

No Kings, No Silence: The Struggle for Democracy in the United States. A conversation with critical educator Antonia Darder

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At least eight million people took to the streets across the United States in more than three thousand 'No Kings' demonstrations. There was also a significant response in Italy and other European countries. Yet, the mainstream media's coverage has given these events a truly marginal place, pushing them into a corner, a backwater, whilst obsessively focusing on images of violence, war, explosions and destruction that seem to attract more attention, audience and interest. The major newspapers and TV channels describe the despicable acts of violence by the US and Israel, often without offering a critical perspective or giving a voice to those who oppose them. Thus, it appears like a pre-written film, which one can only watch as an enthusiastic, indifferent or outraged spectator. A Top Gun version 2.0 in which reality is suspended between horror and fiction. Yet, there is a great deal of ferment: not only the No Kings mass movements, but also grassroots education movements, women's rights groups, teachers' unions, student organizations, immigrant groups, and organizations advocating for climate justice, the Constitution, and international law.

Antonia Darder, intellectual, educationalist and artist originally from Puerto Rico, who has taught in various universities in the United States for more than 40 years, offers us a counter-narrative on North American reality, ensuring that these movements do not remain in the realm of invisibility or pure romantic idealization. As a friend and comrade

of Paulo Freire, Antonia recounts emerging experiences and organizations, situating them within the field of critical pedagogy – a cause she has long championed and on which she has produced internationally recognized texts and essays.

The epistemological shift she guides us through is essential to prevent us from becoming isolated islands, but rather to recognize ourselves in our very existence, in our participation, and to attain – to borrow Freire’s words – a dimension of critical consciousness. This is possible if we open up to complex thinking, capable of understanding social systems and assessing their impact on relationships and subjectivities.

What is clear is that a strategy is being devised in which indifference or a lack of faith in change becomes an ideology that underpins and conserves authoritarianism. This explains the violent attacks on newspapers, intellectuals, and universities—including those not traditionally associated with progressive views, such as Harvard and Columbia University—in an effort to break down the complexity of thought and foster subservience.

Together with Antonia Darder, we rediscover the ferment of intellectuals, teachers, students, and activists engaged in movements in United States capable of keeping the light shining in this darkness of power and abuse of authority, and of making the music of democracy and solidarity ring out amidst this chaos. After all, a king without subjects has no power and is destined to fade away.

PV: Trump acts as if he were the emperor of the world. What remains of the democratic experience in the US? In the mainstream media in Italy, we only see images of war and power. Could you tell us about the opposition to Trump in the US?

AD: First, let me say that within the contemporary American reality, there has been an intensification of attacks not only on explicitly progressive institutions, but also on the very infrastructure of critical thought itself—newspapers, intellectuals, and universities across the ideological spectrum. Even elite institutions long associated with

the establishment, such as Harvard University and Columbia University, have become targets of political intimidation, public vilification, and, at times, direct threats of violence. These attacks are not incidental; they form part of a broader strategy to erode the legitimacy of knowledge-producing institutions and to collapse the space for nuanced, critical engagement. By casting all forms of intellectual inquiry as suspect or elitist, politically reactionary forces seek to flatten complexity into spectacle—reducing public discourse to slogans, fear, and obedience. In this context, the assault on universities and the press is not simply about ideology, but about power: the deliberate cultivation of a political culture in which questioning is dangerous, dissent is punished, and subservience becomes normalized.

With this in mind, to better understand the present political moment in the United States, we must move beyond the spectacle of personalities and examine the deeper historical and structural forces at work. The figure of Donald Trump is often portrayed globally as an authoritarian strongman—someone who behaves, as you suggest, like an emperor of the world. Yet Trump is less an anomaly than a symptom of a much longer crisis within U.S. democracy itself. From a critical perspective, the United States has always carried a profound contradiction at its core. The nation proclaims democratic ideals—freedom, participation, equality—while historically sustaining systems of transnational capitalism, elements of colonialism, and imperialist expansion.

Critical scholars such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks and others help us see that democracy cannot be reduced to formal institutions or electoral rituals. Democracy must be lived as a collective practice grounded in dignity, dialogue, and social justice. By that standard, the democratic experience in the United States has always been partial and contested.

