

# A Brief Analysis of Exploitation of Education System for Propaganda in Fascism: A Deliberate Attempt to Subjugate Critical thought by Fascists

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## 1. Introduction

Jean - Jacques Rousseau defined society as a social contract (Rousseau, 2012). However, the nature of this contract will inevitably depend on the social relations of the individuals it houses. Historically, the evolution of society has been a consequence of the dynamacy or the movement of these relations (Dahrendorf, 2022). The greatest of philosophers have dwelled over these relations and their realities that can only be summarized through development, transfer and mutation of societal functions. One of the essential components of this evolving structure of society is education. The impact of education on political participation and the social characteristics of an individual have been well - researched in political philosophy.

Galston (2001) argues that a "healthy democracy" must contain well - educated individuals that contribute to a state that functions with foundations of effective public participation. Without going into the semantics of this thought, it is better to deconstruct its core idea that asserts a simple notion: an educated individual in a state can recognise their well - being, acknowledge the political and social relations, and then participate in the interest of their well - being. Since individuals may have conflicting interests, a healthy democracy will be a political system of individuals and communities who debate and reason and solutions emerge amidst these conflicts that are of the most favourable for the involved parties. Hence, the primary idea of a functional democracy lies in the awareness, education, and realization of social dynamics among its people. In

conjunction with the thought of a fundamental need for education and awareness in masses for their public participation lies the ground of the very state that establishes the institutions and nature of education. Therefore, it becomes a decision of the state to either promote critical thinking and literacy of the masses or to subjugate the idea of education by diluting its practice through control of institutions.

This paper aims to highlight how the subversion of education and its dilution is a necessity for the survival of a fascist regime. To discuss this, the paper will provide examples from the acknowledged history of fascism and draw its parallels with theoretical models and discussions on education.

### The need to control the form and content of education and the role of state

Fascism is described as a far - right authoritarian state with an ultranationalist ideology and communal servitude (Anton, 2021). This section will discuss control on education as asserted by fascist Italy and Germany.

#### Italy

The textbooks published during the regime of Benito Mussolini talked about how Mussolini will bring back prosperity to Italy (Bosworth, 2021). The front pages of the books laid the imagery of might of Italy with pretexts on how Ethiopia must be won over by power, war and direction of the leader. Figure 1 illustrates the covers of notebooks serving the propaganda in favor of the fascist state.



**Figure 1:** Images from notebooks of Barbara, who was in Italy at the tender age of 7 - 8 years between August 1937 and March 1938 and was given notebooks from school. (Source: Slate, 2016)

Volume 12 Issue 6, June 2023

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The first educational reform in the fascist state of Italy was brought in by **Giovanni Gentile** who re-cast the Italian schools and changed their curriculum (Bosworth, 2021). Through this model, the state had direct control over the institutions and there was vigilant monitoring of the students. The model promoted private education systems and aimed to restrict access to higher education. Changes in the educational programs covered the entire spectrum that ranged from controlling early-year education to higher education. It provided the Church with a right to provide education, and promoted introduction of religious instructions in the pedagogy at the elementary level. In a 1923 paper, *Ginornale d'Italia* the minister explicitly stated that the educational reforms aimed to "reduce the scholastic population" (Lowe, 2012). The liberal form of education was villainized as the cause of unemployment of the literate class of teachers, doctors, lawyers and engineers. They limited universities and technical institutions in the fascist state of Italy; it reduced the regular schools to half in number.

