

Canadian Education as an Impetus towards Fascism

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Responses

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Abstract

I review my more than 40 years experience with the educational system in (Ontario) Canada, from my days as student to my 2009 dismissal as a tenured physics professor at the University of Ottawa, and conclude that a transformation of the student persona has accompanied the imposed system reforms and that this persona reflects real psychological change towards an increased inability for independent thought and an inability to discern one's own learning. I argue that both the system reforms and the individual transformations of students are consistent with a pattern towards fascism occurring in a global disruptive and predatory economic hierarchy during rising economic power-coalescence. The nature of my political dismissal for attempting to resist the reforms – including an abrupt laboratory lockout, intimidations and firing of graduate students and a junior researcher, forceful police arrests of students and of a professor for participating in a public campus event, disregarding due process, and the recently proven hiring of a journalism student as “agent of University Legal Counsel” to perform extensive covert surveillance (from 2006 to 2008) – is also an indicator of emergent fascism.

I am 52 years old. I did high school and university, two graduate degrees, have a Ph.D., and two years of post-doctoral studies in leading scientific laboratories. I was tenured and a physics university professor for 23 years, during which I taught over 2000 students at all levels, until they fired me in 2009. [1] One of Canada's most decorated scientists has said that I am one of Canada's top research scientists. [2] I want to talk about my experience as a teacher.

Observing the Canadian (Ontario) educational system from the inside, both as a student and as a teacher and also as a researcher of education, I witnessed a dramatic transformation of the student persona (over the span of approximately 30 years.) I infer a deep transformation in the young person's psychology.

FREEDOM BREEDS INDEPENDENCE. I remember grade-eight; the whole class being left the entire afternoon to figure out a math problem after the mind twister had been carefully explained. You could debate it, ask questions, test attempts, do whatever you wanted. Some just spent the whole time explaining to others what the problem was. And it didn't really matter if you solved it, in the sense that it was not required. You did it because it was the fun way that the adult proposed an equal to equal interaction, an authentic and dedicated interaction. For others it was a personal challenge or a chance to contribute uniquely to the overall effort.

Just a regular public school with a principal who was back from professional development... This happened all the time. One retired dad would come in for “science afternoons” and tell stories about technological developments and research areas that he had been reading about in popular science magazines.

I only learned to read when I eventually found something I wanted to read (how to breed aquarium fish). I only learned math when it made sense to me because I could see that the teacher understood it, so I knew there was something there to understand. I never learned anything from repetitive mechanical busywork or from regurgitating something on a test – never.

In my working class to middle class and suburban childhood, all I did outside of school was exactly what I could organize with my friends. There was always a ditch with insects and frogs in it. There was always a fort or a go-cart or a terrarium to build from stolen materials. There was always a neighbourhood-wide game of something. There was always a place to hide to experiment with matches or cigarettes or kissing. You only had to decide and re-decide and change your mind and tell others. School homework was a ten-minute affair except when you had school projects you liked.

Yes there was bullying and meanness but you worked out how to survive it rather than be completely managed by keeper adults. And there was racism and classism (and I was a “frog” in a harsh Anglo setting) but we negotiated protection rather than be subjected to limiting controls imposed by adults.

In stark contrast, today’s 24/7 structure on young peoples’ lives, today’s institutionalization and youth management practices, do not resemble the conditions that enable independent thinking.

STUDENT TRANSFORMED. When I started teaching, students were generally self-confident and bold by today’s standards. They would challenge me on the relevance of the material and point out when I was being repetitious. It was not difficult to elicit sincere feedback from the students and the students had the expectation that their feedback would be heeded.

Fast forward to the last five years or more and the students have segregated into two in-class-behaviour groups: formless sleep walkers and cookie-cutter keeners wanting to know if I could please assign more practice problems or more reading and could they volunteer for something.

It has been like waking up to a nightmare. There are more tests, exams, and homework than ever before and the dynamic performance of reliving and sharing discovery at the blackboard or in discussion has been replaced by dead-on-delivery PowerPoint presentations. And the students now expect this linear and bulleted format and are prepared without allergic reaction to regurgitate slide content on command and in any clicking order. [3] [4] [5]

More frightening than the glare of the projector and the everything-is-on-the-screen environment, however, is what I perceive of the student soul. Barring from-privilege nonchalance, the empty eyes translate a range

of states from indifference to hopelessness to powerlessness to superficial engagement based on illusory impressions of having received intellectual nourishment.