That said, what we are witnessing today is the intensification of a long erosion. Over decades, neoliberal economic policies have concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a small transnational elite while hollowing out the social institutions that sustain democratic

life—public education, unions, community organizations, and independent journalism. Under such conditions, authoritarian populism becomes easily possible. Trump did not create this crisis; he emerged from it.

At the same time, the international media often presents an image of the United States dominated by militarism, geopolitical rivalry, and presidential power. This is understandable, because the global projection of U.S. power, through wars, military alliances, and economic dominance, remains a central feature of American politics. Yet this image obscures a crucial reality: beneath the spectacle of power exists a long and vibrant tradition of resistance. If we look more closely at the social terrain of the U.S., we see something that the international media often misses: a dense ecosystem of movements, organizations, and coalitions that are actively resisting the policies and political style of Donald Trump. These struggles are unfolding in the courts, in the streets, on university campuses, and within labor and community organizations.

The opposition to Trump—and to the broader authoritarian turn—comes from many different sectors of U.S. society. Grassroots movements, including immigrant organizations, labor organizers, educators, students, and communities of color have mobilized in significant ways over the past decade. This opposition is not a single unified movement. Rather, it is a constellation of democratic forces—civil rights groups, labor unions, feminist organizations, climate activists, immigrant rights networks, and anti-war coalitions—each confronting different dimensions of authoritarian governance, including countless community-based struggles that rarely appear in international headlines. Immigrant communities organizing against deportations, Indigenous nations defending their lands from extractive industries, and feminist movements challenging patriarchal violence are all efforts that form part of this democratic fabric of resistance.

Several of the most visible currents of resistance today include grassroots democracy movements. One of the most important grassroots networks opposing Trump is Indivisible. This organization emer-

ged during Trump's first presidency and has grown into a nationwide network of local activist groups working to defend democratic institutions and block authoritarian policies through organizing, lobbying, and public protest. Indivisible chapters exist in nearly every state and frequently coordinate protests, town halls, and campaigns pressuring members of Congress.

Throughout 2025 until the present, No Kings has brought millions of people together to hold some of the largest morally grounded and nonviolent direct actions by any movement in US history. Just this last weekend, an estimated 8 million protesters filled the streets at more than 3,300 rallies which took place across all 50 states. Speeches, music, and organizing efforts were combined at rallies where activists protested to air their grievances about the Trump administration trampling of democracy, through his use of autocratic authority and oligarchic rule. No Kings protests have sought to remind the country (and the world) that people power is the true path to a genuinely free America.

Another grassroots movement that has mobilized protests across the country is the 50501 Movement. The name stands for "50 protests, 50 states, one movement." Organized demonstrations have taken place in cities across the United States demanding impeachment, protection of constitutional rights, and defense of minority communities. Related demonstrations include the nationwide Free America Walkout, which has mobilized hundreds of events across the country in 2026 to protest immigration policies, militarization, and executive power. These protests reflect a broader wave of civil resistance that is spreading even into regions that traditionally have supported Trump.

A powerful front of opposition is also tied to civil liberties and legal defense organizations. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has challenged numerous executive actions affecting civil liberties, immigration enforcement, and protest rights. Similarly, groups like Democracy Forward specialize in filing lawsuits against government actions that they argue undermine democratic institutions. In addition, coalitions of Democratic state attorney generals have collectively filed

dozens of lawsuits against federal policies, attempting to block measures related to immigration, citizenship, tariffs, and social programs. In this sense, resistance is not only taking place in the streets—it is also unfolding through constitutional litigation.

A more explicitly militant current of resistance comes from anti-fascist and radical democratic coalitions that openly describe the administration as authoritarian. One example is the coalition known as Refuse Fascism, which organizes protests and civil disobedience campaigns calling for the removal of Trump and opposing policies such as mass deportations, attacks on gender-affirming care, and the use of the military for domestic policing. These networks often connect with broader anti-war and anti-imperialist coalitions.

Opposition to a U.S. invasion of Venezuela by the Trump administration came from a broad coalition of anti-war organizations, labor unions, civil liberties groups, and some members of Congress across the political spectrum. Organizations such as National Nurses United publicly condemned the intervention as illegal and called for diplomacy rather than regime change. Anti-war coalitions, immigrant-rights groups, and Latin American solidarity networks organized protests in several U.S. cities, arguing that military action violated international law and continued a long history of U.S. intervention in Latin America. Some lawmakers also questioned the legality of the action and argued that Congress, not the president, should decide on war.