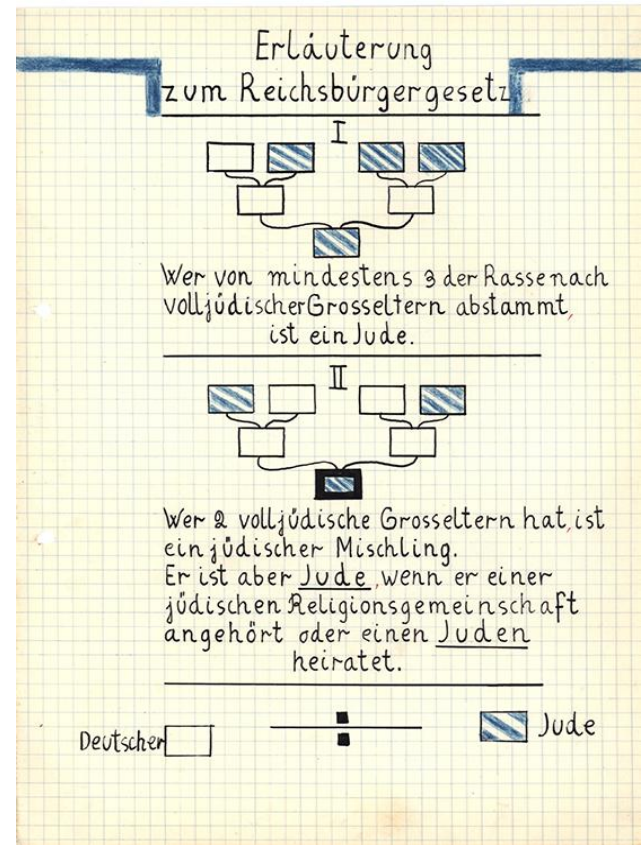
The changes in curriculum in Fascist Italy first came in 1927 with the establishment of a National Board to revise and review the contents of the textbooks followed by a mandate of exclusive use of textbooks that were issued by the state in elementary education. The contents of the books signalled simple ideologies in the minds of the young children, which were, "to believe, to obey, and to fight" (Tannenbaum, 1972, P.173). The books included poems in praise of Mussolini and the military virtues of the state. At secondary school, the changes were not limited to the curriculum but to the active rise of fascist youth organizations. This not only helped Mussolini to diminish the count of the diplomatic, intellectual youth but also ascertained that the number did not rise. It also masked the problem of rampant unemployment in the state and increased availability of labourers who could work in the interest of the private industries and be at the disposal of the military for wars.

Use of educational institutions as a tool of propaganda by Mussolini thus served multiple functions. It established the superiority of the fascist among its youth and masses and minimized all possibility of resistance that could arise against him due to failed economic policies and rampant unemployment in the country.

#### Nazi Germany

The systemic changes in the educational system of Nazi Germany are well-researched and documented. However, this paper will discuss in brief the social and political motivations of education control in fascism. Hitler had established that to take control over the populace, education had to be deployed as a primary tool (Naudé, 2021). The major part of biology was replaced with race sciences and eugenics with mandated youth labour service and the physical training of children to be used in wars. The aim of education policy in Nazi Germany was to indoctrinate the children with the idea of race sciences and to develop instinctive loyalty towards Hitler. The education of women was directed towards making them good mothers and wives and men as foot soldiers of the war (Pan, 2020). It was also mandated that the teachers were part of the Nazi Teachers Association and by the year 1939, over 97% of educators

were part of the association. The educators needed to take an oath of loyalty towards Hitler (Venken, 2022).



**Figure 2:** Image from book of a German student Gerda Nabe, the image is an illustration of process to identify a Jew and depicts the infamous Nuremberg laws (Source: The Wiener Holocaust Library)

The Jewish educators, researchers and scientists were removed from positions and special training was provided to educators to ensure propagation of Nazi ideas. The changes were further concretized by rewriting of textbooks of sciences and social sciences and with the downgrading of subjects such as mathematics that could enhance critical thinking in the children. Even in Nazi Germany, youth organizations played an essential role. The boys who were seen as potential young leaders were provided additional training and Hitler Youth (HY) controlled the major movements in Nazi Germany (Pan, 2022). This group controlled the activities of young masses outside of the classrooms. This allowed complete control over the population by the fascists and allowed his ideas to be the only ideas implanted in the minds of the coming generations.

The mystification of science and the use of pseudoscience is also an integral component of fascist Germany that needs its share of mention. Replacing science with pseudoscientific beliefs supplement the fascist as the primary function in the application and understanding of science is critical thought, reason, and scepticism none of which work in favour of maintaining the hegemony of the regime. Whilst many scientists and researchers left Germany with the brutal actions of Nazis in the region, many were killed. The fall of the Vienna Circle which was the breeding ground of the philosophy of sciences, murder of Professor Schlick with the



migration of scientists like Einstein are well - known attacks of fascist Germany on science (Edmonds, 2020).