The “ah-ha” moments (actual outbursts in class) and office-hour testimonies (teary-eyed and choked up) of having “really” understood have been replaced with “it’s obvious; I get it; I can do it”. And, of course, the good grades reward this empty charade and train the student to judge his/her understanding on the basis of externalities rather than anchor this judgement in self-generated knowledge. [6] [7]

As a result, the majority of students have never developed the ability to discern when they do and do not understand something and they do not develop this ability in their undergraduate degrees. [ENDNOTE-1]

Students don’t know when they don’t know or when they do. Now how did that happen?

Partly the observed change was because more of the students were from the working and lower-middle classes and from the CEGEP system of Quebec, before the tuition fees were made to skyrocket. Partly it was because the students were a year older before Ontario’s “Harris revolution” arbitrarily cut one year from high school. Partly it was because the Harris revolution turned high school teachers into hurried and overworked (but well paid) delivery machines rather than respected professionals entitled to professional development and independence.

Partly the change accompanied a broader societal transformation from the relative economic freedom and middle-class workplace spiritual coolness of the sixties to the constraining obsession for “efficiency” brought on by manufactured crises used to justify redesigning the tax structure (from progressive to fascist) and crushing the workforce into submitting to the new regime. The new paradigms became “competitiveness” and prostitution to venture capitalists – a government-led campaign to mortgage both our natural resources and our labour futures and to attract the most ruthless global occupiers to practice extortion by debt.

The message to grade-school students went from “you can do anything you choose” to “you need to prepare for a competitive environment”.

As parents were put through the ringer, there were few adults at home and kids needed to be farmed out. So started the era of every freaking kid sports and extra classes and music and dance lessons and club and volunteer activity until you die driving them. According to the same “news” media that explained the virtues of attracting investors, the world became a dangerous place filled with child molesters and kidnapers on every corner and no kid could simply play outside.

At the present stage of the transformation in student psychology, my fourth-year physics students were initially telling me things like:

“I won’t learn if you don’t force me to.”

“Grades are what motivate me to learn.”

They were quite sincere. Frightening. The only way for such utterances to be compatible with a sustainable self-image is to have never experienced (or have no memory of) learning. Such is the present state of education. Canada’s developing military economy has no need for independent thinkers or learners. Do what we show you when we say. Period.

MARCH TOWARDS FASCISM. This means that we are expected to give up two components that are generally believed to be needed for human development and fulfilment: meaningful creative work and a true political influence. [8] [9] And what is love between individuals that cannot uniquely contribute to and transform community? What is love outside of community? It is difficult to mate caged animals.

Further, this is a change to the type of personality, socio-psychologists tell us, which is the defining prerequisite among individuals for fascism to take hold. [10] Fascism is not a distant historical anomaly. It is an optimum end-state towards which large-scale disruptive and predatory economic hierarchies tend. It is the state of total and unchallenged control of every facet of life by corporate masters of the economy, achieved by an optimized balance of force and a designed mental and social environment. Independent thought is eliminated and the possibility of even contemplating individual influence is rendered foreign. Fascism cannot be fully achieved by control of the mental (media) environment alone. The key institutions of education, organized leisure, and work must be aligned with the fascist project.

Several analysts have pointed out that the US plutocracy is already in an advanced stage of fascism. [11] This is relevant to Canada which has now integrated the US military economy to an unprecedented degree, from mythical peace-keeper to geopolitical architect and occupier. [12]

At the same time that globalization gave us bigger bosses who controlled more of our lives; professionals within public institutions went along with every evermore far reaching paradigm of social engineering and every evermore extreme application of the religion of the boss-controlled financial markets as the ultimate social remedy. At the same time that national economies were transformed into jurisdictions of foreign and mega-capital exploitation-by-investment and at the same time that markets for untested pharmaceuticals and agri-food practices were opened by putting the bosses in charge of public safety; the schools were being fitted with “standards and accountability” and after-school free time was being made “dangerous and wasteful.” [4] [5] Working parents were told to “rise to the challenge” of global market competition which in turn was used to legitimize losses of entire regional economic sectors as mega-capital prospected the globe for maximum returns.

