

# Militarization in the Age of the Pandemic Crisis

Written by Henry A. Giroux and Ourania Filippakou

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HENRY A. GIROUX AND OURANIA FILIPPAKOU, APR 22 2020

We live at a time when the terrors of life suggests the world has descended into darkness. The COVID-19 crisis has created a dystopian nightmare which floods our screens and media with images of fear. Bodies, doorknobs, cardboard packages, plastic bags, and the breath we exhale and anything else that offers the virus a resting place is comparable to a bomb ready to explode resulting in massive suffering and untold deaths. We can no longer shake hands, embrace our friends, use public transportation, sit in a coffee shop, or walk down the street without experiencing real anxiety and fear. We are told by politicians, media pundits, and others that everyday life has taken on the character of a war zone.

The metaphor of war has a deep sense of urgency and has a long rhetorical history in times of crisis. Militarization has become a central feature of the pandemic age and points to the dominance of warlike values in society. More specifically, Michael Geyer defines it as the 'contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence' (Geyer, 1989: 9). Geyer was writing about the militarization of Europe between 1914-1945, but his description seems even more relevant today. This is clear in the way right-wing politicians such as Trump promote the increasing militarization of language, public spaces, and bodies. Terms such as 'war footing', 'mounting an assault', and 'rallying the troops' have been normalized in the face of the pandemic crisis. At the same time, the language of war privileges the proliferation of surveillance capitalism, the defense of borders, and the suspension of civil liberties.

As the virus brings the engines of capitalism to a halt, the discourse of war takes on a new significance as a medical term that highlights the struggles to grapple with underfunded public health care systems, the lack of resources for testing, the surge towards downward mobility, expanding unemployment and the ongoing, heart-wrenching, efforts to provide protective essentials for front line and emergency workers. At the heart of this epic tragedy is an understated political struggle to reverse and amend decades of a war waged by neoliberal capitalism against the welfare state, essential social provisions, public goods, and the social contract. The failure of this oppressive death-dealing form of casino capitalism can be heard as Arundhati Roy observes in:

the stories of overwhelmed hospitals in the US, of underpaid, overworked nurses having to make masks out of garbage bin liners and old raincoats, risking everything to bring succor to the sick. About states being forced to bid against each other for ventilators, about doctors' dilemmas over which patient should get one and which left to die.

The language of war is used by the mandarins of power to both address the indiscriminate viral pandemic that has brought capitalism to its knees and to reinforce and expand the political formations and global financial system that are incapable of dealing with the pandemic. Rather than using rage, emotion, and fear to sharpen our understanding of the conditions that abetted this global plague and what it might mean to address it and prevent it in the future, the ruling elite in a number of right wing countries such as the U.S. and Brazil use the discourse of war either to remove such questions from public debate or dismisses them as acts of bad faith in a time of crisis. Amartya Sen is right in arguing that '[o]vercoming a pandemic may look like fighting a war, but the real need is far from that'.

Instead the language of war creates an echo chamber produced in both the highest circles of power and the right-wing cultural apparatuses that serve to turn trauma, exhaustion, and mourning into a fog of conspiracy theories, state repression, and a deepening abyss of darkness that 'serves the ends of those in power'. Edward Snowden is right in

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warning that governments will use the pandemic crisis to expand their attack on civil liberties, roll back constitutional rights, repress dissent and create what he calls an 'architecture of oppression'. He writes:

As authoritarianism spreads, as emergency laws proliferate, as we sacrifice our rights, we also sacrifice our capability to arrest the slide into a less liberal and less free world. Do you truly believe that when the first wave, this second wave, the 16th wave of the coronavirus is a long-forgotten memory, that these capabilities will not be kept? That these datasets will not be kept? No matter how it is being used, what is being built is the architecture of oppression.

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 crisis will test the limits of democracy worldwide. Right-wing movements, neo-Nazis, authoritarian politicians, religious fundamentalists and a host of other extremists are energized by what Slavoj Žižek calls the 'ideological viruses... [lying] dormant in our societies'. These include closing of borders, the quarantining of so-called enemies, the claim that undocumented immigrants spread the virus, the demand for increased police power, and the rush by religious fundamentalists to relegate women to the home to assume their 'traditional' gendered role.