Similarly, the military actions against Iran has been opposed by a wide range of peace and advocacy organizations in the United States and internationally. Groups such as Code Pink, Win Without War, and Veterans For Peace have warned that an invasion would trigger a catastrophic regional war and repeat the mistakes of earlier U.S. interventions in the Middle East. These organizations have organized demonstrations, issued public statements, and lobbied Congress to block funding for military action, emphasizing diplomacy, international law, and de-escalation as alternatives to war.

Organized labor and worker movements, as in other moments in the country's history, remain another important pillar of opposition.

While the labor movement is internally diverse and uneven in its political stance, unions and worker organizations today are opposing the Trump administration through a combination of legal challenges, defending collective bargaining, expanding unionization, mobilizing protests, building coalitions, and experimenting with new forms of worker organization. Together, these strategies position labor to wage democratic opposition and working-class resistance in the current political moment. Many labor activists are also connecting workplace struggles to a broader defense of democratic rights within the U.S. and around the world.

PV: In the United States, significant strands of critical pedagogy have emerged since the time of John Dewey, followed by Paulo Freire's presence at Harvard and the group that has as leadership you, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, among others. Do the movements you refer to also have a significant presence in the contexts closest to us and shared by us: schools, universities, and educational organizations?

AD: It is important to mention here that several educational organizations, unions, and movements in the United States are currently opposing major policies associated with the Trump administration's education agenda. These groups range from teachers' unions and academic associations to civil-rights groups, student movements, and coalitions of universities. Teachers' Unions (i.e., National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers) and Educator Labor Movements, for example, are among the largest organized forces opposing Trump's educational policies. Key policy issues driving the opposition include the privatization of education; the elimination or weakening of the Department of Education; restriction being imposed on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs; academic freedom and government influence on universities; and the decrease of civil-rights enforcement in education.

Radical and grassroots education movements opposing the Trump administration's education agenda tend to operate outside traditional

policy organizations and mainstream unions. Many of them are rooted in critical pedagogy, anti-racist organizing, abolitionist education, and community-based struggles for public schools. They often frame their resistance not only as opposition to particular policies, but as part of a broader struggle against neoliberal privatization, racism, and authoritarian governance in education. One of the most prominent of these groups is the Abolitionist Teaching Movement which is focused on reducing policing and surveillance in schools, defending ethnic studies and anti-racist curriculum, and building community-centered education rooted in Black and indigenous struggles.

Other important grassroots educational coalitions include the United Opt Out National movement against standardized testing and the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools fighting against the privatization of education. In New York, the Alliance for Quality Education, grounded in a vision of educational justice, advocates for parent power and statewide educational change. In states like California, a variety of bilingual community organizations continue to fight for bilingual education and dual language instruction, opposing Trump's 2026 executive order that declared English the official language of the United States.

PV: There is a significant presence of young people in these movements, despite the fact that they have been accused of indifference, apathy, resignation, and more and more...

AD: Young people have played a powerful role in opposition to authoritarian politics. Student movements advocating for climate justice, immigrant rights, and Palestinian solidarity reflect a generation increasingly skeptical of U.S. imperial policies and corporate power. Students for Justice in Palestine, for example, have organized for academic freedom and anti-colonial solidarity. Their activism draws from traditions of critical pedagogy and popular education, echoing the emancipatory visions articulated by Freire. Their activism has made universities important centers of resistance through their campus activism.

Student groups across the country have organized petitions, protests, and divestment campaigns opposing immigration enforcement policies and corporate ties to surveillance or deportation systems. These student movements often intersect with climate justice, racial justice, and anti-war activism, forming a new generation of politically engaged young people.

Of course, it is also true that the opposition is fragmented. The United States lacks strong national political parties rooted in working-class or anti-capitalist movements. Much of the formal political opposition to Trump remains confined within electoral institutions that are themselves deeply shaped by corporate interests. This limitation is one reason why authoritarian tendencies continue to resurface. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that democracy in the United States has disappeared entirely. Rather, democracy in this country has always been forged through struggle—from the abolitionist movement to the labor movement, from the civil rights movement to contemporary struggles for immigrant justice. Each generation has had to reclaim democratic possibility against forces of domination.