That’s a lot of change; facilitated by always increasingly inhumane global monetary policy and expanding “free trade” zones. Acceptance, or rather compliance, by the First World middle class is carefully monitored and engineered at every step. A pivotal component is to prevent the development of independent thought and intellectual discernment so that fabricated concerns and their solutions can be received and adopted, so that superficial political oppositions can occupy all the space of allowed political “debate.”

How else can the present degree of widespread First World middle class stupidity be explained? The same psycho-socio-economic pattern from rising economic power-coalescence has been described to explain Italian and Nazi fascism. [10] The main difference today is a relative absence of imposed school uniforms but the same institutional drives to impose monochromaticity of thought and reactions are apparent; indeed too obvious to be seen. Radical elements are most expeditiously either “educated” or culled.

MAKING CHANGE. Next is what I tried to do about it on my watch. The dominant mythology was that I had “academic freedom” and that academic freedom was absolute protection for authentic pedagogical developments based on research and experience – that academic freedom was the safeguard that made the system work and that allowed for advancement and corrections.

My first response was to try to improve my classes more or less within mainstream practice. This led only to different degrees of self-deception and was ultimately unbearably frustrating. Students were receptive and pleased but learning remained superficial. Students did not own the material and could not project it creatively. They were happier bluffers. (The stuff good managers are made of.)

In parallel, I lashed out with letters calling for reform, to my bosses, and to committees and commissions charged with evaluating programs and education. These fell in a vacuum. There were no responses. I must have appeared crazy.

Finally, after much study and discussion with experts and an international group of physics teachers practicing critical pedagogy, I decided to break with half measures and to implement the full deal, without compromise.

In 2005 I practiced what became known as academic squatting and occupied a course as a critical pedagogue, giving the course to the co-occupiers, to the students and community members. It was dubbed the activism course. [13] The Dean of the Faculty of Science tried to kill it. The students rebelled and won. I was disciplined. I won the arbitration and a legal analysis journal summarized the award in a review entitled “Teaching Science through Social Activism is Protected by Academic Freedom, Arbitrator Rules.” [14]

The course was a sensation among students and community members. One student concluded: “Everything else is the same. This is different.” The following year (2006), thanks to unprecedented student demand and protest, it was given under a new official name in the largest auditorium on campus. That year some students sued the university for not providing enough teacher assistants for the course while two other students sued for being deregistered by the university on the basis of age discrimination, all creative political initiatives that I celebrated. Both cases made media headlines. The activism course was never allowed again. [15]

I then expanded these methods into all my courses, while being subjected to a broad disciplinary campaign of repression. The method, adapted as needed, applied to a traditional first-year physics course gave outstanding results throughout the semester and in the final examination. It was the most rewarding first-

year traditional physics teaching experience I have ever had. One enthusiastic teacher assistant who came to all the classes on her own time chose to short-circuit her graduate physics degree to start an education program. (I was disciplined for supervisor deficiency as “evidenced” by the fact that she did not finish her physics graduate degree.) The course was removed from me the following year. [16]

Such was the fervour of my dedication to uncompromised education from 2005 on. I also exposed the University’s treatment of me and others in a detailed blog and the administration’s questionable politics, including all the examples of executive malfeasance that I could document. [17]

And I lectured to encourage others to occupy their classes, and promoted anarchism as a pedagogical development tool. The University hired a student journalist spy to covertly voice-record and transcribe my radical talks given on other campuses. The student reported directly to University Legal Counsel who, in turn, forwarded the recordings and transcripts to the VP-Academic. [18a] [18b]

Legal Counsel Michelle Flaherty abruptly left the University at approximately the same time that a covert voice recording was lost from the record that I have obtained via access to information law. [18b] She is now a vice-Chair (judge) with the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal.

