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# ERASING HISTORY

HOW FASCISTS



REWRITE



THE PAST



TO CONTROL



THE FUTURE

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FOOTNOTE

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## How to Create an Autocracy

Wars are won by teachers.

—Vladimir Putin<sup>1</sup>

**I**n a prescient 1995 address at Howard University titled “Racism and Fascism,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison warned of forces within the United States “interested in fascist solutions to national problems.”<sup>2</sup> These fascist solutions, she explained, involve both representations and practices—in other words, what fascists say or believe and what they do. As Morrison pointed out, representations and practices can be mutually reinforcing. Representations can make practices that would otherwise be unacceptable seem normal and justified, while practices can make representations seem retrospectively apt. The representation of immigrants as dangerous criminals justifies the practice of penning them in large prison-like centers; once they are there, the fact that they are imprisoned leads some to conclude that they must be dangerous.

To understand the power that fascism can wield in the

realm of education, it is first necessary to understand some of its representations and practices. According to the Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt, “[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”<sup>3</sup> Which is to say, for fascists, being political means defining oneself against an enemy. As such, fascist regimes selectively disenfranchise certain segments of their population and violently cast them into what the political philosopher Elizabeth F. Cohen calls “semi-citizenship,” in order to emphasize the virtue and worth of the dominant group.<sup>4</sup>

Fascist regimes are also typically organized around a charismatic leader—and form social and political cultures centered on that leader, who is taken to be the violent and powerful protector of the nation. Russia’s Vladimir Putin is a clear contemporary example. All of Russia is centered around Putin’s rule, and Putin is represented as the powerful male leader upon whose shoulders Russian greatness rests. But fascism can also be leaderless. The southern United States under the Jim Crow system of segregation, for example, was governed by a form of racial fascism premised not on a single powerful leader, but on decentralized groups of vigilantes and terrorists. To fully understand the imminent threat of fascism today, we must pay careful attention to fascist movements that are not necessarily based on reverence for the leader.

Regardless of how it is led, a fascist culture, or form of

life, often has certain features that make it an ideal environment for fascist politics. These cultures will, for instance, elevate an already dominant group of people to a mythic status, exalting them as “the people” who constitute the nation, while relegating others to second-class citizenship. From a fascist perspective, egalitarianism is a threat because it promises to upset this hierarchy. The threat is felt so acutely that fascists are led to take joy in cruelty against those outside this group, and others who stand to benefit from greater equality. A fascist form of life is suffused with fear that others will achieve equal status, a possibility cynically exploited in fascist politics.

A fascist form of life also has certain requirements. Perhaps most importantly, it requires an education system that can validate the dominant group’s elevated status as a justified consequence of history rather than the fabricated result of intentional choices. It does this, as we will see, by selectively doctoring the historical record, erasing perspectives and events that are unflattering to the dominant group, and replacing them with a unitary, simplified account that supports its ideological ends.

In recent years, for example, the United States has seen a wave of right-wing political interference in education focused on banning certain concepts, authors, and books from schools’ libraries and curricula. The unstated goal of these bans is to erase the perspectives and histories of marginalized

groups, including most prominently the history of Black Americans, whose ancestors were enslaved and brutally subjugated in this country.

These bans target especially concepts and theories used to explain how that subjugation operated, how it has changed over time and persisted to this day, and how it might be challenged—concepts such as structural racism, intersectionality, and critical race theory (CRT). The concept of structural racism, for instance, is targeted because it explains racial subjugation not in terms of individual bigotry, but as a result of underlying systems and practices—whether in housing, schooling, banking, policing, or the criminal legal system. It explains, for example, that the racial wealth gap in America (which is so extreme that Black Americans possess just over 15 percent of white Americans' wealth) is a product of racist policies such as discriminatory lending and redlining. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by the law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, reveals the particularly acute harms inflicted on groups that are at the intersection of multiple oppressions.<sup>5</sup>

Critical race theory is the study of these concepts, and emerged from the work of American legal theorists in the 1980s and 1990s, centrally including Harvard Law professor Derrick Bell, Northeastern professor Patricia J. Williams, and Professor Crenshaw. In the rhetoric of those who seek to ban it, the term “critical race theory” has morphed into some-

thing completely unrelated to its true meaning, and is imagined as something like a system for dividing groups into categories of oppressor and oppressed, the purpose of which is to saddle white people with a permanent and debilitating sense of guilt for the wrongdoing of their ancestors.

In erasing these concepts, or transforming them into meaningless slogans, the recent right-wing campaign of educational suppression seeks to eliminate an important means of understanding Black history. But critical race theory and Black history are impossible to separate. History is the study of not just people and events but also the practices, structures, and institutions that shape them. Without accounting for these forces, history is rendered flat and malleable—ideal for manipulation by fascist politics.

