Cultivating Resistance to Fascism in the Classroom: An Introduction

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Perhaps the greatest disservice to students from the current communication pedagogies available to the field is a lack of guidance in cultivating liberatory worlds grounded in relational communicative praxis. Often students move through communication curricula unable to discern or analyze oppressive discourse and behavior during interactions. This concern is exacerbated as students are taught to privilege *listening to* over *intervening in* oppressive discourse and behavior under the guise of maintaining "civility." Meanwhile, fascism—a cultural force far more material than the rhetorically vague "oppressive"—asserts itself, barreling through liberal waves of indifference, asserting political futures to which communication students are ill-equipped to respond let alone engage earnestly and with the political grounding requisite for cultivating resistance to fascism in their everyday lives. Indeed, what good do calls for civility do when our interlocutors are fascists who would rather we were dead than dialogic partners? In a recent special issue of *Communication Teacher* titled *Neoliberal Capitalism has Failed: Teaching Communication toward a New Political Economy*, the critical pedagogue Giroux (2021) argues in his invited article that fascism "first begins with language" (p. 173). Sure; and then what? As communication educators, we ponder the "then what" beyond liberal educative imaginaries and as a political charge to cultivate resistance to fascism that begins in political coalition (p. 173).

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This brief introduction serves three interrelated functions. One, it orients the reader to this forum's exigence: cultivating resistance to fascism in the classroom. In so doing it, two, provides a brief historical review of fascism so as to focus our temporal understanding of fascism as a communicative structure very much animating the present rather than as an anachronistic fluke involving a handful of so-called "bad guys." At the same time, it weaves communication literatures that allude to pedagogical means for cultivating resistance to fascism revealing a liberal educative limitation in our disciplinary approaches—critical or not. And three, it introduces each of the following forum contributions to the reader. Taken together, our hope is this forum encourages greater discussion and provokes bolder practices that labor to cultivate resistance to fascism in the communication classroom and beyond.

Cultivating Resistance to Fascism and The Limits of Our Discipline's Reponses

To fix the problem, we need to name the problem. Rudick (2022), editor-elect of the flagship journal *Communication Education*, argues this much in a recent essay in which he reflects on the journal's (and in turn the field's) reluctance to name race, racism, and in particular White supremacy in our disciplinary approach to communication pedagogy. The same can be said of "fascism," save for the select pieces that interrogate rhetorical dimensions of early- to mid-20th Century fascist orators Hitler (e.g. Lambertson, 1942, Scanlan, 1951) and Mussolini (e.g. Iezzi, 1959; Longman, 1974), for example. However, these discussions and the like tend to locate fascism both in the past and in the rhetorical craft of particularly good orators who used communication for bad. As a result, communication educators were/are charged with protecting democracy by teaching "good" speech, which included fine-turning the moral aptitude of communicators. The "good" of this approach, to be certain, was historically constituted through eugenic logics and in the "mental hygiene" movements of the interwar period leading up to WWII—or as Gunn (2015) states plainly: "fascism" (p. 20).

> In other words, the Speech classroom should be a therapeutic space in which the teacher "diagnosed" the student's emotional stability and proper orientation to society. It was the province of the Speech teacher to judge and determine what was and what was not a healthy disposition, prefiguring, as it were, what it meant to be human—or what was valuable about humanness. (p. 24)

Still, committed to teaching "good" communication *in U.S. English*—particularly in light of intense rising xenophobia—communication pedagogies persist in shaping communication toward U.S. imperial ends (LeMaster et al., 2022) that in turn construct liberal subjects subject to the state (Greene & Hicks, 2005). From this

vantage, critical intercultural communication (CIC) studies emerge with tools that can help us to challenge the hegemony embedded in our pedagogical legacies.

Located at the intra-disciplinary intersections of critical communication pedagogy and CIC studies emerges a constellation of pedagogical works Atay and Toyosaki (2017) term *critical intercultural communication pedagogy* (CICP). CICP employs CIC tools (e.g. reflexivity, difference, critical dialogue, embodiment) to "unmask and uncover oppressive systems in our classrooms, our own teaching, and beyond educational walls" making it especially apt for our purpose of cultivating resistance to fascism (p. viii; see also Cooks, 2017) particularly as it pertains to pedagogical praxis (Calafell & Gutierrez-Perez, 2017; Warren & Fassett, 2010; Fassett & Rudick, 2018; Kahl, 2011; Kahl, 2017). Chen and Lawless (2018) offer a practical CICP framework for "SWAP-ing" educative contexts so as to trouble the presumption of a so-called "difficult" conversation: "(a) Shift the center and the margins; (b) Will oneself to listen as a feeler/thinker/doer; (c) Articulate intersectional reflexivity and inquiry; and (d) Partner for social justice" (p. 380). Chen and Lawless' approach provides an effective pedagogical praxis that invites students and teachers to welcome reflexive implication as requisite to transformative and affirming communication in intercultural coalition working toward social justice. Still, disciplinary approaches to communication pedagogy—critical or not—are limited in their current capacity to cultivate resistance to fascism in the classroom. We teach resistance, but I am less convinced that we have taken on the problem of fascism that is cultivated through liberalism itself.