From the vantage point of critical educational theory, the question is not whether resistance exists—it clearly does—but whether these many struggles can cohere into a deeper democratic transformation. What we are witnessing in the United States today is a society engaged in a profound contest over its political future. On one side are authoritarian forces seeking to concentrate power in the executive state to bolster both domestic and transnational capitalist aims, often mobilizing nationalism and fear. On the other side are decentralized movements attempting to defend civil liberties, social justice, and democratic participation on the domestic front.

The international media, unfortunately, often reports only on the spectacle of presidential power. Yet beneath that spectacle lies a turbulent civic landscape in the streets, on university campuses and the courts, where millions of people continue to organize, protest, litigate, and educate in the hope of reclaiming the meaning of democracy. As a critical scholar, I would insist on this point: democracy does not sur-

vive because of institutions alone. It survives because ordinary people refuse to surrender their moral dignity and political agency.

In this sense, the question is not simply what remains of democracy in the United States, but where we choose to look for it. If we look only at the presidency or at military power, we will see little but hierarchy and imperial ambition. But if we look instead at the everyday struggles of ordinary people organizing in neighborhoods, classrooms, workplaces, and social movements, we begin to see the fragile yet persistent seeds of democratic life.

As critical educators, we must nurture those seeds. Democracy is not guaranteed nor can it survive as a passive inheritance. It must be continually recreated through collective action, critical consciousness, and solidarity across borders. And perhaps the most hopeful dimension of the present moment is that many people—especially the young—are beginning to recognize that the struggle for democracy in the United States is inseparable from struggles for justice throughout the world.

PV: Yes, let's just say that the spectacle of presidential power is undoubtedly repulsive. Thank you for shedding light on these grassroots movements and organizations in the United States; here, they're completely unknown or overshadowed by a media that's only interested in violence. When you talk about these movements—the Abolitionist Teaching Movement, the Alliance for Quality Education, Students for Justice in Palestine, and others— can we point to any leaders? How can we support them in expanding their political discourse? And what is your sense of the mood among the average, politically unengaged, bourgeois American regarding what is happening in the U.S. and around the world?

AD: When we speak about movements such as the Abolitionist Teaching Movement, the Alliance for Quality Education, Students for Justice in Palestine, and other grassroots efforts, it is important to first recognize that many of these initiatives deliberately resist the traditio-

nal model of charismatic leadership that has historically characterized social movements in the United States. This is not accidental. Activists today are deeply aware that movements organized around a single personality can be easily weakened—whether through repression, co-optation, or the simple exhaustion of individuals carrying the burden of leadership. As a result, many contemporary movements have intentionally cultivated forms of collective leadership, where responsibility is distributed among organizers, educators, students, parents, and community members.

That said, there are certainly individuals whose scholarship and activism have helped shape the political imagination of these movements. Within the Abolitionist Teaching Movement, for example, the work of educators such as Bettina Love and Jesse Hagopian has been influential in articulating the need to move beyond reformist approaches to schooling and toward a more transformative vision rooted in racial justice, community self-determination, and the dismantling of carceral structures within public education. Their work resonates with a long tradition of critical pedagogy that insists education must be understood not simply as instruction, but as a profoundly political site where struggles over democracy, knowledge, and human dignity are constantly unfolding.

Similarly, organizations like the Alliance for Quality Education have drawn strength from community leaders, parents, and grassroots organizers who have dedicated decades to the fight for equitable public schooling. In this case, leadership often emerges from within the very communities most affected by educational injustice. Parent organizers, youth leaders, and neighborhood activists frequently become the moral and political voices of these struggles, reminding us that genuine democratic leadership is cultivated through collective experience and shared struggle rather than through institutional authority alone.

In the case of Students for Justice in Palestine, leadership is even more decentralized. The movement operates largely through autonomous campus chapters, where students themselves assume respon-

sibility for organizing teach-ins, protests, and divestment campaigns. Here again we see the influence of a broader intellectual and political tradition—one that links struggles for Palestinian liberation to global movements against colonialism, militarism, and racial capitalism. Scholars and activists such as Noura Erakat and others have helped deepen the legal and historical analysis that informs this activism, but the movement itself remains fundamentally rooted in student organizing and solidarity networks.