When fascists attempt to rewrite history, they sometimes claim that they are erasing only theories and interpretations of history, which they claim to be biased, rather than underlying historical events. But they know well that their interventions result in the erasure of events themselves, as well as the patterns they form. In her celebrated 2021 book, *America on Fire*, the historian Elizabeth Hinton identifies a recurring pattern in mid-twentieth-century US history that she calls “the cycle,” in which over-policing and police violence elicit rebellions within the communities these practices affect. This pattern, she explains, “helped define urban life in segregated, low-income, Black, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican

communities,” and ultimately “put this nation on the path to mass incarceration.”<sup>6</sup>

Hinton’s thesis is based not in abstract theory, but in an account of the historical forces and events that led the United States to where it is today. Without this history, it is impossible to understand, for example, how and why the United States came to have the largest prison population of any country in the world. Hinton’s work shows how institutions—from urban police to public housing and segregated, underfunded schools—have, through their practices, entrenched a racially unjust status quo. Ultimately, it is not possible to teach the history of what happened to Black Americans without teaching about structural racism. When these concepts are banned, the result is, in practice, to forbid schools from teaching any honest account of US history.

The Anti-Racist Teaching and Learning Collective (ARTLC) is an organization in Connecticut that brings together teachers, organizers, and students in order to, as the group’s website puts it, “address the oppressive effects of the racism that shape public education and society at large.” The website also includes a series of firsthand accounts from teachers of the practices they have employed in the classroom to help build a common understanding of structural racism.

Marco Cenabre, for example, teaches literature at New Haven Academy, a public high school in New Haven. In one of Cenabre’s classroom lessons, the students are asked to

study the Civics portion of the US naturalization test, as well as a classic essay from Audre Lorde that discusses “mythical norms” related to age, race, class, and sex.<sup>7</sup> What does the information an immigrant must learn about American history to become a naturalized American reveal about mythical norms? Does it elevate one group’s history over others? Does it allow certain misconceptions to be normalized?

Ruth Terry Walden teaches literature at Westhill High School, a public school in Stamford, and focuses her courses on themes of protest, resistance, and direct action. In her classroom, she invites her students to think about why, during the Colonial era, the ordinary people began to see the British as an occupying army, and how that led to the American Revolution. She asks them to consider this in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, as a way of understanding how Black residents of Ferguson, Missouri, may have come to regard the police as an occupying army.

Other teachers who are part of the ARTLC testify to the immense difficulty of teaching these sorts of lessons without support from school administrators. Samm Leska, a teacher at Staples High School, a public school in Westport, explains that her peers are reluctant to engage in such teaching practices, since they do not feel that the administration will support them if they become a target of political attacks for teaching on supposedly controversial topics. Since even noting the existence of structural racism is considered “critical

race theory,” all but the bravest teachers tend to avoid discussing texts that present students with Black perspectives on US history. This means that it takes a measure of bravery to teach the works of the Nobel Prize-winning Black American novelist Toni Morrison, even in states where that is legal.

It should be no surprise that right-wing politicians’ efforts to stifle any discussion of structural racism extend naturally into a program of combating on-the-ground efforts to redress the harms of racism—and thwarting efforts to build a truly multi-racial democracy that is inclusive of all groups. One way that institutions in the United States have sought to address racism is through what are called Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Predictably, these efforts are often targeted by the same right-wing forces that pour so much energy into attacking the history and theory of racism. The arguments are mutually reinforcing: if there is no racism, nothing needs to be done about it.

Broadly speaking, DEI initiatives are any programs at schools, universities, or private companies that seek to ameliorate the effects of structural racism in teaching, hiring, or institutional mission. For example, a DEI program at a medical school might seek to make sure that doctors from affluent white backgrounds are aware of the structural barriers that patients from other backgrounds may face. Such a program may, for instance, provide non-disabled doctors with insight into the barriers facing patients who are disabled.

As they do with CRT, the right-wing critics of DEI intentionally distort these programs to create the impression that those whose perspectives are finally being included—like Black Americans, for instance—are receiving some sort of illicit benefit or an unfair advantage. And so they target Black Americans who have risen to positions of power and influence and seek to delegitimize them as undeserving. The ultimate goal is to justify a takeover of the institutions, transforming them into weapons in the war against the very idea of multi-racial democracy.



In the years since former US president Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 election, and especially as he has waged his third campaign for office in 2023 and 2024, his fascist tendencies have only grown more extreme. He has, for instance, suggested suspending the Constitution's individual protections, called for drug dealers to be executed, mused about plans to prosecute his political rivals and investigate journalists for treason, said that some migrants are "not people," and promised a "blood bath" if he is not reelected.<sup>8</sup> His grip over his supporters takes the form of a classic cult of the leader. The Republican Party that he leads and the broader conservative movement have doubled down on their support for him, largely casting out any remaining "Never Trump" dissidents.