On the economic level and under the cover of fear, the U.S. in particular, is transferring what Jonathan Cook refers to as:

huge sums of public money to the biggest corporations. Politicians controlled by big business and media owned by big business are pushing through this corporate robbery without scrutiny – and for reasons that should be self-explanatory. They know our attention is too overwhelmed by the virus for us to assess intentionally mystifying arguments about the supposed economic benefits, about yet more illusory trickle-down.

This constitutes a politics of 'opportunistic authoritarianism' and is already in play in a number of countries that are using the cover of enforcing public health measures to enforce a range of anti-democratic policies and wave of repression. The pandemic has made clear that market mechanisms cannot address the depth and scope of the current crisis. The failure of neoliberalism not only reveals a profound sense of despair and moral void at the heart of casino capitalism, but also makes clear that the spell of neoliberalism is broken and as such is in the midst of a legitimization crisis. The coronavirus pandemic has both made clear that the neoliberal notion that all problems are a matter of individual responsibility and that each of us are defined exclusively by our self-interest has completely broken down as the effects of neoliberalism's failure to deal with the pandemic unfold in shortages in crucial medical equipment, lack of testing, and failed public health services, largely due to austerity measures.

One consequence the failed neoliberal state is an uptake in levels of oppression in order to prevent the emergence of massive protests movements and radical forms of collective resistance. The suspension of civil rights, repression of dissent, upending of constitutional liberties, and the massive use of state surveillance in the service of anti-democratic ends has become normalized. Many of the countries driven by austerity policies and a culture of cruelty are using the pandemic crisis as a way shaping their modes of governance by drawing from what activist Ejeris Dixon calls elements of a 'fascist emergency playbook'. These include:

Use the emergency to restrict civil liberties — particularly rights regarding movement, protest, freedom of the press, a right to a trial and freedom to gather. Use the emergency to suspend governmental institutions, consolidate power, reduce institutional checks and balances, and reduce access to elections and other forms of participatory governance. Promote a sense of fear and individual helplessness, particularly in relationship to the state, to reduce outcry and to create a culture where people consent to the power of the fascist state; Replace democratic institutions with autocratic institutions using the emergency as justification. Create scapegoats for the emergency, such as immigrants, people of color, disabled people, ethnic and religious minorities, to distract public attention away from the failures of the state and the loss of civil liberties .

The evidence for the spread of this ideological virus and its apparatuses and policies of repression are no longer simply dormant fears of those fearful of the rise of authoritarian movements and modes of governance. For instance, Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister passed a bill that gave him 'sweeping emergency powers for an indefinite

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period of time....The measures were invoked as part of the government's response to the global pandemic'. What is becoming obvious is that the pandemic crisis produces mass anxiety that enables governments to turn a medical crisis into a political opportunity for leaders across the globe to push through dictatorial powers with little resistance.

For instance, as Selam Gebrekidan observes: 'In Britain, ministers have what a critic called 'eye-watering' power to detain people and close borders. Israel's prime minister has shut down courts and begun an intrusive surveillance of citizens. Chile has sent the military to public squares once occupied by protesters. Bolivia has postponed elections'. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte, who has flagrantly violated civil rights in the past, was given emergency powers by the congress. Under the cloak of invoking public health measures because of the threat posed by the coronavirus plague, China has broken up protests in Hong Kong and arrested many of its leaders. In the United States, Trump's Justice Department has asked Congress 'for the ability to ask chief judges to detain people indefinitely without trial during emergencies—part of a push for new powers that comes as the coronavirus spreads through the United States'.

In the U.S. Trump blames the media for spreading fake news about the virus, attacks reporters who ask critical questions, packs the courts with federal sycophants, dehumanizes undocumented immigrants by labeling them as carriers of the virus, and claims that he has 'total authority' to reopen the economy, however dangerous the policy, in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. In this instance, Trump markets fear to endorse elements of white supremacy, ultra-nationalism, and social cleansing while unleashing the mobilizing passions of fascism. He supports voter suppression and has publicly stated that making it easier to vote for many Americans such as blacks and other minorities of color would mean 'you would never have a Republican elected in this country again'. In the midst of economic hardships and widespread suffering due to the raging pandemic, Trump has tapped into a combination of fear and a cathartic cruelty while emboldening a savage lawlessness aimed at the most vulnerable populations. How else to explain his calling the coronavirus the 'Chinese virus', regardless of the violence it enables by right wingers against Asian-Americans, or his call to reopen the economy to hastily knowing that thousands could die as a result, mostly the elderly, poor, and other vulnerable.