If others wish to support these movements in expanding their political discourse, the most meaningful contribution would be to strengthen the conditions under which critical political education can flourish. Movements grow not only through protest, but through the slow and patient work of cultivating political consciousness. This means creating spaces—whether in classrooms, community centers, unions, or faith communities—where people can collectively examine the social conditions shaping their lives. Public teach-ins, reading circles, community forums, and independent media platforms all play an essential role in expanding the reach of these conversations.

Equally important is the need to connect local struggles to broader structural realities. Too often, the issues that animate grassroots activism—whether school privatization, immigration enforcement, police violence, or university investments in militarism—are discussed in isolation from the larger political economy that produces them. When movements succeed in linking these everyday struggles to systems of neoliberal capitalism, racialized hierarchy, and imperial power, they create the possibility for deeper alliances across different sectors of society. Another crucial dimension involves building stronger relationships across movements that have historically operated in parallel rather than in concert. The struggles for educational justice, immigrant rights, labor organizing, climate justice, and anti-war activism are not separate struggles; they are interconnected responses to overlapping structures of domination. One of the great challenges of the present moment is learning how to cultivate a political culture capable of recognizing those connections without erasing the par-

ticular histories and experiences that give each movement its unique character.

At the same time, we must be honest about the broader social landscape within which these movements operate. While activism has grown significantly in recent years—especially among younger generations—large sectors of the U.S. population remain politically disengaged. Among many middle-class Americans, the prevailing mood is not one of organized political commitment, but rather a mixture of anxiety, confusion, and deep skepticism toward public institutions. Economic insecurity, geopolitical tensions, and the constant spectacle of polarized media discourse have left many people feeling uncertain about the future, yet unsure where to direct their concerns.

For some, this uncertainty produces apathy; for others, it fuels resentment that can be mobilized by authoritarian or nationalist narratives. What we often encounter among politically unengaged citizens is not necessarily hostility toward democratic ideals, but a profound sense that the existing political system offers little meaningful avenue for participation or change. This condition of political alienation has been cultivated over decades through the erosion of public institutions, the consolidation of corporate power, and the marginalization of working-class voices within both national and international political discourses.

Yet even within this climate of uncertainty, there are important signs of possibility. As I mentioned earlier, younger generations are increasingly questioning the assumptions that have long structured political life in the United States. Many young people are openly challenging the legitimacy of endless war, the inequities of racial capitalism, environmental destruction, and the failures of neoliberal educational reform. University campuses, community spaces, and digital networks have become sites where new political languages and solidarities are being forged.

From the standpoint, I will again say that the question before us is not simply whether resistance exists, but whether what appear to be disparate efforts can mature and consolidate into a deeper democra-

tic project capable of transforming the ideologies and structures that sustain inequality and domination. Social movements alone cannot accomplish this task unless they are accompanied by a broader process of political awakening that reach beyond activist circles and speak to the everyday experiences of ordinary people. In many ways, the dissatisfaction and disillusionment of workers with the Democratic party and its leadership provided ripe conditions for Trump to maneuver and manipulate himself into power.

In the end, the struggle for democracy in the United States has always depended on the capacity of ordinary citizens to reclaim their political agency. Democracy has never been secured solely through institutions; it has been built through social movements, through dialogue, through acts of collective courage that challenge systems of power. The movements mentioned represent important seeds of this democratic possibility. Whether those seeds can take root on a larger scale will depend on our willingness to nurture political imagination, cultivate solidarity across differences, and remain steadfast in the long and unfinished work of liberation.

PV: The picture you're painting is very different from the one we see here in Italy. I mean, there's a huge gap in media coverage that fails to capture movements like these but instead focuses solely on the sordid and despicable spectacle put on by the world 'powerful'. A distorted version of the truth. What's more, the violent repression by ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) does the rest, turning the voice of dissent into a cry of pain...

AD: Your observation is profoundly important, and in many ways, it speaks to one of the central tensions of our present historical moment. The image of the United States that circulates internationally—particularly through mainstream media—is often one that privileges spectacle over substance: the theatrics of power, the language of domination, and the sensationalism of crisis. What gets lost in that framing are the quieter, less visible, yet deeply consequential forms of collective

resistance that are unfolding every day. It is absolutely true that there exists a significant gap between lived reality and mediated representation. As you suggest, media coverage frequently gravitates toward what is most “sordid and despicable,” because spectacle sustains attention and reinforces dominant narratives about power. In doing so, it obscures the existence of grassroots movements that are actively contesting these very conditions. This distortion is not accidental; it reflects broader political and economic interests that benefit from rendering dissent either invisible or unintelligible.

