

Subverting Authoritarianism by Empowering Learners and Democratizing Education

What happens to a nation when non-conformists are labeled as "enemies of the people" and their counter-views are described as "alternative facts?"

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Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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Authoritarianism can be subverted if learning environments on college campuses are democratized to meet learner needs.

What happens to a nation when non-conformists are labeled as "enemies of the people" and their counter-views are described as "alternative facts?"

What happens when the ideas and beliefs of American citizens are rejected by the government due to their religion?

What happens when the polity continuously ignores its constituents and avidly deconstructs affordable internet availability?

What happens when critical thought is observed with contempt?

What happens when a society's economic disparities continue to widen?

What happens when violence worsens across traditional socio-economic bounds and it is ignored?

What happens when questioning these concerns becomes inappropriate or even illegal?

The Frankfurt School and Authoritarianism

In 1922, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer founded the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, or what would eventually be known as [The Frankfurt School](#). Their research critically analyzed Western history by critiquing the ideological forces and structures that seemingly constrain people. Their goal in this critique? Individual liberation to reject or revise the conditions authorities have enforced as measures of constraint for the sake of conformance. The notion of defining the conditions of social subjugation became known as critical theory and, thus, evolved into a natural doctrine for redefining what it means to be truly emancipated.

In 1933, less than 10 years after its inception, the Frankfurt School was temporarily transferred, first to Geneva in 1933, and then to New York and Columbia University in 1935.

But why was such a move necessary? An emerging political party had taken control of Germany called the Nazis.

This makes the Institute's move both ironic and poignant. It is a reminder that its emphasis on questioning authority could never be realized without a societal and governmental structure capable of entertaining notions of non-conformance.

Such is the nature of a democracy and the antithesis of authoritarianism.

An authoritarian framework always seeks to overtake those structures that would otherwise subvert the total power it sways and deem them as dangerous or irrelevant to the public good. In fact, authoritarian regimes are notorious for punishing those engaging in what may be observed as "dangerous thinking." But [Hannah Arendt](#) argued that all thinking is dangerous because it is individual thought that questions the relevance of the status quo. It is also the bedrock any civically engaged citizenry needs to critically think about how today's reality will affect tomorrow's democracy. This is especially true when dangerous thinking must traverse through the muck of radical extremist views, white nationalism, isolationism, and petty policies that push the needle of societal thought to the margins.

But where can these ideas be discussed without reservation?

Education's Subversion of Authoritarianism

Colleges and universities are the original bastions of dangerous thinking. These institutions reinforce scholars to question everything that is sacred. In doing so, the role of higher education is solidified as a pivotal mechanism for perpetuating a political democracy and an informed citizenry.

But the educative process for becoming an informed citizenry is not a one-way street.

Educators must recognize how to convey knowledge in a way that learners can engage on their terms. This is not pandering to the wants of the learner. Instead, this is an act of counterbalancing the learners' needs with the educational methods that allow learners to understand the knowledge being conveyed.

[This is not a revolutionary call to arms.](#) Creating authentic and bespoke learning environments that liberate the minds of learners has been an impetus for educators since the era of [John Dewey](#). However, in an age where the proliferation of students in blended learning environments is common, the ability for an educator to account for the needs of a learner is all but impossible without smaller class sizes and a legion of additional faculty. In that context, educators are better able to humanize their learners and emancipate them from being merely a passive object, thus empowering them to be interested and communicative. Learners then become an active part of the learning process because it has been democratized by, with, and through their needs. As a result, learners find an appreciation of [power relations](#) within the education system and society at large, so long as they see their input is relevant to the process at hand.

Yet, regardless of how small the classes are or how energetic the educator, in the end the learner must decide to be an active participant in the learning process, just as in the democratic process. It is truly their decision. In choosing to do so, learners must share their ideas while challenging the accepted assumptions of the time. They must also be free to do so by their peers, educators, and the administrators of the institutions they attend, thus allowing them to find the motivation to be an active participant and build upon that motivation over time.

This way of thinking is a precondition for cultivating a citizenry that prefers understanding and questioning the nature of governance in lieu of blindly accepting it as a natural form of authority. A predicated factor for fostering such a society is a host of civically-minded educators who are conscious of learner needs, unwavering in the quality of the learning process, and democratically-minded towards an end of liberating the minds of learners. In achieving this, dangerous thinking and individuality is encouraged, thus giving learners an example of positive power relations and the necessary context to tackle authoritarianism.

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