
Task of the Intellectual in a Time of Crisis: An Appeal to Colleagues

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<https://doi.org/10.71106/BWKR9483>

This road away from freedom that the West is currently taking is a powerful reminder that, in a globalized, mediatized, and hyperconnected world, new forms of (fascist) political pathologies do not stop at national borders—let alone walls. Instead, in the age of the Internet, they spread contagiously, via a proliferation of new, transnational media and the cyberwars they trigger. These hypermimetic wars dissolve not only the very conception of clearly defined borders, but also the ontological distinction between self and others, originals and copies, truths and lies, virtual attacks and real attacks.

— Nidesh Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (2019; xxxiv)

We write as educators and are making this appeal to colleagues here in the U.S. and abroad. Hurling down this “road away from freedom” (Lawtoo), we find ourselves in a not-so-brave new world, one that seems to break with history and to break history itself. In such times, it is important to situate ourselves in our own history.

Born and raised in the U.S. in the mid-20th century, we grew into ourselves with help from an education system grounded in Enlightenment rationality, Humanist ethics, scientific method, and free inquiry. As we experienced it, the classroom generally was an energizing, liberating space. We were able to pull works by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Karl Jaspers off the shelves of our school libraries. Today, linear yards of books are being pulled from these same shelves, boxed up and stored out of the reach of students. *The Diary of Anne Frank* was required reading. Some classes read *Animal Farm* or *1984*. Today, teachers across the U.S. (particularly in conservative, so-called “Red states”) are required to have their reading lists preapproved.

From Kindergarten through graduate school, we benefitted from teachers who taught us, not what to think, but how to think. And, inspired by our teachers, we followed in their footsteps, becoming educators ourselves. We wonder how children in school today are being prepared to enter a world that is becoming increasingly unsettled, destabilized and unpredictable—indeed, so thoroughly estranged from previous social-political norms as to seem, in our eyes, nightmarishly unreal.

Ours was the world after the Great Depression, after Nazism and Stalinism, after the Holocaust and Hiroshima. We heard stories about these social, economic, political, militaristic nightmares as we listened to our parents discuss politics with their neighbors. It was not until we grew fully into adulthood that we learned how thoroughly our own schooling had been shaped in reaction to these then-still recent events and in response to challenges of the then-current world order. As children of the Cold War, we were trained (emotionally as well as intellectually) to embrace democracy as the highest political value and freedom as its social/psychological enablement. Now, the scope of politics and history discussed at home and in classrooms has narrowed.

We are writing about the loss of “historical consciousness” (Gadamer) which, arguably since the 18th century Enlightenment, has informed Western academic/intellectual culture. Even as we write, the current U.S. administration is demanding that museum exhibitions and public monuments (including national parks and cemeteries) remove all references to the nation’s racist past. In school and college classrooms across the U.S., Critical Race Theory (CRT) among other historicist models are being banned. And this wholesale erasure of history may go largely unnoted by a majority of the population, given our recent popular-cultural shift away from the investigation of our *full* history, of what Howard Zinn would call “a *people’s* history”—which makes it increasingly difficult for emerging citizens to learn how to live as historical beings.

Inquiry and critique, dialogue and debate—these are habits of thought and expression essential to the development of an educated mind. And education as we had experienced it (and sought to practice it) fosters these habits. More than habits of intellect, we came to recognize these as social and political skills vital to democratic process. By means of these, a “mere individual” grows into a citizen, a responsible and responsive participant in democracy. To lack (or repudiate) these habits is to fail, not just as an intellectual, but as a citizen.