At the same time, your point about repression—particularly through agencies such as ICE—is critical. The intensification of immigration enforcement has indeed produced profound suffering within immigrant communities. Families are separated, communities are destabilized, and fear becomes a mechanism of social control. In such a context, the voice of dissent can appear, as you say, less like a political demand and more like a cry of pain. Yet even here, we must be careful not to misinterpret what we are witnessing. That “cry of pain” is not the absence of political agency—it is often its most raw and immediate expression.

Across the United States, immigrant communities and their allies have been organizing in ways that challenge both repression and invisibility. They are building sanctuary networks, engaging in legal advocacy, creating community-based systems of mutual aid, and mobilizing public protest against deportations and detention policies. These forms of resistance may not always appear in international headlines, but they represent a profound commitment to human dignity and collective survival.

PV: There is a significant presence of young people in these movements, despite the fact that they are often accused of indifference, apathy, resignation and more...

AD: I have had many conversations with other comrades in different parts of the world about this issue. So, your observation is pro-

foundly important, and in many ways, it speaks to one of the central tensions of our present historical moment. The image of the United States that circulates internationally—particularly through mainstream media—is often one that privileges spectacle over substance: the theatrics of power, the language of domination, and the sensationalism of crisis. What gets lost in that framing are the quieter, less visible, yet deeply consequential forms of collective resistance that are unfolding every day. And so, it is absolutely true that there exists a significant gap between lived reality and mediated representation. As you suggest, media coverage frequently gravitates toward what is most “sordid and despicable,” because spectacle sustains attention and reinforces dominant narratives about power. In doing so, it obscures the existence of grassroots movements that are actively contesting these very conditions. This distortion is not accidental; it reflects broader political and economic interests that benefit from rendering dissent either invisible or unintelligible.

At the same time, your point about repression—particularly through agencies such as ICE—is critical. The intensification of immigration enforcement has indeed produced profound suffering within immigrant communities. Families are separated, communities are destabilized, and fear becomes a mechanism of social control, given reported deaths. In 2025, there were 31 reported deaths in ICE detention facilities. This figure does not include individuals who died while in Border Patrol custody or while attempting to evade detention. And in just the first 3 months of 2026, 17 deaths in Border Patrol custody have already been reported. In such a context, the voice of dissent can appear, as you say, less like a political demand and more like a cry of pain. Yet even here, we must be careful not to misinterpret what we are witnessing. That “cry of pain” is not the absence of political agency—it is often its most raw and immediate expression.

Across the United States, immigrant communities and their allies have been organizing in ways that challenge both repression and invisibility. An excellent example is the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON)—an organization founded in 2001 that

works to improve the lives of day laborers, migrants, and low-wage workers—strengthens worker centers, defends civil rights, and organizes campaigns to combat exploitation and promote immigration reform through nonviolent, grassroots advocacy. NDLON and other similar organizations are building sanctuary networks, engaging in legal advocacy, creating community-based systems of mutual aid, protecting the rights of immigrant workers, and mobilizing public protest against deportations and detention policies. These forms of resistance may not always appear in international headlines, but they represent a profound commitment to human dignity and collective survival.

What is perhaps most important to emphasize here is that repression and resistance are not separate phenomena—they are always deeply interconnected. The expansion of state violence often signals not the absence of opposition, but its perceived threat. In other words, the very intensity of repression can also be read as evidence that these movements matter and that they are unsettling existing structures of power in meaningful ways.

From a critical perspective, then, the challenge is not only to denounce the distortions produced by mainstream media, but also to actively seek out and amplify the voices and practices that remain hidden beneath that surface. This requires a different way of seeing—one that is attentive to everyday acts of courage, to local forms of organizing, and to the slow, collective work of building alternatives.

So, while the image that reaches Italy may be one dominated by violence, authoritarianism, and despair, there is another reality unfolding alongside it: one of struggle, solidarity, and democratic possibility. The task before us, especially as critical educators and scholars, is to help make that reality visible—not by romanticizing it, but by understanding it with all its complexities and contradictions. In so doing, we begin to challenge not only the narrative of power, but the very conditions that allow such a narrative to exist and dominate in the first place.