Edzard Ernst (2015) in his book, “ A scientist in wonderland” says,

*“When science is abused, hijacked or distorted in order to serve political or ideological belief systems, ethical standards will inevitably slip. The resulting pseudoscience is a deceit perpetrated on the weak and the vulnerable. We owe it to ourselves, and to those who come after us, to stand up for the truth, no matter how much trouble this might bring.”*

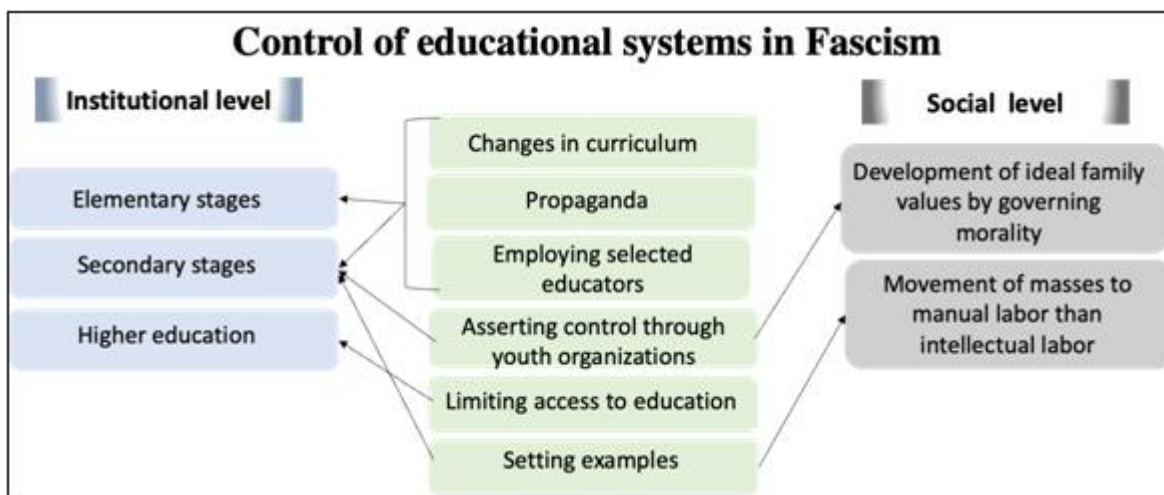
Nazi Germany not only reduced the stature of critical thought, science and reason in the state but also promoted alternatives of pseudoscience and alternative medicine with methods not only ineffective but also dangerous. This allowed the designing and practising of dehumanized experimentation with limited to no resistance from the masses.

**Understanding the dynamics of controlling education**

Understanding that the rise of fascism is a pitfall of capitalism needs primary acknowledgement. It is only upon this acknowledgement that the understanding of how the tools of society such as democracy and education are manipulated by the fascists can be discussed in greater detail. A fascist regime is often supported by industrial wealth that not only assists in maintaining the hegemony of

the fascist for its monetary gains but to assert an indirect control on the populace where the fascist will enable monopolizing of the capitalists in barter of monetary compensation it receives (Micocci & Mario, 2017). A fascist demands complete control over its masses. With the very emergence of fascism and the rise of the fascist leader, an initial control is established with mass hysteria of a perceived threat, a fear from the unknown which leads to the initial power transfer to the leader. The fascist now has two feats to achieve. First, to maintain the mass psychology of obligation and control through direct propaganda, fueling a state of uncertainty and diminishing their confidence in any alternative form of governance. And, second, to prevent youth and future generations from questioning the established system.

Education is one of the most profound tools that can direct the course of society (Glassman, 2001). A pattern of hierarchy emerges across various epochs of civilization where the control of education is associated with class and power and with maneuvered ideologies that masquerade the education system. Hence, education in a state is a highly hegemonic institution. In the same alignment, education can also serve as an emancipatory tool for the masses who can develop thought and reason through a primary understanding of educational principles. As fascist regimes directly take control of educational institutions they ensure the strengthening of hegemonic educational systems rather than emancipatory systems. A fascist regime may do this in multiple ways.



**Figure 3:** Fascism controls the education system through both institutional means and social means

Education is controlled at all stages with elementary and secondary stages being subjected to direct changes in curriculum and propaganda along with only selected educators who are filtered by the regime to indoctrinate the students. Higher education institutions are highly limited or privatized rendering higher education inaccessible to the larger set of population. A key role is played by the youth brigade of fascism in both secondary and higher education with rogue individuals that act as vigilantes and promote fascist ideas by setting examples and isolating the divergent young population. Education and knowledge of the population are not exclusively controlled by the institutions but are also through social paradigms. The learning and

observations gathered from society from a young age is one of the key sources of education for a child. In fascism, the role of family and the principles of morality are given key importance. The principle of morality and abstract concepts of values allows the fascist to make the population believe them to be better than others and instigate a sense of superiority which helps in strengthening the position of fascist in the state as the saviour of this higher moral and value system of society.

