

# The Rise of Fascist Discourses and a Critical Autonomous Education

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I appreciate Krabbe's discussion on fascism, and Freire's role in developing an anti-fascist education. I agree with Krabbe that *dialogue* and *anti-sovereignist* are essential for combating fascist tendencies. In this paper, I do not want to criticize Krabbe. Instead, my response shall offer a possible way of thinking through two issues an anti-fascist education should address.

The first issue is *the rise in fascist discourses*. Here I mean, a plurality of individuals and groups (from diverse political perspectives) are increasingly calling their opponents "fascist." The second issue is the condition of *civic enmity*, which occurs when individuals have difficulty thinking of their political rivals as deserving of equal respect.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, individuals view their political rivals as enemies whose ideas, beliefs, or actions are beyond respect because they are perceived to undermine democracy.

These issues are educationally relevant for two reasons. First, how should students understand why a plurality of individuals and groups call each other fascist? Second, how do students respect others and learn from each other when fascism signals that one's opponent is undeserving of equal respect. To develop my argument, I explain the rise of fascist discourses and its relationship to the perceived crisis in democracy. Then, I demonstrate how fascist discourses exacerbate civic enmity. Finally, I briefly develop a critical approach to an anti-fascist education: an education based upon developing children's autonomy, which is coextensive with a democratic project.

## THE RISE IN FASCIST DISCOURSES AND THE PERCEIVED CRISIS IN DEMOCRACY

Enzo Traverso explains that our "interpretations of the past cannot be dissociated from its public use in the present."<sup>2</sup> This means the use of the term fascist cannot be dissociated from its past interpretations. However, the past is

interpreted in a plurality of ways; consequently, individuals will interpret past events in a plurality of ways to understand present conditions. I use the term *the rise of fascist discourses*, then, to describe the rise of a plurality of interpretations that employ a past understanding of fascism to explain present conditions.

The rise of fascist discourses is witnessed from of various political perspectives using the term to describe current conditions. For example, *Woke Fascism* by Jon Tarr is a right-wing critique of “woke culture”; *Fascism: A Warning* by Madeleine Albright is a liberal critique of Trump, *How Fascism Works* by Jason Stanley is a philosophical analysis of fascist tendencies; and *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right* by Enzo Traverso is a democratic socialist critique of fascism within Europe and the United States.<sup>3</sup> This is a small list of books discussing fascism. Fascism is also readily used on social media, podcasts, and journalist publications. What, then, are some factors contributing to the rise of fascist discourses? I cannot provide a full account of these factors; instead, I shall explain *a* factor contributing to this rise. To be clear, I am not explaining why *a specific* discourse exists; instead, I am briefly explaining why *a plurality* of discourses use this term.

The rise of fascist discourses is partly attributed to what Noelle McAfee terms “a fear of a breakdown”: As she explains “it’s a fear experienced here and now about something to come, but at the same time, it is a fear of what has already happened but was not experienced.”<sup>4</sup> I will distinguish four facets of this fear to clarify McAfee’s point. The first facet is how an individual interprets what is happening in the present. For example, an individual may have experienced their community facing a series of job losses, leading to anxiety about what might come when a community loses jobs. The second facet is the fear an individual experiences (e.g., job losses) based upon something that has already happened. For example, economic downturns or policies may have eroded industrial jobs and a stable safety net, thus leading to job losses and job insecurity. The third facet of this fear is that the original loss has not been emotionally and politically processed—or what McAfee terms *politically mourned*. For example, an individual may experience job losses within their community, but they have not worked through the emotional and political experiences

needed to grapple with the economic downturn or economic policies causing such losses. The final facet is that the original breakdown remains unmourned; as a result, individuals experience anxiety about what they perceive to come.

Fascist discourses become a way individuals understand the breakdown they are experiencing. For example, an individual may interpret the job losses within their community from a plurality of perspectives—from a leftist perspective job losses are due to fascist neoliberal policies. From a rightist perspective such losses are due to fascist liberal immigration policies. Despite the political perspective, the fear of breaking down occurs when individuals harken back to the past—in our case, a past understanding of fascism—to understand one's current anxiety.

The fear of breakdowns and the rise of fascist discourses relate in three ways. First, a plurality of events can cause individuals to experience a fear of a breakdown. For example, an individual could fear a breakdown because they experience the police beating unarmed black people, private property burning in riots, being censored online or in public forums, witnessing government overreach, etc. Second, a plurality of events could be seen as causing the original breakdown. For example, individuals can interpret events mentioned above as signs of fascism. Third, a fear of a breakdown can also be interpreted in many ways. What we are witnessing, then, is a fear of a breakdown occurring across ideological and political perspectives: the plurality of fascist discourses are attempting to make sense of the various fears experienced.

The pervasive fear of a breakdown corresponds with one's perceived *crisis in democracy*. By this, I mean democracy is increasingly seen as threatened (that is, in crisis) by individuals and groups within society. To understand this crisis, individuals and groups develop a plurality of civic narratives to diagnose this crisis, often using fascism to describe the perceived breakdowns. Following Meili Steele, I define a *civic narrative* as “the explicit concepts of a culture but also the images, plots, symbols, and background practices through which citizens imagine their lives.”<sup>25</sup> Civic narratives are the ways citizens imagine and make sense of their lives. In our case, individuals are crafting civic narratives with a past understanding of fascism to explain their fears about a crisis in democracy.

While civic narratives have factual elements, they are also mythical and normative. Civic narratives are normative because they rely upon certain values of what is desirable, and they are mythological because they help people imagine what society could look like if said normative values were realized.<sup>6</sup> Civic narratives interweave all these elements to tell a story about what is happening in one's life.