## **Militarizing the Media and the Politics of Pandemic Pedagogy**

In the age of the pandemic, culture has been militarized. Donald Trump and the right-wing media in the United States have both politicized and weaponized the coronavirus pandemic. They have weaponized it by using a state of emergency to promote Trump's political attacks on critics, the press, journalists, and politicians who have questioned his bungling response to the pandemic crisis. They have politicized it by introducing a series of policies under the rubric of a state of exception that diverts bailout money to the ruling elite, militarizes public space, increases the power of the police, wages attacks on undocumented immigrants as a public health threat, and promotes voter suppression. In addition Trump has further strengthened the surveillance state, fired public servants for participating in the impeachment process, and initially claimed that the virus was a hoax perpetuated by the media and Democrats who were trying to undermine Trump's re-election.

Trump's language of dehumanization coupled with his appalling ignorance and toxic incompetence appears as a perfect fit for the media spectacle that he has made a central feature of his presidency. Trump's 'anti-intellectualism has been simmering in the United States for decades and has now fully boiled over' and when incorporated as a central feature of the right-wing social media becomes 'a tremendously successful tool of hegemonic control, manipulation, and false consciousness'. Trump's apocalyptic rhetoric appears to match the tenor of the moment as there is a surge in right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism, explosive racism, and a culture of lies, immediacy, and cruelty. What we are witnessing as the pandemic intensifies in the United States, and in some other countries across the globe, is the increasing threat of authoritarian regimes that both use the media to normalize their actions and wage war against dissidents and others struggling to preserve democratic ideas and principles.

Given his experience in the realms of Reality TV and celebrity culture, Trump is driven by mutually reinforcing registers of spectacular fits of self-promotion, joy in producing troves of Orwellian doublespeak, and the ratings his media coverage receives. One of the insults he throws out at reporters in his coronavirus briefings is that their networks have low ratings as if that is a measure of the relevance of the question being asked. Unlike any other

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president, Trump has used the mainstream media and social media to mobilize his followers, attack his enemies, and produce a twitter universe of misinformation, lies, and civic illiteracy. He has championed the right-wing media by both echoing their positions on a number of issues and using them to air his own. The conservative media such as Fox News has been enormously complicitous in justifying **Trump's** call for the Justice Department to dig up dirt on his political rivals, including the impeachable offense of extorting the Ukrainian government through the promise to withhold military aid if they did not launch an investigation into his political rival, Joe Biden. Moreover, they have supported his instigation of armed rebellions via his tweets urging his followers to liberate Minnesota, Michigan, and Virginia by refusing to comply with stay-at-home orders and social distancing restrictions. Ironically, he is urging anti-social distancing protests that violate his own federal guidelines.

Trump has used the police powers of the state, especially ICE to round up children and separate them from their parents at the border. Placing loyalty above expertise, he surrounds himself with incompetent sycophants, and makes policy decisions from his gut, often in opposition to the advice of public health experts. All of this is echoed and supported by the conservative and right wing eco-system, especially Fox News, Breitbart News, and what appears to be a legion of right wing commentators such as Rush Limbaugh, who falsely claimed the virus is a common cold and Laura Ingraham, who deceitfully compared Covid-19 to the flu. Fox News not only produced conspiracy theories such as the claim the virus was the product of the 'deep state' and was being used by Democrats to prevent Trump from being re-elected, it also produced misinformation about the virus and represented what 74 journalism professors and leading journalists described as 'a danger to public health'. Like most authoritarians, Trump does everything to control the truth by flooding the media with lies, denouncing scientific evidence, and critical judgment as fake news. The latter is a direct attack on the free press, critical journalists, and the notion that the search for the truth is crucial to any valid and shared notion of citizenship.

The crisis of politics is now matched by a mainstream and corporate controlled digital media and screen culture that revels in political theater, embraces ignorance, fractured narratives, and racial hysteria (cf. Butsch, 2019). In addition, it authorizes and produces a culture of sensationalism designed to increase ratings and profits at the expense of truth. As a disimagination machine and form of pandemic pedagogy, it undermines a complex rendering of social problems and suppresses a culture of dissent and informed judgments. This pandemic pedagogy functions so as to shape human agency, desire, and modes of identification both in the logic of consumerism while privileging a hyper form of masculinity and legitimating a friend/enemy distinction. We live in an age in which theater and the spectacle of performance empty politics of any moral substance and contribute to the revival of an updated version of fascist politics. Thoughtlessness has become a national ideal as the corporate controlled media mirror the Trump administration demand that reality be echoed rather than be analyzed, interrogated and critically comprehended. Politics is now leaden with bombast, words strung together to shock, numb the mind, and images overwrought with self-serving sense of riotousness and anger. Trump shamelessly reinforces such a politics by showing propaganda videos at presidential news conferences.