In this brief narrative so far, we’ve offered little more than the academic commonplaces of our own Cold War generation. As if to test their currency, we asked a web-based search engine to name “the academic values of an intellectual,” to which we received an AI-generated response, titled “What It Means to Be an Intellectual Person.” Built up from web-archived residues of living human discourse, the following bullet points were supplied by an AI website:

- Skills in critical thinking
- Skills in active listening and communication
- Cognitive flexibility and adaptability
- Skepticism and open-mindedness
- A capacity for self-reflection
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Respect for expertise
- Intellectual humility
- Willingness to admit error

Should we lament that a computer program can teach what all-too-many pundits and policymakers today seem to have forgotten, or ignored, or have never themselves

learned? We appreciate both the list and the website's elaboration upon its terms. We're told, for example, that individuals possessing cognitive flexibility and adaptability have "the ability to understand and empathize with viewpoints different from their own, even if they disagree. This allows for more nuanced analysis and richer understanding of complex issues." Amen. Empathy, indeed, is an aspect of mature emotional intelligence that enables us to live together in communities marked by diverse ethnicities, faiths, sexualities, and cultural practices. As responsible/responsive citizens, we become selves-among-others, mutually supportive and protective of each other's rights and freedoms. As a nation, the United States falls short; inequalities and injustices remain. But, even as "the American experiment" in democracy remains a work-in-progress, its humane values and aspirations abide. We believe that much the same can be said of other nations and of the aspirations of their people.

The qualities that turn individuals into intellectuals are the same qualities necessary for active citizenship in a participatory democracy. Such is the nature of social justice, as explored in this Forum: Enfranchisement, equality, legal rights, and freedoms ought ideally to become institutionalized public policy—and, within a healthy citizen-centered democracy, such policies as these will be enacted, and protected, and staffed, and funded. Yet still more is needed, since the institutions (and the individuals who oversee and staff these) must themselves embrace democratic, pluralistic values. To remain alive, these values need to be part of a healthy political dialogue. The mere existence of bureaucracies, regulations, and clerks won't suffice: Lacking a commitment to democratic, pluralistic values, these can devolve into what Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil," where bureaucrats rubberstamp racist, sexist, homophobic policies without consideration of ethics or personal responsibilities. ("Just doing my job," says the clerk as they pull books off library shelves; variations of this refrain were heard time and again in the Nazi Nuremberg Trials, which were televised during our childhood.)¹

Where democracy fails, social justice falters.

We have been writing of democracy as the highest political aspiration. We turn now to the political disease that has threatened democracy historically and continues to do so today. We are alluding to the antithesis and political adversary of democracy, which is fascism (or totalitarianism, or tyranny: call it what you will). In composition texts that we studied from and, later, taught from, selections were included from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. (By the 1990s, these had disappeared from our textbooks and, hence, from our writing instruction; we need them back.) We studied and taught these as part of a necessary civic skill: specifically, the ability to detect fascism in its root causes and to predict its social-political consequences. In the "War Propaganda" chapter of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler laid out his plan for propaganda, a key component of which was the marginalization of the *intelligentsia*. It's a sad and unsettling moment when *Mein Kampf* becomes part of the current U.S. administration's playbook for the ideological "cleansing" of college campuses, curricula, textbooks, faculty, and staff. We should, however, find some hope and courage in the fact that Hitler feared the *intelligentsia*. He

¹The U.S. government produced several television documentaries in both English and German based in trial film footage. See, for example, U.S. War Department. "Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today." 1947. *YouTube*, uploaded by Armyworld, 23 Aug. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmJZlh1N4bI.

understood the power and influence that educators can have and the “good trouble” that we, collectively, can cause. We are writing of our own experience with our own nation’s intellectual/educational crisis, but we know that academicians the world over face similar challenges; with its diverse voices, ethnicities, genders, and nationalities, this *LLIDS* Special Issue gives the proof.

We educators are, *de facto*, the world’s *intelligentsia* today. In our teaching, we do more than promote democratic values; ideally, we profess them—that is, we embody them. By engaging our students in democratic dialogue, we *do* them. But, *within the fascist mindset*, this professing of democratic values makes us effectively “enemies of the state.” We are choosing our words carefully; we don’t believe that we’re exaggerating. (We’re the so-called “Woke,” after all; we’re all “communists,” the ones who “hate America”; we’re the ones who defend gay marriage and create sanctuary cities for illegal aliens and protest the slaughter of innocents in Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere in the world.) Our textbooks may not be burned in public bonfires, and we personally may not be hauled off to concentration camps—both of which happened in Hitler’s Nazi Germany—but our silence, our passivity, endangers us. The intellectual can and should become the cultural hero of this moment but, individually, we fear that our careers remain at stake. At least two authors who had planned to participate have withdrawn submissions from this special issue. Both are of Middle Eastern descent; and both, though committed passionately to issues of social justice, feared reprisals from their own university administrations. In this critical moment, we need to stand with our colleagues and our students. We need to think about their care and our own. We need to learn from history.