While we can look to recent surges in fascist discourse and social movement, fascism itself remains vague in the popular imaginary, particularly as it chafes against radical Right, christofascist, and neoconservative political formations. Even for the critical pedagogue Giroux (2021), fascism is the effect of manufactured ignorance rather than of a historical presence that haunts modernity. Allegedly, the recent surge of ignorance is manufactured vis-à-vis "fake news," Giroux's example, and it is thus the critical educator's task to cultivate "a language of educated hope" that might combat ignorance (p. 174). However, in critiquing the whiteness of post-truth discourse including "fake" news, Mejia et al. (2018) remind us: "American racial politics have never been concerned with the 'truth'" (p. 111). In fact, they add, "Failing to understand that race constitutes the battleground of the (post)truth means that post-truth critics risk operating in service of whiteness: by functioning to shore up respectable whiteness, and by extension, respectable racism" (p. 120). To punctuate the point, Hunt and Meyer (2021) argue for a *pedagogy of civic engagement, antiextremism, and antiracism* in which the communication teacher is charged with helping to "inoculate students against polarized discourse and provide a blanket of protection against them becoming radicalized by antidemocratic ideas" (p. 455). Inherent in their framing—aside from the paternalistic tone—is the presumption of polarized discourse (e.g.

antiextremism and antiracism) that exists *out there*; what they fail to account for are the ways in which minoritized bodies and identities are constituted *as provocative* across educative contexts and are understood as educative threats in need of containment and control (LeMaster, 2021; LeMaster & Mapes, 2020). That institutions of higher education are not implicated as "arms of the settler state" on stolen land further reveals that the critical educative futurities to which settler educators tend to subscribe are constituted through Indigenous erasure and in favor of sustaining U.S. American democratic ends (Grande, 2018, p. 47). To help focus our critical pedagogical efforts, I proffer a working understanding of fascism to which I invite critique, pushback, and dialogue.

Fascism is liberal democracy's bedfellow, or, modernity's constitutive shadow (Skinnell, 2022; Ziegler, 2021). Born out of Enlightenment philosophy, liberal democracies boast an unfurling and progressive futurity built on tenets of *rationalism*, *empiricism*, *individualism*, and *skepticism*. *AND* institutions of colonialism and slavery were born of the same Enlightenment philosophies as liberal democracy revealing a primary and unresolved paradox through which liberal democracies were/are founded: freedom for *some*. In this light, tenets of Enlightenment philosophy—*rationalism*, *empiricism*, *individualism*, and *skepticism*—were used to distinguish human from non-human in scientific terms that asserted a manufactured fact of white superiority. It is from this vantage that Paxton (1998) locates the first fascist political formation in the 1867 founding of the Ku Klux Klan. Fearing a wave of Black voter enfranchisement in the Reconstructionist years, white nationalists terrorized Black voters and communities and in so doing asserted a fascistic political formation (see also Paxton, 2007). So, while fascism may begin with language as per Giroux (2021), fascism is in fact the constitutive ground through which modern political theatre plays out.

Skinnell (2022) proposes that to combat fascism we must learn to reorient to fascism not as an elusive force against which to *inoculate* students—as Hunt and Meyer (2021) would have it—but as a political fact that communicates a rhetorically appealing response to the failings of liberal democracy in the context of late stage racial capitalism. Skinnell explains: "fascism is appealing to people because it is logically connected to contradictions in our systems of belief, and in particular how those systems of belief align—or do not—with people's actual lives" (p. 192). The task is to interrogate fascist rhetorical appeals as "legitimate without seeing them as desirable" (Skinnell, 2022, p. 192; see also Ziegler, 2021). Pedagogically, this insight yields a productive entry point for cultivating resistance to fascism. Indeed, how do we encourage students to "stay in school," or suggest that education is the "appropriate" trajectory, when our economic present and future contradict the white bourgeoisie futures to which liberal democracies articulated the promise of a liberal education. How can we affirm our students' legitimate fears about the uncertain and unstable futures into which we are ushering them: a

future in which capitalism is already dead, a future in which the state is already regulating bodily autonomy, a future that is presently constituted through gore (Valencia, 2018) including the *mass* encaging of immigrants fleeing violence and climate catastrophe from the Global South and into refugee camps along the borders of liberal democracies (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Fascism provides responses to these very real realities; it enflames an already disillusioned populace and provides direction beyond vague calls for *more democracy*.

The failings of liberal democracy brought us here; so, how can we, as communication educators, affirm this material failing, while moving through the discomfort of demystifying hegemonic myths *with* our students in service of proffering a liberatory futurity constituted through humanizing communication that we may simply not yet know how to express (LeMaster & Terminel Iberri, 2021). The following forum contributions reflect on this pedagogical conundrum: Of affirming our legitimate discontent with the failings of a liberal education in the context of late stage racial capitalism. In the end, cultivating resistance to fascism requires a *political commitment* to labor against fascism as requisite to being an educator, but not through asserting democracy through communication. Rather, a political commitment of this sort must begin with interrogating the limits of our own pedagogical training—or lack thereof. It requires that we unlearn and relearn what we think we know about history, economics, and politics; it requires that we commit to understanding the world into which we were trained is not the world into which we are ushering our students. It requires that we move beyond the respectability of the ally industrial complex and toward a liberatory futurity in which we labor in political coalition against fascism and fascist political formations we, as educators, may not yet know how to discern just yet. This forum reflects our collective, cross-institutional attempt to begin to "get at" this pedagogical conundrum and functions as an opening for further deliberation, discussion, and action.

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