PV: To conclude, the role of critical pedagogy emerges precisely from the need for a complex narrative capable of going beyond cynical sensationalism. What Paulo Freire taught us is this necessary commitment of pedagogy to unveil reality, to denounce and to proclaim: I would call it a phenomenological process. In this global context, everything seems more difficult, but these are nonetheless seeds that can bear fruit. I give the example of Italy, which voted en masse in the referendum in defense of the Constitution with an unexpected participation.

AD: I would say, Paolo, that what you are pointing to is precisely the ethical and political task that invites us to reclaim our responsibility to construct a narrative that resists both cynicism and spectacle, and instead engages reality in its depth, its contradictions, and its possibilities.

When Paulo Freire spoke of unveiling, denouncing, and proclaiming, he was indeed describing what we might call a phenomenological process—not in an abstract philosophical sense, but as a lived, embodied practice of coming to consciousness. This refers to a collective process through which individuals and communities learn to read the world critically, to name the forces that shape their existence, and to imagine alternatives that do not yet fully exist. This is not easy work, especially in a global context saturated by media sensationalism, fear, and fragmentation. The dominant narratives we encounter daily are designed precisely to overwhelm, to simplify, and ultimately to paralyze our capacity for critical thought. Yet—although authoritarianism thrives on spectacle—democracy survives in the stubborn, everyday acts of those who resist. No kings can endure where people refuse to kneel.

Thus, moments like the referendum in Italy echo similar political dynamics as those we have seen in the election of candidates with more humanistic and economically democratic agendas in the U.S. In New York City, for example, Zohran Mamdani started his campaign for mayor with little support or visibility. Running on a socialist plat-

form, he recruited 90,000 volunteers and ended up defeating the Democratic establishment, the Republican establishment and the oligarchs. Now as Mayor, he is implementing universal childcare, accelerating affordable housing development, and working toward other initiatives that support working people, something that opponents said could not be done.

Another example was the grassroots opposition mobilized against the ICE occupation in Minneapolis, which reflects a profound moral awakening among ordinary people who refuse to remain silent in the face of state violence directed at immigrant and working-class communities. Ten of thousands of residents—workers, students, faith leaders, and families—took to the streets and participated in a sweeping economic shutdown, declaring through their collective action that the militarization of their city and the terrorizing of immigrant neighborhoods would not go uncontested. This was not simply a protest against a federal agency, but a powerful pedagogy of resistance—an embodied lesson in solidarity—through which people reclaimed the streets, affirmed the dignity of migrant life, and insisted that justice must be rooted in the defense of humanity, rather than the enforcement of fear.

These examples remind us that beneath the surface of disillusionment and manufactured apathy, there remain deep reservoirs of democratic desire among the people. Where power demands silence, people are capable of answering with presence. When large numbers mobilize to support progressive candidates or in defense of constitutional principles—especially unexpectedly—it signals that this capacity for collective political action has not disappeared. Rather, it persists in latent form, just waiting for conditions that can bring it into expression.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, these moments are not anomalies; they are liberatory seeds. But seeds require cultivation. They require spaces for on-going and open dialogue, reflection, and collective analysis; where people can move beyond immediate reactions and begin to understand the deeper historical and structural dimensions of

their conditions and, from that vantage point, work together for collective change. Without such spaces, even the most promising expressions of democratic participation can dissipate and become absorbed back into the very systems they momentarily challenge.

This is why the role of critical pedagogy remains so vital today. It is not simply about education in the narrow sense, but about fostering a way of being in the world—a way of seeing that refuses the reduction of reality to spectacle. It calls us to attend to what is not immediately visible, to listen to voices that are marginalized, and to recognize that every act of participation, however small, can potentially contribute to a broader process of transformation.

In this global moment, where authoritarian tendencies and neoliberal logics seem to narrow the horizon of possibility, the work of unveiling and proclaiming may indeed feel much more difficult. But difficulty does not negate possibility. On the contrary, it clarifies the stakes. The seeds are there—in grassroots movements, in moments of unexpected civic engagement, in the quiet persistence of communities that refuse to surrender their dignity.

Since democracy is a practice forged in struggle and sustained by those who refuse silence, our task, as critical educators and engaged citizens, is to nurture those seeds with patience, rigor, and hope. Not a naïve hope, but a grounded, historical, radical hope—one that understands that transformation is always uneven, always contested, and always the result of collective struggle for a more just world.

0.1 Further Readings

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