To make a long story short, I was fired in 2009, following the arrival of former federal politician and former Minister of Justice Allan Rock as incoming president, after his verbal abuse of a student activist was exposed during a local television interview of me. [19]

I was instantly and without warning locked out of my laboratory and office; accompanied off campus by university police. My research associate was fired without warning or explanation. My graduate students were removed and intimidated into choosing new supervisors. I was barred from my weekly documentary film and discussion series and from my weekly campus radio show. When I returned for a discussion night event I was arrested, handcuffed, and taken to Ottawa Police headquarters. [1] [19] [20]

Mr. Rock has repeatedly stated that all proper procedures were followed in my dismissal.

It appears that former Minister of Justice Allan Rock is of the opinion that, among other things, hiring a student journalist as “agent of University Legal Counsel” to practice extensive covert surveillance of me and students, from 2006 to 2008 and using such methods as a false Facebook identity to infiltrate student activist groups, constitutes simply “following procedure.”

On the contrary, I read the Rock administration’s actions as additional signs of emerging fascism. [21]

Hopefully, the arbitrator of my dismissal case will be a true independent thinker, if my union lets it get that far. (I want my classroom back so I can give it to the students.)

NOW IS THE TIME. My “progressive” colleagues have suggested that I had good ideas and good intentions but that my methods or my timing were ill-chosen. One colleague stated that you can study activism and you can teach activism but you cannot practice activism within academe. Several other colleagues commented that everything would have been fine if I had been quiet about it all. These reactions from the professoriate arise from the now age-old question of “separation between inquiry and reform” which has been at the heart of the debate about academic freedom since the nineteenth century. [22]

I have examined the work of my progressive colleagues and interviewed hundreds of students and dozens of experts about education and societal change and I am at a loss to find anything in what mainstream progressive pedagogues have done that slows the march towards fascism or creates cracks that allow some light to shine out from the hearts of students or shine in from the real world outside. [23] [24]

All of the transformations of North American mainstream education in recent decades have come from above and none have been effectively resisted by teachers or parents or students. There have been no grassroots initiatives affecting the mainstream classroom, no discoveries, no rebellion, nothing that has caught on. There has been only regression since 1968; the crest of the last period of momentary enlightenment when it was understood that teaching is impossible and that learning can only be stopped by suppression.

The schools have gobbled feminism and anti-oppression whole and spit out victims asking for a fairer society with better “protections.” The fire of rebellion has been replaced with “education” to train the oppressor to not oppress. Solidarity has come to mean being “like-minded.” Lifestyle choices have been re-invented as power politics. Modern medical practice is generally believed to contribute positively to public health, whereas one brave leading researcher suggests that it is the third leading cause of death, after everything cancer and everything cardio-vascular. [25] The “right to not be disturbed” has emerged alongside the rights to life and freedom. CO2 concentration in the atmosphere has been “scientifically discovered” to be the main threat to humankind ... Widespread First World middle class stupidity you say?

In physics there has emerged an area of research called “physics education research” (PER) and its only significant achievement has been to somewhat convincingly demonstrate that traditional physics education does not work, something every physics instructor who has ever graded a final examination with real questions knows.

And now the PER community moves on, to find better methods to teach physics concepts, within the confines of the vacuum that is a single discipline, in a world where “personal initiative” means dedication to accomplishing prescribed tasks and where “critical thinking” means finding better ways to support the corporate or institutional ideology of the day, and without a radical examination of the central question of intrinsic motivation. [26]

No. Now is the time to fight back and fighting back is the only real method. Now is the time for teachers and students and parents to take back the classroom. Classroom squatting is the most effective and radical (i.e., “to the root”) thing that teachers and students and parents can do. It is the most that teachers and students can do and it is the only thing that teachers and students can do that will help. And we must do it publicly so that we may join forces and to inspire others to do the same. [13]

In the words of Paulo Freire, arguably the greatest pedagogue, “You can only fight your own oppression.” He added that we were all oppressed by hierarchy and that the oppressed young person could only find liberation (growth, learning) if she managed to find “authentic rebellion.” [8] ●

[ENDNOTE-1] [START]

In the last course that I was allowed to teach (winter 2008) I was able to make a striking demonstration of the latter point, that student can no longer discern their own learning. It was a combined final (4th) year and graduate course in solid state physics, with 24 students in the class. At the start of the semester I needed to open up the possibility that maybe the students did not know when they understood a physics concept, in order to encourage deeper self-examination about the individual learning process.