What is distinct about this historical period, especially under the Trump regime, is what Susan Sontag has called a form of aesthetic fascism with its contempt of 'all that is reflective, critical, and pluralistic'. One distinctive element of the current moment is the rise of what we call hard and soft disimagination machines. The hard disimagination machines, such as Fox News, conservative talk radio, and Breitbart media, function as overt and unapologetic propaganda machines that trade in nativism, misrepresentations, and racist hysteria, all wrapped in the cloak of a regressive view of patriotism.

As Joel Bleifuss points out, *Fox News*, in particular, is 'blatant in its contempt for the truth, and engages nightly in the 'ritual of burying the truth in 'memory holes' and spinning a new version of reality [that keeps] the spirit of 1984... alive and well.... This, the most-watched cable news network, functions in its fealty to Trump like a real-world Ministry of Truth from George Orwell's *1984*, where bureaucrats 'rectify' the historical record to conform to Big Brother's decrees'. Trump's fascist politics and fantasies of racial purity could not succeed without the disimagination machines, pedagogical apparatuses, and the practitioners needed to make his 'vision not merely real but grotesquely normal'. What Trump makes clear is that the weaponization of language into a discourse of racism and hate is deeply indebted to a politics of forgetting and is a crucial tool in the battle to undermine historical consciousness and memory itself.

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The soft disimagination machines or liberal mainstream media such as NBC Nightly News, MSNBC, and the established press function largely to cater to Trump's Twitter universe, celebrity culture, and the cut throat ethos of the market, all the while isolating social issues, individualizing social problems, and making the workings of power superficially visible. This is obvious in their mainstream's continuous coverage of his daily press briefings, which as Oscar Zambrano puts it 'is like watching a disease in progress that is infecting us all: a parallel to coronavirus' (Zambrano, 2020). Unfortunately, high ratings are more important than refusing to participate in Trump disinformation spectacles. Politics as a spectacle saturates the senses with noise, cheap melodrama, lies, and buffoonery. This is not to suggest that the spectacle that now shapes politics as pure theater is meant merely to entertain and distract.

On the contrary, the current spectacle, most recently evident in the midst of the coronavirus crisis functions as a war machine, functioning largely to nurture the notion of war as a permanent social relation, the primary organizing principle of society and politics merely one of its means or guises. War has now become the operative and defining feature of language and the matrix for all relations of power.

The militarization of the media, and culture itself, now function as a form of social and historical amnesia. That is, in both form and content it separates the past from a politics that in its current form has turned deadly in its attack on the values and institutions crucial to a functioning democracy. In this instance, echoes of a fascist past remain hidden, invisible beneath the histrionic shouting and disinformation campaigns that rail against alleged 'enemies of the state' and 'fake news', which is a euphemism for dissent, holding power accountable, and an oppositional media. A flair for the overly dramatic eliminates the distinction between fact and fiction, lies and the truth.

Under such circumstances, the spectacle of militarization functions as part of a culture of distraction, division, and fragmentation, all the while refusing to pose the question of how the United States shares elements of a fascist politics that connects it to a number of other authoritarian countries such as Brazil, Turkey, Hungary, and Poland. All of these countries in the midst of the pandemic have embraced a form of fascist aesthetics and politics that combines a cruel culture of neoliberal austerity with the discourses of hate, nativism, and state repression. The militarization of culture and the media in its current forms can only appeal to the state of exception, death, and war. Under such circumstances, the relationship between civil liberties and democracy, politics and death, and justice and injustice is lost. War should be a source of alarm, not pride, and its linguistic repositories should be actively demilitarized.

