond a reductionist or idealist linguistics in that "There is no true sense of the word that is not an unbreakable union between action and reflection, therefore, that is not praxis."[12] Thus, the word as it is in dialogue is neither the "*chatter, verbalism, bla-bla-bla*" of a fascist propaganda or "action for the sake of action," which Freire also opposes because "by minimizing reflection, [action for action's sake] also denies true praxis and makes dialogue impossible."[13] Thus, for Freire, dialogue takes on a relational interaction that is generative rather than constructive of static categories. He writes, "Dialogue is this meeting of men (sic), mediated by the world, to *pronounce it*, not being exhausted, therefore, in the I-You relationship."[14] Moreover, "dialogue is an existential requirement," "it is not a warlike, polemical discussion" for "There is no dialogue, however, if there is not a deep love for the world and for men (sic)."[15]

As is hopefully evident by this point in this explication of Freire's sense of dialogue, any static binaries cannot persist in the "existential," "not warlike," "deep love" of the "I-You" relation which is the necessary condition for dialogue to occur. Thus dialogue, as a pedagogical mode-of-thought and perhaps here considering Freire's existential and pronunciational explication of dialogue in relation to the world, I might say, mode-of-being, threatens and undoes static and reified binaries by returning them to the world, through dialogue and the word, such that their being is altered into a less static becoming of the world.

CONCLUSIONS

Having rehearsed two functional-conglomerate definitions of fascism by Eco and Stanley, I have suggested that two modes-of-thought can be identified as an aspect of multiple traits of fascism. These modes-of-thought are a reassertion of a frail logic of the One and a deployment of static binary

categorization. Suggesting one way to counter fascism is by countering these modes-of-thought educationally rather than disagreeing with the content or the traits or tactics of fascism directly, I, therefore, proposed to think of Freire as an anti-fascist thinker and to make use of two modes-of-thought from his educational project. Those modes-of-thought are an anti-sovereignty amongst humans and in relation to knowledge, and Freire's deployment of dialogue. The opposing modes-of-thought that Freire offers, I suggested, can counter those modes-of-thinking that are within fascism without having to counter the content of the fascist rhetoric. As such, the educator can encourage resistance to fascism by offering the student an alternative mode-of-thinking such that they can think in alternative ways to the modes-of-thought functioning within fascist traits.

Here at the end of my argument, I write my own warning; this argument should not be too firmly understood as a diagnostic and a prescription that will solve the problem of fascism. For even that mode-of-thought—a diagnostic and prescription—can be seen in fascist histories such as the "final solution," and Freire himself warns against the entailed mode-of-thought taking over when he utilizes the "doctor" as a negative example of educational thought because it structures the relation as "the ones who do not know and of the 'doctor' as the one who knows and to whom they must listen."[16] But I also am weary that if I claim too little and become "too loose" without some minimal form of diagnosis and prescription, I risk complicity in the fascist "non-truth." Thus, I conclude by acknowledging that my analysis perhaps only becomes relevant when it is taken up as but one of a number of contributions in collectively forming anti-fascist pedagogy. Therefore, it is my concluding wish that in a time such as this with fascist politics on the rise, more work and more offerings, specifically in our field of education, are made so as to resist, undermine, and usurp fascism before its most detrimental effects are realized.

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2 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 129ff.

3 Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/.

4 Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2018).

5 It is of personal interest to note that both Eco and Stanley open their works with a reconning of their own histories intersecting with fascism of the mid-twentieth century, Eco with his own involvement in Mussolini's Italy, and Stanley (2018) reckoning with his father's immigration to the United States in 1939 fleeing Nazi Germany (p.xxvi). Perhaps is it my own familial entanglement with mid-twentieth century fascism that has led me to this project, as my maternal great grandfather was fortunate to survive his time in the Buchenwald concentration camp after being caught for refusing to participate in arresting Jewish people as part of his job as a Rotterdam Police officer and instead actively undermining those efforts through working with the Dutch resistance.

6 Eco, "Ur-Fascism."

7 These alternative approaches both seek origins as a means for explanation, which is a project I am not engaged in here. Examples of these lines of inquiry are: Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Ashéri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994); Stanley Payne, "Fascism and Racism," in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Richard Bellamy and Terence Ball, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 123–50, https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521563543.007

8 Eco, "Ur-Fascism."

9 For example, in the manuscript of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire refers to or cites Fromm on nine occasions. Paulo Freire et al., *Pedagogia Do Oprimido: (O Manuscrito)*, trans. Samuel D. Rocha, 1st ed. (São Paulo: Editora e Livraria Instituto Paulo Freire: Universidade Nove de Julho (UNINOVE): Big Time

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10 Paulo Freire, "Forward to the 1986 Edition," in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1986), ix–xi.

11 Freire et al., *Pedagogia Do Oprimido*, 184/185, 71. Citations to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* refer to the Portuguese manuscript, the first page number is the handwritten Portuguese, the second number is the transcribed Portuguese, and the third page number is from the July 21st, 2022, PDF translation by Samuel D. Rocha into English.

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13 Freire et al., *Pedagogia Do Oprimido*, 184/185, 71.

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