I said “let’s look at Newton’s action-reaction law from first-year physics”. Eyes rolled. I drew a student on the green board, standing on a floor, and I drew an arrow pointing down to represent the force of the earth’s gravity on the stick-figure student. I said “OK, that is the action, what is the reaction?” “Forces come in pairs according to Newton’s action-reaction law.” “So what is the correct force to complete this pair?”

One student did not want to give a public answer and abstained. A few students said it would be the gravitational force exerted on the earth due to the mass of the stick-figure student. All the other students said that the reaction was the force that the floor exerted on the student to keep the stick-figure from being drawn to the centre of the earth.

I explained the question again in a different way to make certain that I had been understood, answered some questions of clarification, and asked if the students wanted to change their answers.

Some of these students were teaching or had taught this material as teacher assistants and all had used it extensively in their school work. The majority answer was wrong and I explained why it was wrong. I explained that this wrong answer demonstrates that the central concept could not possibly have been understood.

The students were shocked. It was a jaw dropper. One student said I had tricked them in the way I had asked the question. Several students (who had given the wrong answer) came to my defence and said no, that I had been very clear and that I had stated the question clearly in several ways.

Newton’s action-reaction law expresses a fundamental property of nature: Forces cannot exist on their own. Forces arise from interactions between bodies. The earth cannot act on the student via gravity without the student acting via gravity and in the same magnitude on the earth. Both forces (in this example) arise from the gravitational interaction between the two bodies. All pair-wise interactions (gravitational, electric, etc.) must affect both bodies equally. The action-reaction force-pair is an interaction-pair... a very deep and subtle concept about the nature of all interactions and all forces – a true discovery.

To be fair, many professors, including my former Physics Department Chairman, Dr. Bela Joos, have told their first-year students that the reaction is the force from the floor, and have gone into detailed explanations, year after year, as to how this arises; until I asked the doctor to explain it to me at coffee one day, having quizzed his former students in a second-semester course.

In the end, all the students in my winter-2008 solid state course (except one who dropped the course) progressed exceptionally well and all received A+ as a final grade. Dr. Joos probably also had many A+ grades in his student career but my findings suggest that he may not have deserved them?

[ENDNOTE-1] [END]

FOOTNOTES – LINKS:

[1] <http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/component/content/article/25.html>

[2] <http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/Data/Documents/SupportLetters/Academics/ProfFrankHawthorne-090514.pdf>

[3] <http://activistteacher.blogspot.com/2009/10/on-sacred-space-of-university-classroom.html>

[4] “The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing” by Alfie Kohn

[5] “Teaching By Numbers - Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education” by Peter M. Taubman

[6] <http://activistteacher.blogspot.com/2007/04/giving-up-grade.html>

[7] <http://ry4an.org/readings/short/student/>

[8] “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” by Paulo Freire

[9] “Compulsory Mis-education and The Community of Scholars” by Paul Goodman

[10] “The Fear of Freedom” (UK edition) / “Escape from Freedom” (US edition) by Erich Fromm

- [11] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAV87X5keQ0> (14 signs of fascism)
- [12] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj0mzcZ4wJk> (Malalai Joya)
- [13] <http://activistteacher.blogspot.com/2007/04/academic-squatting-democratic-method-of.html>
- [14] <http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/Data/Documents/law-e-bulletin-analysis-picher-arbitration.pdf>
- [15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denis_Rancourt
- [16] <http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/background/formalgrievances.html>
- [17] <http://uofowatch.blogspot.com/>
- [18a] <http://ottawa.indymedia.org/en/2009/12/10932.shtml>
- [18b] <http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/background/reportoncovertsurveillance.html>
- [19] <http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/videos.html> (November 12, 2008, video)
- [20] <http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/media/news.html>
- [21] <http://uofowatch.blogspot.com/2009/10/on-rocks-corporatization-of-campus.html>
- [22] “No Ivory Tower” by Ellen Schrecker
- [23] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=RAN20060503&articleId=2377>
- [24] <http://activistteacher.blogspot.com/2009/10/organizing-coalition-building-education.html>
- [25] Starfield, Barbara (2000, July 26). Is US health really the best in the world? *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284(4), 483-485.
- [26] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=20060904&articleId=3140>