The intellectual can no longer dwell in an Ivory Tower, sequestered from the world. Our classrooms and our larger communities need guidance—role models—in resisting tyranny. We need to embrace our writing and teaching as “worldly.” We need to commit to the notion that democracy *educates* citizens, whereas fascism merely *indoctrinates*. If, collectively, we can give voice to this claim and profess it—that is, *do* it—then we’ll have begun in earnest to embrace the task of the intellectual in our time of crisis.

Ours is a call to action; noble words all, *but where do we go from here?* To defeat fascism, we must study it and expose it. But, on this critical point, we have forgotten the lessons of history. We no longer read or teach the great European intellectuals who survived the Holocaust and wrote in its aftermath, asking “How did it happen?” and vowing “Never again.” Arendt, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm: They studied the etiology of fascism and sought its antidotes. Worldwide today, academicians and the institutions they work for have fallen under siege politically/ideologically, and their overall response has been weak, disorganized, passive to near-impotence, and confused. This is not the first time that intellectuals worldwide have faced down tyranny. Unlike the Weimar German *intelligentsia*, who stood by largely passive (and in some notorious instances—think of Heidegger—chose complicity), we know what to expect from the fascist playbook.² We

²A printed poster once associated with the U.S. Holocaust Museum offers to identify “Early Warning Signs of Fascism” (Lynch). Available and increasingly popular online, its list of fascist tenets and strategies follows:

Power and continuing nationalism
Disdain for human rights

urge our fellow academicians to arm themselves intellectually with an understanding of our common adversary—fascist tyranny in its several forms—and to speak with one firm, determined voice.

No one of us will determine the path forward. No single speech or action will suffice. So let ours be a choric declaration of common purpose, united in our commitment to the intellectual principles that undergird the educative practices that create active, engaged citizens who embrace and sustain democracy and pursue social justice. Now is not the time for virtue-signaling and mere performative outrage. Rather, let us draw upon the whole of our expertise to act thoughtfully, effectively, and collectively, without rash bravado or meaningless gestures of martyrdom. Let our speaking, teaching, and writing be bulwarks against fascism. Let us, indeed, become students of democracy, and let us not fail when tested in our resolve (as, most assuredly, *we will be tested*). Let us have the courage of conviction and learn to speak, not with reason merely, but with wisdom. Let us rise together to meet this our moment in history.



Identification of enemies as a unifying cause
Supremacy of the military
Rampant sexism
Controlled mass media
Obsession with national security
Religion and government intertwined
Corporate power protected
Labor power suppressed
Disdain for intellectuals and the arts
Obsession with crime and punishment
Rampant cronyism and corruption
Fraudulent elections

As a serious document, it's thin in details and lacking in application. Still, it serves to catch interest and stimulate dialogue.

For more wide-ranging and elaborate discussion, we'd offer Umberto Eco's 1995 essay, variously titled "Ur-Fascism" and "Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt." As recounted in the Wikipedia article, "Ur-Fascism," Eco's list of traits include "the cult of tradition"; "the rejection of modernism"; "the cult of action for action's sake"; a devaluing of critical dialogue (such that "disagreement is treason"); the "fear of difference" (as reflected in racist "appeals against foreigners and immigrants"); an "appeal to a frustrated middle class"; a xenophobic "obsession with [plots]" against the state; the depiction of enemies as "at the same time too strong and too weak"; a political ideology of "life [as] permanent warfare" against enemies; an elitist "contempt for the weak"; "a cult of death" celebrating one's sacrifice to the state; a culture of "machismo," holding "both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality"; "selective populism" (whereby a leader "holds himself as the interpreter of the popular will"); and "newspeak," or the employment of "an impoverished vocabulary in order to limit critical reasoning." See, "Ur-Fascism." *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ur-Fascism>.

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