The youth organizations in the education system become the mouthpiece of similar values and guard the action of individuals of learning age within and outside the

institutions. This control through all the stages of education enables the state to ensure what information is being passed down to the masses. Knowledge of only selected aspects or skewed facts can help in the development of a false pretence through which the masses will be able to develop their worldview. Ludwig Wittgenstein a philosopher of language and science asserted how the *limits of the language of an individual are also the limits of their world*. Here, language is not just the vernacular but also the language of thought and ideas that are nurtured in the process of learning. When the education of the masses is controlled the language of their thoughts is controlled. This also leads to the development of obedience in the masses where the line of obligation is drawn with manipulation of perspective.

History indicates brutal endings of fascism (Payne, 1996). However, anyone who is aware of the profound role of education in the *modus operandi* of education must participate in the promotion of critical thought and knowledge in the masses. A foundational text that identifies the need for a new pedagogical approach for the oppressed masses in a state where oppression is the nature of operation comes from Paulo Freire. Freire articulates how education can function either as a tool or an instrument that can enable the youth and younger generations into critical thought and logic or can act as an instrument to be used to instill conformity in the masses (Freire, 1996). Hence, education for Freire emerges as a tool with dual outcomes where the variable is its application. Fascist leaders do not act dialogically or are not interested in debate or reason and hence impose their ideas either by authority or through manipulation. Hence, they use education as a tool for sustaining their oppression. Liberation of masses is thus not an act of provision of information but of a generation of cognition and consciousness that has been systematically eroded by oppressive regimes or has been subjugated under the fear of the hegemony of institutions (Freire, 1996).

Oppressive states see education as a tool for a transaction directly only with labour and not with its emancipatory and human value. It aims to provide education only in the form and to the extent it can favour the state. For example, Mussolini did not ban early education but controlled higher education as he wanted to limit only the pool of intellectual class but wanted foot soldiers who were well trained and the basic training could be an extension of the primary and secondary education with direct control and supervision of the state. Similarly, Hitler did not ban science or reason but manipulated its nature to enable his anti - semitic activities. The resistance to these practices could come only from the thought directions that were not indoctrinated by the ideals of fascists and were able to expand their horizons of knowledge beyond the state - enabled information.

Like every political thought, the mode of operation of fascism is also bound to evolve, yet, its interference in education will inevitably remain pivotal as controlling education stays as one of the means through which the state gains direct control of the future populace. Therefore, it becomes essential for critical thinkers and educators to understand the nature of state operations and prevent the dilution of critical thought in education.

## 2. Conclusion

The subversion of education is a necessary component of fascist regimes, as it allows the state to control and shape the beliefs and values of its citizens. By controlling education, fascist governments can indoctrinate the youth with their ideology, erase dissenting views, and create a sense of national unity and superiority. One way fascist regimes subvert education is by controlling the curriculum and textbooks. They may remove critical or dissenting perspectives, promote propaganda, and rewrite history to fit their agenda. Another tactic used by fascist regimes is the suppression of intellectualism and academic freedom. Academics who challenge the regime's ideology or policies may be silenced or persecuted. Fascist regimes may also use education to create a cult of personality around their leaders. They may promote the leader as a heroic figure while portraying dissent as disloyalty to the nation. This can lead to the glorification of the leader, the suppression of criticism, and the creation of a cult - like following. The subversion of education can have long - term effects on society, as it shapes the beliefs and values of future generations. It can lead to the perpetuation of fascist ideologies, the suppression of dissent, and the erosion of critical thinking and intellectualism. Therefore, it is crucial to safeguard academic freedom, promote diversity of perspectives, and ensure that education is not used as a tool for propaganda or indoctrination. In conclusion, the subversion of education is a necessary component of fascist regimes, as it allows the state to control and shape the beliefs and values of its citizens. By controlling education, fascist governments can erase dissent, promote propaganda, and create a sense of national unity and superiority. Hence, it is crucial to safeguard academic freedom and ensure that education is not used as a tool for propaganda or indoctrination.

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