## Conclusion

Under the Trump regime, historical amnesia is used as a weapon of (mis)education, politics, and power and is waged primarily through the militarization and weaponization of the media. This constitutes a form of pandemic pedagogy—a pedagogical virus that erodes the modes of agency, values, and civic institutions central to a robust democracy. The notion that the past is a burden that must be forgotten is a center piece of authoritarian regimes, one that allows public memory to wither and the threads of fascism to become normalized. While some critics eschew the comparison of Trump with the Nazi era, it is crucial to recognize the alarming signs in this administration that echo a fascist politics of the past. As Jonathan Freedland points out, 'the signs are there, if only we can bear to look'. Rejecting the Trump-Nazi comparison makes it easier to believe that we have nothing to learn from history and to take comfort in the assumption that it cannot happen once again. Democracy cannot survive if it ignores the lessons of the past, reduces education to mass conformity, celebrates civic illiteracy, and makes consumerism the only obligation of citizenship. Max Horkheimer added a more specific register to the relationship between fascism and capitalism in his comment 'If you don't want to talk about capitalism then you had better keep quiet about fascism.'

The lessons to be learned from the pandemic crisis have to exceed making visible the lies, misinformation, and corruption at the heart of the Trump regime. Such an approach fails to address the most serious of Trump's crimes. Moreover, it fails to examine a number of political threads that together constitute elements common to a global crisis in the age of the pandemic. The global response to the pandemic crisis by a number of authoritarian states when viewed as part of a broader crisis of democracy needs to be analyzed by connecting ideological, economic, and cultural threads that weave through often isolated issues such as white nationalism, the rise of a Republican Party dominated by right-wing extremists, the collapse of the two party system, and the ascent of a corporate controlled

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media as a disimagination machine and the proliferation of corrosive systems of power and dehumanization.

Crucial to any politics of resistance is the necessity to take seriously the notion that education is central to politics itself, and that social problems have to be critically understood before people can act as a force for empowerment and liberation. This suggests analyzing Trump's use of politics as a militarized spectacle not in isolation from the larger social totality—as simply one of incompetence, for instance- but as part of a more comprehensive political project in which updated forms of authoritarianism and contemporary versions of fascism are being mobilized and gaining traction both in the United States and across the globe. Federico Mayor, the former director general of UNESCO once stated that 'You cannot expect anything from uneducated citizens except unstable democracy'. In the current historical moment and age of Trump, it might be more appropriate to say that what can be expected from a society in which ignorance is a virtue and civic literacy and education are viewed as a liability, one cannot expect anything but fascism.

The pandemic crisis should be a rallying cry to create massive collective resistance against both the Republican and Democratic Parties and the naked brutality of the political and economic system they have supported since the 1970s. That is, the criminogenic response to the crisis on the part of the Trump administration should become a call to arms, if not a model on a global level, for a massive protest movement that moves beyond the ritual of trying Trump and other authoritarian politicians for an abuse of power. Instead, such a movement should become a call to put on trial a capitalist system while fighting for structural and ideological reforms that will usher in a radical and socialist democracy worthy of the struggle.

What is crucial to remember is no democracy cannot survive without an informed citizenry. Moreover, solidarity among individuals cannot be assumed and must fought for as part of a wider struggle to break down the walls ideological and material repression that isolate, depoliticize, and pit individuals and groups against each other. Community and a robust public sphere cannot be built on the bonds of shared fears, isolation, and oppression. Authoritarian governments will work to contain both any semblance of democratic politics and any attempts at large scale transformations of society. Power lies in more than understanding and the ability to disrupt, it also lies in a vision of a future that does not imitate the present and the courage to collectively struggle to bring a radical democratic socialist vision into fruition.

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**Henry A. Giroux** currently holds the McMaster University Chair for Scholarship in the Public Interest in the English and Cultural Studies Department and is the Paulo Freire Distinguished Scholar in Critical Pedagogy. His most recent books include *American Nightmare: Facing the Challenge of Fascism* (City Lights, 2018), *On Critical Pedagogy*, 2nd edition (Bloomsbury, 2020); *The Terror of the Unforeseen* (Los Angeles Review of books, 2019), and *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020). **Ourania Filippakou** is Reader and Director of Teaching and Learning in the Department of Education at Brunel University London. Her most recent book, co-authored with Ted Tapper, is 'Creating the Future? The 1960s New English Universities' (Dordrecht: Springer, 2019). Her forthcoming books are: 'Higher education and the Crisis of Europe' (2021) and 'Restructuring Knowledge in Higher Education' (with Ted Tapper) both to be published by Routledge. She is co-editor of the British

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