To be clear, I am not saying civic narratives are beyond criticism. Civic narratives can be criticized for factual accuracy, normative coherency, or being mythically desirable.<sup>7</sup> My point is that civic narratives are propelled by different normative visions, each trying to analyze a fear being experienced. Consequently, each narrative will resonate with different people because they help explain a plurality of ways an individual tries to understand the fear of a breakdown.

### CIVIC ENMITY

The rise of fascist discourses also illustrates a condition of *civic enmity*: a condition where individuals find it challenging to think of their political rivals as deserving of equal respect.<sup>8</sup> For example, calling our opponents fascist means we are strongly condemning their perspective and often see them as deserving of disrespect. Civic enmity has a pernicious impact on public deliberation because it prevents us from empathizing with others and trying to find kernels of rationality within their viewpoint. As Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse explain, “we can regard our political opponents as our equals only if we can sustain the distinction between seeing them as wrong and seeing them as stupid, incompetent, and cognitively deprived.”<sup>9</sup> The term fascist, however, is harsher than seeing our opponents as stupid or incompetent—it renders our opponents morally debased and beyond moral rapprochement.

### TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPROACH TO AN ANTI-FASCIST EDUCATION

An anti-fascist education should grapple with the issues as mentioned earlier: *the rise of fascist discourses* and *civic enmity*. I agree with Krabbe that dialogue (whether Freirean or not) is essential for an anti-fascist education. As Kessler notes, dialogue is essential to undoing “static and reified binaries” and must be “generative rather than constructive of static categories.” However, I offer

some conceptual tools (that move beyond Freire) for addressing the issues mentioned above.

First, an anti-fascist education should, to some degree, respect the autonomous development of students. By *autonomy*, I mean the intersubjective process through which individuals form and pursue their conceptions of the good life based on reasons and emotions they can call their own.<sup>10</sup> I do not want to delve deep into the autonomy debate. Instead, let me state my general reasons for focusing on autonomy. To avoid fascist impulses, individuals must have reasons they can call their own for the validity of their perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations. Individuals must also subject these narratives to reasonable deliberation.<sup>11</sup> Thus, I believe democratic deliberation and autonomy are coextensive.<sup>12</sup> While deliberation is necessary, it is insufficient for dealing with the fears of a breakdown. Dealing with these fears must address the affective dimensions of our losses—for example, the politics of mourning.<sup>13</sup> An anti-fascist education should be linked to a democratic project that cultivates autonomy and includes a politics of mourning.

Before concluding, I will highlight five general features of an autonomous education and how they address the rise of fascist discourses and civic enmity.

1. *Moral Literacy* informs students about the plurality of fascist narratives within the public sphere. This includes understanding the history of these civic narratives, the normative values motivating them, and how each narrative perceives the fear of a breakdown.
2. *Critical Consciousness* teaches students how power shapes public discourse and opinions, and why certain narratives become more prominent within public discourse.<sup>14</sup>
3. *Reconstructing Civic Narratives* provide students with opportunities to develop their own civic narratives, representing their own personal values, ideas, and interpretations of their living conditions.<sup>15</sup>

4. *Democratic Empathy* teaches students to listen to and empathize with the fear's others carefully are facing. It requires listening to the content of a person's speech and empathizing with the larger social context shaping one's fears. Empathy is vital to loosening the grip of civic enmity because it encourages a politics of mourning: collectively grappling with the emotive aspects behind our fears.<sup>16</sup>
5. *Public Deliberation* allows students to deliberate with others over the plurality of narratives students construct and how to deliberate over the normative coherence, factual validity, and mythical desirability of different narratives.

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9 Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, *Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason*

*and Democratic Life*, 1st ed. (Medford: Polity, 2020), 29. almost no one seems able to disagree without hostility. But polite discord sounds farfetched when issues are so personal and fundamental that those on opposing sides appear to have no common ground. How do you debate the “enemy”? Philosophers Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse show that disagreeing civilly, even with your sworn enemies, is a crucial part of democracy. Rejecting the popular view that civility requires a polite and concessive attitude, they argue that our biggest challenge is not remaining calm in the face of an opponent, but rather ensuring that our political arguments actually address those on the opposing side. Too often politicians and pundits merely simulate political debate, offering carefully structured caricatures of their opponents. These simulations mimic political argument in a way designed to convince citizens that those with whom they disagree are not worth talking to. Good democracy thrives off conflict, but until we learn the difference between real and simulated arguments we will be doomed to speak at cross-purposes. Aikin and Talisse provide a crash course in political rhetoric for the concerned citizen, showing readers why understanding the structure of arguments is just as vital for a healthy democracy as debate over facts and values. But there’s a sting in the tail - no sooner have we learned rhetorical techniques for better disagreement than these techniques themselves become weapons with which to ignore our enemies, as accusations like “false equivalence” and “ad hominem” are used to silence criticism. Civility requires us to be eternally vigilant to the ways we disagree.”,”edition”:"1st edition",,"event-place":,"Medford",,"ISBN":,"978-1-5095-3653-5",,"language":,"English",,"number-of-pages":,"160",,"publisher":,"Polity",,"publisher-place":,"Medford",,"source":,"Amazon",,"title":,"Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason and Democratic Life",,"title-short":,"Political Argument in a Polarized Age",,"author"::[{"family":,"Aikin",,"given":,"Scott F."},{,"family":,"Talisse",,"given":,"Robert B."}],,"issued"::{,"date-parts"::[["2020",5,26]]},,"locator":,"29",,"label":,"page"}},,"schema":,"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}]

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15 McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*, 77–113.\_

16 Michael E. Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking, and Deliberation*, 1st ed. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010); McIvor, *Mourning in America*. Thinking, and Deliberation}, 1 edition (University Park, Pa: Penn State University Press, 2010